SESSION 04 · UNIT 1 — LIGHT & OBJECT · Oct 13, 2026

Edward Steichen & Alfred Stieglitz

Steichen 1879–1973 · American, born Luxembourg — Stieglitz 1864–1946 · American

Shared beginnings, divergent paths



Rodin — The Thinker · Steichen, 1902

"In photography there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality."

— Alfred Stieglitz

KEY WORKS

- Rodin — The Thinker, 1902 — the sculptor silhouetted against a cast of his own work (Steichen)
- The Flatiron, 1904 — the building rendered as a nocturne of rain and gaslight (Steichen)
- The Flatiron, 1903 — the same building, bare and geometric (Stieglitz)
- The Steerage, 1907 — immigrants on the deck of a liner bound for Europe (Stieglitz)
- Gloria Swanson, 1924 — the film star behind a veil of black lace, for Vanity Fair (Steichen)
- Marion Morehouse in Chéruit, 1927 — fashion staged like a film still, for Vogue (Steichen)
- Joan Crawford in Schiaparelli, 1932 — a movie star posed like sculpture (Steichen)

CONTEXT

Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz were, for the first two decades of the twentieth century, the closest thing American photography had to a single creative partnership. Stieglitz, older and already established as an editor and advocate, met Steichen in 1900; together they ran the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession — soon known simply as 291 — and Stieglitz's journal Camera Work, the era's most important showcase for photography as fine art. Both, in that period, worked in the soft-focus, painterly style called Pictorialism: Steichen's 1902 Rodin — The Thinker, in which the sculptor is silhouetted against a ghostly cast of The Thinker and a marble bust of Victor Hugo, is as much a staged, darkroom-built composition as a straight photograph. The two even photographed the same subject, the Flatiron Building, within a year of each other — Stieglitz's 1903 version bare and geometric, Steichen's 1904 version dissolved into a blurred nocturne of rain and gaslight. But the partnership didn't last. Steichen moved toward sharp-focus modernism and, eventually, commercial fashion and advertising work; Stieglitz doubled down on photography as pure feeling, eventually abandoning recognizable subjects altogether for his Equivalents — cloud photographs he intended as direct equivalents of emotional states, with no other subject at all.

STEICHEN GOES COMMERCIAL

In 1923 Condé Nast hired Steichen as chief photographer for Vanity Fair and Vogue, taking over from Baron Adolph de Meyer, the first star of fashion photography. For the next fourteen years he was, as one curator put it, “a one-man industry for the magazines”: celebrity portraits like Gloria Swanson behind black lace, Gary Cooper, and Joan Crawford in Schiaparelli; fashion pages built around his favorite model, Marion Morehouse, in gowns by Chéruit, Vionnet, and other Paris couture houses; and advertising work for the J. Walter Thompson agency. He dropped the soft focus entirely and borrowed from the movies — hard light, crisp edges, real props. For one dinner-party fashion shoot he set a second, fully dressed table behind the models so the studio would read as an expensive restaurant. Stieglitz saw commercial work as a step away from photography as art; Steichen saw a client, a brief, and a problem to solve. He left Condé Nast in 1937 and never shot fashion again.

> **Around the corner: 291 Fifth Avenue**
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> The gallery at the center of this story was a short walk from our classroom — 291 Fifth Avenue, between 30th and 31st Streets. Steichen had his studio in the building and talked Stieglitz into turning rooms there into a gallery; in November 1905 they opened the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession. Everyone just called it “291.” Until it closed in 1917 it gave Americans their first look at Picasso, Matisse, and Rodin’s drawings, and hosted Georgia O’Keeffe’s first show. The original building is gone, but walk eight blocks south on the same avenue and you reach the Flatiron at 23rd Street — the building both of them photographed. Next time you’re on Fifth Avenue, stand at 30th Street and picture two photographers arguing about whether a photograph can be art.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Steichen and Stieglitz started in exactly the same place — the same gallery, the same magazine, even the same building as a subject — and still ended up as completely different photographers. That's worth sitting with today: two people can share every tool and every early influence and still choose different relationships to metal, glass, and light. Notice what you keep from your training today, and what you deliberately leave behind.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Steichen and Stieglitz started at the same gallery, in the same magazine, and even photographed the same building — and still became opposite kinds of photographers. What do you think actually causes two artists with near-identical training to diverge that much?
2. Stieglitz's Equivalents have no subject at all except clouds he said stood directly for his emotions. Is that still a photograph of something, or is it closer to an abstract painting that happens to use a camera?
3. Steichen spent fourteen years shooting fashion and celebrities for magazines and ad agencies; Stieglitz thought that was selling out. Is a photograph made for a client — a Vogue spread, an ad, a headshot — any less of an artwork? Would you take the Condé Nast job?

MORE IMAGES



The Flatiron · Steichen, 1904



The Flatiron · Stieglitz, 1903



The Steerage · Stieglitz, 1907



Equivalent · Stieglitz, c.1925–1934

STEICHEN FOR VOGUE & VANITY FAIR



Gloria Swanson · Steichen, 1924 · Vanity Fair



Joan Crawford in Schiaparelli · Steichen, 1932



Marion Morehouse in Chéruit · Steichen, 1927 · Vogue