

When photography wanted to be painting



Gertrude Käsebier's "Untitled (Billiard game)," circa 1909.

By [Mark Feeney](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 23, 2016

SPRINGFIELD — For much of its first century, people didn't quite know what to make of photography. They knew it was a form of technology, and as such highly useful. They knew it was a tool of memory, and as such little short of miraculous. But was it . . . art?

The question seems ridiculous now. The work of such early practitioners as W.H. Fox Talbot and Julia Margaret Cameron has a transfixing beauty and power. The question didn't seem ridiculous then. The attempt to prove that photography most definitely *was* art inspired the movement known as Pictorialism.

Pictorialism is at the heart of “Photo-Secession: Painterly Masterworks of Turn-of-the-Century Photography.” The show runs through Aug. 28 at the Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts.

Pictorialism arose in the 1880s and flourished into the era of World War I. These were the years of the Aesthetic Movement and art for art's sake. With walls painted aubergine and classical music playing over the sound system, the galleries evoke the era's artistic spirit, at once passionately serious and no less passionately overripe.

The key word in the show's subtitle is “painterly.” Such photographers as the Americans Alfred Stieglitz, Clarence H. White, and Gertrude Käsebier; the Englishmen Peter Henry Emerson and Frederick H. Evans; and the Austrian Heinrich Kühn sought to prove that photography was a fine art. The 78 images in the show have a healthy representation from each, as well as two younger photographers, soon-to-outgrow Pictorialism, Edward Steichen and Paul Strand.



“The Steerage” (1907) by Alfred Stieglitz.

Pictorialist photographers would beat fine artists at their own game. They would make photographs that looked like paintings and prints. White's "The Mirror," for example, is the pursuit of Vermeer by photographic means. Käsebier does him one better, with an explicit homage to Manet's once-scandalous "Dejeuner sur l'herbe" (itself an homage to a Renaissance painting) — except this time the central figure is clothed. Pictorialism was nothing if not respectable.

Where the machine aesthetic of much High Modernism shows present as future, Pictorialism shows it as past. Note the anachronistic timepiece in George Seeley's "Woman With Hourglass." Rural settings were superior to urban, the better to suggest a sense of timelessness. Emerson was the master of this approach. Traditional genres (religious pictures, still lifes, gauzy nudes) predominated. A soft, diffuse appearance, as of etchings, was as much statement of artistic purpose as visual ideal. Platinum, palladium, and gum bichromate processes, which easily provide themselves blurry allure, were preferred.

The crisp particularity the camera bestows was a gift to be declined. Pictorialism offers the spectacle of a medium denying, or at the very least disguising, its nature. The French General Staff, it has been said, was always fighting the last war.

Aesthetically, so were the Pictorialists. Happily on horseback, they were attacking — or was it fleeing? — the machine guns of modern life.

The limitations, and perils, of painterliness are on frequent display. Fairy-dust foolishness never looks quite so foolish as when technologically enabled. Even when showing modernity, these photographers strove to make it look like something else. Drahomir Ruzicka's interior of New York's Pennsylvania Station gives it the misterioso look of an incense-filled cathedral. [Karl Struss](#) shows New York's Singer Building framed by Brooklyn Bridge cables — as if to contain the thrust and size of the onetime tallest building in the world.

All that said, Pictorialism produced not a few of the most beautiful photographs ever made (Pictorialists made photographs, they didn't take them), such as Evans's [portrait of Aubrey Beardsley](#) or Emerson's ["Gathering Water Lilies."](#)

Some of the best Pictorialist images, rather than trying to conceal the tension between past and present, embrace it. Showing a woman playing billiards, Käsebier conveys a vision of upper-crust gentility. It could be a scene from an Edith Wharton novel. Yet as with Wharton, look beneath the surface and you find unexpected, even unsettling, things. A strikingly modern visual effect, recession into depth, belies any literal superficiality.

Stieglitz was a master of this interplay between tradition and innovation. He was the leader of Photo-Secession, the American wing of Pictorialism. The show includes a copy of [Camera Work](#), the magnificent quarterly Stieglitz published. Soon enough he would outgrow the movement. His most famous photograph, "The Steerage," is poised between Cubism and social commentary. What could be a more up-to-the-minute subject in 1907 America than immigration and social inequality? Or 2016.

As for Stieglitz's portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe, his then-lover and future wife, they have an emotional intensity that few paintings have had — an intensity that owes nothing to painterliness. There's one in the show, of O'Keeffe fixing her hair, that in

Patti Smith cutting her hair.
Comments

As both pendant and riposte to the larger show, the D'Amour has drawn on its collection for "Monochrome." It runs through Sept. 25. The 17 photographs underscore the medium's affinity for the direct, the real, the contemporary.

They're cannily chosen. [Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother"](#) is even more famous than Stieglitz's "Steerage." It shows how very differently — and immediately — the theme of madonna and child can be handled. [Richard Buswell's "General Store,"](#) with its wall of slatternly slats, is very much kin to the trim, spare elegance of two post-Pictorialist photographs in "Photo-Secession": Paul Strand's "Fish Shed" and Charles Sheeler's "White Barn, Bucks County."

As for "Isolation Unit," from [Michael Jacobson-Hardy's](#) series on Massachusetts jails and prisons, it's hard to imagine something further from a Pictorialist aesthetic. On the other side of that grim locked door is more than just an inmate. In this context, there's a sensibility, too.

PHOTO-SECESSION: Painterly Masterworks of Turn-of-the-Century Photography

MONOCHROME: Black and White Photography From the Permanent Collection

At Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, 21 Edwards St., Springfield, through Aug. 28 and Sept. 25, respectively, 413-263-6800, springfieldmuseums.org/about/museum-of-fine-arts

Mark Feeney can be reached at mfeeney@globe.com.