



A Short Story From *The Man With A Hat*

by Katrin Bechhold



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Commentary

The overwhelming majority of photographs are so-called “straight photography” — a rectangle or square with a clean, crisp, optically accurate reproduction of the world squashed into two dimensions. In the days of film photography, anything beyond this was exceedingly complicated to accomplish. But now, in the age of digital postprocessing, we are at greater liberty to include stylistic elements in our optical reproductions. What the camera captures is less of a limit of what we can produce. This offers possibilities, but also introduces the temptation to employ *style* inappropriate to the content. Whenever I see a stylized image that is exceedingly well done, like this image from Katrin Bechhold, I’m reminded how effectively style can amplify the content when used judiciously.

Bechhold photographed in a museum in Germany that was, in her words, “stopped in time.” Doesn’t it make sense that her photographs would employ a style that implies the historic nature of her subject matter? The black edges with the rounded corners feel like a turn-of-the-century print. The soft whites and relative lack of shadow detail are consistent with so many images from that era. This is *style* employed (properly, in my opinion) to add an emotional (in this case *temporal*) overlay to her image.

And speaking of overlays, did you notice the transparent text that overlays this entire image? It’s particularly noticeable in the right side of the image where there is faint text that seems to run across

not only the inclined desk, but the wall behind it. I must admit that at first glance I didn’t notice this consciously, but I did *feel* it emotionally. This text adds a psychological addition about engineering, science, education — something felt but not understood on a conscious level. It is still a mystery to me whether this text is the result of a purposeful double exposure, a little Photoshop layering, a shadow, or perhaps a reflection as she photographed through glass. Only my intellectual curiosity wants to know *how* this was done; from an artistic point of view, it’s incredibly important *that* it was done.

There is tremendous compositional bilateral symmetry, with a perfectly balanced counterpoint in the swing-arm, the lamp, and the drafting triangle. It speaks of precision, careful attention to detail, the engineer or draftsman’s disciplined mind.

Note also the light on the floor that illuminates the two legs of the desk. Is this natural light, or a highlight introduced through clever photographic dodging? If it’s natural, how fortuitous! If not, how incredibly sensitive of Bechhold to understand the importance of adding that visual balance near the bottom of the photograph and thereby bringing to life what otherwise might be a dead shadow.