

A SERIES BY RICHARD PITNICK

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 PART ONE  
 THE EMERGENCE  
 OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS  
 COLLECTIBLE ART
 

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**T**o the degree that the emergence of photography as a premier fine art collectible can be traced back to a single galvanizing event or individual, it is generally acknowledged that the opening of Alfred Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession in New York City in 1905 was the significant catalyst that led to the eventual recognition of photography as a truly authentic art form.

"It goes without saying that Stieglitz was the first person in America to clearly articulate the potential for photography as a form of creative expression," says Weston Naef, curator of photography at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. "It's not as though Stieglitz invented the idea of the photograph as a work of art, but he elevated the general consciousness of a relatively bourgeois but well-educated public that photographs could be works of art."

As Naef suggests, Stieglitz was by no means the sole advocate for photography as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Among 19th-century European photographers in particular, there was little question that photography was art, although there was much debate over what type of images and subject matter could truly be considered artistic. Stieglitz's essential challenge in developing his own aesthetic philosophy was to find and clearly articulate that combination of craft, technique and stylistic intent that best expressed the true meaning of photography beyond any references to painting and other graphic arts.

In a previously published interview in the magazine *On Paper*, Pierre Apraxine, curator of the Gilman Paper Company Collec-



tion, compared European and American photography in the 19th century, making note of the two culturally distinct trends that emerged during this period: "In America during the 19th century, photography was not burdened by the conventions of art," said Apraxine. "Photography was equated with the truth. The camera became an instrument to approach truth and had to reveal as much as possible. Every image had to teach something. In Europe, photography was definitely approached as art. Later in the 19th century it was downgraded to technology, and then, with [Peter Henry] Emerson, it reinvented itself as art again."

Stieglitz, in both his work and writings, embraced many of the principles articulated by British photographer Peter Henry Emerson, who during the 1880s espoused an aesthetic that favored unadorned realism and photographic exactitude over the contrived artificiality and romanticism of most "art" photography of that period. Emerson's regard for "naturalistic" photography, as eventually filtered through Stieglitz, presaged the ensuing emergence of so-called "straight" photography.

For Stieglitz, the presumptive division between the photograph

as either document or art was an artificial distinction. With such landmark images as *The Terminal* (1893) and *The Steerage* (1907), Stieglitz demonstrated that essentially "documentary" photographs could convey transcendental truths and fully embody all the principles by which any graphic image was deemed "artistic."

Whether consciously or not, Stieglitz's championing of realism or "straight" photography was the perfect expression for an American audience that, as Apraxine implies, was culturally predisposed to understand and appreciate photography that was based on realism as opposed to the high-art pretensions of European photography.

Where Stieglitz ultimately succeeded in becoming the prime motivating force for the acceptance of photography as art was through an intuitive and abiding conviction that photography was best understood as an expression of Modernism. In later incarnations of his original gallery, particularly 291 and An American Place, Stieglitz exhibited photographs along with paintings, sculpture and prints by such masters of Modernism as Cezanne, Picasso, Brancusi and Matisse. By showing photographs within a decidedly

Modernist context, Stieglitz helped forge a new identity for photography that was divorced from references to older traditions of painting and accepted artistic sensibilities of the past.

"Stieglitz was helped enormously by the idea of modern art as a new and different way of looking at and interpreting the world, and one of the most important factors with Alfred Stieglitz's writings in *Camera Work* and his successive art galleries is the fact that he presented photography as an art collectible with other mainstream art, like sculpture and printmaking," comments Steve Perloff, founder and editor since 1976 of the critical journal, *The Photo Review*, and publisher since 1996 of the newsletter, *The Photograph Collector*.

"This is an under-appreciated but important reason, because what Stieglitz struggled against was the perception that photography was purely mechanical without any humanity," adds Perloff. "But the embracing of machines and mechanical means of reproduction by Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists made it easier to think of photography in similar terms. From Marcel Duchamp putting a urinal in the [1913] Armory Show to the use of cut-up newspapers in collages by Picasso and Braque, credence was lent to the idea that something made this way could be considered an artistic object."

**D**espite of, or because of, what became a period of tumultuous political and social change, photography slowly insinuated itself into the consciousness of American culture during the decades between the mid-Twenties and the mid-Fifties. Due in large

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measure to Stieglitz's continued influence, which extended well into the Forties, museums, and to a lesser extent other art galleries eventually came to recognize photography's intrinsic historic and artistic value, and began acquiring substantial collections of work.

Among photographers themselves, there was a growing advocacy for photography's place within the artistic and cultural mainstream that found expression through the creation of such artists' collectives as Group f.64 and the Photo League. Of equal importance during this period was the veritable explosion in mass media and photojournalism, which accelerated on a direct and subliminal level a broader appreciation and understanding of the medium among the public at large. Even though it would take almost half a century for all these factors to fully coalesce, they ultimately combined to form the essential foundation upon which photography came to be fully recognized as an enduring, historically important art form and a valuable art commodity. "It required a convergence of many factors and a process of education at all levels, from museums and collectors to the general public, to create an appreciation for photography," says Stephen White, a Los Angeles-based private dealer who opened one of southern California's first photo galleries in 1975.

**N**o single factor conferred greater artistic legitimacy on photography than the acquisition and exhibition programs initiated by museums through the mid-century. Beginning in 1924, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston

became the first American museum to add photography to its permanent collection by acquiring a group of photographs by Stieglitz. Two years later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art followed suit by acquiring Stieglitz's personal collection of photographs, the first such acquisition for the Metropolitan.

While museums throughout the U.S. exhibited and promoted photography during this period, the one museum above all others that is credited with having the greatest influence in promoting fine art photography is New York City's Museum of Modern Art. Through a series of landmark exhibitions that ranged well into the Sixties, the museum reached huge audiences, and not only legitimized photography as art but in essence validated the Modernist approach as the truest expression of art photography.

In 1937, MOMA presented its first survey exhibition, *Photography 1839–1937*, under the direction of preeminent photography historian Beaumont Newhall, who was selected to head the museum's newly created department of photography in 1940. Featuring works by among others Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Atget, William Henry Fox Talbot, Julia Margaret Cameron, Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan, the exhibition was arguably the first such show to articulate a historical context by which to understand the development of photography in its first 100 years.

MOMA's groundbreaking efforts continued in 1938 with the presentation of its first one-person exhibition of photographs by Walker Evans, whose work and aesthetic influenced an entire generation of photographers.

In 1939, Newhall and MOMA organized the *Seven Americans* exhibition at the New York World's Fair, featuring work by Evans, Ansel Adams, Berenice Abbott, Man Ray, Harold Edgerton, Ralph Steiner and Brett Weston. During the Forties, MOMA mounted enormously influential retrospectives of work by Paul Strand and Edward Weston that further legitimized "straight" photography.

**A**lthough major institutions exerted undeniable influence on photography's growing acceptance, private collectors and art patrons provided substantial support in assisting museums' acquisition and exhibition programs.

One of the most influential and highly regarded individuals in photography's struggle for artistic recognition was philanthropist and art patron David H. McAlpin, the first private person in the U.S. to donate money to museums specifically for the acquisition of art photography. The first major collections acquired by the Metropolitan and MOMA in 1939 in conjunction with the centennial of photography's invention were funded by McAlpin, who also anonymously funded MOMA's *Photography 1839–1937* exhibition.

Beyond his financial largess, McAlpin helped guide MOMA in the creation of its photography department in 1940, and was an early and important patron and supporter of Ansel Adams. Perhaps McAlpin's most significant contribution to photography was his endowment of the first professorship in the history of photography at Princeton University in 1972, setting the stage for what became the proliferation of aca-

demical programs at colleges and universities throughout the U.S.

Another significant individual in the early decades of modern photography was writer, publisher, art critic and arts patron, Lincoln Kirstein, who championed the career of Walker Evans and who, along with McAlpin, played an important role in the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art's photography department. Kirstein was a staunch proponent of Modernism and, as an undergraduate at Harvard University in 1928, helped found the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art which in 1930 staged a groundbreaking exhibition of contemporary photography featuring 10 works each by Berenice Abbott, Atget, Walker Evans, Ralph Steiner, Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand.

Although private galleries between the Twenties and Fifties played a somewhat lesser role in promoting photography, one art dealer who emerged as a significant player was Julien Levy, whose eponymous gallery opened in New York City in 1931 with the retrospective *American Photography* exhibition featuring work by Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Clarence White, Paul Strand and Gertrude Käsebier.

Although Levy didn't exhibit photography exclusively at his gallery, he was a true photo connoisseur and visionary collector with an avid interest in Surrealism. In 1929, while traveling in Europe, Levy purchased approximately 30 photographs from André Kertész, which Levy eventually sold in the U.S. for \$20 a print. (Many early Kertész prints are now valued at upwards of \$10,000, with some vintage works valued at

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upwards of \$60,000). Levy is reputedly the first dealer to introduce the work of Atget to the U.S. and one of the earliest to feature work by Cartier-Bresson and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Carrying on in the Modernist tradition set by Stieglitz, Levy's 1932 exhibition, *Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings and Photographs*, featured works by Salvador Dali, Picasso, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp, along with photography by Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy and Atget. Levy maintained his gallery until 1949, and eventually acquired a collection of 2,000 photographs, including more than 350 prints by Atget.

One of the more important developments in the growing recognition of photography as art was the establishment during the Thirties of photographers' collectives that lobbied for a wider appreciation of photography through the articulation of specific artistic credos. The two most influential were Group f.64 and the Photo League.

As the precursor to the so-called West Coast School of photography, Group f.64, founded in California in 1932 by Willard Van Dyke, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston among others, expounded an aesthetic that was grounded in a commitment to craft and a purity of vision that favored a broad range of rich, expressive tonalities, deep focus and vivid detail. The group had its inaugural exhibition in 1932 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, launching a broader appreciation for art photography on the West Coast and establishing the standard by which

fine landscape photography came to be judged.

The establishment of Group f.64 also heralded the emergence of Adams, who after Stieglitz is arguably the most influential photographer in the medium's history. No photographer did more to popularize fine art photography, and as a technician who advocated a rigorous adherence to principles of craft, helped codify a set of standards by which to evaluate the technical if not aesthetic merits of a photograph.

Throughout his career, Adams lent support to the establishment of photography departments in museums and academic institutions, most notably the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1975. Many art dealers credit Adams's appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1979 as igniting a broad wave of popular interest in collecting fine art photography. Of equal impact was the burgeoning environmental movement which in many ways caught up with Adams's own lifelong interest in conservation.

Where Group f.64 was overtly artistic in philosophic intent, the Photo League, founded by Berenice Abbot, Gene Smith, Paul Strand and others in New York City in 1936, was devoted to socially committed, documentary work. The league sponsored numerous classes and exhibitions during its 15-year history, influencing an entire generation to appreciate photography's potential and power for truth and social justice. The establishment of the Photo League was a logical outgrowth of and drew strength from the emergence of documentary photography and photojournalism.

Concurrent with the creation of the Photo League in 1936 was the publication of the first issue of *Life* magazine, an event of unanticipated future consequence credited with building a popular consciousness of photography that became crucial to the art market during the late Sixties and Seventies.

The period during which photography became an important tool of mass communication was marked most significantly by a crossover and blurring of the distinctions between documentary and art photography. For artists like Edward Steichen, who was appointed chief photographer for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* in 1923, and Walker Evans, who held the position of staff photographer for 21 years at *Fortune*, beginning in 1945, magazine work afforded valid opportunities for creative expression.

In considering the impact of photojournalism in creating a greater awareness and appreciation for photography, the massive documentary record of the lives of American workers and farm families sponsored by the Farm Security Administration in the Thirties touched the lives of millions of Americans and validated the power of photography to communicate and tell stories with artistry and compassion. FSA photographers like Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Marion Post Wolcott, Walker Evans and Russell Lee produced upwards of 270,000 photos, many of which were published in newspapers, books, and magazines or displayed in public exhibitions.

Documentary photography helped validate the philosophy

of Modernism by demonstrating that "artistry" resides as much in the photographer's intent and sensibility as it is does in content. In today's collectors' market, photographers whose work was essentially photojournalistic by design are purchased and appreciated for the same reasons as work that was primarily artistic in intent. What matters to collectors is the historic, emotional and aesthetic value of a photograph.

Two significant events in the mid-Fifties that in retrospect seemed to have prophesied the soon-to-be-realized creation of a culturally broad-based appreciation of fine art photography were the opening of the *Family of Man* exhibition at MOMA in 1955, and the opening one year earlier of what is reputedly the first commercial gallery devoted exclusively to photography, Helen Gee's *Limelight Gallery/Cafe*.

Under the direction of Edward Steichen, who became MOMA's director of photography in 1947, the *Family of Man* exhibition became what many regard as the most influential photography exhibition ever staged. Although the artistic merits of the show continue to be debated, there is no arguing with the fact that with an estimated 7 million people worldwide having seen the show, the idea of photography as art became firmly planted in the minds of a mass audience.

With the opening of her precedent-setting *Limelight Gallery* in New York City's West Village in 1954, Helen Gee in essence launched the modern era of photo galleries. During its seven-year run, the *Limelight* featured approximately 70 exhibitions, showing

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work by almost every recognized photographer past and present. Among the numerous artists Gee exhibited at the Limelight were Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Bill Brandt, Atget, Julia Margaret Cameron, Paul Caponigro, Arnold Newman, Aaron Siskind and Gene Smith. Although Gee had to operate a cafe in order to remain afloat financially (a show was deemed a success if two prints, usually valued at no more than \$25 each, sold), her gallery is credited with establishing the model by which future galleries would function.

"Limelight was the important venue for serious photography, along with the Museum of Modern Art in the Fifties," says Chicago gallery owner Stephen Daiter, who held a major exhibition of Gee's personal photography collection at his gallery last fall. "The gallery received extensive press coverage and the exhibits were consistently reviewed in the *New York Times* and many other publications.

"Many practices at the Limelight, including invitations, press releases and opening receptions, created a prototype closely followed by today's photography galleries," adds Daiter. "However, the Limelight did not maintain an inventory of work for sale, other than the current exhibition. There was no room to store work before or after a show, although Gee did order prints requested later by patrons."

The opening of the Lee Witkin Gallery in New York City in 1969, the first commercial gallery devoted exclusively to the sale of fine art photography, heralded the arrival of photography as a collectible art form. However tenuous and tentative the initial efforts during the Seventies

and early Eighties, dealers throughout the U.S. successfully championed photography as a valuable, defining expression of modern art and culture. "Private dealers and commercial gallery owners were the first to stick their necks out," contends Joshua Mann Paillet, who opened his first photo gallery in Houston in 1970, before moving to New Orleans in 1974 and starting A Gallery of Fine Photography. "Many of the great photographers were already being collected then; it just didn't have the momentum yet. There were no museums or galleries that were teaching or laying a foundation for people to learn about and appreciate photography."

**A**ccording to Paillet, it was the synergistic effect of fortuitous timing combined with a maturing generation that was culturally grounded in photographic imagery that helped launch the art market for photography in the Seventies. "Before you had a generation that was heavy into painting and drawing, but along come the Seventies and suddenly you had a quantum leap with a new generation that was visually literate and whose awareness was sparked by *Life* magazine and television," explains Paillet.

The sense of vision, leadership and energy demonstrated by galleries and private dealers was buoyed both by a renewed interest among museums in photography as an expression of the broader revolution taking place in the visual and graphic arts, and a recognition by colleges and universities that photography was deserving of its own history and deeper study and analysis within the context

of modern art generally. With the creation of university-based archives like the Center for Creative Photography, and photographic art history and fine arts programs at the college and university levels, a new era of scholarship was established that enhanced the value of photographs as both historical and art objects.

"There is a relationship you can feel between the market and institutions," says Trudy Wilner Stack, curator of exhibitions and collections for the Center for Creative Photography. "In order for photography to be collected, to mature and come of age as an art form in the marketplace, attention had to be directed in an institutional context. Photography needed its own institutions, and you can see the ripple effect in the marketplace. When you do historical work on an important figure in the non-profit realm, it affects the market place."

For Boston-based gallery owner Robert Klein, who also serves as president of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers (AIPAD), the increasing depth of knowledge among the general public, combined with a recognition by artists and art institutions of photography's broader potential and significance within the entire field of the visual arts, were critical support factors for the emerging marketplace.

"You had a population come of age with an informed knowledge of the value of photography *vis-à-vis* other art forms from having photography incorporated into art history courses in college, and you had an exhaustion of creativity in the other plastic arts like painting and printmaking that inspired artists to experiment

with light-sensitive materials as means of expression," Klein explains.

"The connoisseurship of photography among people who buy and sell has increased exponentially," agrees Denise Bethel, a senior vice-president with Sotheby's who also serves as the auction house's director of its department of photography. "I would say that photographs are going for more money now than anyone might have expected, and part of what accounts for the tremendous increase in prices is the fact that the history of photography is now incorporated into the history of art as a whole."

**N**ewer artists' growing fascination with mass communication and the incorporation of wide-ranging forms of graphic representation in their work was an important element in museums' renewed interest in photography, as was the affordability of photographic work relative to other more established art, believes Steve Perloff.

"You have to look at market forces," insists Perloff. "As painting and then art prints became more and more expensive, the art market needed another entry and, during the Seventies and Eighties, as photography started to get shown more in mainstream galleries, you saw the beginnings of the idea that people who make photographs were artists and not just photographers. Today, there is so much photo-based work that photography has become one of the main components of the contemporary art market."

From Weston Naef's perspective as one of the country's pre-eminent museum curators, the

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motivating factors behind museums' renewed interest in photography cannot be reduced solely to an issue of economics. Naef believes the renewed interest in photography was reflective of museums' growing recognition of the importance of photography within the context of the entire history of the visual arts, combined with an abiding sense of mission in assembling historically comprehensive art collections. "By the last quarter of the 20th century, the very best examples of works in painting and sculpture had already found their way into museums," explains Naef, acknowledging somewhat the issue of supply and demand. "But by training, museum traders are searching for quality above all else, and there comes a time when the desire to have the best of a certain type of object outweighs all other concerns. It wasn't the relative cheapness of photographs as such, but a much more formidable dynamic coupled with the fact that you could buy the best for an affordable sum of money. Now the market for photographs favored styles and artists has gotten way beyond the affordable stage," admits Naef.

One of the bigger changes in the market over the past few decades has been a shift by museums, corporate collections and regional art institutions away from purchasing works from galleries and private dealers toward acquisition from the large auction houses, donations, and wealthy private collectors. Some of the Getty Museum's most important acquisitions, for example, came from the private holdings of noted American collectors Samuel Wagstaff and Arnold Crane, the latter a Chicago-based

attorney who had purchased a substantial number of works directly from Walker Evans in 1968.

**C**ompared to the market of the Seventies and Eighties, today's market is much more complex.

The interaction between museum and institutional collectors, established galleries and private dealers, and well-heeled private collectors competing for a dwindling supply of work, has created a more competitive and dynamic market.

"The evolution of the photography market has been extraordinarily dramatic in the last 25 to 30 years, and overlaps the history of most photographic institutions' collections in this country," says Trudy Wilner Stack, acknowledging the correlation between institutional collecting and its impact on the market. "It isn't as easy as it was in the first decade. Things are more competitive with less work to compete over, and it's the heavy-hitting institutions that have the biggest influence. Most art museums collect photography, and those that have been in it for generations have so much more financial means. They can buy the archive of an entire life's work of a major photographer for what it costs to buy a great piece by an individual painter or sculptor."

In terms of the future viability of the market, Stack, somewhat ironically, sees photography as having come full circle from the days when Stieglitz first promoted photography within the context of other expressions of modern art. The recognition that photography eventually earned as a unique art form is slowly breaking down and being absorbed back into the broader world of the visual arts.

"In the early part of the century, photography didn't exist as its own category yet—it was an appendix to other visual media," explains Stack. "Stieglitz putting photography in that context at that time was very important, but it didn't happen again for a while. Now we've got photography departments in museums and university programs trying to break down what we built," adds Stack. "You can see certain kinds of post-modern figures being offered at contemporary art auctions versus photography auctions."

**F**or Denise Bethel, there is a growing sense that the photography market may be poised for a shift away from the established names in the collectors' market, whose work is becoming increasingly scarce, toward a renewed interest in the work of emerging and mid-career artists. In both cases, Bethel believes such a shift bodes well for a continued appreciation in the value of fine art photography.

"Among people who've been collecting for years, there is the feeling that the supply of works by the established artists is getting smaller and smaller," acknowledges Bethel. "When I started in 1980, we might not have known how very limited in quantity some of these photographs were. Now we know. Less than 10 percent of important work that sets record prices ever gets recycled, and that is another thing that has made photography more valuable."

Sharing in Bethel's prognosis about the future of the photography market, Stack believes that the evolution of the market will create new opportunities for

collectors and future generations of photographers.

"I see both good and bad for the next wave," says Stack. "In some ways the photography market is probably parallel to what's happening with the other visual arts. The more valuable and recognized, the richer the aura around major figures and the higher prices they command, the less opportunity for emerging artists. This trend results in many fewer venues for emerging photographers because it's too risky to have to show someone new whose work may be difficult and hard to sell.

"There's a power base in the marketplace that's over-centralized, and there is some danger in that to the health of the field," adds Stack. "I feel like the system is starting to choke itself a little bit, and with the economic downturn photo dealers have begun to feel pinched. But on the other hand it can be good for younger people when money is taken out of the market, because then collectors aren't necessarily focusing on 'what's hot' or what's the best investment and instead begin to look at photographs for what they truly represent."

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