

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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

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No. 31

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PRESS PREVIEW:

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sixty-five years of the art of photography by the hand and eye of Edward Steichen will be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art from March 28 through May 21. Three hundred prints have been selected by the artist from more than 30,000 negatives for the exhibition which coincides with his 82nd birthday.

Ranging from a 1895 portrait of his sister to current color studies of a shadow tree, the photographs record and interpret more than six decades of revolutionary changes in American life. Steichen, honored here and abroad as the dean of photographers, was a founder with Stieglitz of the famous pioneering Photo-Secession group, he was the first to introduce such modern artists as Matisse to this country, served on active duty in two world wars plus a stint in the Korean war, became internationally known as a breeder of flowers, and then in his 60s created an entirely new kind of photography exhibition.

In the exhibition catalog Alexander Liberman says, "A Steichen photograph is first a study of light; the secret power of his work is in his instinctive knowledge of the exact moment when illumination fully reveals the subject....In a Steichen photograph one should look for the elusive but always present feeling of sacredness expressed through the humility of the artist and the vital simplicity of statement."

A large part of the exhibition is devoted to portraits made by Steichen during the '20s and '30s when he was Chief Photographer for Condé Nast Publications. Actors of Broadway and Hollywood, poets, playwrights, statesmen, prize fighters, dancers, comedians - dozens of men and women whose talents shaped and expressed an age were caught by Steichen at "the exact moment." Isadore Duncan and her troupe danced in the ruins of Greece, actors in Green Pastures, The Front Page, An American Tragedy "improvised" scenes under Steichen's direction, Katherine Cornell acted for him in an imaginary Greek play she never performed on stage as well as in those she did and Lillian Gish was caught in a variety of roles. Memorable pictures of some of the most photographed men and women of the 20th century, such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, the Astaires, Maurice Chevalier are included. Jimmy Savo is portrayed in a montage that exactly expresses his own wistful comic inventiveness, while Charlie Chaplin is debonair. Heywood Brown, Alexander Woolcott and the poet Carl Sandburg, Steichen's brother-in-law are among the other famous people of our time brought together in the exhibition via Steichen.

Other celebrities in the wide range of the theatrical arts portrayed are playwrights Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello and Charles MacArthur; the comedians W. C. Fields and Ed Wynn; dancers Martha Graham and the de Marcos; musicians Leopold Stokowski, Vladimir Horowitz, Lawrence Tibbett, Jascha Heifetz, Lucrezia Bori and George Gershwin.

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Early Photo-Secession photographs are grouped in one gallery. Steichen's work was first shown in 1899, when he was 20, at the Photographie Salon of Philadelphia. The next year Clarence White saw his work in an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago and commended it to Alfred Stieglitz who had become convinced of the infinite potentialities of photography as an art form. On his way to study in Paris, Steichen met Stieglitz who bought three of his photographs, including The Pool-Evening, on view in the current show. This fruitful collaboration and association continued for many years. Stieglitz encouraged Steichen and reproduced his photographs in Camera Work, while Steichen, living in France, provided Stieglitz with modern French and avant-garde American art for the famous gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue where paintings, sculpture and photographs were exhibited.

"Steichen's photographs from this early period already show his great and tender love for the world around him, his sense of the dramatic, his power over the image and his extraordinary skill as a craftsman," Rene d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum, says in the catalog.

Among the most famous photographs from this period are the lovely series of pictures of Rodin's Balzac, a cast of which is now in the Museum Garden, a portrait of J. P. Morgan and the Flat Iron Building in 1905.

The exhibition concludes with a selection of the color shad-blow studies which Steichen has been making at his home in Connecticut for the past six years. He has photographed the little tree in every season of the year and at all hours of the day and night in both still photographs and on film. "One is reminded of Monet and his waterlilies," Mr. d'Harnoncourt comments. "His subject may not be a very large tree, but all of us who know Steichen suspect that it may be the Tree of Life. Steichen says it will take him at least two more years to complete the film."

Steichen's unique contribution to the art of exhibiting photographs is illustrated in the show by a scale model of a section of the Family of Man exhibition and by installation photographs of two other famous exhibitions, Power in the Pacific (1945) and Road to Victory (1942). Steichen created the Family of Man show for the Museum in 1955 and it has subsequently been seen by more than nine million people in 37 countries.

"In these and other shows he created an entirely new type of photography exhibition in which photographs were carefully scaled and placed to create a collective image or a sequence of images to convey the over-all content of the exhibition in a dramatic manner," Mr. d'Harnoncourt says. Mr. d'Harnoncourt is himself an expert in the field of exhibition techniques and installed the current show. Director of the Museum's Department of Photography since 1947 Steichen has presented 65 exhibitions in all.

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Road to Victory and Power in the Pacific presented before he joined the Museum staff resulted from Steichen's service in the second World War when with the rank of Captain he commanded all Naval Combat Photography. The film Fighting Lady was another great visual manifestation of those years. Symbolizing this phase of Steichen's work the exhibition includes two of his photographs taken on the U.S.S. Lexington in 1943.

Other facets of a multi-faceted career presented in the exhibition are tear sheets from Vogue and Vanity Fair and advertisements Steichen shot during the '20s and '30s, the painstaking flower studies which have preoccupied him throughout his life and a series of experimental photographic abstractions.

Featured at the entrance of the show is the first photograph by Steichen ever exhibited at the Museum which was also the first time the art of photography was shown there. It is a dramatic view of the George Washington Bridge and was shown in Murals by Painters and Photographers in 1932, three years after the institution was founded.

Alexander Liberman sums up the man and his work: "Steichen is a man committed, fully engaged. He has photographed the periods of joy and happiness, the periods of national danger and tragedy. He has been through two world wars....Steichen has known the great of this world...the artists, the writers the champions, the actors, the stars. He has observed the limits of luxury and of fashion. He has observed the simple people, the workers. He has observed the world and men from airplanes and fighting ships. He has observed the separate ingredients of nature from a grasshopper, a sunflower seed, an apple, delphinium stalks, to the shad-blow and the ripples on the water. Few artists have had this unique opportunity of a global vision of life. Steichen was born at the right time; his time, with its new means of transportation and communication, has permitted him to have this unique civilizing exposure."

Photographs, catalogs and further information are available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York CI 5-8900.

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NEW YORK 19

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May 2, 1961

To accommodate visitors to New York during the Memorial Day weekend, the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, Steichen the Photographer, has been extended through May 30. The exhibition of more than 300 prints by the dean of American photographers was originally scheduled to close on May 21.

For further information contact Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York City. CI 5-8900.

Sent to: Cue, Martha Douglas - The New Yorker, Gotham Life, Where, Metropolitan Host, Times Square Reporter, Joyce Brinkley, New York Times, New York World Telegram.