

From the Back Window at “291”

JOSHUA CHUANG

Early in the morning of the day before Easter in 1915, a heavy snow began to fall in New York City. Undaunted, Alfred Stieglitz—the iconoclast gallerist, publisher, and photographer—decided to brave the blizzard, trekking more than fifty blocks south from his home to his gallery on the top floor of 293 Fifth Avenue.¹ Though Stieglitz had studied the views out 291's back windows for nearly a decade, what he saw that day, transformed by the unexpected storm, compelled him to record the scene. To do so he set up the camera—an 8 by 10 inch (20.3 by 25.4 centimeter) Eastman View—he used to make portraits of friends and associates at the gallery, pointed it out an open window, and patiently recorded the snow-blown scenes across the way (fig. 1).

If we consider the fact that Stieglitz had made one of his most celebrated pictures just a few blocks away in similar conditions, and that he was hardly the only photographer to have been seduced by the vantage point of an upper-floor window, the details of this narrative might not seem especially noteworthy.² But after 1911 Stieglitz had photographed less and less as he channeled his considerable energies into promoting the avant-garde—and “anti-photographic”—art of Europeans such as Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, and Picabia and Americans such as John Marin, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley, all of whom were little known in the United States at the time. The series of pictures Stieglitz made from the windows of 291 that day, and that he continued to produce throughout the following year, marked his reengagement with photography and the beginning of his most important and productive years as an artist.

Scholars have argued convincingly that the angular, abstract form of this picture (and that of a variant made with a shorter lens; fig. 2) was inspired by Picasso's and Braque's Cubist imagery, which had been paired in an exhibition at 291 earlier that year. Another possible impetus for the picture's striking composition is the rivalry Stieglitz may have felt upon meeting the young Paul Strand, who had showed Stieglitz a portfolio of his pictures in late 1914 or early 1915, and whose formally bold, “direct” work of the next two years Stieglitz would hail as the most significant by an American photographer to date.³ Yet a third reason for making the picture may have been the logistical and technical challenge presented by the wintry scene; Stieglitz loved the way snow softened the hard edges of the city, and he took pride in his ability to wring masterpieces from negatives others deemed impossible to work with.⁴ Whatever spurred him to make it, the resulting picture is somewhat of an anomaly in the

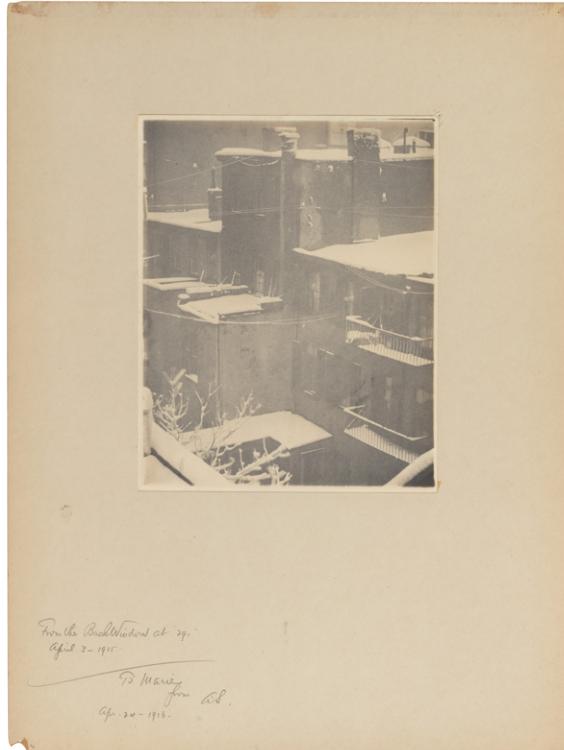


fig. 1 Alfred Stieglitz. *From the Back Window at “291”*. April 3, 1915. Platinum print, 1916. Image: 9 3/4 × 7 11/16" (24.7 × 19.5 cm). Mount: 19 1/8 × 15" (50.6 × 38.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Dorothy Norman, by exchange (MoMA 1870.2001). © 2014 Estate of Alfred Stieglitz/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

stylistic progression of his art, reminiscent of the hazy views he urged his fellow photographers to turn away from in favor of more sharply focused, “straight” camera work. The faint bloom in the middle of the image—a result perhaps of photographing with a frosted lens or of snowfall during a long exposure—emphasizes its Pictorialist leanings.

Stieglitz was a perfectionist when it came to printing, and he published extensively on his methods for achieving optimal results. To make this print, he opted for platinum paper, a material prized for its permanence, rich velvet surface, and ability to render nuances of tone. Also a restless experimenter, he likely tried a few different brands of factory-coated paper—carefully registering each sheet with the glass-plate negative in a contact-printing frame and exposing it to sunlight—before settling on the one that



fig. 2 Alfred Stieglitz. *From the Back Window—291*. 1915. Platinum print, $9\frac{11}{16} \times 7\frac{11}{16}$ " (24.5 x 19.5 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago. Alfred Stieglitz Collection. © 2014 Estate of Alfred Stieglitz/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

yielded the precise atmospheric and tonal effects he sought. Where Stieglitz made this particular print (one of only two believed to exist) is not known, but he likely did so at either 291, where the washroom doubled as a makeshift darkroom,

or his rustic family retreat in Lake George, where he spent his summers. But the print was surely made before April 24, 1916, when he inscribed its mount to Marie Rapp, a young music student who was 291's secretary from around 1912 through June 1917, when Stieglitz closed the gallery for good. By that time, he was unable to access platinum paper due to wartime sanctions on the precious metal and had turned reluctantly to palladium, silver-platinum, and gelatin silver papers.

Despite the extraordinary lengths to which Stieglitz went to achieve the high standard he set for his work, he gave away far more of it than he ever sold, being especially generous to the women in his life. To Rapp he gave at least sixteen mounted prints, including several portraits of her taken at 291. These prints remained in her possession until around 1974, when George Tice, a New Jersey-based photographer and printer associated with the dealer Lee Witkin, heard about a woman in a nearby retirement community who had a Stieglitz picture on her wall. In disbelief, he paid a visit to the Rossmoor Community and met Marie Rapp Boursault, who showed him some of what she had, including a variant of Edward Steichen's *The Pond—Moonrise, Mamaroneck*, a complete set of *Camera Work*, and a handful of Hartley paintings.⁵ Tice returned with Witkin in an effort to persuade Boursault to sell her collection, but she later told Tice that she would only consider selling it to him. With the funds he could scrape together, Tice purchased all the photographs and photography-related material, selling them off gradually over the next few decades. He auctioned this print of *From the Back Window* at "291"—one of four from the series given to Rapp by Stieglitz—at Sotheby's in the autumn of 1991, when it was bought by Thomas Walther.

NOTES

1. In 1905 Stieglitz had established the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession in leased rooms at 291 Fifth Avenue. Three years later he moved his gallery to a space in the adjoining building and renamed it 291, even though its new address was technically 293 Fifth Avenue.

2. Stieglitz began to photograph New York in snow as early as

1893. Among the images he made that year was *Winter—Fifth Avenue*, whose various iterations (examples exist in carbon, photogravure, and gelatin silver) and extensive exhibition history indicate how important the picture was to him. In 1902 Stieglitz photographed the snowy scene out his window at 1111 Madison Avenue, an image he published in *Camera Work*, no. 20 (October 1907).

3. See Maria Morris Hambourg, *Paul Strand: Circa 1916* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), p. 23.

4. About *Winter—Fifth Avenue*, Stieglitz recalled "how upon having the negative of the picture I showed it to some of my colleagues. They smiled and advised me to throw away such rot. 'Why, it isn't even sharp, and he wants to use it for an enlargement!' Such were the remarks made about what I knew was a piece of work quite out of the ordinary, in that it was the first attempt at picture making with the hand camera in such adverse and trying circumstances from a photographic point of view.

Some time later the laugh was on the other side, for when the finished picture was shown to these same gentlemen it proved to them conclusively that there was other photographic work open to them during the 'bad season' than that so fully set forth in the photographic journals under the heading, 'Work for the Winter Months.' As quoted in Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set. The Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs*, vol. 1, 1886–1922 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), p. 49.

5. George Tice, interview with the author, December 26, 2013.

Citation:

Joshua Chuang. "From the Back Window at '291'." In Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg, eds. *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014. <http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Chuang.pdf>.