

The Museum of Modern Art

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PHOTO EYE OF THE 20s

Wall Label

The 1920s were years of exploration and regeneration in the arts. The functions of all artistic media were being redefined: artists and critics alike were seeking directions. Photography was an integral part of this progressive art movement.

Already in New York Alfred Stieglitz had demonstrated in his own photography, in his quarterly Camera Work, and in exhibitions at the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession that photography and painting each had its essential characteristics. In 1916 he championed Paul Strand. The photographs of this newcomer were direct, even brutal: portraits almost life-size of people in the streets, semi-abstractions of geometrical fantasy, and instantaneous exposures arresting the fleeting, ever-changing traffic of the city. Charles Sheeler discovered that with the camera as well as with the brush he could capture the essence of what man had built. To Alvin Langdon Coburn, photography offered a challenge to abstract art. He pointed his camera down from the pinnacles of Manhattan to create photographs he described in 1912 as "almost as fantastic as a Cubist fantasy." And in 1917 he made non-representational photographs by clamping mirrors around his lens to produce kaleidoscopic distortions. Stieglitz had taken a new approach to portraiture, which he conceived as a sequence of images, not of the face alone but of all parts of the body, not the look of a single instant but a revelation of changing aspects over a period of time. Edward Steichen, whose soft gum prints, rich in chiaroscuro, vague in definition, and posterlike in composition, had won praise only a score of years before, began even before 1920 to reveal in sharp detail the bold structure of architecture and plant forms.

Thus, when the decade of the 20s opened, two directions already were established: the direct use of the camera to bring us face to face, as it were, with the thing itself

(more)

in all its substance and texture; the exploration of a fresh vision of the world, conforming neither to tradition nor convention, and the creation of abstract, even autonomous, images unrelated to realism.

The direct use of the camera-or "straight photography"-was mainly an American contribution, especially of Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Weston. On the continent a similar approach was taken by Eugène Atget, Albert Renger-Patzsch, and August Sander.

The exploration of form was mainly the contribution of painters. Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy showed the potentials of photographic materials to record the play of light in their cameraless Rayographs, photograms, and solarized and negative prints. They also showed how the photographer, by deviating from convention, can emphasize form and define or even annihilate space.

Along with the discovery of form through the camera came delight in how it can catch, in a fraction of a second, the unexpected and seemingly irrational and-as in the Equivalents of Stieglitz-the wonder that beyond the thing itself, beyond form, there can lie an inner message, which transcends the moment fixed.

Today is a critical period in photography as artists in all media seek new definitions and new directions. These photographs from the 20s-also a critical period of social and artistic unrest-can suggest solutions in areas as yet unrealized.

Beaumont Newhall

Director of George Eastman House and Director of the Exhibition

(more)

208

KINO EYE OF THE 20s

In no other decade were photography and film more closely related than in the 20s. Many photographers in this exhibition were also filmmakers—notably Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, and Helmar Lerski. Concurrently with the exhibition the Department of Film presents KINO EYE OF THE 20s, a selection of motion pictures from the archives of The Museum of Modern Art and George Eastman House, ranging from such classics as Eisenstein's Potemkin, Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc, and Von Stroheim's Greed, to such little-known films as Dziga Vertov's The Man With a Movie Camera, Ralph Steiner's H₂O, and Joris Ivens' The Bridge. For the schedule of screenings, please inquire at the Information Desk.

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