

Level Heads

Isabelle Pauwels

This photo is 1927, really? What does 1927 look like if it's not syncopating in the city or synching with the silver screen? Does it look a lot like 1888? If I knew photography, I'd be sure that 1927 has a different leeway with light than 1888 or even 1913. 1927 looks sharp. The couple are solid, ensconced in deep blacks, hands and faces clear as day. Significant broaches, a clutch of medals on the man. These people are landed. They have defended their position and grown into it, no apologies. I know the look. I've seen it beaming from family, straight from the source in Flanders.

In Westerwald, the man is seated, no cane at hand. His left hand looks a little tense. Is this the mental leverage it takes to convey the impact of one's discipline, the force of one's standing, while being seated, to the camera? Or maybe the ground is slightly uneven. Her head is inclined ever so slightly towards her husband. She is spoken for, and she in turn has upheld her end of the bargain. Her face and hands are beacons in an otherwise sober form. She seems more copy than person, posing after examples, after Mary (who else?).

Berlin, 1927, merry merry. Surely there are lots of bright shiny things in the night. Actors and actresses, singers grooved into wax. Acres of teeth and flesh and make-believe and shadows and light collapsed onto a screen. Very amusing, but in the country we squint up at the sunlight playing through the canopies, in glorious colour. We daydream. We don't get dizzy.

That soft thing in the background, is it a wild tree or an orchard tree? Westerwald, a civilized forest sparsely trunked, adorning yields, harvests, tonnage, and records kept in stone buildings. Commerce at a sober pace, slowed by natural cycles. It's a mutual accord. The photographer is not intruding, the camera is not threatening. This is mutually agreed-upon surveillance. We hired a reputable man for the occasion.

The tripod drops anchor, positioning the machine for a monumental time-lapse. The couple, holding on to stillness, are ballast. This is not a trick! It is a testimonial to what will continue: people like us. There is little we cannot measure, except for war. An interruption which we survived.



August Sander
Westerwald Farmers Couple, 1927
gelatin silver print, 23 x 16.9 cm