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Paths of Photography

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

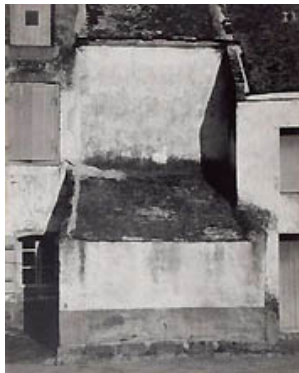


[Paul Strand](#)

[White Horse, South Uist, Scotland
1954](#)

"Three Roads Taken: The Photographs of Paul Strand" and "The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute," May 10-Sept. 4, 2005, at the J. Paul Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles, Ca. 90049

Wherever you go, there you are. That might have been the motto of photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976). He carried his vision with him during a peripatetic career that took him to New York in 1916, Mexico and New Mexico in the 1930s, New England in the 1940s and finally to Europe. With rigor and discipline, he pursued his specific vision.



[Paul Strand](#)

[Houses, Locmariaquer, Finistre
1950](#)

The most talented protog of photographer Alfred Stieglitz, Strand was among the first Americans to recognize the import of the Cubist pictures that he saw in the 1913 Armory Show. Abandoning his allegiance to Stieglitz's Pictorialist esthetic, in 1916 Strand produced photographs that were among the first to experiment with abstract arrangements of form in a medium that had been typically devoted to documentary. Exhibited at Stieglitz's renowned 291 gallery and published in the final issue of his magazine *Camera Work*, these bracing photographs are considered masterpieces of modern photography, frequently exhibited and published.

Despite Strand's considerable fame as one of the first modern photographers, however, the breadth of his work has not been thoroughly examined in 15 years. The Getty's new survey is the first since the extensive retrospective organized in 1990 by the National Gallery of Art.

In 1986, the Getty's perspicacious photography curator Weston Naef purchased some 200 of Strand's prints for \$1.2 million -- a major bargain if you consider that a single vintage Strand print has since sold for more than \$200,000. Even in 1917, a Strand print cost \$1,000.

The Getty show presents a rare opportunity. In "Three Roads Taken: The Photographs of Paul Strand," Getty associate photo curator Anne



[Paul Strand](#)
[Portrait * New York](#)
 1916

M. Lyden charts the major themes of Strand's work -- to bring the innovations of modern art to photography, to convey a sense of place and to create portraits of people.

No matter where he traveled, Strand seems to have found cause to return to these themes. The 1916 still life of glistening ceramic bowls photographed at his family's summer home in Connecticut finds its echo in the 1944 close-up of a piece of driftwood in Vermont that emphasizes sumptuous curves and grain. The architecture of the Ranchos de Taos church photographed in 1931 has an eloquence that can be seen again in *Houses, Locmariaquer, Finistere* from 1950.

And what of his portraits? Inspired by Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Strand had certain humanist ideals -- his first photography teacher was Lewis Hine -- but his 1916 portraits of passersby on the streets of New York verge on the bizarre, taken while using a false lens attached to the side of his camera so that his subjects were captured unawares. Much has been made of this series of photographs, which seem to document a very modern and urbanist anomie.



[Paul Strand](#)
[Seated Man, Uruapan del Progreso,](#)
[Michoacan, Mexico](#)
 1933

Less well known are the photographs that he made in Mexico using the same technique. In both cases, Strand avoids sentimentality, despite the fact that his subjects are invariably downtrodden and poor. When he later sets up his tripod to take formal portraits of the average working man in Scotland or France, Strand's work still conveys more reserve than connection.

Strand was sincere both in his empathy for the workingman and in his commitment to the leftist politics that he embraced in the 1930s, politics that he maintained throughout his life. Still, he reported rather than revealed. His unrelenting coolness effectively draws a viewer into the pictures. Given less, one searches for more. Strand never overstated his position. The esthetic control apparent in his earliest work does not slacken over time. One can see why, despite the more than a decade that he spent making films in Mexico and elsewhere, the Museum of Modern Art staged a retrospective of his photography in 1945.



[Paul Strand](#)
[Tailor's Apprentice, Luzzara](#)

Strand may have followed "three roads," as the title of this exhibition suggests, but he never went far from the superhighway of modernism, a formal legacy that continues to lend his photographs an electric clarity.

(By the way, this show at the cash-strapped Getty Museum was underwritten by Merrill Lynch.)

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If Strand's photographs appear Apollonian, the companion show at the Getty, "The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute," seems decidedly Dionysian. Sommer (1905-99) embraced the psychologically charged symbolism of Surrealism. Working in the high desert town of Prescott, Ariz., Sommer used the camera as one of his

[1953](#)

[Frederick Sommer](#)
[Arizona Landscape](#)

[1945](#)

[Frederick Sommer](#)
[Covotes](#)
[1945](#)



[Frederick Sommer](#)
[Three Graces](#)
[1985](#)



many tools to make art. Having studied landscape design at Cornell University, he pursued that career as well as drawing and painting before taking up photography in the late 1930s, inspired by the work of Edward Weston.

This exhibition of 37 photographs selected from the Getty's own collection includes black-and-white prints featuring the isolated body parts of chickens (obtained from the local butcher), as well photos of the Arizona landscape rendered as patterns of cacti and stone, without a horizon line. Sommer was prone to experimentation, letting candle-smoke randomly pattern grease-coated cellophane and using that as a negative to make prints without a camera. Sommer photographed the clever assemblages that he made from scrap metal and pieces of dolls weathered by the desert. His interest in photographing images of his own creation extended to patterns that he had cut from paper as well as drawings on aluminum foil.

His most well-known photograph may be the portrait that he made of Surrealist Max Ernst in 1946, after the artist had moved to nearby Sedona, Ariz. Sommer printed two negatives together so that the bare-chested artist is mottled with the pattern of a concrete wall and his eyes appear to be staring from behind a mask with great intensity. The two artists became friends -- Sommer, raised in Switzerland, was one of the few people in the area who could converse with Ernst in German. A tiny bit of Ernst's influence can be seen in Sommer's work, but Sommer was truly his own man.

Organized by Julian Cox of the Getty's department of photography, these photos are evidence of a captivatingly original body of work.

Sommer maintained this originality to the end of his life. At least, that is the impression one gets if one leaves the Getty and travels to Craig Krull Gallery in nearby Santa Monica, which is showing a selection of the collages that Sommer carefully composed to represent the brain, the heart and other body parts -- all made in the 1990s. These late works by the great artist are priced at between \$14,000 and \$22,000. The show is on view through June 25, 2005.

For those whose hunger for still more work by Summer, the Frederick Sommer Foundation in Prescott has published an impressive new monograph in collaboration with Yale University Press. In it, Sommer has the following to say about his art: "My things are not pure: they are a seething wealth of imperfection. Anything that's alive comes about because a lot of things go into it."

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