Peter Henry Emerson

1856–1936 · British (born in Cuba)

Is photography art? — the first serious argument, and the famous retraction



Gathering Water Lilies · 1886

"By Naturalism we mean the true and natural expression of an impression of nature by an art."

— Peter Henry Emerson, Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art, 1889

KEY WORKS

- Gathering Water Lilies, 1886 — the definitive pictorialist image
- Poling the Marsh Hay, 1886
- Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads, 1886
- His 1891 black-bordered pamphlet retracting everything he had argued

CONTEXT

Emerson was the first to argue systematically that photography was a fine art. His theory of naturalistic photography — that the camera should mimic human vision, which sees sharply only at the point of focus — produced images of extraordinary beauty. Then in 1891 he published a black-bordered pamphlet retracting everything, concluding photography could not be art because the photographer had too little control. The argument has never quite ended. His photographs, however, remain magnificent.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Emerson introduces the question that runs through photography's history: is it art? He also introduces differential focus — selective focus as a compositional decision. And his retraction is a lesson in intellectual honesty: a man so committed to the truth he publicly destroyed his own reputation when he changed his mind.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Emerson argued photography should show the world as the eye actually sees it — sharp in the center, soft at the edges. Do you agree? Or can photography show us things we cannot see?
2. His platinum prints have a warmth that silver gelatin doesn't. When you choose paper for the P800, you're making the same kind of decision. What does paper choice do to an image?

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Poling the Marsh Hay · 1886