



Jean Charlot

Portrait of Edward Weston, 1924

Red chalk on paper, $12\frac{3}{4}$ x $9\frac{7}{8}$ in. (32.4 x 22.5 cm.)

Collection of Zohmah Charlot

The Charlot Collection of Edward Weston Photographs

Van Deren Coke, Guest Curator

Essays by Jean Charlot and
Zohmah Charlot



Honolulu Academy of Arts
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In Weston's World

by Zohmah Charlot

Edward Weston is always spoken of with admiration and, by those who knew him, with love.

My first meeting with him was in his Carmel cottage. I was living in Hollywood at the time, when one day Jean Charlot came to see me and invited me to accompany him on a visit to Edward. Jean was offered a ride by a couple who were impressed with him as a celebrity but were disappointed when he brought me along, holding my hand instead of expounding wisdom all the way. But their hopes had the happy result of delivering us to Edward and his warm hugs of welcome.

I wouldn't want these little reminiscences to be met by Edward's intense, concentrated look or his restless one at that; though he had his say in his *Daybook*:

The most important event of the summer was a visit from Jean who spent several weeks with us, bringing with him Zohmah Day, a strange little sprite of whom we became quite fond.

We found the house full of people,

including three tall sons. Jean and I were immediately made part of the gathering. A girl named Sonia* was preparing dinner and was expertly rolling a freshly baked cake into a jelly roll. As the evening progressed, Edward read aloud from *Look Homeward Angel*. There was talk of Edward's new series of still-life arrangements of vegetables. I was surprised that sex seemed to intertwine with all other subjects; even photography got mixed up with the information that photographers could meet under their black capes. It was mystifying to hear that more went on in a darkroom than printing, considering the small size, sinks full of acids and wet negatives hanging from the ceiling. And lots of laughter when the pet rooster flew crowing over the roof.

Edward attracted noisy friends, but I listened when he spoke softly. He also seemed to bring the outdoors indoors, giving wherever he was space and serenity.

Someone brought the food, light and delicious, with salads, artichokes and boiled carrots. We ate the masterpiece Pepper. Edward's subject matter often ended up on the supper menu.

This night one of the guests had contributed a large steak. While watching Edward's reaction. I became aware of his way of showing displeasure by vague signs of discomfort. Not until a later visit did I hear him raise his voice in anger—

and at me! It was on a very sensitive subject. I had answered the telephone—looking over to where Edward was sitting quietly in the window light bent over a new photograph—and said, "Edward can't come; he's retouching." WOW! only intimates his loud reaction. For the kind of photographer he was, retouching was unthinkable. He was "spotting."

I was put in the studio to sleep, a huge room, beautiful and lonely, lit by moonlight. The next few days, we went out on Point Lobos: walking on the beach and hiking over rocks and through woods. While Edward took pictures and Jean drew in his sketchbook, I took sun baths, watched the big breakers, looked for sea urchins, wandered among cypresses, poked into termite-eaten logs and fed squirrels.

One of those idyllic days was interrupted when an overweight artist came with us and managed to fall down a steep bank to the edge of the sea cliffs with the ocean crashing on the rocks far below. Jean answered her cries, slid down to her side, and gave her the courage to climb back up, Edward was under his focusing cloth, giving all his attention to where the camera eye pointed.

In the evenings, with the fireplace going like a campfire, Edward would get out a pile of his photographs and, while the audience of family and friends lounged on the couch

*Sonia Noskowiak (1900-75), photographer, companion of Edward Weston and with him a member of the f/64 Group, and informal group of photographers active on the West Coast in the 1930s.

and floor, would display them one by one on a chair.

I was happy in this wonderful, colorful world, but what remains brightest in my memory are the black and white photographs: a fan of cabbage leaves, a slice of rock.

I was learning that Edward picked what he wanted out of nature exactly to fit into his camera lens. We sat in the warmth of the fire, seeing his vision before us. He had an aura of quiet excitement as he presented each print, lifting the edges carefully by the wide white margins.

Edward was photographing nudes as well as legumes and rocks, and one day asked me to pose. I must have looked astonished as he made his request so casually, while telling of his own astonishment at finding one of his models shaved all over, even her head. I recovered myself enough to say no. Later Jean scolded me: "When a great artist like Edward asks something, you should do it—even if he is asking you to jump in a river."

I had refused because I didn't want to show my funny knees. Edward must have laughed at what happened later. After one of my visits to Carmel, I went to San Francisco to look for a job. I came down for a weekend to tell them I was going to get married. They were very surprised because they couldn't imagine to whom. When I said to Jean, they were still surprised but happy.

Jean and I went to stay with them on our honeymoon and were napping on the rocks on Point Lobos while Edward was prowling about carrying his big camera. When he later showed us just the perfect view he had focused on, it was us! This became one of his favorite pictures. So my knees were not only photographed, but published in *The Family Man*, and in not one copy of the best-selling book did they improve.

Bull from the Town of Santa Cruz near Tonalá, 1926
Catalogue No. 8





Kelp, 1930
 Catalogue No. 12

Edward and Charis came to see us on their honeymoon and I photographed them. Edward accepted his subjects however they might be, but asked him to stand a step above the taller Charis.

The house Edward built in the Carmel Highlands inspired me to do a watercolor. Edward was “spotting,” and Charis was sitting at his desk—the same desk at which Edward wrote his *Daybooks* and, what I thought more important, his

postcards to “Zohmah Daisy Darling”:

*Sun-beach-bath-supper-dance
 Come out and Rumba
 Come 5 beds await you
 ?Quando?
 I have prints for you, abrazos for you,
 dances for you.*

The cards were 3½ x 4½ inch works of art, done in Chinese black ink with a heavy pen point.

When Charis came into Edward’s life, she sent more practical invitations: “Come and bring a blanket.” I liked Charis, and she seemed not to mind my coming. But she swayed Edward to think of me as comical. I had to get used to someone else admiring him with an even warmer love than mine. With Charis’ presence felt, his cards read “Zee Day,” and when she was away from him, staying with me over Thanksgiving:

“No word, no response from my concubine, so I turn to you my secret sorrow. Love, darling, and pass it along to my girlfriend.”

Charis and I shared not only the message but a turkey and a bottle of whiskey. She poured the drinks, and I stuffed the bird, when I aimed at the right one of the two I was seeing.

For a while Edward and Charis lived in Santa Monica—for me, only a ride away on the red streetcar. Wherever Edward lived, the house

took on the same quality: few furnishings, usually Jean's painting *Hammocks* on the wall, Edward's desk, a low couch, and always many visitors. No one seemed to do much housekeeping, though everything to do with photography was painfully neat. Once I got one of Edward's restless looks for getting down on my knees and oiling the floor.

I went to see them weekends after work, and if the house was crowded, I slept on four chairs. One evening, we were all sitting at the dinner table (a more regular use of the chairs), and a discussion, or rather a telling of each other's faults began. We all agreed that Edward's only fault was that he was too good. He was patient with the people who wandered in and out of his life, loyal to his friends, and admired and loved his children. Life for Edward was a lot of generous giving.

Money was not one of his topics. If you bought a photograph from him, he usually gave you two. He seemed pleased when offered commissions, but, though poor, was not always able to accept them. Hurrying to meet deadlines did not fit in with his creative moods and disturbed the concentration he needed to do his own work.

To be with Edward was to be with his work. I often walked the beaches and mountain trails with him, but like everyone else, I had to wait for the finished photograph to know what he was seeing. Now I look at a

picture and think: I was there for that moonrise; we had just finished eating Edward's "Lava Beds Stew"—a mixture of beef, Vegal and Lima beans—and washed the supper dishes in the desert sand. Or looking at another photograph: that wave splashed my feet.

A Guggenheim fellowship, cases of canned food, a car with Charis as driver, allowed Edward to go to new sights. One day, when he was planning his first trip to Death Valley, I made the airy announcement, "Oh, I've been there. There's nothing to photograph." Later, when showing his magnificent desert series, Edward enjoyed repeating that remark. Even when present I never reminded him that I was the stupid person who had made it. He really was not being critical, only amazed that others could see so little.

A regular hanger-on, I went with Edward and his group to a Hollywood party. Maybe the absurdity of the \$2.00 organdy dress I was wearing gave Edward the idea we should trade clothes. Then we danced. Dancing with Edward was like being free whirling winds. A lady's whisper blew after us, "How could a great artist like Edward Weston act so wild!" She should have had the chance to whirl away with him to know how truly great! He soon wanted his clothes back but had to catch me before I returned the rough, woodsy shirt and the baggy corduroys.

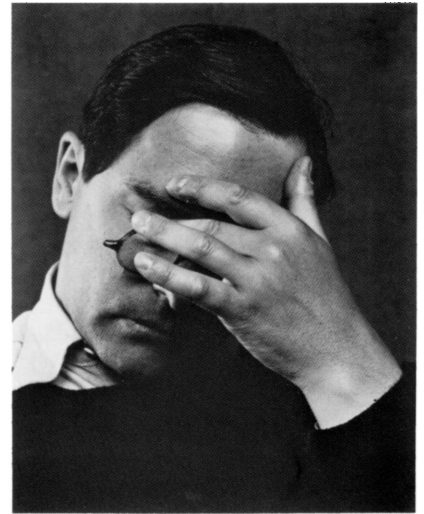
Zohmah and Jean Charlot, 1933
Catalogue No. 23



The best times were participating in routine work, a routine different every day. I helped type lists of negatives and felt proud of the finished stacks and pleased to be part of such enthralled activity and contentment. Charis had the idea of organizing Edward's work; although he had made so many photographs of her she couldn't find a way to file inspiration.

My visits with Edward would pass in reading, eating by the fire, looking at photographs, listening to the radio, waking up too early, playing with the cats in the pine needles while Edward and Charis still slept. Waiting for the most routine of all, the ritual of Edward preparing the morning coffee in the old pot before going out to look at the world.

What Edward saw now belongs to everyone. But I have the special memory of having been part of Edward's world and watching him totally intense at his camera or lighting up with a smile full of joy and mischief and affection.



Jean Charlot, 1933
Catalogue No. 16