

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE MUSEUM COLLECTION ON VIEW

Five hundred photographs taken between 1838 (ca) and 1958 by 300 men and women in 18 countries have been selected by Edward S. Steichen from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art for an exhibition at the Museum, 11 West 53 Street, from November 26 through January 18.

Excellence is the theme of the show, Mr. Steichen, Director of the Department of Photography says, and high quality the common denominator of the individual works. At the same time the exhibition constitutes a history of the art of photography. In subject matter and techniques it illustrates the varied developments in this field during the past century: portraits, landscapes, documentary photographs, abstractions, photographs that evoke an emotional mood, that record an event, that interpret an instant of motion, and photographs that reveal more than the unaided eye can see.

Photographs from the Museum Collection is one of several shows planned for this season in order to present to the public some of the paintings, prints, design objects and other works in the Collections which are seldom on view due to limited gallery space.

Among the photographs being shown for the first time in the current exhibition are recent photographs from Japan, a group of color prints and a selection of black and white abstractions. Many photographs were acquired by the Museum during the past quarter of a century from some of the 70 photography exhibitions it has presented. These include such shows as: "Photography 1839 - 1937" (1937); "Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics" (1940); "Road to Victory" (1942); "100 Years of Portrait Photography" (1943); "In and Out of Focus" (1948); "Photo-Secession Group" (1948); "The Exact Instant" (1949); "Family of Man" (1955); one man exhibitions of the work of D.O. Hill, Cameron, Atget, Stieglitz, Strand, Cartier-Bresson and E. Weston, and the Diogenes series. The Museum Collections include 3000 photographs. An additional 2800 photographs are in the study collection.

Commenting on the importance of photography, Mr. Steichen says:

"Photography has become an indispensable tool in nearly all fields of human activity. As a witness of places, times and events, it records with an exactness beyond the scope of any other visual means. Because of the magnitude and variety of these functions, its esthetic potentialities are sometimes overlooked. When practised by the artist, photography becomes a medium capable of giving form to ideas and incisive expression to emotions.

While the Museum possesses outstanding examples of some of the earliest photography, its collection is predominantly of twentieth-century prints. It contains the work of widely recognised photographers as well as experimental and more.....

exploratory work by newer talents - work marking a continuing effort to penetrate the surface appearance of reality or seeking to translate into pattern and design the magic detail of a fragment of growth or of deterioration. In the collection, there are prints that give evidence of man's passionate search for truth, rendered with technical precision and mental precision, separately or on occasion together. The swift freezing of an exact instant; the gamut of feeling written on the human face in its contrasts of joy, serenity or despair; the beauty of the earth that man has inherited and the wealth and the confusion that man has created within this inheritance - all these are rendered with a sense of timelessness and exactitude."*

A group of enlarged prints, including a landscape, a portrait and a multi-exposure photograph, selected to establish the range of the show, serve as a prelude to the exhibition. The first section presents the mid-19th century background of today's work and includes milestones in the history of photography such as Muybridge's series of a woman dressing, an early attempt to record action, Daguerrotype prints, and photographs by Brady, Julia Margaret Cameron, Hill and Adamson. Older masters such as the American Alfred Stieglitz and the Frenchman Atget are represented, as are 20th century leaders such as Edward Weston and Cartier-Bresson.

The rest of the exhibition is a further demonstration of Mr. Steichen's contention that photography is "an exact witness" and a "medium capable of giving form to ideas and incisive expression to emotion." A random sampling of photographs in the show includes such varied interpretations of cities as New York as seen by the lens and eye of Berenice Abbott and Feininger and provincial architecture in a French town photographed by Paul Strand. Among the portraits are: photographs of Picasso by four photographers - Capa, Duncan, Mili and Liberman; Dali and Cocteau portraits by Halsman, and fashion photographs by Penn and Avedon. Kepes' deliberate abstractions are shown as well as photographs whose primary purpose was to obtain scientific data but which incidentally yield beauty. Ylla's discovery of the idiosyncracies of animals are included and Weegee's photographs of people. Haas' explorations of motion in color and Callahan's experiments with finding beauty in the disconnected detail of ordinary objects taken out of familiar context reveal still other aspects of the art of photography.

Mr. Steichen characterizes the Japanese photographs as the most important contribution by a single country in recent years. Though not imitative of traditional Japanese art forms, he says there is a similar regard for subtle balance, delicate mood and fine craftsmanship. These pictures demonstrate that this country, long noted for its camera and lens, can also use these instruments to make beautiful photographs.

Kathleen Haven of the Museum staff has installed the exhibition in the Museum's first floor galleries.

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* "Masters of Modern Art," edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. The Museum of Modern Art, 1954.

Mr. Steichen also points out that the Museum of Modern Art was the first museum to make the art of photography an important part of its program. In 1932 when the Museum first exhibited photography it was as a peer of painting. The first comprehensive exhibition called "Photography 1839-1937," organized by Beaumont Newhall in 1937 focused attention upon the history of photography as an art without neglecting the technical, scientific and reportorial aspects of photography. The Department of Photography was formally established in 1940 with Mr. Newhall as Curator. Mr. Steichen, who presented two major shows in 1942 and 1945, became Director of the Department in 1947 and the position of Curator lapsed. Since becoming Director Mr. Steichen has organized and presented 32 exhibitions of photography at the Museum, including the Family of Man show which has been touring the world in seven editions since 1955.

A complete checklist and publicity photographs are available on request from Elizabeth Shaw, publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York City. Circle 5-8900.