THE NEW ART IN PHOTOGRAPHY: WORK OF CLARENCE H. WHITE, A LEADER AMONG THE PHOTO-SECESSIONISTS: BY GEORGE BICKNELL

In this age of change and progress, when the prevailing spirit of unrest is so clearly evidenced in the tendency to depart from all conventional expressions of art, none of the forms of the Secession movement, so strong in Europe and just beginning to make itself felt in this country, is more interesting than the New Art in Photography. The purpose of this new art is to further the expression of art-ideas through the medium of photography, which, up to this time, has been used mostly to retain the likeness,—or unlikeness,—of individuals or of individual things, with very little intention of setting forth art-ideas through its medium. Now, however, there is a group of men working with the camera in the endeavor to produce photographs which shall be as truly artistic and embody ideas as universal as are expressed in painting. Different men are seeking to produce different effects, by means of the new photography,—the effect of the etcher, of the lithographer, of the Old Masters. These effects are produced by ever-increasing skill in the manipulation of light, the manipulation of the camera, hand-work upon the negative and by special studio accessories. These men are working to place photography on the level of the fine arts, and already they have done much to influence the world in this direction. The Photo-Secessionists, as they are called, have formed themselves into a society, the purpose of which is to advance photography as applied to pictorial expression; to draw together those Americans practising or otherwise interested in the arts, and to hold from time to time, at varying places, exhibitions not necessarily limited to the productions of the Photo-Secession, or to American work.

Among those whose works rank highest so far are Alfred Stieglitz, Edward J. Steichen and Clarence H. White, whose pictures are here reproduced. Mr. White's home is in Newark, Ohio. He is now recognized as one of the foremost photo-pictorial artists in the world. His beginning in this field was accidental and humble. Ten or twelve years ago he purchased a camera, and for a year or two used it as a mere pastime. He began to study the possibility of pictorial art in photography and soon recognized its great field of possibilities. Clarence White, like many artists, was compelled to
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work early and late at some labor more practical and productive than his art. But he found great joy in his newly chosen pastime and soon began to put out work that was really wonderful, and that early received recognition among other workers who were striving to produce similar effects by means of photography. His first exhibit of pictures was in the amateur section of the Ohio Photographers’ Association in 1897, where he received a gold medal. In the same year he was awarded two diplomas at the Detroit Photographic Salon, while in January, 1898, he was honored with the grand prize at the Pittsburg exhibit for his “Readers.” In October of 1898 he had ten pictures hung in the Philadelphia Photographic Salon, where his work at once attracted the attention of all who were seriously interested in advanced pictorial photography, and where, though personally unknown, he was recognized as one of the leaders among the body of workers that a little later came to be designated as the “New School” of American photography; the school which has since evolved itself into the Photo-Secession, of which Mr. White is one of the founders and fellows. In 1900 he was elected to membership in the Linked Ring of London, and in the autumn of 1903 to honorary membership of the Camera Club of New York, for distinguished service to American photography. In 1904 he took one of five first prizes at the Photographers’ Convention at The Hague. This was awarded to one of the pictures here reproduced and entitled “In the Orchard.”

Every sincere artist must have an interest in the theme to be portrayed for its own sake. If he is making the picture from a mercantile standpoint he is not liable to benefit art much; he must have this first true element of the artist soul, the love of his art for itself. Also one of the artist’s greatest opportunities lies in his choice of the subjects by means of which he is enabled to depict his theme. In all but two of the pictures reproduced here, Mr. White has chosen as subjects to represent his ideas, members of the family of Stephen Marion Reynolds of Terre Haute, Indiana; the father, represented in the portrait of Mr. Reynolds, one of the finest things that Mr. White has ever produced, and the mother, two daughters and son, all represented in the group entitled “Unending Mother-Love,” and again in various other attitudes. Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds are Christian Socialists. Mr. Reynolds is Secretary of The Western Asso-
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ciation of Writers, a member of The Press Club of Chicago, and an ardent advocate of Walt Whitman and his principles. It was while visiting at their home that Mr. White produced his set of pictures known as the Reynolds’ Portfolio. There are about fifty of these marvelous pictures, ten of which are here reproduced for the first time.

Each impression of our varied experiences leaves its touch upon the human soul and it is these many experiences that make memory sweet. It is the purpose of all true art to embody these ideas and retain them to recall again in man his once loved experience. Art is nothing if it does not bring us face to face with these memories of the past. If we have never felt these once the art-idea is of no value to us. The greatest art is that which brings vividly back to us the simplest experiences of our lives. There must be, too, experiences that are universal, that have touched the lives of all men. Millet’s Angelus is great, because it sets forth three universal factors of human existence—labor, love and religion. This picture will touch the heart of universal man because these are the things which have meant most in his life. He brings some experience of each with him before the picture and he is moved, not because of what is in the picture but because of what he has brought to the picture.

The life experiences that Clarence White has undertaken to set forth in these pictures are simple and universal. In “Unending Mother Love” we have Mrs. Stephen Marion Reynolds and her children. At a glance one sees by the arrangement of the mother and daughters,—an unbroken line,—the bond of love. The mother looks longingly into the eyes of the older daughter, who is looking into the realities of life which meet her at this stage. The expression of the mother is at once anxious and trustful. The hands of the younger daughter rest firmly upon the shoulders of the mother. The arms of the mother as firmly encircle this daughter. This daughter, by her attitude, seeks for assurance, but the mother, by her look, shows that her anxiety is toward the older daughter. We also feel that her assurance to the younger daughter is ample. By the placement and expression of the son, we feel that he sees at a glance all that the future will bring. He sees that he cannot always be close to his mother, for he is to become a man and is to fight a man’s battles. He is under the shadow of home and this influence shall always remain, but he
must leave the arms of enfoldng mother love while the daughters always remain near to its protection.

The silence of "The Park" at once impresses. Here, again, one is close to nature. All is still; he is alone. Through the central vista of trees one is led to the vagueness of the distance. Here, through this vista, his eyes cross the point of high light, but in the far distance nothing is definite. He sees life depicted in this setting. Glimpses of light mixed with the shadows, then the gleam of high light where all seems clear, followed by the shadow of dimness, and into the dark where all is unseen. In "The Spirit of Majesty" we are led to feel all that the awed child feels in the wonder and wildness of the woods. In "The Runner" one catches the breathless finish of some former experience and the triumph of victory. In the portrait of Stephen Marion Reynolds the life of the man is as plainly written as if one had told it in words, and all the freshness of the eternal spirit of youth is depicted in the delicate, subtle grace and innocence shown in the younger portrait heads.

The shadowy effects obtained by Mr. White give a feeling of mystery to all his work. It is hard to realize the subtlety of these from any reproductions of the original photographs. The play of light and shade is at times suggestive of the depth and richness of a Rembrandt, and again is as misty and delicate in tone as a Corot. One of the most wonderful effects is that of twilight, when all at first seems blurred and indistinct, but takes shape gradually as the eyes become accustomed to the gloom. These photographs are above all things subtle and suggestive, both in spirit and in execution, and are excellent examples of the movement to revolutionize what has hitherto been one of the most obvious and mechanical of the arts.