

Global Scholars/October OOM

“THE STEERAGE” 69.133.35.9

Alfred Steiglitz

1911



HISTORICAL CONTEXT: The turn of the 20th century saw many important cultural and technological changes. The population of the United States was 76M in 46 states. The 1900-10 were considered the first decade of materialism and consumerism. The Sears and Wards catalogs were more widely read than the Christian Bible. Cars became affordable by many. \$700-\$900 would buy the consumer the newest Ford. There were approximately 8,000 cars on the 10 miles of paved highways nationwide. Transportation was profoundly changed in 1903 when the Wright Brothers made their first flight. This was the decade of business monopolies. U.S. Steel, Standard Oil, and the American Tobacco Company were by far the largest companies in the country. 700 people were killed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. President McKinley was assassinated in 1901. Theodore Roosevelt assumed the office of the president from 1901 to 1909. In 1909 William Howard Taft was elected and was president until 1913. In 1904 the U.S. Supreme Court denied African-Americans the right to vote. Ping-pong was invented in England, and played by the wealthy. “Come Josephine in My Flying Machine” and “In My Merry Oldsmobile” were two popular songs of the day.

During this time America had yet to make its mark on the Art Scene. Many American painters went to Europe to paint, though some American artists were beginning to

develop an American vernacular. Artists such as George Luks, John Sloane, Edward Hooper, George Bellows and Frederick Remington began painting an American landscape. A distinctly American architecture, known as Prairie School, was being practiced by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. With the Larkin Administration Building in Buffalo, NY, 1903 and Unity Temple, 1904 in Oak Park, IL, Wright moved from designing residential architecture to designing public buildings. In 1908, Louis Sullivan and his chief draftsman, George Elmslie designed the National Farmers' Bank in Owatonna, Minnesota.

THE ARTIST: Alfred Steiglitz, was born in Hoboken, New Jersey on January 1, 1864. He is considered by many to be the "Father of Modern Photography". His work as an art dealer, exhibition organizer, publisher and editor made significant contributions to the modern art movement in America. In his Gallery 291 he showcased American photographers and painters. He also gave American debuts to Picasso, Rodin, Matisse, Cezanne and Brancusi. He promoted the work of Georgia O'Keefe, who became his wife in 1924. Before Steiglitz photographs were considered purely historical records. Cameras were machine and were to be used to record a moment in time. It was used by social reformers such as Jacob Riis to document the problems of the poor. Steiglitz viewed the camera and film as another media on a par with oil paint and marble. Steiglitz relied on composition, tone, and atmospheric conditions such as snow, rain and steam rather than manipulating the print in the darkroom. During the years, 1902-1907 Steiglitz and his colleagues, the photographer, Edward Steichen published "CameraWork" which published works of the Photo-Successionist group. This group emphasized craftsmanship and labor-intensive manipulation to more closely approximate painting. Steiglitz, however, continued to rely on the immediacy that the camera allowed. In 1924 Steiglitz married Georgia O'Keefe. He took of 300 portraits of her. He said no one picture could capture her. This was in keeping with the modern view that: the sense of self and the outside world were rapidly changing, truth in the modern world was relative, and photographs reflect the photographer's feeling for the subject as much they are a record of the subject depicted.

THE OBJECT: "The Steerage" is considered Steiglitz's signature work. In this photograph photography was raised to fine art. This photo represents a turning point in Steiglitz's approach to photography. No longer did he use methods to bear likeness to paintings. No longer would photos look like brushwork with soft misty effects. After this photo the main image would be in sharp focus and the background would be in soft focus, just as the eye sees. Form and composition would be the essential element. Steiglitz was also influenced by Japanese woodblock prints that reduced in importance of humans in a scene, and flattened space. And so it is with "The Steerage". In 1907 on a trip to Bremen from New York, Steiglitz observed a scene that had the Cubist composition that Picasso and Braque were working on in Paris. He observed the funnel on the left, the white gangplank cutting a diagonal from left and right, the man with the circular straw hat leaning over the railing, and the man wear suspenders that X-ed in the back. He viewed this scene as his first "modernist" photo. Unfortunately Steiglitz did not have his camera with him. He rushed back to his stateroom, and when he returned with one photographic plate (one plate, one chance). The scene was as he left it. He did not

print the plate until he got to Paris. 1911 was the first time he published it in “Camera Works” along with a Cubist drawing by Picasso. Steiglitz was interested in the geometry of the scene, and it wasn’t until years later that the social aspects of the scene were recognized.

Much has been made about the social commentary that “The Steerage” is a photo of immigrants coming to America. Indeed the people on the boat are returning to Europe. At this time skilled craftsmen were often returning at the end of a two year visa that could be obtained to work in America. Many of the people in the steerage may have been returning to their homeland because they were unable to find work or were dissatisfied with the life they found in America. However, it cannot be denied that the immigration experience of those on the upper deck was significantly different than the passengers in steerage. Immigration officials assumed that if you could afford the upper deck passage you were a welcome addition to this country. cursory health examinations were given on the boat and your arrival was expedited. The same assumption was not afforded those in steerage. Given the reality of the immigrant experience, it is hard not to see an important social statement in “The Steerage”. Steiglitz described “The Steerage” as the “deepest human feelings combined with shapes.”

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