A History of Photography

The Musée d'Orsay Collection 1839-1925

EDITED BY FRANÇOISE HEILBRUN

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PICTORIALISM

BY FRANÇOISE HEILBRUN

Pictorialism arose in England thanks to the initiative of two great amateurs convinced that photography was an art rather than a straightforward mechanical operation. They sought recognition for the pre-eminence of the photographer's eye and sensibility over the depicted subject. In 1869, Henry Peach Robinson published *The Pictorial Effect of Photography*. Then, in 1889, Peter Henry Emerson, son of a rich Cuban planter who had decided to live in England and devote his life to photography, published an essay titled *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*.

Yet actually the movement would not have spread first across Europe (around 1890) and later in the United States (where it would spawn modern photography), had it not benefited from favorable circumstances. First of all, it reached a considerably broader public thanks to new cameras that were cheaper and easier to use. Indeed, large companies began bringing photography within the reach of all. This expanded base then provided a breeding ground for artists who joined photo clubs—as distinct from official associations—and created an interested public for exhibitions being organized all around the world. Furthermore, the abolition of hierarchies among the arts, as preached by William Morris and subsequently by all advocates of art nouveau, allowed such exhibitions to be held in galleries normally devoted exclusively to painting, such as Bernheim in Paris and the Dudley Gallery in London, not to mention museums of fine arts such as the Petit Palais in Paris, the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, and the Art Institute in Chicago.

THE FOUNDING FATHERS

The two founders of pictorialism took opposites routes to reach the same goal: Robinson recommended reworking negatives and even prints by hand, the latter being made up of multiple photocollages. Emerson, on the contrary, argued for a "pure" photography; he claimed that the lens could be a perfect tool for expressing a naturalist vision provided it was used by an artist. These two diverging approaches coexisted throughout the movement's long career; yet all pictorialists, whichever side they took, drew their main inspiration from the art of painting, with greater or lesser independence of mind. Finally, the perfecting of photomechanical methods of reproduction at the end of the nineteenth century, such as photogravure and half-tone engraving, spurred the dissemination of photographs through publication in highly sophisticated magazines or simply through sale as prints.

The European revival of the "estampe originale" at the turn of the twentieth century in fact served as a model for French, German, and Austrian pictorialists in particular. Robert Demachy, a founding member of the Photo-Club de Paris in 1888, and Alfred Maskell, a founding member of the Linked Ring Brotherhood in London, promoted the use of the gum-bichromate process developed by A. Rouillé-Ladevèze. It involved brushing one or two layers of pigment onto a positive print, usually enlarged. The French deliberately concentrated their artistic efforts on the final print thus obtained, for it enabled them, in the words of photographer René le Bègue, to correct the mechanical, slavish image produced by the lens. This became so true that sometimes their work seemed closer to printmaking than photography, taking little more from photographic technique than the art of composition.

In the realm of landscape, the Musée d'Orsay has a fine group of charming panoramas produced by Constant Puyo, for example, who was inspired by Japanese prints to make harmonious compositions from the oblong format produced by the lens (p. 242). But, prior to the development of photogravure, these prints represented just a first step; the negative-and-silver-print technique then in use rendered atmospheric values very poorly when compared to the photogravure landscapes produced by Emerson himself from negatives for his final book, *Marsh Leaves* (p. 269, *The Misty River*). Emerson's prints evoke the works of both Whistler (*The Lone Lagoon*, p. 207) and the impressionists (*The Fetters of Winter*, p. 207), whom he greatly admired.

A fine, abstract shoreline by Demachy, the leading French pictorialist, bought by the Musée d'Orsay in 1982 (p. 268) is often reproduced. Demachy's sophisticated visual culture can be seen in a photogravure published in *Camera Work* in 1904, *In Brittany*, (p. 268): the young Breton woman in the foreground, who stands out from the flat landscape like the pattern on a tapestry, evokes the paintings of the Nabis and the synthetist group, which Demachy certainly knew.

Munich was also a great center of pictorialism, and from there the movement spread to Russia and Czechoslovakia. František Drtikol, who began working in Prague in 1901, was influenced by the pictorialist trend, as witnessed by two albums of landscapes of Bohemia, his homeland, now in the Musée d'Orsay. His small gum-bichromate prints vacillate between naturalism and symbolism, with a predilection for nocturnal scenes that sometimes approach abstraction (*Château fort en ruine en Bohême* [Ruined Castle in Bohemia], p. 270). They were stuck to cardboard of various colors, a refinement typical of the pictorialist taste that placed great stress on the mounting, framing, and hanging of photographs, the better to underscore their status as artworks.

Although the first pictorialist photo club was founded in France, the movement's first international show was held in Vienna in 1888. Heinrich Kühn, a member of the club called Das Kleeblatt (The

Cloverleaf), evolved considerably after having met Alfred Stieglitz and his group in 1904. Without abandoning the gum-bichromate process and oil-retouching techniques so cherished in Europe, Kühn's initially and somewhat emphatically naturalist style evolved toward an increasingly refined interpretation of light—his main concern—and freer and freer composition. Here, the flat space of a landscape at Burgstall, near Brixen in the southern Tyrol (p. 271) where he lived, represented a highly original adaptation, thanks to its high-angle view, of the perspective seen in Japanese prints. The pictorialists also liked to take pictures of cities, which were similarly a favorite subject of painters and illustrators in the late nineteenth century. Nor did Demachy disdain everyday scenes of crowds, factories, and even automobiles, managing to achieve an artistic effect through the magic of his printing techniques.

THE SPREAD OF THE MOVEMENT

The city was notably and lovingly photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, son of a self-made man of German stock, who was one of the leading figures of the pictorialist movement. After training in Europe, he returned to New York, where he became the key proponent of American pictorialism and photographed the booming city, sometimes under a delicate mantle of snow (*The "Flat Iron"* [*Building*]), sometimes as a smoke-spewing symbol of power and the future (*The City of Ambition* p. 277), a picture that soon became famous. Stieglitz's role as head of the Photo-Secession group, which he founded in 1902 in order to push American pictorialism to its utmost, did not prevent him from continuing to learn from younger colleagues, and his views of the New York harbor in 1910 are indebted to ones taken a year earlier of London and the docks of New York by Alvin Langdon Coburn.

In 1909 Coburn had produced a portfolio of magisterially composed photogravures of London, as exemplified by a view of the Thames that inevitably evokes Whistler (p. 273). Meanwhile, the Frenchman Pierre Dubreuil, an indisputably original artist, notably exhibited his work at the Photo-Club de Paris and the Linked Ring Brotherhood in London between 1896 and 1914. Subsequently, his work became influenced by constructivism. Dubreuil's *Grande Roue des Tuileries* (Ferris Wheel in the Tuileries, p. 272), taken in gray weather on a September 7th sometime around 1905, is typical of his early manner in its urban picturesqueness and its emphasis on a misty atmosphere highlighted by just a few dots of light.

SYMBOLIST INSPIRATION

Along with natural and urban landscapes, images of women were the pictorialist subject par excellence. Female imagery had already invaded everyday decorative life by 1900, whether carved on the façades of houses, arrayed across posters, or entwined around furniture, jewelry, and so on. A woman was supposed to personify grace, mystery, and sensuality, and she was usually shown nude or garbed in timeless drapery.

Members of the Photo-Club de Paris, notably Puyo and Demachy, along with Charles Lhermitte, hired very young sitters whom they took into the countryside, chaperoned by their parents. Puyo's female figures were very popular in his day, even though they now seem to us less inspired than his landscapes in their quest for an escapism that, anticipating Hollywood, was somewhat heavy-handed. Whereas the face of a young brunette taken by a fairly minor member of the Photo-Club de Paris, André Hachette, seems wonderfully fresh today. Demachy liked to play on the contrast between the dark skin of a young colored woman and the white of the shawls in which she is draped and the wall against which she leans imploringly (*Jeune fille suppliant* [Beseeching Girl]).

Nudes always carried a symbolist connotation that steered the pictures away from the pitfall of pornography. Edward Steichen was a master in this sphere; the artistic young painter and photographer, born into a modest family in Milwaukee, was as enterprising as he was talented. He was soon noticed by Stieglitz, then left America in 1900 to spend a year in Europe, where he managed to win over Rodin, a godlike figure to him. Rodin's influence is unmistakable in the pose and handling of *In Memoriam* (p. 275), a magisterial nude simultaneously fleshy and abstract, shot in Paris and printed on Steichen's return to the United States. Although the print was made with the gum-bichromate technique, it respects the photographic nature of the image more than prints by his European counterparts. Like Stieglitz, Steichen was a peerless technician as well as an inspired artist, becoming one of the presiding geniuses of the group. Only a small version of this picture is known, which recently surfaced on the market. Steichen's gum-bichromate prints are all the rarer in so far as his studio in Voulangis later burned down, destroying prints and negatives.

It was Clarence Hudson White, one of the founding members of the Photo-Secession, who introduced Steichen to Stieglitz. Although lacking the power of the other two masters, White had a profoundly poetic temperament that made his photos of young women believable and touching. He would lead the ladies into a natural setting at dawn, before going to work, and drape them to represent *Autumn* or *Spring*. White's photographs provide us with an

equivalent of Nabi compositions—despite his modest resources, he, too, seems to have owned several Japanese prints, as seen on the walls of his studio.

The Kiss (p. 279), sometimes mistakenly interpreted as a Sapphic theme, imitates Aubrey Beardsley's composition illustrating the famous passage in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* when the dancer kisses the decapitated head of Jokanaan. White, however—who liked not only literary subjects but also private family scenes (*Jeune fille couchée dans sa chambre* [*Girl Lying in her Bedroom*])—emptied the scene of its macabre content and tension, and simply showed a young mother kissing her child.

In 1909, White worked closely with a new member of Stieglitz's group, Paul Burty Haviland, who was the son of a porcelain manufacturer and who would play a leading role in the Photo-Secession movement, notably by helping to found the magazine *291*. Haviland and White both used the same model, the ravishing Florence Peterson. Whereas White photographed her nude in the woods like some timeless nymph, Haviland showed her as a modern young woman in an interior (p. 278), either nude or in a dressing gown but always pensive or day-dreaming. The very soft focus and use of artifices such as mirrors and iridescent lighting added a note of unreality. Unlike White, Haviland did not make platinum prints, but rather cyanotypes.

The symbolist atmosphere is even more pronounced in the work of George Seeley, another member of the Photo-Secession who lived in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. *The Brass Bowl* (p. 274) shows an ecstatic young woman with a shiny bowl, a prop often used by pictorialists to create light effects within a shadowy composition. In *The Tribute* (p. 274), a woman standing next to a tree makes an offering of the bowl—Seeley's handling of the slender figure and the soft, light-radiating landscape makes the sacred atmosphere sought by the photographer highly convincing, and yet it was produced on a straightforward silver print. If American pictorialists succeeded in evoking a symbolist atmosphere, then why did French photographers usually fail? It would seem that the sharp focus of their original exposures and the realism of the resulting figures created an irreconcilable contradiction with the idealist content, although this hypothesis needs further exploration.

Baron Adolf de Meyer was an international socialite, but that did not prevent him from being a remarkably talented photographer to whom Stieglitz devoted several issues of *Camera Work* between 1908 and 1912. Excited on first seeing the Ballets Russes, de Meyer soon got in touch with Diaghilev and began taking photographs of Nijinsky. In 1914 he was commissioned by Paul Iribe to illustrate the book that Iribe was preparing on *L'Après-midi d'un faune,* the ballet choreographed and performed by Nijinsky to music by Debussy. The book was designed to promote the ballet, inspired by Greek vase paintings, which had created a scandal when first presented in Paris two years earlier. However, most of the one thousand copies printed for publication were lost during a shipwreck, and only a very few survived, including one donated to the Musée d'Orsay by bibliophile and music-lover Michel de Bry. For this commission, shot in a London studio, de Meyer had a special lens made (a Pinkerton Smith) that allowed him to get different degrees of sharpness on the same image, or to make the light shimmer (pp. 280–81). Thanks to fast emulsion, de Meyer was able to convey fluid movement perfectly, and he ably alternated groups and individual figures (whom he did not hesitate to fragment, a technique that Stieglitz would borrow several years later for his famous ongoing portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe (*Georgia O'Keeffe, Torso*, p. 289). De Meyer could wonderfully render the suppleness of bodies and artfully light faces, as seen in his portrait of dancer Ruth Saint-Denis, who was then famous in the United States. These qualities made de Meyer, along with Steichen, one of the first great fashion photographers to work for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* as early as 1914.

THE RISE OF PICTORIALIST PORTRAITURE

The realm of portraiture enjoyed a veritable renaissance among the pictorialists, because easy-to-use equipment freed them from the constraints of fixed lenses and slow emulsions, and above all because creativity became the byword. The days of flat, passport-like photos were over; it was the atmosphere and feeling that predominated, even in the many family portraits done by Steichen, Stieglitz, and Kühn. Such atmosphere could be further enhanced by the beauty or boldness of the composition: Kühn showed his son Walther absorbed in reading (p. 282); White placed De Meyer in mysterious back-lighting (p. 282). Steichen described the circumstances in which he produced a portrait of himself and his wife Clara during their honeymoon, in the garden of the Stieglitz's home at Lake George (p. 283); although the sunset colors are invisible in the black-and-white silver print, there remains something of the exalting moment in the proud poses and facial expressions of the couple.

Portraits of artists and writers that glorified the genius of the human soul enjoyed a revival under the pictorialists, just as it had among the early photographers of the 1850s. Steichen was the uncontested master of this genre.

Very different from Steichen's majestic, symbolist compositions is the portrait that English photographer Frederick Evans took of his friend, the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (p. 285). Evans had started out doing micrography of shells, and thus he favored a straightforward vision and rigor (unlike other pictorialists, he did not enlarge his negatives). But how effective that vision could be! Taking advantage of his sitter's bird-of-prey profile and long, thin artistic hands, Evans composed a fascinating, highly modern portrait. Along with Emerson, Evans was the most skillful printer on platinum paper,

invented in 1885. Platinum prints were appreciated for their subtle rendering of tonal gradations, and were used by photographers until the First World War made the process too costly.

TOWARDS MODERNISM

The war had a profound impact on pictorialist photographers—it decimated the movement in Europe, apart from Kühn who, living in his own world, carried on as he had in the past. In the United Sates in 1910, a retrospective show organized by Stieglitz and his group at the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, represented a public triumph for the movement, yet simultaneously sounded its death knell in the eyes of true connoisseurs. Avant-garde artists such as Rodin, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, and Picabia—whose work Stieglitz had been showing since 1908 in his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue—inevitably altered the vision of people like Stieglitz, Steichen, and Paul Strand (*The Blind*) by ridding them of sentimentality and convincing them to abandon soft focus. As early as 1907, Stieglitz, in his famous *Steerage* (p. 286), showing the deck of a ship teeming with penniless passengers, took a direct look at reality, an approach that represented a notable change; and a few years later Picasso would acknowledge his admiration for this picture's content and "cubist" composition. However, Stieglitz did not go on to document social issues—unlike his disciple, Strand—and his work always remained profoundly individual if full of humanity.

In 1917, Stieglitz was forced to close his gallery, but he met a young, highly talented artist, Georgia O'Keeffe, who triggered his emotional and artistic rebirth. Stieglitz at once began an ongoing portrait of the woman he loved, a portrait conceived as the sum of successive moments, in a Bergson-like spirit, which continued up to his death. In 1918, as the lovers' passion blossomed, this portrait took the form of a tribute to Womanhood, whose various features—torso (p. 289), breasts (p. 288), feet, hands (O'Keeffe's were very beautiful p. 288), neck—became a source of inspiration similar to the sixteenth-century poetic tradition of brief paeans to parts of a woman's body. Stieglitz thereby developed an original form of portraiture. Shooting his sitter in close-up, he endowed O'Keeffe's delicate figure with a sculptural monumentality reminiscent of Rodin, whose erotic drawings Stieglitz had exhibited. Those drawings, along with D.H. Lawrence's novels, totally liberated Stieglitz from his figurative inhibitions.

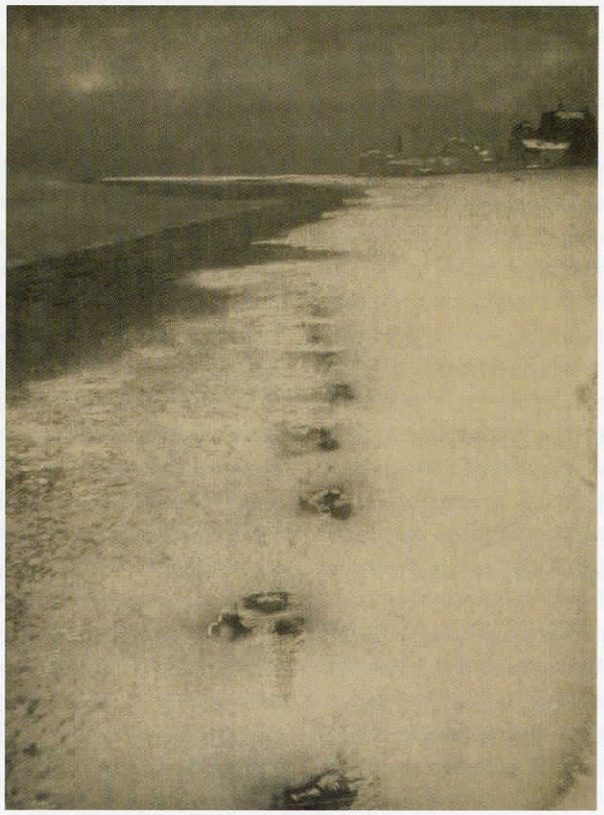
At the same time, Stieglitz produced many portraits of his artist friends. The one he took of his young protégé, Man Ray, then an unknown painter, was somewhat different due to its improvised nature (p. 291). Some historians even consider it to be a self-portrait by Man Ray himself, allegedly experimenting with the medium. However, in his memoirs Man Ray described at length the sitting in the 291 Gallery, with Stieglitz flitting around him like a dancer, wielding a hoop of cloth in order to model the light. Furthermore, there is a genuine stylistic similarity between this portrait and those of O'Keeffe done in 1918, notably a marked taste for curves, plus a precociously expressionist feel.

Steichen's transition to modernism, meanwhile, was prompted by his experience of aerial photography for the military, which revealed to him the merits of detailed accuracy. His superb shot of a building taken from his New York studio at night (p. 287) showed that Steichen's new, straightforward photography had lost none of the mastery that characterized his earlier work. He produced an entire series of these images. Stieglitz had always been drawn to nature, but his various roles as gallery director and magazine editor hadn't left him much time to devote himself to it. Once the war forced him to close his gallery, Stieglitz could indulge this passion on his family property at Lake George; in a pantheistic spirit largely inspired by Walt Whitman's poetry, he photographed trees, drops of dew on fruit, blades of grass.

In 1923, undergoing a crisis provoked by the death of his mother and the mental illness of his only daughter, he decided to photograph the sky, using a lighter camera, a Graflex that allowed him to concentrate on the clouds. These cosmic images—simultaneously realistic and abstract, since any way up is up—were titled *Equivalents* by Stieglitz, in the sense of musical equivalents (p. 293). He put his entire philosophy of life into these pictures, the height of his art. He exhibited them as a series in 1925 in New York's Anderson Gallery, which he was running at the time, promoting the American painters he liked. The following year, some of his *Equivalents* were included alongside works by Mondrian, Arp, Klee, Kandinsky, and Miró in the large show organized at the Brooklyn Museum of Art by Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme, which she founded with Marcel Duchamp as a forerunner to a museum of modern art in New York.

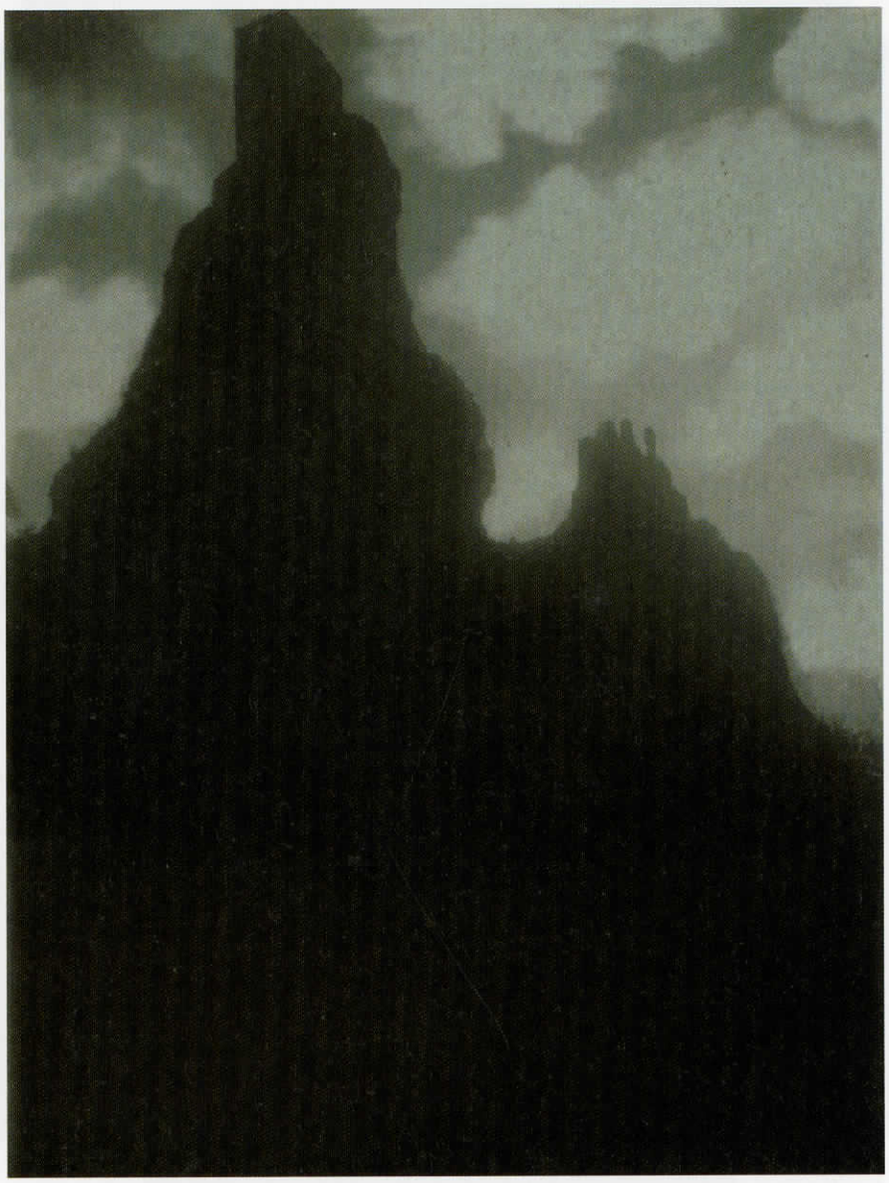
Just prior to giving up photography for health reasons in 1937, Stieglitz took pictures of trees at Lake George that had been planted at his birth, symbolizing passing time and his approaching end (*Poplars, Lake George*, p. 292). In a much-vaunted exhibition, John Szarkowksi divided the two trends of contemporary photography of the 1980s into two camps: one that presented a mirror of the inner world, and another that opened a window to the outside world—Stieglitz was certainly one of the fathers of the former approach.

ROBERT DEMACHY, **IN BRITTANY**, 1904



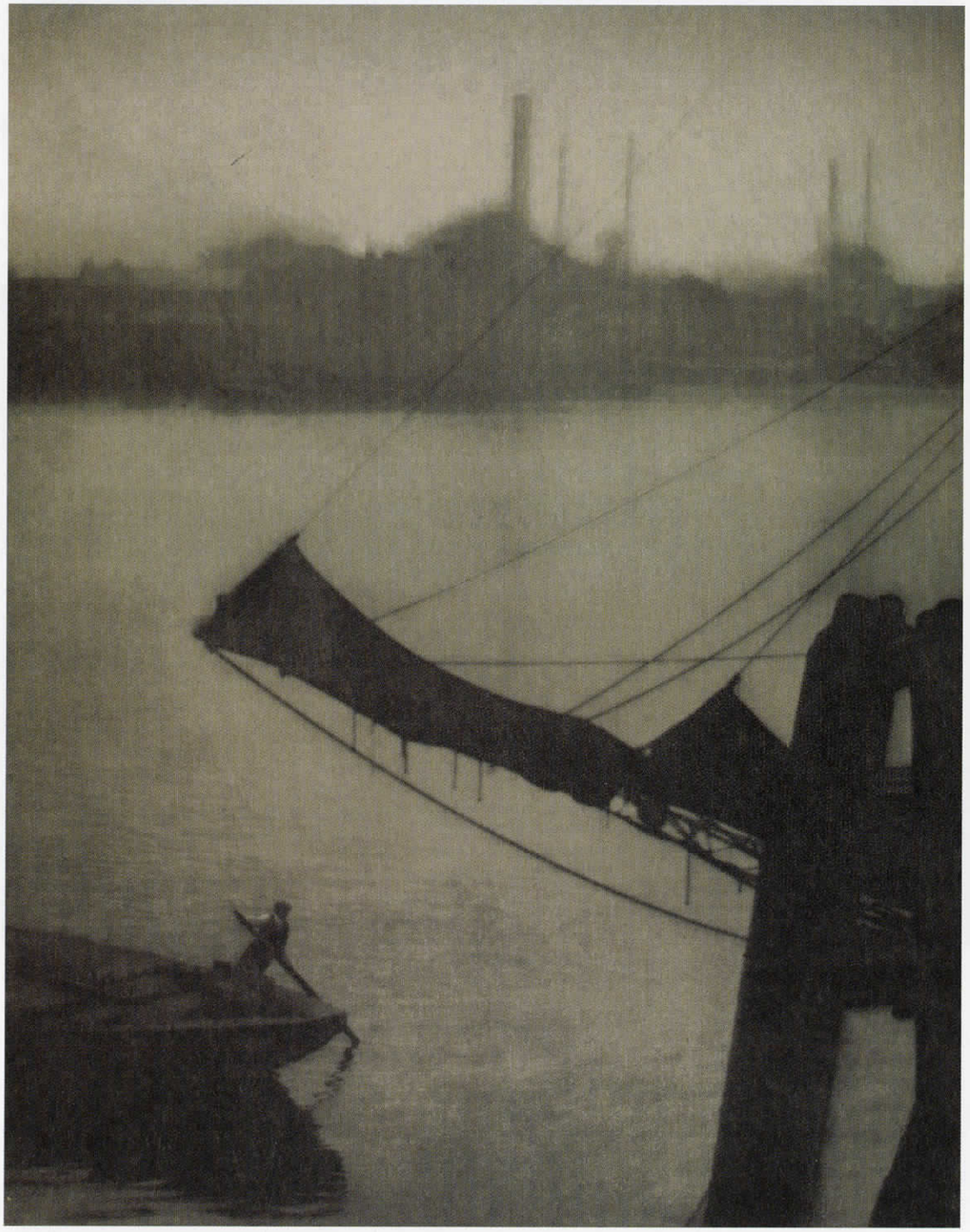
ROBERT DEMACHY, **LANDSCAPE**, c. 1904

PETER HENRY EMERSON, THE MISTY RIVER, 1895



FRANTIŠEK DRTIKOL, FORT IN RUINS IN BOHEMIA, c.1901

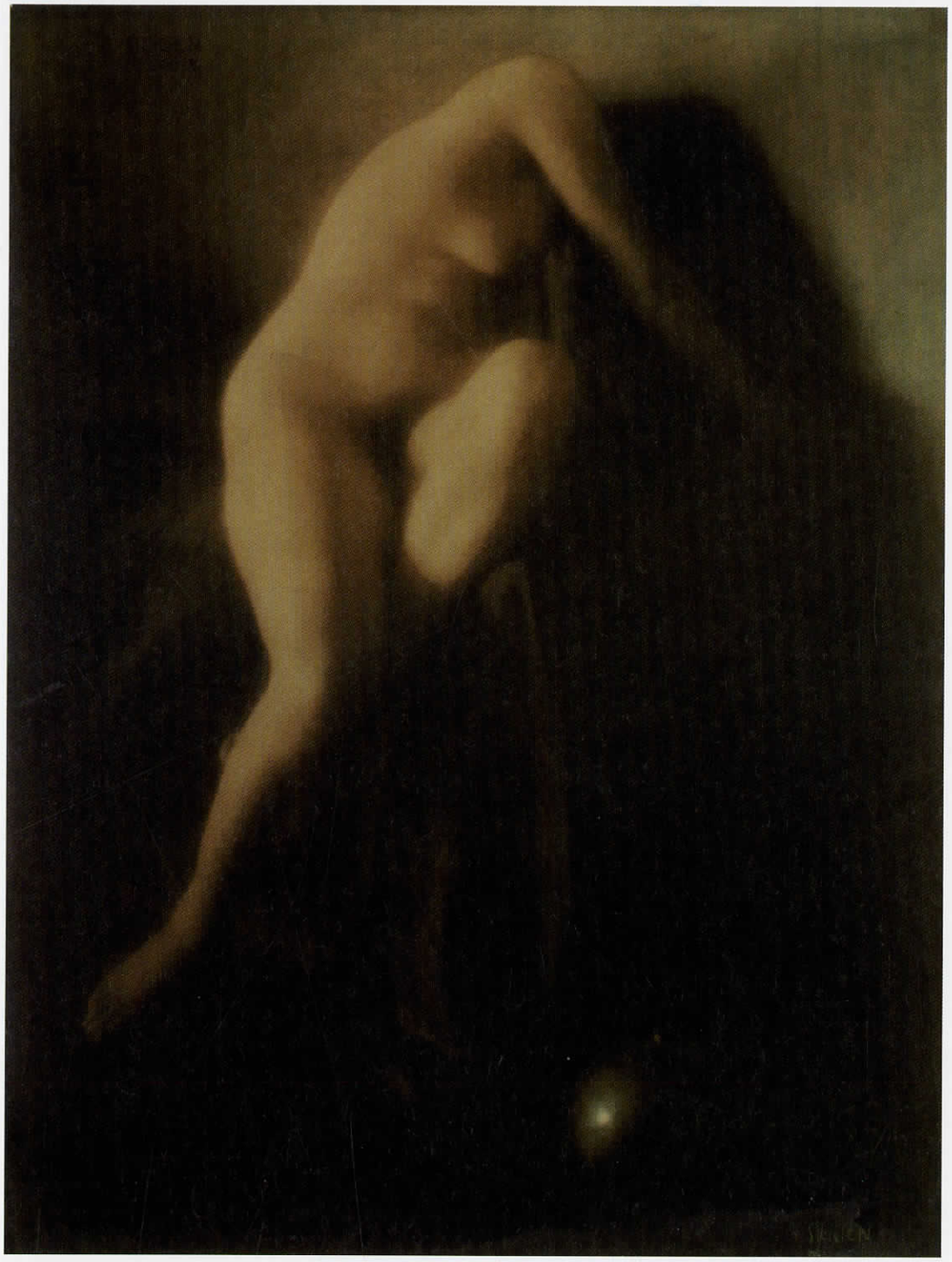
PIERRE DUBREUIL, THE FERRIS WHEEL IN THE TUILERIES, c.1905



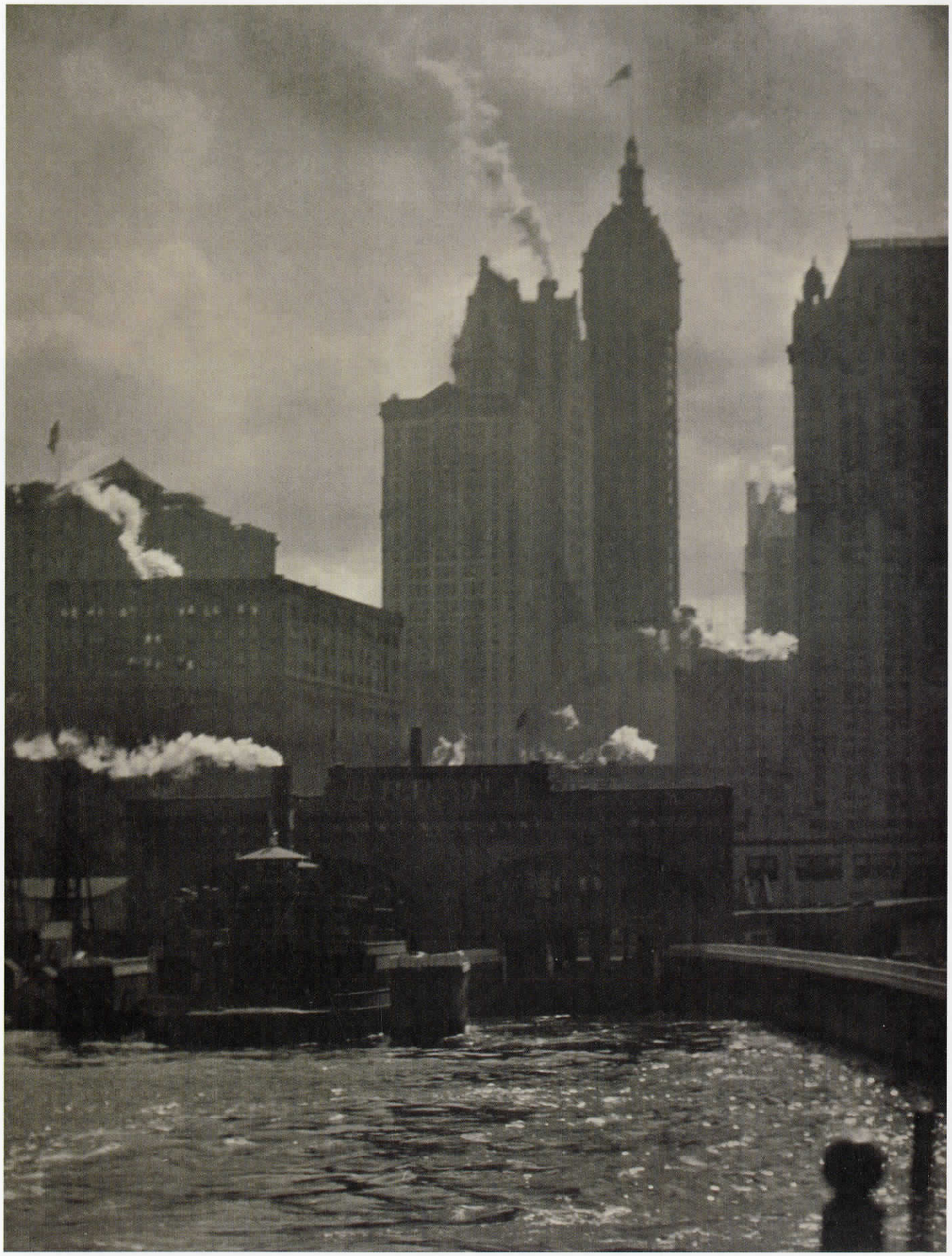
ALVIN LANGDON COBURN, **LONDON STREET SCENE: THE THAMES,** 1909

GEORGE HENRY SEELEY, **THE BRASS BOWL**, c.1905

GEORGE HENRY SEELEY, **THE TRIBUTE**, c.1907



EDWARD STEICHEN, IN MEMORIAM (NU FÉMININ), 1904



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, THE CITY OF AMBITION, 1910

PAUL BURTY HAVILAND, FLORENCE PETERSON,
STANDING NUDE, c. 1909

PAUL BURTY HAVILAND, FLORENCE PETERSON
IN A KIMONO CARRYING FLOWERS, c. 1909

CLARENCE HUDSON WHITE, **THE KISS**, 1904

ADOLF DE MEYER (BARON), NIJINSKY AS A FAUN HOLDING A BUNCH OF GRAPES, 1912

ADOLF DE MEYER (BARON), DANCER KNEELING IN *THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN*, 1912

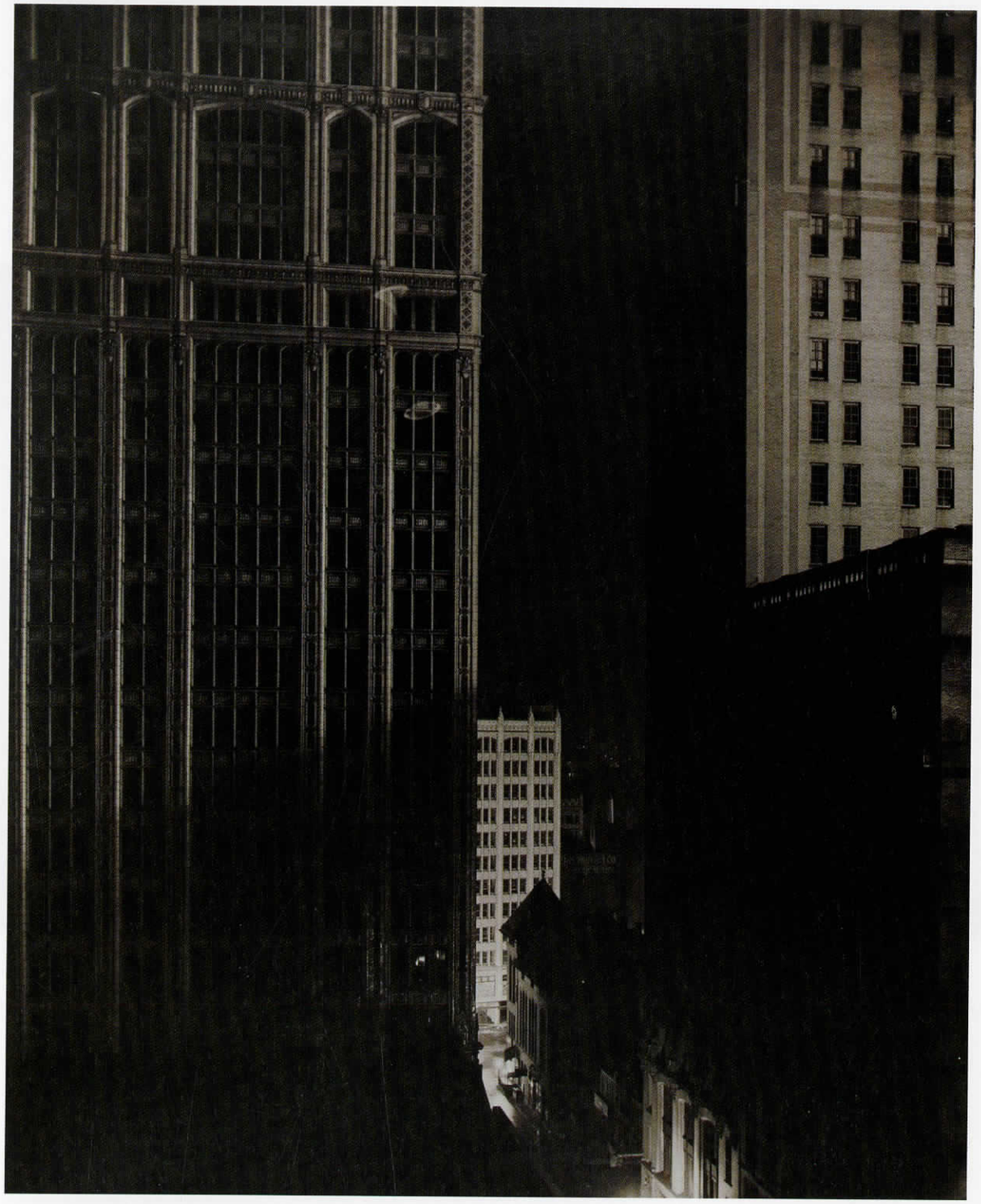
HEINRICH KÜHN, **WALTER KÜHN, THE ARTIST'S SON,** READING, c. 1914

CLARENCE HUDSON WHITE, **BARON ADOLF DE MEYER,** c. 1904

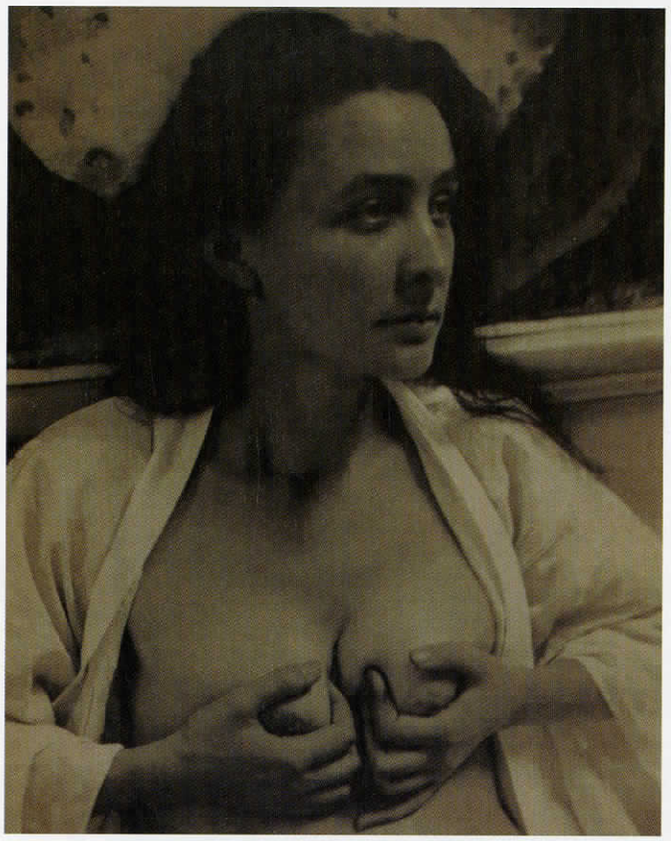
EDWARD STEICHEN, "A SOUVENIR OF A LAKE GEORGE HONEYMOON", SELF-PORTRAIT OF STEICHEN AND HIS WIFE CLARA, 1903

FREDERICK H. EVANS, **THE ILLUSTRATOR AUBREY BEARDSLEY**, 1895

ALFRED STIEGLITZ, THE STEERAGE, 1907



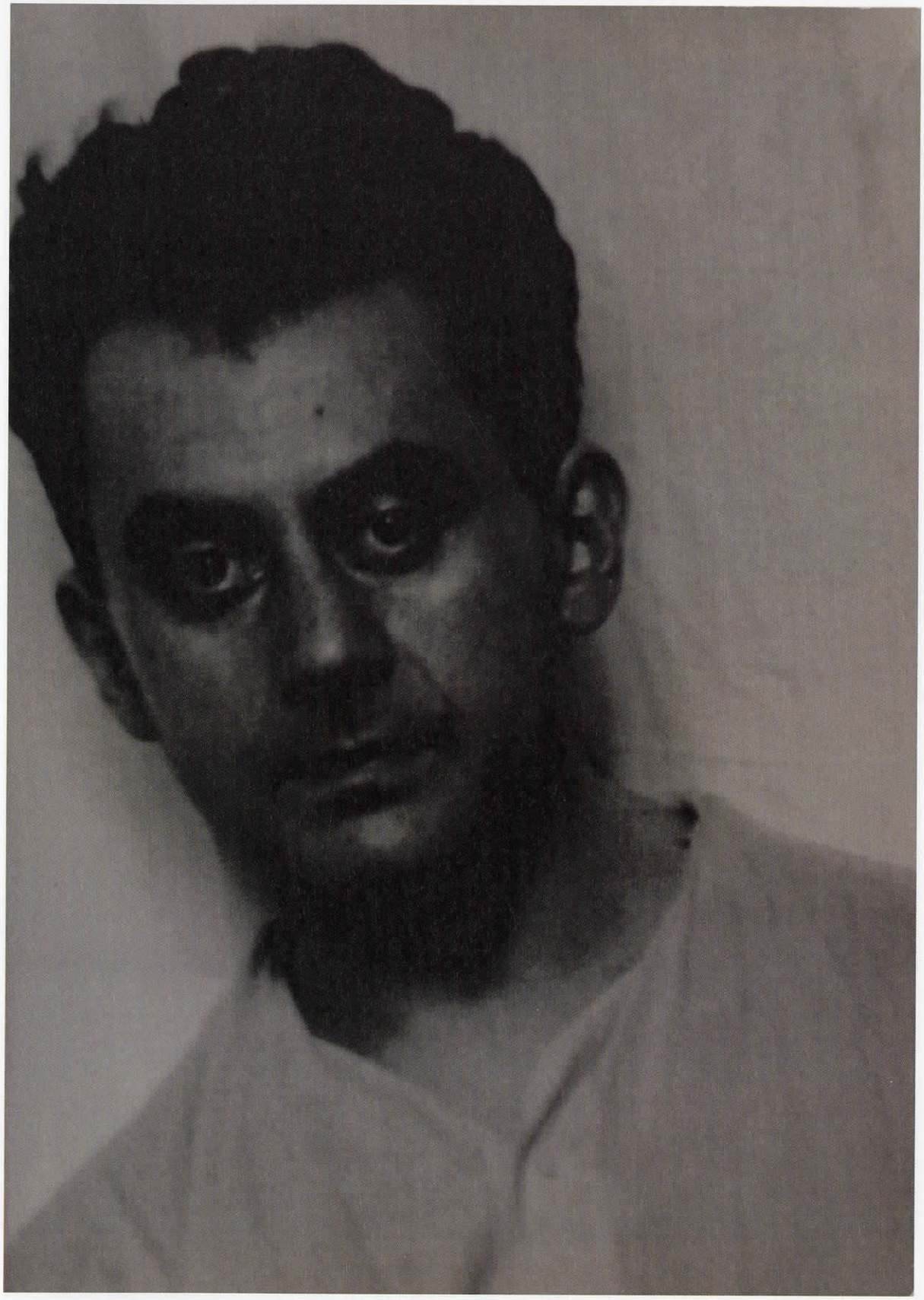
EDWARD STEICHEN, SUNDAY NIGHT ON 40TH STREET, 1925



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, SQUEEZING BREASTS, 1918

ALFRED STIEGLITZ, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE IN FRONT OF ONE OF HER WORKS, 1918

ALFRED STIEGLITZ, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, TORSO, 1918



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, PORTRAIT OF MAN RAY, c. 1915

ALFRED STIEGLITZ, POPLARS, LAKE GEORGE, 1932

ALFRED STIEGLITZ, **EQUIVALENT**, 1925