

Steichen and Warhol together at Block Museum

By: Tom Mullaney January 15, 2014

A museum exhibition pairing Edward Steichen and Andy Warhol may seem a puzzling, if not perverse, choice.

Both men revolutionized photographic practice. And each was the portrait photographer of their day. Steichen's photos for Vogue and Vanity Fair at Conde Nast from 1923 to 1937 gave new definition to how glamour and celebrity were portrayed. Warhol resurrected and redefined portraiture with his iconic images of Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy in the early 1960s.

But the similarities end there. While Steichen's images convey pure elegance, most Warhol images are more banal. Famed photographer Walker Evans claimed that Warhol was a "purveyor of parvenu elegance and slick technique." There was nothing slick about Steichen.

While they appear to be artists from two different planets, Warhol admired Steichen, collected his work and drew inspiration from him.

A new show opening Jan. 18 at the Mary & Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in Evanston, "**Steichen/Warhol: Picturing Fame,**" marks the premiere display of a gift of 49 vintage Steichen prints alongside an earlier donation of 150 Warhol images and five new prints by the Andy Warhol Foundation of the Visual Arts.

Crain's talked with Block director Lisa Corrin and exhibit curator Elliot Reichert about this exhibit; this is an edited version of that conversation. The exhibit, which represents the first time the two photographers have been shown side by side, runs through April 6.

Why put together Warhol and Steichen?

Ms. Corrin: I had an instinct about the relationship between these two artists. It was Elliot who discovered that relationship between Steichen's Garbo photograph and Warhol's inkblot works on paper, showing tracings of the Steichen photograph. Warhol even owned the cover of the Vogue magazine issue with the photo on the cover. That was the jumping-off point.

Mr. Reichert: Warhol studied the way the master photographer (Steichen) portrayed glamour and celebrity, subjects that unite the work of these important artists.

How did the Steichens come to the Block?

Ms. Corrin: Northwestern (University's) president, Morton Schapiro, has for many years been a close friend of Richard and Jackie Hollander. The Hollanders decided it was time to give away some of their extraordinary Steichen holdings to three museums — the Whitney Museum of American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Block. Our president was extremely proactive in convincing them to make the Block the Midwestern institution for their gift.

What were Steichen and Warhol's innovations in portraiture?

Mr. Reichert: Steichen began applying new methods, using the latest artificial lighting new at the time and staged backdrops to bring the figure into bold focus. That was a dramatic departure from what came beforehand. Part of the reason for the death of portraiture before Warhol arrived was the development of the camera. I think Warhol understood this and, through his use of Polaroids, brought portraiture back to the canvas.

Steichen's life overlapped with Warhol's. Would Steichen have liked what Warhol was doing?

Ms. Corrin: I think he would have liked the entrepreneurial spirit. Steichen was a great opportunist. He was a great tuning fork for the changes that were happening in his lifetime and he understood the power of photography and of the mass-produced photographic image. That is what he has in common with Warhol. Warhol also understood the power of taking reproducible images and turning them into art with a capital A. In a way, Warhol made you somebody. He gave people who were nobodies status; he made them important.

What image do each of you like best?

Ms. Corrin: I'll pick an image not of a person but an artwork, Brancusi's "Bird in Space," one of the most notorious artworks of its time. When Steichen photographs the Brancusi, he photographs it as if it was a movie star. It's in the spotlight, it's practically elevated onto an altar. He turns it into something almost religious. And when he photographs Greta Garbo, she becomes more than a woman. Like with the Brancusi, they transcend the life of that thing or that person. That's the genius of Steichen, how he was able to propel those images into the public imagination

Mr. Reichert: The photograph of Clara Bow taken in 1929 by Steichen. You can see he is refining what is coming to be defined as glamour in Hollywood: the direct gaze, the perfectly coiffed hair, lips slightly puckered and rubied, jewelry dangling. She's compressed close inside the picture. Steichen is really trying to get as much into that photograph of desirous, glamorous beauty.

Then go to Warhol's Polaroid of pop singer Carly Simon taken in 1980 and you see the same conventions there. Her lipstick is bright red, her hair is coiffed out to fill the frame . . . so all you can see is her face and hair and bare shoulders. It's a banal portrait but shows how Warhol is looking directly at that glamour tradition that Steichen initiated in the 1930s but also how he subverts it by making it an image he used over and over again — mass-produced, readily available.

What accounts for Warhol's enduring fame?

Mr. Reichert: There was a time when Warhol was looked at askance by the art world. Now, nothing sells faster than a Warhol. Several things can explain this. More people today have a sense of post-Modernism — a leveling of all artistic categories with all things having equal importance. Plus, I think his images have defined a new kind of celebrity in their own way. For people of a younger generation, Warhol represents more of what a celebrity icon is than even Edward Steichen.
