

#16 December 2014 *Cameraderie* Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976)

I am probably leaving something out, but here is a chronological list of Cunningham's major projects, achievements, and activities, as noted in the Wikipedia article on her (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imogen_Cunningham):

- Portraiture
- Pictorial Photography
- Botanical Photography, especially flowers
- Industrial Photography
- Human form, especially hands
- *Vanity Fair* employment, photographing stars without makeup
- Co-founder of Group f/64 (future article), a Western US modernist group of photographers, with Ansel Adams (March 2014), John Paul Edwards, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke, and Edward Weston (Oct. 2012)
- Street Photography
- Art Photography Department Faculty at the California School of Fine Arts (invited by Ansel Adams (March 2014), and joined by Minor White (future article) and Dorothea Lange (March 2013))
- Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- Continued to shoot until shortly before her death at age 93

Imogen Cunningham's descendants own and manage her photographic estate. Please have a look at the extensive display of Cunningham's works at the official website of the Imogen Cunningham Trust: <http://www.imogencunningham.com/>. You will see examples of all the genres of photography from the list above. The automatic slide show on the home page alone will give you a taste of Cunningham's wide-ranging finest works. It includes her renowned *Two Callas*.

What strikes me most about Cunningham's entire body of work, through all her disparate projects, is *style*. It's hard to pin that term down, but Cunningham has got it, and it glows in all her work.

For this article, I contacted Meg Partridge, granddaughter of Imogen Cunningham, and Director of the Imogen Cunningham Trust. As ours is a non-commercial club, Meg very kindly agreed for me to reproduce a couple of her grandmother's images without charge.

First, let's look at *Coffee Pot*, 1938. I chose this image from hundreds on the Trust's website simply because I like this sort of subject matter. Like Edward Weston's famous *Green Pepper* (Oct. 2012), *Coffee Pot* also has an everyday subject matter and a common background (a small Chinese table) running almost to black. The coffee pot tones run almost to pure white, showing a relationship to Ansel Adams's tonal range. What makes this a brilliant photographic study? Aside from the tonal range, there are the diagonal lines of the table's floating panel, the inversion of one part of the coffee pot, the "S" curve of the handle contrasting with all the other elliptical shapes, the reflections in the polished wood of the tabletop, the stamped manufacturer's mark on

the pot bottom, the “kissing” of the two pot halves. But above, all, there is holding power—how long do you want to keep looking at this? A long time. Its simultaneous tranquility and compositional energy holds and holds and holds. It’s just a masterpiece.

Meg Partridge reviewed this article in draft. Here is what she said about *Coffee Pot* in an e-mail to me:

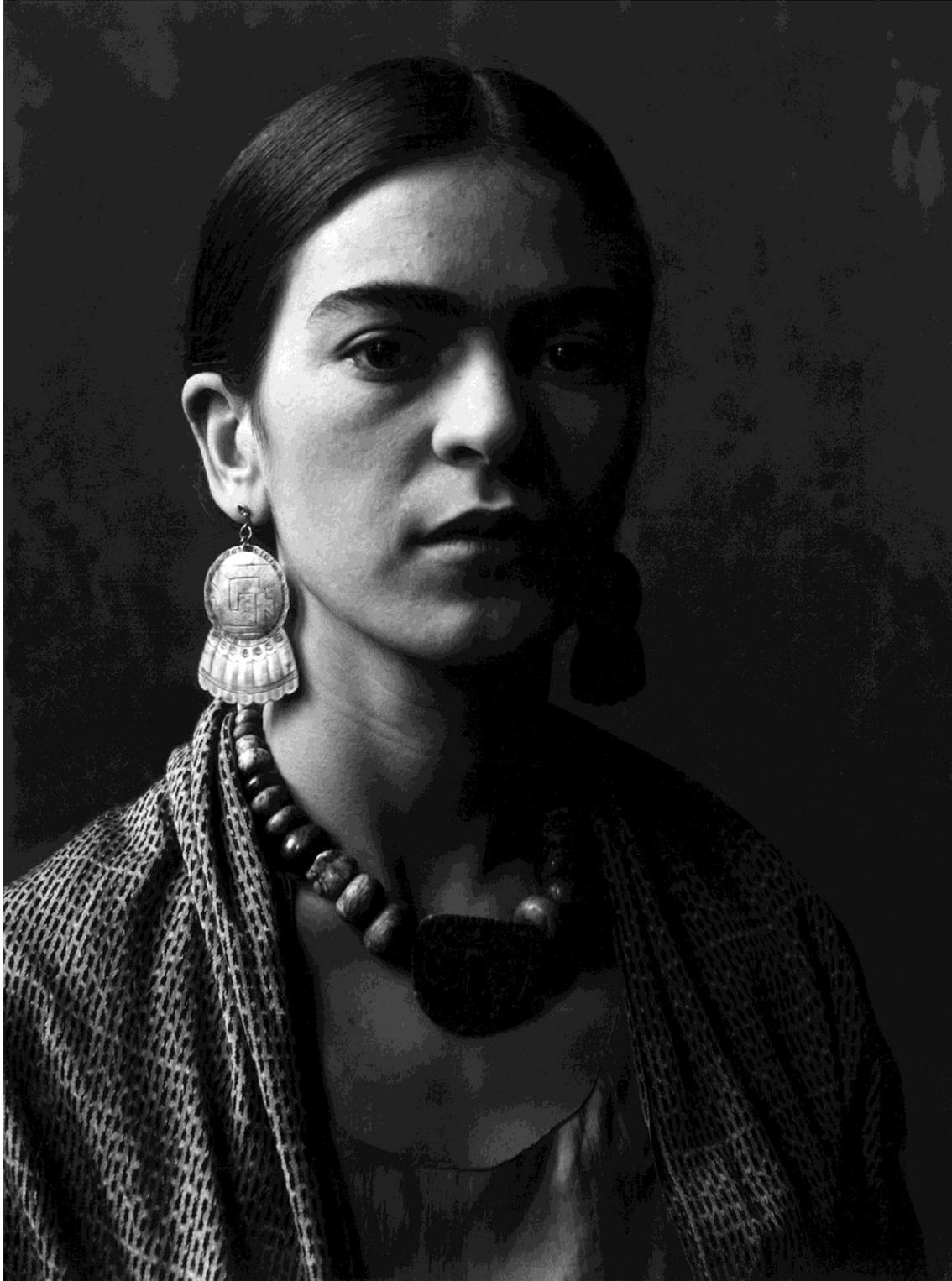
“I remember that coffee pot well -- and since I worked for her around 1970 (spotting prints as a teenager) Imogen obviously had this coffee pot around a while. It surely captured her eye, and with her very economical ways, she used it for decades!”



Coffee Pot, 1938. © 2014 Imogen Cunningham Trust. Used with permission.

Next, let’s look at one of Cunningham’s portraits. This is the Mexican painter, Frieda Kahlo, a familiar face to everyone. Again, I chose this image because I like this style of portraiture. All the light is coming from a single diffuse source to the right of Kahlo. I suspect it is a large window about 10-15 feet away. There are no additional lights, no secondary light on the other side, no backlight, no highlighting of the hair. Kahlo’s left side is almost in darkness. You can just barely make out her features on that side—but there is that tiny spot of light in her eye, and all your attention goes there—it’s much more interesting than the entirely black right eye. There is the slightest trace of a Rembrandt Triangle of light under her left eye. There are no props as

such—Kahlo wears all her own props on her body with her signature flamboyantly artistic jewelry and clothing.



Frida Kahlo, Painter, 1931. © 2014 Imogen Cunningham Trust. Used with permission.

Imogen Cunningham. Now *that* is the person I would have liked to have studied under for a degree in Fine Arts.