

#13 April 2014 *Cameraderie* Paul Strand (1890-1976)

The summary of Paul Strand's career is concisely expressed in the lead paragraph of the Wikipedia article on him (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Strand):

“In his late teens Strand was a student of renowned documentary photographer Lewis Hine [November 2013 *Cameraderie*] at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. It was while on a fieldtrip in this class that Strand first visited the 291 art gallery—operated by [Alfred] Stieglitz [January 2013 *Cameraderie*] and Edward Steichen [September 2013 *Cameraderie*—where exhibitions of work by forward-thinking modernist photographers and painters would move Strand to take his photographic hobby more seriously. Stieglitz would later promote Strand's work in the 291 gallery itself, in his photography publication *Camera Work* [future article], and in his artwork in the Hieninglatzing studio. Some of this early work, like the well-known *Wall Street*, experimented with formal abstractions (influencing, among others, Edward Hopper and his idiosyncratic urban vision). Other of Strand's works reflect his interest in using the camera as a tool for social reform. He was one of the founders of the Photo League [future article], an association of photographers who advocated using their art to promote social and political causes.”

An article on the website of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/216-429-607-508.html>) explains Strand's artistic importance as follows:

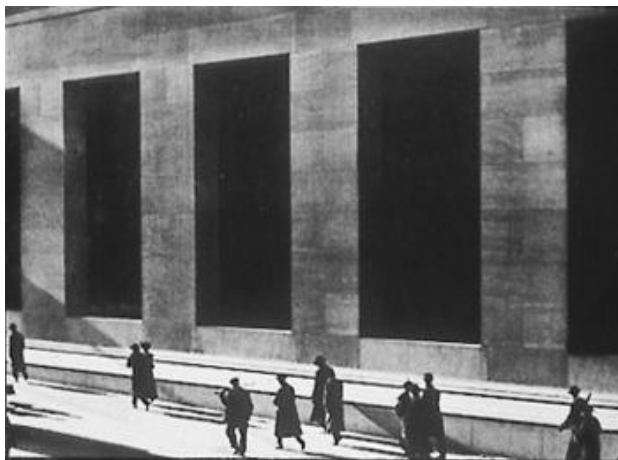
“Paul Strand ... ranks indisputably among the most significant photographers in the history of the medium. He explored the modernist possibilities of the camera more fully than any other artist before 1920, producing a celebrated series of abstractions that reduced still life and architectural elements to simple arrangements of shapes, while at the same time creating some of the earliest ‘street photographs’ of people he caught unawares in urban New York settings. These diverse experiments produced iconic masterpieces such as *Wall Street* (1915) and *Blind Woman* (1916) and are now widely recognized as major contributions to modernist art, having introduced subjects that influenced leading photographers of the twentieth century such as Walker Evans [future article], Dorothea Lange [March 2013 *Cameraderie*], Henri Cartier-Bresson [future article], and Robert Frank [future article].”

Here is a copy of *Blind Woman* from Google Images:



I can't say much about this image beyond the obvious. It is a breakthrough "street image" of tremendous impact, and it just stays with you—as unforgettable as much more graphic images of war, death, and disease.

Here is a copy from the Wikipedia article of Strand's *Wall Street*.



A lot has been said of this image, over and over again. As the Wikipedia quote mentions, it is a formal arrangement of geometric shapes, almost more than it is an image of an actual place. Compare this to some of Ansel Adam's work in the Southwest, particularly of the Taos Pueblo Church, shot in 1942, and you may, in my view, see Strand's influence on his successor—here is a copy of one of Adams's shots of the church—from the back of the church:



The long shadows of the unidentifiable pedestrians in *Wall Street* lend an other-worldly sense to the *Wall Street* image. Other artists have picked up this idea, particularly in cinema: who recalls the 1961 Alain Resnais film, *Last Year at Marienbad*, with its famous people-cast-shadows-but-trees-do-not scene? Here is a still of that scene from Wikipedia:



The edifice in *Wall Street* dwarfs the faceless people trudging before it, simultaneously dominating them and rendering them without individuality. At this point, it is worth noting that this clear commentary about Wall Street in *Wall Street* comes from a man who was an active socialist, and eventually moved himself to France for the last 27 years of his life, where socialist political parties are acceptable.

Below is Strand's 1916 image, *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*. In this image you can discern what is perhaps a summer cottage porch chair, but the subject is really the abstract patterns. This goes quite a bit beyond *Wall Street*. What a wonderful source for us all this image is! We can all go out with Strand's photographic eye and see such images all around us, and capture them, with a bit of seeing and a bit of thought.



It would seem that there are few if any great photographers without an intense emotional or intellectual commitment to the ideas underlying their art. Perhaps that commitment, in addition to their technique, is essential for them to *see* their images.