

#83 June 2023 Cameraderie
Photo-Secession (1902-17)



Design by Edward Steichen

For the next five articles, I am going to take up five organizations (or movements) throughout the 20th century that were major forces in the direction of American photography. There were similar organizations (or movements) in Europe and elsewhere. Some of the organizations (or movements) were international from the start.

This month, I am going to discuss the earliest, the Photo-Secession movement. In the next four months, I will look at Group f/64, The Photo League, Magnum Photos, and Getty Images.

The Photo-Secession organization, or movement, was formed in 1902 by Alfred Stieglitz (#2, Jan. 2013) and others, the first influential group of American photographers that worked to have photography accepted as a fine art. Led—and autocratically controlled—by Stieglitz, the group’s “Fellows” included: John Bullock, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Mary Devens, William Dyer,

Dallett Fuguet, Gertrude Käsebier, Joseph Keiley, William Post, Robert Redfield, Eva Watson-Schütze, Edward Steichen (#9, Sept. 2013), Edmund Stirling, John F. Strauss, Clarence White, and S. L. Willard, as reported in Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work*, no. 3, Supplement, July 1903. (Here is the Wikipedia link to *Camera Work*, an interesting and related read: [Camera Work - Wikipedia](#))

According to the Wikipedia article (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo-Secession>):

The Photo-Secession ... held the then controversial viewpoint that what was significant about a photograph was not what was in front of the camera but the manipulation of the image by the artist/photographer to achieve his or her subjective vision. The movement helped to raise standards and awareness of art photography.

The group is the American counterpart to the Linked Ring, an invitation-only British group which seceded from the Royal Photographic Society.

Proponents of Pictorialism, which was the underlying value of the Photo-Secession, argued that photography needed to emulate the painting and etching of the time. Pictorialists believed that, just as a painting is distinctive because of the artist's manipulation of the materials to achieve an effect, so too should the photographer alter or manipulate the photographic image. Among the methods used were soft focus; special filters and lens coatings; burning, dodging and/or cropping in the darkroom to edit the content of the image; and alternative printing processes such as sepia toning, carbon printing, platinum printing or gum bichromate processing.

The American Photo-Secession was preceded by the 1898 Munich Secession Exhibition.

Here is a link to a brief history of the Photo-Secession movement:

[History of Photography: The Photo-Secession Movement - Photofocus](#)

The Photo-Secession took place in a time of great change in American arts. The great Armory Show (#6, May 2013) of modern art took place in New York City in 1913. This was the show that blasted open modern art in America, with the famous painting by Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and paintings and sculptures by most all the artists that we now regard as "modern." At the same time, Stieglitz opened a counter-exhibition of modern photography in his influential 291 photo gallery (originally called the "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession").

Edward Steichen went on much later to head the Photography Division of the Museum of Modern Art and put on his life's-work show in 1955, *The Family of Man* (#22. Sept. 2017) (#69. Feb. 2022). Steichen had said, "When I first became interested in photography, I thought it was the whole cheese. My idea was to have it recognized as one of the fine arts. Today I don't give a hoot in hell about that. The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself." If this remark of Steichen's sounds like he departed from Stieglitz's mission to promote photography as a fine art, that was probably the case, for we know the two men eventually differed and eventually became personally estranged.

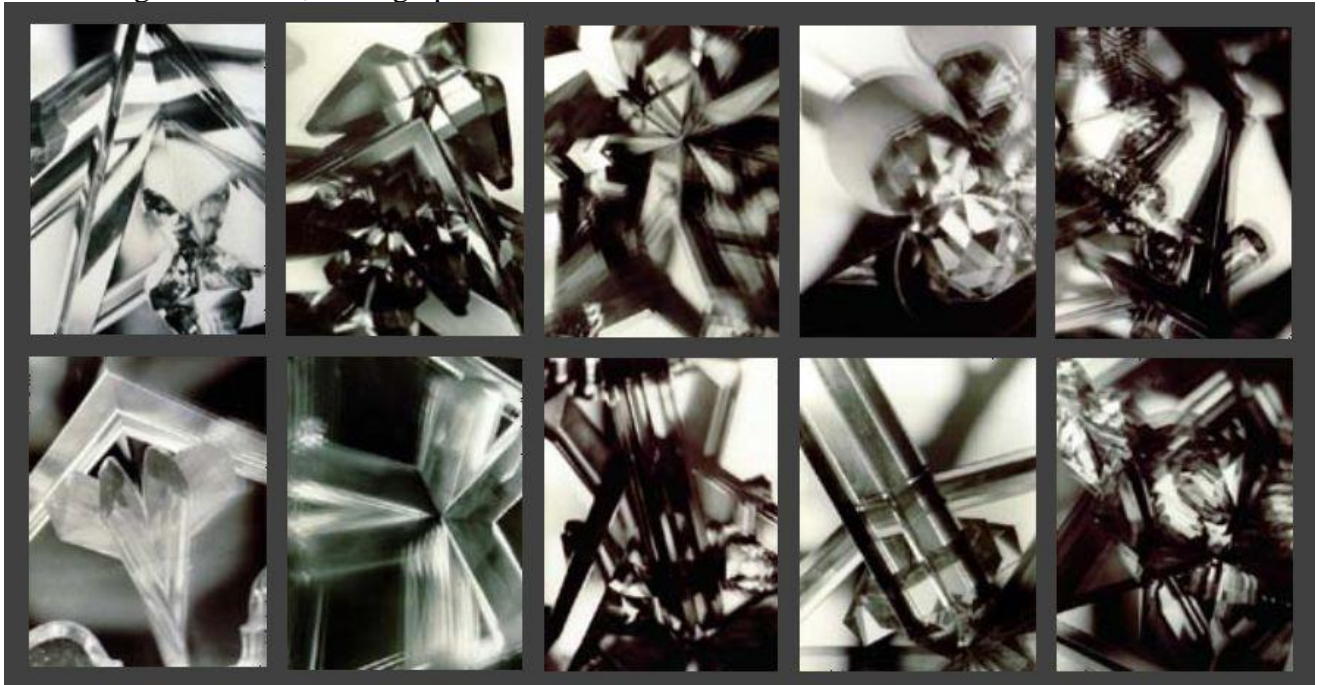
You can look back at my articles on Stieglitz (#2, Jan. 2013) and Steichen (#9, Sept. 2013) to see samples of their work. Here are several other typical images from the Photo-Secessionists, by "Fellows" of the Photo-Secession group. I will eventually write individual articles on some these photographers.

Beach scene, John G. Bullock, late 19th–early 20th century.



This is a radical composition, with no one looking at either each other or the photographer. The boy on the left is mostly out of the frame. But the photographer conveys the experience of being at the beach, where, true to life, everyone concentrates on digging a hole in the sand.

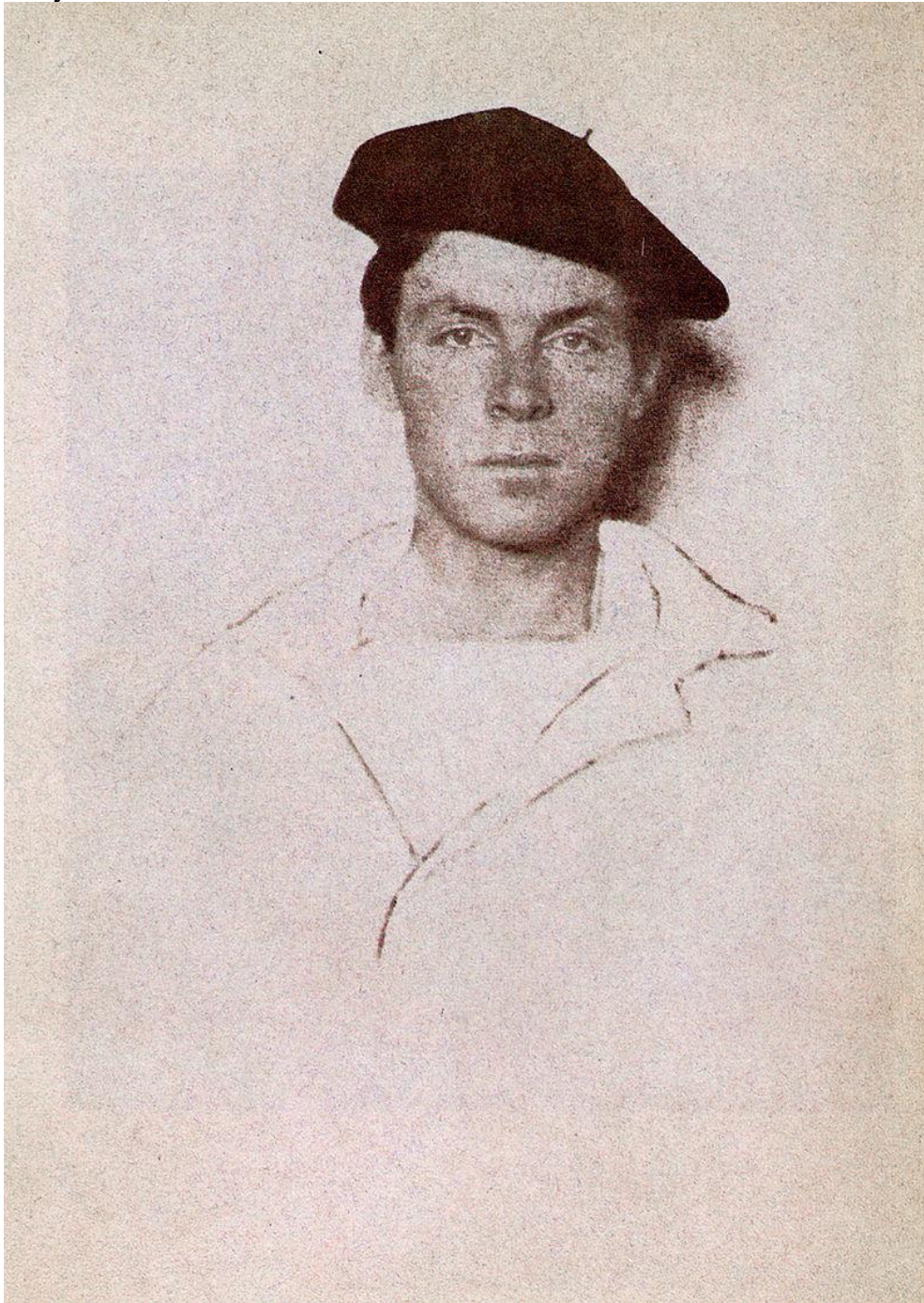
Alvin Langdon Coburn, Vortographs.



Images and text from the Museum of Modern Art Show: *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*.
December 23, 2012–April 15, 2013.

The intricate patterns of light and line in this photograph, and the cascading tiers of crystalline shapes, were generated through the use of a kaleidoscopic contraption invented by the American/British photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, a member of London's Vorticist group. To refute the idea that photography, in its helplessly accurate capture of scenes in the real world, was antithetical to abstraction, Coburn devised for his camera lens an attachment made up of three mirrors, clamped together in a triangle, through which he photographed a variety of surfaces to produce the results in these images. The poet and Vorticist Ezra Pound coined the term "vortographs" to describe Coburn's experiments. Although Pound went on to criticize these images as lesser expressions than Vorticist paintings, Coburn's work would remain influential.

Mary Devens, Charcoal Effect.



From a University of Delaware exhibit of Devens photographs, *Women in Pictorialist Photography*:

Devens was known for her mastery of complex printing techniques. Alfred Stieglitz listed her as one of the ten most prominent Pictorialists in an article published in the *Century Magazine*. Devens also had connections with European Pictorialist groups.

Gertrude Käsebier, 1909.



This is compositionally remarkably like the first image above: one child is almost out of the image, yet the feeling of the situation is wonderfully captured.

Käsebier was one of the pre-eminent woman photographers of her time in the USA, and was known for her images of motherhood, her portraits of Native Americans, and her promotion of photography as a career for women (according to the Wikipedia article—worth checking out).

William Post (life: 1857-1921)



The subject matter here is about mood and artistic expression, right in line with the Photo-Secessionists. Post's images were displayed in the inaugural show of the Photo-Secession that Stieglitz put on in his New York Gallery.

Here is a link to a good biography of Post: http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/William_B_Post/ABCDEF/