



When photographer Alfred Stieglitz (below, in his Self-Portrait taken about 1911) arrived in Paris in 1894 at age 30, he wrote in *The American Amateur Photographer*: "The great city is full of fascination and beauty. I am particularly pleased in studying the different phases of life here, have done some photographing."

STIEGLITZ IN FOCUS

A NEW EXHIBITION AT WASHINGTON'S NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART TRACKS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEMINAL PHOTOGRAPHER ALFRED STIEGLITZ

IN THE SUMMER OF 1875, A SMALL-town portrait photographer in upstate New York invited an 11-year-old boy to join him in his darkroom. The youngster watched in fascination as faces slowly appeared on coated-metal plates submerged in developing trays. When the photographer bent over the finished tintypes to brush a bit of red pigment onto faces in the photographs, the boy asked why he did that.

"Makes 'em look more natural," the photographer replied.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the lad shot back.

The young upstart was Alfred Stieglitz. Brilliant, opinionated, and often tactless, he would do more than anyone in America to persuade the art world that photography deserved a place alongside painting and sculpture. Although his legacy has been colored by his battles on behalf of other photographers, his role as the nation's earliest champion of modernist painting and his marriage to painter Georgia O'Keeffe, Stieglitz was himself a consummate photographer, as a new exhibition at Washington's National Gallery of Art demonstrates.



(His subtle-toned *Wet Day on the Boulevard--Paris* was taken in 1894 at the intersection of Boulevard des Italiens and rue Scribe.) Throughout his 50-year career, Stieglitz never stopped documenting contemporary life and the changing world around him.

"Today Stieglitz is most known for his portraits of O'Keeffe and for his studies of New York City from around the turn of the 20th century," says Sarah Greenough, the National Gallery curator who organized the exhibition. "But many of his other photographs have not been seen or reproduced in the last 50 years." The 100 prints in the new exhibition are drawn from the more than 1,600 photographs (all printed and mounted by Stieglitz himself) that O'Keeffe bequeathed to the National Gallery in two gifts--the first in 1949, a few years after his death, and the second in 1980. "This is far and away the most comprehensive collection of Stieglitz's photographs that exists anywhere," Greenough says.

The eldest of six children in a family of argumentative German-Americans, Alfred Stieglitz (pronounced Steeg-litz) was born in 1864 in Hoboken, New Jersey, and raised in a brownstone on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Small in stature, with unruly dark hair and a broad, crooked nose (broken in a childhood fall), Stieglitz had intense, deep-set eyes that give him a romantic, intimidating air in early portraits.

His father, a retired woolen merchant and Sunday painter, moved the family back to Germany in 1881. The next year, 18-year-old Alfred began studying mechanical engineering at Berlin's Technische Hochschule but soon switched to photography, then being transformed by better cameras and chemicals.



In the summer of 1887, Stieglitz traveled through Italy recording scenes of city and village life. Many of these photographs were inspired by popular paintings of the day. For example, The Last Joke--Bellagio (opposite) probably took its cue from a widely reproduced painting by Austrian artist Ludwig Passini. Praised for its spontaneity, the photograph won first prize in an 1887 competition sponsored by The Amateur Photographer. Like many of his contemporaries, Stieglitz made misty, atmospheric studies at the turn of the century, but he also focused on New York City's dynamism and modernity.

Eager from the outset to elevate photography's status, he hiked the European countryside with his camera, producing artistic scenes of peasants scything hay and mending nets on the Dutch seacoast. Of a later picture-taking sojourn in Germany's Black Forest, he wrote: "No

bricks and windows to disturb, no railroads with smoky locomotives to dim the pure atmosphere." Clearly, says Greenough, he was "emulating the popular painters of the day."

Stieglitz began winning prizes and attention in Europe in the 1880s. Sun Rays--Paula, Berlin, his 1889 photograph of a well-dressed young woman writing a letter in his own small room, is lit by stripes of sunlight filtering through Venetian blinds. The picture is a triumph of technique: Stieglitz managed to control the contrast between sun and shadow without losing the detail in either. Paula endures as a tender if stagy memento of the young woman who was likely his first long-term lover.

He shot The Hand of Man (right) in 1902 from the back of a train pulling into the freight yard of the Long Island City railroad station.

Throughout his life, Stieglitz would have periodic infatuations with younger women, in some cases marked by bursts of photography. Recognizing the signs, his first wife threw him out of the house in 1918 after coming home to find him photographing the young Georgia O'Keeffe. As his second wife, O'Keeffe herself realized she had a serious rival when, in the 1930s, Stieglitz took a series of photographs, some nude, of an attractive heiress named Dorothy Norman. "When I make a picture," he once explained, "I make love." And after making love, he liked to take pictures.



He rarely photographed his first wife, Emmeline Obermeyer, whom he married in 1893, when he was 29 and she 20, not long after he returned to New York from Germany. They were, it seems, ill-matched. Emmy, a family friend, was prudish and materialistic, very different from her spirited husband. But a \$3,000 annual allowance from Emmy's father, a wealthy brewer, combined with one from his own father, meant Stieglitz never had to work for a living. They had one child, Kitty, born in 1898. Stieglitz, at first the doting father, photographed his daughter's every moment of "delight and discovery." But as Kitty--who would spend most of her adult life in psychiatric hospitals--grew older, father and daughter became more and more estranged.

The year of his marriage, Stieglitz signed on as the unpaid editor of the prestigious American Amateur Photographer magazine. The advent of dry-plate photography in the 1880s created a boom in amateur photography, which became a

pastime for gentlemen of leisure in Europe and America. Camera clubs in London and other cities held huge and, for the most part, indiscriminate exhibitions of their members' works. Stieglitz was appalled by the thousands of images that often covered gallery walls from floor to ceiling.

As a magazine editor, his brusque, autocratic manner soon led to trouble from gentlemen-photographers who expected their work, however banal, to be published. His verdict on a typical submission: "Technically perfect, pictorially rotten." When subscribers canceled in protest, he told his publisher the magazine was better off without them. By then, few photographers were as widely exhibited or admired as Stieglitz, but respect for his authority was undercut by a lifelong streak of grandiloquence. Describing himself in 1921, for instance, he would write: "Photography is my passion. The search for Truth my obsession."

Forced to resign his editorship in 1896, he turned to the New York Camera Club (whose halfhearted members were considering a switch to a newer fad--bicycles) and reinvented its newsletter as a serious art periodical he called *Camera Notes*. In it, he announced that every published image would be "a picture rather than a photograph," leaving to himself alone the decision as to which was which. His judgments about art, he later declared, were "not a question of personal likes and dislikes; not a question of theory; I approach the subject in a scientific way, objectively, impersonally."

Stieglitz signaled his displeasure with the big camera clubs by organizing in 1902 a small, invitation-only group he dubbed the Photo-Secession--a name he borrowed from similar groups in Vienna and Paris. His fellow revolutionists, as he saw them, were mostly young, mostly unknown photographers--among them, Edward Steichen, Gertrude Kasebier, Clarence White and Alvin Langdon Coburn. The group shared a belief that exhibition standards for art photography were woefully lax. In his usual bombastic style, Stieglitz issued a manifesto declaring that the Photo-Secession stood for "rebellion against the insincere attitude of the unbeliever, of the Philistine, and largely of exhibition authorities." The organization's goal, he said, was to force the recognition of photography "as a distinctive medium of individual expression."

The group held its own exhibitions and published a lavish quarterly, *Camera Work*, which included prints made using photogravure, the finest process for black-and-white reproduction. When photographs for an opening in Belgium went astray, the exhibitors lifted prints from an issue of *Camera Work* and hung them instead. No one noticed the difference.

The work of the Photo-Secessionists tended toward moody, soft-focus imagery. They often printed with gum bichromate, which allowed them to use brushes and sponges in the darkroom to add texture and remove unwanted details. Steichen's works in particular looked like paintings, charcoals or washes. "Gummism," however, had its detractors. In *DOT*, British playwright George Bernard Shaw, a friend of some of the group's members, maintained that one who indulges in the practice "fails in respect for his art" and "is a traitor in the photographic camp."



Stieglitz was a great admirer of artist John Marin. He first exhibited the painter's work at "291" in 1909 and continued to do so for more than 35 years. Despite their different personalities--Marin was boyish and taciturn, Stieglitz was serious and verbose--the two were close friends. The portrait of Marin (right), taken in 1910, was a collaboration between Stieglitz and photographer Edward Steichen.

Although Stieglitz at first tolerated the heavily retouched work of his fellow Secessionists, most of his own photographs were remarkably free of manipulation. To supply the kind of painterly atmospherics that others added in the darkroom, he exploited the real-life effects of rain, snow, mist and smoke. In his Japanese-flavored *Spring Showers* 1900-1901, a rain-soaked foreground and misty tower in the distance frame a lone tree on a city street amid asphalt and masonry. In a grittier view a year or so later, *The Hand of Man* suggests Stieglitz's growing ambivalence about the changing face of New York City. Ostensibly a majestic photograph of a rail yard, it is also an ominous tableau of smoke, steam and steel in which not a single human figure is visible.

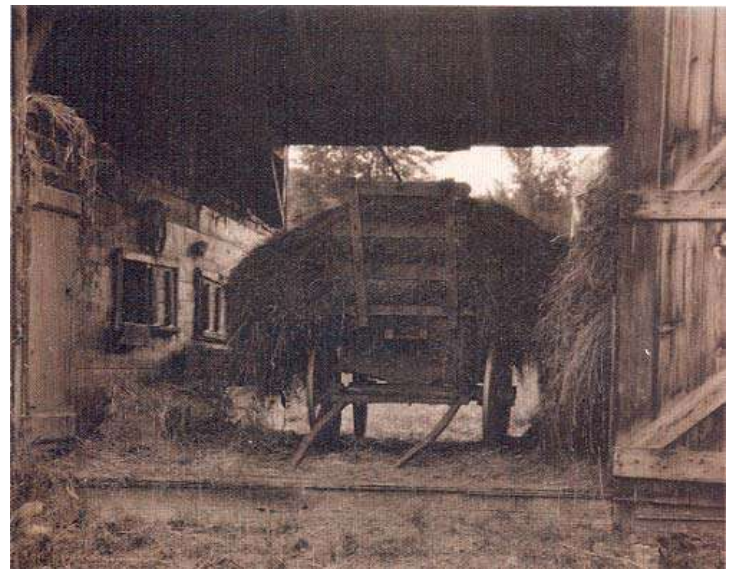
From 1905 to 1917, Stieglitz managed, without pay, the Photo-Secession's exhibition space at 291 Fifth Avenue (two small rooms with burlap-covered walls, and a washroom that doubled as a makeshift darkroom, on the top floor of a brownstone). Passionate and combative, he was known to take unappreciative visitors by the arm and lead them out the door of the gallery. He was a relentless monologist who could hold forth for hours on life and feeling and expression. But he was undeniably charismatic. After one visit, critic Henry McBride wrote that he wondered "whether it is Mr. Stieglitz or the pictures on the wall at the Photo-Secession that constitute the exhibition." A New York Sun columnist advised readers to visit the gallery during Stieglitz's lunch hour, lest "the seductiveness of his golden voice" persuade them that photographers invented Impressionism.



Over the 28 years of his relationship with Georgia O'Keeffe, Stieglitz made hundreds of photographs of the artist. In the portrait (left) of her taken in 1918 against a background of a charcoal drawing (of which this photograph is the only record), Stieglitz merges O'Keeffe and her art in such a way that the drawing appears to spring forth from her head.

Stieglitz had no interest in profiting from the sale of photographs, least of all his own. "He was fiercely anticommercial throughout his entire life," says Greenough. "His goal with the PhotoSecession was primarily to have art museums accept and exhibit photography." He achieved nothing less in 1910 when he was invited to organize an unprecedented exhibition at Buffalo's Albright Art Gallery. The show—600 photographs by more than 60 artists—filled the museum's eight galleries and set attendance records. After the show, critic Austin Lidbury saluted Stieglitz in *American Photography* as a "Napoleon of pictorial photography" who had "the fanaticism of a Mad Mullah, the wiles of a Machiavelli, the advertising skill of a P.T. Barnum, the literary barbs of a Whistler, and an untiring persistence and confidence all his own."

During the 1920s and '30s, Stieglitz spent summers at his family compound in Lake George, New York. The "hay crop was a real winner this year," he wrote to Rebecca Strand, the wife of photographer Paul Strand, in August 1922. "Hay stored--packed in everywhere. I believe some in my head too." While The Hay Wagon (right), taken that summer, recalls the subject matter of Stieglitz's European photographs of the 1890s, its lyricism and luminosity are also typical of his work from the early 1920s. During the winter in the 1930s and '40s, Stieglitz lived in Manhattan and presided over his Upper East Side art and photography gallery, An American Place.



Having convinced many that photography could be as expressive as painting, Stieglitz now faced up to the contradiction inherent in advancing one medium by disguising it as another. Gummism, he concluded, had gone too far. "Photographers must learn not to be ashamed to have their photographs look like photographs," he wrote in 1913. Soon he was praising such photographers as Paul Strand, who did not use "trickery" and "flimflam" in order to "mystify an ignorant public." Painting and photography, he now argued, were inherently different; photography's very realism freed painting to become more abstract. As if to prove his point, Stieglitz had already become a crusader on behalf of avant-garde art. In 1908, with Steichen's help, he had begun exhibiting modernist art instead of photography at "291." In fact, the gallery exhibited paintings by Matisse, Picasso and Cézanne years before the landmark 1913 Armory show in New York brought them to America's attention. (At a Picasso exhibition at 291 in 1911, the only two buyers were Stieglitz himself and a critic from Brooklyn, who paid \$12 for a pencil drawing.) To the indignation of critics and the puzzlement of subscribers, *Camera Work*, too, had begun devoting more and more

pages to abstract art. Stieglitz explained, with typical hauteur: "Before the people at large, and for that matter the artists themselves, understand what photography really means, as I understand that term, it is essential for them to be taught the real meaning of art."

From its 17th-floor window, he photographed the city's changing skyline. Of the more than 80 studies he made, From My Window at American Place, North is the only one in which a human being is clearly depicted.

At the same time, Stieglitz was pushing his own work toward abstraction. A harbinger was the picture for which he is perhaps best known, *The Steerage* (p. 80), which he photographed in 1907 but didn't publish until 1911. The portrait of working-class passengers crowding two decks of a transatlantic steamer is a tightly balanced, almost Cubist composition--"a picture of shapes," he called it. More obviously abstract was a series of pictures that he took in 1915 and 1916 from the back window of his gallery. Rather than softening the pictures, as in his earlier cityscapes, shadows, twilight and snow now accentuated the sharp geometry of corners and planes.

But his own photographs were rarely exhibited in the decade from 1910 to 1920. He was feuding then with many of the old Secessionists, and his authority with them had eroded, along with his marriage. He used his cherished 8by 10-inch view camera, its bellows now held together with string and adhesive tape, mainly for portraits of friends and artists. Family money could no longer support his quixotic endeavors. In 1917, Stieglitz closed 291 and mailed the final issue of *Camera Work* to its 37 remaining subscribers. He then experienced one of his periodic turnabouts. Over the next eight years, he would produce more finished photographs than he had in the previous 30, and his life would be utterly transformed. The agent of this change was a young schoolteacher and aspiring artist named Georgia O'Keeffe.



Stieglitz first became aware of O'Keeffe's work in 1916, when he was 52 and she 28. A friend of hers, Anita Pollitzer, had brought a series of the artist's charcoals to 291 for an opinion. Without asking O'Keeffe's permission or even learning her correct name, Stieglitz exhibited ten of the drawings that spring as the work of "Virginia O'Keeffe." When O'Keeffe learned of the show by accident a few weeks later, she marched over to the gallery to confront the impresario. He later remembered the young woman with "a Mona Lisa smile" and a prim black-and-white outfit who demanded, politely but firmly: "Who gave you permission to hang these drawings?" Though surprised that this young 'unknown would object to the attention he'd given her work, Stieglitz was not about to back down. "You have no more right to withhold these pictures," he informed her, "than to withdraw a child from the world, had you given birth to one." Then he took her to lunch.

O'Keeffe left both soothed and stimulated. In truth, seeing her pictures on the walls was precisely what the ambitious artist had been hoping for. "I would rather have something hang in 291 than any place in New York," she'd confided to Pollitzer a few months earlier. Adding to the excitement, she found the intense, blunt-talking older man she'd encountered very "easy to look at." Within two months, she was confessing to him that her drawings now felt "as much yours as mine." For his part, Stieglitz was hopelessly infatuated. When O'Keeffe took a teaching job in Texas, he deluged her with long, often deeply personal letters, as many as four a day. A month after O'Keeffe moved to New York for good in June 1918, settling into a small borrowed apartment that he'd found for her on East 59th Street, Stieglitz left Emmy and moved in with her. "I don't believe there ever has been anything like her," he wrote his friend the painter Arthur Dove. "Mind and feeling very clear-- spontaneous--& uncannily beautiful-absolutely living every pulse beat."

Their top-floor flat was hot that summer, and O'Keeffe often painted in the nude. Stieglitz kept his view camera on a tripod nearby so he could photograph her whenever the impulse struck him. It often did. The hundreds of pictures he made of her were not cool, academic figure studies. They were powerful and sensuous portraits of an identifiable woman with

whom he was obviously in love. Many of the photographs were taken with the lens just inches from O'Keeffe's hands or nude torso. Modeling for Stieglitz was hard, time-consuming work--he stage-managed her every pose and raged if she fidgeted during a long exposure. Late in life, she recalled: "I was photographed with a kind of heat and excitement and in a way wondered what it was all about."

Their apartment became a gallery in exile, to which Stieglitz invited friends and critics to see his latest work and the vivid, semiabstract paintings of his talented protégé. Stieglitz didn't publicly exhibit the pictures he'd taken of O'Keeffe until 1921--his first one-man show in eight years. The exhibition, at the Anderson Galleries in Manhattan, drew thousands of delightedly scandalized visitors. O'Keeffe was displayed before the New York art world not as an important new artist but as an artist's subject, and a nude one at that. Rumor had it that Stieglitz was asking \$5,000 for one of the photographs of his undraped lover. "Gracious Heavens! \$5000 for a mere photograph!" declared Henry McBride in *The Dial* magazine. "And then everyone had to see the exhibition over again, the crowd about the nude being particularly dense."

Stieglitz was one of the first photographers to recognize the expressive potential of isolated parts of the human body. His 1930 photograph of the hands of his 25-year-old protégée and lover Dorothy Norman is both a delicate portrait and a study in abstraction. Stieglitz met the rich young heiress in 1927. Over the years, she made herself ever more indispensable to him, ultimately taking over the management of his galleries.

O'Keeffe later wrote: "Several men--after looking around awhile--asked Stieglitz if he would photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me." Stieglitz, O'Keeffe continued, found the idea amusing. "If they had known what a close relationship he would have needed to have to photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me, I think they wouldn't have been interested."



Later, when a critic suggested that Stieglitz "moulded" his sitters, the photographer was indignant. Taking up the implied challenge, he set about photographing clouds. The sky above the Stieglitz clan's longtime summer home at Lake George, New York, became his new obsession, and he produced hundreds of images of clouds in all kinds of weather. He mounted the prints sideways, or with only a snippet of horizon, to force the viewer to see them as pure pattern. When a cloud picture came out right, he felt he was revealing a truth that was "more real than reality." To the poet Hart Crane, a friend, he wrote, "Several people feel I have photographed God. May be."



In striving to create a new, more intuitive and expressive language for photography, Stieglitz also turned to taking pictures of clouds (such as his 1931 Equivalent, left). By abstracting clouds from their relationship to the ground, he wanted viewers to be "freer to think about the relationships in the pictures than about the subject matter for its own sake."

By the time Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were married in 1924, her career as an artist was blossoming, thanks in large part to her husband's energetic promotion. But there was friction. Independent and aloof, "Miss O'Keeffe," as she insisted on being known, apparently loved "my funny little Stieglitz," but she eventually grew weary of the constant stream of family and friends that her husband insisted on keeping around him. If posing for Stieglitz had been difficult, looking after him as he grew increasingly frail in the late 1920s (he had a heart condition and was a hypochondriac) was far harder. Feeling suffocated in New York and suffering from headaches and insomnia, O'Keeffe in the 1930s began spending as long as six months a year in New Mexico without him. Stieglitz grew anxious she would

abandon him altogether. "That's death riding high in the sky," he said of a cloud picture he made, "ever since I knew Georgia couldn't stay with me."

Some 25 years after shooting his classic The Steerage (1907), Stieglitz described the circumstances of its creation. "Coming to the end of the [first-class] deck I stood alone, looking down," he wrote. "The scene fascinated me: A round straw hat; the funnel leaning left; the stairway leaning right; the white drawbridge.... I stood spellbound for a while. I saw shapes related to one another--a picture of shapes.... Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I did." Racing back to his cabin, Stieglitz grabbed his camera and returned to create this extraordinarily modem, carefully balanced composition of repeated geometric shapes and contrasting tones.



With and without his wife in the 1920s and '30s, Stieglitz summered at his beloved Lake George. He converted a shed there into a proper darkroom in 1927, the first he'd ever owned, and photographed its exterior, the outbuildings and the hills around it as reverently as if they were, in his words, "the Sphinx and pyramids." In New York City the rest of the year, he presided, in turn, over two small, resolutely uncommercial galleries (The Intimate Gallery and An American Place) devoted to American modernist art. On a card announcing the latter's opening, Stieglitz warned: "No formal press views, No cocktail parties, No special invitations, No advertising."

The couple's winter home was a small, bleak apartment in the Shelton, Manhattan's first skyscraper hotel. Some of Stieglitz's last photographs before heart disease ended his camera work in 1937 were crisp, formally composed views of skyscrapers under construction taken from the couple's 28th floor windows. (When a building was completed, he'd usually lose interest.) "In the 1890s, New York had been a place he found profoundly exciting," says Greenough. "By the 1920s and '30s, Stieglitz with his romantic spirit felt the modern age was destroying the human element within the city." People, in fact, rarely appear in his later cityscapes.

By the 1930s, O'Keeffe's paintings were selling for as much as \$10,000, and her annual income was far greater than Stieglitz's. A 1938 profile of her in Life magazine identified her dour-looking husband, then 74, as the man who "helped this one-time schoolteacher to become one of the country's most prosperous and talked-of painters."

Stieglitz died in 1946 at 82. Though as lovers their commitment sometimes wavered, as artists he and O'Keeffe had always been each other's most loyal supporters. "I believe it was the work that kept me with him--though I loved him as a human being," O'Keeffe wrote eight years before her own death in 1986 at 98. "I put up with what seemed to me a good deal of contradictory nonsense because of what seemed clear and bright and wonderful."

Stieglitz photographed only what he knew, and his most revealing works were of the things that were part of his daily life. Stieglitz in Yosemite is unimaginable. "I never knew him to make a trip anywhere to photograph," O'Keeffe wrote. "His eye was in him, and he used it on anything that was nearby. Maybe that way he was always photographing himself."

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By Doug Stewart

A frequent contributor, the author wrote about pinhole photography in the May 2000 issue.