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Harry Fisher, Pathfinder to the Spirit: A View from Having Been There (Photo Essay)

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I found the Harry Fisher photographs (or vice versa) quite by accident, as is the case with most discoveries. And I find in his photographs a hint of mysticism that for me seems to originate from prehistory. Mr. Fisher’s work, for me, is symbolic of something much more than the times he portrays; it brings me a feeling that I might trace to the earliest inhabitants of the same area that Fisher photographed.

Roughly a thousand years ago there lived in Marietta a people whose history is lost save for several burial mounds that have survived time and the elements. I’ve known these mounds since I was old enough to walk on them, and the mystery of their making is still a fascination to me. Added to this there existed an ancient road that connects the burial site, Turtle Mound, which lies in the center of town, with the river, Muskingum. This path became a city street about 150 years ago but still retains its link with its origin through its name, Sacra Via, the sacred way.

When I look at these ancient earthworks, I can’t help feeling that, although the religion of these people must have been the dominant law in their life, something with immense spiritual influence, beyond their religion, affected their lives. And having been born in Marietta myself, and having lived there for a quarter of a century, I have a sensation of what that incredible influence might have been. It was the land where Marietta now sits, at the point where two rivers, once rich in fish and soil nutrients, blend to enrich the already Edenlike landscape. The wild game were great in variety and number; the weather a beautiful balance of four seasons and the earth ideal for life with open fields, abundant hardwood forests, and rolling hills.

These people are gone, and much of the game too. But the land is still there, and the two rivers still meet, and it is all still beautiful, with a subtle power.

Five years ago Nancy Stout, who is also a native of Marietta, was appointed to the Historic Preservation Office at Marietta College, at which time she embarked on a project to preserve local architecture having historic value. I was asked to assist her in photographing certain sites for documentation, and to aid our own research we visited the college’s library for whatever local visual material we could find. In a well-kept storage-reference room constituting the top floor of the library we found about fifteen file cabinet drawers packed thick with negatives (some 14,000) known to have been made by Harry Fisher.

This work would have gone up in flames had it not been for an old friend who heard, shortly after Fisher’s death, that his negatives were going to be burned. He immediately raced to the old studio and, with permission of the family, gained custody of the collection. Realizing their historic value, my friend gave the negatives to Marietta College for safekeeping. They now rest in the same condition as they were when given to the college some 25 years ago—wrapped in crumbling paper envelopes rich in sulfur, negatives in contact with each other. I could go on forever... For three months I was given the freedom to pull from the collection images that strongly reflected the period of Fisher’s life. And for those three months I printed nearly every day whatever findings I’d made. It was intense, and in a way I was alone with this work. The darkroom can be like a vehicle in all its isolation, and it is possible to make profound visits to other places and times.

In moving back and forth from Harry Fisher’s time to mine, I experienced a remarkable difference in the Marietta of then and now. The more obvious changes were in clothing, appliances, and other superficial aspects of both eras. But most importantly there was a change of spirit. Since this work was connected to a project in preservation, it faced me with the problem of deciding what should be preserved. It was this search that led me to understand that behind all those Victorian houses, behind all those planted fields, behind all those faces, and behind the very making of those 14,000 negatives is a spirit of and for life. It is this human spirit that is to be preserved, this spirit that even the moundbuilders held in the highest esteem. The survival of the burial mounds is a testament to their great concern with preservation of the human spirit.

It is this human spirit that I find so different today from that of Fisher’s time. Now it is TV and “mega-business” that dominate our culture. These two activities are dehumanizing, and in a time before their development, such as Fisher’s, people were different. Stimulation must have begun inside each person, giving birth to imagination and spirit. Fisher’s pictures reflect a more animated people with a life-supporting need to interact. Of course, many conditions of Fisher’s time must have contributed to this spirit. At the turn of the century when Fisher was about 20, Marietta experienced its greatest growth. There was an oil boom, a great river transportation system stimulating local business; a still active migration of wealthy easterners to the west, bringing with them money and culture, and a world war in the making, bringing people alive with patriotism.

Michael E. Northrup was born and raised in Marietta, Ohio. His interest in photography began at age 21, after he had tried other professional studies from commercial flight training to petroleum engineering. He is presently teaching at the University of Virginia.
Adding to the already existing spirit, Fisher has a way of intensifying that very element in his photographs. I would find it difficult to discuss this work in terms of art, as our definition of art is always changing. There has been in the past 5 years a growing interest in the snapshot, and although there it has a non-intrusive quality, I feel that Fisher’s records go much farther. They are powerful and clear documentation. Powerful because one is faced “smack up against” the subject. It is not diluted with excessive self-consciousness or an imposed subjective point of view. It is straight on. The subject is made clear not only by large format and good optics but through Fisher’s strong sense of basic photographic structure, and it is his sense of order that helps penetrate to the heart of the subject.

One might even see Fisher’s use of the camera as akin to some Eastern thought in that his camera is like a stream leading to each image and he merely keeps the current flowing rather than trying to change its course. It is not passively but rather actively helping the camera to perform its greatest function: to document.

Another aspect of Fisher that delights me is his deep enjoyment of this medium, photography. As I look at some thirty random photographs, I can see that many were made on commission but that many others were made on his own initiative for his own enjoyment. Yet all seem to be made with an equal fascination for the subject. This consistency about his work I find admirable.

Fisher was quite caught up in all that life, and, I sense, quite affected by more than just his own present. There is something incredibly influential about that land that is seen or sensed by some locals from each generation. Spirit is a vital and timeless element, and when it is displayed it can embrace the mind and heart. I feel Fisher’s work profoundly does this to me.

**Biographical Note**

Harry P. Fisher was born in Marietta, Ohio, in 1879, and lived there nearly all his life. In those years he made approximately 14,000 negatives of that local culture, which are nearly all that survive him. Just as it was his position to observe and record, always placing himself behind the camera, so he went through life somewhat unnoticed. These photographs, and Mrs. Max Farley, who was his receptionist for nearly 30 years, give us a bit of his history.

Fisher’s schooling was completed at the Marietta Academy in 1896, giving him something equivalent to a high school diploma. For most of his adolescence Fisher worked in his father’s shoe store until, at the age of 22, he opened a photography studio on Front Street, near the wharf, at the union of the Muskingum and Ohio Rivers.

Fisher devoted his early work to documenting river boats, making some 1,100 glass plates which were printed as postcards. This satisfied two needs: an aesthetic one, stemming from an early-born fascination for this popular river craft, and a financial one, as river boats and postcards made a perfect union and sold well.

As this business developed, he accepted all types of subject matter and for over 40 years photographed nearly everything under the sun, either for commission or for some other kind of gratification. Of all those photographs Fisher made I feel sure that the portraits were his favorite work. One need only see the subjects’ response to him and vice versa. These portraits are both spirited and elegant.

I also find it interesting to note that not only did Fisher make photographs of almost anything but at almost any time of day and almost any place. Portraits at night were made with flash powder or flash bulb, and interiors with several electric lights which Fisher would move around himself during long exposures, thereby rendering a room shadowless. And during the day he would always rely on natural light whether on location or in his studio.

The place didn’t matter much either. There are photographs made in orchards, of floods from inside a rowboat (including some interiors during that phenomenon), in stone quarries, from over the Muskingum in midwinter, and so on. As if the location weren’t challenging enough, Fisher made sure that the documentation was made with great clarity, taking his 8-by-10-inch view camera everywhere, even on those shaky boats during seasonal floodings.

To assist him in the making of those 14,000 negatives Fisher trained two assistants: a receptionist, who also did developing and printing; and a lab assistant, who helped with the greatest bulk of work. His business was housed in a converted riverfront store boasting a reception room, an office, dressing rooms, and a studio on the first floor, and a workshop on the second floor where processing was done. The skylight was on the back of the building. This was the way he worked for more than 40 years, right up to his death.
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