

**19 June 2017 Cameraderie**  
**W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978)**

Eclectic, “thorny;” moral; and a perfectionist to boot. Evidently, W. Eugene Smith was all of these.

You can read Smith’s story on Wikipedia here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W.\\_Eugene\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._Eugene_Smith). Here are two quotes from that article:

“Renowned for the dedication he devoted to his projects and his uncompromising professional and ethical standards.”

“Smith was arguably the originator and certainly the master of the photo-essay.”

In the early 1970s, Smith documented the effects of mercury poisoning on people near the Chisso Corporation chemical factory near Minamata, Japan, which discharged heavy metals into nearby seawaters between 1932 and 1968. The chemicals concentrated in fish that local people ate, and thousands were sickened and died. Smith intended to stay a few months in Japan to document this, but remained for three years. Smith’s photo of *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* (1971) is one of the most dramatic and poignant images ever shot, and is the finest example of his photo-essay perfection.



*Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* (1971)

Here is a link to the Wikipedia article on this image.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomoko\\_Uemura\\_in\\_Her\\_Bath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomoko_Uemura_in_Her_Bath).

From the point of view of photo-essay, the story told in this single image is deep and elaborate:

- Mother and daughter (Tomoko) are both naked in a traditional Japanese bath.
- Tomoka is cradled by her mother, obviously paralyzed and unable to care for herself, with distorted limbs and fingers, and staring eyes showing the effect of the severe mercury poisoning she has suffered.

- It is an image of suffering caused by industrial pollution, and deep caring of a mother for her daughter.

Photographically, it is a masterpiece of black and white imagery, with its single side-light source, and deep shadows intensifying the two women. No one wants such situations to happen. No one enjoys taking a great photo and seeing such pain. But when the matter is before us, we take the photo and put it to use.

As a result of his involvement, Smith was assaulted by Chisso factory workers fearing the loss of their jobs, but he survived the attack.

Here is another of Smith's most famous photos, often called *The Walk to Paradise Garden*:



*The Walk to Paradise Garden* (1946)

Here is the history of this photo. Refer back to my article in September, 2013 on Edward Steichen, when I mentioned, among so many other achievements, that Steichen was the curator for “The Family of Man” exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1955. Many of you have seen the book, *The Family of Man*, that resulted from that exhibit. Now recall the back cover photograph of two very small children treading along a dark forest path out into a sunlit glen. This is that photo and the children are Smith's own. He shot it in 1946, during a period of recovery from injuries he suffered in WWII. Here is a link to a recent article telling the back story of this photo.

<http://time.com/37534/into-the-light-w-eugene-smiths-walk-to-paradise-garden/>

What a fine composition, and what levels of meaning we may interpret from it. This one image has inspired me over the years to often shoot children from behind as they walk away from me. The anonymity makes them into *all* children.

Here is a link to a past Smith exhibit at the Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis that shows both of the above images and 32 more.

<http://weinstein-gallery.com/exhibits.php?eid=40#nogo>

Smith's collection now belongs to the International Center for Photography (ICP). Go to this link to browse through his work:

<https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/w-eugene-smith?all/all/all/all/0>.