

The Museum of Modern Art

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLARENCE H. WHITE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first retrospective exhibition in more than forty years of the photographs of Clarence H. White (1871-1925), one of the most innovative and influential artists of the pictorial photographic movement, will be on view from July 21 through September 27 at The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition, consisting of more than seventy-five photographs, is directed by Peter C. Bunnell, Curator, Department of Photography.

Born in Ohio in 1871, Clarence H. White took up photography at the age of 23. Wholly self-taught, he had, by 1899, achieved an international reputation for his intimate and lyric genre studies, and in the following decade he exhibited in Boston, Dresden, London, New York, Paris, Turin, Vienna, and in the important salons in Chicago and Philadelphia. He was one of the Founding Members of the Photo-Secession, a group of vanguard photographers organized by Alfred Stieglitz in 1902 to promote photography as a creative art, and White's work formed the largest individual contribution to their last group exhibition at the Albright Art Gallery in 1910.

After moving to New York from Ohio in 1906, White taught photography at Teachers' College, Columbia University and, in 1914, he founded the Clarence H. White School of Photography. Among his students were Margaret Bourke-White, Anton Bruehl, Laura Gilpin, Dorothea Lange, Paul Outerbridge, Ralph Steiner, and his son Clarence Jr. In 1916, White became the first president of the Pictorial Photographers of America.

"Clarence H. White's approach to photography," observes Peter Bunnell, "was one in which the photographer became involved with the actual contrivance of the subject, rather than a more reactive approach where the photographer responded to scenes or events which occurred outside his own participation." Bunnell adds that photographers like White "are interested in revealing how things are, rather than showing things as they are, and their pictures often display that precise combination of emotion and

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reason that causes them to imprint themselves on our consciousness."

White's control of every pictorial element--the relation of each object to every other--yields a rare intensity of expression and when this is combined with his remarkable rendering of the effects of light and shade, his work is clearly differentiated from that of his most notable colleagues including Steichen, Stieglitz and Coburn. He was influenced by the aesthetic principles of oriental art and indirectly by the European modernists through his knowledge of the painters Chase, Sargent and Whistler; though probably the most profound influence in his earliest years was exerted by the popular genre illustrators of the late nineteenth century. The content of his first pictures reveals these varied influences and his taste for the pictorial conventions of the day: simple scenes of young girls reading or playing blind man's buff, women gathering apple blossoms, and allegorical and mystical figures in the landscape. His first models were all members of his immediate family or their friends. In later years he concentrated more on portraiture, studies of the nude figure, and pure landscape. The prints of all his work, done mostly in the once popular platinum medium, reveal a richness, subtlety and luminosity rarely achieved at any time in the history of photography.

As Bunnell says, "unlike many of the lesser photographers of his day and those who followed him in what became known as the pictorial photographic movement, his poetic inspiration transformed local facts into greater truths....He showed that photography relied on contemplation and planning, and that through the continued use of picture subjects that did not vary greatly, he could come to a deeper understanding of their intrinsic emotion."

In 1925, while leading a student tour in Mexico, Clarence H. White died. The Museum's retrospective is the first of his work since a memorial exhibition held in 1926 at the Art Center in New York.

Lenders to the exhibition are Mr. and Mrs. Clarence H. White, Jr., the Estate of Lewis F. White, the Estate of Julia McCune Flory, The George Eastman House, The

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Library of Congress, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art.

After the New York showing, the exhibition will be seen at The Cleveland Museum of Art, the Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois, the Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Ohio University (where Clarence H. White, Jr. has been Chairman of the Department of Photography since 1949), and the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

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