

Russell Lord

The Opposite of Pictorialism: Contradictions and Paradoxes in the Pictorialist Movement

*Lecture on November 22, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
"Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered"*

"What a pity it is that your photographs are not paintings."¹

– Berlin artist to Alfred Stieglitz, circa 1883

Sometime in the early 1880s, Dr. Hermann Wilhelm Vogel asked the young Alfred Stieglitz if he could show some of his recent photographs to a group of Berlin artists. Vogel was impressed with his student's work, and so were the artists. They asked to meet with Stieglitz, and in an important encounter that he recalled years later, a discussion about his work ensued that established, for Stieglitz, some important preconceptions about photography. Stieglitz was taken aback when one of the artists remarked, "What a pity it is that your photographs are not paintings." Not quite sure what to make of the comment, Stieglitz asked him to elaborate, to which he responded: "Why, young man, if those photographs of yours had been made by hand they would be art, but not having been made by hand, wonderful as they are, they are not." What followed was a debate about the mechanics of the camera and the relative merits of craft or handwork, the older artists informing the young photographer that a machine could not make a product that would ever supplant the handmade version. Although the idea of the Photo-Secession was not yet even a twinkle in Stieglitz's eye, this specter – the division between craft and mechanics, between art and not art – would haunt his endeavors for much of his life.

It is the same specter that haunts the broader world of Pictorialism, a phenomenon that, perhaps because of its peculiar synthesis of the mechanical and the handmade, engenders a set of contradictions that make it a complicated field of study and has led it in and out of critical favor. Many of these contradictions, however, have been largely ignored in favor of establishing Pictorialism as a cohesive and cogent movement, as a uniform group of like-minded individuals all working toward the same ultimate goal: the improvement of photography's status among the other fine arts. In the spirit of the conference, this talk reconsiders this monolithic approach to Pictorialism and its goals through a discussion of some of the inherent contradictions in the Pictorialist phenomenon. The goal here is not really to define Pictorialism in opposition to what it is not, but rather to identify the movement for what it was: a complex web of international practitioners, each of which had different and sometimes conflicting conceptions of how to define, execute, and disseminate photography.

To begin we might consider how Pictorialists implicitly defined photography in their attempts to secure a foothold among the fine arts. Inherent in this goal is the belief that photography offered something unique, that it belonged with painting but was not painting. In other words, they were trying to establish, in Stieglitz's words, "[photography's] own possibilities of

¹ Alfred Stieglitz, recounting a meeting with a group of Berlin artists sometime in the 1880s. Quoted in Katherine Hoffman *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 59.

expression.” How strange then that, for many Pictorialists, photography’s unique expression was best exemplified by elaborate printing processes that echoed and even imitated paintings and drawings? As if in response to Stieglitz’s anonymous debate partner, who lamented that photographs were not paintings, Pictorialist photographs often masquerade as paintings (or charcoal sketches or chalk drawings), intent on disguising whatever mechanical origins they might possess.



Fig. 1
René Le Bégue (French, 1857–1914)
[Study in Orange], 1902
Gum bichromate print
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Here for example, is a work by René Le Bégue (fig. 1), a member of the Photo Club de Paris whose work Stieglitz would reproduce in *Camera Work*. Not only does the vivid gum pigment approximate the look of a red chalk drawing, the composition itself replicates the act of drawing. Showing three figures in various states of finish, the work appears to be in progress, a status that should be impossible for a mechanically produced photographic print, which emerges whole or not at all. In producing an image of the act of creation, Le Bégue draws attention to the craft aspect of the Pictorialist print.

The case of George Seeley, the youngest member of Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession, provides rare insight into the craft and working process of a Pictorialist photographer. Seeley worked in relative isolation, sending prints of wispy or brooding allegorical maidens (often his sisters) to New York for exhibition from his home in the Berkshires where he lived with his family. It is perhaps this distance from the epicenter of Stieglitz’s kingdom that allowed Seeley to maintain a decidedly practical

sensibility when it came to photography. In contrast to the high-minded rhetoric about art and photography that filled the pages of Stieglitz’s *Camera Work*, Seeley offered a “how-to” guide for the creation of art photographs to the readers of *Western Camera Notes*, a monthly magazine for amateur Pictorialists.

In an almost humorous step-by-step process, Seeley doles out specific advice on the choice of subject, arrangement of light and shadow, even the selection of a title. As Seeley explains, it is often easy to make “a technically good photograph, but if you wish to call it a picture, it will be necessary for you to study and apply the rules of composition, chiaroscuro, etc., and also learn to see the pictorial, whether walking or riding, wherever you may be.” He then goes on to offer three specific acceptable arrangements of light: “I. Middle ground in shadow, foreground well lighted, background well lighted. II. Foreground rather dark, sky rather dark but full of gradation, middle ground gleaming with sunshine. III. Foreground dark (in shadow) middle ground broken with small masses of shade, intermediate portions well lighted.”

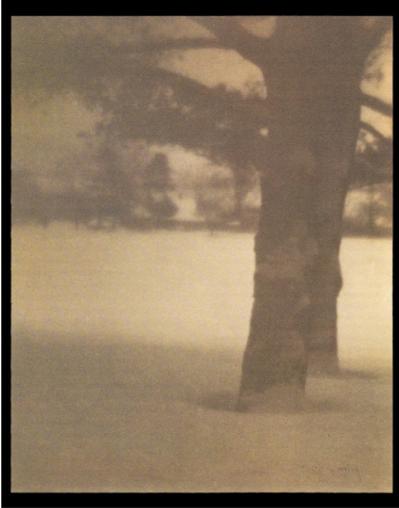


Fig. 2
George H. Seeley
(American, 1880–1955)
Tree, 1917
Platinum print
Yale University Art Gallery,
Gift of Doris Bry, 2002.148.2

Tree (fig. 2) seems to demonstrate roman numeral II. and Seeley's adherence to his own established parameters. His use of words such as "chiaroscuro" and even "composition," terminology traditionally reserved for the other fine arts, draws a direct line between art photography and the other arts. As elementary as these instructions may seem, they do suggest that, at least for George Seeley, a successful Pictorialist image depended upon a kind of formula.

Further evidence of this practice is found in an archive at the Beinecke Library at Yale, where Seeley's own chemical formulas for printing processes are stored alphabetically in a traditional "recipe box." (fig. 3) Individualized formulas for gum bichromate and platinum prints are included, but even here, decidedly aesthetic terminology is used to categorize them rather than their standard names. One developer is suggestively labeled "Vigorous results," while

another will produce "Softer results." One card is even titled "Old Master," perhaps the chemical formula for a process that produced something like Le Bégue's masterful gum print imitating a chalk drawing. Seeley's archive also includes a tool, the Willo Visible Dodger, which facilitated the manipulation of light during the exposure of a print. As the manufacturer proclaimed on the package: "The Willow Visible Dodger allows the operator to paint with light."



Fig. 3
George Seeley's Recipe Box.
George Henry Seeley Papers
Yale Collection of American Literature
Beinecke Rare Book and
Manuscript Library.

What Seeley's case demonstrates is that, although many Pictorialist photographers had aspirations for photography in the highest echelons of fine art culture, the growing ranks of amateur art photographers generated a need for more banal commercial journals and products, virtually creating a middle-class photographic economy and fracturing the Pictorialist movement into the high and the low, the amateur and the professional, the cultural and the economic.

Seeley's plain-spoken instructions to the amateurs and his rote organization are the symptoms of a straightforward, if not repetitive approach to photography. For much of Seeley's artistic output there did indeed seem to be a formula. In one of the instances that he broke with that formula, Seeley created this grand landscape (fig. 4), a dark and gestural whip of attenuated forms, with virtually no recognizably photographic detail to speak of.



Fig. 4
George H. Seeley (American, 1880–1955)
Winter Landscape, 1909
Gum bichromate and platinum print
Metropolitan Museum of Art

The paradox is, of course, that even when these works seem to conform to romantic notions of the artist's gesture, informed by individual vision and spontaneity, they are in fact often the products of something as formulaic as a recipe and hours of tedious work in the darkroom.

Which is not to say that the results are always the same, even if the formula was followed precisely. Indeed, Stieglitz and Steichen repeatedly stressed the importance of the individual object as a central tenet in Pictorialist strategy. When selecting prints for the 1898 Philadelphia Academy Salon exhibition, Stieglitz did so according to "distinct evidence of individual artistic feeling and execution."² Their insistence on the uniqueness of each print was intent on masking a particular conception about photography's mechanical basis.

Photography's status as a medium of multiples did nothing to help their cause, so diligent darkroom work and careful hand manipulation individualized their prints, emphasizing craft over mechanics and the singular over the monotonous.

Over the course of five years, for example, Edward Steichen produced three masterful prints of *The Flatiron* (fig. 5), each one striking a different tonal chord in a palette of muted browns and greens. The building itself is rendered as a faint, but foreboding presence, a glimmer of the future breaking the horizon and emerging from the fog of memory. Among other things, these prints reveal that the impression of atmosphere was partially manufactured by Steichen's hand; the lamps in all three prints are lightly illuminated by the addition of pigment.

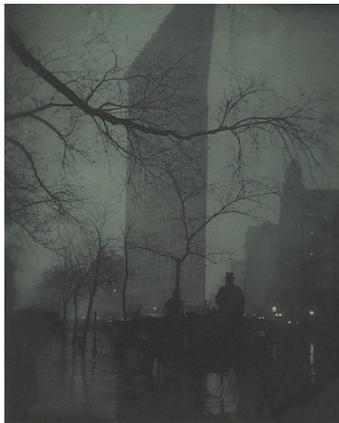


Fig. 5
The Flatiron, 1904



The Flatiron, 1904, printed 1905



The Flatiron, 1904, printed 1909

Edward J. Steichen (American,
born Luxembourg, 1879–1973)
Gum bichromate over platinum
prints
Metropolitan Museum of Art

² *Philadelphia Photographic Salon* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Oct. 14–Nov. 12, 1898), no pagination.

But most importantly, each print is distinct from the next, emphasizing the individualized nature of Steichen's printing practice. In front of the works, one's own sense of the time of day represented in the picture shifts from one print to the next, ranging from the rain-soaked early moments of dawn to last moments of daylight at dusk.

Similarly, Gertrude Käsebier's portrait of Alfred Stieglitz (fig. 6), printed two very different ways, is completely transformed by the processes used to render it. Stieglitz's expression shifts from assured, direct, and confident to brooding and, finally, to an almost menacing stare. Each print also represents a successive stage in a transformation from a recognizably photographic base to a draughtsman-like mass of black shadow that completely obscures any photographic detail. The first image is a more recent positive print produced probably by the Library of Congress from the original glass negative that they now possess. Although this version of the image should not be read as a work by Käsebier, it is helpful in that it reveals the amount of detail possible from the original negative, thereby emphasizing Käsebier's desire to obscure that detail in her actual prints.



Fig. 6
Modern positive print from original
glass plate negative
Library of Congress



Platinum print
Art Institute of Chicago

Gertrude Käsebier
(American, 1852-1934)
Alfred Stieglitz, 1902



Gum bichromate print
Private Collection, Courtesy of
Hans P. Kraus, Jr., New York

The Photo-Secessionist's deliberate privileging of uniqueness and singularity is somewhat at odds with their willingness to distribute their work in the form of photomechanical reproductions in *Camera Work*. It is true that the photogravures included in the journal were expertly created and often replicated the range of tones found in the original prints, but each one was precisely like the next. What's more, the luxurious photogravure process was not the only reproductive process used. During its run, *Camera Work* would include half-tone reproductions, three-color prints, offset prints, and others, forming a veritable collection of early twentieth-century printing technology and perhaps pointing to Stieglitz's dissatisfaction with any one process and his restless attempts to find the most appropriate form of reproduction. As if to preempt the debate, Stieglitz admitted in the first essay of the first issue (titled "An Apology") that "no reproductions can do full justice to the subtleties of some photographs."³

³ Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, No. 1, 1903.

In certain instances, the transformation was far from subtle. Steichen often suffered the most: his ambitious exhibition prints were some of the largest of the period, and they possessed characteristic and complex tonal variations that were effaced and shrunken in the half-tone reproductions in *Camera Work*. His frustration with the reproductions provoked him to take a rather drastic measure: before the photogravures of his *Road into the Valley – Moonrise* were tipped into each issue, Steichen diligently hand-colored the nearly one thousand copies himself.

Until now, this discussion has focused only on photographers who have long been considered central figures in the Pictorialist movement. But aside from the important circles in New York, London, Paris, and other major cities around the world, Pictorialist photographers also established practices in many smaller communities in far-flung corners of the globe. Take, for example, the case of Caroline Haskins Gurrey, who moved to Hawaii in 1901 to work for a portrait photography studio. A year later, her work was being lauded as “the finest specimens of art photography on the islands.” It remains unknown if she had any direct correspondence with Stieglitz or any other Pictorialist figure, but Gurrey seems to



Fig. 7
Caroline Haskins Gurrey (American, 1875–1927)
Portrait of young “Italian-Hawaiian” woman holding
large bowl, titled *The Calabash*, 1909
Gelatin silver print
National Anthropological Archives, National Museum
of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution



George H. Seeley (American, 1880–1955)
The Black Bowl, 1907, Gum bichromate and
platinum print
Private collections

have been perfectly aware of the aesthetic concerns of the movement. In what is now her best-known body of work, Gurrey produced a series of large, softly focused, pictorial portraits of children. Their ethereal qualities, softly modeled volumes, and the child’s often wistful stare would at first suggest that these were made exclusively as aesthetic objects, as fine art photographs that celebrated the individuality of each sitter or engaged with mainland Pictorial tropes (such as fig. 7, which echoes a common practice of George Seeley’s, in which a woman poses with a piece of pottery.) Gurrey’s titles, however, suggest a different function for these photographs, a decidedly non-art function. In addition to the alternate title *The Calabash* (which also mimics Seeley in focusing on the prop and not the sitter), Gurrey draws attention to the hybrid ethnicity of the child in labeling her an “Italian-Hawaiian.”

In fact, this more documentary role was more to the point of these pictures than was their acceptance as art. In fifty pictures, Gurrey creates a catalogue, albeit in a Pictorialist style, of Hawaiian children of mixed parentage. The result is a complex body of work that pits aesthetics against information and that engages contemporary Pictorialist practice with the long tradition of ethnographic portraiture.



Fig. 8
 Caroline Haskins Gurrey (American, 1875–1927)
 Portrait of “Indian-Hawaiian” girl
 Portrait of “Irish-Hawaiian” girl
 Portrait of “Japanese-Hawaiian” girl
 Gelatin silver prints
 National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

In this sense, these pictures are akin to the work of photographers like Jacques-Philippe Potteau and Louis Rousseau, who undertook a massive project to compile pictures of racial types for the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man) in Paris in the 1860s. Figure 9 illustrates



Fig. 9 Jacques-Philippe Potteau (French, 1807–1879) and Louis Rousseau (French 1811–1874)
Portrait of Marie Lassus of New Orleans, 1860
 Albumen silver print
 New Orleans Museum of Art, Clarence John Laughlin Photographic Society Fund, 86.113

a picture of Marie Lassus, a creole woman (like Gurrey’s subjects, she is ethnically hybrid) who happened to be in Paris in the 1860s. Potteau and Rousseau’s work is clinical in its detail and clarity and in its approach: each subject was often photographed frontally and in profile, emphasizing not individuality but rather the general physiognomic properties of the facial features.

Gurrey, too, photographed many of her subjects in two images (fig. 10), frontal and profile. These pairs throw into light the somewhat uncomfortable and even contradictory marriage of pictorial practice with ethnographic portraiture: the soft focus effaces information, and the carefully contrived poses of the figures emphasize psychology over sociology, as if the child’s individual identity struggles to shrug off the generic mantle of racial typing.

Gurrey claims to have made these pictures to celebrate the diversity of Hawaii's ethnic composition, but regardless of her original intention, these pictures would find their way into highly conflicted and problematic venues. In 1909, all fifty were exhibited at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exhibition in Seattle, whose express purpose was to promote the "exploitation" of AYP resources, including Hawaii. They were displayed in the ethnographic section of the show, where visitors were served pineapple by attractive young Hawaiian girls. As Heather Waldroup writes: "Juxtaposed with the sweetly excessive pleasures of the pineapple pyramid and sugar palace [nearby], Gurrey's photographs conveyed a life in Hawaii that could be at once pleasurable and modern for the bourgeois white settler."⁴

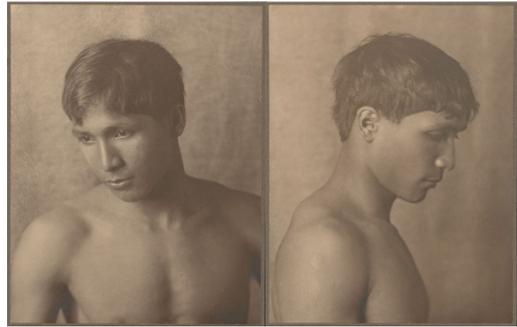


Fig. 10
 Caroline Haskins Gurrey (American, 1875–1927)
 Portrait of "Japanese-Hawaiian" boy
 (frontal and profile), 1909
 Gelatin silver prints
 National Anthropological Archives, National Museum
 of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

As unsettling as this may seem for the modern viewer today, a later context for Gurrey's pictures proved even more disturbing. In 1921 they were exhibited at the Eugenics Congress at the American Natural History Museum. There, they were exhibited alongside the nineteenth-century composite images of Henry Pickering Bowditch and Francis Galton, the controversial social scientist who coined the term eugenics to describe his belief that human genetics could be controlled and refined through breeding. It does seem strange, however, that in the case of the Pictorialists, blur added an allegorical universality, whereas in the work of the composite social scientists, blur was an emblem of statistical accuracy.

Eugenics, ethnographic portraiture, popular commercial products and manuals, photomechanical reproductions and dissemination: we seem to have come very far afield indeed from a conception of Pictorialism as a cogent or unified movement, far from Stieglitz's idealistic and aesthetic notions about photography's identity. And yet, these phenomenon pervade the broader field of Pictorial photography and as such deserve closer scrutiny in order to arrive at a more complete reconsideration of this important movement. The problem is that Pictorialism, as a movement, continues to be defined not by its inherent contradictions or the differences between its practitioners but rather by their similarities and a generalized group of stylistic traits. The paradox is that their visual sameness often masks the fundamental differences in conception across the international movement.

I close with one final nod to the contradictory critical fortunes of Pictorialism. Strangely, the very properties that made Pictorial photographs successful in their own day all but wrote them out of histories of photography in later years. For example, in a series of ambitious exhibitions and provocative publications, John Szarkowski, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, set out to define the terms of photography in the 1960s. Like a guest arriving fashionably late to the party, he quickly, if eloquently, entered photography into the decades-old discussion about medium specificity, seeking to describe the "characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium" and the "formulation of a vocabulary and a critical perspective more fully responsive to the unique phenomena of photography."⁵ Those words come from his 1966 publication, *The Photographer's Eye*, in which he outlined

⁴ Heather Waldroup, "Ethnographic Pictorialism: Caroline Gurrey's Hawaiian Types at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition," in *History of Photography*, 36:2, 183.

⁵ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 7-8.

five such characteristics of the vocabulary of photography: The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point. The book is now notorious for what it left out: abstractions, solarized prints and photo-collages, and, as for Pictorialism, it included only one lone representative – a picture by Alvin Langdon Coburn – to stand in for the entire movement. Szarkowski had cast aside any semblance of the heavily manipulated Pictorialist photographs that masqueraded as chalk drawings or painted surfaces in favor of the slick-surfaced black-and-white prints that initially the Pictorialists themselves had reacted against. It was almost as if John Szarkowski's conception of photography, which came to dominate the field of photography throughout the second half of the twentieth century, was the opposite of Pictorialism.

Russell Lord is the Freeman Family Curator of Photographs at the New Orleans Museum of Art. He previously held positions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Yale University Art Gallery and has written widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century and contemporary photographers. His recent publications include *Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* and an essay in *Edward Burtynsky: Water*. Lord's recent exhibitions include *What Is a Photograph?*; *Photography, Sequence & Time*; and *Reinventing Nature: Art from the School of Fontainebleau*. Much of his research focuses on the relationships between photography and other visual media.