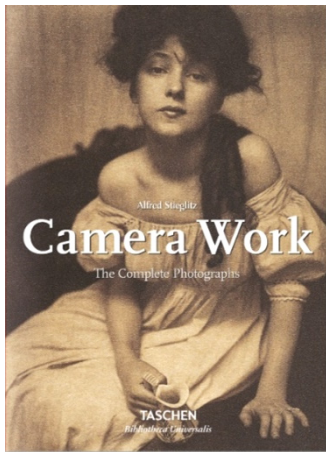


## BOOK REVIEW:

**Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work*.  
*The Complete Photographs 1903-1917*,  
Köln: Taschen Bibliotheca Universalis, 2022, 552 p.**



The catalogue is a new edition of the 1997 original, and frames the photographs, now owned by the Royal Photographic Society, Bath, published in *Camera Work* between 1903 and 1917. As such, it highlights the multifaceted work of Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), known first and foremost as a photographer, although he was also a publisher and curator. However, his contribution to the field of photography is not restricted to his own astounding photographs. Around the turn of the twentieth century, he founded the *Photo-Secession*, a progressive movement concerned with exploring the creative side of photography. This was part of Stieglitz's plan to gain recognition for photography as an art form in its own right, propelling it from a peripheral position to center stage. In this context, in 1903, Stieglitz began publishing *Camera Work*, an avant-garde magazine devoted to expressing the ideas of the *Photo-Secession* in both images and words. *Camera Work* is considered the first photo journal whose focus was visual rather than technical and its illustrations were of the highest possible quality. Thus, the first merit of this book is to bring together the amazing photographs from the journal's 50 issues while highlighting Stieglitz's work as a publisher. As a journal, *Camera Work* was also intimately linked to the *Little Galleries of the Photo Secession*, often referred to simply as 291, for the number where they were located on Fifth Avenue, to the point of becoming an exhibition catalogue and a publicity machine for the *Photo-Secession*.



The book also brings new insight into Stieglitz's life and oeuvre, as details of his biography are less-known to a wider public and highlights the development of his work from European Pictorialism to Modernism. Stieglitz's work was initially very European in style, impacted on by pictorial techniques, but eventually promoted clarity and modernism. The change was mostly due to the challenges brought by his return to New York in the 1890s and the more realistic subject-matter available in a growing and increasingly intense city scape. Photographing New York, which became 'the' character, he realized the vast photographic potential of the energy and rapid growth of a city. Finally, at the end of his life, Stieglitz distanced himself from the style of photography that he had initially nurtured and introduced to America. Perhaps surprisingly, after withdrawing from his activities as a gallerist and as a publisher, Stieglitz turned to his own work, photographing Georgia O'Keefe obsessively, enhancing and emphasizing the photographic purity, steeped in naturalism, that had been so strong in his earlier work.

The catalogue, however is ultimately less concerned with Stieglitz's personal development, the abandonment of photogravure, which he had mastered while working for the *Photochrome Engraving Company*, and his support for amateur photography, which he had become familiar with while studying in Europe, especially the work of Secession groups in Austria and Germany, than with the movement he initiated and his work as a publisher.

The *Photo-Secession* began as a group of American photographers who emulated European pictorial ideals but who rapidly developed a photographic language of their own, which eventually became photography's *lingua franca*, moving from pictorial photographic production and its concern for specifically-created subjective moments to what was to be known as 'straight photography', which captured reality with "unqualified objectivity". Stieglitz's movement was informed by photographic portfolios created in Vienna, Paris and London in the 1890s. Generally, the groups who produced these portfolios, for example, the *Linked Ring Brotherhood*, formed as a breakaway group by members of the *Royal Photographic Society*, have separated (seceded) from existing photographic clubs and other associations, such as the *Société Française de Photographie*, to create new and liberating institutions. All such groups wished to free photography from its documentary and technical fetters and to use it as a more impressionistic and flexible tool to realize a valid form of artistic expression. They wished to create a new photographic reality. Their success was ensured by the increasing availability of photography, due largely to technical developments, which, in a way helped place the camera in the hands of amateurs, and by the rapid occurrence of a market for commercial photography.

Stieglitz, no matter how visionary he was, fell into the turn-of-the-century pattern of promoting his ideas with the help of a gallery, making his mark as an exhibition organizer, featuring modern art as well as photography. In March 1902, Stieglitz organized the exhibition at the *National Arts Club* in New York

entitled *American Pictorial Photography*. In 1905, the *Little Galleries of the Photo Secession* opened their doors and became a meeting place for members of the *Photo-Secession* and interested adherents. The scope of the gallery broadened when, in 1907-1909, Stieglitz visited Europe and met Matisse and Rodin while becoming familiar with the work of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Braque. Around this time, especially in 1914-1915, non-photographic exhibitions, showing drawings, paintings and sculpture, gradually became part of the programme of 291, including the controversial introduction of French art. Initially, Stieglitz showed drawings by Rodin and introduced works by Picasso and Braque, Brâncuși and Gino Severini, while he developed an interest in African art. True to these aesthetic choices, Stieglitz started to exhibit young American painters who had worked in Paris, while he also began to show Georgia O'Keefe's work.

When discussing Stieglitz's work as a publisher, one has to note that *Camera Work* was not his first venture into this field. From 1892 he edited the *American Amateur Photographer* believing that only the true amateur had real artistic freedom. In 1897 the *Camera Club* was formed. Stieglitz was appointed vice president of the club and the editor of the club's new quarterly journal, *Camera Notes*. Commendably, the catalogue highlights the fact that, between 1897 and 1902, *Camera Notes* became the most influential photographic journal, attracting a wide readership, mostly because of the journal's artistic quality. Completely immersed in the new venture, Stieglitz reprinted articles, critical essays and exhibition reviews from European publications and commissioned home-grown artists and critics to write provocative and controversial texts. The journal published works by George Seeley, Gertrude Käsebier, Eduard Steichen and Clarence White. After he resigned from *Camera Notes* in 1902, Stieglitz produced the first issue (1903) of a new journal he had been thinking about for some time. The catalogue thus suggests continuity between the two projects and Stieglitz's significant involvement in the process. *Camera Work* was funded, edited and largely designed by Stieglitz himself, reflecting his choice of writers, photographers and artists. It was not a commercial publication and, on the whole, it turned out to be a profit-losing venture. From its very beginnings, the journal was the voice of the *Photo-Secession*, while after the *Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession* opened, it increasingly became an exhibition catalogue, a symposium for the gallery, and even a sort of public relations exercise, despite Stieglitz's initial reticence.

As Stieglitz always fought for editorial control over content, *Camera Work* primarily presented stunning reproductions of the best available photography. It was, in that respect, the first journal with a visual focus, intent on communication with a wider public. Each issue was dedicated to the work of a single photographer or a school of photographers – usually members of the *Photo-Secession*. Some of the photographers whose work was featured in the journal were Eduard Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Clarence H. White, Frank Eugene, Heinrich Kühn, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. Remarkably, for those times, the journal also

featured women photographers, like Annie W. Brigman, Ema Spencer and Alice Boughton. Under Stieglitz's guidance, who was commissioning articles from more interesting contributors, *Camera Notes* became less domestic and assumed an increasingly cosmopolitan vibe, impacted on by European modernist experiments. One is thus led to conclude that *Camera Work* began as a confluence of Symbolist art, photography, and literature and ended up as a messenger of modernism. The final issue of the journal, dedicated to Paul Strand, was Stieglitz's *vademecum* for the future of photography, ultimately mirroring the autobiography of its creator.

Stieglitz was almost obsessed with the quality of the illustrations which were reproduced either from the photographer's original negatives or from prints. Equal attention was paid to detail in the production of the quarterly, including the cover and the binding. Stieglitz was also concerned with the dissemination of the journal, making sure that the New York Public Library and the Royal Photographic Society had complete, freely-given and sometimes signed sets. In the same vein, he gave his collection of 600 photographs by members of the *Photo-Secession* to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The catalogue must be commended for highlighting Stieglitz's contribution to getting photography accepted as an art form. In the words of Pam Roberts, who signs the introduction to the catalogue, Stieglitz "brought photography from obscurity to center stage". He tried to change the direction of American photography from within the establishment structures but ended up changing it from outside the system. In this sense, the catalogue does not do justice to Stieglitz's effort, obvious in all aspects of his work, to introduce modern European art to the US. Nor does it comment on the fact that these tireless endeavours mostly impacted on New York and, even more narrowly, on the isle of Manhattan. It does however highlight the importance of Stieglitz's work as a publisher, who turned both *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work* into publications with international appeal. Under his guidance, and because of the quality of each issue, *Camera Work* ceased to be a cosy home journal, becoming a state-of-the-art publication, whose relevance to the field is obvious to this day.

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