

A Transatlantic Art

European Pictorialism in the United States

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Although American technology was arguably one of the main catalysts for the rise of Pictorialism, the movement itself began in Europe. London, Paris, and Berlin had long been centers of the photographic world, and many of the technical advances that drove the photographic enterprise in the mid-nineteenth century were introduced in these capitals. Toward the end of the century, however, American chemists and engineers equalled and in some cases exceeded the successes of their European counterparts. New York, then a dynamic and upstart city, emerged as an important center of photographic innovation. From their studios on Broadway, Edward and Henry Anthony published their *Photographic Bulletin*, the leading platform for the exchange of photographic information in the United States. And in 1888 George Eastman launched his Kodak camera from headquarters in Rochester. With its legendary slogan "you push the button, we do the rest," this new device gained international popularity. European art photographers had Eastman to thank for the flood of amateurs who besieged camera clubs in the 1890s. Convenient and affordable roll film, combined with a simple, easy-to-use camera and a knack for mass marketing, proved a potent blend, and the Kodak camera became an integral part of the context in which the Pictorialists worked. Nevertheless, Pictorialism as an artistic movement did not arise in the United States. It began in Europe and made its way to New York, where it was quickly assimilated and spread to other parts of the country.

It is impossible to gauge the influence of European

Pictorialism on photographers in the United States without first acknowledging the direct relationship many Americans enjoyed with their European counterparts. Gertrude Käsebier, Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, and Clarence White were crucial figures in photographic history, and the loosely constituted circle of "Photo-Secessionists" they formed in 1902 altered the trajectory of art photography in America. However, their understanding of the medium was profoundly influenced by European principles. With the notable exception of White, the core group of American Pictorialists consisted of European expatriates and Europhiles. Stieglitz, the doyen of Pictorial photography in America, was born in New Jersey to German immigrant parents; his abiding fascination with his ethnic heritage shaped his early career. Stieglitz's father, Edward, a successful wool merchant, had amassed enough wealth by 1881 to enable him to retire early and return to Germany with his family. Alfred remained in Germany for the next nine years, completing his education at the Realgymnasium in Karlsruhe and the Berlin Polytechnic Institute, where he famously studied photography with the chemist Hermann Vogel.

Stieglitz's close associate Edward Steichen had a parallel upbringing. Born in Luxembourg, he came to the United States with his family at the age of two but returned to Europe in 1899 to study painting for a year in Paris. During his stay there he met Stieglitz, and the two initiated the collaboration that would become a linchpin of American Pictorialism. Steichen exhibited in Paris, most notably in the *New School of*

Paul Burty Haviland
Young Woman Seated—
Florence Peterson, 1909–10
Detail (see fig. 137)

American Photography exhibition organized by Frederick Holland Day in 1901.

Although American by birth, Gertrude Käsebier spent the formative part of her career in France. The influence of European photography may well have begun to exert itself on her in the early 1890s, when, as a student at New York's Pratt Institute, she was exposed to images by Italian pre-Pictorialists such as the Alinari Brothers, Giacomo Brogi, and Giorgio Sommer, and the Swiss Adolph Braun.¹ In 1894 she traveled to Europe. After a short stay in Wiesbaden, Germany, she spent the summer in Crécy-en-Brie, about thirty miles east of Paris, as an assistant at the summer art school run by Frank Dumond, a professor at the Pratt Institute. It was there, on a rainy day, that Käsebier began making her signature photographic portraits, later claiming that with her first success she instantly knew it would become her vocation.² She professed affection for the Barbizon painters, especially Corot, and in the ensuing months produced two photographic surveys of peasants in Normandy,

Fig. 127
Alfred Stieglitz
The Steerage, 1907
Photogravure
33.4 x 26.6 cm



which exhibit the distinct influence of Jean-François Millet. After a brief spell at the Académie Julian, she returned to Germany, where she apprenticed to a photographic chemist to refine her technique.

Other "American" Pictorialists were similarly cross-pollinated. Paul Haviland was born in Paris, the son of the Limoges china manufacturer Charles Haviland and Madeleine Burty, daughter of the well-known French art critic Philippe Burty. After completing preliminary studies at the University of Paris in 1898, at the age of eighteen he enrolled at Harvard University, where he received a bachelor's degree. In 1901 he moved to New York, but during World War I he returned to France and remained there until his death in 1950. Other photographers also crossed the Atlantic: Frank Eugene was born in New York but traveled to Germany at the age of twenty-one to study at the Royal Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He emigrated permanently in 1906. Adolphe de Meyer, conferred a Saxon barony in 1902, was an Anglo-German socialite of Jewish and Scottish ancestry. At the outbreak of World War I he found himself unwelcome in both of the countries in which he resided, so he left for the United States in 1914. Arnold Genthe emigrated from Germany in 1895. Initially settling in San Francisco, where he made his celebrated photographs of the city's Chinatown, he moved to New York in 1911. His business in California never recovered after the calamitous earthquake of 1906.

With so much coming and going between Europe and the United States, Stieglitz's celebrated photograph *The Steerage* (fig. 127) must have had particular resonance for the photographers in his circle. The image showed unemployed workers returning to Europe after their dream of emigrating to the United States had failed: steerage class was one of the cheapest ways to travel on ocean liners. No one in Stieglitz's circle suffered such hardships, but privately they must have discerned something of the artist's lot in the picture. Shuttleing between two continents, many New York Pictorialists were artistic migrants, exploring new territory in search of critical respectability and a good living. To Stieglitz the picture embodied the flip side of his own family's good fortune. How many of those who left Europe, as his mother and father had done, could return as triumphantly as they did?

New York was not the only American city in which Pictorialism thrived. Lively organizations devoted to art photography existed in Newark, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Boston, Chicago, and Minneapolis, among other places. For a time San Francisco boasted two camera clubs, the Pacific Coast Amateur Photographic Association and the California Camera Club. By 1900 the California Camera Club

claimed to be the largest such organization in the world. With 425 regular members it easily outstripped the New York Camera Club (New York was where Stieglitz's Photo-Secession originated), which had only 333 members.³ Nevertheless, as a result of its geographical proximity to Europe, the relationships its photographers cultivated with European colleagues, and the sheer force of Stieglitz's personality, New York rapidly became the central clearing house for European Pictorialism in America.

Stieglitz built his organization in a European mold. His Photo-Secession closely resembled the Linked Ring Brotherhood, the exclusive society of Pictorial photographers founded in London in 1892. Membership in both groups was considered honorary and was offered by invitation only. By extension, the Linked Ring declined to grant prizes at its salons, as being selected for inclusion was held to be its own mark of distinction. Stieglitz adopted the same system for his Photo-Secessionist exhibitions. Both groups sought to draw a clear distinction between photography made as art and that made for reproductive or industrial purposes. Like their British cousins, however, the Photo-Secessionists embraced a variety of photographic styles, ranging from "straight" photographers, who printed straight from the negative, to those who made manipulated images using gum bichromate, oil prints, and related methods. Ultimately, a number of prominent members of the Photo-Secession were also admitted as members of the Linked Ring. By 1908 the Americanization of the Linked Ring was so extensive that it became a bitter point of contention among British members, particularly when it was apparent that the majority of exhibits in the annual salon that year were by American entrants. The magazine editor Francis Mortimer subsequently organized a "Salon des Refusés" for photographers denied admission. This prompted the Linked Ring to change its exhibition rules, which caused several influential American photographers, including Stieglitz, to resign their membership. By 1909 the Linked Ring had folded completely. The American Photo-Secession was perhaps the most consequential remnant of that mercurial institution.

Not all American photographers had the luxury of traveling to Europe personally. For those who remained rooted in the United States there were three principal means by which they might stay abreast of developments in European Pictorialism. First, there were trade publications, such as the Anthonys' *Photographic Bulletin*, or even imported English-language journals such as the *British Journal of Photography*, which contained advice and reviews of Pictorial strategies. British photographer and Linked Ring founder Henry Peach Robinson's landmark book

Pictorial Effect in Photography, first published in 1869 and revised in 1886, became one of the bibles of the would-be American Pictorialist.⁴ It was followed in 1896 by Robinson's *The Elements of a Pictorial Photograph*.⁵ Peter Henry Emerson's *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* of 1889, though repudiated by the author in a pamphlet of 1890, was also a popular guide.⁶ In 1901 the critic Charles Caffin published his manifesto *Photography as a Fine Art: The Achievements and Possibilities of Photographic Art in America*. He described the origins of European Pictorial photography, beginning with the Viennese photographic Secession, continuing to the genesis of the Linked Ring, and concluding with Pictorial societies in Paris, Hamburg, and Munich. "Finally," Caffin declared, "pictorial photography came to be taken seriously by the continental Art Societies and Academies, and today the principal photographic exhibitions are held under their auspices, and in several art centers the leading art museums have established permanent exhibitions of photographs of real artistic merit and value, and have set aside a fund for the purchase of same."⁷

Caffin was a supporter of Stieglitz's drive to recast photography in the United States, and his writings contain a measure of propaganda for European Pictorialism. The situation was not quite as rosy in Europe as Caffin suggested, but this idealized view provided an attractive blueprint for how things could be improved in the United States. By contrast, he derided most American Pictorialists: "Up to this time there has been no dearth of photographic societies in the United States, or of exhibitions; but their artistic standards were poor, for the facilities of the cheap camera have been and still are prolific of mediocrity."⁸ The message was clear: to improve, American photographers should emulate the Europeans.

A second way in which American photographers were exposed to European Pictorialism was through international exhibitions. Although photographs were admitted to the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, it was too early for Pictorialism to make its presence felt. By 1904, however, Pictorialism had achieved a strong reputation, and the organizers of the St. Louis World's Fair attempted to include a selection of Pictorial photographs in the display. The director of the Palace of Fine Arts, Halsey Ives, initially hoped to include photographs in this prestigious building showing paintings, sculptures, and a selection of prints and drawings. Space limitations forced all photography to be transferred to the Palace of Liberal Arts, where commercial and artistic photography was displayed together with photographic equipment. A number of Pictorialists persevered, including a contingent from the Photo-Club de Paris, among them Ferdinand Coste, Robert

Demachy, Céline Laguarde, and Constant Puyo. Puyo was granted a medal for his entry (fig. 128), but the nature of his contribution is unknown. British photographers also made a solid showing, including J. Craig Annan and Frederick Evans.⁹ Stieglitz, meanwhile, boycotted the exhibition. His impassioned arguments for the reinstatement of photographs to the Palace of Fine Arts fell on deaf ears, and he refused to compromise on photography's claim to be exhibited alongside other fine art media.¹⁰ Several stragglers joined the proceedings anyway, including Clarence White and Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr.

When Stieglitz opened his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, also called Gallery 291, in New York in 1905, he moved quickly to exhibit works by European Pictorialists. The second show ever held in the Gallery, in spring 1906, featured the work of Demachy, Puyo, and René Le Bègue. The following exhibition was dedicated to Britons Frederick Evans and Annan, and historical works by Hill and Adamson (David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson). Shortly afterward Stieglitz staged exhibitions devoted to the Austrian Trifolium: Heinrich Kuehn, Hugo Henneberg, and Hans Watzek; and the German brothers Theodor and Oskar Hofmeister.¹¹ In 1910 the Photo-Secession had its climactic exhibition at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo, New York State. Again Europeans were given center stage. The exhibition

Fig. 128
Medal awarded to
Constant Puyo
at the St. Louis
World's Fair in 1904
7.3 x 6.2 cm



was divided in four parts: Secessionist works were balanced by a section devoted solely to Hill and Adamson, an open section adjudicated by Stieglitz, and a final "foreign" section where the work of continental Europeans was shown.¹²

A third and final way in which Americans learned about developments in European Pictorialism was through the pages of the lavish publication *Camera Work*. Not only did *Camera Work*, and to a lesser degree its predecessor *Camera Notes*, contain images by the coterie of European expatriate photographers with whom Stieglitz surrounded himself; it also provided a means to show European photographs to the American public. *Camera Work* was the jewel in the crown of Stieglitz's efforts to elevate Pictorial photography in the United States. Illustrated with meticulously produced photogravures and a small selection of half-tones, it was intended to advance the cause of American Pictorialism. Stieglitz had begun his editorial career in charge of *The American Amateur Photographer*, in which he began to promulgate the theories of European Pictorialists. In 1897 he created the journal of the New York Camera Club, *Camera Notes*, which he edited until 1902. Lovingly produced, *Camera Work* superseded *Camera Notes* and became the voice of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession. Of the 575 photographic images that appeared in *Camera Work's* fifty issues between 1903 and 1917, a remarkable number represented European Pictorialists. More than 180 photographs—roughly a third of the total—were by European photographers. British photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn was the most prominent of these, with twenty-six images. Others approached his importance: twenty-five photographs by Annan, nineteen by Heinrich Kuehn, and sixteen by Robert Demachy were reproduced in the pages of *Camera Work*.

Several European contributors to *Camera Work* also published essays in the journal. Robert Demachy, for example, wrote forcefully about the merits of manipulated photography:

Pictorial photography owes its birth to the universal dissatisfaction of artist-photographers in front of the photographic errors of the straight print. Its false values, its lack of accents, its equal delineation of things important and useless, were universally recognized and deplored by a host of malcontents. There was a general cry toward liberty of treatment and liberty of correction. Glycerine-developed platinotype and gum bichromate were soon after hailed as liberators; today the oil process opens new perspectives on personal treatment. And yet, after all this outcry against old-fashioned and

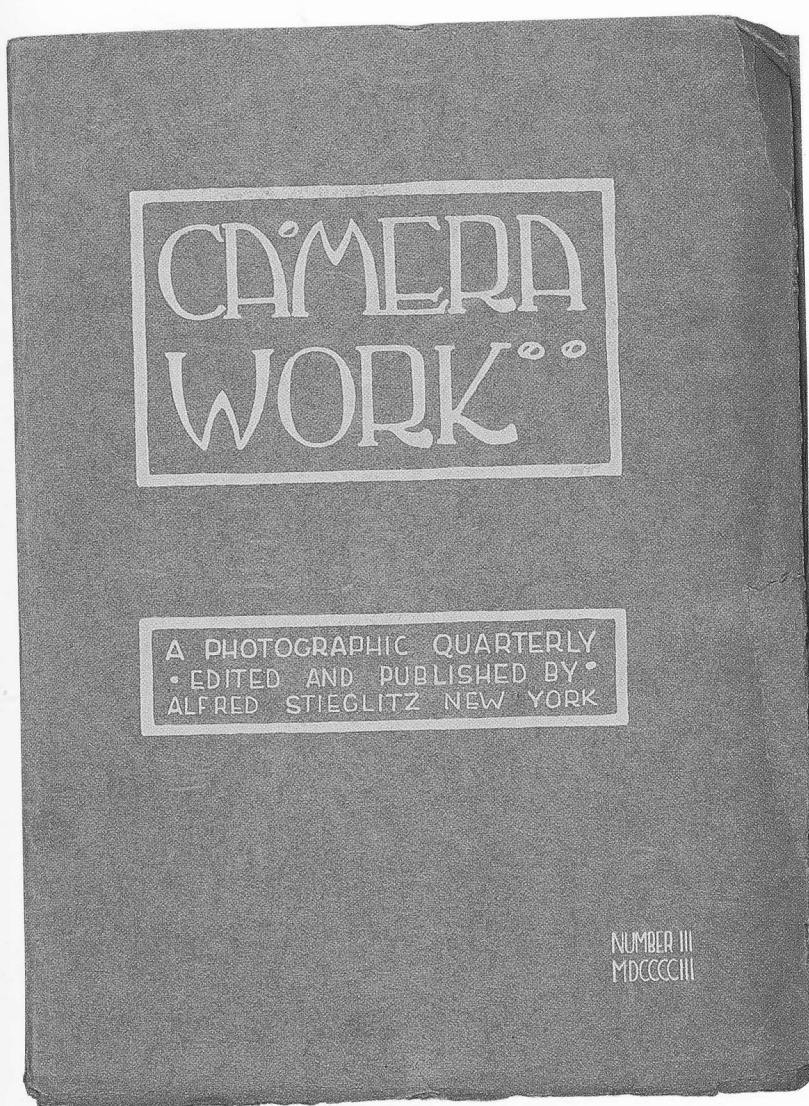


Fig. 129
Camera Work no. 3, 1903
 29.8 x 21.6 cm

narrow-minded methods, after this thankful acceptance of new ones, the men who fought for new ideas are now fighting for old errors ... that [they] should extol the virtues of mechanical photography as an art process, I cannot understand.¹³

Although Demachy's views were not shared by all of Stieglitz's followers, including Stieglitz himself, the tone of his remarks is typical of essays published in the journal by European Pictorialists. Stieglitz encouraged his contributors to take a firm stand on contemporary issues in photography. Strident and assertive, Demachy did not merely acknowledge the debate between proponents of straight and manipulated photography but joined in wholeheartedly, urging readers to embrace his position. *Camera Work* provided contributors with a means to speak directly to Stieglitz's readership. Essays such as Demachy's enabled European Pictorialists to expound their ideas. It was as if

the reader had been brought into a meeting of a European camera club where theoretical positions were hotly contested.

Like the Photo-Secession itself, *Camera Work* was fashioned after European predecessors. The short-lived publication *Sun Artists*, published by W. Arthur Brood from 1889, included four original photogravures in each issue and lengthy essays by contributors. The Wiener Camera-Klub (Vienna Camera Club) published a similar journal, called the *Wiener Photographische Blätter*. Although it lasted for only five issues, this too contained exquisitely produced photogravures, including a representation of work by Stieglitz.¹⁴ Other, non-photographic publications may also have helped to inspire the work. London's notorious quarterly *The Yellow Book*, copiously illustrated with prints by Aubrey Beardsley, Walter Sickert, and other artists, prospered for some three years, from 1894 to 1897. Edward Steichen, who designed *Camera Work*'s handsome minimalist cover (fig. 129), may have had in mind the Art Nouveau graphic style of literary magazines; like most of his compatriots, he is known to have admired the Arts and Crafts luminary William Morris.

Camera Work was substantially a European publication. Although the text was printed in the United States, Stieglitz often turned to European printers to obtain photogravures of the high quality he demanded. For the first two years all the gravures were supplied by the Photochrome Company (later renamed the Manhattan Photogravure Company), a firm where Stieglitz had once worked and that had produced the prints for *Camera Notes*. Although he praised the company's productions, he came to believe that he could obtain better images from European manufacturers. Beginning with issue number eight, the Scottish firm of Annan and Sons supplied all the photogravures of British photographers, including those made for J. Craig Annan himself. Continental European photographers were handled by F. Bruckmann Verlag in Munich, under the supervision of Frederick Goetz. Goetz produced photogravures for *Camera Work* for eight years, including sizeable groups of images by Frank Eugene, Heinrich Kuehn, Adolphe de Meyer, and Edward Steichen.¹⁵

Pictorialism in America grew from European seeds. It was steered by people who knew Europe's culture intimately and who regularly interacted with European colleagues first-hand. Leading European Pictorialists entered American exhibitions, helped to publish the movement's pre-eminent journal in the United States, and flavored it with weighty essays. The extent of the exchange was so great, it would be tempting to think of American Pictorialism as a provincial expression of its European precursor. But this would be a mistake. Each of Stieglitz's Photo-Secessionists and the

photographers they stimulated throughout the United States interpreted the lessons of European Pictorialism in unique ways. The enduring strength of American Pictorial photography lies in its distinctiveness; that is, its transcendent ability to convey the aesthetic concerns of *fin-de-siècle* America. For while photographs and ideas may flow freely across borders, subject-matter does not.

Ultimately, Pictorial photography is a chameleon art; it draws energy from prevailing forces in the artistic community and reflects the concerns of local practitioners. When European Pictorialists looked beyond photographic circles for inspiration, they

discovered Symbolist, Expressionist, and Nabis painters. Americans did not have the same muses. Pictorialism in the United States reflected the parallel developments in painting of American Tonalism and the Ashcan School. As a result, the history of Pictorialism should not be viewed simply as a dialogue between West and East; it is a complex concatenation of competing motivations and pressures. European Pictorialism had a profound effect on American photography. But one must not forget that American Pictorialism in turn fueled art photography in Europe.

1. Michaels 1992, p. 17.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

3. Michael G. Wilson, "Northern California: The Heart of the Storm," in *Pictorialism in California: Photographs, 1900-1940*, Santa Monica, J. Paul Getty Museum and Huntington Library, 1994, p. 5.

4. Robinson 1886.

5. Robinson 1896.

6. Emerson 1889.

7. Caffin 1901, p. 6.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

9. For more on photography at the Fair, see Phillip Prodger, "The World in St Louis," *Apollo*, December 2004, vol. CLX, no. 514, p. 65.

10. Peterson 1997, p. 14.

11. Gee 1978, p. 11.

12. Doty and Homer 1983, p. 15.

13. Robert Demachy, "On the Straight Print," *Camera Work* no. 18, 1907, as cited in Green (ed.) 1973, pp. 121-22.

14. Peterson 1985, p. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 26. I am indebted to Peterson for much of the historical information in this paragraph.