

#6 May 2013 Cameraderie The Armory Show (1913, and still running)

Let's revisit Alfred Stieglitz from an earlier article (#2, January, 2013). Recall that one of his missions was to promote photography to an artistic standing equal to that of painting and sculpture. He was extremely active in this effort, and quite successful. This article is about the relationship of photography to those other art forms, chiefly surrounding the great Armory Show of modern art in 1913.

First, here is the basic sketch of the Armory Show from the Wikipedia article (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Armory_Show):

*Many exhibitions have been held in the vast spaces of U.S. National Guard armories, but **the Armory Show** refers to the 1913 **International Exhibition of Modern Art** that was organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, the first large exhibition of modern art in America. The three-city exhibition started in New York City's 69th Regiment Armory, on Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets, from February 17 until March 15, 1913. The show served as a catalyst for American artists, who became more independent and created their own "artistic language."*

Stieglitz was involved, as follows, from the Wikipedia article on him (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Stieglitz):

In late 1912 painters Walter Pach, Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn began organizing a great show of modern art, and Davies asked Stieglitz to help. Stieglitz, who strongly disliked Kuhn, declined to become involved, but he agreed to lend both a few modern art pieces from [his] 291[gallery] to the show. He also agreed to be listed as an honorary vice-president of the exhibition along with Claude Monet, Odilon Redon, Mabel Dodge and Isabella Stewart Gardner. In February 1913 the watershed Armory Show opened in New York, and soon modern art was a major topic of discussion throughout the city. Stieglitz took great satisfaction in the public's response, although much of it was not favorable, but he saw the popularity of the show as a vindication of the work that he had been sponsoring at 291 for the past five years. Ever the promoter and provocateur, he quickly mounted an exhibition of his own photographs at 291 to run while the Armory Show was in place. He later wrote that allowing people to see both photographs and modern paintings at the same time "afforded the best opportunity to the student and public for a clearer understanding of the place and purpose of the two media."

To make clear the immense impact of the 1913 Armory Show—pretty much every modern artist you have ever heard of was represented, and many of the most iconic modern art works of all time were there under one roof. Here is a link to the Wikipedia article where you can view the list of artists, from Braque and Bellows to Sisley and Whistler:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_artists_in_the_Armory_Show

You can also view selected works from the show here, from *Whistler's Mother*, to *Nude Descending a Staircase*. You will be amazed at how many of the works of modern art you know were at this first large-scale and most famous of all American modern art shows:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armory_Show#Selected_works

Notice that Stieglitz was active in presenting modern art and photography to American in his 291 Gallery for several years prior to the Armory show—hence his invitation to participate. And then he presented his own exhibition of photography concurrently with the Armory Show, setting forth photography as an equal art form to painting and sculpture.

Here is a link to one of his photographs that Stieglitz exhibited in his 291 gallery concurrently with the Armory Show, *Old and New New York*, shot in 1910:

<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/13836#>

Click on the image to enlarge it. Here we see Park Avenue South, lined with free-standing mansions, but the rising Vanderbilt Hotel looms in the background. Just from the title and a glance at the image, we know this is an old/new contrast, but let's look at how that is supported in the image. The old buildings are on a receding diagonal, gradually fading out a bit in the haze, as if disappearing into time. The new building looms like a tyrant force in the gloom beyond—soon it will come out of the gloom and into full being. Perhaps it will eat the tiny creatures before it? The subject matter is framed within the frame by buildings left and right, and a stone garden curbing at the bottom. But the top is unbounded, suggesting that there is no limit to the growth of the new building, which almost touches the top of the frame. The composition leaves nothing to chance. We have been looking at it for 113 years, and it does not grow tired. See if you can match this the next time you are in New York (or a similar situation)—maybe you can locate the same spot—and send me the results. If I get a few responses, I will put them in a follow-up article. My email address is in the club list.

This year, the United States Postal Service brought out a set of commemorative stamps, called *Modern Art in America 1913-1931*: [Modern Art Stamps](#).

It would be no coincidence that the stamp set images date from 1913—the year of the Armory Show. *Nude Descending a Staircase* is there among the dozen stamps in the set. But—hold on—one of the stamps is a photograph, not a painting—Man Ray's 1926 *Noire et Blanche*. The United States Postal Service, whose stamp art reflects the heartbeat of America, has fulfilled Stieglitz's vision—to set photography on the same platform as painting!

Our art world is “deeply intertwined” with itself and the events of the world. Literature influences both the fine and performance arts, and world events, trends, and fashions are in the game as well. Reciprocity is the rule. Folk music and folk arts influence all forms of academy arts. As soon as a major archaeological find is unearthed, its iconography appears in local folk art patters. In this article, I have been discussing the relationship of the modern art Armory Show to photography, as promoted by one of photography's greatest impresarios, Alfred Stieglitz.