

Edward Steichen

Lives in Photography

Jeu de Paume, Paris, 09/10/07 – 30/12/07

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When introducing the work of an artist or photographer for a review, it is customary to give a brief outline of their career, or their impact upon a particular genre or movement. However, in the case of Edward Steichen, such a brief introduction could never do justice to the man who tried and excelled in almost every field of photography, and whose personal contribution to the status of the photographic image as a work of art in its own right is unequalled. In the – albeit biased – words of his friend and contemporary, Alfred Stieglitz, he was “the greatest photographer that ever lived”, which, given his success at each of the various points throughout his epic career, is a statement that remains unchallenged today. Even three decades after his death he made the headlines last year when one of his images sold for \$2.9m, making it the priciest photograph ever. *Lives in Photography* refers to the modestly titled publication *A Life in Photography*, which followed Steichen’s self-curated retrospective at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1961. This touring exhibition, which will be shown in Switzerland, Italy and Spain, is the first one of its kind in Europe and the largest and most comprehensive retrospective of Steichen’s work on both sides of the Atlantic.

Despite his prolific and indeed complex career, the exhibition literature boldly splits Steichen’s career neatly in two; his earlier pictorialist work and his modernist work. It is towards the end of this first section that we learn of Steichen’s work producing aerial reconnaissance images for the American air force during the First World War, which made him drastically re-think the aesthetic priorities of photography, turning against his pictorialist roots in favour of “sharp, clear images.” He then embarks upon his “second apprenticeship” during which time he made a thousand images of a cup-and-saucer, just to perfect his technique. It is facts like these, along with the sheer volume of work on display that conjure up an image of an individual who was

not only extremely gifted, but whose diligence also suggested a humility – a quality rare in such celebrated photographers.

Laid out in one of many cabinets, is a copy of *Art et Decoration* from 1911 which contains Steichen's photographs of clothes designed by Paul Poiret, which are now considered to be the first ever *modern* fashion photography shoot. That is, photographing the garments in such a way as to convey a sense of their physical quality as well as their formal appearance, as opposed to simply illustrating the object. Browsing the many specimens of Steichen's fashion works for clients that included *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, and his celebrity portraits, the only thing that really links them is their attention to detail and careful composition: Steichen did not work to any formula or in any specific style, other than that of precision and excellence.

As splendid as they are, there are a lot of works on display, and trawling around the necessarily dim-lit rooms peering at these dainty little images (particularly his pictorialist works) is a little fatiguing. A short 16mm silent film made in 1937 documenting one of his fashion shoots, offers the viewer some welcomed respite, as well of course, an insight to how he worked on commercial assignments.

In 1938, Steichen retired from commercial photography, and spent the War years involved in combat photography – making his own work, but also curating for the US Navy and the Museum of Modern Art, including *Road to Victory* (1942) and *Power in the Pacific* (1945). This section of the retrospective is particularly successful, not least due to the installation of recent prints, hung asymmetrically, much like how the original propaganda exhibitions were designed. Indeed, other sections of the exhibition might benefit from the odd print enlargement to break-up the repetitive layout of 10" x 8" prints, or so we might enjoy the contact print-sized pictorialist work a little more easily.

The inclusion of vintage material (catalogues, magazines etc) does help to animate the exhibition: Steichen was commissioned by the Stehli Silk Corporation in the 1920s to create some designs, which he did using ephemeral and everyday items, producing patterns that were extremely advanced for their time. These are not only a novelty to see at first-hand, but also give the exhibition some much-needed colour, something which it is a little thin on, considering how much time he devoted to developing colour process and how keen he was on colour photography.

The retrospective concludes under the title *The Art of the Exhibition*, another discipline which Steichen can certainly be credited with mastering. There is of course an in-depth analysis of what is arguably his singular most important work, *The Family of Man*, which was seen by nine million people when it toured the world from 1955 to 1962. A superb three-dimensional reconstruction of this seminal exhibition is projected onto a wall and guides the viewer virtually through the meticulously engineered space. (If this is not authentic enough, *The Family of Man* is on permanent display at the Château de Clervaux in Luxembourg.) As excellent as this is in concluding this show, there is barely more than a mention of the other 46 exhibitions that he curated whilst Director of the Department of Photography at MoMA from 1947 to 1962.

Lives in Photography undertakes the ambitious task of making a gallery installation about one individual who had many different facets, nearly all of which could fill a space as this with equal success. Personally, I thought there was too much emphasis on his earlier work, leaving the last two sections feeling a bit rushed; as if the gallery had suddenly run out of space or forgotten a deadline. Although it does give an excellent impression of an individual with a plethora of talents (photography being just one of them), a few more of his designs would have added even more: Why is the gallery not filled with the hybrid delphiniums about which he was so passionate, and which he exhibited as works of art at the MoMA in 1936, or the *Monsieur Steichen* iris that he found time to breed and which is still commercially available?

These criticisms are, however, little more than footnotes to an otherwise excellent show. Those potential viewers who are concerned about their carbon footprint dragging across the Continent can purchase a copy of the exhibition catalogue for just a little more than the price of a no-frills airline ticket, which is a superb volume chronicling his work and containing much source material as well as insightful essays. Furthermore, many of the reproductions are larger and more visible than the originals so while your arms may be strained, at least your eyes (and your legs) won't.