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Photogravure of Alfred Stieglitz's 1902 "The Hand of Man" is in exhibition at Phillips Collection in D.C.

ART REVIEW

A Confluence of Influences

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WASHINGTON—"Founding couple of the modern" is how art historian Roger Shattuck refers to Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz. But for all their individual fame as artists and personalities, there has not been an exhibition since 1924 to examine their influence on one another. That oversight is remedied this month with a fine exhibition at the Phillips Collection, "Two Lives: Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz—A Conversation in Paintings and Photographs."

Stieglitz, the pioneer photographer, publisher and gallery owner, was among the first to promote modern art in America. He was already a legendary figure in 1917 when he decided to exhibit the drawings of an unknown schoolteacher from Wisconsin at his gallery, which was known by its Fifth Avenue address as "291." The ensuing love affair with O'Keeffe, who was 22 years his junior, is considered one of the most dramatic and creative of this century.

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Georgia O'Keeffe's watercolor "Train at Night in the Desert" echoes composition of Stieglitz photo.

ART: Stieglitz, O'Keeffe

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It was a largely beneficial union for O'Keeffe, though complicated by the fact that Stieglitz was also her dealer. He carefully controlled the presentation and interpretation of her art. After his death in 1946, O'Keeffe made sure that she had other equally protective caretakers until her own death in 1986. As a result, there have been few exhibitions to examine her art from a fresh or critical perspective. This exhibition, which could not have been mounted without the cooperation of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, is welcome material for scholars as well as the sizable O'Keeffe fan club. The catalogue published by Harper Collins/Callaway Editions includes thought-provoking essays by Shattuck, Belinda Rathbone and Phillips curator Elizabeth Hutton Turner.

Turner points out that the general audience already knows many of the facts of the two artists' lives. They are less familiar with the legacy of paintings and photographs. Walking through the exhibition, Turner says: "What the public doesn't know is what they produced as artists and how they related to one another as artists."

She adds: "In 1918, thanks to Stieglitz's support, O'Keeffe was able to [move to New York and] paint full time." In addition, Stieglitz had virtually given up his gallery and photography when he met O'Keeffe. She inspired him to begin a serial portrait, hundreds of pictures of what he called a woman "in the flux of life," both clothed and not, taken during the first decade of their relationship. "He saw something uninhibited, forthright and true," explains Turner, "something that he wanted."

There is abundant writing about Stieglitz's influence on O'Keeffe's painting and career, but recently art historians have begun to examine the painter's role in the photographer's evolution. In an excellent essay, Rathbone contends that Stieglitz, though the first to show such abstract artists as Picasso and Matisse, was unable to make the leap to abstraction in his own photography until he documented the abstract paintings of O'Keeffe. First he photographed them as installation records. Then he photographed the artist posed before one abstraction after another. By 1922, Stieglitz was photographing the clouds in the sky with no orientation to the Earth. These pictures are meant to represent feelings and sensations while remaining abstract.

In the exhibition, there are some examples of mutual influence that are especially striking. O'Keeffe's "Dark Iris No. 2" of 1927, with petals like so many gray, mauve and burgundy ruffles, is echoed in Stieglitz's photograph of 1929 with a pattern of rippling, dark, vertically oriented clouds obliterating the sun. These close parallels in abstraction underscore the central point of the exhibition—*that* between 1918, when O'Keeffe came



ARNOLD NEWMAN

Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe in 1930s: Exhibition examines influence the "founding couple of the modern" had on each other.

to New York and began living with Stieglitz, to 1929, when she began annual pilgrimages to her future home in New Mexico, the two artists lived in a virtual laboratory of new ideas and innovative exchange.

The exhibition also examines the ways in which photography by Stieglitz influenced O'Keeffe. In the first gallery, there is a photograph of Stieglitz's 1902 "The Hand of Man," a well-known depiction of a train puffing its way into the city. The composition is nearly identical to a 1916 watercolor by O'Keeffe, "Train at Night in the Desert." Stieglitz had sent copies of his magazine *Camera Work* to O'Keeffe and she surely would have known his image. She revered his work. She was quoted later as saying, "For me he was much more wonderful in his work than as a human being. I believe it was the work that kept me with him."

Turner points out that O'Keeffe and Stieglitz shared many subjects, themes and compositions, learning from one another freely. The exhibition includes many of O'Keeffe's still lifes of apples juxtaposed with Stieglitz's photographs of the fruit, which he considered to be the symbol of America at its most pure. There are paintings and photographs of the windows and doors of the Stieglitz's family summer home as well as the landscape of Lake George. Music is documented as the source of a series of abstractions by both artists.

In 1923, the work was exhibited individually for the first time at the Anderson Galleries. The following year, the artists were married. Stieglitz decided to add 61 of his photographs to O'Keeffe's 1924 exhibition of 51 paintings. These two exhibitions of O'Keeffe's paintings elicited sexual, mystical and biographical interpretations from critics, often encouraged by Stieglitz. O'Keeffe felt violated, and soon after the spirit of collaboration diminished. According to Turner, "From this time onward, the need to assert what was hers, and his, began to undermine their sense of artistic collaboration."

Shared concerns continue through 1930, especially in O'Keeffe's paintings of Manhattan and the East River and Stieglitz's photographs of O'Keeffe posed with the bleached cow skulls that she had shipped back from New Mexico. However, O'Keeffe was more interested in laying claim to artistic territory she considered her own.

"They were introduced to each other through their work initially," concludes Turner. "He was given her drawings in 1916 and she knew him through *Camera Work*. The work is the lasting legacy."

There is an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington that serves as an extraordinary complement to the show at the Phillips. "Stieglitz in the Darkroom," organized by the museum's curator of photographs Sarah Greenough, documents the ways in which Stieglitz—often perceived

as the exemplar of modernist discipline—cropped, spotted, retouched, solarized and otherwise altered photographs and negatives. Greenough has drawn from the key set of approximately 1,600 Stieglitz photographs given to the National Gallery by O’Keeffe, and has presented well-known images in a new context, as well as images not seen since the ’20s.

Greenough points out that the show appeals to anyone interested in Stieglitz or photography, not just those fascinated by the evolution of darkroom technology. “The show uses Stieglitz photographs to illustrate a point, that photographs are constructed every bit as much as any other work of art. We have a tendency with photography to look exclusively at the subject matter—a pretty landscape or barn. But you don’t think of how it is that the photo was made. I created groupings that I felt said the most about Stieglitz’s relentless experimentation. Every decade he seems to have rethought what [his photography] was about.”

Greenough comes up with some revisionist observations on a few photographs too. For example, “Sun Rays—Paula, Berlin” of 1889 depicts a young woman writing at a table. Tacked to the wall are photographs of her taken by the young photographer. Bands of strong light pour in from the window, leading art historians to regard this image as prescient of Modernism and abstract photography. Greenough, however, discovered that Stieglitz did not exhibit or reproduce this photograph in the 1890s or early 1900s. It was only after he had exhibited the work of Picasso and Cezanne at his gallery that he came to appreciate this early photograph. The earliest known print was not made until 1916.

Asked about this revelation, Greenough said, “If people would go back to the facts of the photographs, they’d get the story straight. It was not a precursor as so many people have written.

“People see one print and think that’s the only interpretation that Stieglitz made,” she adds. Walking over to two different prints of “The Hand of Man,” she points out some important differences. In the 1902 rendition of the train coming into the station, Stieglitz suppressed the highlights glittering on the railroad ties to create a more romantic image. The 1910 version is more modern, more about man’s love of the machine, and the railroad ties are emphasized as compositional elements of bright steel.

“Everyone assumes Stieglitz was a ‘straight’ photographer. That’s a Modernist aesthetic, so they are describing Stieglitz after 1910. But after 1910 and through the 1920s, Stieglitz is still altering and manipulating prints.”

Several photographs of O’Keeffe are featured in the exhibition but Greenough does not believe the serial portrait was in any way a collaborative venture. “I think that’s ridiculous and demeaning to photography. No one would say that about Rembrandt’s portrait of his wife, Saskia.”

She adds that the symbolic portraits of O’Keeffe, whether with apples or with the cow skulls, represent Stieglitz’s vision of her. “Stieglitz regarded O’Keeffe as a pure thing that hadn’t been sullied by education or Europe—the opposite of him. That is not a collaboration.”

Though not a collaboration, these exhibitions enhance and complement one another. In offering a rare opportunity to see the work of the “founding couple of the modern,” they extend the sensational conversation between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz to a previously excluded party: the viewer.

■ “*Two Lives: Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz—A Conversation in Paintings and Photographs*” is at the Phillips Collection through April 4. “*Stieglitz in the Darkroom*” is at the National Gallery of Art through Feb. 14.