Alfred Stieglitz: The Early Years, 1883-1907

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This work is a reconstruction of the thesis done for my Master of Arts in the American Studies Department, University of Texas at Austin in 1988 under the direction of Robert Crunden. The process may have introduced errors and ommissions that I have not caught.

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INTRODUCTION

> When finally I am to be judged, I think I'll have to be judged by my own photographic work.
>
> --Alfred Stieglitz[1]

The popular image of Alfred Stieglitz is as a modernist, photographic Minerva springing forth full-formed from the Zeus of nineteenth-century pictorialism.[2] In Henri Cartier-Bresson's words, "Stieglitz was, of course, the father of us all. . . ."[3] At the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession at 291 and later at his other galleries, Stieglitz introduced fresh, radical, European artists such as Matisse, Cezanne, and Picasso, and he fostered an American avant-garde in artists such as Strand, Marin, Dove, and O'Keeffe.

Only in the middle of the first decade of the 1900s did Stieglitz achieve his mature style for which he is best known. Contrary to the popular image, Stieglitz' earliest photographs and writings suggest that he was not a revolutionary voice of modern photography crying in a wilderness of pictorialism. Instead, Stieglitz' career was a progression beginning with an amateur period derivative of the English pictorialists Henry Peach Robinson and Oscar Gustave Rejlander spanning from 1883 to the early 1890s. In the mid-1890s Stieglitz entered roughly a decade of experimentation, when he tried different styles and different forms of visual syntax while developing for the first time his own artistic sensibility. The evolution of his mature style, nominally marked from *The Steerage*, took some twenty-five years.

Without careful attention to the entire corpus of his work, Stieglitz' oeuvre takes on a false continuity and suggests that his was style mature and developed from the beginning. Stieglitz and many of his contemporaries' compounded such a false interpretation of his early work in statements made well after he attained his mature style. Those statements reflect a revisionist rather than contemporaneous, aesthetic stance. Stieglitz' early photographs exhibit a clear aesthetic development often at variance with that later interpretation.

By building up an observed aesthetic from the images and from statements made in roughly the same period, a very different understanding of the photographer emerges: photographs interpreted as foreshadowing a mature style often resist such analysis when placed in the context of other work made at the same time; his style is not revolutionary, but evolutionary; Stieglitz' role as *primus mobile* fades as those who surrounded him frequently emerge as leaders, not followers. The result is a fuller understanding of a complex figure. Stieglitz is the photographer, par excellence, whose life and work traces the changes from nineteenth- to twentieth-century cultural sensibilities.

Stieglitz noted in 1921, "Many of my prints exist in one example only. Negatives of the early work have nearly all been lost or destroyed. There are but few of my early prints in existence."[4] The foundation of images on which this thesis is based includes reproductions from nineteenth-century journals, exhibition catalogs, visual anthologies, auction catalogs, and original prints in the key set of Stieglitz photographs at the National Gallery of Art and at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House. Certainly, the photographs no longer extant and the early work not identified would add to the understanding of Stieglitz' early work. In spite of the lacunae, the approximately 400 surviving distinct images and their variants which he made before 1900 suggest an understanding very different from the traditional interpretation of Stieglitz' career.

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[1] Alfred Stieglitz to Thomas Hart Benton, 2 January 1935. Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983), p. 13.

[2] The term pictorialism became meaningless in the nineteenth century as a result of its universal use to describe all aspects of "fine art" photography. Unfortunately, language has not reflected the changes in how fine art photography was understood. For the context of this paper, pictorialism will refer to the photographic aesthetic of H. P. Robinson, author of *Pictorial Effect in Photography* (New York: Scovill and Adams, 1897). I have used the term naturalism to refer to the more general ideas and followers of P. H. Emerson.

[3] Dorothy Norman, "Stieglitz and Cartier-Bresson, *Saturday Review*, 45:38 (22 September 1962); pp. 52-56.

[4] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Return of Alfred Stieglitz," *Afterimage*, Summer 1984, p. 22.

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STIEGLITZ AND THE HISTORIANS

> Many of the stories told by Stieglitz in later life must be dealt with very carefully, especially with regard to factual accuracy and credibility. Stieglitz used story-telling as a means of making a dramatic point in conversation rather than of relating a strictly autobiographical account of his life.[5]
>
> — Richard John Kent, Jr.

In spite of all that has been written about Stieglitz, he remains something of an enigma: a larger-than-life person whose features myth has transformed into rarefied caricature. His forceful personality polarized most people; those around him generally either loved or hated him with a passion that exaggerated their understanding of him. The different viewpoints of defenders and detractors prevent a simple understanding of the man. Stieglitz certainly contributed to the confusion about his own life. Much of the story of Stieglitz' life is less factual account than parable. Sue Davidson Lowe notes, "It was Stieglitz's talent . . . to create a single public image, oversimplified and overpure."[6]

Historians of photography and American culture have taken Stieglitz as their subject, and their treatments of the man deserve separate study. Few works on Stieglitz are balanced, the authors falling into one of a few standard biases. Stieglitz continues to polarize people, dividing historians like those he knew. Well before his death Stieglitz had already become something of a demi-god, and his followers were unabashed in writing hagiographic accounts of his life. As that generation passed, many critics began to take a less flattering look at the man, portraying him as tyrannical and dogmatic. Some authors have followed a safe route by providing their readers little more than a biography and leaving aesthetic issues aside.

The most important accounts of Stieglitz' life come from those who formed a coterie around him in his later life: Dorothy Norman, Herbert J. Seligmann, Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, and other poets, writers, critics, and artists. In the words of William Innes Homer, Stieglitz' "passionate devotion to freedom and vitality of expression in contemporary art, to distinctly American values, and to fine craftsmanship" inspired these individuals.[7] These writers tend to be responsible for the popular image of Stieglitz as an artistic genius of complete originality. With the exception of Anderson and possibly Frank, the work of most of these writers has failed the test of time, and they receive only minor note for their contribution to American letters. Many of the artists in this group, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, and Arthur Dove, are recognized for their importance in the plastic arts.

The pre-eminent example of hagiography is a collaborative effort of this group, *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait.*[8] Opening with an epigraph of two Biblical quotes, the spiritual tone of the writings is unmistakable and pervasive. Waldo Frank describes the book as a portrait seen through a glass darkly; the essential Stieglitz defies abstraction and the essays can only point to his essential being

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[5] *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture* (Dissertation: John Hopkins University, 1974), p. 8.

[6] *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), p. xviii.

[7] *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde* (Boston: Little, Brown for the New York Graphic Society, 1979), p. 261.

[8] Waldo Frank, et al., (New York: Literary Guild, 1934).

by describing its manifestation.[9] "Since the Stieglitzian exposition of the person is simply and wholly his life, there is no direct way to learn it save to experience his life by watching him live and living with him; and there is no direct way to describe it except by describing his life. This description, manifold yet single, is the body of our book."

Paul Rosenfeld's biographical sketch in the work, "The Boy in the Darkroom,"[10] fits perfectly into the scriptural genre of apocalyptic literature both Old and New Testament writers employed. The piece presents a stylized history which is not factually accurate, but creates an artificial account of events probably elaborated by Rosenfeld from Stieglitz' recollections. The sketch portrays the master as a child who preferred straight, unmanipulated imagery. Rosenfeld tells his tale in such a manner as to suggest that long ago prophecy foretold the present struggles against pictorialism and artless photography, and he then promises a glorious future when art in the form of straight photography will reign. Rosenfeld also authored *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns,*[11] a book of criticism of the arts; the chapter on Stieglitz is also written in the style of hagiography.

Herbert J. Seligmann's contribution to the edition, "291: Vision through Photography," portrays Stieglitz as the man with transcendent vision who can see life truthfully.[12] A similar work published much later, although written at roughly the same time, is Seligmann's *Alfred Stieglitz Talking*.[13] The book is the result of Seligmann literally followed Stieglitz around, recording his account of the gospel.

The beloved disciple was, no doubt, Dorothy Norman. A poet, photographer, and patron of the arts, Norman and Stieglitz worked together intimately as teacher and student, and as photographer and model. Her contribution to the collective portrait, "An American Place," portrays Stieglitz and the art he fostered there in mystical terms of the spirit leaving the corrupt flesh behind.[14] In her *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer*, for years the standard biography, Norman describes Stieglitz' effect on her as a healing of the spiritually blind.[15]

Norman authored numerous other articles and monographs on Stieglitz, including "Photography's Patron Saint."[16] All of Norman's writings lack any sense of distance from her subject, and her statements reflect too much of Stieglitz' own self-interpretation to be of any use in coming to know the photographer apart from his public image.[17]

The use of religious imagery in so much of the literature about Stieglitz reveals much about the personality of the man and how he related to those around him. He spoke in parables, preferring to talk around a subject than address it concretely. His manner reflected his personal belief that one can never

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[9] Frank, et al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 221.

[10] Ibid., p. 59ff.

[11] (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924).

[12] Frank, et al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 105. "In him it became the act of vision, of life itself, by which all things, all relationships might be focused at a timeless moment in their flux, held as the artist holds his picture: a vision of the world serving as a challenge, a guide, a corrective, and an incentive."

[13] *Alfred Stieglitz Talking: Notes On Some of His Conversations, 1925-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1966).

[14] Frank, et al., *American and Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 132. "Graven images are graven images when they are pictures and do not carry you beyond to that throbbing essence which is the original--which is God. The medium must disappear, you yourself must disappear."

[15] Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Random House, 1973). "It was his presence. His magnetism. The way he saw it, said it, spoke his life out loud. Confronting the world without masks. Removing barriers. Drawing forth buried truths. But what Alfred Stieglitz said to me so moved me, I wrote it down before I knew his name or saw his photographs."

[16] *New York Post*, 9 February 1941; p. 41. Cited in Weston Naef, *The Collection of Alfred Stieglitz*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), p. 501.

[17] Cf. Richard Nevin Masteller, *Romanticism in a Modern Mode: The Photography of Alfred Stieglitz* (Dissertation: University of Minnesota, 1978), p. 9. "Thus, Dorothy Norman, on Stieglitz's cue . . . ."

truly communicate with another; rather each individual must experience life for himself, and at most he could point.

This cloak of divinity has distorted any real understanding of his work as a very human artist who developed. Only in the past few years has this image of Stieglitz begun to fall apart. A large factor in the reassessment of Stieglitz is that many of the artists Stieglitz fostered and others he helped into positions of influence in the photographic and art world, people who owed him much and thought favorably of him, have been largely replaced by a younger generation. Estelle Jussim's biography of F. Holland Day,[18] one of Stieglitz' most important early rivals, is frank in breaking the traditional, deific understanding of Stieglitz. Jussim presents Stieglitz as a political machinator, selfish, and manipulative. Abigail Solomon-Godeau's is even more vitriolic in its attack on Stieglitz, calling him a "sacred monster."[19]

The real Stieglitz lies somewhere in between. As recently as 1974 Gene Thornton called for an "impious critical biography" of the "sacred cow of American art and photography."[20] Since then Sue Davidson Lowe has published her account of her famous grand-uncle, *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography*. Even assuming a certain degree of familial deference Lowe cannot be placed among the hagiographers, and only her book gives a thorough account of Stieglitz' family life. While avoiding psychobiography, Lowe does provide contextual information that is sometimes teleological.

James Strother Terry's unpublished dissertation, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Photographic Antecedents of Modernism*,[21] also attempts to present a thorough biographical background of Stieglitz. While lacking the family anecdotes, Terry has located accounts by colleagues and protégés from Stieglitz' later life of a number of incidents at variance with the canonical biography.

Richard John Kent, Jr.'s *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, also an unpublished dissertation, looks at Stieglitz in terms of Eriksonian psychobiography. A thorough account of the events of the photographer's life, the Kent seeks explanation for many of Stieglitz' actions in non-aesthetic motivations.

In 1983 the National Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, mounted an exhibition of Stieglitz' photographs. The stated purpose of the exhibition was "to demystify Stieglitz: to strip away the label of prophet so frequently and uncritically applied to him. . . ."[22] The published catalog reproduces the images in the exhibition in addition to an introduction by the curator and a selection of writings by Stieglitz. The photographs in the show follow the canon of masterpieces, as the writings follow a traditional interpretation of his art.

Two final works on Stieglitz deserve mention, William Innes Homer's *Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession*[23] and *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*. Taken together, the books trace Stieglitz' connection to the aesthetic development of American photography and art from his student days to his death. Both books pay some attention to Stieglitz as a photographer. The real substance of the books, especially the work on the avant-garde, consists of an analysis of Stieglitz as a taste-maker and mentor. Homer is noteworthy for not portraying Stieglitz as a genius of complete originality; the analyses of the influences on Stieglitz include a recognition of the importance of H. P. Robinson, an English amateur photographer generally held up as the villainous straw man of art photography by most hagiographic works. Homer also notes the role that photographer and painter Edward Steichen and critics Joseph T. Keiley, Charles Caffin, and Sadakichi Hartmann played in forming Stieglitz' aesthetic.

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[18] *Slave to Beauty: The Eccentric Life and Controversial Career of F. Holland Day, Photographer, Publisher, Aesthete* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981).

[19] Solomon-Godeau, "The Return of Alfred Stieglitz," p. 22.

[20] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. vii.

[21] (Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1980).

[22] Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*, p. 9.

[23] (Boston: Little, Brown for the New York Graphic Society, 1979).

To attempt to distill a picture of Stieglitz out of these many recollections and interpretations of the man would only add one more version for consideration. Yet, certain traits of the mature artist and mentor emerge--traits which might very well describe his mature photographs as well. Stieglitz was a man interested in the ideal of truth; out of that quest for truth came his belief in straight photography. In his mature photographic style and in the artists that he fostered, Stieglitz no longer sought the idealized world of nineteenth-century art, but confronted the reality of the modern world itself. Leaving behind the continental sophistication of his youth, Stieglitz sought an art that portrayed an American spirit; rustic landscapes, pastorals, and genre scenes of his youth gave way to documents of modern, urban life. Stieglitz was a man of powerful individualism and strong will, much as New York City was hard-edged and often harsh; even the contrast in the cloud photographs suggest a sense of power and forcefulness. Stieglitz had abandoned the security of nineteenth-century piety for the ambiguity of the modern era, yet he had not abandoned spirituality; beyond the clear vision of the façade of the buildings and skies was a spirit of transcendence and emotion more expressive of the romantic than twentieth-century cynicism.

Although Stieglitz' mature photography is straight, unmanipulated imagery, but it is not documentary. The photograph for Stieglitz was an expressive document[24] and not above allegorical allusion. An obvious, unsubtle example is the picture detailing a castrated draft horse, *Spiritual America*. Sarah Greenough presents an extensive discussion of Stieglitz' use of apples as symbolic forms in photographs of Waldo Frank, Georgia O'Keeffe, and as still lifes.[25] Stieglitz' photographs were intended to communicate on a much deeper level. "That is it. You've captured life," Hart Crane was reported to have said on seeing Stieglitz' photograph *Apples and Gable*. Stieglitz replied that Crane was the first person to understand the meaning of the photographs.[26]

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[24] Cf. Van Deren Coke and Diana C. Du Pont, *Photography: A Facet of Modernism* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1986), p. 10ff.

[25] Sarah Greenough, "From the American Earth: Alfred Stieglitz' Photographs of Apples," *Art Journal* 41:1 (Spring 1981), pp. 46-54.

[26] Ibid.

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THE AMATEUR PERIOD

> Stieglitz' photography has always been "straight." . . . And in the making of none of the prints which he has exhibited has the human interfered; none are gummed, fuzzied, or diffuse.
>
> — Paul Rosenfeld[27]

Rosenfeld expresses the commonly held belief about Stieglitz' photography, standard in the hagiographical accounts. That belief is false. Stieglitz' early photographs, which were exhibited, published, and won awards, are typical of the period. Far from a modern understanding of straight photography as an unmanipulated document, Stieglitz' prints were often the very things Rosenfeld says they were not.

Biographies and visual anthologies include little of Stieglitz' surviving early work. A few early images, such as *Venetian Gamin*, *The Terminal*, or *Winter on Fifth Avenue* are reproduced frequently as examples of a modernist style that developed consistently from the beginning. For the key set of Stieglitz images at the National Gallery of Art Georgia O'Keeffe selected only images that suggest straight photography and his modernist, mature style, even though they show stylistic influences of the period. O'Keeffe did not include the early false starts, experiments, and errors Stieglitz made that might compromise an understanding of later style.

Those images which are not a part of the canon suggest a different understanding of Stieglitz' aesthetic development. His earliest photographs suggest that he was a part of the amateur photographic movement and heavily influenced by their style--a style that continued to influence even his most mature work fifty years later.

The amateur photographic movement was made up of individuals who, in the root meaning of the word, loved their activities and who did not deserve the pejorative connotation of dabbler or incompetent. The earliest amateurs, as exemplified by the Photographic Exchange Club, tended to be wealthy, educated, and cultured members of the leisure class. Their photographs reflected their elite cultural sensibility through the use of established pictorial traditions derived from other media and the depiction of conservative values. Later amateurs, excluding the mere snapshooters, participated in clubs, exhibited their photographs, and read photographic journals. By the 1880s amateur photography was no longer the hobby of the wealthy and had become a social activity of the middle class like bicycling and camping.

Stieglitz was a part of the amateur movement. In January of 1883 Stieglitz bought his first camera. Lowe notes that it was a whole-plate, shutterless, view camera using the wet-collodion process. Within a year Stieglitz was using gelatin dry plates.[28]

Stieglitz was unhappy during this time in his life. His family had moved to Europe eighteen months earlier so that the children could receive a continental education. Stieglitz commented frequently that he disliked Germany. Photography as a hobby may have provided him with an activity which would distract him from his melancholy.

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[27] *Port of New York*, pp. 249-250.

[28] Lowe, *Stieglitz*, p. 441. Lowe comments, "When dry plates appeared on the market that year [1884], he immediately bought a more modern camera that could utilize them" (p. 81). However, this conflicts with Crawford's date of 1873 for the introduction of the dry plate. William Crawford, *Keepers of Light* (New York: Morgan and Morgan, 1979), p. 63.

Shortly after his enrollment at the Polytechnikum in Berlin, Stieglitz made contact with the noted Professor Hermann Wilhelm Vogel. Vogel would have a profound influence on Stieglitz. Through Vogel's tutelage, Stieglitz became a technical master of the medium. Stieglitz' knowledge of the chemistry of photography would set him apart from the common photographer; because he knew more than the application of formula and understood the chemical theory of photography, he could manipulate the process to obtain photographs which were technically superior to other amateurs'. Stieglitz would remain an acknowledged master of technique throughout his life as a result of Vogel's training.

Vogel was an advocate of photography, acting as director of the 1865 Photographic Exhibition in Berlin and the Berlin Jubilee Exhibition in 1889.[29] Vogel's aesthetics were not particularly original, however. In his *Handbook of the Practice and Art of Photography*, Vogel relies largely on the theories of Englishman H. P. Robinson. Robinson's pictorial aesthetic was, in turn, based on John Burnet's *Treatise on Painting*.

Graham Ovendon and Michael Bartram have associated Robinson's photography with the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.[30] Ovendon notes that "certain artists and photographers working during the mid-Victorian period are clearly linked by shared assumptions, attitudes, and sentiments typical of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood."[31] The Pre-Raphaelite sensibility can be roughly summarized as expressive of a nostalgia for the lost world that existed before the Industrial Revolution, a romantic love of nature, sentimentality, and the picturesque. Much of their work, especially that of William Holman Hunt, moralizes the importance of social propriety and piety. The Pre-Raphaelites believed in absolute standards in art as defined by Ruskin, "laws of truth and right . . . just as fixed as those of harmony in music, or of affinity in chemistry."[32]

Vogel, recounting Robinson's aesthetic, stated that a picture should be simple and not contain needless accessories which detract from the central subject.[33] Photographs should have an "easy and natural symmetry." They should not be flat, but give a sense of three-dimensionality through correct use of perspective and the modeling of light.[34] The total effect of the print should be to elicit in the viewer a sense of a scientific truthfulness to nature. This was Ruskin's basis for his condemnation of French Impressionism, "because it violated one of the prime laws of art--namely, that objects must be painted with the clarity and detail that can be seen from the point of observation."[35]

A second, major part of Robinson's belief was that "the purpose of the artist [is] to represent agreeable truth, or, at least, truths which do not irritate the eye."[36] Robinson felt that the content of an image was equally important to the presentation. The sense of truth to nature was not literal transcription, but artistic interpretation that adapted an unattractive reality to a picturesque rendition. Robinson's and Vogel's aesthetic was very far from straight or unmanipulated imagery. Photographing a contrived tableau or assembling a composite image from several negatives was quite permissible, provided it looked natural and met the requirements of being picturesque.

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[29] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 47.

[30] Graham Ovenden, *Pre-Raphaelite Photography* (London: Academy Editions and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972, 1984). Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Images of Victorian Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown for the New York Graphic Society, 1985).

[31] Ovenden, *Pre-Raphaelite Photography*, p. 5.

[32] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 149.

[33] Hermann Wilhelm Vogel, *The Chemistry of Light and Photography* (New York: D. Appleton, 1875), p. 150.

[34] Hermann Wilhelm Vogel, *Handbook of the Practice and Art of Photography* (Philadelphia: Benerman and Wilson, 1871), pp. 256, 239.

[35] Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 149.

[36] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 80.

To a large extent the acceptability of contrived and composite imagery was a recognition of the limitations of the medium. Neither the negative materials nor lenses were fast enough to capture a scene instantaneously except in full sunlight. Studio portraiture still required the use of head-braces. Contriving a tableau should not be understood as untruthful but an attempt to recreate a scene from life by overcoming the technical limitations of the medium. Most attempts were noble failures as the camera was so accurate in the recording of detail that some imperfection of prop or pose betrayed the contrivance. The technique of combination printing was also used to over come the limitations of the medium. The processes reached their acme with The Two Ways of Life by O. G. Rejlander. Combination printing suffered the same limitations and successes as contrived imagery. Occasional successes demonstrate the potential quality of the processes, however. Robinson's Dawn and Sunset and Der Geburtstag by Atlier von Gottheil and Sohn in Königsberg[37] are excellent examples.

In spite of these discussions of the aesthetics of the medium, photography was by no means accepted as a fine art at the time. As a craft photography could be pleasing, but it was generally considered utilitarian and incapable of expressing sublime beauty. The amateur movement in England had begun to fight for recognition of photography as a fine art on par with painting. A similar movement existed in Germany, which paralleled closely the development of the English amateur movement.[38] Although Helmut Gernsheim discounts the quality of German photography made before the Bauhaus,[39] Vogel felt that while photography in the New World was technically superior to that in Germany, photography in the Old World was superior in art and culture.[40] Several examples will point to the quality of work done in Germany. Die Einsteighalle des Münchener Ostbahnhof,[41] a salted paper print made by Georg B”ttger in 1858, contains all the elements of a beautiful print that Vogel argued for: a sense of depth, a central subject, and a sense of atmosphere. "Hammer-Fritz", der erste bei Krupp eingef rhte Dampfstiehlhammer,[42] a paper print made by an anonymous photographer after 1861, shows a fascination with detail and the mechanization of the machine age. The image is similar to many of P. H. Delamotte's photographs of the Crystal Palace made a few years earlier. Finally, all of the reproductions in Janos Frecot and Helmut Geisert's Berlin, Frühe Photographien Berlin 1857-1913[43] show a fascination with the urban environment, many reminiscent of Thomas Annan's photographs of the closes and alleyways of Old Glasgow and the photographs of the Dixons and the Booles made for the Society for Photographing the Relics of Old London. Other examples of high quality commercial photography made in Germany are reproduced in carbon relief and ink-on-paper processes in the Photographische Mittheilungen, which Vogel edited.

Robinson and Vogel directed their comments to photographers who were producing images that were totally conventional and lacking in meaning. Robinson--who made his living as a commercial photographer--and Vogel sought to improve the work done by commercial and amateur photographers. Many of the photographs were technically excellent but lacked any artistic sense. Vogel encouraged these photographers to follow the model of painting not because he hoped to see a new art form evolve, so much as he hoped to see high quality craft.

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[37] Reproduced in *Photographische Mittheilungen* 1888, n.p.

[38] Ursula Peters, *Stilgeschichte der Fotografie in Deutschland*, 1839-1900 (Köln: DuMont, 1979).

[39] Helmut Gernsheim with Alison Gernsheim, *History of Photography* (New York: McGraw, Hill, 1969), p. 466.

[40] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 48.

[41] Reproduced in Peters, Stilgeschichte der Fotographie in Deutschland 1839-1900, pl. 163.

[42] Reproduced in Peters, Stilgeschichte der Fotographie in Deutschland 1839-1900, pl. 171.

[43] Janos Frecot and Helmut Geisert, Berlin: Frühe phorographien Berlin 1857-1913 (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 1984).

The extent to which Vogel influenced Stieglitz in terms of aesthetic, however, is unclear. Lowe comments that Stieglitz frequently skipped Vogel's lectures on aesthetics,[44] and in his later life Stieglitz told of how he rebelled against Vogel early on.[45] Vogel was certainly no aesthetic theoretician; the Photographische Mittheilungen contains no articles on aesthetics but is limited strictly to technical articles and minutes of the club's proceedings. Vogel was simply promoting the derived aesthetic of English pictorialists, which Stieglitz could have picked up elsewhere.

In addition to Vogel, Stieglitz could have been exposed to pictorialism through exchanges of photographs between German and English clubs. The Photographische Mittheilungen for 21 May 1886 makes reference to an exhibition of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs under the auspices of the Verein zur Föderung der Photographie in Berlin.[46] Cameron was a noted British amateur photographer who associated with Robinson, Rejlander, and author and amateur photographer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, photographers considered Pre-Raphaelite by Ovendon. Because of Stieglitz' connections with the Verein, he almost certainly was familiar with her style of pictorialism.

As a cultural center of Germany, the Berlin environment offered other influences on Stieglitz. Stieglitz regularly attended the opera and may have seen Bizet's Carmen more than 100 times. In later life, Stieglitz reminisced on his first months in Berlin:

> When I was a boy of 19 I openly declared that Rembrandt was rot. At this time I was living in Berlin with a sculptor who was a very wise person. Instead of arguing with me he sent me every day to look at the statues and the old Madonnas, and gradually things began to happen to me.[47]

Such an attitude is typical of anti-intellectual Victorian mentality pervasive throughout all of America and Europe.[48] Stieglitz' youth, lack of formal training in art, and the anti-intellectualism of the time may have tempered the degree to which Stieglitz was able to absorb the culture that surrounded him.

Stieglitz was living at the cusp of a new world, a time which knew itself to be the transition age from the old to the new.[49] The generally conservative, unquestioning, and dogmatic attitudes of the mid-nineteenth century that surrounded him were balanced by the more radical intellectual climate of the period that included Darwin and the notion of natural selection and evolution, Marx and his treatise on capital and social classes, Tolstoy's asceticism, and Dostoevsky's psychological novels and his sense of nihilism. The philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Dilthey were prominent at the time. Lowe notes that Stieglitz saw the plays of Swedish modernist Henrik Ibsen.[50] However, no evidence exists as to any direct effect any of these trends had on Stieglitz, and his photographs suggest the contrary.

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[44] Lowe, Stieglitz, p. 80.

[45] Kent, Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture, p. 53. Kent comments, however, ". . . his independence was more imagined than real."

[46] Photographische Mittheilungen, 1886, p. 61.

[47] Maesteller, Alfred Stieglitz, p. 40. The sculptor referred to was Erdmann Encke, also a studio photographer.

[48] Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, p. 124, quotes Mill: "Every dabbler . . . thinks his opinion as good as another's. . . . It is rather the person who has studied the subject systematically that is regarded as disqualified. He is a theorist: and the word which expresses the highest and noblest effort of human intelligence is turned into a bye-word of derision. People pride themselves upon taking a 'plain, matter-of-fact' view of a subject. . . . Men form their opinions according to natural shrewdness, without any of the advantages of study."

[49] Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 1. "For although all ages are ages of transition, never before had one thought of their own time as an era of change from the past to the future."

[50] Lowe, Stieglitz, p. 73.

The early photographs that Stieglitz made in Germany are typical of a beginning photographer. The earliest extant image is Self-portrait, Mittenwald made in 1884.[51] The image shows no influence of the English amateur photo-aestheticians in style. Rather, the print is an unpretentious snapshot; the image lacks sophisticated composition with the subject dead center and other elements scattered randomly in the frame. Another photograph made the next year, My Room, shows a similar style.[52]

With the exception of the two photographs mentioned above, Stieglitz' earliest surviving photographs were made in 1886. Many of the photographs made on a student outing that year suggest the social function photography played for Stieglitz and continue to show the lack of a developed aesthetic.[53] A few of the images, such as Village Street, Couple in Field, and Mountains[54] include some of the elements of an amateur sensibility: picturesque, rustic subjects, simplicity of composition, and sentimentality. Die Ernte, also known as Mittenwald and included in this album, was important enough for Stieglitz to include it in Sun Prints. Die Ernte and a variant image in the album show a conscious attempt to compose the image by posing the subject and careful cropping of the print.

In 1886 Stieglitz made three photographs which show an imitation of the anecdotal style of painters like Meyer von Bremen, Achenback, and Sir John Gilbert.[55] These images contain an aesthetic like that the English pictorialist promoted and Vogel promulgated in Germany. The photographs depict an "agreeable truth . . . truths which do not irritate the eye" and have a strong narrative content. The Truant, Music in the Tyrol, and Back from the Hunt so excited Vogel that he asked Stieglitz' permission to show the prints to some friends who were painters.[56]

Several versions of the encounter between Stieglitz and the artists are recounted in various biographies. Norman's description runs:

> Artist friends in Germany, upon seeing Stieglitz's early photographs in the 1880s, declared that they envied him, wishing they could paint the way he photographed: "They claimed to feel my photographs superior to their paintings. But, they would add, unfortunately photography was not an art. . . . I could not understand why these artists should envy me for my work, yet, in the same breath, decry it because it was Machine-made--their "art" painting--because Hand-Made--being considered necessarily superior.[57]

Kent reproduces an earlier, variant account recorded by J. Nilsen Laurvik of the incident as taking place between the well-known painter Menzel and Stieglitz.

> Stieglitz promptly resented this patronizing attitude on the part of the painter [Menzel], insisting that photography be considered solely on its own merits, like any other work of art, which was laughed at as altogether absurd. To him many of these photographs were as good as certain paintings of the day, which were highly esteemed because of their faithful photographic rendering of the facts of

[51] Reproduced in Lowe, Stieglitz, p. 82.

[52] Reproduced in Norman, Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer, p. 32.

[53] Alfred Stieglitz, A souvenir album to the family: July 4th 1886, Friendwalde a.O. [unpublished album held by the National Gallery of Art in the "key set" of Stieglitz photographs].

[54] Included in A Souvenir Album. . . at the National Gallery of Art; titles are assigned by the Gallery.

[55] Kent, Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture, p. 74.

[56] Lowe, Stieglitz, p. 83.

[57] "Stieglitz and Cartier-Bresson," p. 53.

> life, and he saw little difference between the two, except that much of this greatly admired painting was to him very poor photography.[58]

Rather than being a moment of revelation or great significance, the artist's evaluation is qualified and the photographer's response is tempered.[59] Lowe account is more hagiographic:

Proclaiming that his talent was demeaned by the use of the camera, [the painters] wanted to know why Alfred didn't paint, for any one of them would have been happy to produce a painting as lovely as his photographs. Alfred's inner response was that he would never wish to produce a photograph that in any way resembled their paintings.[60]

The allusion to the parable of the child Jesus among the doctors of the law (Luke 3:42 ff) is apparent. In later years, Stieglitz would interpret this incident as the moment when he realized that the camera was for the photographer what brush and paint were for the painter. Norman's account points to the irrationality of the artists' position; given the time when Norman was writing, the emphasis of photography as art may be read as a continued fight for acceptance of the medium addressed to her audience. Kent's comment on this incident suggests that "capturing a meaning behind the scene portrayed was what prompted the favorable comments of the artist Menzel. This ability to capture meaning as well as an accurate representation of objects was very close to Vogel's conception of the essential `truth' of nature."[61] Lowe's version stresses a low key response on Stieglitz' part, far from the histrionics suggested by Norman and Kent, and suggests Stieglitz' aesthetic was superior to the artists'.

During the spring of 1887, Stieglitz spent time in Pallanza, Lake Como, Bellagio, and Venice. Out of this trip came a number of images which would be reproduced in journals and exhibited in competitions throughout the 1890s. These images, to a large extent, were the foundation of his reputation as an outstanding amateur photographer.[62] Many of these photographs are oriented towards storytelling. *The Dice Players* is a contrived genre piece which Weston Naef considers in the style of Robinson,[63] although Nancy Newhall, in an amazing attempt to make this a straight photograph, claims that the image was made at a costume party.[64] *A Good Joke*, titled *The Last Joke* in the key set, won Stieglitz his first medal and brought him to the attention of Peter Henry Emerson, who became an important, later influence. Through use of a literary title, *The Wanderer's Return* and *The Unwilling Bath* suggest specific stories, while many of the other photographs made during this period are genre pieces depicting the flavor of daily life among the working class.

Other photographs are picturesque views of the landscape and of city scenes stressing the rustic. *The Stones of Venice (Chioggia)*, *A Nook in Pallanza*, and *On the Bridge--Chioggia* suggest the exotic appeal of a foreign place. *Washerwomen at Lake Como*, *Portrait of an Italian Mason*, and *Maria, the Fruit Seller* romanticize the pre-industrial worker. Both qualities were typical in nineteenth-century art.

A major consideration in photographic competitions was technical quality. Because photographers had to rely on chemicals which they mixed themselves, inconsistent materials, and no reliable guide for exposure, technical quality was often a matter of luck and skill. Stieglitz' work certainly stood out in amateur competitions because of his outstanding technical skill.

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[58] Kent, Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture, p. 55. Citing J. Nilsen Laurvik, "Alfred Stieglitz, Pictorial Photographer," The International Studio 44:174 (August 1911), p. xxii.

[59] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 55.

[60] Lowe, *Stieglitz*, p. 83.

[61] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 74.

[62] Lowe, *Stieglitz*, p. 84, dates these images as being made in 1886.

[63] Naef, *The Collection of Alfred Stieglitz*, p 36.

[64] P. H. Emerson: The Fight for Photography as a Fine Art (New York: Aperture, 1975), p. 55.

The Italian images frequently form part of the canon of Stieglitz' masterpieces, and they suggest precedent for his mature style in his early work. Such an interpretation ignores the fact that Stieglitz' style did not continue towards straight photography, but further towards pictorialism. The sophisticated framing, the graphic structure, and most importantly the harsh, unidealized subject matter of his mature work all are lacking in these prints. An alternate interpretation of these prints places them in the same vein as the snapshot style reflected in Stieglitz' *Self-portrait, 1884* and *My Room*, or as Robinsonian pictorialism. Two of the images are very suggestive of photographs by Robinson. *Weary* and *The Truant* are both similar in subject and treatment to untitled prints by Robinson in the Photography Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.[65] The prints have a directness and simplicity, not because they are precursors of modern photography but because they follow the precepts of Robinson's and Vogel's aesthetic: fidelity to an unobjectionable truth, simplicity, and sentimentality. If the images do not look like Robinson's well-known combination prints, it is because Stieglitz is making travel views.

The images that Stieglitz made while he was living in Germany belong to his period as an established amateur. Many of these photographs are striking when viewed with a modern eye, but they do not foreshadow a modernist style. The photographs are largely derivative of the commonly accepted aesthetic of amateur photography which Stieglitz likely received through Vogel from the English pictorialists. Stieglitz' technical excellence distinguished him from many other amateurs. His work was far from his mature style; Stieglitz was still thinking of photography more as an amateur preoccupation than as an expressive art form.[66]

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[65] Reproduced in Dave Oliphant and Tom Zigal, *Perspectives on Photography* (Austin: Humanities Research Center, 1982), pp. 83 and 88.

[66] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 86.

3

THE INFLUENCES OF P. H. EMERSON AND OF NEW YORK

> The so-called "realist" who abounds today is the shallowest of artists, since what he takes to be the world is a mere surface record of his dogmatically rationalized senses--the record, indeed, not of direct experience but of an *inherited language* which, in turn, is a series of symbols for discordant parts and not for the whole of life.
>
> --Waldo Frank[67]

Stieglitz' attitude towards photography changed radically as a result of two events: his contact with Peter Henry Emerson and his move back to New York. Emerson's aesthetic, radically different in style as well as concept from Robinson's, stimulated Stieglitz to thinking about photography as a fine art and as a vocation rather than as a craft and pastime. New York provided a fertile background for Stieglitz to grow and achieve independence from his mentor Vogel and a different intellectual and cultural environment from Berlin. His years in New York marked the end of his work as an amateur and signaled the beginning of a period of experimentation during which he realized the essential elements of his mature style.

P. H. Emerson was an American physician who had lived in England since 1869. Emerson had been photographing only slightly longer than Stieglitz, having purchased his first camera in 1881, only two years earlier than Stieglitz. According to Newhall, Emerson's training in art consisted to a large degree of a pilgrimage to the major art centers of Europe, where he found the Mona Lisa not much to his liking, and the art history of Woltmann and Woermann as his general guide. Emerson had discovered, in Newhall's words, "There was not a fact nor a scientific first principle in all art. There was nothing more solid than *taste*--and historical expediency."[68] In 1889 he published *Naturalistic Photography*, a work described as "a bombshell dropped at a tea-party."[69] Emerson claimed in a letter to Stieglitz that the book "contains the most balanced ideas on art, ideas which I have been able to gather and learn from my large circle of artist friends and from my training in art."[70]

Emerson's theories were an attempt to base a photographic aesthetic on scientific principles. Basing his ideas on Hermann von Helmholtz's *Handbook on Physiological Optics*, Emerson suggested that a photograph should appear the same way nature is perceived by the human eye, with a central cone of sharp vision surrounded by a less sharp area. Rather than detail, the photograph should have effect; atmosphere was "absolutely necessary in a picture which claims to have artistic merit."[71] Emerson was able to achieve his effect, which he called differential focus, by using a shallow depth of field and coarse-surfaced printing papers with a long tonal scale.

Emerson's goal was the destruction of detail, for "the fewer facts we record in art, and yet express the subject so that it cannot be better expressed, the better."[72] The resulting images were

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[67] Frank, et al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 219.

[68] Newhall, *P. H. Emerson*, p. 26.

[69] Ibid., p. 3.

[70] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 85.

[71] Ibid., p. 94.

[72] *British Journal of Photography* 36 (1889), p. 252.

far from the sharply-detailed transcriptions of nature that the pictorialists sought in imitation of the academic tradition; Emerson's style was much closer in appearance to the art of the Impressionists. The adherents of naturalistic photography were quickly dubbed the "fuzzies."

Emerson's theories were a radical departure from the accepted aesthetic of Robinson and Rejlander. Emerson claimed that Burnet's laws of composition, the foundation of Robinson's aesthetic, were nothing more than arbitrary rules and that critic John Ruskin was a "spasmodic elegant of art literature."[73] More important than his rejection of Robinson's and Rejlander's models of good art was his rejection of their subject matter. "*Sentimentalism*, *affectation*, and *artificiality* are the three cardinal sins of this photographer [Rejlander] and they are the three most deadly artistic sins."[74] Where the goal of the amateur movement in England was to see photography accepted as a fine art by imitating it, Emerson saw this imitation the antithesis of true art. A good photograph--any good art, for Emerson--must possess originality and individuality rather than being derivative.

Newhall claims that Emerson "wrote the first manual on straight photography as an art in its own right" and that "marring photography in any way, from flattering retouching to imitations of painting, sculpture, etching, engraving, drawing or other handwork, was to him an abomination."[75] Although Emerson was different in style and subject from the aesthetic of the pictorialist, he was still quite far from a modern understanding of straight photography. Emerson's photographs are more expressive than documentary, and, in spite of his protests against handwork, many of his images are retouched. Emerson shared with other photographers of the period an interest in the rustic, but the sense of Victorian sentimentality associated with the Pre-Raphaelites is lacking.

Emerson contacted Stieglitz in January of 1888 shortly after Stieglitz had won the "Holiday Work" competition. Emerson, who had judged the contest, praised Stieglitz for *A Good Joke* and claimed that he was sure they held common values in photography.[76] Such a comment seems odd in light of the fact that Emerson had seen only twelve of Stieglitz' photographs and the general Robinsonian style which much of Stieglitz' work reflected. In fact, the compliment may have been a means of buttering up Stieglitz for the job of translating Emerson's forthcoming treatise, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*.

Although Emerson did not know Stieglitz and was only superficially aware of his work, it is uncertain how much Stieglitz knew of Emerson. Emerson began his campaign for a new art of photography in March of 1886. His two most important works *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* and *Pictures of East Anglian Life* were published in 1886 and 1888 respectively. The *British Journal of Photography* published only two articles by Emerson on naturalistic photography between 1886 and 1889, neither of which suggested the radicalness of his philosophy. How much of Emerson's work or the uproar it created in Great Britain reached Stieglitz in Berlin is not known, although it would be surprising if Stieglitz were completely ignorant of the ideas of such a controversial figure.

Stieglitz was not an immediate convert to Emerson's theories. In his review of the Berlin Jubilee Exhibition for the *American Amateur Photographer*, Stieglitz praised Emerson: "Here is a man with individuality and great originality, and one who has had the pluck to introduce naturalistic principles into the art of photography not withstanding tremendous opposition."[77] Stieglitz also pointed to Emerson as a major force for the good of art photographers on the horizon. Nevertheless, Stieglitz made some favorable comments on other photographic work which did not fit into

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[73] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 87. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 141.

[74] *American Amateur Photographer* 2:2 (February 1890), p. 73.

[75] Newhall, *P. H. Emerson*, p. 3.

[76] Kent, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Maturation of American Culture*, p. 85.

[77] *American Amateur Photographer* 1:1 (July 1889), p. 5.

Emerson's naturalistic model. Much of Stieglitz' own photographic work done in the early 1890s continued to reflect the sentimentality, artificiality, and affectation which Emerson so despised.

It is entirely possible that the compliment, phrased in Emerson's own words for good art--individuality and originality--was calculated to secure Emerson's good feelings about Stieglitz as a translator for *Naturalistic Photography*. Given that Stieglitz would receive half the royalties of the German translation, any stimulation of interest in the book would be to his personal gain. When a German publisher could not be found for Emerson's book, Stieglitz continued work on the translation. Stieglitz' continued efforts on the book may signify that he perceived value in the ideas or that he was willing to speculate in a business venture.

Stieglitz had been under pressure from his family for several years to take up a profession. While Stieglitz' family was not particularly wealthy, his father had made a sizable enough fortune to be able to retire with a comfortable lifestyle; he had supported his son the entire time he was in school in Berlin. A number of factors contributed to the familial insistence that Stieglitz come home to New York. The most significant, evidently, was that his father felt that it was time for Stieglitz, at age 24, to make the transition from student to man and begin to make a living on his own. The death of Stieglitz' favorite sister brought the issue to a head. He returned to New York in the spring of 1890. On his arrival he began work at John Foord's Heliochrome Engraving Company by his father's arrangement and within months was established as a partner in the firm.

Stieglitz rapidly became involved with the American amateur photographic societies. He had already worked for the *American Amateur Photographer* as a correspondent, and on his return he became a contributor and later an assistant editor under Frank Beach. In 1891 Stieglitz joined the Society of Amateur Photographers (New York). Certainly the major motivation of Stieglitz' involvement with the amateur photographic society was his passion for the medium. Nevertheless, shortly after his contact with the magazine Stieglitz' engraving company began doing at least some of the printing for the magazine. Stieglitz may not have been a particularly astute business man, but he evidently understood some of the tactics to generate business for his firm. The clubs' social function would have helped him to establish new acquaintances to replace his German friends.

Stieglitz' involvement with the amateur societies--a seemingly happy one for the first several years--is significant in that it points to his own attitude towards photography. Stieglitz' convivial participation in these clubs as editor and avid member suggests that he held much in common with the general mentality of the American amateur photographer when he arrived, not surprising as the American societies had much in common with Robinson's pictorialist photography.

In 1888 George Eastman had introduced the Kodak. "You push the button, and we do the rest" made photography available to people who had not been willing to trouble with the darkroom or cumbersome equipment. The snapshooters who took up this camera were a class apart from the amateurs. The snapshooters were not interested in the technical aspects of the darkroom or the aesthetic possibilities of the camera, but used it largely as a mnemonic tool to record the important events of their lives.

The Kodak was the apotheosis of amateur photography gone to the dogs. A note from the first issue of *American Amateur Photographer* points to some of the sentiments amateurs felt towards the snapshooters at the beginning of the 1890s:

> Photography has been degraded to the level of a mere sport, and many take it up . . . without a thought of the grand and elevating possibilities it opens up to them. The making of pictures is fast becoming merely an episode in a day's pleasure, not the earnest and untiring search for the beautiful.[78]

The modern mind may find it difficult to conceive of the threat that amateurs perceived in mere Kodakery. Snapshooters were robbing amateurs of their hobby's trappings as a serious pursuit of art that required diligent work.

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[78] *American Amateur Photographer* 1:1 (July 1889), p. 5.

One result of the Kodak threat was the strengthening of the movement on the part of amateurs to have photography accepted as a fine art, as capable of expressing beauty. In an effort to distinguish their own art photography from mere Kodakery, many amateurs followed in the footsteps of Robinson. The editorial position of *American Amateur Photographer* demonstrates Robinson's prominence in a review of a new edition of his *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, released in 1892. The book was acknowledged with acclaim: "It is surely painting the lily to try to add anything more to the universal praise the book has received."[79]

Two elements of Robinson's aesthetic helped it to remain popular with amateurs as it provided them with a defense against being associated in the public eye with the Kodakers. First, in the belief that a good picture should tell a story, pictorialists often arranged tableaux and recorded them with the camera. Secondly, amateurs used darkroom techniques such as combination printing to overcome the technical limitations of the medium producing images which a Kodak could not make. Pictorialism's sense of narrative and the darkroom manipulation distinguished amateurs from the Kodakers and showed a great deal of effort on the amateur's part, effort which was proof of their artistry with results unobtainable to those who would merely push the button.

"The Present Aspect of Amateur Photography" in the first issue of *American Amateur Photographer* for July 1889 bemoans the state of amateur photography after the introduction of the Kodak. The article also points to other values held by amateur photographers at the time:

> It is not saying too much to affirm that there is a moral element in the practice of the art picturesque, which should be felt and followed by every worker with the camera: . . . to interpret to unseeing eyes some portion, at least, of the charm and beauty with which God has filled this home of his making. . . . .[80]

The author's sentiment reflects a spiritual idealism, a belief that natural phenomena reflected the metaphysical order. Spiritual idealism gave many nineteenth-century scientists and artists a religious perception of their task: to understand nature in order to reveal the divine order. Such a sense of moral or religious purpose was in keeping with Robinson's notion of art as uplifting.

Robinson's influence over American photographic societies was not complete. Emerson had triggered as much thinking and debate within the American clubs as he did in England. A. G. Treat wrote "Impressionism in Photography," published in *American Amateur Photographer* for January 1891, and reflects the philosophy of Emersonian naturalism. Frank M. Sutcliffe's article, "How to Look at Photographs," published in August 1892, tried to reconcile the two schools. George Davidson's "To American Photographers," published in January 1894, is a keystone piece of Emersonian thinking. Although Stieglitz apparently never bought Emerson's philosophy entirely, his criticism of the Philadelphia Salon reflected the principles of naturalistic photography and acknowledged "the enormous benefit that P. H. Emerson has bestowed upon photographic art."[81]

From his return in late 1890 until 1893 most of Stieglitz' business, his involvement with the Society of Amateur Photographers, and his marriage apparently took most of his time. Excepting family photographs made at Lake George, the vast majority of his photographs during that period were of New York street life made with a detective camera.

Stieglitz' dry spell was particularly pronounced the first year after his return. In addition to little time, Emerson's recanting of *Naturalistic Photography* in 1890[82] and his total lack of communi-

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[79] *American Amateur Photographer* 4:7 (July 1892), p. 327. As well, Robinson's photographs continued to be reproduced in the magazine as special, tipped-in illustrations.

[80] *American Amateur Photographer* 1:1 (July 1889), p. 5.

[81] *American Amateur Photographer* 6:5 (May 1894), p. 213.

[82] Newhall, *P. H. Emerson*, p. 145.

cation with Stieglitz must have been confusing.[83] Stieglitz was likely uncertain of a subject in New York. Lacking the picturesque scenes of Europe, the American city must have seemed far from beautiful. The work he had made just before his return showed no influence of Emerson's aesthetic. The New York street scenes are visually very similar to the work of London amateur Paul Martin, who also was experimenting with the detective camera at the same time. Stieglitz probably did not know of Martin's work, and the inherent syntax of the detective camera is likely responsible for the similarity in style. Indeed, the style of the images showed little influence of either Robinson or Emerson.

Stieglitz made two of his most famous early photographs, *The Terminal* and *Winter on Fifth Avenue*, during this period. Stieglitz noted on the matt of the latter, "This photograph is the basis of so-called `American Photography.' Shown in every important exhibition since then."[84] His comment fits in well with the canonical interpretation of the images. Both are unposed, the closest thing to straight, documentary photography Stieglitz has produced. The weather has reduced the visual detail, and the prints have a sense of Emerson's atmosphere.

An alternate reading of the photographs balances the canonical interpretation. Although unposed, the images still have a sense of narrative quality. Stieglitz downplayed the sense of the narrative in *Winter* by substituting the more familiar dash for the preposition.[85] Stieglitz was not above retouching *Winter*, anathema to Emerson's aesthetic: the timbers in the lower left have been opaqued out in the final version of the print. More importantly, while these images had won wide acclaim, it was not necessarily for the aesthetic impact: Stieglitz, noted for his technical skill, had captured an "impossible" photograph. Finally the detective camera was very much like the Kodak in its portability and was already guilty by association with it; it was a coup for Stieglitz to make serious photographs using a "toy."

The different technique of the detective camera may have opened Stieglitz to a new way of seeing that suggested more spontaneous images better suited to capture the pace of modern New York. By making photographs of subjects which broke with the established themes of the picturesque and the beautiful, by photographing under conditions considered impossible, and by using a camera which was suspect, Stieglitz had begun a period of experimentation. However if these images were the kernel of modern American photography, it would be a number of years before it germinated. The argument that Stieglitz' photographs of New York City are modern might be convincing if he had not reverted to his previous style in his next major group of photographs.

The images that Stieglitz made on his 1894 trip to Europe formed the foundation of his reputation as an amateur photographer. He was prolific with the camera, obviously much more at home with subjects of picturesque beauty that surrounded him. The Robinsonian narrative image no longer surfaced. Stieglitz continued to concentrate on genre and picturesque scenes, however: *Gossip (Venice)* and *The Net Mender* relies on a literary title, *Venetian Well* and *The Letter Box* suggest the activities of daily life, and *An Old Mill* and *The Jungfrau Group* are of a piece with his early travel photography. *The Net Mender* was the center of a controversy that points to attitudes towards the image at the time. Stieglitz was immediately accused of plagiarizing a painting of the same title by Max Liebermann, an established, conservative painter.[86] Keiley called

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[83] Newhall, *P. H. Emerson*, p. 114, notes that there is no correspondence between Emerson and Stieglitz between 1890 and 1902.

[84] Mss note on verso of matt. National Gallery of Art key set, 1949.3.94.

[85] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 148-149. The preposition remained in the title as late as 1897.

[86] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 91. "When [*The Net Mender*] was first exhibited, Stieglitz was instantly accused of plagiarizing a genre painting by Max Liebermann with the same title. [Stieglitz] acknowledged his familiarity with Liebermann's style of work but denied ever having seen the specific painting."

Stieglitz' Katwyk photographs realistic,[87] but the images' truth which does not irritate the eye recalls Robinson more than Emerson.

Stieglitz' aesthetic had not been static in the three years he lived in America. Naturalistic qualities began to appear in his work: the originality and individualism of poetic vision, the print qualities of depth and atmosphere, and simple compositional structure. Decorative treatment, which Emerson argued against, surfaced in prints such as *On the Seine--Near Paris*, also known as *A Decorative Panel* when configured in a particular black frame with gold trim. The Impressionists' influence is readily apparent in *A Wet Day on the Boulevard--Paris*: the image suggests a glancing view, but its careful arrangement of visual elements distinguishes it from a mere snapshot; the coarse grain captures form and tone without detail.

The detective photographs of the early 1890s made with new tools of different subjects mark the end of Stieglitz's period as an amateur photographer and the beginning of the second period of Stieglitz' photographic career. He had begun to break free of commonly accepted amateur aesthetics and subjects. He was following Emerson's advice to find an artistic expression which was original and individualistic. On the other hand, Stieglitz had not adopted the technique of differential focus, but was looking for his own style to express his individuality. This second period was a period of experimentation, for Stieglitz had not yet achieved his mature style.

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[87] *Camera Notes* 2:3 (January 1899), p. 119.

4

THE EXPERIMENTAL PERIOD

> While Stieglitz does not descend to some of the embellishments or manipulations of his colleagues like Day, doesn't dress Boston Negroes as Ethiopians or white adolescents as classical satyrs, he nevertheless uses nearly posed situations and the mellow masking of atmosphere to create the same effect.
>
> — James Strother Terry[88]

Established as a recognized photographic artist through the work produced during his amateur period in Europe, Stieglitz began to further explore the aesthetic possibilities of photography both conceptually through his associations with photography clubs and visually through his photographs. During a period of low productivity as an photographer in the last half of the 1890s, Stieglitz began to abandon genre and the picturesque to find his own style and identity as an artist. Stieglitz was not alone in the pursuit of a new photographic vision; he was surrounded by a number of people who had an even greater influence on him than Robinson, Vogel, or Emerson. Critics and painters often became the source of new ideas which Stieglitz would adopt and then abandon, especially during the early years of the 1900s. However, Stieglitz did not suddenly revolt against his amateur background in a fit of aesthetic genius. Rather, he evolved from the subjects and forms of his amateur period.

In 1894 Stieglitz was elected to the elite circle of English amateur photographers, the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring. This group had formed in reaction to the conservative, inartistic attitudes they believed were entrenched in the Royal Photographic Society. The Linked Ring consisted of several old voices for art photography, notably Robinson and Rejlander. A number of younger photographers in the Brotherhood did not adhere to the strict principles of pictorial photography as set forth by the two grand masters; Emerson's naturalistic aesthetic influenced some members of the Linked Ring, although Emerson was not a part of the group. Stieglitz' participation in the Linked Ring suggests that he retained enough of his pre-Emersonian, pictorial past to be comfortable associating with these photographers.

Stieglitz' participation in the Linked Ring also signified a distancing from the masses of amateur photographers in pursuit of a higher level of art photography. His attitude is reflected in a comment in his review of the Seventh Annual Joint Exhibition, "Popular taste runs in the channels of the ordinary and favors mediocrity."[89] He expressed similar opinions in his overview "Pictorial Photography in the United States," published in *Photograms of the Year* for 1895. "The American professional has done absolutely nothing to advance pictorial photography. . . . We have no Robinsons, Sutcliffes, Annans, Sawyers, etc."[90] In the 1896 edition of the same yearbook Stieglitz' article reflected his growing disdain for the majority of photography in America further: "American photographers, as a rule, still lack originality and individuality. They strive more for prettiness than truth; they still cater more to the popular taste than to the refined."[91]

Stieglitz continued his work on *American Amateur Photographer* until 1895. He picked up activity in the Society of Amateur Photographers and was a prime mover in the 1896 merger of the Society with the Camera Club to form the Camera Club of New York. Certainly one of Stieglitz'

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88 *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 150.

89 *Photograms of the Year, 1895*, p. 84.

90 *Photograms of the Year, 1896*, p. 43.

91 *Camera Notes* 2:2 (October 1898), p. 46.

motivations for the reorganization of the clubs was his desire to see the emergence of an organization committed to fine art photography and not merely a meeting group for hobbyists producing banal, amateur work.

Stieglitz declined presidency of the new club in favor of chairmanship of the publication committee. Through the publication committee Stieglitz was able to produce a vehicle for his ideas which would go beyond the club. *Camera Notes*, the "official organ of the Camera Club of New York," began publishing in 1897, committed to the finest in photography. Stieglitz included only what he considered the best in artistic photography and did not limit his selections to American work. His editorial policies point to his elitism. One reader commented:

A growing and very dangerous Tarantism has inoculated the club, and it appears that nothing is artistic which is not *outré,*, nothing beautiful which is not *bizarre*, nothing worthy of attention which is not preposterous, nothing serious unless untranslatable.[92]

Ultimately his editorial policies alienated him from the other members and force his resignation from the club.

Camera Notes contained a variety of photographic aesthetics, reflecting the editor's ambivalence as to what made up the best of artistic photography. All the writers held the common belief that photography was not merely a craft and that the medium was capable of poetic vision, but no consensus existed between the older and newer pictorialists as to the syntax of fine art photography. The older pictorialists were often photographers who, like Stieglitz, had grown out of the amateur movement. F. Holland Day's article "Art and the Camera" emphasized the need for art photographers to be familiar with traditional masterpieces of art. In drawing on painterly masterpieces for models, Day was following the Robinsonian example of attempting to make photography a fine art by imitating accepted art forms. Day's photographs, which were published in the magazine, reflect elements of the older pictorialism which he espoused. William M. Murray's article on genre photography published in April 1899 also recalls pictorial photography's attempt at art through contrived scenes.

Suggesting an alternate point of view, writers such as Joseph T. Keiley and Sadakichi Hartmann discussed the evolution of a new understanding of photography based on more avant-garde perceptions of art in other media. In his article "Tonality" Keiley shifted from questions of technique and content to an emphasis on the plastic qualities of the final print.[93] Hartmann's "A Few Reflections on Amateur Photography" abandoned the older spiritual idealism, which felt art should depict the divine order in nature, for a more modern concern for the private vision of the artist.[94]

Keiley pointed to the different trends in the thinking of American fine art photographers in his review of the Philadelphia Salon of 1898. Stieglitz was represented at the show by, among others, his images *Scurrying Home* and *The Net Mender*, from the series of images made at Katwyk. Keiley characterized Stieglitz' work as realism, "which is built on observation and on facts in opposition to idealism, which is founded on impressions and affirmation, established *a priori.* To this later class belongs F. Holland Day."[95]

The majority of Stieglitz' articles In *Camera Notes* were technical. The few reviews that he contributed to various journals were statements of his personal opinions about the work and contained no theoretical assessment of the photographic aesthetic. Keiley and Hartmann, on the other hand, were able to articulate more essential ideas about the nature of photography. Stieglitz was clearly not the philosopher in the crowd.

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[92] *Camera Notes* 2:4 (April 1899), p. 135ff.

[93] *Camera Notes* 2:2 (October 1898), p. 41ff.

[94] *Camera Notes* 2:3 (January 1899), p. 123.

[95] *Camera Notes* 2:2 (October 1898), p. 53.

All the writers emphasized the importance of originality, individuality, and poetic expression. They also stressed persistence and patience and encouraged photographers to be reticent to trip the shutter and to show only the finest of their work. which captured something beautiful, rather than being satisfied with a technically good print of a mediocre subject. The critics were developing the cult of the artist among fine art photographers. The notion of artist as eccentric genius had many of its roots in James McNeill Whistler, for whom Hartmann had a particular fondness.

Although Stieglitz had quit his position at the engraving company in 1895 to devote his time to photography, he produced relatively few images in the five years after his 1894 trip to Europe. Most images were made with the detective camera. Like his earlier photographs capturing the effects of a snowstorm, these images were outstanding for being made at night, and they may have been praised more for their technical prowess than their aesthetic vision.[96]

The advent of the gum bichromate process greatly stimulated discussion of the limits and techniques of art photography. Introduced commercially by John Pouncy in England in 1858, the gum print was not accepted at that time because of it coarse image. With the influence of Emerson and the Impressionist painters resulting in the movement away from detail, the syntax of the gum process was ideal for art photographers. The gum process also allowed photographers to develop prints selectively and suppress unwanted detail in the image which competed with the primary subject. Stieglitz noted, "Gum printing undoubtedly opens a new field of possibilities, impossible to be attained by any other known printing method; still it by no means kills the existing ones."[97] The number of gum photographs that Stieglitz included in *Camera Notes* and later reproduced in *Camera Work* points to his continuing interest in the process and an artist's ability to make distinctive prints using this technique. Other print processes such as bromoil and photogravure also came into vogue during this period for much the same reason as gum printing. Stieglitz had used localized development with glycerin to achieve the appearance of ink-on-paper processes; *Gossip (Venice)* is an example of this technique.

Stieglitz' own photographs of the late 1890s and early 1900s exhibit a style shift in response to the changes in the visual syntax of gum printing. Stieglitz only dabbled in the gum process, but his technical mastery allowed him to achieve an equivalent visual syntax with the platinum process as in the untitled photograph of the subway entrance (1896) and *The Hand of Man*. Stieglitz no longer had to rely on snowstorms to achieve the atmospheric effect so Emerson treasured.

Stieglitz' individual eye was developing, a point which Keiley noted in his review of the Philadelphia Salon, "For the first time it was realized that a Stieglitz, a Hinton or a Day was as distinctive in style as a Breton, a Corot or a Verestchagin. . . ."[98] An important aspect of Stieglitz' development was his choice of subject. Following the lead of the Impressionists, Stieglitz began to find beauty in the forms and patterns of urban New York. Stieglitz' father commented on *The Flat Iron Building*, "I do not see how you could have produced such a beautiful thing from such an ugly building."[99] *Spring Showers* and *The Street--Design for a Poster* see the city not as subject so much as the source for a formal study.

As Stieglitz and the other elite connected with *Camera Notes* were exploring the new modes of photographic expression, many members of the Camera Club of New York were becoming more exasperated with Stieglitz and his editorial policies. By 1900 the members began to exert editorial control over the magazine through the Club's Board of Trustees. Stieglitz, finding that he could no longer use the Club or its publication as a vehicle for the development of fine art photography, began to develop a new circle of photographers and critics based on the model of the European Secession movement.

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[96] Paul Martin also made images at night at the same time. Although this fact is noted in *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, most of the hagiographical accounts credit Stieglitz with making the first night photographs.

[97] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 91.

[98] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 176.

[99] Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: Introduction to an American Seer*, p. 16.

The Photo-Secession was a loosely formed movement. The first group appearance of the Photo-Secession was a show Stieglitz arranged at the New York Photo Salon at the National Arts Club in New York in 1902. The same year Stieglitz began publishing *Camera Work*. Terry notes that the relationship between the Photo-Secession and *Camera Work* is unclear and informal.[100] Both were products of Stieglitz' machinations to become the pre-eminent authority of pictorial photography in America.[101]

The organization of the Photo-Secession points clearly to Stieglitz' real importance as a catalyst and organizer of those working around him. Organizing the show from the work of his colleagues and then labeling the group the Photo-Secession, many photographers represented had never heard of the concept. Gertrude Käsebier's query to Stieglitz is now legendary: "What is this Photo-Secession? Am I a Photo-Secessionist?"

In many ways *Camera Work* was an extension of what Stieglitz had been attempting to do with *Camera Notes*. The important distinction was that Stieglitz was free of any responsibility to an outside group and could follow his own lead. The articles continue to develop the cult of the artist, the importance of individual expression, and question the nature of photographic art.

Keiley and Hartmann continue their affiliation with Stieglitz. Hartmann first defines a modern understanding of the unmanipulated, straight photograph in his 1904 article, "A Plea for Straight Photography."

Surely every medium of artistic expression has its limitations. We expect an etching to look like an etching, and a lithograph to look like a lithograph, why then should not a photographic print look like a photographic print?[102]

Hartmann had begun to build a constructive aesthetic of photography based on the inherent nature of the medium, rather than a reactionary aesthetic based on existing art forms.

Charles Coffin was an important new critic who joined the Stieglitz circle and contributed a number of articles to *Camera Work*. Coffin produced the first major treatise on artistic photography, *Photography as a Fine Art: The Achievement and Possibilities of Photographic Art in America*.[103] Coffin's thinking reflected the ideas of fine art photography as they had evolved in the 1890s.

Another important newcomer to this group was Edward Steichen, whom Stieglitz had met in 1900, when they became close friends. Steichen especially, but also Keiley, Hartmann, and Caffin, introduced Stieglitz to avant-garde art. Stieglitz was very much dependent on his painter and critic friends for his education in modern art. On first seeing paintings by Cezanne in 1907, Stieglitz commented that they were no more than "empty paper and a few splashes of color."[104] Steichen also introduced Stieglitz to John Marin, Alfred Maurer, Max Weber, and to Gertrude and Leo Stein. These modernist painters and writers inculcated in Stieglitz a whole new set of modernist aesthetic values now generally associated with him.

Weber has claimed responsibility for pointing out the value of much of Stieglitz' earlier work which the photographer had overlooked. One of the most striking examples of this re-evaluation was the reinclusion of *The Terminal* in Stieglitz' *oeuvre* nearly twenty years after its making. An apocryphal story Weber told recounts his salvaging *The Steerage* from of a pile of Stieglitz' for-

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[100] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 262.

[101] Jussim's biography of Day provides an excellent documentation of Stieglitz's political ambitions and his undermining of Day, his one real adversary for leadership.

[102] Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, eds., *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 110.

[103] (New York, 1901).

[104] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 84.

gotten prints.[105] Weber's stories have compromised the standard hagiographical account which places this image as the mark of Stieglitz' realization of his modern, mature style.

Regardless of Weber's account, Stieglitz was moving toward the aesthetic of straight photography in the first years of the 1900s. The editorial content of *Camera Work* documents Stieglitz' evolution to his modernist, mature aesthetic, a style he achieved--from his own point of view--with the making of *The Steerage* in 1907. Dating the transition from his experimental to his mature period in 1907 is arbitrary, as the style began to evolve during his association with the Photo-Secessionists and continued to develop long after *The Steerage*, peaking with the equivalents.

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[105] Terry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p. 281.

CONCLUSION

STIEGLITZ AS A MATURE ARTIST

> Often I have not, myself, completely understood what I have exhibited, at the very first, but if the *spirit* of someone's work has meant something to me, I have shown it in order to see for myself what living with it might disclose.
>
> --Alfred Stieglitz[106]

Out of the context of the modernist intellectual climate and under the influence of the coterie of artists, writers, and critics that surrounded him after *Camera Work*, Stieglitz continued to reassess his own photography. The result of his experimentation with the new ideas led him to his mature style which is truly modernist and for which he is best known. Bradbury and MacFarlane comment that out of the avant-garde came a desire for poetry which refused

> to be "poetical" in the old sense [and] the Modernist poets chose to exclude most of the things that older readers understood by poetry itself. . . . The obvious, the sentimental, the lyrical . . . were suspect, and a new vocabulary (irony, complexity, tension, structure, ambiguity, toughness) enters the critics vocabulary.[107]

These values were very much contrary to the aesthetic Stieglitz had followed during the period of his experimentation and had explored in *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work*.

Yet, the modern qualities of the straight photograph came only after a quarter century of work. Stieglitz liked to claim, "I was born a revolutionist. . .,"[108] but in fact he was very much the product of his times. Those times were times of radical change, and Stieglitz was able to ride the crest of the wave. Stieglitz was rooted in the early nineteenth-century pictorialism of Robinson and Rejlander. His work of this period reflected a spiritual idealism that perceived the role of the artist as one who captured beauty, the metaphysical order in nature. The photographs he made had a strong narrative storyline and tried to be artistic by imitation of an existing aesthetic established in other media. That aesthetic was based on the principles of John Burnet, whom Stieglitz received from Robinson and Rejlander through his mentor, Vogel. After his return to America, Peter Henry Emerson influenced Stieglitz to the degree that Stieglitz began paying more attention to the qualities of atmosphere and less attention to technically perfect rendition of detail. More importantly, Emerson helped instill in Stieglitz the notion of individual and original poetic vision apart from the banal sensibilities of the amateur photographer. The critics Keiley, Hartmann, and Caffin who helped to develop the notion of the cult of the artist heavily reinforced in Stieglitz the artistic sensibility of artist as poet, characteristic of his period of experimentation.

To portray Stieglitz' as a genius of spontaneous invention working in the style of straight photography well before its time is to misconstrue his real development as an artist and thinker. This misunderstanding of Stieglitz' career is partly the result of his own attempts to mystify his *oeuvre* and the efforts of a coterie of devoted followers to assure that he would be seen as preeminent in the development of modern photography. Stieglitz' *oeuvre* has also been misunderstood because so little of it is known.

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[106] Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: Introduction to an American Seer*, p. 21

[107] Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane. *Modernism, 1890-1930* (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 158-159.

[108] Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: Introduction to an American Seer*, p. 6.