

Mr. Rives

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Photography

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Block/Class : \_\_\_\_\_

## PETER HENRY EMERSON

TEXT FROM: KHANACADEMY.ORG

Peter Henry Emerson (1856–1936) championed a style of photography he referred to as “naturalistic.” A British citizen, Emerson was born in Cuba and spent part of his childhood in the United States. Traveling among different regions was not only central to his upbringing, but was also an important component of his work as an adult. Quoting the poet John Keats, Emerson asserted, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” on the title page of his 1889 treatise *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, arguing that art should imitate nature. In his photographs, Emerson rejected prevailing methods and subjects in favor of an approach that employed selective focus and used only a single negative to realize his prints, rather than combining negatives to create an image. His views sparked heated debate among photographers and critics, but Emerson passionately defended his approach as more realistic and truer to nature.



*The Haunt of the Pike*, 1886, P.H. Emerson. Platinum print; 8 1/16 inches high x 11 3/8 inches wide (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XP.259.23)

### In or out of focus

At the time Emerson was working, the question of whether photographs should be in or out of focus—sharp or soft—was the subject of intense and occasionally angry debate within photographic circles. One school believed that photography’s defining characteristic was its ability to capture detail with clarity. Others felt that selecting the degree of focus in different parts of the photograph—using a technique known as **differential focus**—resulted in an image that was, in fact, closer to the effects that a human eye can perceive.



*The Skirt of the Village*, 1887, P.H. Emerson. Photogravure; 4 3/8 inches high x 4 5/16 inches wide (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XB.696.1.1)

Differential focus was at the heart of Emerson’s photographic aesthetic. In keeping with the then-current scientific ideas about vision, he maintained that the human eye rarely sees anything fully in focus. Emerson therefore manipulated his camera’s focal plane to create areas in and out of focus. In addition, he advocated working outdoors in nature and composing the scene in the camera with a single shot.

Emerson called his style of photography **naturalistic**, as it was taken from nature and left un-retouched.

## The photogravure print

Introduced in the 1880s, **photogravure** is a mechanical process using copper printing plates to transfer a photographic image and faithfully reproduce a photograph in quantities of a hundred or more. Emerson, who saw his work as pioneering in the field, was innovative in using the medium expressively to convey the atmosphere of the regions he visited (see image below).



*The Haysel*, 1887, P.H. Emerson.  
Photogravure; 5 9/16 inches high x 9 7/8 inches wide (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XB.696.1.2)  
Emerson's perspective of agricultural labor was a romantic one and did not address the drudgery and difficulties workers endured. Writing about this image of the haysel (harvest) in *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, he referred to the peasants as "mowers in their picturesque dress" who would, at lunchtime, "retire to some

shady nook and, in peace, eat their slender meal, after which they take a short nap, or angle in the river..."

Photogravures can be printed on different types of paper, from translucent Japanese tissue to textured cotton fiber. The finished prints achieve varying degrees of tone, ranging from charcoal black to bright white. Emerson favored the relatively new medium because his photographs could be reproduced in a manner that reflected his vision for naturalistic photography. His photogravure prints influenced a later generation of photographers, including Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz, who took inspiration from the rich body of work Emerson produced from the late 1880s through the mid-1890s.

## The lure of the overlooked

Emerson was often drawn to the uninhabited landscape—the flat marshland, the stretch of sky and water only occasionally disrupted by a rooftop or a sail. In his *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, he decreed that landscape itself could be a subject and source for inspiration: "Nature is full of pictures, and they are to be found in what appears to the uninitiated the most unlikely places." At first glance, many of Emerson's photographs seem empty. He ignored the crowds of tourists and amusements along the Norfolk Broads, as well as the fact that the region's agriculture was failing. Instead, he turned his gaze to other aspects of the landscape, remaining engaged with nature.

*Gathering Water-Lilies*, 1886, P. H. Emerson. Platinum print; 7 13/16 inches high x 11 1/2 inches wide (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XO.1268.10)  
*Gathering Water-Lilies*, shown above, is arguably Emerson's best known photograph and certainly his most widely reproduced. Originally realized as an albumen silver print, the image was subsequently published as a



photogravure in two highly successful editions before he produced the platinum version for *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads*, his 1886 publication with the painter T.F. Goodall. The subject, while seemingly peaceful and romantic, actually records two people working collecting flowers to use as bait for fishing. This context did not become clear until Emerson included the image in his book, which documented the various traditions of the people who worked the Norfolk Broads, a wetlands region on the coast northeast of London. To create the book, Emerson interacted with the locals, recorded their traditions, and presented a view of the countryside that was aimed at “lovers of art.”

## Work and types

Once the railways made the Norfolk Broads (a selection of waterways in East Anglia) more accessible, tourism flourished, as this area was seen as a bucolic escape from the congested urban life of industrialized England. Emerson saw himself as an anthropologist of types. Through his photographs of East Anglian hunters, gamekeepers, farmworkers, and fishermen (see image below), he hoped to preserve, at least photographically, the traditional ways of life, which he believed were at risk of becoming obsolete with industrialization and the rise of tourism. His images presented idealized types that reflected his subjective vision of the countryside.



*The Old Order and the New*, 1886, P. H. Emerson. Platinum print; 4 11/16 inches high x 9 3/16 inches wide (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XO.1268.13) Although his photographs today appear to celebrate the worker as hero, Emerson did not advocate change within the fixed social order. In *Pictures of East Anglian Life* (1888), Emerson wrote: “Equality there can never be; the stern laws of heredity forbids that

*in utero*. An anthropological aristocracy there must be; the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest declares it.”

In 1890, only one year after publishing *Naturalistic Photography*, Emerson published *The Death of Naturalistic Photography*, in which he renounced many of the tenets he had previously advocated. Nonetheless, his interest in selective focus photography and careful attention to the atmospheric effects of the gravure process came to greatly influence subsequent generations of photographers, particularly those who came to be identified as Pictorialists.

---

## Transcript of: P.H. Emerson's Naturalistic Photography

Written by: Steven Hyde: Great grandson of P.H. Emerson

My name is Steven Hyde. I am the great-grandson of P.H. Emerson. He is my mother's grandfather. He came from actually a very distinguished American family distantly related to Ralph Waldo. P.H. Emerson was born in 1856 in Cuba and he spent the first eight years of his life there on his father's sugar plantation.

In 1864, which was in the middle of the American Civil War, the family moved to Delaware and then when P.H. Emerson was just 11, his father died. His mother was English and when her husband died she decided to come back and from then on Emerson was brought up in England. I think he adjusted pretty well, although it is my belief that he didn't truly fit in. I think he was always slightly an outsider. Emerson then went on to study medicine at King's College London. He continued with his athletic pursuits, playing a lot of rugby, and did very well at his medical studies. Bit by bit, he came away from practicing his medicine. He devoted his life to photography and also to nature.

He combined his two passions and this is where we find Emerson at his most eloquent, both visually and indeed in his writing. Right from the very start, Emerson was aware of the importance of limited editions and unlike many of his fellow photographers, he did see his photographs as high art and he wanted to preserve the artistic status of the photographs. Accordingly, he published the books in limited editions and then broke the negatives after he had printed the books. In his first book, "Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads," Emerson most successfully portrays people. Although most of the photographs are posed, they seem fairly natural and they portray people at work and at play when we come to the gentry shooting. He also really fell in love with the people of Norfolk. He liked them. He thought they were unpretentious, noble people doing a hard day's work, often unrecognized. In his writings on them, he quite often used the vernacular language they spoke in. I do think that Emerson was to a certain extent idealizing the life of the worker and he believed very much in the integrity of the simple life of working the land, lack of sophistication, and simplicity. In fact in many of his books, he finds honesty and a beauty in the lives of people who work the land.



"Marsh Leaves" was the last of Emerson's books and in my opinion, one of the most beautiful. It's very spare in its subject matter. This is possibly as a result of the fact that in 1894, the year in which most of it was photographed, was one of the coldest on records. The photographs are very pure, simple, almost abstract in their subjects. The photographs are not of

life and vigor. They are of the end of something, and it perhaps is very fitting that Emerson ended with these. I feel he didn't have any further impetus, any energy left to carry on. I mean how could he after he had already announced that photography wasn't an art? He came back to it because it's strange, you know, once you give something up you don't actually totally realize quite what a big part of you you are giving up. But by that stage it was too late. He



never really could recreate the passion and the energy which he had as a young man and although 39, 40 seems a very early age by our standards in which to give up what he was doing, he had no need to carry on. He could enjoy the good life from then on. All the time that Emerson was indulging himself in Norfolk, he did keep very much focused on the issue of whether photography was an art or not. A lot of what he was trying to achieve there was simplicity and an integrity which ran against the tide of what most of photography was doing at the time.

Emerson believed in two main aspects. The first was that photographs should not be totally sharp in every respect. You should have what's called differential focusing, which was that when you actually looked at something, you focused on one thing but everything else tended to fall back into a sort of slight lack of focus. Even that which was the main subject shouldn't be totally sharp in his point of view.

The other aspect which Emerson believed that photography should concentrate upon is not to do too much in terms of what we would call post-production. As in, you should take a photograph and you should not muck around with it in the darkroom afterwards. This is what he called naturalistic photography. This was very much counter to what was the norm at the time.

In 1889, he published his thesis in naturalistic photography. Later, he had this complete change of mind. He published a black bordered pamphlet entitled, "The Death of Naturalistic Photography," in which he stated, "I have, I regret it deeply, compared "photographs to great works of art "and photographers to great artists. "It was rash and thoughtless and my "punishment is having to acknowledge it now. "In short, I throw in my lot with those who say that "photography is a very limited art. "I deeply regret that I have come to this conclusion."

I think Emerson came to this conclusion mainly because he was frustrated by the limitations of photography as it was possible at that time. If he wanted to take a beautiful photograph, he had to go out with a massive large format plate camera, see the image upside down on the ground glass screen, cover himself with a black cloth to keep out the daylight so he could see what was going on. He then, if he wanted to get the differential focusing that he wanted to achieve, had to do this focusing in the dark, with it upside down. He then had to compose what he saw in terms of the subject matter in a way that looked spontaneous and natural. So in the end, what he had to put up with was a contrived photograph, not a distillation of a moment, but a creation of a moment. I think this was the thing that frustrated him so greatly and I think this was the thing that led him to change his mind as to whether photography really was an art or not because it was just such an incredible problem for him to solve.

1. When and where was Peter Henry Emerson born?
2. Where did he move when he was just eight years old?
3. What major event in American history was going on during this time?
4. Where did Emerson's mother go after her husband (Peter's father) died when he was 11 years old?
5. Where did Emerson study medicine?
6. What sport did Emerson play?
7. How did Emerson protect his photographs and present them as high art?
8. What did Emerson like so much about the people of Norfolk?
9. What were the two main aspects of photography that Emerson believed photographers should strive to maintain?
10. Toward the end of Peter Emerson's photographic career, the tone of his work changed. In the last series, known as "Marsh Leaves", the change is apparent. What do you see different about his work prior to this point? What do you think was happening in his mind that changed the look of his work?
11. How do you think an artist's own feelings and emotions change the mood of their pieces? Do you think this is more or less evident in photography?

12. In the end of Emerson's career, he struggled with questions about photography even being a form of fine or "high art". He felt that he had put so much time and passion into a medium that was inferior to others. Do you feel Emerson made positive contributions to the history of photography as art?

13. Sometimes, I think people concentrate too much on the why and how, and as a result, they don't do anything. As a result, they don't create art. What are some of the barriers you have with art?