

Real American Places

Edward Weston & *Leaves of Grass*



The Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art, Susan and Stephen Chandler Wing
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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Cover, Figure 1

Woodlawn Plantation House,
Louisiana, 1941

Gelatin silver print

Photograph by Edward Weston
The Huntington Library, Art
Collections, and Botanical
Gardens

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At right, Figure 2

Gulf Oil, Port Arthur, Texas, 1941
Gelatin silver print

Photograph by Edward Weston
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That is why I thought of this idea, that Whitman's own symbolism could be sharpened by the inclusion of real photographs . . . of the real American faces and the real American places which are part of Whitman's vision of America.

—George Macy to Edward Weston, 1941

Real American Places

On the evening of May 27, 1941, photographer Edward Weston and his wife, Charis Wilson, ate a quiet supper with friends and listened to President Franklin D. Roosevelt make a radio address. "I have tonight issued a proclamation that an unlimited national emergency exists," the president announced. As the Nazis continued to overtake Europe, Roosevelt warned that America needed to shore up its military readiness in anticipation of being called to support Britain and its allies.

Edward and Charis were set to leave the next morning from Los Angeles on a cross-country trip. A brand new eight-cylinder Ford (nicknamed "Walt") sat loaded with gear: an 8x10-inch view camera, a Cooke Triple Convertible lens, film negatives, a typewriter, camping equipment, and cans of food. Preparations had taken weeks. Armed with letters of introduction from influential friends—and hundreds of contacts stretching from California to New York—the two planned to take a southern route before heading up to New England and driving back six months later via a northern path. The assignment? To create a visual portrait of America for a deluxe edition of Walt Whitman's iconic poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass*.

President Roosevelt's sober message signaled turbulent times. While the nation veered ever closer to World War II, Weston faced a difficult journey of his own. With more than three decades of accolades and awards behind him, the 55-year-old photographer stood at the pinnacle of his career. When he accepted the invitation from George Macy, publisher of the Limited Editions Club, to photograph "the real American faces and the real American places" that symbolized *Leaves of Grass*, Weston saw it as a tantalizing opportunity to make a truly significant body of work.

Edward and Charis left Los Angeles as scheduled. Following Route 91 to Barstow and then east into the Mojave Desert felt as familiar, Charis wrote, as a "repeating dream." The two had only recently completed another major road trip after Weston's 1937 receipt of a prestigious Guggenheim grant (the first awarded to a photographer). The resulting book, *California and the West*—with pictures by Edward and text by Charis—had appeared in 1940 to great acclaim. With the Whitman commission, the artist relished the opportunity to expand his geographical boundaries and push yet further a visual investigation of landscape, continuing his "mass observation in seeing," as Weston described it.

Born and raised in Illinois, Weston had moved from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1906. He married and opened a portrait studio in Tropic (now part of Glendale) to support his wife Flora and four young boys. Outside of his day job, he made dreamy, soft-focus photographs featuring dancers, his family, female nudes, and other evocative subjects that won prizes at top Pictorialist salons. A meeting in New York in 1922 with Alfred Stieglitz, art photography's *éminence grise*, as well as three transformative years in Mexico beginning in 1923, led to the emergence of a sharp-focused aesthetic and prints of radiant depth. By the time Weston relocated to the bohemian coastal colony of Carmel in 1929, his reputation as a leading photographer of the West Coast school was sealed. There he fell in love with Charis Wilson, the beautiful, self-possessed daughter of famed novelist Harry Leon Wilson, and the two built a simple home and studio named Wildcat Hill.

The Whitman project began straightforwardly enough. In 1940, Macy asked 50 of the nation's foremost literary critics to list the 10 most influential American books; *Leaves of Grass* appeared near the top. Given the volatile global political climate, many saw Whitman's collection as a full-throated tribute to democratic ideals. The Limited Editions Club had issued *Leaves of Grass* in 1929, but Macy called that edition a failure because of its restrained and delicate design. This time he sought a quintessentially American photographer to *illustrate*—an expectation that became the project's stumbling block—a quintessentially American work.

As Charis and Edward headed east toward their first significant stop—Boulder City, Nevada, and its massive hydroelectric dam—Charis was behind the wheel, since Edward had never learned to drive. Their itinerary took advantage of cheap lodging and the hospitality of acquaintances. Despite early fee negotiations, Macy remained firm on \$1,000 to cover six months of travel and six months of printing, plus supplies. Weston's initial insistence that he needed to see the full sweep of America took Macy aback. The publisher thought that the "melting pot" nature of Southern California would provide a wealth of "American types" from which Weston could choose, an assertion the photographer found ludicrous. Despite the early disputes that augured bigger challenges ahead, Weston told Macy, "I fully expect to do the best work of my life in the coming year."

Once at Boulder (now Hoover) Dam, Edward immediately got to work. Over the three days that he and Charis toured the site, he made 18 negatives, a prolific output for a photographer who created precise compositions on the ground glass and never cropped or significantly altered his final prints. All in all, Weston found it a "tremendous experience," he wrote to his sister May.

Indeed, for Weston—whose work in recent years had been tied closely with that of Ansel Adams and other California artists focused on the natural world—the trip's industrial and architectural sites excited him the most. The Westons stayed an extra three days in Port Arthur, Texas, where Edward made more than a dozen pictures of gleaming Gulf Oil storage tanks that appear gargantuan and otherworldly, like spacecraft touched down to earth (fig. 2). At the Armco Steel Mill in Middletown, Ohio, a place he had visited in 1922, Edward pointed his camera up to the sky for a series focused on concrete smokestacks and intersecting power lines. Charis claimed they would have explored more such places, were it not for security restrictions.

By August, when the pair reached New Orleans, a number of problems had reached a slow boil. Four months had passed, and they had covered thousands of miles through Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and now into the South. En route, the partnership had taken a painful turn. Though 28 years his junior, Charis—talented in her own right—considered herself Edward's equal on the project. She had been typing up each day's events and envisioned publishing a book similar to *California and the West*. The realization began to dawn on her that Edward did not see her contributions as equivalent to his own. In the midst of a disagreement about whether they should venture off the beaten path, he hissed, "It's my grant."



Figure 3

New Orleans, 1941
Gelatin silver print
Photograph by Edward Weston
The Huntington Library, Art Collections,
and Botanical Gardens
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Weston had been sending negatives back to his son Brett in California to develop, and the routine worked well. When he sent a progress report to Macy, the publisher fired back a letter stating that some of the subjects Weston mentioned gave Macy a real “fright.” He asked the photographer to send sample pictures straight away.

Thus came to the surface the fundamental misunderstanding that dogged the project from its inception to the bitter end: how the publisher and Weston construed the word *illustration* in relation to the book. The artist interpreted it in a metaphorical sense, whereas Macy wanted to tie Weston’s photographs to specific lines in Whitman’s text. “I appear to have fastened onto an idea that you haven’t,” Weston replied to Macy. “[That] the pictures as a whole were to embody the vision of America that Whitman had . . . The fact is, illustrating specific lines in the poems would—to my mind—be too easy and get you nowhere.”



Figure 4

The Brooklyn Bridge, 1941
Gelatin silver print
Photograph by Edward Weston
The Huntington Library, Art
Collections, and Botanical
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The book's designer, Merle Armitage, soon entered the fray. A self-described "impresario," Armitage was a longtime champion of Weston and a bellicose friend. Armitage sent Macy a screed. He took the publisher to task for his literal-mindedness with regard to two accomplished artists working generations apart. He reminded Macy that it was the timeless spirit (rather than the specificity) of Whitman's poetry that made Weston the perfect complementary choice. "Let us keep before us the reminder that 'the strongest and sweetest songs remain to be sung,'" he wrote. "This quotation by Whitman is the very essence of his meaning, it was the future of America which interested him equally if not more than its present." For the time being, Macy demurred. He avowed that the project had room enough to satisfy Weston's "cosmic America" as well as the publisher's more down-to-earth concerns.

Weston kept working in spite of the testy exchange. He considered New Orleans and its Deep South environs a high point of the trip. He and Charis made the acquaintance of fellow photographer Clarence John Laughlin, who squired them to his favorite haunts, including Woodlawn Plantation, a former architectural beauty ravaged by the weight of its past (fig. 1). Weston made a disquieting photograph of an automobile parked between the home's Greek Revival columns, looking as if it had simply run out of gas.

The Westons were captivated by places that seemed quirky, strange, or exotic to a couple of Californians, like a forest of glittering trees made of glass jars—a “bottle farm”—created by an Ohio eccentric named Winter Zellar (Zero) Swartzel, and New Orleans’ aboveground cemeteries, with their water-stained vaults (fig. 3). As they headed north to New York and then into Maine, the two stayed with friends and fellow artists who recommended local sites. Famed photographer and Precisionist painter Charles Sheeler showed Weston the churches and barns of the Connecticut countryside. On a different occasion, a day trip out to Whitman’s birthplace on Montauk, Long Island, yielded nothing. Weston would be satisfied, however, with a picture he made in Brooklyn, an obvious bard locale, showing the famed bridge in the background and Manhattan peeking through (fig. 4).

And what of the “faces” that Weston had agreed to make? In spite (or more likely because) of his four decades working as a portraitist, the ratio of people to places is proportionally small. Weston took this one aspect of the job quite literally, searching for “types”: Yaqui Indians, a Tennessee farmer, some homespun Texans, two African American men.

The racial realities of Jim Crow America form powerful through lines in Charis’s journal entries. She records a comment from one Texan about “Negroes knowing their place” and mentions segregated drinking fountains at the Gulf Oil plant. Migrant sharecroppers found shelter at dilapidated Woodlawn, using the plantation’s doors as firewood to cook and keep warm. A portrait of Brown Jones, made in a classroom in Athens, Georgia, is a somber study of the cook and choirmaster dressed in his Sunday best (fig. 5). An alternate view shows Jones looking forthrightly at the camera, his expression open and unguarded. No pictures of African Americans were included in the book.

While Edward and Charis relaxed one December afternoon at a Delaware home, a butler burst in to announce that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Charis had been plotting a Midwest route back to California to avoid the worst winter weather. That plan was instantly jettisoned. The two left for Georgia the next morning to retrace their southern route back to Los Angeles.

Charis hoped to linger a bit on the drive, but Edward was in a rush. He knew that submarines were patrolling up and down the coast; he also feared possible enlistment for his four boys. They arrived in Carmel on January 20, 1942, some eight months, 24 states, and 20,000 miles later.

Weston immediately set to work sorting and selecting the 800 negatives he had made on the trip. In late March, he sent 70 prints to Macy, who would ultimately choose 49. The publisher had fired Armitage as the book’s designer and had decided—all protests to the contrary—to pair the pictures with lines from Whitman’s text. Macy informed a horrified Weston that the images would be printed on glossy paper bordered by a green mat. The book was rushed into production, and Weston never saw the proofs. He presented a copy to his friends Sally and David McAlpin with the inscription: “No apologies for the illustrations, but for their presentation, my tears.”

Though Weston deemed the book a failure, he considered the photographs a success. In 1944, he selected and printed 500 photographs for The Huntington Library as a gift to establish the most significant institutional legacy of his lifetime. Of this remarkable group, 90—almost one-fifth of the total—are from the Whitman project.

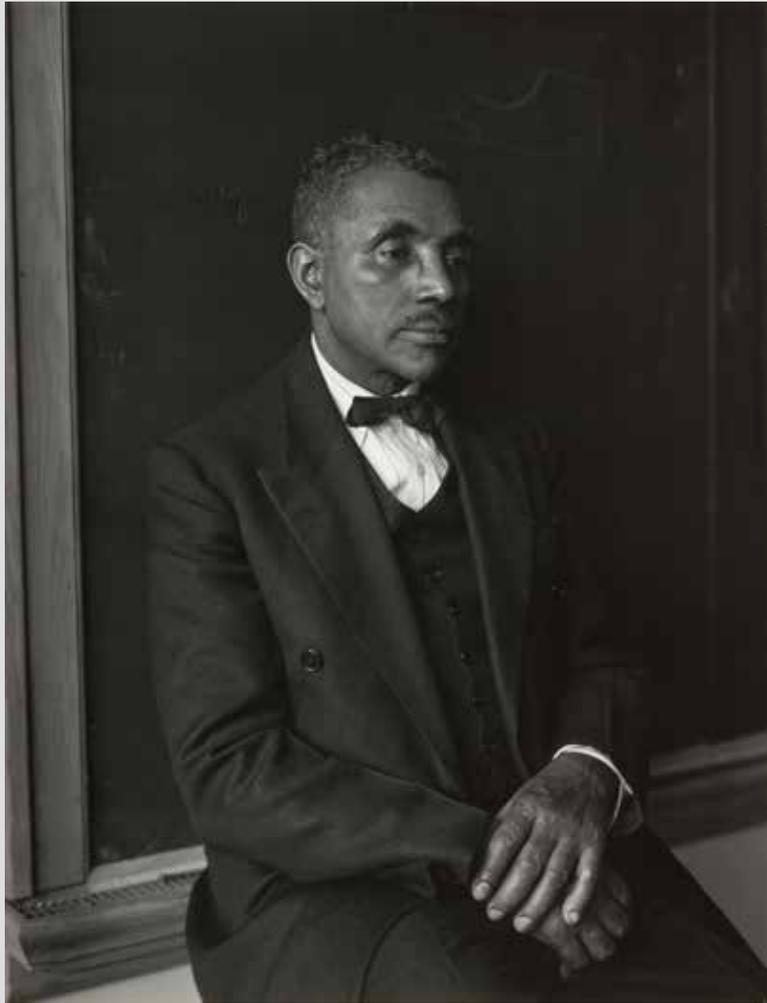


Figure 5

Mr. Brown Jones,
Athens, Georgia, 1941
Gelatin silver print

Photograph by Edward Weston
The Huntington Library, Art
Collections, and Botanical Gardens
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What to make of the photographs produced for this contentious commission near the end of Weston's career? The best of the group build on subjects that Weston already knew and loved: the industrial sites of Middletown steel; the broad expanse of western desert, with its confounding sense of scale; New Orleans graves flattened out like Point Lobos tide pools. With other pictures, one can sense his frustration, which Charis noted at times, especially when he defaulted to "illustration mode." Yet there are masterpieces in the mix, every bit the equal of Weston's best work. How could it be otherwise? The Whitman effort came after a lifetime of honing a prodigious talent. The challenges of the project notwithstanding, Weston's mastery shines brilliantly through.

— Jennifer A. Watts

Curator of Photography, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

Weston's Whitman

My plan for work on this commission was direct: I photographed anything and everything I saw which excited me. I could do no more.

—Edward Weston, 1941

The previous essay laid out the vexed story of the Limited Editions Club commission and Weston's disgust with the publisher's decision to pair his photographs with specific quotes from Whitman. The question remains: if Weston did not willingly illustrate Whitman, then what was he doing? Was Whitman merely an annoying stipulation to be ignored or swatted away with clever verbiage in diplomatic letters? Although there is ample evidence to the contrary, I believe that Weston did engage with Whitman, albeit in a selective, eccentric way. Weston's Whitman is not to be found in shared subjects—lilacs, everyday working people, Brooklyn streets, or moss-draped Louisiana live oaks—but in the need to be on the move in order to create. For both, travel was part and parcel of their art.

Reading the letters between Weston and George Macy, the publisher—now housed at The Huntington—one really does suspect the photographer was paying lip service to his client to finance a cross-country junket and repeat the success of the Guggenheim-funded trip that had resulted in *California and the West* (1940). Indeed, outside of these letters, there are suspiciously few mentions of Whitman. Charis's journal and extensive documentation of the cross-country trip say very little about Whitman or *Leaves of Grass*. In 230 typed pages that chronicle the trip from their departure in May 1941 to their return to Carmel in January 1942, Whitman is mentioned only five times and never extensively. In her memoir, *Through Another Lens* (1998), Charis recalled that, "after a tiring day [on the road] we'd take turns reading Whitman until we fell asleep." If Weston read Whitman, it hardly mattered, because "in truth, Edward didn't give a hoot about *Leaves of Grass*—he was having the time of his life." The blithe hope that the publisher's demands could be ignored was later crushed. After the trip the publisher made clear that captions were not optional. In February 1942, Weston wrote his sister that, among other "chores such as kindling wood, [and] garbage," he "read Whitman for lines to illustrate"—hardly a sign of enthusiasm for the task.

Weston denied having any artistic influences, and Whitman for him was no exception. In Weston's Daybooks—diaries he kept in the 1920s and 1930s to ruminate on art, friends, and aesthetic problems—he claimed to be indifferent to the work of other photographers. Alfred Stieglitz, for instance, who had exhibited Weston's work and was the maestro of the American photographic community, was only intriguing to Weston as a writer; his photographs held nothing of interest. The cheekiness is breathtaking. Weston was willing to admit the artistic importance of Bach and other composers: "I am not moved to emulate,—neither to compete with nor imitate, these other creative expressions, but seeing, hearing, reading something fine excites me to greater effort." But even this statement emphasizes that however much these "efforts" spurred him on, they left no residue in the final product.

In one of Weston's more definitive statements about the relationship between *Leaves of*

Grass and his photography, he flatly denied a meaningful connection: "My plan for work on this commission was direct: I photographed anything and everything I saw which excited me. I could do no more. Since Whitman's poems cover all walks of life, and every high- and byway, I couldn't easily neglect him." Since Whitman wrote on just about everything, Weston's photographs inevitably resonate with *Leaves of Grass*. He certainly made it easy for himself.

Why did Weston take on the project at all? Surely part of the allure was Whitman's iconic status. In the 1930s and 1940s, Whitman was a ubiquitous cultural figure with broad appeal, a poet whose democratic message spoke to the egalitarian ideals of the FDR era and the looming prospect of another world war. An October 1940 editorial by Dorothy Thompson that appeared in several major newspapers extolled Whitman as the poet of a "democratic army" that would fight the Nazi scourge. When Franklin D. Roosevelt died unexpectedly in April 1945, an NBC radio broadcast featured the British-born actor Charles Laughton reading Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!* (1865), a eulogy for Abraham Lincoln, another wartime president. Whitman, depicted in a snowy beard and soft hat, was featured on a five-cent postage stamp issued in 1940, as good a sign as any of his cultural entrenchment. For a photographer keen to deny artistic debts, the *Leaves of Grass* commission was as much a source of worry as it was an opportunity, a dynamic similar to what the literary critic Harold Bloom has called the "anxiety of influence." Whitman's poetry and canonical status threatened to eclipse Weston's photographic vision, to lower him to a mere visual expositor, an illustrator-for-hire.

Despite all this, Weston did selectively identify with aspects of Whitman. One point of convergence was the role of mobility in stimulating their creative processes. Weston was on the road repairing unreliable jalopies, lugging a 50-pound camera, and developing negatives in makeshift backseat darkrooms. Whitman, during his decades as a journalist, was out and about gathering material for stories and staying abreast of local and national controversies, from slavery to corporal punishment in Brooklyn's primary schools. By age 19—decades before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855—Whitman had founded the *Long-Islander*, and he later edited a number of Brooklyn and New York newspapers, including the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Weston could not stay cooped up in the studio and darkroom, and he identified with Whitman's itch to break away from his desk.

Weston's iconic images of nautilus shells, cabbage leaves, and convoluted peppers, made in the 1920s, required long exposure times and were done in the controlled conditions of his studio. However, by the 1930s, Weston considered travel, whether to the tide pools and gnarled cypresses of Point Lobos, down the road from his Carmel home, or lengthy road trips, indispensable. His application to the Guggenheim Foundation reads, "In a single day's work, within the radius of a mile, I might discover and record the skeleton of a bird, a blossoming fruit tree, a cloud . . ." In his later career, photographic work was equated with distance traveled. Summarizing the Guggenheim-funded trip that took him up and down California, he said, "I traveled over 23,000 miles and took over a thousand negatives." In an article for *Camera Craft*, he offered close to the same metrics: "I traveled 22,000 miles and made over 1,200 8 x 10 negatives." This tight connection



Figure 6

White Sands, New Mexico,
1941
Gelatin silver print
Photograph by Edward
Weston
The Huntington Library, Art
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Gardens
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persisted into the late 1940s. *The Photographer* (1948), a documentary directed by Willard Van Dyke, follows Weston as he travels by car across California. In Yosemite National Park, a smiling brunette drives while Weston scans the horizon for potential subjects from the passenger seat. As if to underline the car's important role, an early scene takes place in a Los Angeles car wash, as a chrome-plated automobile is scrubbed with mechanical brushes. When Weston's modest home is shown, the narrator explains that he uses it "mainly as a headquarters for his frequent trips through the countryside." Make no mistake, the narrator seems to say, the art happens on the road, not here.

Whitman, in his autobiography *Specimen Days* (1882), recounts his youthful walkabouts on Long Island, his rides on horse-drawn omnibuses on New York's Broadway, his time in New Orleans, where he briefly edited the *New Orleans Crescent*, and his wending trip back to New York "up the Mississippi, and around to, and by way of the great lakes, Michigan, Huron, and Erie." He also stresses the importance of field notes—"impromptu jottings in pencil to refresh my memory of names and circumstances"—taken in palm-sized notebooks easily slipped into a pocket. Mobility was built into his way of writing, not simply a subject. Indeed, he says that "most of the pages from 26 to 81 [of *Specimen Days*] are verbatim copies of those lurid and blood-smutch'd little note-books" kept during his time attending wounded soldiers in Civil War hospitals. Elsewhere in *Specimen Days*, he makes clear that



Figure 7

Mr. and Mrs. Fry of Burnet, Texas, 1941
Gelatin silver print
Photograph by Edward Weston
The Huntington Library, Art
Collections, and Botanical Gardens
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the pattern continued after the war: "Wherever I go, indeed, winter or summer, city or country, alone at home or traveling, I must take notes." Even at home, he was on the go.

Though *Leaves of Grass* is replete with passages about journeys, I suspect these did not attract Weston. Instead, he might have latched on to the way in which Whitman conjures travel with a sequence of mental images, like a slide show. A portion of "Song of the Open Road" ambles along, not because of verbs—there is only one verbal phrase—but because of the narrator's shifting attention: "You flagg'd walks of the cities! you strong curbs at the edges! / You ferries! you planks and posts of wharves! you timber-lined sides! you distant ships! / You rows of houses! you window-pierc'd façades! you roofs! / You porches and entrances! you copings and iron guards! / You windows whose transparent shells might expose so much!" Curiously, except for the "ferries" and "distant ships," all of the items in question are immobile parts of buildings or structures that cannot go anywhere. Nonetheless, these stationary objects push the reader forward. It is as if one were walking and watching these things pass by, each noun a stepping-stone marking the distance traveled from "flagg'd walks" to "curbs" and skipping to "roofs" and "windows."

An equivalent technique is found in "Our Old Feuillage," which conveys North America's vastness by juxtaposing scenes: "In their northerly wilds beasts of prey haunting the Adirondacks the hills, or lapping the Saginaw waters to drink, / In a lonesome inlet a sheldrake lost from the flock, sitting on the water rocking silently, / In farmers' barns oxen

in the stable, their harvest labor done, they rest standing, they are too tired, / Afar on arctic ice the she-walrus lying drowsily while her cubs play around." New York's Adirondack Mountains, Michigan's Saginaw River, a lonely duck, sleeping oxen, and a walrus in the wilds of the Arctic. The continent's size is imparted by abrupt cuts from one scene to another, a cinematic technique *avant la lettre*.

In a letter to the publisher written from New Orleans, after he and Charis had been on the road for about three months, Edward showed that he grasped Whitman's additive method: "To really 'get' America in those 54 photographs is a terrific challenge and difficult task. While to take a list out of Whitman's catalogs, 1 Louisiana liveoak, 1 California redwood, 1 tired oxen in a barn, 1 knife grinder, 1 lilac bush in dooryard, etc. and make pictures to fit, is not even properly a job for a photographer."

The comment about difficulties was pure humblebrag; he did not doubt his ability. Though Weston ridiculed treating Whitman like a to-do list, he understood that the photographs would function as a group, as 54 slices of America. To call one picture the epitome of the United States circa 1941 was as fatuous as trying to understand Whitman from a single line of poetry. Weston had been thinking about photographic groups since at least *California and the West*, and the compilation of photographs in books would occupy him during the coming years with *Fifty Photographs* (1947), *The Cats of Wildcat Hill* (1947), *My Camera on Point Lobos* (1950), and the *Fiftieth Anniversary Portfolio* (1951). Moreover, in the early 1940s, he selected 500 prints for *The Huntington*. It is no wonder that Weston identified with Whitman's lists, even if he resisted letting them dictate the photographs' content.

Though Weston picked up on the mobility and additive process that pervade Whitman's poetry and prose, neither movement nor method manifest themselves in the individual photographs. Moreover, if one takes Weston at his word that he did not consciously replicate Whitman's subjects, then there is little to say about the photographs themselves in relation to the poet. Stepping aside from the tangled question of Weston's Whitman to look at the photographs on display in this exhibition, one sees the striking transformations wrought by Weston, who often makes the world seem strange without manipulating anything other than viewpoint. Rather than presenting Boulder Dam as a predictable, cliff-like concrete wall, for instance, he points his camera down this engineering marvel to focus on the flattened, boldly outlined U shape of the outflow area below. Strata of clouds and dust over White Sands National Monument mingle like cream diffusing into black coffee (fig. 6). A glowing metallic sphere at a Texas oil refinery is pristine and clean, somehow both ultra-modern and atavistic, like a totemic symbol from an ancient culture (fig. 2). Rockefeller Center's chiseled Art Deco skyscrapers are decapitated sentinels in a gray sky. One opposition does emerge: alongside the technological wonders of American engineering—including Boulder Dam, steel mills, oil refineries, and bridges—other structures are fragile holdovers from the nation's past. A falling-down plantation has hay bursting from its windows, and below, a battered car that is either parked or abandoned (fig. 1). With streaky stains and heat-singed ferns in a vase, a New Orleans aboveground grave is moldering away in the dank summer heat (fig. 3).

Weston's portraits have a similar push and pull between old and new in the contrast between wrinkles and signs of age and the sitters' cleaned and pressed clothing, all of which are captured by the prints' dazzling resolution. An elderly Texas couple wearing clean clothes nonetheless have worn-out shoes, weathered faces and hands, and sagging stockings. Their home needs a fresh coat of paint (fig. 7). A middle-aged African American choirmaster and cook wearing a three-piece suit and bow tie crosses his hands, meditatively resting, lost in thought in front of a blackboard (fig. 5). A Yaqui chief in Arizona holds a ceremonial staff of office and stares intently in a brilliantly white, ironed shirt.

Though Weston treats his sitters with dignity, he does not trumpet a triumphalist celebration of the American spirit. In this respect, he diverges from Whitman's ecstatic praise for America. It is, perhaps, to an altogether different source that Weston turned to think about decay and senescence. In one of her reading lists for the trip, Charis scrawled a note about chapter 1 of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835); she was probably referring to "Exterior Form of North America," a sketch of the geography, climate, and pre-European inhabitants of North America. Toward the end of the chapter, the French politician and writer meditates on the earthen burial mounds, called *tumuli*, constructed by Native Americans in what is now the Midwest. (Serpent Mound in southern Ohio and the Cahokia Mounds in Illinois are two examples.) In the 19th century, the mounds were thought to be remnants of a mysterious race that had preceded the Native Americans. (Even today, almost nothing is known about the mound-building cultures.) For De Tocqueville, they were reminders that cultures are just as mortal as individuals: "How strange does it appear that nations have existed and afterwards so completely disappeared from the earth that the remembrance of their very names is effaced, their languages are lost, their glory is vanished, like a sound without an echo."

Manmade objects, whether mounds, bridges, or marble graves, endure long after the cultures that create them. Weston's photographs can preserve an instant for a murky future, but they cannot revivify because they are mute. Maybe he liked the idea that silent artifacts outlive chattering peoples and nations. After all, he resisted talking about his art, and he often panned art critics' fanciful interpretations. With the exception of simple captions or titles, words polluted photographs. For all of their beauty, the photographs for *Leaves of Grass* do not add up to a standpoint on American life, though there is an undercurrent of change, of sparkling new steel beside bleached wood boards and crumbling buildings. The photographs have a message, but not one that is decipherable. If Weston is saying something, if he really does "get" America, then it is only a murmur crackling beneath the photographs' exquisite surfaces, a sound without an echo.

— James Glisson, PhD

*Bradford and Christine Mishler Assistant Curator of American Art,
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens*

Checklist of Works

All photographs are by Edward Weston (1886–1958) and are gelatin silver prints. All items are from The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

New York
1941
000.111.6

The Brooklyn Bridge
1941
000.111.8

**Mrs. Sangi's Windows,
New Jersey**
1941
000.111.12

**Barn with Hex Signs, Berks County,
Pennsylvania**
1941
000.111.14

Pittsburgh
1941
000.111.16

**Winter Zero Swartsel's "Bottle Farm,"
Farmersville, Ohio**
1941
000.111.18

Armco, Middletown, Ohio
1941
000.111.19

Mr. Brown Jones, Athens, Georgia
1941
000.111.22

**Bonaventure Cemetery, Savannah,
Georgia**
1941
000.111.23

Marshes of Glynn, Sea Island, Georgia
1941
000.111.24

Dillard King of Monteagle, Tennessee
1941
000.111.25

**Mr. and Mrs. Summers of Monteagle,
Tennessee**
1941
000.111.27

**William Edmondson, Sculptor,
Nashville, Tennessee**
1941
000.111.28

Negro Church, Louisiana
1941
000.111.33

Belle Grove, Louisiana
1941
000.111.34

**Woodlawn Plantation House,
Louisiana**
1941
000.111.39

New Orleans
1941
000.111.41

**Altar of Chapel in St. Roch Cemetery,
New Orleans**
1941
000.111.49

Gulf Oil, Port Arthur, Texas
1941
000.111.53

Fort Worth, Texas
1941
000.111.57

Mr. and Mrs. Fry of Burnet, Texas
1941
000.111.59

White Sands, New Mexico
1941
000.111.84

Yaqui Indian [Tomas Alvarez], Tucson
1941
000.111.107

Yaqui Indian Church, Arizona
1941
000.111.112

Boulder Dam
1941
000.111.122

Boulder Dam
1941
000.111.123

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
Draft preface to *Leaves of Grass*
ca. 1863-67
Autograph manuscript
mssHM 6714

Samuel Hollyer (1826-1919)
Portrait of Walt Whitman after a
Daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison
1854
Steel engraving
Frontispiece for 1855 *Leaves of Grass*
mssHM 1193

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
"You Lingerin Sparse Leaves of Me"
Letterpress proof sheet with autograph
corrections by the author
1885-87
mssHM 1193

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
with an introduction by Mark Van
Doren and photographs by Edward
Weston
Leaves of Grass, 2 volumes
New York: Limited Editions Club, 1942
RB 606485

Real American Places

Edward Weston & *Leaves of Grass*

This exhibition considers a dialogue between two iconic figures in American culture: the renowned photographer Edward Weston (1886–1958) and the poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892). The 26 vintage photographs on view illuminate an understudied chapter of Weston's career. In addition to the photographs, the exhibition includes a number of Whitman items from The Huntington's holdings, allowing visitors to explore the creative response of one giant of American culture to another.

Curator Tour:

November 9 (Wednesday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.

Join curator Jennifer A. Watts for a private tour of the exhibition.

Members: \$15. Non-Members: \$20.

Registration: Huntington.org/calendar.

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment and the Steve Martin Fund for American Art.



THE HUNTINGTON

Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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