

The Museum of Modern Art

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STEICHEN: THE MASTER PRINTS 1895-1914, an exhibition examining the early work of the master photographer Edward Steichen, is on view at The Museum of Modern Art through March 28, 1978. Directed by Dennis Longwell, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography, the exhibition and its accompanying publication* relate approximately 75 of Steichen's rare and beautiful prints to the important tradition of European Symbolism--the source of their inspiration.

The exhibition studies the early prints made in the first two decades of Steichen's long and varied career, a period when Steichen painted as well as photographed. He worked under the influence of the Symbolist style that dominated the visual arts of the Western world at the turn of the century. His adoption of Symbolist concepts was furthered by two years of study in Paris, from 1900 to 1902. The twenty-one-year-old Steichen attended the venerable Académie Julian, where he was strongly influenced by Eugène Carrière.

In his catalog essay, Dennis Longwell writes: "Until recently, the suggestion that the art of the Symbolist movement as exemplified by such French artists as Moreau, Redon, and Puvis de Chavannes could have influenced American artistic photography in the first decade of this century would have seemed incomprehensible, because Symbolism was itself so little known and appreciated. It now appears, however, that the traditional way of thinking about the evolution of modern art--Impressionism followed by Post-Impressionism, followed by Fauvism and Cubism--has greatly oversimplified

*Steichen: The Master Prints 1895-1914. By Dennis Longwell. 180 pages, 73 illustrations (6 in color). \$35.00 clothbound. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed to the trade by New York Graphic Society, Boston.

the complex growth of the art of this century, and that the Symbolist movement, far from being ancillary, was in fact seminal to that growth.

"As we shall see, it is an error to link Steichen's photographs of the period 1895-1914 primarily with French Impressionism of the 1870's and 1880's. The aesthetic informing them is that of Symbolism, a movement contemporaneous with the photographs, and fully as vital and as revolutionary as the art descending from Impressionism. Placing these very beautiful prints--some of the most beautiful photographs in the history of the medium--in their proper Symbolist context will give to his early work the recognition it deserves for its contribution to the Symbolist photographic tradition that leads to our own time."

Steichen's Rodin - Le Penseur (1902) is a perfect example of the photographer's adoption of the Symbolist concept of synthesis: two separate negatives were combined to create the symbolic image of the master artist contemplating the works of his genius. Steichen extended the same concept of synthesis to the processes used in many of his most beautiful prints. Often, as in the sumptuous The Flatiron (1905), platinum prints were coated with a layer of gum bichromate, and an overprinting--in color--of the same image was applied. Sometimes three or more separate coatings of gum bichromate were layered one over the other. Winter Landscape (1904-05) and Experiment in Multiple Gum (1904) are classic examples of this technique.

Technically, the work involved in making such large prints was very difficult and time consuming. Thus, although new finds of original Steichen prints turn up from time to time, the number of great works is extremely small, fewer even than one hundred works, and a significant portion of these images exist in only a unique print.

Steichen, who began to photograph in 1895, made very few of these prints after 1914, when World War I forced him and his family to return

to the United States from France. The war seemed to change everything. Steichen worked for the Army taking reconnaissance photographs, which, he declared in his autobiography, clarified his vision and taught him to appreciate the beauty of the unmanipulated photograph.

In conjunction with the exhibition STEICHEN: THE MASTER PRINTS 1895-1914, The Museum of Modern Art is presenting a special lecture entitled "From Germany to France: Steichen's Reorientation of Stieglitz" on Tuesday, February 28, 1978 at 8:30 p.m. Colin Eisler, Lehman Professor of the History of Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, will discuss European modernism in the first decade of this century and how it was introduced to New York City in the galleries of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession, exploring Edward Steichen's role as a catalyst in this dramatic event. Tickets at \$4, members \$3, students with valid ID \$2, available at the Lobby Information Desk.

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