

Photography and painting are tied at the hip

by Joan Altabe



When you think of American photographers in history who made a difference, the names of Ansel Adams or

Robert Mapplethorpe may come to mind.

But the first American to spur change by tripping a shutter was Alfred Stieglitz, who also ran a painting gallery. He was the first to define photography as a fine art. “There are many schools of painting,” he said.

“Why should there not be many schools of photographic art?”

I bring this up because the look of so much photography on exhibit these days seems to be only one school: the pretty-picture-if-you’ve-seen-one-you’ve-seen-them-all school. If this is you, listen up.

Stieglitz mentored Adams. He gave him the idea of making photography the “equivalent” of painting, complete with all of its aesthetic concerns. Stieglitz also gave Adams his first show. It’s notable that not long afterwards, New York’s Museum of Modern Art established its permanent Department of Photography with attendant shows.

Photography went on from there to its rightful place alongside painting as a fine art.

Colleges began to include photography in their fine art departments and photography galleries came into being. Not unexpectedly, Robert Mapplethorpe, whose lens art is celebrated for its poetry, began his career as a student of painting.

Adams’ thank you note to Stieglitz says it all: “My visit with you provoked a sort of revolution in my point of view – perhaps the word simplification would be better...If you have given me the awareness of anything but a standard, I would be eternally grateful. It is up to me and to others who have so greatly benefited through your influence to pass the message.”

Stieglitz did much to earn his place in history, and you might say that it all started with the art of painting, which coincidentally is how photography was invented. Portrait painter Louis Jacques Daguerre came up with the camera as a shortcut for his work. Stieglitz transformed Daguerre’s invention into an art form, inspired by the avant-garde artists he showed in his art gallery. (Which is how an unknown schoolteacher from Texas – Georgia O’Keeffe – became famous: Stieglitz promoted her paintings). Stieglitz also showcased the

The Terminal
Alfred Stieglitz.1892



art of Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Edward Steichen, John Marin, Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley.

Of course, Stieglitz's appreciation of modern painting, which was ahead of most everyone else in America, demonstrates that he had the mind of an experimental artist before he befriended any. O'Keeffe alluded to this once when she recounted how, in his student days, Stieglitz would open his camera shutter in some unlit space and leave it open for days to see what it would image. "Nobody else would do that," she said.

Ever grateful to Stieglitz for helping her career, O'Keeffe returned the favor when, after he died, she overcame an abhorrence of clerical work and catalogued all of his work – 1,600 photographs in all – and donated them to the National Gallery.

Stieglitz's photographs in adulthood, while often about New York, where he lived, were really about him and how he felt about the city. Feelings, rather than focus, were his main idea. He often photographed in inclement weather – snow, rain – to subjugate skyscrapers, which

depressed him, by tying them to nature.

And just as photography learned its art lessons from painting, the reverse ultimately took place with the advent of photo-real painting, also known as super-realism. This is not the stuff of representational imagery. It's about what a camera sees. Paintings in this case take on the look of good quality color slides, often made section by section and sometimes upside down, the aim being the look of reproductions, not interpretation.

Portrait painter Chuck Close's work fits this description. His main idea has been to translate photographic information into paint. By doing this, he impels viewers to see that which is normally blurred by their peripheral vision.

Since photography has long since come of age as an art form, why does so much of it nowadays look so unevolved? 📷