

# The Photography of Imogen Cunningham

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A C E N T E N N I A L S E L E C T I O N

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

December 13, 1985–January 30, 1986



Imogen Cunningham occupies a singular position in the history of American art of the twentieth century. For over half the history of photography, she innovatively explored all the major traditions associated with the medium as fine art. Experimenting with numerous techniques and styles, she photographed a wide range of subjects: pictorial tableaux, plant forms, nudes, architecture, and portraiture. Yet when Imogen Cunningham died in 1976, at the age of ninety-three, she had received only infrequent critical and public recognition for her pioneering accomplishments.

In celebration of Cunningham's significant contribution, fifty photographs from public and private collections have been selected for "The Photography of Imogen Cunningham: A Centennial Selection." The curators have chosen a representative number of her most celebrated images as well as photographs which have rarely, if ever, been exhibited or published before. A unique aspect of this exhibition is that it consists of only vintage prints, that is, prints which were made shortly after the photograph was taken. Because the tonal range of photographic papers changed considerably during Cunningham's lifetime, these prints provide the most accurate representation of the artist's original aesthetic intentions.

Throughout her career, Cunningham conscientiously worked to establish a meaningful and penetrating interrelationship between herself and her subject. This is clearly evident in her very early soft-focus pictorial work, where her fascination with dramatizing human gestures is skillfully revealed and underscored with a mysterious intrigue. Working in the style that dominated art photography at the time, she directed her artist friends to re-create romantic tableaux inspired by the poetry of William Blake and nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite painting. The resulting images were printed on platinum paper which provided a deep tonal range and luminous quality, enhancing the spiritual sensuality of her allegorical imagery. This spiritual, at times surreal, quality of her early work would surface again in Cunningham's photographs of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

By the early 1920s a new vision had emerged in photography, displacing impressionistic romantic imagery with a precise objective view of the world. This was due in part to technical advances in camera equipment and in part to a heightened interest in observing objects with a new respect for photographic veracity. For Cunningham, a large-format camera proved to be an ideal instrument for her

close-up formal studies of plants and nudes. Delicately recording the abstract shapes created by the play of light and shadow and exploring new space-form relationships, she carefully retained a recognizable identity of the subject. For these works, she rapidly received critical acclaim, particularly for her images of plants, and by 1930 these photographs had been internationally exhibited and published. Cunningham was unique among her American colleagues, for her innovative close-up realism paralleled the philosophy of the New Objectivity movement in Europe.

Imogen Cunningham's friendship with the photographers Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Willard Van Dyke led her to become a founding member of the informal Group f. 64, which exhibited in the San Francisco Bay area in 1932. The term Group f. 64 stood for one of the smallest apertures then available on a large-format camera lens. This group of West Coast photographers championed an unmanipulated, direct approach with the camera. Cunningham brought to it an attitude and vision shared with other photographers, among them, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler on the East Coast; and Karl Blossfeldt and Albert Renger-Patzsch in Germany.

Ironically, Cunningham's photographic achievements were, in the last two decades of her life, overshadowed by her elevation to celebrity status. An increased recognition of and interest in the women's movement, in aging, and in fine art photography propelled Cunningham into sudden fame. She was celebrated for her outspoken personality, quick wit not dulled by age, and independent spirit. But had she retired in the 1930s, before the age of sixty, her photographic achievements would have remained prominent. This exhibition, therefore, seeks to refocus on Cunningham's work in order to celebrate the significant contribution that she has made to fine art photography.

SUSAN EHRENS

LELAND RICE

*Guest Curators*

*This exhibition was organized by the American Federation of Arts and has been traveling nationally with support from its National Patrons. This showing represents a portion of the original exhibition.*

# Checklist

All photographs are silver gelatin prints unless otherwise stated. The titles used are the original titles given by the artist. Variant titles used in previous exhibitions appear in parentheses. The date immediately following the title is the negative date. Image dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

*Marsh (Marsh at Dawn)*, 1901

Platinum print,  $8\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$   
International Museum of Photography at  
George Eastman House, Rochester

*Adam and Eve (The Suppliant)*, 1910

Platinum print,  $9\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$   
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University  
of Nebraska, Lincoln

*Trafalgar Square*, 1910

Platinum print,  $8\frac{3}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$   
Private collection

*The Dream (Nei-san-koburi)*, 1910–12

Platinum print,  $9 \times 6\frac{3}{8}$   
Private collection

*Boy with Incense*, 1912

Platinum print,  $9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$   
Private collection

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## LEFT

*Two Callas*, before 1929

Gelatin silver print,  $11\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{7}{8}$  inches  
Bokelberg Collection, Hamburg, West Germany

*Untitled (Decorative Panel)*, 1912

Platinum print,  $9\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{5}{8}$   
New Orleans Museum of Art; Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs. Peter Roussel Norman

*On Mt. Rainier 2*, 1915

Platinum print,  $7\frac{1}{16} \times 9\frac{1}{16}$   
Dr. and Mrs. R. Joseph Monsen

*Roi Partridge (Etcher)*, 1915

Platinum print,  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Albert M. Bender

*Banana Plant*, c. 1920

$11\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$   
New Orleans Museum of Art

*Gertrude Gerrish*, c. 1920

$11\frac{3}{8} \times 9$   
Private collection

*Partridge Aloe*, c. 1920

$11\frac{3}{16} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$   
New Orleans Museum of Art

*Brett Weston*, 1923

Platinum print,  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{5}{8}$   
Vision Gallery and Robert Klein Gallery,  
Ltd., Boston

*Torso (Figures Number 1, Nude 1923)*, 1923

Palladiotype print,  $7\frac{1}{8} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Albert M. Bender

*Magnolia Blossom*, 1925

$7 \times 8\frac{1}{16}$   
Collection of Alma Lavenson

*Aloe Bud*, c. 1926

$12 \times 8\frac{3}{4}$   
Private collection

*Shredded Wheat Tower*, 1928

$9 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$   
Vision Gallery and Robert Klein Gallery,  
Ltd., Boston

*Triangles*, 1928

$3\frac{7}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{16}$   
Private collection

*Two Sisters*, 1928

$8\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$   
Private collection

*Two Callas*, before 1929

$11\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{7}{8}$   
Bokelberg Collection, Hamburg,  
West Germany

*Snake in Bucket*, 1929

$3\frac{7}{16} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$   
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art;  
The Henry Swift Collection, Gift of  
Florence Alston Swift

*Banana Plant*, c. 1929

$4\frac{5}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$   
Collection of Tom Eckstrom

*Hand of Cellist Gerald Warburg*, c. 1929

$3\frac{1}{8} \times 3$   
Collection of Tom Eckstrom

*Leaf Pattern (Carmel Mission)*, c. 1929

$4\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$   
Private collection

*Nude (Portia Hume)*, c. 1930

$3\frac{5}{8} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$   
Private collection

*Untitled (Shells)*, c. 1930

$10\frac{3}{16} \times 13$   
Collection of Barbara Kasten

*Frieda Kahlo (Painter and Wife of Diego Rivera)*, 1931  
11 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{7}{16}$   
Collection of John H. Hauberg

*Nude of John Bovingdon (Back)*, c. 1930  
5 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8 $\frac{13}{16}$   
New Orleans Museum of Art

*Martha Graham*, 1931  
5 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$   
Collection of Robert and Joyce Menschel

*Martha Graham*, 1931  
5 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$   
Collection of Paul Hertzmann

*Martha Graham*, 1931  
5 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$   
Collection of Paul Hertzmann

*Martha Graham*, 1931  
Multiple print, 5 $\frac{13}{16}$  x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$   
Collection of John and Peg Frankel

*Martha Graham*, 1931  
8 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 6 $\frac{3}{16}$   
Collection of David and Barbara Myers

*Hands of Henry Cowell with Parts of His Rhythmicon*, c. 1931  
Multiple print, 7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{13}{16}$   
International Museum of Photography at  
George Eastman House, Rochester

*Agave Pattern (Agave Design 2)*, 1932  
9 $\frac{9}{16}$  x 7 $\frac{9}{16}$   
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art;  
The Henry Swift Collection, Gift of  
Florence Alston Swift

*Calla*, 1932  
9 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Albert M. Bender

*Nude*, 1932  
6 $\frac{15}{16}$  x 9  
Gift of David and Barbara Myers

*Amaryllis*, 1933  
9 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{1}{16}$   
Private collection

*Hands Reading Braille (Robert Irwin)*, 1933  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Albert M. Bender

*Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz*, 1934  
9 $\frac{9}{16}$  x 7 $\frac{9}{16}$   
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art;  
The Henry Swift Collection, Gift of  
Florence Alston Swift

*Gertrude Stein*, c. 1934  
7 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$   
Collection of Nata Piaskowski

*Helene Mayer*, 1935  
9 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Albert M. Bender

*Mr. and Mme. Ozenfant*, 1935  
9 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$   
Private collection

*Hands of Sculptor Robert Howard*, c. 1938  
8 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$   
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Leo Keoshian

*Morris Graves*, 1950  
7 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 7 $\frac{11}{16}$   
Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland, California

*The Unmade Bed*, 1957  
9 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 13  
Collection of Edna Bullock

*Portrait of Minor White*, 1963  
7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$   
The High Museum of Art, Atlanta

*Taiwan Leaves, 2*, 1963  
8 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$   
Collection of David and Barbara Myers

*Four Hands and Three Heads*, 1964  
From Polaroid negative, 7 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$   
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University  
of Nebraska, Lincoln

*Michael as Steppenwolf*, 1966  
Darkroom-easel multiple print, 3 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 3 $\frac{7}{8}$   
Collection of Leo and Florence Holub

*Pentimento (Morris Graves)*, 1973  
7 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 8 $\frac{15}{16}$   
Pomona College, Claremont, California;  
Gift of the Artist

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