PHOTOGRAPHY AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS; THE CAMERA PICTURES OF ALVIN LANGDON COBURN A VINDICATION OF THIS STATEMENT: BY GILES EDGERTON

The claims of photography to a place among the fine arts have formed the subject-matter of frequent keen controversies between artist and photographer. The defenders of the claims of photography have stoutly contended that the whole spirit and meaning of art have been missed by the opponents of those claims when they have based their arguments upon the fact that the photographer must work through such a mechanical medium as the camera. Why not also deny the claim of music for the reason that, in its highest form, it demands such mechanical means of expression as the highly complex and mechanical musical instruments? Why should the creative impulse and the quickened imagination be restrained from using any agency, any means of expression?

The victory of the champions of photography, now generally conceded, was not the result of formal argument, however, but of achievement. The work of such leading exponents of the Photo-Secessionist movement as Gertrude Käsebier, Clarence H. White, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen has been an all-sufficient answer to those who carped about the "necessary limitations of purely mechanical processes," and a vindication of the claims of those who would place such work among the fine arts, along with music, painting and sculpture. These pioneers in the new development of photography, bursting the narrow bounds which held camera work to the more mechanically exact reproduction of physical likeness—bounds which had not been essentially widened since the daguerreotype days—set out to conquer the camera, to make it express spirit and feeling no less realistically than physical shapes. In a word, they believed it possible to so dominate the mechanical processes of photography as to produce pictures as truly artistic, as expressive of creative imagination and poetic inspiration, as painting or sculpture. They believed that no innate qualities to express emotion and insight into life belong to the materials with which artists have worked, but that they are inherent in the artist. Therefore, they argued, there is no reason why those qualities which constitute the soul of art should stop short, and, having conquered pen and ink, chalk, paint, brushes, marble, wax, clay, bronze, and a variety of other things, making them means of art-expression, refuse to admit
From a Photograph by Alvin L. Coburn.
From a Photograph by Alvin L. Coburn.

MRS. GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER.
From a Photograph by Alvin L. Coburn.

"SAND DUNES."
From a Photograph by Alvin L. Coburn.

VAN DEERING PERRINE IN ONE OF THE WINTER STORMS HE LOVES TO PAINT.
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the possibility of achieving a similar conquest over the camera and the dry plate and their accessories. In this spirit they set to work, and conquered.

Among the most brilliant and successful of these artist-photographers is Alvin Langdon Coburn, a young American artist who has been winning golden renown in England, and to whom no small measure of the success of the new art-photography in commanding recognition and respectful placing among the fine arts is due. Mr. Coburn is only twenty-four, but he has achieved an unique and enviable position in the art world. Among his fellow Secessionists, it is the wonderful, seemingly limitless, range of his work, no less than his mastery of almost every technical process known to our greatly enlarged modern photography, which commands attention and respect. Some of his finest prints are simple bromide enlargements, though—Mr. Bernard Shaw says—they do not look in the least like anybody else’s enlargements. He also takes the platinotype and secures, by simple, straightforward platinotype printing, results which are the envy of the best photographic artists. He turns to what is known among photographers as the “gum process” and is quite as much at home as when using the platinotype. Again, he takes the ingenious and somewhat difficult device of imposing a gum print on a platinotype, as a means of subduing contrast. Many other photographers have done this and given it up when they found it did not produce the result aimed at. But not so Mr. Coburn: finding the method little better than worthless as a means of subduing contrast, he discovered—apparently by close observation of the accidents of experiment after experiment—that by it he could secure a wonderful golden brown tone, quite unlike anything produced by chemically toned platinotype, which combines with the softness and delicacy of the platinotype image. Studying oil painting as an auxiliary to his camera work, he adapts the three-color process, and with a single negative and a few casual pigments produces wonderful color effects in his portraits. In short, from the simplest process to the most difficult multiple printing he is master of the technical difficulties involved in printing from negatives.

GOOD negatives are very largely a matter of accident. Given the utmost care and wisdom in the selection of subjects and time, it is nevertheless true that the novice may secure with his kodak a more artistic negative than the trained veteran, and that the veteran himself will get the most artistic negatives largely as a
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result of chance. The genius of the artist is called into play afterward—in the hand-work upon the negative and the printing. Many of his fellow artists and many critics marvel at Mr. Coburn’s work, and are amazed that so young a man should be so completely master of the technical difficulties which they still encounter. They forget that while he is a young man, Mr. Coburn is really quite a veteran craftsman, who has sixteen years’ experience behind him.

Unlike most artist-photographers, Mr. Coburn does not depend to any extent upon the manipulation of lights and special studio accessories. Indeed, he has no studio, preferring to wander in quest of suitable subjects and to photograph them amid their own surroundings. He does not believe in the studio method, holding it as a fundamental article of his creed that people cannot be convincingly portrayed out of their proper environment. In the spirit of the old literary canon that in order to write a biography it is necessary first of all to love the subject and enter into full sympathy with it (a canon most of our modern professional biographers ignore), Mr. Coburn believes that to secure an artistic portrait of a person, the artist, no matter whether he works with canvas and brush or with camera and dry plates, must know his subject and be in full sympathy with it. Coburn’s admiration for Rodin and his work inspired him to do a portrait of that great master sculptor of the age, and the result is a wonderful presentation of the man and artist.

So, too, with the portrait of Mr. George Bernard Shaw. To begin with, it is admirable as a picture. Without knowing whose portrait it was, a lover of the beautiful would proudly and gladly hang it in a prominent place and revel in it as a picture of rare charm. As a portrait of the famous writer of cynical plays, however, it is a masterpiece. The pose is a copy of Rodin’s “En Penseur.”

IN LIKE manner the portrait of Edward Carpenter appeals to one as an intimate and almost reverent portrayal of the fine spirit whose constructive and wholesome gospel inspires so many earnest souls in two hemispheres. It is not a mere likeness of the physical man. The sentient spirit, the vital force of this prophet of Democracy, is expressed with just as much power and inspiration as Watts put into his painted portraits. The same feeling is produced by his portraits of H. G. Wells, Mark Twain, Gilbert Chesterton, the English maker of paradoxical essays, and of the artist’s mother. There is an entire freedom from artificiality and an overwhelming sense of sympathy and the impelling power of the creative impulse.
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This is also true of his studies of architecture and of characteristic city scenes. He takes a towering New York skyscraper, for example, and one knows at once that he believes in the glorious future of a form of architecture almost universally condemned as ugly and repellant. Almost superfluous are his wise and courageous words to an English interviewer: “Now, the idea I had in making this picture . . . was to try and render the beauty of what is commonly, but quite erroneously, regarded as a very ugly thing. If I have made the observer feel the dignity of the architecture, with its straight lines practically unornamented and with only the proportions to give it charm, . . . I am satisfied, for I feel that the architects of the future, artists all of them (such as the architects of Wells in his ‘Modern Utopia’), will do wonderful things with steel and stone—like this building, only much finer—towering to the clouds.” In this spirit Mr. Coburn seeks subjects amid the great docks of Liverpool, the bridges of London, Rome and Venice.

In landscape he manifests equal power. There is a study, “The Snowy Hill-Top,” which, for the charm with which it glorifies a simple and commonplace bit of scenery, deserves to be called an artistic masterpiece. The silhouetted branches of the trees are charmingly brought out in a composition that in a painting would go far to establish the artist’s reputation. “The Day After the Blizzard” and “The Track Through the Woods” are almost equally effective and pleasing. Characteristic of the highest level of the great Palisades which guard the Hudson, and as beautiful as it is characteristic, is “Above the Hudson.” The struggling figure, making his way through the heavy snowdrift, is Van Deering Perrine, the painter of the Palisades, and Mr. Coburn’s photograph might almost be taken for a reproduction of one of his paintings.

Mr. Coburn is no apologist for his art. He believes in it thoroughly. To him, photography is not a lesser medium than painting, but for many purposes a greater. “I do not feel that it is the aim of a work of graphic art to tell a story,” he says, “but rather to express the feelings of the artist. If he has a story to tell, his thoughts should be expressed with a pen and not with a lens, or any of the clumsier methods of making pictures, such as painting or etching. But for the ensnaring and illusive visions of things, only half felt and hardly realized, fleeting things like the movement of smoke, the reflections in water, or the ever-changing forms of clouds on a windy day, there is no other medium but photography responsive enough to give these things in their fulness.”