

**Gerd Hurm**, *Edward Steichen* (Luxemburg: Éditions Saint-Paul, 2019), 176 pp. Lëtzebuenger Biografien.

Two biographical snapshots capture the amazing career of Edward Steichen. Paris, 1900: a young, self-taught, and little-known photographer from Milwaukee, achieves instant fame in the European capital of modernist art movements. New York, 1955: Steichen, now at the age of 76, designs and promotes what turns out to be one of the most widely seen photo exhibitions, “The Family of Man.” As Gerd Hurm suggests in this comprehensive German-language biography, it is not an easy task to tell the story of Edward Steichen’s life which coincided with the emergence and ultimate triumph of modernism and witnessed major shifts of power in transatlantic relations. Steichen (1879–1973) who, according to Hurm, represents an enigma of modernity due to the sharply divergent views about him, had multiple talents. He was a skilled photographer—yet also active as a painter—who furthered the gradual acceptance of photography as an art form. He lived for long periods in Paris and New York, traveling regularly between both cities, and acted as a major promoter of modernist art in the United States—through direct interaction with the Paris art scene but also by creating innovative installations for the earliest exhibitions in New York. Steichen became the best paid photographer of advertising working for Condé Nast in the 1920s, designed morale boosting shows during World War II, and became the director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) after the war. Last but not least, he perfected the military uses of photography during World War I and was an accomplished plant breeder.

In view of this overwhelming wealth of activity and experience, Hurm’s biography dedicates eleven chronological chapters to Steichen’s life which balance his personal and family story with the larger issues of art and cultural history. Although his life story, told in great detail, is the focus of this book, Hurm pursues two major arguments about the (mis)perceptions of Steichen’s career. First, his role as an artist and promoter of modernist art has been underestimated—to the benefit of Alfred Stieglitz and his circle in New York; second, Steichen’s reputation as a commercial photographer misrepresents the deeper significance of his work. The first argument is connected to his family background. Steichen was born in Luxembourg and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1881, eventually settling in Milwaukee. He received an education in lithography and design at the “American Fine Art Company,” yet many of his skills as a photographer and painter were apparently self-taught. His close relationship and intellectual exchange with his sister Lilian—who later married Carl Sandburg—shaped Steichen’s early work, as Hurm emphasizes. Early in his career, he was discovered and supported by the established photographer Clarence H. White, a few years later by Fred Holland Day. He became acquainted with Alfred Stieglitz en route to Paris in 1900 and, once settled in the French capital of the art world, quickly made the acquaintance of many artists, partly due to his multiple language skills.

Hurm shows that Steichen was instrumental in promoting modernism, not just in his own work as a pictorialist photographer, but by helping to publish the highly influential journal *Camera Work* and by collaborating on seminal exhibitions in Stieglitz’s 291 Fifth Avenue Gallery from 1906 to 1914—among them on Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Édouard Manet. Indeed, Hurm calls them partners, even though Stieglitz came from a different generation and an affluent family background,

and, eventually, ceased to collaborate with Steichen. Everything changed with the Armory Show in 1913, according to Hurm, which excluded photography as an art form and was organized without any input from Steichen. It subsequently established Stieglitz as the major early promoter of modernism in the United States and relegated Steichen to a secondary role—wrongly, as Hurm contends, although more details on the Armory Show and the New York art scene would have helped to further explain its impact on Steichen.

In the late 1930s, Steichen began to feature the new forms of documentary photography which had emerged from New Deal art projects and the activities of the Farm Security Administration. Still, with regard to Hurm's second major argument, Steichen's commercial reputation, it does not come as a surprise that many photographers—among them Ansel Adams—protested against Steichen becoming the director of the Department of Photography at the MoMA in 1947 (serving in this capacity until 1962). After all, the majority of his work in the 1920s and 1930s had been for advertising agencies or journals such as *Vogue* and thus dedicated to the commodification of culture. Even if he managed to make advertising photography more artistic, as Hurm points out, he was certainly no longer producing the kind of autonomous art which had shaped his early career. To see this period of Steichen's work as an equally valid contribution to modernism, therefore, rests on an understanding of artistic practices which was not prevalent at the time—and, indeed, would need a more elaborate discussion. Yet Hurm ultimately chooses a different path to rehabilitate Steichen's negative reputation after the war. He examines the actual exhibitions and activities initiated by Steichen at the MoMA and finds that his track record was impressive. He not only promoted experimental aspects such as color photography and, following a generally progressive outlook, female photographers (Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt, and others). He also organized two major photographic shows of the Museum, one on "The Family of Man" in 1955, the other on Depression era photography called "The Bitter Years" in 1962.

A massive undertaking which drew on an international array of photographers, "The Family of Man" show became one of the most widely seen photo exhibitions, eventually touring through many countries and continents. After the horrors of World War II, Steichen organized the show around the idea of similarity, including human emotions, actions, interests, rituals, and experiences as well as supporting the concept of the United Nations. The popular success of the exhibition proved him right, but there were also critical voices, most famously by Roland Barthes who criticized the mythical interpretation of sameness glossing over the cultural and social differences among the regions represented in the show. Its "grandiloquent tone" (Orvell 116) and the idealized vision of commonality, which had a precursor in Steichen's collaboration with Carl Sandburg on the "Road to Victory"-exhibition (1942), were unique to the 1950s Cold War setting, yet Hurm demonstrates that its significance has been reconsidered and revised in recent years (he co-edited a volume of new essays in 2018). Hurm's biographical account addresses scholars as well as a general audience. Written in German (all English quotes have been translated), it contains many high-quality reproductions of Steichen's work, both his paintings and photographs, a lively layout, and a short chronology—unfortunately, some secondary sources referenced in the text are not included and have to be accessed in an online bibliography. All in all, the book presents an elaborate and convincing case for the reappraisal of Steichen's art, which has often been misrepresented and underappreciated—particularly his early period from 1900 to 1914. It provides an excellent introduction to Steichen's life and career, pointing to

numerous aspects of his work that merit further archival research to illuminate Steichen's contribution to the history of photography and modernist art in the United States but, ultimately, to the transatlantic and global art world.

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### **Works Cited**

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