

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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DIOGENES WITH A CAMERA III, an exhibition of photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Walker Evans, August Sanders and Paul Strand, will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from January 18 through March 18. This is the third in a special series of shows organized by Edward Steichen, Director of the Department of Photography. Each photographer's work is hung as a one-man show, accompanied by his own statement and a critical evaluation.

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, an outstanding Mexican photographer, is represented by work done during the past quarter of a century. Walker Evans, well known American photographer, is represented by 37 photographs taken from 1929 to 1955. August Sanders, a 79-year-old German, whose work is being presented for the first time in this country, is represented by 14 portraits, part of a life long series, the earliest shown here dated 1892. Paul Strand, the other American in the exhibition and who is also widely admired, is represented by recent photographs taken in France and Italy and a small group of early gravure prints.

Because each of these photographers has devoted more than a quarter of a century to photographing the same physical aspects of the world -- ordinary people engaged in ordinary activities and buildings whose main distinction is that they show use by many generations -- the individual style of each photographer is clearly revealed. None of the photographers uses mechanical tricks of angles, focus or developing in achieving his individual style, but each relies on the sensitivity of his eye and hand to select and record his own version of the essential significant detail of an ordinary scene or person.

Commenting on this exhibition Edward Steichen says "This is the Museum's third exhibition under the title Diogenes With a Camera. Of the twenty-nine exhibitions I have organized here since becoming the director of the Department of Photography in 1947, there have been fourteen group exhibitions along lines similar to this one. Each of these group exhibitions was made up of small one man shows by four to six photographers. They have often deliberately contrasted work of the widest possible variations of form, style and content and technique including work based on the meticulous rendering of minute detail to the swift interception of an exact instant to complex abstractions. In the present group there are certain similarities of approach, but the evident differences based on each photographer's sensitivity, intellectual and emotional orientations again emphasizes the scope and range of photography as a creative medium. I believe the validity and relative value of the photographer's concept is emphasized by the juxtapositions here. These are four highly individual and concrete evaluations of the medium of photography in relation to the photographer, his simplicity or extravagance and his relationship to himself, his time, and his environment."

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Using the subject matter of simple people engaged in everyday tasks, country villages and much used buildings, Manuel Alvarez Bravo who was born in 1902 imparts a moodiness and a sense of foreboding to his pictures of Mexico. Street scenes, glimpses of laundry behind the blank street wall of a house, a boat washed ashore, a dead horse, a dead tree, and a child walking take on a different aspect, a more somber and tragic mood than similar scenes by the other three photographers.

Bravo says "Frequently, the passionate discussion takes place, between artists of different occupations, as to which art is more profound, more significant or more complete....Those involved discover two fundamental concepts; one is that each medium has its own dimension...so that different arts do not exclude each other but complement each other. The other result is understanding the submission to the medium and to the environment, in such a way that the artist becomes the sensitivity and the brain of the tools he handles, and the interpreter of the imperative dictates of the human group to which he pertains. This interpretation gives room to a conflict which is: the choice of what should be heard, in order to be executed in the work of art -- and in this choice is to be found the importance, the value of the work; not in the medium used....Furthermore, limitations of the medium and personal limitations can constitute expressive forces."

In presenting a retrospective exhibition of the work of Manuel Alvarez Bravo in Mexico in 1945, La Sociedad de Arte Moderno said "The photography of Manuel Alvarez Bravo is neither a spontaneous phenomenon nor an exotic one in the Mexican environment; it is, on the contrary, the culmination of all the antecedents of work in this field, so well known and absorbed by him, of all the forces and advances which have marked the history of photography in Mexico. Manuel Alvarez Bravo is a photographer of the purest Mexican nature; this is reflected in his subject matter, his light, his composition and his lofty poetic and dramatic feeling."

The photographs by Walker Evans include work done during the past 26 years and reveal that he has consistently sharpened his eye and hand to record an ever more sensitive, personal view of America's buildings, houses, signs, billboards, streets and people without ever resorting to a single fancy trick. Evans, who was born in 1903, is one of the few photographers who is also a writer. During the 40's he was on the staff of Time covering art and film, and in 1941 he collaborated with the poet James Agee on "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." For the past ten years he has been associated with Fortune magazine and has been responsible for photographs and text for many portfolios on the American Scene. A few of the photographs in the exhibition originally appeared in that magazine. Mr. Evans has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for photography. In 1938 the Museum of Modern Art presented his work in its first one man photography exhibition and at the same time published it in a book called American Photographs, with an essay by Lincoln Kirstein.

Evans' photographs of a movie poster, a corner of a bedroom, a lace-curtained window, a blind street singer or a country general store combine an interest in the texture of materials and in design with a singular perception of what the homely details of the world, isolated in this way, can reveal about the people who live in it. The crumbling doorway that could at best have given dingy shelter to the living man draped in splendid flowers and ribbons for his death; the three-storey rectangular

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house designed for a city block but standing alone; the primitive wooden sink in a kitchen decorated with flowers growing in old tin cans; and the farmer's face as lined and firm as the weathered clapboard behind him are not only beautiful and satisfying as photographs but also significant comments on man and his world.

Commenting on photography, Mr. Evans says "...What it is not can be stated with the utmost finality. It is not the image of Secretary Dulles descending from a plane. It is not cute cats, nor touchdowns, nor nudes; motherhood; arrangements of manufacturers' products. Under no circumstances is anything ever anywhere near a beach. In short it is not a lie, a cliché -- somebody else's idea. It is prime vision combined with quality of feeling, no less."

The 14 portraits by August Sanders, born in 1875, show farmers, policemen, and industrialists recording the essential quality of each. When a selection of these photographs was published in 1929 as "Antlitz der Zeit" (Faces of Our Time),

Thomas Mann said of them "I have perused with interest and pleasure the "Antlitz der Zeit" and warmly felicitate you on its publication. This collection of photographs which are both precise and unpretentious, is a true find for the devotees of physiognomics and offers an excellent opportunity for the study of the vocational and social imprints on the human countenance."

At the same time a German newspaper reviewer said "In these photographs images of the time are recorded factually, consciously and firmly. Here photography has understood, differentiated and performed its role; it has earnestly verified essences of our time...created documents which only photography can create."

The photographs by Paul Strand in the exhibition were taken in Italy and France in the 1950's and were published in "La France de Profil" and "Un Paese." In addition a few early gravure prints made in the early part of this century and reproduced in "Camera Work" are included. In some the facades, shop interiors, a port or tree roots become an abstract design as the arrangement of objects becomes more important or apparent than the objects themselves. ~~Other~~ photo pages show Italian people, children, young people and crowds, and French fishermen, carpenters and farmers. All are simple people with no pretense to grandeur, but Strand gives them dignity, and sees in their mundane activities, beauty and significance.

In his statement, Strand who was born in 1890, points out the special difficulties a photographer has in a foreign country, "where...he is relatively a stranger. He must come to know, see and understand what he sees, with a good deal of humility and respect....It is my hope to find what is explicit and implicit in the France of now, in the Italy of now -- that essential character which is compounded of both past and present."

Leo Hurwitz says of Paul Strand, "All this virtuosity is at the service of what Strand has to express, the felt idea behind the photograph....To him the object is all important. His photograph is his best effort to render the emotional significance of the object. His approach is one of utmost simplicity....He has sought in his photographs to express his most vigorous feelings about his world. His passion has sharpened his vision to the degree where he is satisfied with no less than the most dramatic manifestations of events. It has driven him to the most superb mastery of techniques, so that his medium places no impediment to his expression....He has given us photographs that are more than the look and the surface of things, photographs that live and grow, that will take on new beauty and meaning for people as long as his prints...are seen."

The exhibition has been installed by Kathleen Haven and Jean Volkmer.