

SATURDAY REVIEW: THE ARTS

The Stieglitz Collection: When Photography Was Young

by Vicki Goldberg

THIS SUMMER, three enormous banners billowed over the facade of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, announcing the season's most luminous treasures inside: Monet at Giverny, The Arts Under Napoleon, The Stieglitz Collection. Stieglitz and photography have obviously moved up since the day in 1902 when the Metropolitan's director was appalled to think that photographs might ever hang in the museum: "Why, Mr. Stieglitz, you won't insist that a photograph can possibly be a work of art.... You are a fanatic." Stieglitz conceded the point readily enough but insisted that "time will show that my fanaticism is not completely ill founded."

Time and Stieglitz won the battle he waged as editor, writer, photographer, and gallery director. So we had 214 works of art from Stieglitz's own collection on display at the Met from May 18 to July 16, and better still, a catalog of the museum's entire holdings from his collection. *The Collection of Alfred Stieglitz* (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Viking, \$30) includes 580 photographs by 50 photographers.

Stieglitz's collection is as fine a survey of Photo-Secession and of international photography over the years 1890-1910 (with a few important footnotes before and after) as we are likely to get for some time. Though there are significant omissions, there are many fine examples by such as Steichen, J. Craig Annan, Clarence White, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Gertrude Kasëbier, Heinrich Kuehn (and from later years, Strand and Sheeler), and a host of names that were solid once but have melted away with time. Weston J. Naef, associate curator of prints and

photographs at the Metropolitan, organized the show with the aid of a grant from Vivitar Corporation. He also wrote the catalog, which should prove indispensable to anyone seriously interested in the period. The bibliography is exemplary, the catalog gathers together information on some photographers that is not readily available elsewhere, and Naef not only illuminates such matters as the influence of technical changes on imagery but has unearthed such choice and arcane details as who owned the pedigreed staghound in Seeley's photograph.

We need no longer ask the question that dogged these photographers: But is it art? Ask rather: How does it look today?

Some of it looks no less than delicious. The Steichen landscapes were recently on loan to New York's Museum of Modern Art and were lovelier still on second acquaintance. The wistful quality of the nightscenes and the blurry, cowering, and rather silly nudes could be seen in context and fitted into the spirit of the times. By dint of microscopic examination, Naef discovered what even Stieglitz did not know about the tinted Steichens he owned: They were actually ingenious copies Steichen had made of his own unique prints.

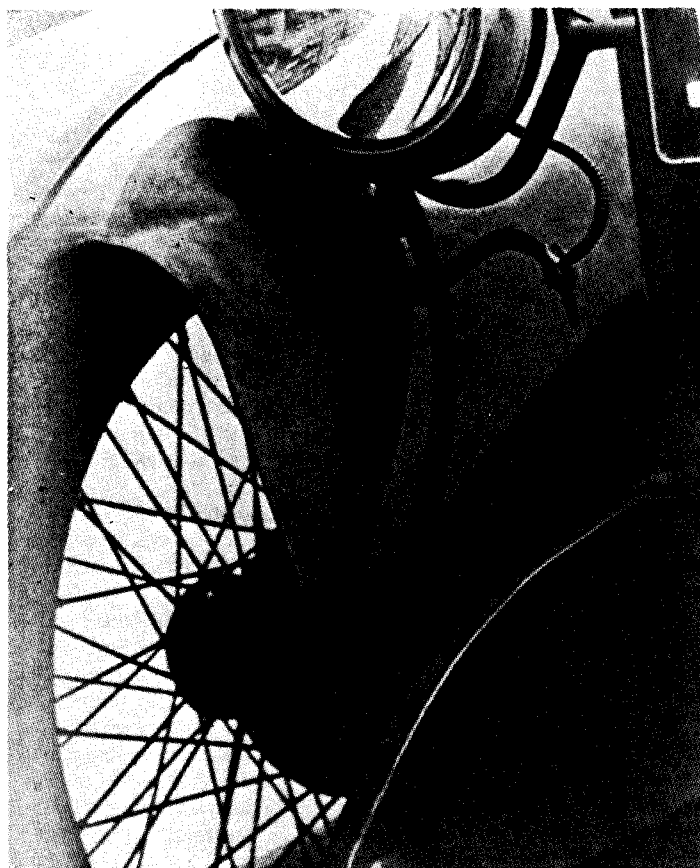
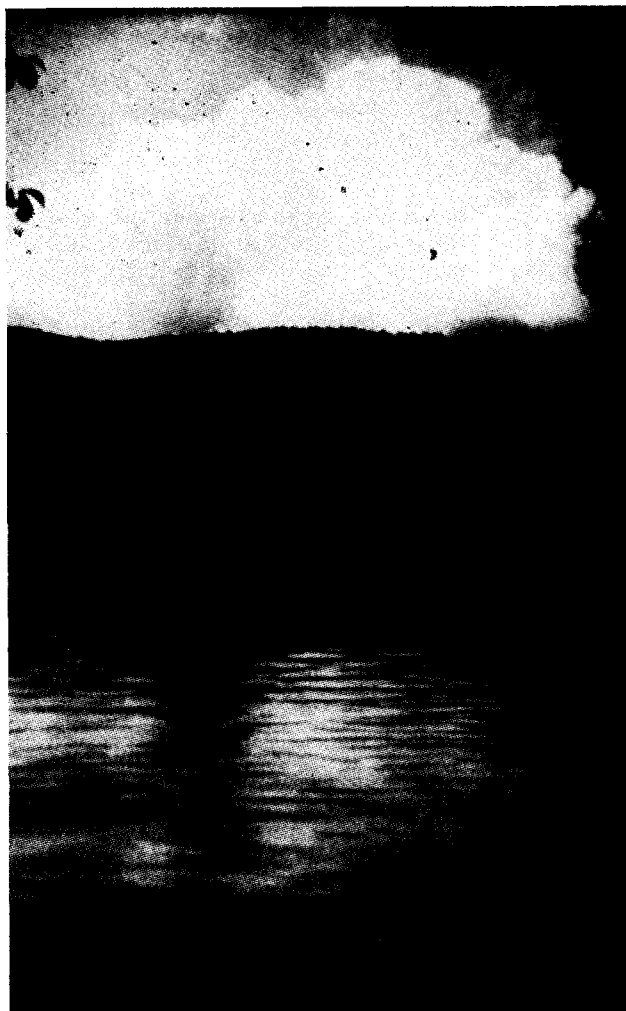
The big photographs from Vienna, by Kuehn, Henneberg, and Watzek, struck me as astonishing in size, handsome in organization, marvels of surface. (Most are gum prints, that manipulative process that can cloud details and wash the image in tender color.) The Coburns have a formal strength that has not weakened with the years; the Annans poise in a kind of haunted, haunting stillness; and there

are many exceptionally fine single images by less well-known photographers.

But one part of the exhibit called forth only a sigh. Those 20 years at the turn of the century must have been awash in mawkish sentimentality, the photographers repeatedly coming down with attacks of *September Morn* or "the littlest angel." Today, Kasëbier's mothers and children look suspiciously like greeting cards; Anne W. Brigman's storm-ridden nude in a Batman rig is tediously symbolic; and F. Holland Day's seven self-portraits as Christ on the cross are downright vulgar.

MORE DIFFICULT is the group of boring pictures. Every show has its quota; still, these are distressing in view of the grand claims and grand aims to scale the heights of art. In their eagerness to be artists, many of these photographers imitated other media, producing a "fuzzy artiness" that Ansel Adams later said eluded him. Today, the fuzz is not so distasteful, but the art is another matter. Indeed, the most beautiful as-





Paul Strand. [Untitled], 1917.

Edward J. Steichen. *The Big White Cloud, Lake George*, 1903.

pect of many of these photographs is exactly their texture and color, yet the images often strike a dreary note. These photographers looked all too hard at Whistler, Corot, and Inness, wonderful artists but dead ones not likely to be resurrected by inferior versions in another medium. And some looked to artists who were dull to begin with or to pedestrian prints and book illustration—rather a poor way to pick your influences. Though there were marvelous masters with powerful visions at the time, many of the Photo-Secessionists and their colleagues looked backward and consequently froze into pillars of salt. The paintings and sculpture that Stieglitz showed in his gallery from 1908 on forged a new spirit in art for a new century. But if his collection of photographs truly represents the most advanced photography of its day, then one is left to wonder if photography was not at the time a lag-gard art. Of course Stieglitz, like every collector concerned with history, collected too much; there is room at the top for only a very few visionaries at any one time.

Stieglitz himself changed his mind and his aesthetic a few years later. He felt that many of the photographs in his collection were “of more value historically than artistically,” a judgment that stands up fairly well today. In his own photography as well as in the photographs he collected and exhibited, he came to prefer the straight, sharply focused print and often chose predominantly formalist imagery, abstracted from nature. On the walls of the Metropolitan, the stark contrasts and honed edges of the Strands and Sheelers were a shock after all the elegant platinum fog that went before. Sheeler’s photographs looked particularly spare and strong and closely related to his own more modernist painting aesthetic. This is not to say that Sheeler and Strand are necessarily better because they are more up-to-date. Being modern only guarantees being modern, not being more beautiful.

The line between Steichen in, say, 1904, and Strand in 1916 marks a gulf between tastes, aesthetics, and techniques. Stieglitz actively assisted in the formation of both eras in American

photography and preserved the documents for display. The catalog suggests that he outgrew an early desire to be remembered as a collector, wanting instead to be thought of as a photographer. He has certainly had his wish, but the Metropolitan’s show presented a side of him that years of neglect have turned into news: He was a collector who threw a wide net. The collection is an education as well as an introduction to a number of fine but obscure photographers. The pictures are alternately glorious and dull, old-fashioned and new—Stieglitz himself seems to have been peculiarly capable of holding contradictory ideas in his mind. Like his other pursuits, his collecting was designed to further the dignity and artistry of photography. He once said to Dorothy Norman, his biographer: “What I would like is that when I die, photography should say of me, ‘He always treated me like a gentleman.’” He succeeded. ●

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THEATER

Canada's Embalmed Stratford Festival

by Martin Gottfried

CANADA'S Stratford Festival has established itself so successfully as the unparalleled summer tourist theater that people no longer go to see the plays there. They go to be at the festival. They go no matter what the play, making reservations a year in advance, before the schedule has been announced. There Shakespeare's plays have become a matched set, one indistinguishable from the other, all "Shakespeare," the bindings more important than the contents. Things have gotten so out of hand that this season—Stratford's twenty-sixth—didn't even begin with a play but with a one-performance-only *Gala Shakespeare Revel*, a polyglot of dances, songs, and brief scenes.

Festival representatives dismissed this gala as a way of satisfying stuffy first-nighters (Canada's financial and political and social aristocracy), but the excuse was a classic case of buck-passing. Why should the festival take the blame for letting the packaging overshadow the plays when the audience can be blamed instead?

Wrapped up in a \$6-million annual budget, Stratford exemplifies all the pitfalls of art institutionalization. For with its gorgeous and magnificently equipped Festival Theater; its handsome, smaller Avon Theater; its manicured lawns and picnic grounds and swan-stocked river and gay-chic restaurants, the festival has become a cultural world's fair, sterile and automated.

From the start, there was no company on our continent that could touch Stratford's. Here was a repertory theater in the world class. Moreover, with a hundred actors and its own scene and costume shops, the festival could turn out productions worthy of museum exhibition. Museum exhibition, window display—this is now the problem. Stratford's productions have become ones in which actors give irreproachable readings; ones that boast sumptuous costumes of suede and fur and leather and silk; ones that are pictures, lovely to look at but devoid of life.

Robin Phillips, in his fourth season as Stratford's director, has now put makeup on the mannequins, so to

speak. He has actually made window dressing the theme of a theater where performance has become display. Phillips seems to revel in the physical splendor of the festival; seems to find perverse satisfaction in lavish sterility, in theater as decor. One thing that can be expected of any production of his: It will have masses of stunningly costumed actors flowing onstage and then streaming off, as if they were mobile architecture.

This season, virtually every one of Stratford's productions has been staged by Phillips. He has directed or codirected six of the eight plays that opened during the first week. Think of that: eight productions opening in a single week! As a matter of fact, eight productions in *four days*. How many theaters could have managed it? Even if another one could have, it would not have had the manpower or financial resources to mount the plays on a level even approaching Stratford's. Every one of these new productions is lavishly costumed; most require large companies; each is physically worthy of being a theater's showpiece; and in terms of sheer expertise, all but one performance is impeccable.

Impeccable, however, does not mean that the performances are vital or stimulating or heartfelt. Alas, only one of the new productions has any spirit; only one of them comes to life. *Uncle Vanya*, at the Avon, captures the beauty of Chekhov's dramatic orchestration. It grasps the sublime grace of his compassion, his ability to deal with boredom without being boring; to make the extraordinary of the ordinary. Brian Bedford's bewildered Astrov, Martha Henry's flirtatious Elena, and Marti Maraden's frustrated Sonya are but three subtly drawn characters in a perfect ensemble.

Contrarily, the Shakespeare of this year's festival is dreary. Does the world really need an uncut version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? Not while some go without a Water Pik. (If Queen Elizabeth I hadn't insisted on seeing Falstaff just one more time, the play wouldn't have been written at all.) As for *Macbeth*, it may be a pleasure to see Maggie Smith as Lady Macbeth, but the play has always defied production because it treats Macbeth as its tragic hero while she is more naturally that figure. *Macbeth* is a literary dream but a

performing nightmare, and this time the actor to catch the blame for not succeeding in the title role is the gifted Douglas Rain.

The Winter's Tale ought to have been the most interesting of the new productions since it is so peculiar a work. It is, after all, Shakespeare's *other* jealousy play—the gentler side of *Othello*. But Phillips chose to stage it in a never-never land turn-of-the-century Sicily, somehow hoping that by crossing Victorian England with Belle Epoque France he could create an elegant middle European languor. The play is implausible enough—who would buy Queen Hermione pretending to be a statue for 18 years? In this production, with its 90-minute second act during which virtually nothing transpires, the play is ridiculous, when endurable. Ah, but the pictures are so pretty.

Over at the Avon, aside from *Vanya*, the revival of John Whiting's *The Devils* (based on Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun*) is an exercise in exorcism. Here, Phillips uses fancy stage illustration to try to disguise the poverty of his imagination. Obsession with style inevitably reveals inanity of content. His irrelevant stroboscope lighting and rock music give way to a possessed nun who actually speaks in the electronic growl used in the film *The Exorcist*. So ultimately even the style is inane. But to Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* goes the distinction of being the season's greatest embarrassment. Stratford's talent for professional patina evidently doesn't extend to Broadway musicals. Your garden-variety dinner theater would have ejected this shabby orchestra and gauche performance. Nowhere is Stratford's plush campiness more apparent than in this production of the musically inspired but textually problematic work.

But festival audiences will buy *Candide* because a musical is a relief after all the Shakespeare. They accept Shakespeare because it is Stratford—like the waterfall is Niagara—but a Broadway musical makes this cultural vacation so much more bearable. After all, nobody really expects to have fun inside these theaters, and of course, that's what's wrong with Stratford. It has taught its audiences to forget why Shakespeare is great; to visit rather than partake of theater; to look at the display—a theater embalmed. ●

Answer to *Wit Twister* (see page 50):
tinsel, inlets, listen, silent, enlist