



Hugh Edwards,
retired curator of
photographs of the
Art Institute.

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The man behind the photographs

Hugh Edwards, for the last ten years curator of photography at the Art Institute, has retired "to do nothing." In his case that means re-reading the collected works of Zola, learning Spanish and making no plans.

Born in Paducah, Ky., Edwards arrived in Chicago as a music student in 1928. The Great Depression and "a complete lack of talent — thank God" steered him into a library position at the Art Institute, and after two years he was appointed assistant curator of prints and drawings under the late Carl Schniewind.

"He was just a remarkable man," says Edwards, now a fragile but vigorous sexagenarian who lives high above Hyde Park in an apartment crammed with books, pictures and a prepossessing stereo system he compares to the finest works of Captain Nemo. "Schniewind influenced me more than anyone," he recalls. "I learned from him that any kind of graphic representation can have validity, including photographs."

This spirit of cultural equipoise was reflected in the first institute photo shows back in the 1940s, and when he became head of the photo section in 1959, Edwards used his slender budget to mount influential shows that would focus on the real world as seen by the masters of the past — such as in this year's Eugene Atget and Thomas Eakins exhibits — and by young men of talent like Robert Frank, Danny Lyon and Robert Riger.

"I was always interested in photography," he says. "I guess it was the great Walker Evans show in 1938 at the Museum of Modern Art (N.Y.) that crystallized my attitudes. I thought Walker captured the real force of this country in a way no other media could. You see, I think pictures should stimulate ideas rather than impose them. There's nothing wrong with abstract or 'pure' photography, but a medium like drawing can express all those artistic tremblings so much better."

Though some cultural aristocrats still abuse the camera as a form of trick art, Edwards feels that "the fact that it is so instantaneous and mechanical is what makes it special. Anyone can use it, and many of the finest pictures are anonymous. If I had another 50 years, I would try to show those pictures."

Did he ever take up the camera himself? "Oh, I used to have a great mania for making pictures," he says, as if looking back upon a rather pleasant affliction. "But once I saw Robert Frank's book, 'The Americans,' I knew my own work as a photographer was done."

But there was other work to be done, and that it was done well, with conviction and grace, will surely not be lost on those who worked with him. Among them is Marie Czach, a former student who has left her position as a research assistant at the Eastman House in Rochester to become the institute's new assistant curator for photography.