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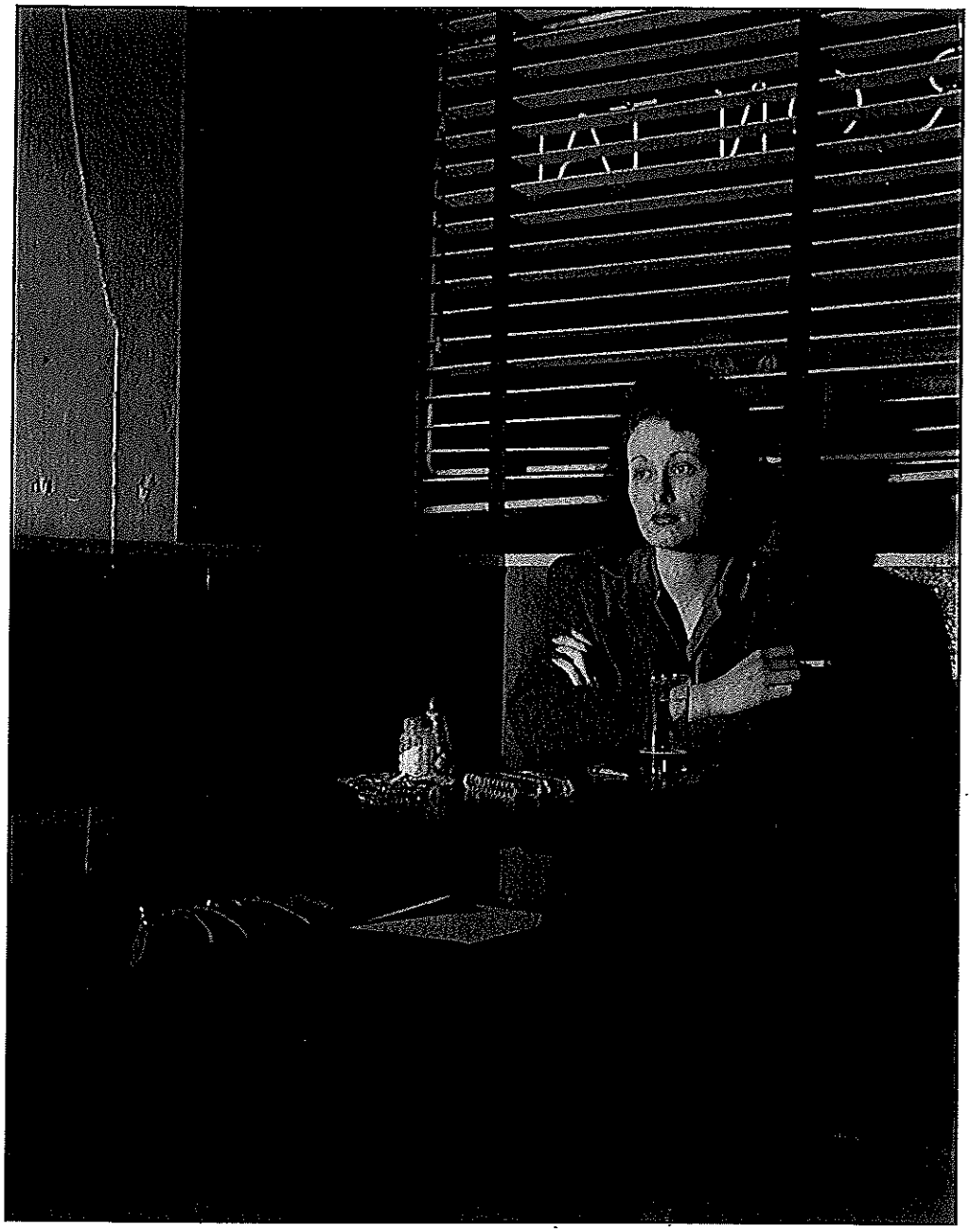
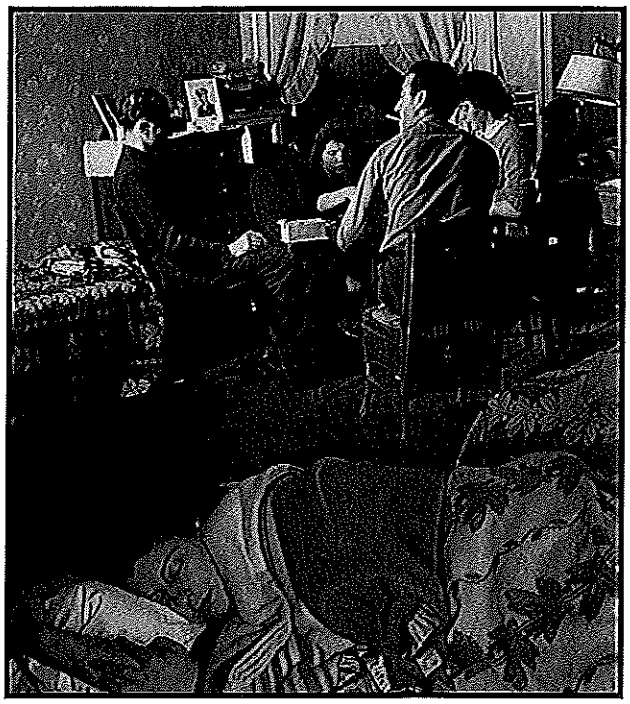


Julie Wittes Schlack

Esther Bubley's Interiors

In 1943, a photographer shot a series of pictures at Dissin's Boarding House, a Washington, D.C. establishment. These photos show young women, without parents or husbands, living with each other. It shows them sitting and chatting on the stairwell as they await their turn in the bathroom, shows them tired, smoking cigarettes, wearing bathrobes. It shows them with men.



In one, two men and two women sitting on low chairs play a grim and smoky game of Mah-jongg while in the foreground, on one of the three beds crammed into the room, a young woman sleeps soundly. In another a woman lies with her arms behind her head, still in her skirt and sweater, listening to the radio on the windowsill behind her. The curtains are closed,

so it could be any day, any time, but, looking at it, you feel that it must be around 10 o'clock at night – too early for bed, too late to go out, and nowhere to go or money to go there with. The woman stares out under heavy-lidded eyes toward someone or something outside the frame as she listens to a music-filled, dancing life chirping tinnily from a radio—a life she'd come looking for and not gotten. This picture of a woman, barely more than a girl, reveals a soul that is weary and not nearly naïve enough.

Esther Bubley, the 22-year-old photographer who captured it, was, in all likelihood, even younger than her subjects but already displaying the penetrating eye and technical fluency that would characterize her work. Almost a generation removed from the early giants of photojournalism at the start of her career and, at the end of her career, at least a generation older than the pioneers of digital photography, Esther's professional life spanned the evolution from photography as journalism—that is, as a means to spontaneously capture and convey the stories of *others*— to its contemporary dominance as a means of expressing and broadcasting *oneself*. In a climate in which we are bombarded by self-disclosure and exhibitionism, looking at Esther Bubley's work today is a reminder that pictures can be revelations.

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In 1942, work in the federal government was plentiful for young, aspiring women. Esther came to Washington, D.C. and got a job shooting microfilm of rare books for the National Archives. Soon after arriving, however, she landed a position as a darkroom technician in the historical section of the Office of War Information (OWI), a division that had, until just a few months earlier, been a part of the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

A New Deal initiative, the purpose of the FSA was to provide loans and resettlement opportunities to farmers who'd fallen victim to the Dust Bowl and the Depression. Under the leadership of former miner, cowboy, World War I infantryman, and economics professor Roy Stryker, the historical section was the agency's visual propaganda arm. Charged with documenting the FSA's work in photographs, the historical section's mission was supposed to build public support for providing federal aid to the poor.

It was a mission that Stryker—the proud "son of a Populist"—and the photographers he recruited embraced with gusto. For Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, and others, shooting the dilapidated homes, gaunt faces, worn shoes, calloused hands, and stooped backs of the nation's migrant laborers, subsistence farmers, and breadline recipients was an opportunity to educate the citizenry and excite its conscience.

Their work had succeeded brilliantly with Esther. It's what drew her to the profession, and she was now plying her trade, if not her craft, in the immediate shadows of her heroes.

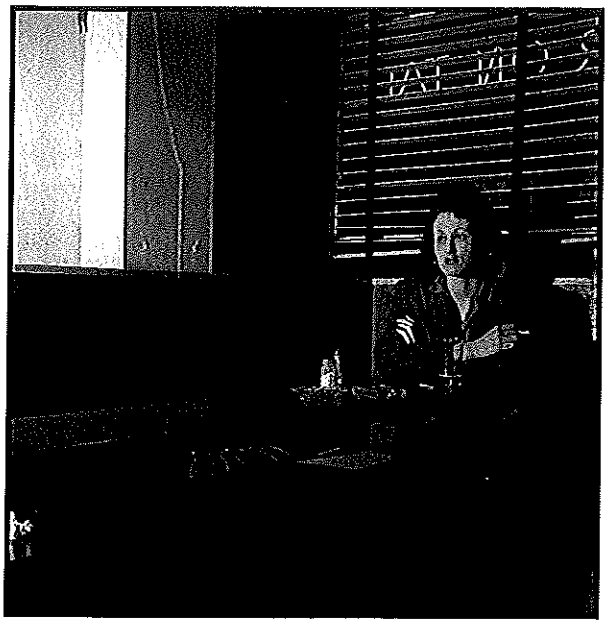
But, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Stryker's mission, and that of his talented group, changed. The FSA's photographic unit was transferred to the OWI, and their objective shifted from creating sympathy for the poor to generating energy and support for the nation's war effort.

Grateful to be working under Mr. Stryker, Esther dutifully discharged her technical responsibilities. But her real ambition was to imprint her own images onto the film, not to develop and print someone else's. So, in her off-hours Esther took pictures, creating her own photo essays. She started in Dissin's, her sister Enid's home away from home, one of hundreds of private residences that had been converted into boarding houses to accommodate the huge influx of government workers. And that early series—unselfconscious, clear-eyed, un-posed—epitomized the quality that marked Esther's style. It also produced some images that were iconic of the single working girl.

"Her many photographs, intimate moments of privacy—day-dreaming out a window, napping on a couch, thumbing a magazine, arranging personal objects on a dresser—offer a sense of stasis," writes film historian and critic Paula Rabinowitz, "of lives held in abeyance, waiting alone for an uncertain future, as they depict women inventing independent lives during the war....Alone and mobile, they are free from family scrutiny and control; yet their availability is limited by the absence of men who have deserted this and other urban spaces for war."

Indeed, the photos comprising the *Sea Grill Restaurant* series could have been prototypes for the Barbara Stanwyck and Rita Hayworth characters in the movies of the late '40s—the seductive fortune hunters or the hardened molls with a flicker of compassion in their hearts that they can't quite snuff out. These nighttime interiors more sharply reveal the hunger just hinted at on the face of the lone radio listener.

In the photo captioned "Girl sitting alone in the Sea Grill, a bar and restaurant, waiting for a pickup," we see a young woman, arms folded and resting on the far end of a narrow, shiny bar, a cigarette in one pale hand, an empty glass in front of her. Above her head is a large window, and on the other side of the open blinds behind her, the backward neon letters affixed to the window promise something "ON TAP" to the passersby outside. Her strapless handbag and a large envelope lay on the booth seat next to her. She is staring into space; her pale face is luminous and longing. It is creamy and human in a room that is all angles and shadow.



Stryker was so impressed with Esther's work that he started giving her assignments, placing her in the same league as the great FSA photographers whom she'd idolized.

In Germany, Leni Riefenstahl and other photographers and filmmakers were creating wartime photographic propaganda as well, via posed, medium shots of shining-eyed Hitler Youth and wide-angle vistas of hundreds of marching feet and ecstatic faces, a choreography that would have made a fascist Busby Berkeley proud. While the OWI's approach was more nuanced, according to photographer John Vachon, their mandate was clearly to depict "shipyards, steel mills, aircraft plants, oil refineries, and always the happy American worker."

In support of that mission, Esther was given assignments that enabled her to focus on everyday people engaged in ordinary activities, letting the viewer's knowledge of extraordinary times imbue the pictures with even greater meaning. In a landmark series titled *Bus Story*, she rode Greyhound buses across the country, and while each image conveys a highly specific and personal moment, in aggregate they form a grand narrative of a nation in motion, a populace literally and metaphorically driving through the night, together, to a bright, new day.

But with the end of the war, just as working women were herded back into the home, so too were photojournalists assigned to more domestic assignments. Robert Capa, who shot the only surviving still images of the Normandy Invasion, was now shooting (and striking up an affair with) Ingrid Bergman on her movie set. And, under the leadership of legendary photo

editor John Morris, a woman's magazine like the *Ladies' Home Journal* was able to attract top talent.

"We're all trying to learn how to live," said Beatrice Blackmar Gould, coeditor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* with her husband Bruce Gould in late 1939. "But every problem jumps out at us before we're quite ready. Adolescence—the boy next door. Marriage, for better or for worse—little, demanding children—swiftly they, too, are rebellious teenagers. Soon worrisome elderly relatives. This is why women talk to their neighbors. We all need to learn. Men in their working day discuss details of their professions. Women, in a sense, all have the same profession. They learn constantly from others."

From this realization sprang the idea for a series that continues (albeit as an airbrushed, pastel shadow of its former self) to this day: "How America Lives." The Goulds' idea was to choose an American family each month that was struggling with the ordinary challenges that would, according to Bruce Gould, "keep homemaking, food, and fashion material close to the realities of ordinary existence," depicting the family through words and photos.

Esther Bubley was an ideal photographer for this series. Unlike her mentors and heroes, she had not made her reputation by showing her viewers people and sights they would otherwise never see, not by displaying exotic sites or disenfranchised citizens to those removed from them. Rather, the subjects of her pictures—pictures meant to be viewed in mainstream magazines in typical living rooms—were the same sort of people likely to be viewing them.

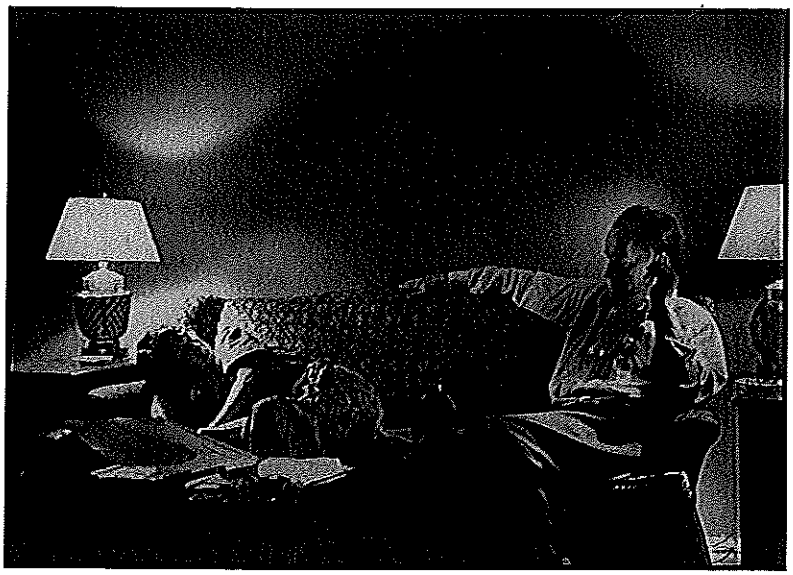
Perhaps no *How America Lives* project better illustrates her ability to capture what no subjects would intentionally or voluntarily show than the story that ran in the October 21, 1952 edition, "They Learned to Love Again."

"Meet Richard and Eugenia Simons, of Los Angeles, who faced marital failure— and refused to surrender to it" announces the earnest subhead to the story. Below the headline is a portrait of *Walter A. Helfrich, Simonses' counselor at the Los Angeles Institute of Family Relations*—a middle-aged man with a deeply lined brow, rimless glasses, pinstriped suit, and a gaze that is remarkably direct and compassionate.

But it is the photo above the headline that is riveting. Behind a coffee table cluttered with papers, cigarettes, a record jacket and a fluted candy bowl is a couple on the couch, each with faces partially lit by perky, slightly mismatched lamps on the two end tables. With feet crossed on the floor, Genie Simons half-sits, half-lies with her head on the right arm of the couch, one of her own arms cushioning her head, the other pressing into the cushion in front of her. In this awkward pose she looks like she has toppled over from exhaustion, but her fatigue is belied by her intent look at her husband Dick. Though his cuffs are still buttoned, his bowtie is undone and his posture weary as he reclines into the opposite corner of the couch, right

arm on its back, left arm bent, a cigarette dangling from his hand. They are not touching, though Genie looks as though she would have been much more comfortable with her feet in Dick's lap. Even in profile, it's clear that Dick is gazing back at Genie with absolute seriousness.

The lamps, the record jacket, the loosened tie, and the slouched and reclining bodies all signal to us that this is the end of a long day, but the topic, even the emotional tenor of the conversation, isn't obvious. They could be discussing the kids, their finances, his job, the failing health of a family friend—we just can't tell. We don't know if they're connected by love, by stubbornness, by a mutual, maddening inability to concede, but what *is* evident is their absolute engagement with one another. We can't take our eyes off of them.

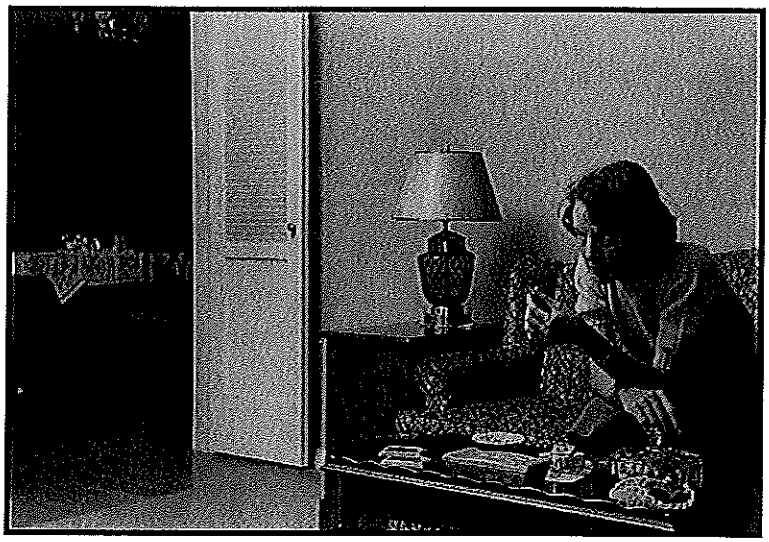


This image of Genie and Dick introduces the story. Then a progression of skillfully cropped pictures—the Simons children doing their chores; Dick and Genie each making their case to Dr. Helfrich; the family gathered for bedtime stories; and finally, a solicitous Genie bending down to look into the eyes of a pleased and receptive Dick, sitting in his armchair—show the tale of this couple's evolution from strained alienation to tender domesticity and, miraculously, do so without a hint of falsity.

But there was one image in this series that was a little too true for *Ladies' Home Journal* to publish.

We are looking at the same couch, the same coffee table, and the living room is immaculate. Through the open French doors on the left, we see the dining room, the table cleared of everything but a sugar bowl and perfectly

aligned salt and pepper shakers. But the chairs are askew, their odd angles as though they were simply abandoned without being pushed back to the table. And sitting hunched over on the couch, one arm on her knees, her other hand holding something indecipherable between thumb and forefinger, is Genie. Her hair, though styled, is greasy and starting to fray, with shapeless wisps marring its surface. Her head juts forward; her chin lifted just enough to let her make eye contact with someone unseen across the room. There is a puffy bag under her left eye, and her glare is paralyzing. Here, in this neat and pristine room, all bare walls and orderly surfaces, she is absolutely enraged.



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How was Esther able to capture these images?

"She was invisible. This was one of her great talents," notes her close friend, photo editor Sally Forbes.

That observation was shared by others who knew her. Her sister-in-law Frances recounts an overnight visit that Esther paid when Frances and Stanley Bubley's daughter Jean was a child:

"In the morning, an hour or two after breakfast, I asked, 'Aren't you going to take any pictures of Jean?' And she told me she'd already shot two rolls. I hadn't even seen her pick up the camera."

Esther's nephew, Jerry Raines, tells a similar story. Following the death of Esther's brother-in-law, the family gathered at the home of her sister Claire to sit shiva. Months later Esther sent the family photos she had taken that day, pictures that no one was aware of her having taken.

But being inconspicuous alone was not enough to explain the uncanny intimacy of her pictures, even on the part of someone that Sally Forbes

described as "the least extravagant, self-aggrandizing photographer who ever lived."

"She was straightforward and trustworthy, so people revealed themselves," notes Esther's niece Jean. "She was also a very keen observer. Nothing got past her. Even during her hospital stay the last month of her life, she knew everyone from the doctors to the housekeeping staff and what their duties were, who was competent and who wasn't, and the latest gossip. She could read people. She captured honest emotions, not facades."

Esther Bubley brought great technical skill and a marvelous eye for composition to her work. She never wasted a frame; indeed, she was the only photographer whose sequence of contact prints – without a duplicate among them -- was chosen by Edward Steichen for display at the Museum of Modern Art precisely for the economical narrative they presented. Agility, foresight, and patience are all demonstrated in her work. But so, too, is diligence. Her notebooks and weekly calendars reveal her studious immersion in her assignments, with lists of specialized terms and processes, from the use of a macromolecular weight apparatus by scientists in a Pittsburgh hospital to an exhaustive (and exhausting) list of household tasks performed by the housewives she was shooting.

In all of the images associated with these journal entries, Esther's genuine interest infused each emulsified moment with backstory, one that still makes us lean forward in our seats and try to read the enigmatic faces.

Witness the photograph of Peggy Coleman, the *Housewife with 10 Thumbs* that ran in the February 1950 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal.* Chosen to illustrate the hardships and dreams of postwar urban families, Peggy lived in a three-and-a-half-room Manhattan apartment with her husband and two small children. In the story's lead photo, Peggy, pert and trim in her checked seersucker dress, holds a large piece of fabric. Her head is turned and slightly cocked, her short but thick hair flairs out behind her, as if she has just whipped her head around, and her expression is ... what? Alert? Alarmed? Troubled? All we know, without reading the caption, is that we are transfixed by her dark eyes that, while staring intently, are looking inward, as if she is straining to hear her own thoughts.

In this image, as in so much of Esther Bubley's work, we're witnessing someone's interior life. It is a mesmerizing privilege and we know it.

We're also witnessing a brief, crucial inflection point in the history of photography. This "invisible" woman—childless, only briefly married, quiet, self-reliant, nonmaterialistic except for her indulgence in good and good-looking shoes—made photography an intimate art.

Esther Bubley reached professional prominence in post-war, newly affluent America, when magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* replaced exposure with empathy, added generous helpings of practicality and patriotism, and created the comforting broth that would serve as the cultural nourishment for Oprah and other celebrity helpers of today.

But unlike today's "reality" shows and social media ethos that demands, as YouTube does on its home page—that you "Broadcast yourself!"—Esther Bubley's print documentaries were captured, not constructed. They uncovered the breathtaking in the mundane and manifested real lives of common people, unstaged and miraculously recognized.

That's not to say that her palette was small. On the contrary, in her assignments for the Standard Oil Company (New Jersey), Pan American World Airways, Pepsi-Cola International, *Life*, the Children's Bureau, the Pittsburgh Photographic Archive, and UNICEF, she traveled the world, shooting everything from oil refineries in Aruba to Berbers in Morocco.

But this work—shot largely indoors and revealing the internal lives of her subjects—epitomized an approach that was unique not just in its skill, but in the brief American cultural period that informed it. Esther came of age professionally in a time in which aspiring to live an average life was the highest ideal. While she shared the same progressive impulses that fueled the photojournalists who had reached their prime a decade before her, unlike them, she did not treat her subjects as icons. She quietly celebrated the

fullness of the ordinary.

Henri Cartier-Bresson wrote of taking photographs that "It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis." Though far more eloquent with her images than her words, this entry from Esther Bubley's diary confirms the truth of those words and reveals what the few posed pictures of her never did:

Feb. 18 1952 Rome Italy. The Realta Hotel in a white room with watermelon curtains. I think that the wonderful thing that is happening or has happened to me is that I am growing up; or I am grown up and enjoying it. I have found the human race. It is like finding one's family at last.