

Edvards Steihens

Fotogrāfija

Edward Steichen

Photography

Edwards Steihens. Fotografija /
Edward Steichen. Photography

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The Artist and Propagandist: Steichen's Role at Two Decisive Moments in the History of American Photography

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Edward Steichen's name is associated with the emergence of two aesthetically and thematically different and even oppositely oriented movements in photography. At the beginning of the 20th century Steichen was a pioneer of Pictorialism, and his 1904 photograph *The Pond – Moonlight* is a textbook example of this artistic style: intimate, romantic, timeless, and painterly. Yet in the mid-20th century Steichen became a master of American political propaganda in photography and remains known for the creation of a radically new and different type of photography exhibit. In Steichen's curated photography exhibits, *Road to Victory* (1942) and *The Family of Man* (1955) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, photographs lost their individuality, and the participating photographers' original intentions were sacrificed for the sake of creating an atmosphere of patriotic pathos. This article examines the two contradictory directions in Steichen's career and their interpretations by art historians in order to establish a broader context for the work on view in the exhibit.

Steichen the Pictorialist

A new trend in photography called Pictorialism emerged in Europe and the United States at the turn of the 20th century. New trends often identify themselves as a creative protest against a previous era's tradition, and Pictorialism can

be viewed in this aspect. The aesthetics of Pictorialism was related to a creative protest against the democratization of photography in the 1880s, which included the industrial manufacturing of photo paper, the fact that *Kodak* began making and selling simple and relatively inexpensive cameras, photo optics were greatly improved, etc. Photography was no longer an elite, refined, technically complicated pursuit like in the middle of the 19th century. In fact, it quickly became a hobby of the bourgeoisie that *Kodak* capitalized on. Highbrow aesthetes scoffed at what they viewed as the vulgarization of photography. A marvelous example of contrast between the two camps: take a look at the exhibit's sampling of Steichen's work from the beginning of the 20th century and compare it to the work of that era of his contemporary the dandy Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894–1986) that exemplifies the beginning of the new culture of carefree snapshots.

On the backdrop of this new culture many photographers, including Steichen, wished to preserve photography's status as an elite artistic vocation; new associations sprang up throughout Europe and the United States. Steichen is considered one of this trend's pioneers in the US, and in 1902 together with photographer Alfred Stieglitz he began the Photo-Secession movement; its name was

a tribute to the so-called secessionists of Vienna and Munich. Steichen and Stieglitz's Photo-Secession movement and other similar associations in Europe ridiculed the usage of industrially manufactured photo materials; instead, they accentuated each photograph's uniqueness by using special handmade photo paper and developing particular printing techniques (such as the bromoil and other oil pigment-based processes, the gum bichromate process, etc.).¹ The use of modern cameras was forbidden, with adherents returning to the cameras of earlier times and making effects out of defects. The ban pertained to lenses too; the pictorialists favored optics that created a slightly blurry image with soft contours, ignoring technological advances that offered increasingly precise, detailed, and sharp images. The photographers wanted to avoid the brutality, bluntness, and ordinariness of the image towards which the technological approach to photography seemed to be geared. Instead, they chose to use photographic techniques and means of expression like an artist would use a set of paints and paintbrushes – as instruments for producing subjective interpretations.² And this statement has no better illustration than the well known (but unfortunately not included in this exhibit) photograph by Steichen, *Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette* (1902). This superb example of Pictorialism, a gum bichromate print, indicates that the author wished to position himself as an artist and a painter by using not only a painter's professional attributes but also photography's means of expression to pursue his painterly goals.

Pictorialism's themes and iconography are meant to reveal subjective impressions and feelings, and a typical example of this in the exhibit is Steichen's work *In Memoriam* (1904). Here we see a variation on a popular pictorialist theme, the image of a woman borrowed from Romanticism and Symbolism that can be interpreted as a mythological allegory for an

element of nature or a demonic *femme fatale*. In this case, the fatefulness is shown through a sexualized female body; a shadow concealing the woman's face renders it impersonal; the painterly composition seems to speak of mournfulness or regret. An emotional mood aimed at creating a dramatic or somber effect is also typical of Pictorialism and is intended to differentiate between "serious" and "real" art, and the vulgarity of the new snapshot culture. Another fundamental position of Pictorialism was the avoidance of anything contemporary and modern, and thus you will not find electric poles, railroad tracks, or factory smokestacks in pictorialist photographs. *In Memoriam* was intended to create the impression of timelessness, and only the fact that this is a photograph reminds you that it is the product of a modern, highly industrialized society. *Pond – Moonlight* (1904) is another work that exemplifies Pictorialism, although it is not included in the exhibit. An outstanding example of the use of the gum bichromate process, in 2006 it sold for \$2.9 million at New York's Sotheby's auction house, a record sum for a photograph. This landscape flooded with moonlight evokes the melancholy nature of the art of Romanticism, in which there is no room for the mundane or the contemporary.

This veering away from the contemporary and indulging in nostalgia for an idealized, imaginary past is one of the reasons why Pictorialism has been assessed critically since the second half of the 20th century. Another reason was that Pictorialism attempted to replicate painting or the graphic arts, thereby disengaging itself from the theoretically existent autonomy of its medium. Furthermore, the photographs produced by this movement are markedly apolitical – landscapes, symbolic nudes, or arresting portraits, as evident in the work of Steichen in this exhibit. Such subject matter has not helped this movement's theoretical reputation, at least according to the

leading critics and theorists of photography who are most often associated with, or influenced by, *October* magazine and its implied assumption that radical political and social positions are expressed through radical aesthetics. From this perspective, Pictorialism is an insignificant surrogate style with no political substance. It is to be noted, however, that the history of this type of art is being actively reviewed, and Pictorialism is being reconsidered as the first truly international movement in photography, a significant trend in the history of American photography, and even as a "silent resistance".³

Steichen the Curator

Steichen's other significant contribution to the history of American photography is his work as a curator at the MoMA. This portion of his career paradoxically, contradictorily and yet logically continues Steichen the photographer's career at the turn of the century. Logically, because a department devoted to photography, established within the art museum, was basically the dream of his youth come true. The paradox and contradiction lies in the fact that Steichen refuted Pictorialism's idea of photography as an individual, subjective work of art, and with a surprising enthusiasm he greeted non-artistic photography, the kind that most of society was engaged in. Another interesting turn is the fact that the beginning of Steichen's career at the MoMA is connected with wartime propaganda, which in its essence cannot have much in common with the intimate, personal motifs of Pictorialism. This transformation is logical, however, because the romantic Steichen of 1902 in his self-portrait with paintbrushes and a palette and the patriotic Steichen in the US army uniform in 1942 are separated by four decades, two world wars, and radical changes in the use of photography in mass media, fashion and advertising, and political propaganda.

Christopher Phillips was one of the first in the 1980s to emphasize Steichen's radically innovative approach to photography exhibits with his 1942 show *Road to Victory* at the MoMA.⁴ The best known example of Steichen's curatorial work is the international exhibit *The Family of Man*, which opened at the MoMA in 1955 and toured the world for the next decade in various forms, even showing up in 1959 in Moscow, the capital of the United State's ideological enemy, the Soviet Union. Within the history of post-war photography, *The Family of Man* is clearly considered the most significant and influential exhibit: anyone who has anything to say about photography has criticized it, starting from Roland Barthes.⁵ The exhibit among other things was criticized for overly optimistic humanistic pathos, claiming that all people are the same, because they all are born, they suffer, love, and die, thereby silencing and concealing the very opposite, which is that all people are not the same, that racism exists, that there is war, that economic inequality is pervasive, etc. The exhibit was also criticized for promoting consumerism and what Guy Debord would call "the society of the spectacle", reducing the world's diversity, pluralism, and complexity to the passive consumption of visually pleasing images.⁶

It is important to note that *The Family of Man* cannot be imagined without the archive of *Life* magazine, from which many of the photographs were gleaned, nor can it be imagined without Steichen's experience as a magazine photographer. It is only logical that Steichen applied many of the principles used in the pages of *Life* magazine to the exhibit, including the combination of images of various sizes to achieve a maximum visual effect. These principles were effectively in direct contrast to the ideas of Pictorialism; the photographs that make up *The Family of Man* serve only as visual material. They can be enlarged or made smaller depending on the intended effect, and

they can be mounted on practically any flat surface in a room. These photographs are not treated as works of art that would demand a more dignified attitude, such as being presented as framed original prints lined up in neat, symmetrical rows. In this exhibit an individual author's intent is not particularly significant; if the curator saw an image that he considered suitable, it was incorporated into the exhibit regardless of its original title, the photographer's purpose in taking the photograph, and whether it was part of a larger thematic or narrative group of images. The vision of the curator was what mattered, and, paradoxically, Steichen was an artist once more, "painting" with the works of other photographers by composing them according to his own ideas. Just like an illustration of Rosalind Krauss' theory about various discursive spaces, which determine a photograph's content and meaning, the photographs Steichen selected for the exhibit acquired a completely new meaning because of their size, placement, and sequence.⁷ It is another question, however, whether this new meaning is somehow related to each photographer's original intent. From today's perspective such a curator would be considered authoritarian, power hungry, and despotic, because today a curator's work ethic (at least theoretically) must involve a dialogue and cooperation with artists. It is important to remember that this sort of understanding of curatorial work had not emerged yet in the early 1950s, when Steichen began working on *The Family of Man*, and he saw his function and duties as being similar to those of a magazine's picture editor.

Another equally important aspect that largely influenced the reputation of *The Family of Man* was its essential role in the ideological battle of the Cold War. For example, everyone knows that American Abstract Expressionism, a contemporary of *The Family of Man*, was presented in the international arena of political

debates as the epitome of the individual's freedom of expression.⁸ It did not matter how apolitical Jackson Pollock was in his artistic endeavors or how critical Robert Rauschenberg was later on: in this context the aims of the artists were only valuable inasmuch as they could be adapted to the necessary political discourse. Steichen's exhibit ended up in a very similar situation, when the United States government's propaganda apparatus wished to use it as their global messenger.⁹ Exhibiting *The Family of Man* in Moscow was especially noteworthy in the context of the Cold War's cultural policies; it was part of the first American national exhibit in the USSR in 1959. This exhibit happened to be the location of the so-called Kitchen Debate between US Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet people's first encounter with American culture and its modern consumer goods has recently been analyzed from a historical perspective showing that modern American art and *The Family of Man* were among the show's central attractions.¹⁰ It is important to note, however, that Steichen's exhibit was not a 100% American product, because the photographers he chose to include represented various countries around the world, including the Soviet Union.

These and other questions have been formulated in recent decades, when the history of exhibitions emerged as a distinctive field of study within the context of art history. If traditional art history was based on study of the biographies of artists and analysis of their work, then this new field of inquiry emphasized the exhibition as a public announcement with its own meaning and function, which is not necessarily the sum of meanings of all the works in the exhibit. Exhibition in this context is viewed as an independent entity, and its author is largely the curator; through the curator's theoretical prism one can examine how art works acquire a new meaning by being exhibited together at a

specific time and place. The creation and history of *The Family of Man* have also been recently viewed from this perspective.¹¹ It reminds us that there is no room for simplistic political contrasts in 20th century art history, and Steichen's legacy serves as an example of how an artist's career can make dizzying flips between politically and aesthetically opposing platforms.

In the bromoil process, an image is transferred from a negative onto special photo paper, then bleached until it becomes invisible, but its form is preserved in a gelatinous layer. The paper is then treated with oil paints and brushes; in the areas exposed to light the gel has hardened and become receptive to oil paint. The final image is reminiscent of a monochrome drawing or watercolor; its appearance is fluid and diffused, with a gentle overlapping of tones; the photographer can alter the image by erasing areas and unnecessary details.

1 The bromoil process and other processes associated with Pictorialism are described in Latvian, too, and were also used in Latvia. See: Buclers, M. *Fotografija. Rokas grāmata pašmācībai visos fotografiskos darbos*. Rīga: Valtera un Rapas akciju sabiedrība, 1924, pp. 310–328.

2 Morand, S. Imagination and Pigment. Archaism and Technique in Pictorialism. In: *Impressionist Camera. Pictorial Photography in Europe, 1888–1918*. London: Merrell, 2006, p. 254.

3 See, for example, Cutshaw S. M. and K. Sichel. *California Dreamin': Camera Clubs and the Pictorial Photography Tradition*. Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 2004; Martin D. F. and N. Bromberg. *Shadows of a Fleeting World: Pictorial Photography and the Seattle Camera Club*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011; Свиблова, О. *Тихое сопротивление. Русская пикториальная фотография 1900–1930-х*. Москва: ГУК г. Москвы "Мультимедийный комплекс актуальных искусств", 2008.

4 Phillips, C. "Steichen's Road to Vicotry". *Exposure* 18.2 (1980), pp. 38–48.

5 Barthes, R. *Mythologies*. Translated into English by A. Lavers. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972, pp. 100–102.

6 For a compilation of reviews about *The Family of Man*, see Back J. and V. Schmidt-Linsenhoff. *The Family of Man 1955–2001*:

Humanismus und Postmoderne: Eine Revision von Edward Steichens Fotoausstellung = Humanism and Postmodernism: A Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2004.

7 Krauss, R. "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View". *Art Journal* 42.4 (1982), pp. 311–319.

8 See, for example, Guilbaut, S. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

9 See, for example, Turner, F. "The Family of Man and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America". *Public Culture* 24.1 (2012), pp. 55–84; Bezner, L. C. *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

10 Reid, S. E. "Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959". *Critical review: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9.4 (2008), pp. 855–904.

11 See, for example, Sandeen, E. J. *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995; Ribalta, J., ed. *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to The Family of Man, 1928–55*. Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2008.