

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 mm 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

annual reports for Volkswagen, film stills, and of course the famous Marlboro Man cigarette advertising campaigns. Many of these assignments took him out to the American West, with one typical shoot for Volkswagen in 1967 to work on a brochure for the VW Campmobile van seeing him travel to Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California.²² Haas used these commissions as a source of income to pursue his own agenda, remarking that he made “many trips around the country, in constant search for what it is to be American.”²³ As his friend and fellow Magnum photographer Eve Arnold recalled, Haas “never really liked assignments. He usually came up with his own ideas and worked within them ... very seldom was he willing to simply give back what was offered to him. He always had to have something of his own or originate an idea.”²⁴ He was astute at using this paid work to buy him the time to pursue his own vision, and often used the downtime during commercial work to shoot his own personal photographs, explaining, for example, how “during movie making, when locations are off the beaten track and long periods of waiting occur between takes, I have always used the opportunity to build up my collection of photographs of natural phenomena.”²⁵ Indeed, Haas produced many of his most memorable photos while on movie sets, in particular during the filming of *Little Big Man* starring Dustin Hoffman, where the meticulous recreating of the lives of Native Americans allowed him to transport the viewer back into the nineteenth century. Haas saw this as a perfect opportunity to explore the Native American culture, noting, “Film assignments have taken me out West on location to places where the past has been reconstructed with ultimate care and attention to detail. The filming of many stories calls for extras who are not actors, but local folk dressed as their ancestors were a century or more ago ... as if time had not changed a thing.”²⁶ Haas treated these subjects as a documentary photographer, rather than as advertising for the movie. He usually followed the second unit of the film crew, which he explained “works without actors and tries to convey the epoch and general atmosphere that is to pervade the film.”²⁷ *Little Big Man* offered Haas the opportunity to extend and deepen his connection with Native Americans, who he had been documenting for several years by this point, having photographed them extensively for a story published in *Look* magazine in 1970 entitled “America’s Indians, a Conquered People Wake Up.” This story included a double-page spread of an Indian man walking across a dusty windswept landscape, in an inversion of the classic image of the cowboy-hatted adventurer, and the text accompanying the story concluded with a romantic summary of their lifestyle, claiming that “each gesture becomes, at once, a regard for past traditions, a renewal of his mythic visions and a reverent respect for the fierce and fragile harmony of human life upon a stern land.”²⁸ Haas clearly felt a strong connection with their philosophy and way of life, recalling, “In the country of the mesas and adobes I have slept under the stars with the Indians, seen the world from their point of view, talked philosophy in tepees, and felt

a strong affinity.”²⁹ But he was also acutely aware of how their culture and way of life been subverted and destroyed and then compromised by the white dominance of the West. Several of his images tuned into the cultural misappropriation of Indian symbols such as the Navajo hauling company, a cowboy-hatted man seated in front of a mural depicting a woman tapestry, and a neon-lit head of an Indian chieftain. Haas was also critical of the way that commercial advertising had pervaded and desecrated the raw beauty of the American West, chronicling how on his first encounter with its vast landscapes he hadn’t expected the “eye polluting billboards, signs, and other ugliness to invade the staggering beauties of the countryside to the extent they did.”³⁰ Indeed, he regarded *Route 66, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1969*, one of his most famous images, as a critique of this overwhelming onslaught rather than as a celebration, noting in his caption for it that the “backdrop of dark clouds rendered the street illumination an even more forceful reminder of the clutter of our civilization.”³¹

Despite his reservations about the banality of advertising and its negative impact on the landscape, Haas was of course deeply connected to the commercial world, as his work on perhaps one of the most famous and successful campaigns ever attests to. Haas first began working on the Marlboro Man account in 1972 and continued regular campaigns for them up until his death in 1986. He worked frequently with the quintessential Marlboro Man, the rancher turned model Darrell Winfield, as well as many of the other cowboy models that the team at Leo Burnett recruited for the campaign. Haas’s style of shooting was perfect for the ads, as he was able to capture the movement and energy of the riders against the epic backdrop of the plains and mountains of the West that he knew so well. Haas’s extensive experience of the terrain of the American West equipped him with the knowledge to suggest suitable locations for shooting. In a letter to Ralph Delby at Leo Burnett pitching for the 1986 campaign, Haas explained in detail how he wanted to shoot at a specific ranch in Wyoming and against the “very dramatic landscapes in the Badlands of South Dakota,” where he thought that the “dramatic rock formations combined with color and light would give some remarkable opportunities,” with the emphasis “on the drama of the horse against rugged landscapes with very little greenery, water or signs of civilization.”³² But as any good photographer is aware, he was also open to the potential for serendipity to enhance the creative process, noting that his proposed plan “does not include all the surprises that happen due to changing weather. It has been my experience for the past 13 years that the most exciting pictures come from those unusual moments of sun, sky and clouds against landscape which are impossible to pre-plan.”³³ This openness to spontaneity was for Haas a key attribute of any successful photographer, as he explained: “You have to be open, the more you theorize, the more you narrow yourself. You have to become an idiot like Dostoyevsky’s idiot,

and then you can open yourself: everything is fascinating. But if you become an intellectual, you see everything with a tele lens, and then your angle is very narrow. I think especially as a photographer you have to have an angle of 360 degrees, not 180 degrees. Everything has to interest you, the world is your stage, and to this stage you react. The best things are surprises, and for surprises you have to be open, and if you are not open, you don't have surprises."³⁴

Haas was also undoubtedly aware of his place in the photographic tradition of the American West, making a pilgrimage to Big Sur and Point Lobos in 1976 to acknowledge his debt to Edward Weston, about whom he confessed to be "greatly inspired by his work and would like to pay tribute to him,"³⁵ and who had "taught me how to electrify a picture that does not move and make it move."³⁶ In his turn, Haas was a significant influence on a new generation of photographers who were exploring how to use color creatively to express meaning and not simply for its chromatic attraction. Cornell Capa commented that Haas "did a lot to create a great number of enthusiastic users of color in his manner, which doesn't mean imitation. He just opens the mind and spirit and the eye to the possibilities of how to perceive color."³⁷ As well as through his published work, Haas had a substantial impact on the photographers who took one of the numerous workshops he led, with one participant, Anna Winland, recalling how "he expanded our sense of the possibility of the use of color ... trying to convey a certain sense of fearlessness in shooting."³⁸ Haas felt that these workshops were a very important part of his life, noting that "I learn, I think, more in a seminar from them than they learn from me ... I'm really not interested in somebody who starts copying me. I really think you should go beyond me or on the side of me."³⁹

Haas thought of himself as a poet with a camera, and his extended exploration of the American West is a prime example of how he sought to transfer and translate his own knowledge, experience, and sensibility into his images by using the full range of visual strategies available to him, and even developing new and innovative ways to reflect the world through the lens of the camera. His extensive writings and interviews on the nature of the medium reveal him to be an image maker who thought deeply about the very nature of photographic communication. His philosophy in this explanation of how having a distinctive visual signature has to come from within the photographer is perhaps best summed up in the following: "Style has no formula, but it has a secret key. It is the extension of your personality. The summation of this indefinable net of your feeling, knowledge, and experience. Take color as a totality of relations within a frame. Don't ever overanalyze your results! Don't ever try to find your own secret of the one which you admire. One does not try to catch soap bubbles. One enjoys them in flight and is grateful for their fluid existence. The thinner they are, the more exuberant their color scheme. Color is joy. One does not think joy."⁴⁰

- 1 Ernst Haas, *In America* (New York, 1975), p. 136. Haas was also likely a keen reader of the popular German writer Karl May, who had entertained generations of youth in Europe with his vivid tales of the noble fictional Apache leader Winnetou and his blood brother, Old Shatterhand, a German immigrant to the United States.
- 2 The accompanying text described Haas as "a distinguished Viennese photographer ... who thinks of himself as a philosopher with a camera," and explained how he had "hitchhiked over the web of white man's roads, visited the red man's pueblos" and documented the "drama, the loneliness and the vastness of the land." Ernst Haas (photo), "Land of Enchantment: A Hitchhiker with a Camera Records New Mexico's Many Moods," *Life*, September 15, 1952, p. 117. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 3 Inge Biondi, "Biographical Essay," 2000, Ernst Haas Estate, <https://ernst-haas.com/essays-on-haas/>.
- 4 Ernst Haas, letter to Wilson Hicks, editor of *Life*, In response to an invitation to join *Life* as a staff photographer, London, November 30, 1949. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 5 Cornell Capa, cited in Amla Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas" (MA thesis, Syracuse University, 1981), p.28. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 6 Haas, *In America*, p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 8 Ernst Haas, "Black and White Versus Color," Writings by Ernst Haas, Ernst Haas Estate, <https://ernst-haas.com/writings-by-haas/>.
- 9 Bryn Campbell, *Ernst Haas, The Great Photographers* (London, 1983), p. 4.
- 10 Haas, *In America*, p. 144.
- 11 Rumrill-Hoyt, "Ernst Haas' 36-year Love Affair," Kodachrome Testimonial prototype, job no. EXPR-5-0-371 (0876A), March 29, 1985. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 12 Haas, "Black and White Versus Color."
- 13 Ernst Haas, *The Creation* (New York, 1971), pp. 8–9.
- 14 Haas, *In America*, p. 144.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Ernst Haas, cited in Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas," p. 43.
- 17 Haas, *In America*, pp. 9–10.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 19 Ernst Haas, cited in Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas," p. 42.
- 20 John P. Jacob, *Ernst Haas: On Set* (Göttingen, 2015), p. 9.
- 21 Haas, "Black and White Versus Color."
- 22 Haas was paid \$8,000 for the commission in this instance and shot eighty-three rolls of Kodachrome. He also sold large prints of his photographs to VW to decorate their offices.
- 23 Haas, *In America*, p. 135.
- 24 Eve Arnold, cited in Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas," p. 25.
- 25 Haas, *In America*, p. 151.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 28 "America's Indians, a Conquered People Wake Up," *Look*, June 2, 1970, p. 29. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 29 Haas, *In America*, p. 12.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 141. Despite Haas's reservations, the image became an iconic depiction of the American West, and was even used in a Marlboro travel brochure to advertise adventure tours of the United States.
- 32 Ernst Haas, Letter to Ralph Delby, Leo Burnett, August 20, 1986. Ernst Haas Archive, Getty Images, London.
- 33 *Ibid.* The pitch letter also detailed the planned expenses for the shoot, which include a daily fee for Haas of \$2,500, and \$1,250 for Winfield, as well as the rental for saddle horses at \$50 a day, loose horses at \$15, and an estimated 200 rolls of film. The whole shoot was budgeted for \$95,340.
- 34 Ernst Haas, cited in Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas," p. 40.
- 35 Haas, *In America*, p. 133.
- 36 Ernst Haas, cited in Inge Biondi, *Ernst Haas: A Colour Retrospective* (London, 1989), p. 11.
- 37 Cornell Capa, cited in Dhirajlal Sanghvi, "Ernst Haas," p. 33.
- 38 Anna Winland, cited in *ibid.*
- 39 Ernst Haas, cited in *ibid.*, p. 32.
- 40 Ernst Haas, "Color Theories," Writings by Haas, <https://ernst-haas.com/essays-on-haas/>.





















