

Line and Shadow: Photographs by Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty shows us a world we might otherwise never see. Although Welty consciously chose the writing of fiction as her vocation, she pursued visual and written arts with equal interest beginning when she was a schoolgirl. The photographs viewed here, selected from more than a thousand contact prints, demonstrate Welty's conscious efforts as an artist to impart a view of the people, time, and aesthetics of the world in which she lived. They give us Welty's world, which is also our world, through light, line, shadow, and form. The pleasure and knowledge we receive from Welty's vision, fixed in place and time, transport us without limitation.

Welty's photographs illustrate how light and line captured her attention. The cover photograph, titled "Potter" by Welty for one of her two 1936 photographic exhibitions in New York City, this one sponsored by Lugene Inc., Opticians at the Photographic Galleries at 600 Madison Avenue, reflects one artist acknowledging another making art. (The potter, I believe, is A. R. Cole.) Other images that follow here show evanescent patterns of light and shadow, black and white, straight and curved lines. The towheaded boy's cartoonish shadow, the wagon wheel mandala-like shadows, the angles and x's in the photograph of the boy sitting in front of the sideshow barker, the lines and white squares of the beer distributors' warehouses at sunset and of the camellia house, all illustrate Welty's intentional care in snapping her photographs. Among the portfolio are everyday faces of people at play and work: children in action and adults proudly posed. These photographs reveal how Welty artfully manipulated perspective, background, and focal point and call us to give serious attention to her avocation.

By 1938, Welty had published ten photographs and eleven short stories. Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks encouraged her; Alfred Steiglitz, Bernice Abbott, and Walker Evans didn't know she existed. As a writer, Welty found her "fiction's source" in "living life," not in her photographs. Yet, itinerant photographers, family photographs, advertising images, and the language and the craft of photography infuse her writing. These scenes, faces, attitudes, lines, and shadows that once caught Welty's attention and caused her, intuitively but not naively, to frame the image and click the shutter, are published here, for the most part, for the first time.

—Pearl Amelia McHaney