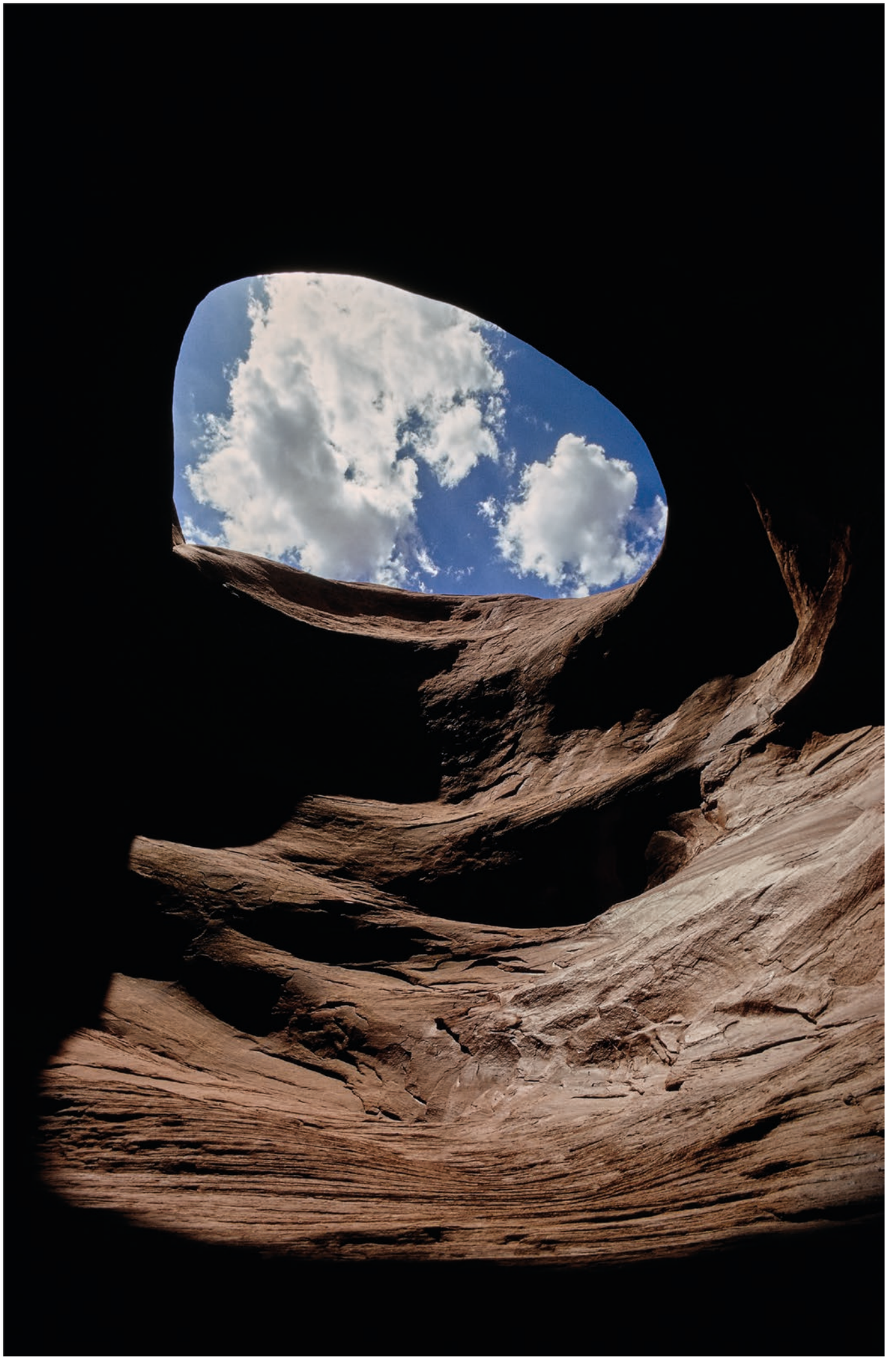
Ernst Haas

The American West



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With an essay by Paul Lowe

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In America's West

Paul Lowe

In the summer of 1952, the Austrian-born émigré photographer Ernst Haas embarked on a road trip into the heart of the American West. On assignment for *Life*, he hitchhiked along the barren desert roads of New Mexico in search of the mythical West that had fascinated him as a child. He had been brought up on Western adventure novels, as he recalled, "As a young man I feverishly read Jack London and Zane Grey, wondering what it would be like to follow in their footsteps."[1]

The trip resulted in a six-page spread in the magazine entitled "Land of Enchantment: A Hitchhiker with a Camera Records New Mexico's Many Moods," which contained images that set the tone for his later, much more extensive coverage of the American West.[2] The story included shots of wide expanses of sky, with an empty, dusty road lined with telegraph poles receding far into the distance; while in another image a Native American woman is tightly framed on the left of the composition, with a child and another woman carrying a baby, skillfully composed in a triangle that leads the eye toward the pueblo in the background. These themes formed the seed of an engagement with the myth and the reality of the American West that sustained Haas for the next thirty-four years. And according to Inge Bondi, the trip also led him to the other theme that defined the rest of his career: how to engage and understand the world through the medium of color, as she noted, "While photographing in black and white in the New Mexico desert, he experienced a great longing for color. Thus began a life-long odyssey of exploration of the uses and meaning of color in photography."[3]

Haas had arrived in the United States in 1950 at the invitation of Robert Capa, who had appointed him to be the US vice president of Magnum Photos, the prestigious and iconic photo agency that Haas had joined the year before. Joining Magnum was a decision he had made to try to maintain his independence from the editorial world, as in 1949 he had also turned down an offer from *Life* to become a staff photographer, writing in his letter of rejection that "there are two kinds of photographers—the ones who take pictures for a magazine to earn something, and the others who gain by taking pictures they are interested in.... What I want is to stay free, that I can carry out my ideas.... I don't think there are many editors who could give me the assignments I give myself."[4] This freelance attitude of wanting to maintain control over what and where he photographed sustained Haas throughout his life, even to the point of leaving Magnum in 1963. As Capa's brother Cornell observed, "Haas has a sense of generosity and self-preservation. He's very willing to give from himself and of himself, but when it becomes evident to him that it is destructive to his making a living, to his artistic expression, when it becomes more restriction than freedom, then he gives up."[5] Haas saw the United States as a place where he could escape the limitations of the European culture he was leaving behind, stating, "I was born in Europe in an era when everyone grew up with a more or less idealized concept of the New World. America was the last frontier of freedom, the land of peace and plenty, the land of equal opportunity for all."[6] He was also excited to discover "a landscape which today must appear essentially as it did before the arrival of man,"[7] seeking out commissions like his Time-Life book on the Grand Canyon that allowed him to explore the unspoiled beauty of the American West.

Haas clearly felt that his move to the United States opened up new creative opportunities as well as commercial ones, as he reflected, "Looking back, I think my change into color came quite psychologically. I will always remember the war years, including at least five bitter post-war years, as the black and white ones, or even better, the grey years. The grey times were over. As at the beginning of a new spring, I wanted to celebrate in color the new times, filled with new hope."[8] He began to experiment with the relatively new medium of color slide film, as he wrote, "The change came quite naturally. I was longing for it, needed it; I was ready for it, and there was a film available to work with. The year was 1949, and the film was Kodak I, rated at 12 ASA."[9] Haas maintained this love affair with the unique qualities of the film, through its various incarnations of Kodachrome 1, 11, 25, and 64, all with their characteristic rich, deep saturated color palette, and remained faithful to it for the rest of his career, remarking that "because it has fine definition and almost no grain, I have never seen any reason to try out other materials."[10] In the copy for a 1985 advertising campaign for Kodak entitled "Ernst Haas' 36-Year Love Affair," he described how these different incarnations of the film had their own distinctive qualities: "The original Kodachrome film had incredibly rich blacks and reds, and everything looked like a stained-glass window. Then Kodachrome II came along, and it became a very beautiful film.... After 36 years I know Kodachrome film inside and out. How I can use it tenderly or harshly. No matter how I use it, it has never let me down." He also attested to his prolific shooting rate, saying, "I don't think there is a more thrilling moment than when you return from a journey, and you get you 60 or 80 rolls of Kodachrome film back from the lab. The slides have a special smell, and I love that smell."[11] Haas truly did understand the idiosyncrasies of Kodachrome; as color slide film is very unforgiving, the exposure has to be perfect in camera as no postproduction can be done. From the very beginning Haas was a master of controlling this difficult medium as the rows and rows of perfectly exposed images in his archives at Getty Images attest to. Commenting on the nature of color, he explained how "there are three different factors which have to be realized and balanced: form, content, and color. The last does not always benefit the composition. It can even go against it; in which case it has to be overcome.

To translate a world of color into black and white is much easier than to overcome the color, which so often runs contrary to its subject matter."[12] He was able to control the exposure very precisely, often deliberately underexposing the film to create deep blacks and hold detail and saturation in the highlights, and frequently used these darker areas to create silhouettes to frame other elements in the image. In other situations he used the film almost as a monochrome medium, creating images that are explorations of how a single color can vary in terms of tint and hue. In the radical composition of *Palm Springs, California, 1976*, he created a vast expanse of black negative space, contrasted with a deep blue twilight sky, pairing a bright cross in the bottom left corner with the arc of the crescent moon in the top right in a perfectly balanced yet daring harmony. In his studies of rock faces with their infinite variations of a single color, he played with subtle gradations of tone and color, yet still retained a sense of depth and movement in the frame. Haas was a master of the found still life and was acutely aware of how one of photography's greatest assets is its ability to pay attention to details that would otherwise pass unnoticed, commenting that "William Blake saw 'the world in a grain of sand.' It can be seen in many such things, for in the smallest cells are reflections of the largest. And in photography, through an interplay of scales, a whole universe within a universe can be revealed."[13]

Haas also adopted the classic tool of the photojournalist, the Leica M series rangefinder camera, and then later in 1969 he also began to use the Leicaflex single lens reflex camera that allowed him to utilize the full range of prime lenses from 21 mm super wide angle to 400 m telephoto, along with a macro lens for close-up photography. Despite his careful and precise compositions, Haas generally eschewed the use of a tripod, preferring to "travel light,"[14] and advising readers of his book *In America* to "learn to work with the minimum of equipment. The more you are able to forget your equipment, the more time you have to concentrate on the subject and the composition. The camera should become an extension of your eye, nothing else."[15] Haas also did not use zoom lenses, feeling instead that the photographer should move themselves through space, explaining that "the one lens which is the best is your feet. You can go close, you can go back, you can make out of a normal lens a wide-angle lens—it is the way you pose yourself—like a tennis player, he will know where to stand, close to the net, and far from the net, and he will judge his opponent."[16] At the heart of Haas's aesthetic was, of course, composition, the complex combination of thought process, camera technology, and instinct that combine to surgically select exactly what the four edges of the photograph will contain. He explained that the "frame of the camera is the photographer's discipline. It can contain as much as it withholds, cut into or hold together images that detract or contribute to a given theme. Through it, lines, colors, form and content are all seen to be related to each other in a very special way. Every nuance is important in heightening or weakening a composition."[17] Haas was undoubtedly obsessed with exploring the nature of how the camera sees in a different way to the human eye and investigated in depth how to use all the creative and technical controls at his disposal. He incessantly experimented with the unique qualities of the still photographic image, exploring how different lenses create different viewpoints, and how the three dimensions of the world are represented in the two-dimensional space of the flat photograph. Haas took this experimentation to an extreme in *Western Skies Motel, Colorado, 1978*, where he skillfully used the rearview mirror of his car to reflect a patch of blue sky that seems to float in the frame, its edges blurred because of its proximity to his wide-angle lens while the rest of the image is sharp. In the center of the composition, Haas juxtaposed a telegraph pole, what he described as "the tree of the desert,"[18] balanced against the metaphoric name of a roadside refuge. He used a similar strategy in *Las Vegas, Nevada, 1975*, except in this case he deployed the compressing effect of a telephoto lens to cram the frame with the dense detail of neon lights, slicing into the composition with the pole of a traffic light and a mirror that reflected what was behind him. In describing this process of organizing disparate elements of a scene into a coherent whole, he compared it to juggling, noting how "at first you learn to juggle with two, and then you can juggle with three, it's a balance. And then you go on one foot, and you do the whole thing on a rope, and then you make the rope spinning [*sic*], and you can still do it, always keeping the balance. But you always have to have different kinds of compositions, in order to keep the balance, in any kind of arts, you have to calculate all different kinds of juggling activity into one thing and then relate it to each other."[19] He demonstrated this virtuosity of orchestrating the geometry of the image to great effect in *Utah, 1979*, where he framed a nondescript scene of a swimming pool and its attendant poolside furniture through a water slide, creating an image of great complexity and a subtle observation of the cultural landscape of American life.

As one of the pioneers of slide photography, Haas found that his ability to use color in a powerfully aesthetic as well as symbolic way was in high demand, and he used this to his advantage in securing commissions that allowed him to pursue his exploration of the nature of the United States. As John P. Jacob observed, "What was unique about Haas, however, was his capacity to integrate the experimental with the task at hand, and the fluidity with which his pictures moved between the abstract and the narrative."[20] Haas recalled that "it was a wonderful, adventurous time. We did not have much money, and we traveled like millionaires. Everything was connected with the new courage for color. Fashion, food, travel, cars, flying—everything changed and took on a new brightness. The dark ages were over. Is it any wonder then that a young photographer longed for a color film with which he could capture all this new colorfulness in the environment?"[21] Haas worked for a very wide range of clients, from editorial magazines like *Look* and *Life* to corporate