

#2 January 2013 Cameraderie Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946)

[“Stieglitz” is a German name. Pronounce it “Schtee-glitz.” Go here to hear Stieglitz’s full name spoken in German: http://www.forvo.com/word/alfred_stieglitz/.]

I might call Alfred Stieglitz “The Father of 20th Century Photography,” but he is probably already called that. The range and depth of his achievements is astonishing:

- The promotion of photography as an art form as legitimate as painting or sculpture.
- Editing the photo magazine, *Camera Work*.
- Operating several photo art galleries.
- Organizing major photo exhibitions.
- His photographic work itself.

To paraphrase Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Stieglitz’s entire life message was “Attention must be paid to photography!”

Please go to the Wikipedia page on Stieglitz (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Stieglitz) and scroll through the images, stopping to notice several great icons of American photography: *The Terminal*, *Winter-Fifth Avenue*, *Venetian Canal*, *The Steerage*, *Portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe*, and *Georgia O’Keeffe Hands*. The first four of these helped create 20th century photography. So do the portraits of his wife, Georgia O’Keeffe, but in a different way—they belong to perhaps the finest body of photographic work studying a single model every created. O’Keeffe was of course a fantastic model—just look at her hands—where can that intensity be found elsewhere? Even a trained dancer cannot project that energy in a pose, for it would only be a pose. O’Keeffe’s very soul is radiating from her hands. It is Stieglitz’s genius to have notice this.

Do you have a library of cloud photographs? Photographers everywhere have “cloud banks.” Stieglitz originated this concept and his collection of clouds, his *Equivalent* series, is still perhaps the final statement on the subject. His exploration of this subject attempts to go beyond a mere variety of images, but speaks to specific feelings and concepts.

A high-quality group of seven of his photographs is available on the Met’s website (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stgp/hd_stgp.htm). Please select and expand these to appreciate the variety of his work. *The Terminal* and *The Steerage* appear here very clearly. Also one of his cloud photographs, two more of Georgia O’Keeffe, both with her wonderfully expressive fingers edging into the frames, and two New York cityscapes.

What is it that makes the New York cityscapes special? Perhaps it’s the geometric compositions. Perhaps it’s the study of light and dark, one at night and one in brilliant sunlight. But wherever you see a cityscape image, I believe you are also seeing Stieglitz’s work coming down to us through the years.

Here are the foundations of modern photography, every image strangely familiar because it is so with us in everything that came after. This can be said of all great photographers (or artists in general), but I believe Stieglitz speaks the loudest amongst photographers.