

ART OF THE TWENTIES

NO. 68A

IN THE TWENTIES: PORTRAITS FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

WALL LABEL

Prominent photographers who made portraits in the twenties were patriots and expatriates of many countries. Their positions in relation to the primary art "isms" of the early part of this century were varied: they were central or eccentric, partisan or maverick, sophisticated or naive. But these qualifications were local, determined by circumstance. The pictures in this exhibition strongly suggest that these photographers shared with the broader artistic community of the time a collective concern for a formal definition of function.

Unlike the soft-focus silhouettes of the preceding decade, these are pictures taken from the front. The camera has been used directly, head-on, creating a new kind of non-cosmetic, face to face reality. By shifting the distances and directions of the camera spatial relationships within the picture are altered, giving illusions of flatness or of three-dimensionality. Often these pictures are simultaneously realistic and abstract, or realist and surrealist. Light is consciously used to define or erode outlines, patterns, shapes, shadows, tones and textures. Like aerial photographs, recently pioneered, some of these portraits reveal new orders of pattern: the shape of a head unflinchingly fills the picture, and the facial features resemble topographical information on a globe. In others the subjects are shown as central to the worlds of their own creation.

The Museum of Modern Art

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That these pictures are portraits introduces a problem other than the exploration of form. These photographers chose public people or recognizable "types" as their subjects. They made portraits to be seen, in magazines or exhibitions, not to be contemplated in oak-paneled studies. They made portraits which revealed the spirit of unique individuals who knew they were unique.

The twenties that are shown here are not exactly roaring. Instead, like the machines in Walter Mitty's mind, they seem to be going "ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa." The patterns are of modernism. The people are modern. Rodchenko's Mayakovsky, Steichen's Garbo, Curtis' Luta-kawi are all beyond amazement at the mere fact of being photographed, and are using the moment to describe themselves.

The act of collaboration (even performance, even contest) between photographer and subject--the result of mutual knowledge--allowed new concepts to emerge concerning the public and private meanings of these subjects. The conscious combination of the photographer's search for design with the sitter's projection of his or her world adds to this new reality.

Many of the major feature-length films of the decade will be screened from December 22 through January 27. Included will be Broken Blossoms (1919) produced, written and directed by D.W. Griffith, Le Roue (1922) by Abel Gance, Metropolis (1925) by Fritz Lang, The Kid (1921) by Charlie Chaplin, Man With A Movie Camera (1929) by Dziga Vertov, and, of particular interest, Marcel L'Herbier's L'Inhumaine (1923) which will be shown in a newly restored print. L'Inhumaine was a conscious attempt to synthesize the concerns of modern art. It is significant that L'Herbier worked on the film.

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