

The Museum of Modern Art

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PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS

Approximately 46 portrait photographs will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from July 10 through September 30. Directed by Gary Metz, Curatorial Intern, the exhibition is installed in the Steichen Photography Center.

Portrait Photographs includes works dating from the 1840's to the present. The media range from original tintypes, calotypes, and gum bichromate prints to hand-colored, toned and conventional silverprints. Represented in the exhibition are Mathew Brady, Alfred Stieglitz, Minor White, Harry Callahan, Diane Arbus, and others, in addition to less well-known photographers of the past and present. The selection has been drawn from the Museum's collection and supplemented by temporary loans.

The exhibition considers some of the motivations possible in the making of a portrait and presents a range of conceptual and formal approaches that have been used in the medium of photography which are being extended today.

In the exhibition wall label, Mr. Metz comments: "The portrait is generally considered to be a picture that presents information about a specific person. While the notion of the portrait as a visual substitute for its subject may be useful in certain instances, most would agree that a person is more than his appearance. When a portrait impresses us as revealing or convincing, it will contain at least one additional matrix of information that is active behind, or superimposed upon, the depiction of physical appearance. For example, in his portrait of George Herman Ruth, Muray adds to a figural representation the fact that this man plays baseball; Callahan's Eleanor suggests that this woman standing in water can be found deep within our own archetypal and subterranean ocean; Sommer's Max Ernst is not only a picture of that artist, it is also a statement about, and in terms of, Surrealism itself.

(more)

The organization of this exhibition is both historical and ideographic. It follows continuities of idea in time and points out new intentions as they arise within, or are added to, existing traditions of portraiture. The tintype of an unknown couple (c.1855), the Blackfoot brave and his pony (c.1885), the yearbook picture (1933), and the passport photograph (1965) relate to each other in intent, as do the photographs of Ellen (1916) by Stieglitz and the Muskrat Trapper (1966) by Davidson - the last two in the sense that both photographers were aware of the popular snapshot picture and used it in part as a formal basis for their image. The portraits by Nadar (1859), Steichen (1907), Cunningham (1938), Cartier-Bresson (1944) and others incorporate pictorial conventions that are used to reinforce some aspect of the sitter, while simultaneously referring the viewer to a consideration of the photograph as a beautiful object. Thus, the Nadar portrait of George Sand recalls Ingres; Steichen's Mrs. Condé Nast, Whistler and Carrière; Cunningham's M. and Mme Ozenfant, the formalism of the later Cubists; and Cartier-Bresson's Matisse, the structure and iconography of that artist's paintings. Le Secq on the parapets of Notre Dame (1851), Bunnell at the feet of Romulus and Remus (1968), and Bonnie in her rooms of memory (1969) are related in that the juxtapositions of subject and setting are plausible, yet ultimately the reality of these photographs is in terms of the dream and the non-rational.

The relationships implicit among the examples in this exhibition indicate a range of formal and conceptual approaches that have been used in the medium of photography. Taken collectively, these relationships reveal a variety of motivations and concerns that challenge the popular notion of a photographic portrait as meaningful merely because of its supposed resemblance to the original subject. Even the most elementary document is linked to ideas and uses that extend beyond that of replication. When a portrait, like the original subject, is of interest to us, it is so on various levels, and for longer than a single moment."

 Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Maeve Kinkead, Assistant, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019. 956-7501, 7299.