

## #9 September 2013 *Cameraderie* Edward Steichen (1879-1973)

Let's recall the incredible contributions that Alfred Stieglitz (January 2013 *Cameraderie*) made to photography and keep separate in our minds the similar-sounding name of Edward Steichen, also one of the giants of early and mid-twentieth-century photography. I feel compelled to reproduce pretty much the entire Wikipedia article's ([Wikipedia Edward Steichen](#)) summary paragraph on Steichen because of his incredible range of accomplishments, none of which should escape notice:

“Steichen was an American photographer, painter, and art gallery and museum curator. He was the most frequently featured photographer in Alfred Stieglitz' groundbreaking magazine *Camera Work* during its run from 1903 to 1917. Steichen also contributed the logo design and a custom typeface to the magazine. In partnership with Stieglitz, Steichen opened the "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession", which was eventually known as 291, after its address. This gallery presented among the first American exhibitions of (among others) Henri Matisse, Auguste Rodin, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and Constantin Brâncuși. Steichen's photos of gowns designed by *couturier* Paul Poiret in the magazine *Art et Décoration* in 1911 are regarded as the first modern fashion photographs ever published. Serving in the US Army in World War I (and the US Navy in the Second World War), he commanded significant units contributing to military photography. He was a photographer for the Condé Nast magazines *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* from 1923–1938, and concurrently worked for many advertising agencies including J. Walter Thompson. During these years Steichen was regarded as the best known and highest paid photographer in the world. Steichen directed the war documentary *The Fighting Lady*, which won the 1945 Academy Award for Best Documentary. After World War II he was Director of the Department of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art until 1962. While at MoMA, in 1955 he curated and assembled the exhibit *The Family of Man*. The exhibit eventually traveled to sixty-nine countries, was seen by nine million people, and sold two and a half million copies of a companion book.”

So, he merely helped introduce America to modern art, pioneered fashion photography, worked for the finest magazines and agencies, was the highest paid photographer of his time, was the lead military officer for photography in his service branches in two World Wars, won an academy award in documentary film, was the Director of MoMA's photography department, and curated *The Family of Man* exhibit!!!

If you follow this link to [The Family of Man](#) in Wikipedia, you will find a familiar image, *Migrant Mother*, by Dorothea Lange (March 2013 *Cameraderie*). Here is another link to many of the images that were in the exhibition, but I think some are missing and there is some pollution of random images: [Family of Man Images](#).

Steichen was at first very much in support of Stieglitz's project to promote photography as an art form as important as painting and sculpture. (Steichen, like Stieglitz, also worked extensively to promote modern art in America.) The following quote illuminates Steichen's view of this, and his progress a step beyond that:

“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.

In this series of articles, I frequently quote photographers who explain that photography opens their eyes to better seeing. In the next quote, Steichen again goes a step beyond:

“Once you really commence to see things, then you really commence to feel things.”

Here is a link to Steichen's 1908 *Balzac Toward the Light, Midnight* ([Balzac Plaster Photo](#)), in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. This image of Auguste Rodin's plaster of his not-yet-famous sculpture *Balzac* was an extended time exposure, enhancing the monumentality of the statue's plaster version. The statue was at the time a failure and was never cast in bronze during Rodin's lifetime. Steichen and Rodin were good friends, and Rodin commented to Steichen “You will make the world understand my Balzac with your pictures.” For more on this period of Steichen's work, see this excellent article on the Met's web site: [Steichen Article at Met](#). Also, please have a look at *Balzac* at the Hirshhorn Museum outdoor sculpture garden on the Mall in downtown Washington, and thank Edward Steichen for helping a little to make it come into being as a bronze.

Next, here are links to two of Steichen's photographs of the dancers, Isadora Duncan and her daughter, Thérèse Duncan, at the Parthenon and Acropolis in Athens in 1921: [Isadora Duncan in the Parthenon](#), and [Wind Fire](#).

In *Isadora Duncan in the Parthenon, Athens*, the dancer is photographed almost in miniature within a vast arcade of columns. In *Wind Fire*, Thérèse Duncan is photographed close-up, with the wind whipping her veils, making them resemble fire in the slow shutter setting—obviously a deliberate, and most effective, technique, in which motion is stopped in some parts of the image, but not in other parts. Look at these two daring and innovative photographs, at Steichen's use of full black surrounding Isadora Duncan, a tiny but riveting focal point at the end of the columned arcade, and his harnessing of the exposure time to obtain a breathtaking effect for Thérèse Duncan's pose.

Here is a link to The National Portrait Gallery's site for their 2008 exhibition of a selection of Steichen's portraits: [National Portrait Gallery Steichen](#). Delve into the site and look at the ten or so portraits. I particularly like the one on the first page of the site, of Fred Astaire. It is meticulously composed and artificially lighted to construct the finished image. A spotlight casts a perfect shadow of Astaire on the backdrop, delineating every detail, including his cigarette holder and top hat. Notice that trademark top hats are scattered everywhere in the portrait. This considerable effort to set the scene for a dynamic portrait gives this 1927 image a very modern look. Steichen was at the cutting edge of fine art portraiture. Here also is a link to a series of

takes of this same portrait, and you can see why the above one was selected for the Portrait Gallery show: [Fred Astaire by Steichen](#).

Finally, for more images, here is a link to an entire page of Steichen's portraits, including Auguste Rodin, Alfred Steiglitz, and the definitive image of Greta Garbo: [More Steichen Portraits](#).

Correction:

In Steve Levitas's article in *Cameraderie* on Edward Steichen, a couple of links were not active. Here is the affected paragraph with the links restored, and copies of the images themselves:

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