Taking pictures in the twentieth century

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The current exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of his early work demonstrates that American photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976) was a truly remarkable artist. His photos from 1915-17 possess a rare beauty and intelligence.

The exhibit raises a number of issues. One of the most intriguing, and which I only mention in passing here, is the degree to which art and intellectual life in general in the United States was emerging in the decade of the 1910s from a state of provincialism and beginning to address itself to "world-historical" problems. It is impossible to look at Strand's rigorous, unsentimental, modernist photos from 1916 or so without recognizing, first and foremost, the striking changes that had taken place in American society and mentality since the turn of the century.

Strand was born to a cultivated middle-class Jewish family on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. His forebears, whose original name was Stransky, had come from Bohemia in the 1840s. His parents made financial sacrifices to send him to the Ethical Culture School, which adhered to the educational principles of John Dewey. One of his teachers was the renowned photographer of New York's poor, Lewis Hine.

Through Hine, Strand was brought into contact with the Photo-Secession group of Alfred Stieglitz and its famous gallery, 291. The eminent art critic Charles Caffin was another of his teachers, and as a result of his encouragement Strand took a tour of Europe's main art museums in 1911. The Armory Show of 1913, which was for many Americans their first introduction to Picasso, Braque and other modernists, was a significant event in Strand's early life. He came into closer contact with Stieglitz and other artists associated with the Modern Gallery, opened in 1915, including the French avant-gardists Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia.

There are several remarkable photographs from 1915 and 1916 in the Metropolitan Museum exhibit. Strand took many pictures in New York at that time trying to capture the movement of urban life. One of this series is particularly well known, *Wall Street* (1915). It is a photograph of J.P. Morgan Company's recently-completed building. A handful of small, anonymous figures, presumably on their way to work, are dwarfed by the massive stone building, with its gigantic windows, visible simply as rectangular black holes. Strand later denied that this and similar photos had any overt political overtones, but photographers and painters of the time took for granted many things that remain a closed book to contemporary artists.

During this time Strand also engaged in experimentation with abstract or apparently abstract forms. A number of the photos of architectural elements and household items taken at a summer cottage in Twin Lakes, Connecticut in 1916 are included in the current exhibit. The pictures of bowls, pears and jugs, on tables or porch floors, in sunlight or shadow are austere and elegant. In later years Strand, who never wavered from realism after this early period, somewhat apologetically explained that this work had proven useful in teaching him that a work of art had its own structure independent of its substance. No apology was called for. The photographs are genuinely beautiful insofar as they demonstrate the capacity of the human mind and hand to break objects and space into the most essential components of form and light and movement. They resemble mathematical axioms, preliminary and lacking flesh, but unimpeachable.

One of the highlights of the exhibit is a selection of Strand's portraits made in 1916 or so. He employed a prism lens that allowed him to focus on a subject without the individual's being aware of it. The directness of expression obtained has no doubt been equaled by other photographers since, but perhaps not surpassed. *Blind Woman*, New York, 1916 is one of the most remarkable on display. We see the upper body of a middle-aged woman against a stone wall. She wears dark clothes and a scarf on her head. At her throat she has a small metal badge, issued by the authorities, with the number 2622 on it, her license to beg. Beneath it, on a sign suspended around her neck on a cord, is the word "BLIND." She is slightly turned to the viewer's right, one eye closed and the other open but sightless. A critic has commented: "Strand's portraits combine sociological objectivity with an intense, but dispassionate and unsentimental, involvement with personality, character, and humanity. As he said about them: 'I felt they were all people whom life had battered into some sort of extraordinary interest and, in a way, nobility.'"

Stieglitz, who published Strand's work in his journal, commented: "His work is pure. It is direct. It does not rely upon tricks of process. In whatever he does there is applied intelligence."

One feels enormous intelligence at work in Strand's photos. One feels his interest in the world and one feels the newness of

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all sorts of processes and tendencies in the world. One feels, in short, both the stimuli at work and the highly developed mental equipment prepared to receive and work it over.

But is it "pure" and "direct"? Such words can be misleading. Many people have cameras and point them in any number of directions. Why are some photographs meaningful and others merely picturesque? There is an extensive and sophisticated cultural prehistory to Strand's photographs. One must know what and how to shoot. This is not merely a technical or mechanical operation, although that obviously comes into play. It is an expression of subjective choices taken in accordance with a body of knowledge and a well thought-out view of reality. What one produces, after all, must have some relation to what one thought and felt when taking the photograph.

A painter produces essential truth about the world from out of his or her imagination; a photographer must align certain objective elements so that they betray, perhaps against their will, this sort of essential truth. Which is the more difficult task? It's impossible to say, but one is certainly drawn to the conclusion faced with Strand's early pictures that a serious photographer must possess a rare combination of vigilance and aesthetic sensibility.

Peter Schjeldahl, in an article that appeared in New York City's *Village Voice*, expresses admiration for the show, but goes on to assert that Strand's modernism "was a productive mental illness, perhaps, with heroic symptoms." Of Strand's photos, he writes, "Each suggests that to see through a lens is to know, and that to know is to master essential reality. It can seem a simple step from such lucidity of vision to lucidity of action, taking the world in rational and enlightened, perhaps revolutionary hand. Nuts."

Is there a naiveté in the clarity of Strand's work of this period? Does it suggest that knowing and mastering the world are perhaps relatively simple tasks? It's possible. He was young; the century was too. But that sort of confidence was itself a necessary and healthy stage. Has the cynicism and skepticism that dominates current artistic circles proven more productive? Hardly.

Strand became a supporter of the Stalinist movement in the 1930s and remained one to the end of his days, living the last quarter-century of his life in France, as something of an exile. Whatever limitations the political traumas of the century placed on his later work is beyond the scope of this article. The memoirs of younger photographers, however, make clear that Strand, steeped in a knowledge of painting and culture, never accepted the reactionary banalities of "Socialist Realism." He was, in fact, refused a work permit in the USSR in 1935 because of his association with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, then under suspicion of "formalism." In 1949, in response to the question raised at a symposium organized by the Stalinist-influenced Photo League, "Where do we go from here?, Strand responded. "Go to the Metropolitan Museum." The brilliance of his early work remains an inspiration to anyone with a faith in art and humanity.

The exhibit of photographs by Robert Capa at the International Center of Photography tells us as much about the tragic progression of the century as it does about the evolution of the photographic art. Capa, born Endre Friedmann in Budapest in 1913, was forced to leave Hungary because of his leftist student activities in 1931. He emigrated to Paris where he began to work for the photo agency Dephot. Ironically, for a man who was also to attach himself to the Stalinist movement, his first break came with the opportunity to photograph Leon Trotsky delivering his famous speech, known to us as "In Defense of the October Revolution," in Copenhagen in 1932.

If Capa became famous as one of the preeminent recorders of war it was because he was active in a period marked by nearly uninterrupted and bloody conflicts. His photographs of the Spanish Civil War were groundbreaking. Using the compact 35-millimeter Leica camera, which had appeared on the market in the 1920s, Capa was able to go closer than any photographer had ever gone before. He famously told his colleagues, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." His photo of a Loyalist militiaman, who has been hit by a bullet such a short time before that his body has not yet hit the ground, still horrifies one. Capa's lover, Gerda Taro, was killed in Spain in 1937.

Capa went on to photograph the Sino-Japanese War in 1938, the European theater of World War II, including the invasion of Normandy in 1944, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and the French Indochina war in 1954. He was killed, at the age of 40, by a land mine on May 25, 1954, while accompanying French soldiers.

Capa was obviously an intensely energetic and dedicated photographer. Due to the character of the events into which he was thrown it is unclear that he ever had the time to reflect on his art, as Strand and those of his generation had. Indeed, it is a commentary on the speed with which events took place in the middle of the twentieth century that Edward Steichen, who was already active as a photographer when Paul Strand came onto the artistic scene, delivered a speech at a memorial service for Capa.

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