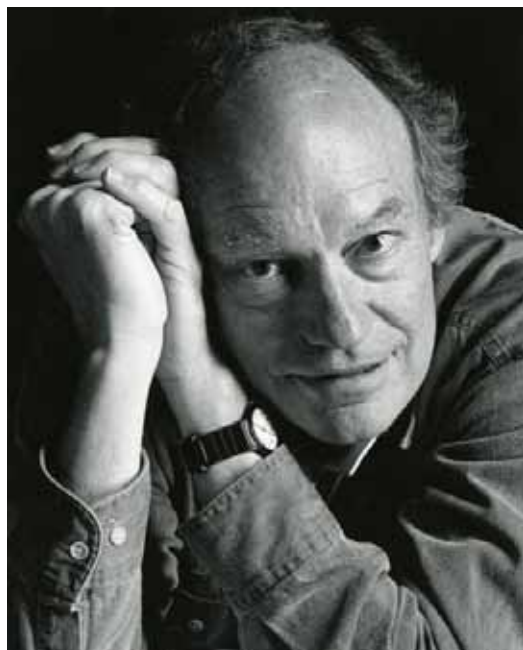




WILLIAM CARTER

MUSEUMS ARE IN PHOTOGRAPHER WILLIAM CARTER'S DNA. HIS FATHER WAS chairman of the original Board of Trustees at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the early 1960s; during that time Carter was already shooting both professional and personal photography, and traveling as a jazz clarinetist, his first real job. Since 2005, Carter is a founding member of the Photographs Council, an advisory board for photography accessions at LA's Getty museum, which holds more than 150 of his black-and-white prints in its permanent collection. A year ago, he joined a similar committee at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

William Carter's most recent book, *Causes and Spirits*, is a retrospective of photographs from his world travels, some recently revealed by the technical advances of digital photography. In his photography blog, Carter writes, "From colonial times and the U.S. Civil War to today's cell phone revolutions and satellite imagery, photography has been as intertwined with the history of science as with the historical events it was picturing."

Carter doesn't collect photography for himself, in order to fund his own art making, but he points out that "People in Los Angeles and San Francisco have loved this medium even before the days when photography was considered a fine art collectible; it's achieved that status in our lifetimes." He spoke with me by phone from his home near San Francisco about how a major art institution collects photography now.

ARTILLERY: My favorite piece at the last two New York art fairs was a photograph, yet photographers I talk to are straddling worlds; the ground is shifting under their feet, and they're trying to stay alive.

WILLIAM CARTER: Trying to stay alive in the art world is not too new! I see the shift a little differently. Some very creative moments in the history of art have happened when there's a major shift in media. Vast new possibilities came in with oil paint, invented around the 16th century. Oil didn't dry right away; painters could mess around with it and use it expressively. Artists who knew the old way of egg tempera, but were young and energetic enough to work in the new way, understood the possibilities, and set the style for many who came after.

We're just beginning to see the possibilities of digital photography. I'm late to this changeover, but two or three pictures in my last book were unprintable until you could scan negatives and print digitally. I personally have prints that were not possible before.

In your blog, you call the feeling when a photo hits you "primal heartbreak." So you're identifying an emotional reaction, more than

any technical facility?

Emotional reaction is the major most important thing. I like to compare photography to jazz—both modern art forms. The sizzle is catching that split second.

How does your emotional instinct play into adding to a major museum collection?

You have a balance of people on these committees. Serious collectors who spend a lot of time and money to go look at art, and really know the field. They put their hearts on the line when they buy, and often end up donating to museums. Then you have museum professionals with academic credentials, who deal with thousands of pictures every day; they have a massive, global view. Add one or two photographers, who bring a different viewpoint. I try to stay close to the immediate experience of the picture.

How would the Photographs Council go about choosing a work?

Each institution has its own way, but the process is exciting and draws on the lifeblood of the community. At the Getty, there's a separate committee budget. The department recommends more work than there

are funds to purchase, so there's a narrowing process, first looking at slides, then prints of the work.

You called yourself a "purist." How does that apply to photography?

When digital first came around, the medium was fugitive; prints are gone because they faded out. There are two steps: first you take the picture and it exists in the digital realm, comparable to the negative in film. When you print the digital picture, you have to think about materials. Art should have long-lasting, conservation values—that's the museum word for it—but that's not necessarily how the art world looks at things. What's inherited from the past is inherited because it didn't disappear. I look at prints that were shot in Egypt in the 1850s, 10 years after photography was invented. Massive glass plates: what those guys had to go through to get those pictures! But they're in pristine condition. It gives yet another layer in how these things mean.

The medium itself is no longer in question, collectors are established, but the line between art and commercial work seems blurred. Will there be a distinction in the future?

It was always blurred. Very few photographers could make a living as a pure artist. Photography was used for many different purposes along the way, like advertising, or selling ideology as a propaganda tool. It's always had a strong relationship to the market, even though it wasn't a fine art market. The kind of blurring I don't like is a tendency in America to knock your socks off by impressing you. That belongs to Mad Avenue too much for me, the all-new, improved version of everything. It's important to differentiate between surface sizzle and internal authenticity.

Care to name a piece the Photo Council recently admired?

I made a speech in favor of one of Gregory Crewdson's works. He tells a story and it's very emotional; it isn't complicated, it's right there—heartbreak, and questioning the human condition. He uses color in a poetic, expressive way, not to look glitzy and fashionable.

In a more painterly way?

That's right. Now I see painters imitating photographers, so it's come full circle. ☺