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“Photography is part science and part fun. Mostly fun.”

HERBERT QUICK PHOTOGRAPHER

INTRODUCTION

CURATED BY E. R. BEARDSLEY

Herbert Quick: Photographer is a joint presentation of Intangible Publications and the California Museum of Photography (University of California, Riverside). Curator: E. R. Beardsley.

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HERBERT QUICK

“We tend to call too much ‘art’ today that isn’t really. Americans are too prone to select something that is almost good, but nothing that is really top of the line.”

INTRODUCTION

WHEN HERBERT QUICK was five years old and living with his parents in Manistique, Michigan, his father, a banker and amateur photographer, encouraged the boy's interest in photography by handing him an old wet-plate camera that had belonged to Quick's grandfather. This was not the sort of camera one would think to hand to a child of five, but Quick nonetheless was taught to coat the plates himself, expose them in the camera, and then to process and make prints from them. For a darkroom he and his father used an old chicken coop, which no doubt added to the tedium of an already tedious procedure. An aunt took pity on Quick, however, and provided him with a Kodak box camera that was much more convenient to use, allowing him to range further afield to find his subjects. A few of the surviving photographs made with the box camera have been included here—a small print of a Michigan landscape, an elegant little still life, and several photographs depicting circus scenes.

It would be easy to dismiss these first efforts as the learning exercises of a child, but the choice of subjects and the quality of the results are so entirely beyond our expectations that we must regard them at very least as the first solid products of a natural, evolving talent. Moreover, the aesthetic he denies today, except as afterthought (*see page 5*), is everywhere present in these early works—clean, sophisticated, and confident of its ground. Compared to the work produced in later years, they hold up surprisingly well and provide valuable insights that help us understand the body of work now before us.

Quick's formal training as a photographer was taken at Art Center School of Design in Los Angeles in the late 1940s after his return from service with the United States Navy during World War II. At Art Center he learned important technical fundamentals of camera work and darkroom technique, especially in commercial applications, but it was his contact with the likes of Edward Weston that perhaps most dramatically shaped the character of his work and set the course his life would take from then on. Representing this period are a number of photographs, ranging from a marvelous portrait of jazz musician Kid Ory to his first crisp California landscapes.

While a student at Art Center he visited Weston in Carmel with portfolio in hand. Weston received him kindly and offered criticism and suggestions, despite the fact that Weston was suffering greatly from the ravages of Parkinson's disease by then. Quick would go away, make more photographs, and then return to Weston with the results. This contact continued for some time and allowed Quick to establish an intimacy with Weston's approach to photography and to place his own ideas within a new and more profound context. We can see in the landscapes and architectural images his progress from technical mastery toward a more profound application of purpose in his approach to composition and light. The photographs made on the California coast or in the Bay Area of northern California are particularly interesting in this regard.

Quick was also befriended by Dorothea Lange in Berkeley.

She even retained him for a brief period to work for her as a printer. Quick characterizes the experience as interesting, but says that Lange was difficult to get along with. And, during these same years, Quick attended the classes taught by Fred Archer and Ansel Adams at Art Center, where the efficacies of the zone system in the making of photographs was then being promoted. Quick had already adopted the zone system (*see page 6*), but was eager for information that would guide him in its application.

In later years Quick found a friend in the person of Max Yavno, who helped him develop his technique and discover the essential style that would characterize his work from then on. Yavno became both friend and confidant over the years, and is counted among a handful of photographers whom Quick truly admires and respects. The two of them developed a deep collaborative relationship that would end only with Yavno's death a few years ago. They were kindred spirits in many ways, both equally dedicated to photography to the point of sacrifice. Quick has never married, maintains an almost hermit-like existence in a house that is more photographic studio than home, and devotes most of his waking life to the pursuit of photography. He estimates that perhaps half of his lifetime income has been spent on photography and its material requirements. Judging from the contents of his house, studio, and shops, it seems a conservative estimate.

Quick's career in photography now spans sixty-five years, and, at age 71, he seems fit enough to continue for a good many more. He is widely regarded as one the medium's most able and

knowledgeable practitioners. Few can match his technical skill or his mastery of the underlying science of photography. And in sustained productivity he has only small competition. He makes no claims for his work other than to call it "documentary" in nature, the bulk of it produced using an 8 x 10 view camera, including a finely crafted camera made by Quick himself (*see page 7*). In 1985, Collin Gardner of the *Los Angeles Times* described Quick's documentation of the changing California landscape as an effort undertaken "with as much attraction as regret," but that even in the most alienating environment he is able to infuse the images with mystery. And this seems a fair enough characterization. Quick's sharp, richly rendered photographs transform even the most unassuming subjects into monuments to moments of "things as they are."

Most impressive, however, has been the sustained integrity of Quick's effort from start to finish; he has successfully avoided the temptations of fads and fashions, often at a cost to his professional standing, and he has insisted without thought of compromise on the very aesthetic he so carefully denies. In fact, there is only a precious handful of photographers working today who have produced so much good work with as much honest conviction over so many years. (It should be noted here that Quick takes pride in the fact that he never once was tempted to apply for a grant to do his work; he regards grants as "welfare for artists.") And this fact alone makes Quick not only important as a photographer, but critically important as a teacher by example to the young who

would be photographers. Quick has been a teacher, of course, one of the best—the sort who is demanding beyond measure, impatient with laziness, but tireless and generous to those who respond with hard work, interest, and who show a bit of talent in the use of the medium.

Finally, whether we approach Quick's work as art or as documentation, it needs no amplification from me to make it accessible. As art it is unencumbered by theory or posture. As documentation it is authoritative, clean, and always to the point. It is my hope that the presentation on these pages is equally clean and straightforward. The viewer need only accept that the choice of photographs and their arrangement was mine alone to make, and that I alone am responsible for the words you are reading.

E. R. BEARDSLEY
December 1996

AESTHETICS: THE AFTERTHOUGHT ELABORATED

QUICK SEES PHOTOGRAPHY in straightforward terms. It is, he says—paraphrasing Berenice Abbott—representational by virtue of the image formed by the lens as well as the chemistry that permits its faithful translation onto film and paper. He can find no reason why this rather marvelous function should be distorted or otherwise tampered with, believing the qualities that make photography what it is should be respected and explored to the fullest. He acknowledges that this may seem a bit too precious for some and that it has perhaps led him to a point of being “more pure than the purest,” but it is what makes his photography what it is. That is how he has worked the majority of his photographic career. “Photography is a way of seeing,” he says. “After you’ve photographed for awhile you begin to pick a particular kind of light that you like. It becomes instinct after a while, pure and simple. Aesthetics are afterthoughts.”

When he is making photographs, Quick assures us that he is not thinking about aesthetics but how the image he sees through his lens can be rendered. “You look at something, think that it might make a good picture,” he says. “You set the camera up, focus and find that it really will make a good picture. So you push the button, go home and develop it. But then you don’t like it for six months. You go back to it later and maybe it’s all right.” In short, Quick says, instinct matters more than theory.

HERBERT QUICK AND THE ZONE SYSTEM

THE ZONE SYSTEM is predicated on the idea that reflected light from a subject can be separated into definable “zones” or “levels” of tonal values, providing the photographer with a reliable procedure by which he or she can evaluate exposure, determine development schemes, and print with expectations of achieving a predetermined tonal structure in the final image.

While Ansel Adams is considered the founder of “the zone system of planned photography” and Minor White is credited with popularizing the method with his *Zone System Manual*, the roots of the idea may be found in the ideas of Edward Weston and the “straight” photographers of the American school in the 1920s. Weston and his followers, including a young Ansel Adams, formed Group f/64 to promote Weston’s vision of a pure photography where the photographer maintained absolute control over the use of materials and equipment, as well as composition and tonal structure, to achieve results. Weston’s ideas permeated American photography in the 1930s and ’40s.

In 1940, Quick was introduced to what was then an intriguing system by which the photographer would be able to maintain a constant quality in the printing of his negatives. Two articles by John L. Davenport appeared in the November and December issues of *U.S. Camera* that year describing the use of the Weston meter and providing details of the approach. Quick was fascinated and set out immediately to learn more so that he might apply the method to his own work.

At Art Center, Fred Archer and Ansel Adams taught courses

in which they elaborated on the method, giving it a name—“the zone system.” Quick attended these classes, which further solidified his belief in the method and his determination to master its technical nuances.

In later years, Quick would advocate the use of the zone system and the Pentax Spot Meter (as modified by Zone VI Studios) to his own students at U.C. Riverside and elsewhere. His classes were small, as most students were either unwilling to accept the discipline and hard work required or were inadequately prepared in the fundamentals of photography to undertake the work.

QUICK'S CAMERA

QUICK'S PREPARATION for making cameras also commenced early. He was five or six years old when he would visit an uncle, a craftsman carpenter who worked in the winter repairing circus wagons and other things that would be shipped to him from the likes of Ringling Brothers. Quick was taught the fundamentals of using chisel and hand saw, as well as other nuances of wood-working. Over the years this experience translated into a variety of projects, including tampering with cameras to repair them or to alter them to improve performance, and eventually to making cameras to meet his requirements.

When L. F. Deardorff, an American camera manufacturing company that had for many years made fine 8 x 10's and 5 x 7's, went out of business, Quick decided to make cameras in earnest, calling the operation The 19th Century Camera Company. He would make them available to those who could satisfy him of their interest and ability to use one. "I feel that if I am going to go through the trouble of making a hand-made camera, put a lot of my time in the thing," Quick says, "it should go to the person who has the ability to use it. Therefore, I require a portfolio be submitted before anyone can have the privilege of buying one. So far I've only sold one camera."

Quick secured permission from R. H. Phillips and Sons of Midland, Michigan, to use their basic design in the manufacture of his camera. While the Phillips camera was made chiefly of carbon fiber and wood, the Quick camera would be made of fine wood. To the surprise of Phillips and Sons, both the Phillips camera and the

Quick wood camera weighed exactly nine pounds, a tribute to Mr. Quick's ability as both woodworker and machinist. Moreover, the Quick camera featured a longer bellows by four inches to accommodate the use of longer lenses. Five such cameras remain in his possession today, one of which he uses for his own work.

He no longer makes cameras, given the time and effort required, and concentrates instead on printing the negatives he didn't have time to print while working as photographer for the University of California, Riverside.

