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Modern Convert

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No less an authority than modernist impresario **Alfred Stieglitz** called **Paul Strand's** photographs "the direct expression of today."

Although Stieglitz' observation was made in 1917, Strand's photographs retain their currency. In their urgency, clarity and spatial dissonance, they deserve their status as the first unquestionably modern photographs. Without Strand, we may not have had the bracing photography of such Northern California figures as **Edward Weston**, **Ansel Adams** and **Imogen Cunningham**.

Paul Strand circa 1916 is on view at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** June 19 through Sept. 15, its only West Coast venue. It presents some 60 vintage prints made by Strand between 1915+17. Organized by **Maria Morris Hambourg**, curator of the department of photographs at **the Metropolitan Museum of Art**, where the show debuted, the exhibition highlights the period when Strand executed the first intentionally composed abstract photographs, as well as urban studies and searingly insightful portraits of anonymous people on the streets.

Hambourg focused the exhibition tightly for a couple of reasons. While there have been several full-scale retrospectives of Strand's career - in 1973 a show of his photographs and films came to the **M. H. de Young Memorial Museum** - there has never before been an in-depth examination of these highly influential works.

"Strand himself never saw this work hung together," Hambourg says, making a broad gesture at a Metropolitan gallery wall hung with abstractions of shadows and porch railings.

Strand conceived these pictures at a time when photography as a medium was in a state of transition. Although our own contemporary art world is awash with media images - from the **Pop Art of Andy Warhol** to **Cindy Sherman's** filmic

self-portraits - at the turn of the century, photography had been fighting a decades-long war for credibility as an art form. Stieglitz was the general who won many battles by publishing his own photographs and those of his pictorialist colleagues in the magazine *Camera Work* as a way of legitimizing the nascent art form. In fact, the term Pictorialism was coined to describe a photograph composed with the same aesthetic implications as a "picture," which, in those days, meant a painting - specifically, oil on canvas.

Pictorialism was still the dominant aesthetic philosophy when Strand was a teenager taking photography classes at the **Ethical Culture School** in Manhattan. His parents were first generation Americans, **Matilda Arnstein** and **Jacob Stranksy**, born of German and Bohemian Jewish stock, who changed their name to Strand when their son Paul was born in 1890. Jacob was a traveling salesman of clocks and cookware, so young Paul was raised by his grandmother, mother and aunt, who was a kindergarten teacher, in a brownstone house at 314 West 83rd St.

Strand remained an unexceptional student and a slow learner until he discovered photography. In 1907, his teacher, the documentary photographer **Lewis Hine**, took his class to Stieglitz' Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, known as 291 after its Fifth Avenue address, where Strand saw photographs by **Clarence White** and **Alvin Langdon Coburn**, as well as Stieglitz. By his own recollection, Strand underwent instantaneous conversion to a life in photography.

His earliest efforts emulated the established pictorialists and, under White's guidance, he acquired the necessary technical prowess. To further educate his eye, he went to Europe in 1911 to see paintings by the old masters in the Louvre and the Uffizi. He called photographs from these years his "Japan period" after their asymmetrical compositions and misty atmospheres. They were among the prints that Strand brought to a jaded Stieglitz in 1914. Having seen hundreds of similar pictures, and beginning to doubt the long-term promise of pictorialism, Stieglitz brusquely advised the younger photographer to get the fog out of his prints by stopping down his lens to F-22.

A methodical and determined personality, Strand immediately began moving toward his new style. In 1915, he traveled across the United States selling hand-tinted photographs of universities to their alumni and students. When he returned to New York, he restlessly walked the length of the city, photographing the streets and buildings, attempting to capture the sense of energy and movement. Within a year of Stieglitz's critique, Strand shot his acknowledged masterpiece, *Wall Street*, which depicts the monolithic frontage of J.P. Morgan and Co. as the early morning sun casts massive shadows and dwarfs the hurried pedestrians. The picture reflects a belief shared by many in the Stieglitz circle that rampant capitalism and concern with material gain was corrupting the spiritual core of America.

Strand returned to Stieglitz with a portfolio of photographs, including *Wall Street*. The elder photographer immediately asked to show them at 291 and publish them in *Camera Work*. Years later, Strand recalled, "It was like having the world handed to you on a platter."

With that, Strand's learning accelerated dramatically. A generation younger than Stieglitz, Strand had assimilated the implications of cubism intuitively. He had seen some cubist paintings at 291 but the 1913 Armory Show offered dozens of drawings and paintings by Cezanne and Picasso as well as Duchamp and Picabia, who were working in a cubist style at that time. He realized that the photographic goal of emulating "pictures" had come to an end. A photograph would need to be an end unto itself.

During the summer of 1916, when the 26-year-old Strand was languishing, jobless, at his family's summer home at Twin Lakes, Conn., he had time to concoct a series of still lifes out of bowls and chairs, tables and vases, vertiginous spaces and repetitive angular shadows. During this singular summer, his photography was radically reconfigured. His exercises in abstraction predate those by Alexander Rodchenko by a decade. Strand later called them, "experiments which were intended to clarify for me what I now like to refer to as the abstract method to find out what an abstract photograph might be, and to understand what an abstract painting really was "

The complete realignment of Strand's sensibilities can be seen clearly in two photographs of his New York backyard taken only four years apart. The first, from 1913, is a vaguely Japanized, bucolic scene of leafy trees and dappled light. The second, from 1917, offers an overhead view of clotheslines and white sheets flapping in angular counterpoint against the brick walls surrounding the yard. In looking at the two pictures, one sees that the fussy Victorian era has been smartly and suddenly replaced by the sharp realism of the modern.

"It's an extraordinary visual evolution," notes show organizer Hambourg, as she looks at the two pictures.

"That anybody could have moved that far, that fast, is shocking and exciting and that is what the show is really about. We were able to reconstruct in step-by-step **fashion** what Strand was doing from one picture to the next. It's as if you could be with him, watching him master this material, and that invites us into the process of one of the great creative minds of the early part of the century."

Despite his high regard for Cezanne's still lifes, Strand was not content to pursue pure abstraction in photography. Like other American artists and intellectuals of his generation, he was preoccupied with the mandate of democracy, of unifying the workers with the cultured classes, and seeking traces of dignity among the ethnically diverse poor and disenfranchised.

In the fall of 1916, Strand photographed anonymous people on the streets around Five Points, the slums documented by Jacob Riis in the 1880s. In an effort to avoid the artificiality of a posed portrait, Strand attached a fake lens to the side of his camera in order to capture his subjects unaware and unguarded. This approach could seem callous if not for his sympathy, even identification, with his subjects. His most celebrated picture, *Blind*, is a sightless woman with a sign around her neck identifying her handicap. Strand was moved by the fact that the woman was not a beggar but was selling newspapers in an attempt to earn money. His photograph of a man wearing a sandwich board while standing in front of a warning to "post no bills" offers a wry comment on the

notion that advertising may be hung upon a human being but not a wall. Decades later, Strand explained, "I photographed these people because I felt that they were all people whom life had battered into some sort of extraordinary interest and, in a way, nobility.

(Strand's portraits offer instructive contrast to SFMOMA's concurrent exhibition of amateur photography, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life*.)

The advent of World War I brought an end to this era of discovery for Strand and hundreds of other artists. Stieglitz closed his gallery. Strand was inducted into the army in the summer of 1918, though he never saw action. After the war, he returned to New York but found that the avant-garde had been dissipated by death, illness or emigration.

Strand went on to pursue photography and film until his death in 1976. Throughout that lengthy and productive career, however, the pictures made circa 1916 would continue to reverberate. "It was the apex of an extraordinary episode," says Hambourg. "He worked through pictorialism and found techniques that he could apply with a clearer focus to a modern world."

Paul Strand circa 1916 will be on view June 19-September 15 at SFMOMA. Open daily (except Wednesdays), 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; summer hours 10 a.m.-6 p.m., open until 9 p.m. Thursdays. Adults, \$8; seniors, \$5; students, \$4; SFMOMA members and children 12 and under admitted free. Information: (415) 357-4000.

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, a Los Angeles-based writer who specializes in topics of art and design, has completed a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe to be published by Alfred A. Knopf.<

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