

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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ALFRED STIEGLITZ EXHIBITION OPENS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

x "I was born in Hoboken. I am an American. Photography is my passion. The search for truth my obsession."

These words, both autobiography and epitaph, sum up the life and work of Alfred Stieglitz, whose twofold achievement as leader and influence in the modern history of art in the United States will be celebrated in a double exhibition: ALFRED STIEGLITZ: HIS PHOTOGRAPHS AND COLLECTION which opens to the public today (June 11) at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street. Two floors are devoted to the exhibition: on one is shown a selection of paintings, sculpture, drawings and prints which belonged to Alfred Stieglitz; on the other, a group of photographs by Alfred Stieglitz. The exhibition as a whole will close August 31; the photographs, however, will remain on view through September 21.

James Johnson Sweeney, in consultation with Georgia O'Keeffe, executrix of the Alfred Stieglitz estate, has directed the exhibition. Mr. Sweeney has also installed it. A book by him on the Alfred Stieglitz collection and a complete catalog of Stieglitz photographic work edited by Mr. Sweeney will be published by the Museum.

This country's introduction to modern art is generally credited to the famous Armory Show of 1913. Actually, however, Stieglitz was the first to introduce advance guard European art to this country through exhibitions in his Photo-Secession Gallery on lower Fifth Avenue later known as "291". A section of the current exhibition includes examples of the early work of the European artists which were included in those first American showings arranged by Stieglitz:

Rodin exhibition, drawings, 1908, 1910
Matisse, drawings, lithographs, watercolors,
sculpture, 1908, 1910, 1912
Toulouse-Lautrec, lithographs, 1910, 1911
Cézanne, color lithographs, 1910
Picasso, 1911
Manolo, 1912
Picabia, 1913, 1915
Picasso and Braque, 1914
Brancusi, 1914
Severini, 1917

In addition, Stieglitz presented the first exhibition in America of Henri Rousseau, le Douanier, 1910, of children's drawings, 1912, and of African Negro sculpture as art, 1914. He also gave their first one-man shows to such American artists as John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Arthur Dove, Arthur Carles, Abraham Walkowitz, Elie Nadelman, Georgia O'Keeffe and others. As James Johnson Sweeney says in his book on the collection:

"The story of the Alfred Stieglitz collection is the story of the awakening connoisseurship of contemporary art in the United States."

Alfred Stieglitz was born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1864. Seven years later his family moved to New York where he attended school and, for two years, the College of the City of New York which many years later (in 1937) awarded him the Townsend Harris medal for outstanding post-graduate achievement. When he was seventeen Stieglitz went to Germany, where he studied mechanical engineering at the Berlin Polytechnic. In 1883 he dropped engineering for photography, his teachers being, as he said: "Life--work--continuous experiment. Incidentally, a great deal of hard thinking." Although he made Germany his headquarters, he traveled over much of Europe photographing wherever he went. He sent his pictures to competitions and exhibitions all over the world and won more than 150 medals.

By the time Stieglitz returned to New York in 1890 he was recognized as the American leader in the new photographic approach. In New York he began to champion the cause of photography as art and to enlarge its horizons both in technique and expression. From 1893 to 1896 he edited the American Amateur Photographer. From 1896 to 1902 he devoted his energies to making the Camera Club of New York the photography center of the country and to editing its quarterly, Camera Notes. In 1902 he founded the dominating and stormy Photo-Secession Group and its organ, the magnificent Camera Work.

Paradoxically, Stieglitz's pioneering for modern art grew out of his fight to have photography accorded the status of an art equal in value and dignity to painting and sculpture. Modern art found its first home in this country in the famous little gallery which he established primarily for the purpose of showing photographs in a new and revolutionary manner.

He says of himself at this period:

"As always, without a break, from 1883 in Berlin on, I was fighting for photography....Everywhere in the world where photography played any role I was looked upon as the leading spirit in American photography, and as such I was called upon to send collections of American photographs to this and that international exhibition..

"Such collections were never sent unless the conditions that I laid down were accepted without reservation. Only in this way, I felt, would the Art Institutions (for it was these that I was dealing with) respect the spirit of my endeavor. I was ever really fighting for a new spirit in life that went much deeper than just a fight for photography....

"I did not know that in time I would be broadening the fight, a fight that involved painters, sculptors, literary people, musicians, and all that is genuine in every sphere of life."

In 1905 Stieglitz, with Edward Steichen, opened the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, later to be famous as "291." Here all kinds of individuals met daily in a stimulating atmosphere of discovery. Here from 1908 on were introduced to the American public what were then obscure, revolutionary painters and sculptors, among them Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi, Rousseau, and the American Demuth, Dove, Marin, O'Keeffe and Hartley. In 1917 the difficulties consequent on America's entry into the First World War brought "291" and Camera Work to an end.

For the next seven years Stieglitz gave his attention to his own photography, which to some extent he had neglected in encouraging others since the foundation of the Photo-Secession, and to the work of the American artists whose careers one almost might say his perception and enthusiasm founded and certainly furthered. Chief among these were John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe. As his last exhibition in "291" he had given Miss O'Keeffe a one-man show and in 1923 he presented, at the Anderson Galleries, an exhibition of 100 oils, watercolors, pastels and drawings by O'Keeffe.

In 1925 he opened the Intimate Gallery to supply two needs: a place to show the work of artists who needed a discriminating public and equally a place where a discriminating public could find the work of such artists. He closed the Intimate Gallery in 1929 and in 1930 opened its successor, An American Place, at 509 Madison Avenue. This was his last "little" gallery--little in physical compass but large in the scope of its influence--over which he presided until his death.

Of these galleries and the man who was their guiding and animating spirit Carl Zigrosser has written:

"In his three enterprises for bringing art and the public together, '291,' 'The Intimate Gallery,' and 'An American Place,' it is not difficult to see a unifying idea or leit motif running through them all. It is what he calls the Spirit of the Place, and it makes his gallery stand for something definite, certain qualities of integrity and vitality and adventure. It is that which fosters and encourages the experimental approach, the creative attitude, that divine discontent which tolerates no diminution of effort but drives on to new conquests....No one will ever know how many struggling artists he has encouraged toward creation."

The exhibition of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection is shown on the Museum's third floor and, in addition to the paintings of Demuth, Dove, Hartley, Marin, and O'Keeffe, includes work by Rivera, Picabia, Matisse, Picasso, Severini and other American and European artists whose work Stieglitz introduced to this country. On this floor also are shown photographs by fellow Photo-Secessionists to whom he gave exhibitions: Käsebier, Steichen, Frank Eugene, Keiley, Coburn, Clarence White, Paul Strand and others. He also gave one-man shows at "291" to such leaders of European photography as Demachy, Puyo, Octavius Hill, J. Craig Annan, Evans, and De Meyer. Approximately 150 paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographic prints have been selected from Stieglitz's entire collection for this part of the exhibition.

In the first floor galleries photographs by Stieglitz himself are on exhibition ranging from 1885, Paula, to 1935, Equivalent. Included are many of his "Portraits without Faces," "Songs of the Sky," and "Music--A Sequence of Ten Cloud Photographs." Of his cloud series, which he made throughout the twenties and early thirties, Stieglitz has written:

"Clouds and their relationship to the rest of the world, and clouds for themselves, interested me, and clouds which were most difficult to photograph--nearly impossible--I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in 40 years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life--to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter--not to specific trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone--no tax on them as yet."

Stieglitz is known as the first photographer to make pictures of night scenes and in the photographs from his New York series shown in the exhibition are included several of these: Night Reflections made in 1896, North from the Shelton Hotel, Night 1931, and An Icy Night, 1898. Also among the New York photographs is The Terminal, 1892, a snowy scene showing one of New York City's old horse cars at the end of its run with the vapor rising from the hides of the horses. The Steerage, probably Stieglitz's most famous photograph, is also shown. This seems to have been the great photographer's favorite picture. The description of how he came to take it and how the picture composed itself in his mind before he even had his camera in hand is almost a diagram of genius:

"As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck right at the bow of the steamer. To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck there was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state...On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat...He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck.

"A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white draw-bridge with its railings made of circular chains--white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape. I stood spellbound for a while, looking and looking. Could I photograph what I felt, looking and looking and still looking? I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life."

When the photograph was shown, people then as now recognized its greatness, and Stieglitz himself has said: "If all my photographs were lost and I'd be represented by just one, The Steerage, I'd be satisfied."

In 1904 Stieglitz made his first return trip to Europe. What he said of himself then was even more true on July 13, 1946, when, at the age of 82 and after many more years on the firing line, he died in New York after a brief illness:

"I had been on the firing-line for fourteen years in New York, fighting the fight of photography. The fight I am still fighting. This fight includes everything in life as far as I am concerned. A fight for my own life as well as a fight for the lives of all true workers, whether American or any other--with perhaps an emphasis on Americans because I believe they have needed it most."

The quality in Alfred Stieglitz's art which, as James Johnson Sweeney points out, strikes one at once:

"is that evidence of his own character and purpose: on the one hand, directness, simplicity and a sense of humor; and on the other, an interest in a leisurely and intimate exploration of the familiar with a view to drawing out of it the richest possible pictorial constituents both of form and of expression; the familiar, whether a commonplace of New York streets, a shot into the grass at Lake George (offering apparently nothing but an interlacing pattern of grass stalks) or a view from the window of 291 Fifth Avenue, from his apartment in the Shelton Hotel, or from An American Place at 509 Madison Avenue--almost always something he saw day in and day out, knew thoroughly and should have, one would have thought, completely exhausted of interest. Then that tireless, leisurely, persistent exploration of these familiar subjects: the same buildings seen from different windows--now in one light, now in another, now from one angle, now from another; the same trees, now rain-wet, now snow-clothed, now summer-lit; the same open sky, but with a hundred different cloud patterns. Always a simple subject--no 'humbug'; always directly approached, no 'faking'--nothing in the production of a picture which was not a Stieglitz photographic process: a procedure admitting modifications of the result by those means, but not an alteration of it."