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The Museum of Modern Art

EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE AESTHETIC OF SUBTLE DISTINCTIONS IN THE WORK OF
FOUR LEADERS OF AMERICAN MODERNIST PHOTOGRAPHY

Ideal Motif: Stieglitz, Weston, Adams, and Callahan

April 30-September 26, 2000

Third Floor

The idealist tradition in American photography achieved its modern form in the 1920s in the work of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, among others. Favoring clarity of description and purity of vision, the tradition thrived for decades thanks to the advent of a talented second generation, led by Ansel Adams and Harry Callahan. *Ideal Motif: Stieglitz, Weston, Adams, and Callahan* examines the tradition's guiding aesthetic by bringing together groups of closely related pictures from the 1930s to the 1970s. Organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, the exhibition is on view from April 30 through September 26, 2000, as part of *Making Choices*, the second cycle of MoMA2000.

American photographic modernism of the 1920s inherited from its turn-of-the-century Pictorialist precedents a devotion to beauty and perfection, unsullied by the troubles and uncertainties of the modern world. Within that ivory tower, however, the new aesthetic of "straight photography" created a fresh artistic opportunity by stressing precision of detail and delicacy of observation. As a result, even the most familiar or idealized motif was guaranteed to yield a potentially endless number of resolutely concrete and specific pictures, each subtly different from the others. That aesthetic of fine distinctions is the subject of this compact exhibition.

Among the seven groups of works on view is a series of five photographs by Stieglitz, titled *From the Shelton, West* (1935), which record the view from the photographer's rooms in the Shelton Hotel toward the towers of Rockefeller Center. The camera remains fixed; only the light changes, with the exception that, in one picture, a different lens offers a wide-angle view. Similarly, in Adams's *Surf Sequence Nos. 1-5* (1940), the breaking surf creates the cinematic sequence, while the immobile photographer observes the ceaselessly evolving pattern from the cliff above.

Weston is represented in the exhibition by four photographs titled *Nude on Sand* (1936), in which the photographer's wife adopts a variety of graceful poses on a sand dune, floating in the blank field of the image. Among the photographs by Callahan are a pair of views made in 1974 of the skyscrapers on Sixth Avenue, just west of Rockefeller Center. As in the pictures that Stieglitz had made nearby almost four decades earlier, the crowded city is pictured as a natural wonder, animated by changing light.

SPONSORSHIP

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