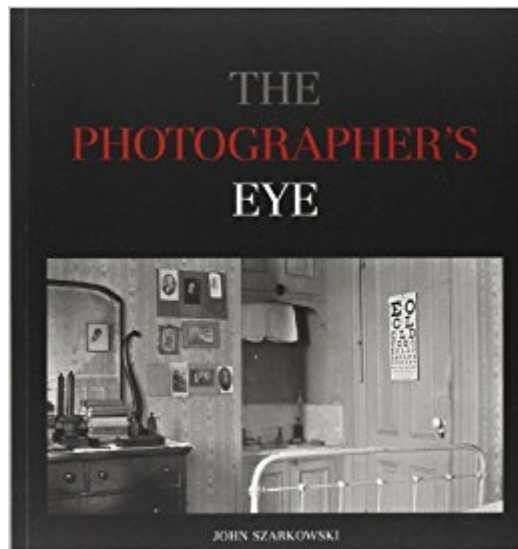


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# The Photographer's Eye



## Synopsis

The Photographer's Eye by John Szarkowski is a twentieth-century classic--an indispensable introduction to the visual language of photography. Based on a landmark exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1964, and originally published in 1966, the book has long been out of print. It is now available again to a new generation of photographers and lovers of photography in this duotone printing that closely follows the original. Szarkowski's compact text eloquently complements skillfully selected and sequenced groupings of 172 photographs drawn from the entire history and range of the medium. Celebrated works by such masters as Cartier-Bresson, Evans, Steichen, Strand, and Weston are juxtaposed with vernacular documents and even amateur snapshots to analyze the fundamental challenges and opportunities that all photographers have faced. Szarkowski, the legendary curator who worked at the Museum from 1962 to 1991, has published many influential books. But none more radically and succinctly demonstrates why--as U.S. News & World Report put it in 1990--"whether Americans know it or not," his thinking about photography "has become our thinking about photography."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When John Szarkowski recently passed away at the age of 81, the world lost one of photography's most important figures. He was the "Stieglitz" of the 1960s and 70s, changing the way audiences look at photographic images and he shaped the way future audiences will come to appreciate the pioneering work of Arbus, Eggleston, Friedlander and Winogrand. When he took over the reins of

curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from Edward Steichen, photography's early twentieth century grand master, Szarkowski promoted a "new" photography that incorporated the everyday moment as it was unfolding on the streets around cities and towns across America. His great gift to all of us who love photography besides his championing of new talent, was his incredible skill at writing texts, essays, criticism, books on photography. With his talent as a writer, and his background as a photographer, he was able to open a window onto this two-dimensional world of form and tone, shape, texture and composition, explaining the ins and outs, the subtleties, and the intuitions of image makers, their techniques and their medium in all its finesse. Having simply tried to take a good photograph all his life, he simply knew a good photograph when he saw one. It is what made him such a great curator. His own best known books of photographs, "The Idea of Louis Sullivan" published in 1956, contains photographs of the architecture of Chicago, and his other, "The Face of Minnesota" published in 1958, contains haunting landscape images of his home state. He wrote the way he carefully crafted his own images. He framed each paragraph paying close attention to his ear, to diction and to all the elements of style. It is why I love to read him and why I think he was the greatest writer to take on this visual art form. Two books of his about photography that in my opinion are indispensable are "The Photographer's Eye" first published in 1966, and "Looking at Photographs" first published in 1973. With these two collections, the reader will gain an historic appreciation of photography from its earliest innovators beginning in the 1830s to the period of high modernism in the 1970s. With Szarkowski as your guide, readers will appreciate how the medium advanced, yet they will also understand how it has remained fundamentally the same picture-making process when it comes to handling two-dimensional space. In *The Photographer's Eye*, Szarkowski covers what a viewer needs to take in from a photograph, how it was framed, cropped, what the subject is, what the detail is, the focus and the vantage point. In each of these wide areas, he supplies important photographs from the Museum of Modern Art's vast collection that illustrate these points. He begins with "The Thing Itself" the "what" of photography, the landscape or still life, or portrait that the photographer has aimed his camera at. From there he moves on to how photographers fix on detail, the synecdochal "parts" that make up the "whole" and that produce visual metaphor: the close up of the hands, the side of a face, a rifle, a window, a headlight of a car, a door latch. He then illustrates how photographers carefully frame their images, how they crop, how they envision the image from its interior picture plane to what is left out, alluded to, outside the frame. And finally, he shows how photographers measure time; freeze moments, single out the present for the past or some distant future. Added to this element of time is vantage, that trick of where to place the picture plane in

terms of its perspective, foreground to background, its recession to a vanishing point or points, whether it is head-on and flat, or deep and endless, looming up or slanting down, the world from above, or the world from below. In *Looking at Photographs* which is subtitled--"100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art," Szarkowski leads the reader across time, from the earliest best works of the 19th century masters: Timothy O'Sullivan, Fredrick Evans, Lewis Hine, and Jacob Riis, all the way to Robert Frank, Roy DeCarava, Paul Caponigro, and Joel Meyerowitz. The book is printed so that there is a one-page essay facing each of the 100 photographs it describes. Within that compact structure, Szarkowski is able to move from one idea to another across the history of photography as the reader turns the pages, and he is able to pinpoint for the reader, the attributes that each photographer brings to his medium. In this way the reader learns to read images for their wealth of craft, form and subject matter. It is like having the curator take you on a personal guided tour of the museum's photography galleries. I learned from reading this book that Timothy O'Sullivan's "white skies" were a result of the wet plate's over-sensitivity to blue light and that "sky areas were thus automatically overexposed, and rendered as blank white." I also learned that O'Sullivan "...accepted the white sky and used it as a shape, enclosed in tension between the picture's visual horizon and the edges of the plate." Knowing this, I can never look at O'Sullivan's work again without understanding how much this 19th century photographic pioneer wanted the figure-ground relationship of sky to land to feature in his compositions. And this is only one example from the book. There are 99 more. Owning "*Looking at Photographs*" and "*The Photographer's Eye*" is like having your own private collection of the world's most famous photographs. The way you look at photographs will be enriched. On your next visit to a gallery or a museum, you will be able to see so much more thanks to the intelligent and thoughtful writing of John Szarkowski. His precise, clear and uncluttered prose style will make your reading experience a pleasure in itself.

I agree with some of the reviews that expressed surprise at the fact that the amount of text is less than the blurb leads you to believe. I too was expecting a commentary on each of the photos in the book hoping to gain insight into the authors opinions about each photo. In fact the commentary is not so tightly linked to the individual photos, instead groups of photos illustrate each of the five main themes of the book. However, the essay by the author is pretty deep and to the point, there is no fluff here. After reading it I thought what he was saying seemed kind of obvious and true. You could take this as a criticism, but for me I have found that it has been very helpful to have these fundamental things articulated. In summary, for me this is a deceptively concise but classic statement of some of the "truths" behind the photographic process, accompanied by some stunning black and white

photos.

This is a book with many images and a few words. But the small text is of seminal importance for the understanding and the future of photography. Firstly, John Szarkowski draws a parallel between the art that forged photography - painting - and photography in itself. A comparison between the inclusion of a painting canvas and the exclusion of a camera viewfinder. He does not dismiss the photograph as something lost in the space and time, but as something in motion, even if only for 1/30 of a second. A Cartier Bresson's "decisive moment", not in the sense that is commonly accepted by most (a dramatic climax), but a visual one. The author emphasizes that this is a new art and needs to be still discovered in many senses. The photographers need to discover new meanings and ways to express themselves in new images. John Szarkowski was the curator of photography of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York for many years. In the exhibits he put into action his thoughts, inclusively promoting color photography. As a photographer, I have learned a lot in those few pages. One of the conclusions that I draw is that the film and digital controversy is innocuous. Whatever image you capture through the viewfinder is photography.

I've been a professional photographer for 35 years, (with a BFA from RISD) and this is the book that got me really juiced! Spend some time reviewing the images and concepts within. The magical nature of recording light in our physical world is very clear. I've loved this book for 35 years. I have purchased many copies for others interested in photography and can fully recommend this for anyone who will take the time to see what is really contained within. Cheers, Gary

I was excited to receive this collection of photographs assembled by MOMA curator John Szarkowski. At first, I was a little disappointed because I was expecting more commentary on the images - I imagined a publication where Szarkowski would deconstruct the images, point out observations and relate them to photo theory. I looked forward to getting in the mind of the master. Once I got over this disappointment, I picked the book up again and realized what an idiot I had been for wanting that to begin with. "The Photographer's Eye" is the perfect title for this book - It doesn't overwhelm you with essays explaining how to see, how to think and what each image "means". Instead, it presents 5 expertly curated collections of photographs (The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point) and it gives the viewer just a tiny bit of written information to consider regarding that collection. The viewer is then forced to visually consider and decipher each image (as well as the collection as a whole) and make those wonderful little

discoveries on their own. In effect, to see and understand using the photographer's eye rather than the writer's word. Man, Szarkowski was a genius. I can't recommend it highly enough. Beautiful images, beautiful sequence, beautifully curated.

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