

KEITH DE LELLIS
GALLERY

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

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The Geometry of Modernism

September 13 - November 4, 2023

Keith de Lellis Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of: **The Geometry of Modernism**, opening on September 13 and on view through November 4th. The exhibition tracks the development of Modern Photography that began in the last decade of the 19th century and continued to flourish internationally through the late 1930s and beyond. Modern Photography replaced the blurred lines of the sentimental, soft focus painterly style of the last century with a new cubist inspired precision based on the principles inherent in geometrics conducive to the encroaching modern era.

Long considered one of the earliest examples of Modern Photography and historically one of the most important works of the photographic arts of the 20th century is **Alfred Stieglitz's (1864-1946)** shipboard masterpiece "The Steerage, 1907". Stieglitz considered this monumental image a turning point in the evolution of his photographic art. A dense image populated with passengers on upper and lower decks, the image is bi-sected diagonally by a gangplank serving as a visual metaphor for the class structure of passengers populating the upper and lower decks of a transatlantic ocean liner. The haves and the have-nots in stark contrast. This image is represented in the exhibition by a large scale photogravure Stieglitz printed on vellum.

A lesser-known image in the exhibition also by Alfred Stieglitz is a platinum contact print, "Night-The Savoy, 1897". This image was made ten years before the artist's landmark modern masterpiece "The Steerage, 1907". One could argue that this early experimental night view—faster film stock had only recently been made available to facilitate a quicker exposure—is as consequential a product of a modern aesthetic as his later more famous effort. It is modern both technically and in terms of its picture structure. The image of the Savoy, a hotel, on 5th Avenue and 59th Street in Manhattan, depicts the abstract quality inherent in the central element, a repeat pattern of a row of gaslit circular street lamps illuminating and reflected in the rain soaked cobblestone pavement. The picture is a precise and moody depiction of a damp night scene capturing all the mystery and sensation of what later came to be known as film noir.

Arnold Genthe (1869-1942) is primarily known as a pictorialist photographer, faithful to the romanticism achieved by soft focus lenses. His accomplishments as a photographer included important studio portraiture as well as travel and numerous other genres within the field of professional art photography. Initially based in San Francisco at the beginning of the 20th century, he spent 6 months in Japan in 1908 photographing the culture, architecture and landscape of the island nation. His photograph of Japan's beloved Mount Fuji taken on that trip is an entirely inspired interpretation and a radical departure from the style that he was typically presenting in his practice. In what appears to be a moment of experimentation, he turns his camera on the diagonal, shifting the horizontal picture plane to capture a complementary balance of triangles of land and sky. The result veers away from the traditional mountain landscape to something entirely graphic, a geometric take and an entirely new vision for Genthe.

In addition to American photographers, the exhibition also includes French, Italian, Swiss, and Czech as well as both men and women photographers. Artists who used their craft for commercial pursuits as well as personal

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expression. **Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971)** was one of the best-known women artists of the twentieth century and the exhibition includes three stellar examples of her modernist production. The massive finial of the Chrysler Building Tower under construction in 1929, her iconic photograph "The George Washington Bridge, 1933" and her aerial photograph of the Sierra Madre mountains photographed in California in 1935 (A japonisme layered mountain range study that appeared on the dustjacket of her 1963 autobiography "Portrait of Myself").

Antoinette B. Hervey (1857-1945) was another NY photographer and acolyte of the Clarence White School of Photography. In 1926 on a photography sojourn to Europe she photographed Chartres Cathedral creating a palladiotype image that rivals Charles Sheeler's well know but slightly later 1929 body of work re-interpreting the medieval structure as a beacon of modernist sensibility. Hervey's life work was photographing New York's Cathedral of Saint John the Divine so it's not surprising that Chartres captivated her on her mid-career visit to France.

Modernism permeated every genre of photography such as industrial and architectural photography, street photography, advertising photography, etc. Modernist portraiture made for an especially interesting and complex challenge to photographers. A futurist portrait by **Elio Luxardo (1908-1969)**, a Roman Studio photographer in the 1930s, made a complicated and layered montage with multiple portraits of F. T. Marinetti, the great proponent of Italian futurism, using relevant iconography in the lexicon of the modernist art that was contemporaneously produced in Italy.

Herbert Matter (1907-1984), the monumental Swiss born graphics wunderkind, who settled in New York by way of Chicago's New Bauhaus, created one of the most ingenious photogram portraits of none other than Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, émigré director who relocated to America to head the school. This unique image was created by slicing multiple reject negatives of Moholy-Nagy into numerous triangular sections and contact printing them in a random overlapping pattern on glossy photo paper. A subtle but powerful technique and a fitting homage to one of the leading figures in the art of the photogram.

A completely different method of modernist portraiture is a **George Hoyningen-Heune (1900-1968)** 1926 portrait of Josephine Baker taken in Paris for Vogue Magazine or Vanity Fair. This clever image shows Heune to be a master of the understated. The simplicity of this comical portrait, a head shot of the chanteuse with her signature Charleston era bob, presents Josephine as the clown with eyes crossed, one of her comedic gags that amused audiences at the Folies Bergere in Paris in the 1920s. Heune's contribution is a simple diagonal set that speaks to the zig zag lines associated with jazz age art and publicity. A masterpiece of minimalism and restraint.