

#88 Dec. 2023 Cameraderie
Gertrude Käsebier (1852-1934)



Portrait of the Photographer,
a manipulated self-portrait by Gertrude Käsebier

Gertrude Käsebier “was known for her images of motherhood, her portraits of Native Americans, and her promotion of photography as a career for women.” (from the Wikipedia article introduction)

Here is the Wikipedia article link, telling a very complete story of her life (Please, please read it!), followed by some key quotes from the article:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude_K%C3%A4sebier:

In 1895 ... she had an extensive mastery of photography. Just one year later, she exhibited 150 photographs at the Boston Camera Club, an enormous number for an individual artist at the time. These same photographs were shown in February 1897 at the Pratt Institute. ... The success of these shows led to another at the Photographic Society of Philadelphia in 1897. She also lectured on her work there and encouraged other women to take up photography as a career, saying "I earnestly advise women of artistic tastes to train for the unworked field of modern photography. It seems to be especially adapted to them, and the few who have entered it are meeting a gratifying and profitable success."

In 1898, Käsebier watched Buffalo Bill's Wild West troupe parade past her Fifth Avenue studio in New York City, toward Madison Square Garden. Her memories of affection and respect for the Lakota people inspired her to send a letter to William "Buffalo Bill" Cody requesting permission to photograph the members of the Sioux tribe traveling with the show in her studio. Cody and Käsebier were similar in their abiding respect for Native American culture and maintained friendships with the Sioux. Cody quickly approved Käsebier's request and she began her project on Sunday morning, April 14, 1898. Käsebier's project was purely artistic and her images were not made for commercial purposes. They never were used in Buffalo Bill's Wild West program booklets or promotional posters. Käsebier took classic photographs of the Sioux while they were relaxed. Chief Iron Tail and Chief Flying Hawk were among Käsebier's most challenging and revealing

portraits [see below]. Käsebier's photographs are preserved at the National Museum of American History's Photographic History Collection at the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1900, Käsebier continued to gather accolades and professional praise. In the catalog for the Newark (Ohio) Photography Salon, she was called "the foremost professional photographer in the United States". In recognition of her artistic accomplishments and her stature, later that year, Käsebier was one of the first two women elected to Britain's Linked Ring [the British equivalent of the American Photo-Secession [#83, June 2023]] (the other was British pictorialist Carine Cadby).

In 1902, Stieglitz [#2, Jan. 2013] included Käsebier as a founding member of the Photo-Secession. The following year, Stieglitz published six of her images in the first issue of Camera Work. They were accompanied by highly complementary articles by Charles Caffin and Frances Benjamin Johnston. In 1905 six more of her images were published in Camera Work, and the following year, Stieglitz presented an exhibition of Käsebier photographs (along with those of Clarence H. White) at his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession.

When Käsebier returned to New York an unexpected conflict with Stieglitz developed. Käsebier's strong interest in the commercial side of photography, driven by her need to support her husband and family, was directly at odds with Stieglitz's idealistic and antimaterialistic nature. The more Käsebier enjoyed commercial success, the more Stieglitz felt she was going against what he felt a true artist should emulate. In May 1906, Käsebier joined the Professional Photographers of New York, a newly formed organization that Stieglitz saw as standing for everything he disliked: commercialism and the selling of photographs commercially rather than for love of the art. After this, he began distancing himself from Käsebier. Their relationship never regained its previous status of mutual artistic admiration.

There is so much more to read in this exceptionally good Wikipedia article. Again, please go read it in full.

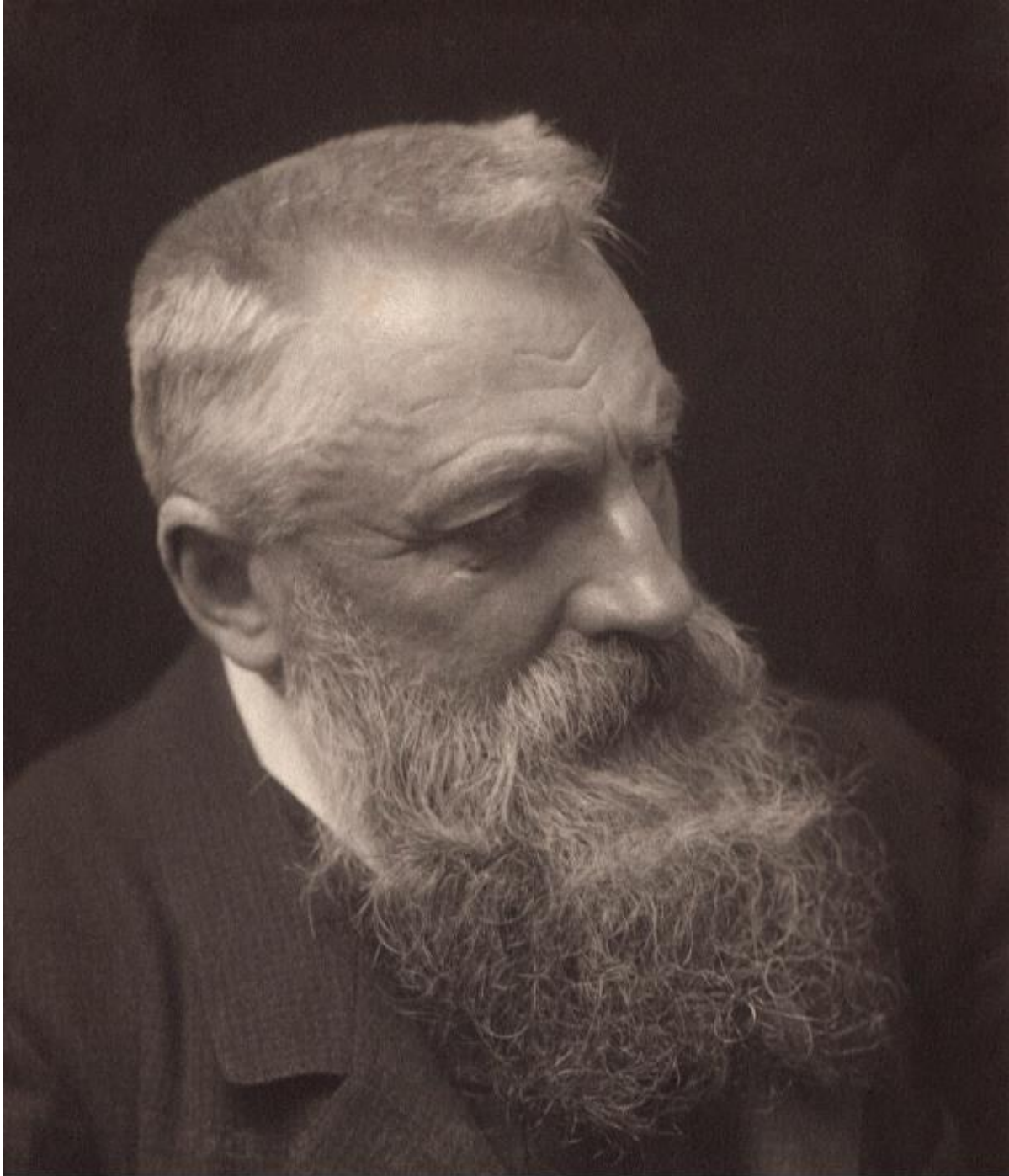
Here is a sample of Käsebier most notable works.

Yoked and Muzzled, Marriage, ca.1915.



Käsebier's famous commentary on her own marriage.

August Rodin, National Portrait Gallery London.



Käsebier did a series of portraits of the famous sculptor. She landed a great opportunity, as Rodin had a reputation for privacy. I chose this image from her series because I thought it was the most sculptural. You can see many more of them by googling “Käsebier portraits of Rodin”.

Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz, 1902.



As noted above, Stieglitz welcomed Käsebier into the Photo-Secession group, but later broke with her because he did not admire her focus on commercial success (to support her family albeit).

The Manger, 1899.



This is among Käsebier's most famous images. It is the one that sold for \$100.00 in 1899, the most ever paid for a photo until that time. This is one way in which we should remember (or rediscover) that Käsebier was one of the most prominent photographers of her time.

Finally, here are some of Käsebier's portraiture works.

Rose O'Neill, ca.1907.



Miss N (Portrait of Evelyn Nesbit), 1903.



These two portraits show, I presume, state-of-the-times portrait techniques. On the left, the scene is carefully composed with props—even a mother-and-child portrait on the wall behind—a common subject of Käsebier's photography work. On the right, the setting is less formal, but no less carefully composed.

Chief Flying Hawk, 1898.



Chief Iron Tail, 1898.



Both of these chiefs were working for Buffalo Bill Cody's travelling Wild West Show. Käsebier had a strong interest in portraying them as individuals, not types. With great difficulty, she persuaded them to pose without full regalia.