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From Pictorialism to Photoshop: Pictorialism in Twentieth Century Photography

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ARTH372: Modern Art History 1900-1945

Professor Shanahan

December 10th, 2014

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ARTH372 - First Draft Final Paper

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After the birth and beginning of the evolution of photography, onlookers began questioning where the craft belonged in society. Was it an art? A craft? A hobby? A tool? Pictorialism clarified that, indeed, it was and continues to be an art. Pictorialism refers to the concept of manipulating photographs, creating an artistic, painting-like image. It specifically has a mysterious misty quality to the finish of the image, giving it more tonal range. I chose to focus on Edward Steichen's photograph, *The Flatiron (*1904) (Figure 1), because it epitomizes the pictorialist movement's artistic goals and more specifically, photo manipulation. The image's "emotional effect allies it with art photography's emphasis on personal expression, [and] as a nocturne it self-consciously orders and tranquilizes the volatile urban environment" (Sharpe 123). Not only does *The Flatiron* display modernity through photo manipulation techniques, but the composition and subject matter is modern as well. Through pictorialism, manipulated photography has stood the test of time and remains prominent in society today.

Pictorial photographs could be created through various methods of transformation and alteration of the tone, texture, contrast, and color of the image. Commonly used techniques include gum bichromate, bromoil, cyanotype, and platinum prints. By using these techniques, a straight and strictly representational image could be

transformed into a work of art. In the early twentieth century, pictorial photographers created camera clubs, or gathering groups to display their work in photography salons, sparked by Alfred Stieglitz's "Little Galleries" (whose name was later abbreviated to '291' and became a Mecca for photography) displaying photo-secessionist images hand-picked by him. Because the pictorialists were initially organized under Stieglitz, all of the early pictorial images relied on similar techniques to make the images artistically appealing. "Despite an emphasis on individuality and personal expression pictorialism operated within well-defined visual boundaries" in order to achieve the strict aesthetic goals set forth by Stieglitz (Peterson 15). Manipulation of images is the key to pictorialism that sets the movement apart from all other photography styles.

Steichen was particularly well-versed in a variety of techniques and often employed multiple methods in his works. *The Flatiron* is one of Steichen's multiple-technique manipulated images, as he used the gum bichromate technique over a platinum print. The combination changed the tone and color of the photograph to the deep blue and grey, creating the hazy mysterious effect seen in the final image. Inspired by other pictorial images in addition to modern paintings, Steichen was a leading figure in combining modernism and photographic artistry. With international influences, mentoring from Stieglitz, a keen eye for design, and highly developed manipulation skills, Steichen rose to be one of the most successful photographers both in the pictorialist movement and in commercial photography later in his career.

One of the first photography methods adopted was "straight photography," or taking and developing a purely representational image, with no aim at artistry. War photography, a part of straight photography, has become a staple in photographic

history because it was the first time Americans were able to see both the trenches and traumas of war. Matthew Brady's *Confederate dead behind a stone wall at Fredericksburg, VA* (1860-65) (Figure 2) photo depicts fallen soldiers in the trenches after a Civil War battle. The image is particularly memorable and striking because it allowed the public to see the realities and casualties of war up close. The image has few artistic elements and was developed as a straight photograph intended to strictly be informative, with no pictorial manipulation. The aim of Brady's image is quite different from Steichen's *The Flatiron*. Brady hoped to inform and represent, while Steichen aimed to express and evoke emotion. Early pictorialists wanted to make the point that "an artist has the freedom to manipulate photography to create another truth," not to distort or destroy the truths set forth by straight photography (Osterman). The pictorialists did not want to eliminate representational or straight photography, but rather begin a new branch of artistically-driven photography.

As an extreme contrast to straight photography, James Abbott McNiell Whistler's painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold - The Falling Rocket* (1874) (Figure 3), is an excellent comparative image to *The Flatiron,* showing that although the media are different, the outcomes are quite similar. Whistler's painting is similar to Steichen's image as both have a mysterious tone, shown through their similar coloring and soft lighting. The concept of lighting is what connects the two images. Whistler's use of color evokes a nostalgic, somber emotion, while Steichen accomplishes the same type of mood in his photograph through the use of gum bichromate manipulation, creating the blue-grey tones. Whistler was a leading figure in the Tonalism artistic style movement in the 1880s featuring many of the same characteristics as pictorialism. Both styles feature

a soft, shadowy, misty tone. Tonalism had a great influence on the Pictorialists, giving

them the concept for a hazy finish and mysterious, dark tones in their photographs. The

difference between the movements is the pictorialists specialization in photography

specifically, while tonalists focused on painting and traditional art forms. Both

movements had a following of artists, but pictorialism rose above Tonalism in fame and

in use. "Photography came to be recognized as an art form, and the idea of the print as

a carefully hand-crafted, unique object equal to a painting gained

acceptance," (Nordstrom). Pictorial photographs began to rival paintings through

photographers, like Steichen, creating popular pictorial images with aesthetic appeal

and mastery of manipulative skills.

In *Starry Night over the Rhone River, Arles* (1888) (Figure 4), Vincent van Gogh

illustrates the image of two figures in the foreground with a dramatic nighttime

landscape of the Rhone River behind them. The painting has similarities to *The Flatiron*

because of the haziness and somber mood it creates. There is also a shared sense of

mystery between the two works of art. The aim in comparing Steichen's image to van

Gogh's is to highlight the notion supported by Steichen and other pictorialist

photographers that photography can have the same effect as art. While there is not nor

will there probably ever be a universal definition of 'art', the concepts and elements

involved in creating traditional mediums of art are nearly identical to creating pictorialist

photographs. Both a photographer and a painter envisions a final outcome and strives

to express this mental image through a physical medium. Both paintings and

photographs can be assessed using the principles of design and elements of art

including composition, unity, and balance. The technique or medium one chooses to

represent one's mental image should not stop the final product from being considered art. Pictorialists, led by Alfred Stieglitz and the photo-secession group aimed to prove just that.

One cannot make a cohesive argument about pictorialism and photographic art without mentioning Alfred Stieglitz. He spearheaded the photo-secession movement, dedicated to promoting photography as a fine art, particularly pictorial photography. Stieglitz's photograph *Reflections — Night, New York* (1897) (Figure 5) highlights the aestheticism photography can accomplish. The image has movement, contrast, and intrigue. While it proves that photography can be aesthetic and a piece of fine art, it is a photogravure that has not been manipulated past development and, therefore, does not specifically fit into the manipulated pictorialist style of *The Flatiron*. Steichen was a prodigy under Stieglitz, who had an almost overbearing influence on the artists he mentored. Steichen learned techniques of manipulation and would then take them to the next level, combining many different manipulations, such as the combination used in *The Flatiron.* The influence Stieglitz had on photography is unmatched to this day, although there were many artists fighting for artistic recognition for photography.

Clarence H. White, while also a prominent pictorialist and member of the photo-secession group, was the man who brought Steichen and Stieglitz together, despite White's rumored feud with Stieglitz. Both White and Stieglitz were fighting for the same cause of incorporating photography into the fine arts, but each had different techniques in achieving them. White's image, *Study of a Dancer*, is iconic of his early style as it featured soft lighting and artful composition. White's definition for pictorial photography was to create artistic "photography with 'construction and expression,'" (Fulton 124). His

images and the images of his students were thoughtfully and artfully composed, and focused specifically on a balanced design. White opened the *Clarence H. White School of Modern Photography* to teach the techniques of capturing and manipulating images, giving them artistic value. There were other photography schools in America at the time, but White's was unique in that it featured and focused on pictorial or art photography. White's hope for the school was to allow "the student to pursue his photographic work and art training in one school" (Fulton 140). White placed a great emphasis on design and merged art and photography. White's influence touched more than just his students, as he became the president in 1917 of the Pictorial Photographers of America (PPA), whose goal was to exhibit and promote pictorialism. He also taught the usefulness of photography in commerce, paving the way for advertising and commercial photography.

Photography is everywhere. Photography can be found in nearly every aspect of society today as a useful tool. However, because of the pictorialist movement, photography has also been elevated to a higher level of creativity while remaining utilitarian. No other facet of photography better proves this than advertising photography, in which Steichen had a particularly large influence. White believed that "art and social usefulness were compatible" (Fulton 16). Steichen became the chief photographer for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* magazines, eventually leading to him being the most successful commercial photographer of the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, his commercial image of *Gloria Swanson* (1924) (Figure 7) for <u>Vanity Fair</u> elevated his fame in the commercial photography world. The portrait has pictorial elements like the mystery in the woman's gaze, the dark tone, and the clear manipulation by adding a layer of black lace, heightening the image's aesthetic appeal. Steichen's eye for detail

and aesthetic composition are what set him apart from and made him more successful than other photographers at the time. Contrasting to Stieglitz's art-for-art's-sake type of attitude, Steichen was much more commercially successful. Johnston states that "where Stieglitz embodied the persona of a fine artist…Steichen personified a twentieth-century model, the artist in the service of corporate modernism and technology," (Johnston 28). Steichen's ability to combine modernism with traditional ideals of art is what set him apart in the pictorial world. The *Gloria Swanson* image is different from *The Flatiron* because, although it is a pictorialist image, its aim is commercial, not purely artistic. Steichen's later career involved much more design-focused and modernist works, as seen through his many commercial or advertising photographs.

America was not the only region employing pictorial photography. It was an international movement inspiring photographers worldwide to create not only representative but also aesthetic and artistic photographs. There were facets of pictorialism in France, Italy, The Netherlands, Russia and many other nations worldwide, however, the movement actually originated in Britain. British author and pictorial photographer, Henry Peach Robinson's book *Pictorial Effect in Photography* published in 1881 is debatably, yet most widely agreed upon, origin of pictorialism. Robinson's main point was that through art education, a photographer could create pictorial or artistic images. He believed that "the same object represented by different photographers will produce different pictorial results" not only because of different chemical developments but "because there is something different in each man's mind, which, somehow, gets communicated to his fingers' ends, and thence to his pictures," (Robinson 5). He saw pictorial photography as more of a mental process of

incorporating the elements of art and principles of design into photography to create art. As a proud supporter of photography as fine art, Stieglitz was very influenced by British photographer, Paul Martin, who captured documentary photographs of typical London street scenes but Stieglitz images were composed more artistically. Another artist that had international influence on pictorialism was Adolf Fassbender, a German photographer who later immigrated to the United States. His images had a romantic, old-worldly style, typical of European or European-born pictorialist photographers. The "pictorial images made in Europe of quaint structures, costumed villagers, or picturesque landscapes frequently beat out domestic scenes in American competitions" because pictorialists saw the artistic value in the combination of modern techniques with old-world subject matter (Peterson 19). Martin, Fassbender, and countless other photographers had a major impact on Stieglitz and by association, Steichen was inspired to create pictorial images as well. Artists worldwide came to know and practice the pictorial style of photography, each with their own unique addition to the style.

Despite the photo-secession movement being formally dissolved by Stieglitz in 1917, pictorialism lived on. In the later years of the pictorialist movement, the style came to embody modernism, particularly due to the commercial appeal the artistic images provided. Reasons for the decline of the photo-secession included equipment and techniques becoming more advanced, along with the improvement of film, color film, and motion pictures that many pictorialists moved towards. Ironically, another downfall of the movement was the plurality and success it had brought photographers. "More and more photographers were making pictures primarily for exhibition purposes and not as a means of self-expression" (Sharpe 156). The final straw of the movement away from

photo-secession was the creation of the 35mm camera, allowing easier access for amateurs and different developing strategies. Pictorialism in name may have died with the movement, but its aim of creating artistic and aesthetic images remains strong to this day.

Since it's inception, photography has been criticized for many reasons, but one that has remained extremely prevalent is the mistrust of the images. In the beginnings of photography, society did not accept or understand manipulated photography because they believed that painting was for art and photography was for representation. Steichen and the other pictorial photographers attempted to sway this view and to include photography in the realm of art, not simply representation. By using techniques to alter or manipulate their photographs, pictorialists were elevating the craft to include expression and emotion into their images. They were not trying to deceive the viewer into thinking the manipulated image is purely representational. In modern times, image manipulation continues to have a bad reputation because trust has become such a rare commodity. "Photoshop" may as well be a 'four-letter-word' when it comes to advertising, as the public considers manipulation of the images as a manipulation of the product or service it is representing. Despite the bad connotation, manipulation of imagery is still constantly being used both in fine art and in commercial photography.

As Adolf Fassbender, a prominent international pictorial photographer, said "there is no solution in trying to eradicate pictorialism for one would have to destroy idealism, sentiment and all sense of art and beauty…there will always be pictorialism" (Fassbender 54). The path created by pictorialism has been modernized and continued through technology like Photoshop, but it's artistic aim remains static.

Pictorial photography may seem like a smaller movement within the grandeur and length of art history, but its implications have extended into modern times, and have opened up an entirely new sector not only of art history but of art's future.

Figure 1.

Edward J. Steichen - *The Flatiron* (1904)

18 13/16 x 15 1/8 in. Gum bichromate over platinum print

Figure 2.

Matthew Brady - *Confederate dead behind a stone wall at Fredericksburg, VA* (ca.

1860-1865)

40 x 31.31 in. Photograph. The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

Figure 3.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler - *Nocturne in Black and Gold - The Falling Rocket* (1874)

23.7 in × 18.3 in. Oil on Canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.

Figure 4.

Vincent van Gogh - *Starry Night over the Rhone River* (1888)

28.5 in × 36.2 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 5.

Alfred Stieglitz - *Reflections — Night, New York* (1897)

8 1/4 x 13 13/16 inches. Photogravure. Lee Gallery, Winchester, Massachusetts

Figure 6.

Clarence H. White - *Study of a Dancer* (1910)

9 1/4 x 7 5/8 in. Photographic platinum print. Library of Congress.

Figure 7.

Edward J. Steichen - *Gloria Swanson* (1924)

9 7/16 x 7 1/2 in. Gelatin silver print. *Vanity Fair*.

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