

DeCordova focuses on the varied career photographer Edward Steichen

Monday Posted Oct 24, 2016 at 3:37 PM

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By Keith Powers/Daily News Correspondent

LINCOLN - The world might be more beautiful if everything were black and white. Certainly the world of photographer Edward Steichen seems so.

More than four dozen of Steichen's photographs, on view through next March at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, tell a story.

Or rather, multiple stories.

There's a story of war, where Steichen served as a Navy photographer (and quasi-publicist) in both world wars. The story of celebrity, where, as house photographer for publishing giant Condé Nast - mainly Life and Look magazines - Steichen captured celebrity profiles ranging from Garbo to Cooper to Chaplin. A story of nature, where the inquisitive artist and passionate gardener created surprisingly vibrant black-and-white still lifes. And, finally, the modernist tale, where Steichen, like many 20th century artists, used the shapes and energy - not all good - of the urban landscape to uncover the changing society around him.

The early part of the 20th century was still the early days of photography - not the earliest, to be sure.

For Steichen (1879-1973), it was a time when photographers had to insist the camera was a tool for fine art, rather than simply documentation. Along with mentor and friend Alfred Steiglitz, Steichen would be one of the artists to prove it.

He did so on his own terms, never claiming that there was any artificial border between his commercial work and his fine art.

Good thing, too. Steichen did so much commercial photography, for the publishers and for the military, that the work seamlessly blends together.

This exhibition features prints that were made after Steichen's death, mostly in the 1980s, by photographer George Tice. Steichen, who had become head of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1947, had largely given up printing from his own negatives after that.

Steichen hired multiple assistant photographers to keep up with the demand for his work after the MoMA appointment, and so it is unlikely that he would quibble with this exhibition. (His work as a curator at MoMA, eventually creating more than 40 exhibitions, had a separate but equally powerful influence on the rise of photography as a medium of fine art.)

The most recognizable of these images involve celebrity. Artists - Constantin Brancusi, Eugene O'Neill - and actors Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Gish, Marlene Dietrich, the unforgettable Greta Garbo - all sat for Steichen, who strove for a discovery of the individual.

In black-and-white photography, composition, cast and shadow take prominence. Looming stage equipment behind a smiling Chaplin quietly recalls his movie roles. Garbo, clutching her "terrible hair," wordlessly speaks volumes about her self- and public images. Carl Sandburg (Steichen's brother-in-law) gazes poetically away from the camera. German author Gerhart Hauptmann stares directly into the camera under the starry firmament. The British dramaturge E. Gordon Craig poses foppishly in front of Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris.

These are mostly lush silver gelatin prints, some with a distinctly yellow cast. There are a few trick techniques - some double and triple exposures. But usually Steichen's artistry remained firmly in the human - trying to capture the essence of his sitter, and not trying to create art solely with his medium.

"Edward Steichen: Twentieth-Century Photographer"

WHEN: Through March 26, 2017

WHERE: deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

ADMISSION: \$14 adults; \$12 seniors 65+; \$10 students: free under 12. "Free Second Saturdays" 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Nov. 12 and Dec. 10

INFO: 781-259-8355, www.decordova.org
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