

[Note: The following book review is slated for publication in the Summer 2006 issue of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*.]

Ostman, Ronald E. and Harry Littell (2005). **Margaret Bourke-White: The Early Work, 1922-1930**. Boston, MA: David R. Godine, Publisher. pp. 92.

The premier issue of *Life* magazine (November 23, 1936) introduced the bold photography of Margaret Bourke-White to the average American. Yet her instant notoriety was preceded by years of hard work punctuated by self-doubt. During college, as she drifted from one school to another, photography was but one of several areas of interest, albeit the most profitable. Nevertheless, as Robert J. Doherty points out, an examination of her early work reveals that Bourke-White's major theme, power, was evident from the beginning.

Ostman and Littell's book is divided into two parts. A thirty-page essay opens the book, periodically illustrated with small, mostly biographical images. The authors construct both an historical and a psychological context, while connecting the early work to Bourke-White's subsequent achievements.

With her gift for self-reinvention, her fondness for reptiles, her fame and notoriety, her physical courage and her impeccable timing, Bourke-White often confounds those who write about her. As the authors mention, some, including at least one psychiatrist, remember Bourke-White as an insecure, depressed and solitary figure. Yet others recall someone who "captivated plenty of men on the campus," and would do whatever she deemed necessary to make a photograph. Her biographer, Vicki Goldberg, portrays Bourke-White as a "plain little girl with a face too old for a young child" and "a bit plump." Yet Elsa Dorfman, writing about Goldberg's book in *The Women's Review of Books*, states unequivocally that Bourke-White was "by all accounts, beautiful," a person many believed "the most extraordinary person they had ever encountered."

Ostman and Littell prove sure-footed evaluating the work itself. They point out several ways, supported by the photographs, in which Bourke-White positioned herself to develop quickly as a photographer and an artist. While enrolled at Columbia University, she had the good fortune to study under one of pictorialism's notable proponents, Clarence H. White, a member of the Photo-Secession group that struggled to win acceptance for photography as an art form.

Under White's tutelage, Bourke-White turned to abstraction, pattern, balance and contrast, as the basis for creating effective compositions, regardless of subject matter or desired effects. Despite working in a variety of styles and contexts over the years, and moving freely between objects and people as subjects, Bourke-White's work consistently exemplifies White's basic tenets, echoed in his mantra, "design, design, design." Work included here shows Bourke-White developing the ability to strengthen a composition — changing the point of view, manipulating exposure times, or constructing a series. Through the authors' eyes, we watch her thinking, learning, growing.

What could stand more attention is arguably Bourke-White's most formidable tool. Time and again, what distinguishes her images is the use of repetition. The silhouette of a tree, in the foreground, echoes the path of an ice-skater, in the distance; a single upright column is followed by several, each receding further into the background; a multi-ribbed loudspeaker juts at the viewer, while others, running parallel to the

horizon, recede; a statue of a man, seated, hands on knees, towers above several students, seated at his feet. Bourke-White's focus on repetition lends depth and a persistent rhythm to her work, drawing viewers "into" the pictures.

The written essay is followed by a "selected" portfolio of the work itself, made up of seventy-one images, divided into sections. The first of these, "University of Michigan, 1922-1924," presents a dutiful student of pictorialism, struggling to make art, and pay her tuition, by making photographs of her immediate environment — university buildings, archways, bridges and walking paths — with a cracked lens, no less! The middle group of photographs, "Cornell University, 1926-1927," makes up the bulk of the book, and includes an occasional human portrait. The final section, "Cleveland, Ohio, 1927-1930," consists of only five images, but clearly anticipates the "mature" work that would grant Bourke-White the attention of millions.

The book itself is handsomely designed. Type on the cover is centered, and strategically placed, so as not to interfere with a majestic, full-bleed photograph. Bourke-White's name is set in a shade of yellow that draws attention to her name, even as it accentuates the warm tones of the image beneath it. Inside, each photograph is printed on a single page, centered above a title, set in *Italic*, and a page number, set in Old Style numerals. The occasional blank page serves as a "rest." Text is set in black ink, while titles and page numbers are a warm grey, reflecting the tonal intricacies of the photographs. A colophon provides generous information about the (classic, yet modern) typeface, Plantin, employed throughout.

In essence, the book's design frames the content as "high art." Given Bourke-White's place in the photojournalistic pantheon, such an approach seems justified, despite the somewhat unremarkable nature of much of the "early work" reproduced between the covers. Bourke-White's work and career, despite her considerable fame and unique accomplishments, attract surprisingly meager attention today. This book constitutes a small but significant step towards rectifying that situation.

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