

A FEW WORDS IN APPRECIATION OF ALFRED STIEGLITZ

by

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Much more than has already been said will be written about Alfred Stieglitz by those who knew him better and longer than I. They are able to speak with authority of his influence on art in America. I cannot add anything significant to our knowledge of his public life, so to speak, nor am I able to write of his private life, which must be left, if at all, to his most intimate friends. Of necessity I shall speak only of my personal experiences with Stieglitz and of his influence on myself.

I have known him for about ten years. The first time I saw him was at AN AMERICAN PLACE, his gallery I called it though he has repeatedly rejected the term, where on the suggestion of my brother I brought some photographs for his criticism. He looked at them all and then said, not unkindly, they are all woolly but it is not a matter of sharpness. You must work hard if you want to be a photographer. I understood clearly only the latter part of his remark. He talked quite a lot that day, but I remember nothing more of what he said. He was not disagreeable or short with me as I was warned he might be. Several years later a photographer friend asked me for an introduction to Stieglitz. I gave him one, although I told him it was not necessary, because he was timid about going to see the man with the fearful reputation for being tellingly outspoken. After he had been to see him I told Stieglitz about this and he remarked that it was curious how people were afraid of him. It seems to me that only people who were dishonest with themselves, with him, or who tried to force themselves on his attention had need to be afraid of him. With them he could be utterly and devastatingly severe. I was in the PLACE once when a woman brought in a great burden of paintings to show him. He didn't want to look at them then and suggested a later time, but she showed them to him never-the-less. He asked her what her purpose was in painting and she said she painted because she thought people loved color. Stieglitz ripped off her pretense exposing her stupidity in such deadly language that she hurriedly gathered up her pictures and left mumbling in great confusion. He was also intolerant of bargain seekers, those people who try to pick up cheap the pictures of painters who have not yet received full recognition. I believe that Stieglitz felt that if a person really appreciated painting he would be able to recognize the full greatness of a picture from the effect it produced on himself and not have to depend on ~~the~~ acceptance by others. He would be much easier on a person who frankly admitted he bought pictures ~~xxx~~ for their probable increase in value, than he would be on one who was crafty about it or who was rich enough to collect pictures because it was the smart thing to do. Quite typical of Stieglitz was his reply when I asked him long ago at an O'Keeffe show the price of

the smallest picture. It was a beautiful thing of a shark's egg case. He said: "It is invaluable."

I did work hard and with a new growing vision after my first interview with Stieglitz when he showed me, after looking at mine, a few of his own incredibly beautiful photographs. I had never seen anything like them before, nor since for that matter. The next time I took photographs to him to criticize was in the fall of 1938. He looked at them carefully and long. "You are getting there", he said, "Some day I hope to hang some of your pictures on these walls". That was a terrific boost to my selfconfidence and determination to put all I could into making pictures. Then, a year later I went again to him with all the best I had done in the meantime. He said almost immediately ~~that~~ he wanted to show them. Perhaps it can be imagined how happy I felt.

From the time of my show at AN AMERICAN PLACE I saw Stieglitz no more frequently but each time it was a warmer, more personal experience. I could speak of anything to him. Sitting in his little office, Stieglitz ~~in his black cape~~ ^{WEARING} or propped up against white pillows on his couch, ~~many subjects~~ ^{WE TALKED} OF MANY THINGS were brought up, many related to photography. On one occasion I told him how a relative had suggested that I cut off part of one of my photographs to improve its composition. Stieglitz said: "Do you know what you should have said to him? You should have said, 'My dear fellow do you know what you are doing? You are destroying my picture' ". Most of the time, however, I did the listening. He had much to say about the world and much to protest against. He had always been a fighter and continued to be one. He hated the intense commercialism of modern New York because it fostered a dilution of standards, a loss of integrity and finally a blindness to true values. If I came to Stieglitz assailed by doubts, feeling that there was not much use in trying to express myself in photography - that it had all been said and would not be listened to anyway - he invariably made me feel, not by any direct encouragement, that it was alright, even necessary, to be dissatisfied. I always went away with renewed determination, more confident, as a result of his clarification of values. He could always wipe the mist of doubt and confusion from ~~away~~ ^{my} eyes.

One of the warmest experiences I had with Stieglitz was on an evening I visited him in his apartment near the East River. After supper he went to lie down and later when I went into his room to say good-bye he gently pressed my hand in both of his and saying a few forgotten words gave me a sense of his complete understanding that nearly brought tears to my eyes.

Stieglitz loved and was loved by many people. They have felt the full warmth of his tolerance and understanding. Those who have disliked Stieglitz never knew him because they were incapable of comprehending his uncompromising demand for absolute integrity.