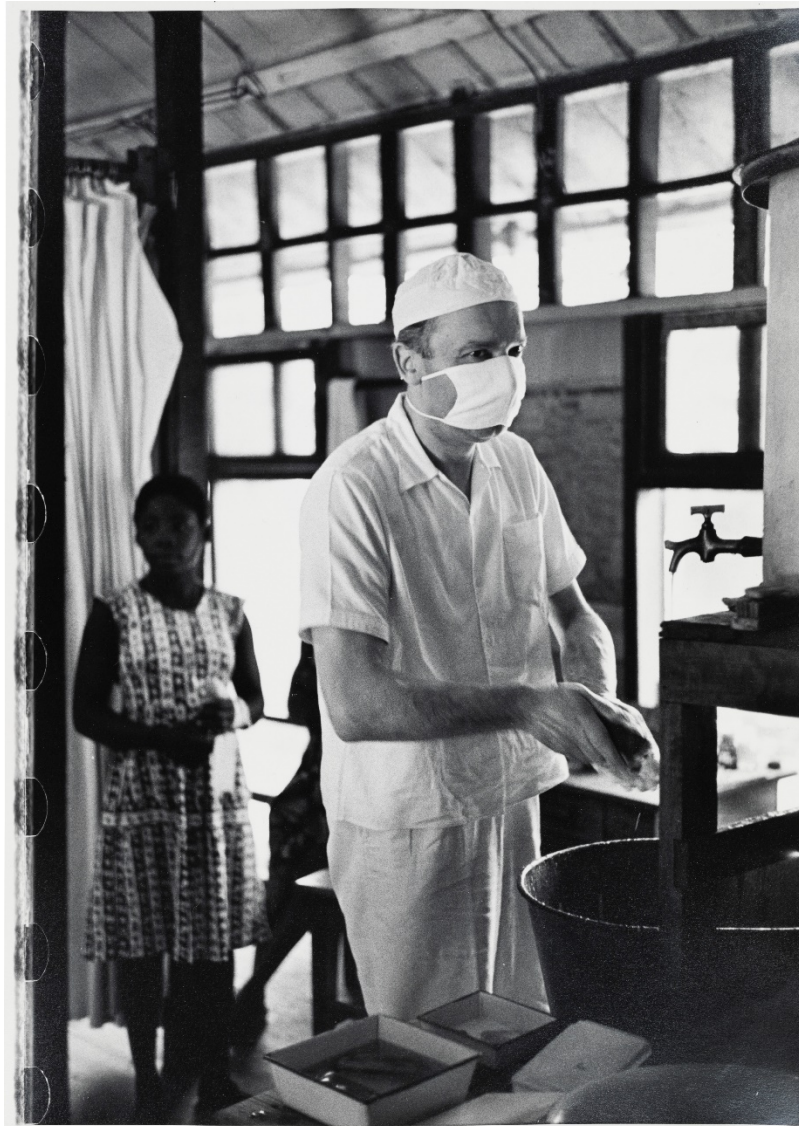




W. Eugene Smith, *Doctor Washing Hands*, 1954



Gelatin silver print, 13 3/4 x 9 1/2 in.  
Gift of Kevin Eugene Smith, 1989.65

*I have personally always fought very hard against ever packaging a story so that all things seem to come to an end at the end of a story. I always want to leave it so that there is a tomorrow. I suggest what might happen tomorrow – at least to say all things are not resolved, that this is life, and it is continuing.*

—W. Eugene Smith <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “W. Eugene Smith: Master of the Photo Essay,” *Magnum Photos* [website](#): Theory & Practice



### **Artist Biography**

W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918—1978) was an influential photographer who helped shape the field of photojournalism in the mid-twentieth century. Born in Wichita, Kansas, he became interested in photography at age fourteen and started taking photographs for local newspapers in his late teens. Soon after his high school graduation, he enrolled at the Notre Dame University in Wichita. Within a year, he had dropped out of college and moved to New York City. There, he gained experience working for publications like *Newsweek* and freelancing for others, including *LIFE* and *The New York Times*.

During World War II, Smith was a war correspondent in the Pacific theater first for the Ziff-Davis publishing company, which published the magazine *Flying*, followed by *LIFE*. In total, he flew on and photographed over sixteen combat missions, though many of the resulting images were censored. In 1945, he was severely wounded in Okinawa during combat maneuvers and evacuated to Guam. Of his photographs shot during the war, Smith wrote “I would that my photographs might be, not the coverage of a news event, but an indictment of war—the brutal corrupting viciousness of its doing to the minds and bodies of men; and, that my photographs might be a powerful emotional catalyst to the reasoning which would help this vile and criminal stupidity from beginning again.”<sup>2</sup>

After a two-year recovery, Smith returned to *LIFE* magazine, where he received widespread acclaim for his photo essays, which covered a range of topics, including art, labor, medicine, rural and urban life, and racial tension. His best-known photo essays included “Country Doctor” (1948) and “Spanish Village” (1951). These are held as landmarks in the field of American photojournalism and archetypes of the photo essay. Despite his success, Smith was regularly frustrated by his editors, who limited Smith’s control of the stories in which his photographs appeared; he ultimately left the magazine in 1954.

In 1955 he joined Magnum photography, a well-known photo agency that had formed after the Second World War, becoming a full member two years later and leaving the agency in 1958. In 1955 Smith also began working on a project documenting Pittsburgh, creating a massive archive of photographs of the city and spending much of his capital on a project that ultimately came to naught. Between 1957 and 1965, he made tens of thousands of photographs and audiotapes of prominent jazz musicians in an around his loft apartment slash recording studio on Sixth Avenue in the heart of the jazz scene; a resulting project was titled “The Jazz Loft.” Between 1966 and 1969 he became special editor of medical reportage for *Visual Medicine* and was also commissioned by Hospital for Special Surgery in New York to photograph its services.

Smith and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith moved to Minamata, Japan in 1971 to create a photo essay on the mercury poisoning of the fishing village’s residents. The resulting essay, “Death-Flow from a Pipe,” published in *LIFE* in 1972, and a subsequent book released in 1975, raised awareness of both what became known as Minamata disease and the devastating effect that toxic waste was having on the environment and nearby populations. For this work, he received the 1974 Robert Capa Gold Medal.

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<sup>2</sup> W. Eugene Smith: *His Photographs and Notes* (New York: Aperture, 1969), n.p



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He returned to the United States in 1974 and soon after moved to Tucson to teach at the University of Arizona. He passed away the following year. After his death, the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund was established in recognition of his contributions to the development of photojournalism. The fund supports photographers whose projects follow Smith's tradition of humanistic photography and compassion.



### **Location**

W. Eugene Smith's photograph *Doctor Washing Hands*, along with *Maude Feeding Banana to Patient* and *Doctor, Patient, and Maude* are all currently installed in the Chazen Museum Mezzanine gallery. To view these photographs in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### **Visual Description**

*Doctor Washing Hands* is a small, vertical, black and white photograph created by W. Eugene Smith. It measures thirteen and three-quarters inches by nine and one-half inches. The photograph depicts a white male washing his hands as a young African American person stands in the distance. The male is dressed like a doctor and wears all white clothing including a surgical cap, a short-sleeved button up shirt, and pants; a surgical mask covers his nose and mouth. He faces the right of the image as he looks to the distance and holds his hands over a large wash basin. Slight blurring of his hands suggest that they are in motion, that he is rubbing them together, as if washing his hands. The water he uses to wash his hands falls from a spout attached to a large kettle placed on a stand above the basin. The wash basin rests on a table that reaches the height of the doctor's knees. On the table beside the basin rest several small but deep square trays that appear to contain surgical instruments in fluid. A child wearing a patterned dress stands in the background, behind the doctor, at the lower left side of the image. The child stands forward but looks left to the distance. A plain white curtain hangs vertically directly behind the child. Though obstructed by the doctor's stance, a third person appears to be sitting in a chair to the right of the child as evidenced by a back-lit silhouette of an arm, waist and legs. This person also seems to be wearing a dress. In the background of all three figures is a wall composed of small square windows with a wooden roof above and floor below, suggesting the figures are positioned in an interior space.



## Content and Context

*A photo is a small voice, at best, but sometimes - just sometimes - one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses into awareness. Much depends upon the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought.*

— W. Eugene Smith <sup>3</sup>

W. Eugene Smith (often referred to as “Gene”) brought a sympathetic eye to the people and events he photographed. His personal mission was to champion good people and expose societal problems. Critics and scholars have observed that Smith sometimes blurred the boundaries between objective reportage (reporting of the news) and interpretive commentary. He frequently identified emotionally with the people he photographed and intended his photographs to expose injustice and inequality. The great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, “I feel Gene’s photographs reflect a great turmoil. They are captured between the shirt and the skin; this camera, anchored in the heart, moves me by its integrity.”<sup>4</sup>

Smith did not claim neutrality for his own work and did not believe it was even possible for a photojournalist to be entirely objective. “In the building of a story,” he explained, “I being with my own prejudices, mark them as prejudices, and start finding new thinking, the contradictions to my prejudices. What I am saying is that you cannot be objective until you try to be fair. You try to be honest and you try to be fair and maybe truth will come out.”<sup>5</sup>

During his career Smith repeatedly returned to the theme of healthcare and caregivers. Among those photo essays he produced for *LIFE* magazine were “Country Doctor” (1948), “Nurse Midwife” (1951), and “A Man of Mercy” (1954). Photographs from all three series are in the Chazen Museum’s collection and can be viewed on its collection database via the Chazen website. He saw the individuals featured in these stories as heroic, in that they sacrificed for the wellbeing of others. At that time *LIFE* was widely read, with a readership of 20 million or about thirty percent of the American population; the message that these essays conveyed was one of hope and reassurance. Both “Country Doctor” and “Nurse Midwife” inspired many to enter the healthcare field. Smith would return to the theme of medical ailments and treatment later in life, in his and his then-wife’s exposé on Minamata disease.

The series “A Man of Mercy” featured Alsatian-French missionary and physician Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his humanitarian work in French Equatorial Africa. The photograph *Doctor Washing Hands* is likely one Smith took in 1954 while working on his story about Schweitzer. It probably depicts one of the doctors who worked with Schweitzer at the hospital he founded in Lambaréné, Gabon, Africa.

In his photo essay “Nurse Midwife,” Smith made a heroine of Maude Callen, a black woman who worked selflessly and tirelessly to provide healthcare to a community of 10,000 people, primarily African

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<sup>3</sup> “W. Eugene Smith,” Magnum Photos [website](#)

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in “W. Eugene Smith,” *The J. Paul Getty Museum* [website](#)

<sup>5</sup> “W. Eugene Smith: Master of the Photo Essay,” *Magnum Photos* [website](#): Theory & Practice



American, in rural South Carolina. Smith followed Callen for over two months, photographing her with patients, conversing with her, and recording facts about her work in a notebook. He would later refer to her as “the greatest person I have been privileged to know.” And “perhaps the most completely fulfilled person I have ever known.”<sup>6</sup> The text that appeared in *LIFE* alongside Smith’s photographs articulates Callen’s duties: “On her daily rounds she sees dozens of patients suffering from countless diseases and injuries. She visits the nine schools in her district to check vaccinations, eyes and teeth...She tries to keep diseases isolated and when she locates a case of contagious illness like tuberculosis she must comb through her territory like a detective, tracking down all the people with whom the patient may have been in contact...Whenever she is home—she is childless and her husband, a retired custom-house employee, sees her only at odd hours—she throws open a clinic in her house to take care of anyone who wanders in.”

Callen was the first African American non-celebrity to be featured in a major photo essay in *LIFE*. Smith wanted his story about Callen to help alleviate the effects of poverty and racism, and his photographs, which portray a remarkable, resilient woman, brought visibility to the important medical and social work performed by black women in the United States. The essay inspired readers to donate \$27,000 in unsolicited funds toward the construction of the Maude E. Callen Clinic, which opened in in 1953 in Pineville, SC, and operated until Callen’s retirement in 1971.

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<sup>6</sup> *W. Eugene Smith: His Photographs and Notes* (New York: Aperture, 1969), n.p.



### Discussion Questions

1. W. Eugene Smith is referred to as both a photojournalist and photographer – a dichotomy that Smith himself was torn by throughout his career. What is the distinction between photojournalism and photography? In which category do you think Smith’s work belongs?
2. Why do you think Smith repeatedly returned to healthcare and caregivers as subjects of his photography? In what ways does his portrayal of caregivers from the 1950s mirror contemporary society? In what ways does it differ?
3. Smith’s legacy is one of “humanistic photography” in which he used his camera as a powerful tool often documenting harsh realities in effort to raise social consciousness. In what other ways do artists of all genres and media raise social consciousness? In what ways have you?
4. Like the written word, photography is a form of storytelling. Whose story does this photograph tell? Did you notice any one person first in any of these images? If you could speak to this person, what would you say?
5. How is resiliency demonstrated in this photograph? What do you see that makes you say that?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Edvard Munch (Norwegian, 1863 - 1944), [The Sick Child I](#) (Det syke barn I), 1894. Etching, drypoint, and roulette, 18 15/16 x 13 9/16 in. F. J. Sensenbrenner Trust Fund purchase, 1979.1124.

Over the course of his career, Munch returned many times to the image of his sick sister, who died of tuberculosis at the age of fifteen. In this image, we see a caretaker who has fallen asleep as they watch over the ailing patient.

W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918 - 1978), [Doctor, Patient, and Maude](#), 1951, Gelatin silver print, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 in., Gift of Kevin Eugene Smith, 1989.69. On view on the Chazen Mezzanine.

Part of the larger photo essay, “Nurse Midwife”, this photograph captures Dr. W. L. Fishburne, head of the Berkeley County health department, examining a patient brought to the hospital by Maude.

*Doctor, Patient, and Maude* is a small black and white photograph created by W. Eugene Smith. Taken in 1951, the small vertical photograph measures thirteen- and one-half inches by ten- and one-half inches. The photograph depicts three figures: a white male stands in the background and faces us, an African American female sits in the middle and faces left, showing us profile only, and an African American female stands in the foreground, her back to us. The white male is



older as evidenced by white hair and deep forehead wrinkles. He wears a stethoscope in his ears and rests his left hand on the patient's back while his right hand holds the stethoscope against the patient's chest. He is looking neither at us nor the patient but could possibly be looking at the nurse. The patient is thin and wears a white sheet wrapped around her body. Her shoulders and neck are bare and the bones of her back and shoulders poke out. She wears a patterned scarf on her head and holds her head down as the doctor examines her with a stethoscope. The nurse, known as Maude, holds the patient's left arm with a grip that appears firm, but comforting. She wears a white pinstriped outfit typical of nurse's uniforms at the time period and has short curly hair. All three appear to be in an examining room as the background is void of details except for the edge of a dark countertop and electrical outlet.

W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918 - 1978), [\*Maude Feeding Banana to Patient\*](#), 1951, Gelatin silver print, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 in., Gift of Kevin Eugene Smith, 1989.70. On view on the Chazen Mezzanine.

*Maude Feeding Banana to Patient* is a small black and white photograph created by W. Eugene Smith. Taken in 1951, the small vertical photograph measures thirteen- and one-half inches by ten- and one-half inches. The photograph depicts two women whose relationship is patient and caregiver. In the right of the image, the patient lays in bed on their side partially upright resting their left elbow on the bed to hoist their upper body. The patient wears a sleeveless white gown with a fine pattern on it. The patient lays atop a dark checkered blanket and covers their lower body with light checkered blanket. The patient's eyes look away from us and focus on a half-eaten peeled banana that the nurse holds. The nurse, known as Maude, stands to the left of the patient's bed and bend slightly towards the patient. She wears a white uniform of a collared shirt and skirt typical of nurse's uniforms at that time. She wears light framed glasses and holds what appears to be a brown paper bag under her left arm. In the lower right corner of the image, several cans of food and a whole banana rest on a table. It is possible that this scene takes place in a domestic space as evidenced by thick wood slats that line the walls in the background of the photograph. Additionally, a black handbag hangs on a thin post behind the patient's head. An open window frames Maude's head and upper body, its curtains drawn to reveal outside light.





### **Additional Resources**

*W. Eugene Smith's photo-essays as published:*

"Country Doctor," *LIFE* (September 20, 1948),

[https://books.google.com/books?id=kgEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA115&dq=country+doctor&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiFp8TsmZhrAhUUbc0KHR\\_dCoIQ6AEwAXoECAEQAg#v=onepage&q=country%20doctor&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=kgEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA115&dq=country+doctor&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiFp8TsmZhrAhUUbc0KHR_dCoIQ6AEwAXoECAEQAg#v=onepage&q=country%20doctor&f=false)

"Nurse Midwife," *LIFE* (December 3, 1951),

[https://books.google.com/books?id=oVQEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA134&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=oVQEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA134&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false)

"A Man of Mercy," *LIFE* (November 15, 1954),

<https://books.google.com/books?id=YFIEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA161&dq=a+man+of+mercy&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjV3emrwprAhXDQc0KHWwyAZYQ6AEwAHoECAIQAg#v=onepage&q&f=false>

James Estrin, "Fact and Fiction in Modern Photography," *New York Times*, April 24, 2015 [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Noel Gillespie and Albert Schweitzer, "With Schweitzer in Lambarene: Noel Gillespie's Letters from Africa," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* vol. 54, no. 3 (Spring 1971),

<http://www.jstor.com/stable/4634624> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Sean O'Hagan, "Frontline Hero: The Rocky Mountain GP who Healed America," *The Guardian* (May 14, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/may/14/coronavirus-frontline-hero-rocky-mountain-gp-healed-america-doctors-w-eugene-smith> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

James Carleton Paget, "Albert Schweitzer and Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* vol. 42, fasc. 3 (2012), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41725476> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

"W. Eugene Smith: Master of the Photo Essay," *Magnum Photos* website: Theory & Practice, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/w-eugene-smith-master-of-the-photo-essay/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]