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A New Documentary Champions the Photographer Who Captured Wright, Calder, and Nevelson

by [Benjamin Sutton](#) on September 17, 2015



*Pedro E. Guerrero, Frank Lloyd Wright's Arizona home, Taliesin West (1940) (all photos © 2015
Pedro E. Guerrero Archives)*

Photographers who shoot the work of famous artists are rarely celebrated in their own right, but a new documentary shifts the focus onto the man responsible for some of the most iconic images we have of [Frank Lloyd Wright](#), [Alexander Calder](#), and [Louise](#)

[Nevelson. Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey](#) premieres on PBS Friday and tracks the career of [Pedro E. Guerrero](#) (1917–2012), a Mexican American photographer from Mesa, Arizona, who, at age 22, got his first job taking photos for Wright during the construction of his [Taliesin West](#) complex across the river in Scottsdale. Beginning from this auspicious encounter, co-directors Yvan Iturriaga and Ray Telles follow the chronology of Guerrero's career, with ample commentary from the photographer himself thanks to a lengthy and candid interview conducted a couple of years before his death. While the documentary itself is nothing if not rudimentary in form, the story it tells is extraordinary.



Pedro E. Guerrero, Frank Lloyd Wright stands at the drafting table in his studio at Taliesin, Wisconsin (1947) (click to enlarge)

Guerrero's work with Wright resulted in some of the most evocative images of his buildings, conveying a sense of their dimensions, spaces, and textures. For the young photographer, who had followed his brother to art school on a whim and then dropped out, the job provided an artistic mentor. Guerrero and Wright's friendship and professional relationship continued up until the architect's death in 1959, by which time Guerrero was one of New York's most sought-after photographers of architectural

interiors. Their work together was only interrupted when Guerrero joined the US Army during World War II, running a photo lab out of a barn in southern Italy. Though he enlisted out of a sense of needing to prove his citizenship, doing so paradoxically allowed him to leave a hometown he described as “bigoted.”

“We went to a school that was just for Mexicans even though we spoke English already,” he recalled. “But this was part of the underlying prejudice.” How apt that Latino Public Broadcasting and THIRTEEN have chosen to mark [National Hispanic Heritage Month](#) by telling the story of a man who sought to escape racism in a state where, over 50 years later, [it remains pervasive](#).



Pedro E. Guerrero, self-portrait, circa 1950s, New York City (click to enlarge)

In New York, Guerrero thrived in the world of editorial photography, shooting plush and storied interiors — including Julia Childs’s kitchen — for *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *House and Garden*, *Architectural Forum*, and others. He eventually moved to New Canaan, Connecticut, a city favored by Madison Avenue’s executive class and, consequently, modernist architects. There, while serving on the local draft board during the Vietnam War, he was named in a *New York Times* article about the unusually high number of deferrals given to the area’s conscientious objectors and, consequently, was

fired from *House and Garden* after 20 years. “That was a big blow,” he said. “That was one way they could get to me: destroy my ability to make a living.”

Thereafter he devoted himself mostly to working with artists. Of the three he photographed the longest, Wright clearly had the most profound impact on Guerrero’s life, but this documentary offers some especially delightful insights into Calder’s process and personality. These include playful images of him entertaining children with his circus sculpture — now [at the Whitney Museum](#) — and the hilarious detail, recounted by Guerrero, that he leased part of his property in eastern France to grape farmers and collected wine from them in lieu of rent. While Wright and Nevelson remain enigmatic in the documentary, Calder comes across as a gregarious big kid.



Sculptor Louise Nevelson, photographed by Pedro E. Guerrero (click to enlarge)

A few years after Calder’s death in 1976, Guerrero met Nevelson, who by then was already about 80, and the hourlong film’s final chapter is devoted to their collaborations and the formal challenge of photographing her monochromatic sculptures. “Louise almost had to make me start studying photography again, because you don’t do black on black without losing any form or any shape,” Guerrero said. “I spent quite a bit of time figuring out how I was going to light the back panel and the middle panel and the front panel without destroying the piece of artwork.”

This devotion to the art of others and desire to make images that not only captured the likeness but also the spirit of their work are what have made Guerrero's art so enduring. In addition to his extensive interview, his images are ultimately *A Photographer's Journey's* most powerful and eloquent documents.

Watch an exclusive clip from Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey about Louise Nevelson:

[Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey](#) premieres on PBS Friday, September 18, at 9pm (check your local listings).