

# HUGH EDWARDS

Aim for the realistic image

By JACOB DESCHIN

“I wanted to get people to look at photographs, to show the life around them.”

Thus Hugh Edwards summed up his aims in offering photography shows at the Art Institute of Chicago, and incidentally indicated the kinds of photographs—hence photographers—he favors.

In an interview during a ten-day visit to New York City he was recalling his start as curator of photography in 1959 under Harold Joachim, who was appointed curator of prints and drawings in 1958, making Edwards associate curator with special responsibility for photography at the museum.

Definitely anti-precious and anti-obscure in his photographic preferences, he is also “very tired of social propa-

“At the Institute we have not had a show that people have not liked. They linger in the photography shows and carefully examine each picture. We ascribe this to the fact that they are finding in photography a statement of themselves and the life around them which is often denied them in other contemporary arts.”

Although Hugh Edwards came into the limelight barely six years ago, he was no newcomer either to the Institute or to Chicago. He has been in the city for nearly three decades, since about the time of the 1929 stock market collapse, and has been associated with the Institute, in one capacity or another, to the present.

Born in Paducah, Ky., fractionally Cherokee (one-eighth, in fact, by grace of his great-grandmother) and of Scotch and Welsh parents, he had a solitary boyhood. Books and music took the place of human contacts until high school days, when he first got to know people and experienced the capacity for human understanding and friendship that has blossomed into one of his most agreeable traits.

Books (“we can learn more from books than from people themselves,” he believes) and music (a hi-fi fan, he owns an extensive collection of records) have continued to be his principal enthusiasms. Photography was a later addition when, about 25 years ago, he first turned the pages of *American Photographs* by Walker Evans, and was immediately captivated. It was a discovery, both of a new medium and “something new about myself,” that was to become years thence a strong influence on his work as photography curator and exhibitor.

He was 25 when he came to Chicago, specifically to study music. Part-time, to help pay for his tuition, he worked as a library assistant at the Institute. It was an occupational skill he had brought with him from Paducah, where he had worked as librarian in the local public library. When the ensuing Depression put an end to music study, the Institute took him on full-time.

Two years later he was transferred to the department of prints and drawings, and when, in 1940, the late Carl O. Schniewind came from Brooklyn to be curator of the department, he was made his assistant. Schniewind recognized photography's value as a visual medium of expression on a par with other printing arts. Backed by the hearty approval of Daniel Catton Rich, the Institute's director, who had been discussing for some years the possibility of including a photography and film program at the museum, Schniewind inaugurated a series of photography shows in 1940.

At first intermittent, the shows were scheduled on a regular basis when Peter Pollock, the museum's publicity director, was made curator of photography. His long series of exhibitions continued to 1957, when he left Chicago.

At Edwards' request, the photographs Pollock had acquired as curator were turned over to the department of prints and drawings, where they joined the Alfred Stieglitz Collection from Georgia O'Keeffe in the museum's permanent collection of photography. When Harold Joachim succeeded Schniewind upon the latter's death, photography became part of the department's activities and Edwards was given the title of curator.

For two years after Pollock left, the museum showed no  
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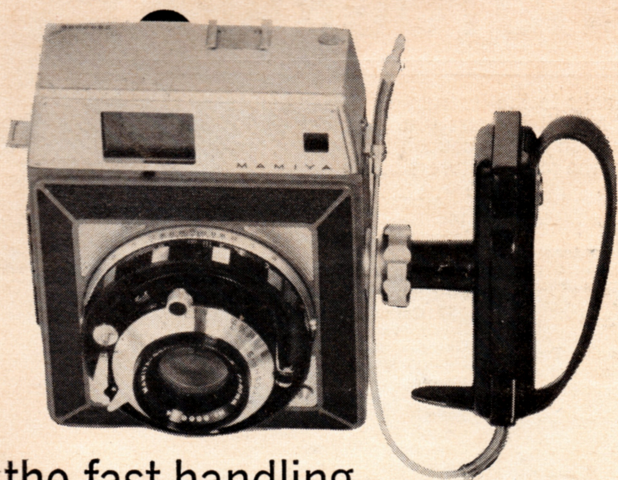


Curator of photography at Chicago's Art Institute, Hugh Edwards

ganda” pictures, he told me. “Photographs should awaken some responses in the observer, differing with every individual. This evocation of personal feeling on the viewer's part makes for a kind of universal acceptance of the photographic image.”

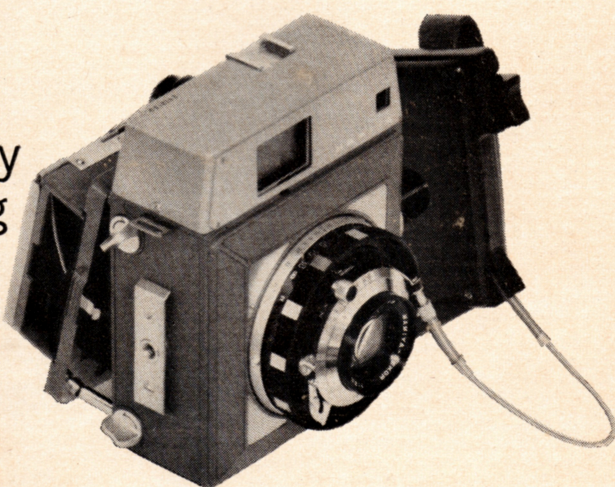
“In our effort to get people to look at photographs in an art museum,” he continued, “we aim primarily for the realistic image. Any art distinguishes itself by what it does that no other art can do. That is why I prefer the photographer of actuality, the actuality of the passing moment.”

“Looking at good photographs is like reading a good book. It enlarges one's awareness of the world, makes one increasingly more conscious of many things in life one did not know before, inspires fresh perspectives.



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photographs. When regular exhibits were resumed in 1959 it was quickly apparent that an eager public was ready to support them with large attendances.

Edwards' first show was held in a small gallery on the first floor. It was a carefully picked selection from the museum's collection of masterpieces of photography, in effect a historical survey in 76 prints from Hill to Stieglitz to contemporary photographers.

Edwards prefers one-man shows to large exhibitions, and detests the huge enlargement, which he feels misrepresents the photograph.

"It is the small print," he says, "that arrests attention and may lead to prolonged contemplation. One of the best rewards for our efforts is the proof that people do prefer seeing photographs as nearly as possible in the formats in which their makers conceived and realized them."

His first show by a contemporary photographer was Ray Metzker's "My Camera and I in the Loop." This was the result of a master's thesis Metzker had prepared for Harry Callahan, then head of the photography department at the Institute of Design in the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. Aside from the fact that it was a highly successful achievement, the Metzker exhibition also was a kind of open gesture of encouragement to Chicago photographers to exhibit their mature work at the museum.

However, this was only one aspect of his exhibition approach. Searching for diversity in style, treatment and content, he presented such photographers as Robert Frank, Dave Heath, Rudolph Janu, Dennis Stock, and Art Sinsabaugh, among others. In his effort for broad representation of current work in the medium, he showed Minor White and Robert Riger, whose documentation of sports subjects is unique in this country, and was astonished to learn that over a period of three years these two strongly different talents had attracted the largest audiences.

Another phase of his program is to show at least two photographers of the past each year, for he finds there exists an "amazing" lack of knowledge, even by photographers, of such historic figures as Fox Talbot, David Octavius Hill, Roger Fenton, Peter Henry Emerson, Alexander Gardner, and countless others.

Hugh Edwards is not one of your eat-sleep-breathe-photography zealots, but a personality that embraces many and diverse interests and activities. He insists, however, that all are, and can be shown to be related to photography in some way—or to any other expressive art, for that matter. For if photography is the art of mirroring and reporting the life we see and experience around us, as he frequently points out, then anything that has to do with life is material for the photographer.

As a hi-fi buff he is engaged not only in the pleasures of listening to music, but also

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Popular PHOTOGRAPHY

in the mechanics of the hi-fi medium itself. As a lover of literature, which has been a lifetime affair, his sympathies range widely, though his leanings as a collector run mainly to French and Italian books. He has a large personal collection of photographs that have pleased him particularly. In movies, as in photographs, his tastes lie in affirmations of the statements of life that are opposed to the prevalent pleth-

ora of defeatist and absurdist themes.

He makes friends; most of the photographers whose work he has exhibited have joined his growing list. Ever receptive to new experiences and sensation, he has standards but no prejudices. When friends took him to a garishly decorated restaurant during a New York visit his eyes popped with excitement at the vivid colors and crudely worked patterns and designs. "I

liked it. It was in bad taste, but so freshly imagined. We have so much that is in good taste, it is a relief to see something that isn't."

In addition to the regular duties of his curatorship, Edwards has written on photography, art, and other subjects for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and other publications, and has collaborated in the preparation of several scholarly volumes.—

Great Ideas in Color continued from page 69

HARBUTT:

"Feeling, not meaning"

I don't take color seriously. To me it's sort of like frosting, and I shoot it mostly for pleasure, not for meaning. It's too uncontrollable, it might not be the right mood. For instance, somebody dying might be covered with blood—which is such a nice bright red gay color. I think Ernst Haas takes wonderful color pictures, but to me they have feeling, not meaning. I go for meaning, so I don't go for color.

Charles Harbutt, Magnum

LAND'S REVOLUTIONARY THEORY

"A half-truth for a larger truth"

A theory of color that has stood for nearly 300 years has suddenly been overthrown. In a series of startling experiments, Edwin H. Land, the brilliant founder and head of Polaroid Corp., has shown that the eye does not need "red" wave lengths of light to see red, does not need orange to see orange, yellow to see yellow, brown to see brown, green to see green, blue to see blue, or purple to see purple. By using black-and-white photographs in combination with various filters, or light sources, Land can produce images of scenes and objects that appear to possess their original gamut of color—yet, according to classical theory, only one, or at most, two colors are "really" present. . . . Once again, it turns out, we have been fooled by nature's deep subtlety into accepting a half-truth for a larger truth.

From *An Astonishing New Theory of Color* by Francis Bello, May 1959 Courtesy of *Fortune*

STEICHEN:

"An entirely new medium"

Color photography can be considered as a technique that enriches the value of a photograph as visual information and documentation, but in the domain of abstract photography I believe it can be regarded as an entirely new medium. I devoted much time to experimenting with it as a new medium, but without coming to a conclusive or convincing solution, and I believe that today, in the field of abstract images, there is a richly rewarding opportunity for exploration.

Edward Steichen, from *A Life in Photography*, Doubleday

DISNEY:

"Children think in color"

Color adds another important dimension to the art of story-telling. Every child thinks in color—more so than adults. And many children have told me that they absolutely dream in color too. Without color as an



Walt Disney

artist's tool for our films, we certainly would not have been able to bring our basic audience all the beauties, imagery, and joy that are conceived in the mind of an artist, and loved in the hearts of all.

EVANS:

"A brick automobile?"

The effect of color on an observer may be wholly changed, depending on whether the color is glossy or matte. Picture a shiny red automobile and then try to imagine it with a matte brick surface; the whole effect would be different! Since we use colors to produce some effect on people, we must be aware of how surface texture can influence that effect.

Ralph M. Evans, director, Photographic Technology Division, Eastman Kodak Co., from *Graphic Graftex Photography*, 10th Ed., Morgan & Lester

VARDEN & SNYDER

"Nobody's skin is gray . . ."

No one finds a black-and-white reproduction of a subject objectionable . . . on the basis of "accuracy" of reproduction. The black-and-white photographic portraits of Yousuf Karsh, for example, are sometimes considered works of art. But if you ever saw a person on the street with the gray skin color of such photographs, you would stop dead in your tracks. Such a ghostly figure

would not, by any stretch of the imagination, conduce you to say, "There's a person with flesh that matches Karsh's black-and-white portraits exactly."

So why is it so commonplace to find "accuracy" used in relation to color reproduction when such a simple instance can be cited to show that exact reproduction is not a requirement for esthetic appreciation? Maybe color reproduction is so new, relatively, that we have yet to outgrow the novelty of it which, obviously, derives from its closer approach to realism.

Lloyd Varden and Joe Snyder, from *Print*, July-August 1959

CAPA:

"Colors of war"

Italy . . . Every five yards a foxhole, in each at least one dead soldier. . . . Their blood was dry and rusty, blending with the color of the late autumn leaves fallen about them. . . . The higher I climbed, the shorter the distances between the dead. I could not look any more. I stumbled on toward the hilltop, repeating to myself like an idiot, "I want to walk in the California sunshine and wear white shoes and white trousers." *The Invasion*, June 6, 1944. . . . Waiting for the first ray of light, the two thousand men stood in perfect silence. . . . I too stood very quietly. I was thinking a little bit of everything; of green fields, pink clouds, grazing sheep, all the good times, and very much of getting the best pictures of the day . . . The boatswain lowered the steel-covered barge front, and there, between the grotesque designs of steel obstacles sticking out of the water, was a thin line of sand covered with smoke—our Europe, the "Easy Red" beach. . . . It was still very early and very gray for good pictures, but the gray water and the gray sky made the little men, dodging under the surrealistic

