

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 21, 1992

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STIEGLITZ IN THE DARKROOM EXAMINES

THE MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER'S PRINTMAKING ART

Washington, D.C. -- The art of photographic technique as demonstrated in the work of the preeminent American photographer Alfred Stieglitz will be explored in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art from September 27, 1992 through February 7, 1993. By showing different kinds of prints made from the same negative, Stieglitz in the Darkroom examines how photographic prints look, how they differ from one another, and how Stieglitz controlled and changed his statements through cropping, scale, tone, and paper selection.

The seventy-eight photographs on display span Stieglitz' career, beginning with those he made in Europe in the early 1890s, views of New York from the 1890s through 1910, and portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe taken in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Such landmark works as the 1915 photogravure print of The Steerage will be on view, along with an extremely rare gelatin silver print of this same image. Other well-known images will include five variations of Winter, Fifth Avenue (1893), three prints of The Hand of Man (1902), and four prints of The Terminal (1893). Portraits of O'Keeffe that have not been exhibited in more than sixty years will also be featured.

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All prints are drawn from the key set of Stieglitz' photographs given to the National Gallery by Georgia O'Keeffe in 1949 and 1980. This collection of more than 1,600 works includes at least one example of each mounted print in Stieglitz' possession at the time of his death in 1946. When different croppings or different kinds of photographic prints existed from any single negative, O'Keeffe selected the finest example of each for the key set.

"It is indeed rare to have such a complete collection of a photographer's work to draw upon," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery. "Thanks to the foresight and generosity of Georgia O'Keeffe, who preserved this remarkable collection, we are able to retrace the working steps of this colossus of American photography."

A superb and meticulous craftsman, Stieglitz was extraordinarily demanding in his pursuit of final prints that realized his artistic vision. He continued throughout his working life to develop his own negatives and make his own prints with a perfectionist's zeal, often producing more than a hundred prints before achieving one that satisfied him.

The dominant figure in the development of American photography in the early twentieth century, Stieglitz extended the technical and artistic boundaries of the field. He crusaded for the acceptance of photography as a valid form of artistic expression and never worked for commercial gain.

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Born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1864, Stieglitz started photographing at the age of nineteen during his first year at the Berlin Polytechnic, where he studied with Professor H.W. Vogel, the renowned photographer and chemist. Stieglitz' academic studies in Germany strengthened his understanding of the chemistry and physics behind the photographic process, enabling him to experiment successfully with new technical approaches.

In the late 1880s he began working with the newly invented platinum paper, characterized by its remarkable range of tones. Although he continued to use this paper until the late 1910s, he also experimented extensively with carbon, photogravure, gelatin silver, and palladium prints. Examples of all these different kinds of prints will be included in the exhibition. In addition, as indicated in recent research at the National Gallery, Stieglitz utilized many different kinds of developing and toning baths as well as waxes or varnishes to enhance the color, contrast, and texture of his prints.

Stieglitz returned to New York in 1890. While he used many different cameras throughout his long career, in the 1890s he began to experiment with the newly invented hand-held cameras, which were smaller, lighter, and less cumbersome than the older view cameras. This new equipment permitted increased flexibility in capturing spontaneous moments, an advantage he applied to recording the growing city at the turn of the century.

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A constant innovator, he was among the first to take successful photographs during a snowstorm, including the widely reproduced Winter, Fifth Avenue (1893). The following year, he made photographs in the rain, and in 1896 he recorded some of the first night prints.

In 1902, Stieglitz founded the photo-secession, a group of photographers including Edward Steichen, Clarence White, and Gertrude Käsebier. Their mission was the acceptance of photography as art, and their vehicle was Camera Work, a new magazine edited and published by Stieglitz. In this elegant publication, Stieglitz reproduced in superb photogravure the finest contemporary photography and introduced avant-garde art to the United States. Featured through reproduction was the work of such modern artists as Rodin, Matisse, Picasso, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, whose paintings Stieglitz showed in his gallery "291."

When he closed the gallery in 1917, Stieglitz was free to concentrate his efforts on photography. Important images from this late period include portraits of O'Keeffe, landscape views from Lake George, New York, and a series of cloud studies -- all characterized by aesthetic and technical beauty as well as searing emotional power.

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Stieglitz gave up photography in 1937 at age seventy-three when he could no longer easily handle his heavy cameras, including an 8- x 10-inch view camera with a Packard shutter, and a 4- x 5-inch Auto Graflex with two Goerz lenses. Bridging the centuries with unmitigated dedication to his art, Stieglitz continued to pursue the "perfect" image, inseparable from his personal involvement with photographic technique.

National Gallery curator of photographs Sarah Greenough is curator of the exhibition and author of the accompanying brochure. Constance McCabe and Nora Kennedy, National Gallery consulting photograph conservators, also contributed to the brochure with the assistance of Julia Thompson in the department of photographs.

Related exhibitions at the Gallery have included Exhibition of Photographs by Alfred Stieglitz in 1958 and Photographs by Alfred Stieglitz in 1983.

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