

# Minor White in Oregon

## *A Personal Recollection*

by Gerald H. Robinson

Minor White was one of America's foremost photographers and an outstanding teacher of the art of photography.<sup>1</sup> Though generally identified as the head of the photography departments at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he also lived and taught in Oregon. Through his teaching and personal contacts, he had a substantial effect on this area's creative photography. White had two different contacts with Oregon. In the first, from 1938 to 1942, he was primarily a photographer. From 1959 until the mid-1960s, his influence was that of a teacher and, for me, a friend.

White was born in Minneapolis on July 9, 1908. He majored in botany at the University of Minnesota, graduating in 1934. In about 1927, he learned the basics of photography and became increasingly familiar with the history and aesthetic trends of the medium. He arrived in Portland in 1937, looking for work and carrying a newly purchased Argus C3 35mm camera. While living in the YMCA and processing his photographs in its darkroom, he soon became the leader of a small band of amateur photographers who were considered *avante garde* by the more traditional members of Portland's Oregon Camera Club.<sup>2</sup> Among White's colleagues were Larry W. Smith, a recently transplanted New Englander (who died in Beaverton, Oregon, in 2000), and Ray Wing (now retired in Lake Oswego), a news and medical photographer who became a successful businessman and manufacturer of computer-controlled photographic processing equipment.

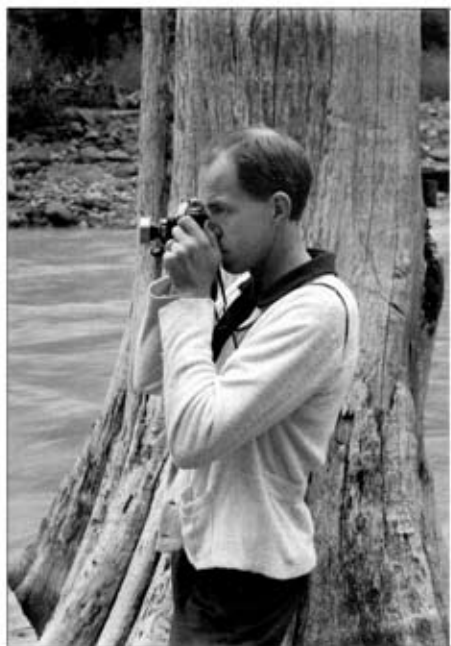


Photo by Lawrence W. Smith. ©Thomas Robinson 1997

To earn a living, White worked for several months as a night clerk at the Beverly Hotel in downtown Portland. He took some photographs for the Portland Civic Theater and made a number of portraits. He also produced two significant groups of photographs, those of the iron-front buildings near Portland's waterfront and architectural studies of several of the mansions that then lined Southwest Park Avenue.<sup>3</sup>

White's distinctive photographs of the city's iron-front buildings were commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, which, with considerable prescience, believed that a record of those unusual structures should be made in case they were ever demolished. Most of them are, in fact, gone. His photographs are more than mere documents, however. They are somber, haunting images of the office and commercial buildings that once comprised Portland's downtown core. Taken very early in the morning, the scenes are empty of people and seem like eerie relicts of a vanished civilization.

In June 1940, White left Portland to work for the WPA in La Grande, Oregon, where he taught photography and supervised an art center. As far as we know, this was White's earliest attempt to teach photography. While in the eastern part of the state, he also took the opportunity to broaden the range of his work and to experiment with different techniques, including infrared film, which had been introduced by Eastman Kodak in 1928. In his free time, he photographed the eastern Oregon landscape. It was in LaGrande that White probably first became seriously interested in religion. He became a Roman Catholic, a faith he tested over time but that remained central to his life, even as he experimented with Zen Buddhism, Sufism, and other belief systems.

In April 1942, White was drafted, and he left Oregon to serve in the South Pacific in a frontline military intelligence unit. Though he never saw combat, his experiences led him to produce a sequence of overtly anti-war pictures entitled "Amputations," later presented in his 1969 book, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*. After the war, White studied at Columbia University with art historian Meyer Schapiro. He wrote his thesis on the photographs of Edward Weston, a twentieth-century master of photography renowned for his landscapes, nudes, and details of nature. He also worked as a photographer-intern at the Museum of Modern Art. While in New York, White met Alfred Stieglitz, the most influential philosopher of creative photography during the first quarter of the twentieth century and a persistent promoter of photography as a fine art.<sup>4</sup> Stieglitz developed the concept of the Equivalent, which he described as a spiritual connection between all valid and honest feelings as manifested in life and art. It is fair to say that White venerated Stieglitz, whose message about the Equivalent had a profound influence on both his photography and his teaching.<sup>5</sup>

In 1946, at the invitation of Ansel Adams, White moved to San Francisco to teach at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). There, he be-

gan a long and close association with Adams, who had recently organized the school's photography department. White quickly adopted and enhanced Adams's Zone System of planned photography, which enables a photographer to control, to some extent, the tonalities of monochrome prints. Soon after arriving in San Francisco, White met with Edward Weston, the subject of his thesis, in nearby Carmel. Weston profoundly influenced White and encouraged him to have faith in his own vision and sensitivity to nature. This advice complemented the encouragement Stieglitz had given him earlier. The power of these ground-breaking photographers' thoughts would drive White and influence his photography for the rest of his life. Weston's doctrine of previsualization neatly dovetailed with Adams's Zone System and Stieglitz's idea of the Equivalent, and White integrated these ideas into his own approach to photography.

Soon after White arrived at the CSFA, Adams received a Guggenheim Foundation grant and left the school to photograph full time. White eventually succeeded him as head of the CFSFA photography department. Then, in 1952, he conceived of a new magazine, one that would be a forum for creative photographers' work and opinions. With the help of Adams and several others, he founded *Aperture* magazine, a vehicle for the type of introspective photography he espoused. White moved to Rochester, New York, in 1953 to work at the George Eastman House and to teach at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He continued to edit and publish *Aperture*, conduct private classes, and pursue his own expressive photography.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in Oregon, a nucleus of dedicated photographers struggled to articulate their feelings and ideas. Most of them were members of Portland's Oregon Camera Club and all earned their livings in ways other than art photography. In truth, serious art photography as a career was simply not an option for any but a handful of geniuses, such as Edward Weston and his son Brett, and even they barely eked out a living from print sales. In Portland, fine arts photographers Alfred Monner and Ray Wing worked as news photographers, Max Allara made portraits and photographed weddings, L.K. Andrews worked for the telephone company, Bill Grand did commercial work, Larry W. Smith was a warehouseman, and I had just begun my law practice. Through *Aperture*, photographers like White, Weston, Adams, Stieglitz, and Paul Strand greatly influenced this group. Unlike many of the other members of the Oregon Camera Club, we came to believe that photography could not only be a serious art form, but that a person could use photography to express personal viewpoints and feelings. In this way, we believed we had a glimpse of what it meant to be an artist.



*While working for the Works Progress Administration, White made documentary photographs of many of the buildings that once comprised Portland's downtown core. This photograph of South Front Street was taken in about 1938 from the Burnside Bridge.*

In the 1950s, Portland had no photographic galleries and few opportunities for public display of serious photography.<sup>7</sup> The competitive salons of the camera clubs dominated noncommercial photography, so it was largely through *Aperture* and a few books of reproductions of the work of fine arts photographers that we formulated our



*In 1939, White took this photo of the iron-front Kamm Building from the vantage of the wreckage of the Opitz Building on Portland's Pine Street.*

ideas and hopes. We also believed that, as artists, we should have contact with those working in other media. We started "Group 15," which consisted of several photographers, painters, and sculptors, along with a musician, a poet, and an architect. Our monthly meetings were informal and there were no officers or dues, but there was a lively interchange of ideas, showings of current work, a great deal of mutual encouragement, and generous consumption of beer. From time to time, there was considerable discussion about Minor White, Edward Weston, and *Aperture* magazine.

In 1959, the year of Oregon's state centennial, the group had an opportunity to take a major step forward. Larry Smith and I were appointed to the Centennial Fine Arts Advisory Commission to represent photography. Seizing the chance to have personal contact with a major photographer who had previously been to Oregon, we invited Minor White to give a workshop as part of the centennial celebration and to hang his "Sequence 13—Return to the Bud," a series of abstract images, in the Oregon Centennial Exposition Photography Show.

In July, White arrived at my home with an assistant, Paul Caponigro, who is now an elder statesman of art photography. Both men had charismatic personalities, and their impact on those of us who met them was immediate and difficult to over-estimate. Tall, a little gaunt, and with startling blue eyes, White was clearly brilliant, but also warm and friendly. Everyone enjoyed his sense of humor, which manifested itself in puns and, sometimes, far-reaching analogies. In retrospect, however, it is clear that White was still learning the craft of teaching workshops: developing formats and assignments; assessing students, their accomplishments and motivations; and developing techniques of constructive criticism. Like all good teachers, he seemed very far ahead of those of us in Group 15, though he confessed to me that he was learning as much as he was teaching. The first Oregon workshop included most of the Group 15 photographers as well as several other serious workers, most notable being Don Normarck from Seattle, who photographed for *Sunset* magazine and created some of the best and most expressive work in the group.

At this time in his life, White's own philosophy (or religion, if you will) had not crystallized. In the 1959 Portland workshop, he used several Zen Buddhist symbols and texts. Eugene Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* was required reading, as was *Acting: The First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky. D.T. Suzuki's books became valued sources. Later workshops tracked White's spiritual progress through Zoroastrianism, Sufism, and Christian mysticism, ending with Gurdjieff's teachings.

All of White's workshops had a rigorous schedule. On each day, we met at about seven o'clock in the morning at different locations selected by White in Portland or at the Oregon Coast. He expounded

on some facet of the art of photography and gave assignments for the day. We photographed until about noon, rushed to our darkrooms to develop and print, and brought our finished and mounted work to a critique session at seven in the evening, a session that lasted until ten or eleven. Then we collapsed into bed. As a result of this schedule, workshop students were exhausted.

White, however, was careful to nap in the afternoons. He made it clear to us that he counted on our weariness to break down our resistance to new ideas, for he advanced several of them that affected us deeply and changed not only our photography but, for some of us, our lives. Years later, in a postcard to me dated April 23, 1961, White expressed one of his ideas this way: "Memorable Fancy — when a photograph mirrors the man, and the man mirrors the world, it becomes possible that both can fuse into a mirror of Spirit."

White believed that serious photography involves a search for what he called "Spirit," however that may be defined. In later years, he believed Spirit was synonymous with God in the conventional sense, but during the early Oregon workshops the concept related more to Zen Buddhism, which is non-theistic but envisions an order in the world. To White, grasping Spirit meant intuitively understanding Nature and one's intimate involvement in its processes. He later called this "The Way Through Camera Work." For him, it was the way of the Spirit.

White's use of Zen symbolism in the 1959 workshop was particularly helpful to students, who were encouraged to approach photography in a frame of mind like a Zen painter or archer might, allowing our feelings to dominate our minds and seeking rapport with our subject. This gave us a whole new approach to the medium and heightened our perception of nature. It also instilled in us a reverence for the act of photographing. We used to smile about White's insistence that when we finished photographing, we should thank the subject, even a rock, for sitting for us. I once asked him what to do if the rock replied "you're welcome." He grinned knowingly, as if that had happened to him.

White also stressed the need for inner quiet and concentration while photographing so that all extraneous concerns were shut out and the photographer could pre-visualize the final print — that is, see it in the mind's eye, complete in its composition and with its various tones and values, mounted and presented as a finished work of art. "Be still with yourself and let the subject generate its own composition," he said.

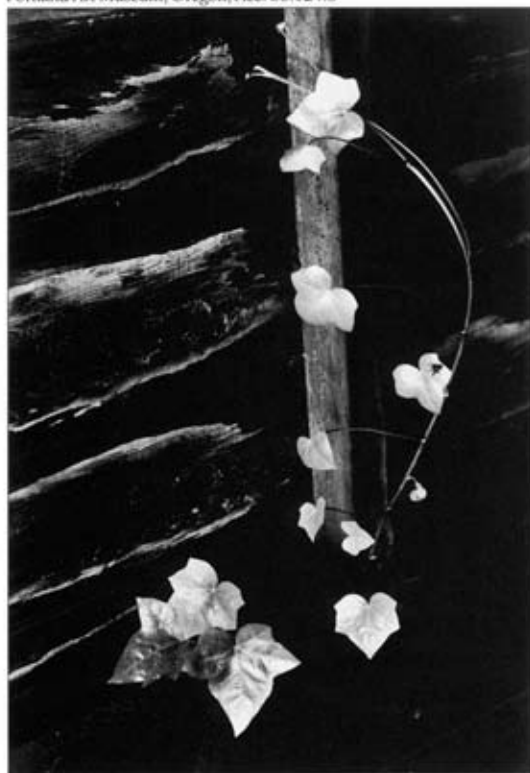
We not only concentrated while making photographs, but White also made sure we focused our attention when we looked at finished prints. He taught us how to view each photograph systematically to develop a heightened awareness of not only its image but also the formal relationships of shapes, details, tonal values, and composition, as well as its emotional and symbolic content.



*Portland's YMCA Camera Club in about 1940, with White at far left in back, Ray Wing second from right in back, and Larry Smith at center front.*

The workshops inspired some of us to devote ourselves to serious photography as a lifetime enterprise. White instilled in us a deep respect for the medium and its possibilities as well as a devotion to a high standard of craftsmanship. He insisted that the camera be "faithfully used," a favorite expression of his. To that end, White devoted considerable time explaining Ansel Adam's Zone System of previsualization and planned exposure and development. He was also concerned about print quality, tonal balance, and formal relationships. The fine print, however, was not an end in itself, he told us, but rather the means to a complete expression of a photographic idea.

Over the years, workshop members and Minor White held dialogues about his photographic theories in letters, taped discussions, personal visits, and subsequent workshops. One issue was the extent to which an expressive photograph actually contains "Spirit," as opposed to what a viewer brings to it and infuses into it in his or her mind. In short, he asked, is "Spirit" in the photograph or in the mind of the viewer? After all, he explained, medieval religious painting was aimed at an audience familiar with Christian iconography and it applied that knowledge and belief to enrich the experience of viewing art as well as in worship. I remember once commenting to White that



*White's photo at left, "Ivy, Portland, Oregon," demonstrates his emphasis on the natural world and presages his later, more abstract work. Above, White works with student Irwin Cohn. Below, he teaches a class in advanced photography in the studio of sculptor Fred Littman in September 1961.*



OHS.IMP. OTH02627

some of his workshop students were deliberately photographing ambiguous lights, shadows, and vaguely suggestive forms in the hope that he would find "Spirit" in such images. It was like, I suggested, telling a teacher what he wanted to hear. White agreed that this happened but suggested that such false starts could grow into genuine experiences and that he would know the difference.

During the workshop, White used a range of challenging assignments to energize the participants and create opportunities for growth.

He developed our awareness of light with projects that called for pictures made with different qualities and kinds of light. He explored composition by asking us to use open and closed forms, and with various perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Although we were trained to be aware of design elements, he never spoke about composition as a set of rules. To him, the rules were to be broken whenever the process of seeing as strongly as possible demanded it.

Some of White's workshops were held at the Portland Art Museum School, although initially the school had grave doubts about including photography among its offerings.<sup>9</sup> Still, a beginners class was added to the summer workshops, and White lavished his energy and attention on the novices no less than on his more accomplished students. I helped in a couple of the workshops, and White encouraged me to try to explain the assignments and technical matters to the participants. He was quietly grooming me to begin to teach camera work. As a result of White's influence and that of several other teachers, in 1961 I began to teach one evening a week at the Portland Art Museum's first regular class in photography.

Through 1965, White returned to Oregon each summer to conduct workshops and renew friendships. In 1967, he participated in a large workshop at the University of Oregon in Eugene that included Ansel Adams, Brett Weston, and W. Eugene Smith. In the winter months, he kept in touch with students by taping comments on photographs sent to him and by carrying on a wide and consistent correspondence.

During this time, White was active in the Boston-area Gurdjieff group, a Christian mystic sect, and photography became for him a means of self-improvement, personal therapy, and religious expression. Despite my less than enthusiastic acceptance of this philosophy, we remained friends and corresponded frequently. Among several projects, I helped establish *Aperture* as a tax-exempt Oregon non-profit corporation, and White recommended the inclusion of my photographs in several significant exhibitions. In 1964, he published an issue of *Aperture* largely devoted to camera work by Oregon photographers, all of whom had attended his workshops.<sup>10</sup>

Minor was always generous and understanding to his Oregon friends in both his support and criticism. In an introduction to one of my shows, for example, he wrote sympathetically about my profession, the law, and photography and how they moved in opposite directions to create a personal dilemma. "Each form of expression," he wrote, "may be considered as an activity of two separate aspects of ourselves, the intellectual and the emotional, each with their own typical behavior. The alternative requires only a purpose bigger than either law or creative photography."

White's contacts with some of his friends in Oregon gradually be-



*Minor White leads a critique session during a 1960 workshop in Portland.*

came less frequent. He had moved to Arlington, Massachusetts, to organize a photography department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he was ever more deeply involved in the Gurdjieff group and in giving intense, private workshops. Nevertheless, he and I kept in touch, increasingly by phone. Once in the early 1970s, I spent a long afternoon with him at Ansel Adam's home in Carmel, California. White had suffered a severe heart attack a few years before, and I was dismayed by how frail and old he seemed. His hair was completely white, and he wore it shoulder length. I remember Brett Weston teasing him, saying he looked like "an aging Anglo-Saxon guru." White joined in the fun.

I last saw Minor White in October 1975 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We visited galleries and talked about photography. He told me that he would soon be going to England for a show of his work and then directly to New Mexico for a workshop. Despite my concern over the effects of jet lag on his weakened heart, he insisted on going, saying that he would rather die than limit his activity. The day after he returned to Cambridge from this trip he suffered a massive coronary. He died on June 24, 1976.

White's choice to continue his work despite the danger to his health was consistent with his philosophy. For him, photography and life were intertwined. The act of photographing was, he was fond of say-

ing, a moment of living. That was true of his teaching as well. All of life, he taught, should be lived as intensely as one photographed, a creative process full of awareness and involvement. For White, retirement or withdrawal was simply unthinkable.

An extraordinary teacher as well as a friend, White charmed both men and women and somehow stimulated those around him to work harder and do better. He was creative in devising a variety of instructional techniques and assignments, and many students believed that in his presence they produced work far beyond their usual level of accomplishment. For him, his workshop tasks were open doors, and he invited students to step through them into new experiences and fresh moments of revelation.

Although he had a profound impact on many people, White encouraged his students to find their own ways. He often experienced mixed feelings when some of them turned away onto their separate paths, occasionally without even a nod to him, but he would repeat the advice that Edward Weston had once given him: "Go and make your own scratch."<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

1. White wrote one major book, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (New York: Aperture, 1969), and many articles for *Aperture* and other journals. He organized several small shows of photographs by other people, including *Light 7, Photographs from an Exhibition on a Theme* (New York: Aperture, 1968); *Be-ing without Clothes* (New York: Aperture, 1970); *Octave of Prayer* (New York: Aperture, 1972); and *Celebrations: An Exhibition of Original Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 1974). For an extensive bibliography, see James Baker Hall, *Minor White: Rites and Passages* (New York: Aperture, 1978), 137-9. See also Peter C. Bunnell, *Minor White: The Eye that Shapes* (Princeton, N.J.: Art Museum, Princeton University, 1989).

2. "Pictorialism" is a movement started in the nineteenth century by photographers trying to convince the public that photography could produce art; most camera clubs have been dominated by pictorialists. The YMCA Camera Club was avante garde in that its members used straight photography without hand embellishments and sought to create pictures that emphasized the strong points of the camera: sharpness, depth of field, a wide range of print tonalities, and sometimes stopped action, for example. Traditional amateurs considered the approach unorthodox.

3. See Fred DeWolfe, *Heritage Lost: Two Grand Portland Houses through the Lens of Minor White* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1995).

4. From 1903 to 1917, Stieglitz published *Camera Work*, which appeared in fifty issues and in

which he presented his philosophy. Stieglitz coined the phrase "camera work," which expanded "serious photography" to any activity that embodied a search for spirit and equivalency in life. White revived the term and used it in the same sense.

5. See Minor White, "A Way through Camera Work," *Aperture* 7:2 (1959).

6. *Aperture* continued under White's direction until his death in 1976 and thereafter with a changed format and content.

7. In 1940, the Portland Art Museum presented "The Pageant of Photography," organized by Beaumont Newhall and Ansel Adams for the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition of 1939. In 1942, the museum hung White's *Grande Ronde Valley Photographs* and *Two Portland Houses*, while the Portland YMCA displayed White's *First Sequence*, a series of photographs made near Mount St. Helens.

8. In teaching the formal aspects of composition, White relied on Heinrich Wölfflin, *The Principles of Art History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950).

9. Before World War II, the Portland Art Museum considered establishing a curatorship of photography, but the idea was abandoned. See Bunnell, *Minor White*, 4-5. Terry Toedtemeier was named the Museum's first curator of photography in 1983.

10. *Aperture* 11:3 (1964).

11. For one example of a disillusioned student, see Arnold Gassan, *Report: Minor White Workshops and a Dialogue Failed* (Sun Prairie, Wisc.: Baumgartner Press, 1983).