

# The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release  
August 1995

## **ALFRED STIEGLITZ AT LAKE GEORGE**

September 14, 1995 - January 2, 1996

The first exhibition devoted exclusively to the work created by American master photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) at Lake George, New York -- including many works never before published or shown -- opens at The Museum of Modern Art on September 14, 1995. Organized by John Szarkowski, Director Emeritus, Department of Photography, **ALFRED STIEGLITZ AT LAKE GEORGE** examines the most personal and radical work of the artist's career: images of his family and closest friends, including his wife, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, and his responses to the landscape surrounding his family home.

On view through January 2, 1996, the exhibition and its accompanying publication are made possible by a generous grant from Springs Industries, Inc., and are part of The Springs of Achievement Series on the Art of Photography.

**ALFRED STIEGLITZ AT LAKE GEORGE** comprises ninety-three black-and-white photographs made between 1914 and 1936. Works include selections from Stieglitz's portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe -- a series of more than 300 photographs made over two decades -- ranging from the early, intimate close-ups of the painter's face and hands to the later pictures of the liberated, mature woman. The exhibition includes the sky and cloud pictures known as "Equivalents," and one of Stieglitz's favorite late subjects, the poplars

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that lined the road between his house on the hill and the nearby lake. Many photographs concentrate on the house and barns on the property, trees and grasses in various seasons, and portraits of such visitors as Paul Strand and Abraham Walkowitz, and various family members.

Around 1915 when Stieglitz was 51, he began to photograph only subjects that were part of his "quotidian life": "the buildings of the farm on the hill, the sky over his head, his family and servants and friends and sweet nubile young women who came to visit, and the dying poplars: subjects that were important because he knew them well and wanted to know them better," explains Mr. Szarkowski in his catalogue essay. The photographs form a record of the artist's private life at Lake George and of his highest artistic achievement.

At Lake George, Stieglitz was removed from the tumult of the political and artistic arenas that had previously occupied him. In the early 1900s, Stieglitz was celebrated as a writer, publisher, photographer, art dealer, proselytizer for photography and modern art, and visionary. After World War I, Stieglitz began to feel increasingly isolated from the contemporary art world that he had helped to define. Redesigning his life and art along leaner and more private lines, he began to concentrate anew on his own photography.

Among the earliest works from the Lake George years is a group of pictures of Stieglitz's friend Ellen Koeniger in and around the lake that demonstrate a radical departure from his earlier philosophy. In 1897, Stieglitz advised photographers that finding the "moment when everything is in balance...often means hours of patient waiting." By 1916, however, as seen in

the photographs of Koeniger, Stieglitz's work has achieved an intuitive immediacy and freedom from contrivance.

In another departure from the artist's earlier work, some of the best of the Lake George pictures are enhanced by humor. One intimate portrait reveals Georgia O'Keeffe and Donald Davidson seemingly half transformed, as Mr. Szarkowski writes, "into Quixote and Dulcinea, he with his armor and lance stolen from the potting shed, she with her conspiratorial smile suggesting that she knows the good knight is slightly off his rocking horse."

Indeed, the Lake George photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe, as demonstrated by the exhibition, are fundamentally different from those made in Manhattan. The New York City pictures, Mr. Szarkowski notes, "no matter how intimate, seem in the philosophical sense ideal representations, pictures that describe woman as artist, woman as fertility goddess...etc., rather than Georgia O'Keeffe of Sun Prairie in various moods and circumstances...but in the Lake George pictures, even from the beginning, we see the gradual emergence of a subject who serves no fictions but her own." The Lake George photographs capture O'Keeffe deep in thought, laughing with her sister, and, perhaps most tellingly, sitting in her new car, in a position now to remove herself from camera range.

The exhibition includes eight "Equivalent," the series that Stieglitz created over a decade, beginning in 1922. These pictures of a quickly changing sky harken back to the early, kinetic Lake George photos of Ellen Koeniger. Stieglitz summons his technical virtuosity to concentrate on extreme problems of tonal rendition, where the brightness of the clouds and

the sky are very nearly the same, as well as those that exhibit the most extreme range of brightness, including the disk of the sun.

In the early 1930s, Stieglitz began directing his camera more often earthward; the poplars that received much of his attention are among the latest pictures in the exhibition. Mr. Szarkowski remarks that these trees had grown old with the artist and that Stieglitz "identified with their dwindling vitality, and their crabbed and desiccated branches; in 1932 he photographed them over and over, as one might check one's pulse...often framing his negative in almost the same way...Then he would print his negatives over and over, lighter and darker and softer and harder, in scores of permutations, trying to make real -- make objective -- his sense of what these trees were."

**ALFRED STIEGLITZ AT LAKE GEORGE** was made possible by an unusually generous loan from the National Gallery of Art, and also includes pictures lent by George Eastman House, The Art Institute of Chicago, The J. Paul Getty Museum, San Francisco Museum of Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as photographs from The Museum of Modern Art's own holdings. The exhibition is on display in the International Council Galleries on the Museum's first floor.

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#### **PUBLICATION**

***Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George***, by John Szarkowski.  
Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Paperbound, \$19.95,  
or clothbound, \$35.00; distributed in the United States and  
Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. Available at The  
MoMA Book Store.

No. 42

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