

**"A Plea for Art Photography in America,"
by Alfred Stieglitz
Photographic Mosaics, 1892**

There is no reason why the American amateur should not turn out as beautiful pictures by photographic means as his English brethren across the long pond, and still the fact remains that he does not do so.

Every exhibition in which the two meet proves this statement. "We cannot compete with those English fellows," I heard remarked over and over again at the joint Exhibition held in New York City last May. And why not? I should like to ask. Have we Americans not the same innate sense for the beautiful? have we not the same skill to reproduce what we see? have we not the same material to work with? We have all this, and still look at the difference existing between our work and that of our English cousins. Every impartial observer and unbiased critic will grant that we are still many lengths in the rear, apparently content to remain there, inasmuch as we seem to lack the energy to strive forward — to push ahead with that American will-power which is so greatly admired by the whole civilized world, and most of all, by the Americans themselves.

In what respects are our photographs deficient, more especially when compared with those of our English colleagues? Granting that we are, in our technique, fully equal to the English, what we lack is that taste and sense for composition and for tone, which is essential in producing a photograph of artistic value—in other words, a *picture*.

When we go through an exhibition of American photographs, we are struck by the conventionality of the subjects chosen; we see the same types of country roads, of wood interiors, the everlasting waterfall, village scenes; we see the same groups at doorsteps and on piazzas; the same unfortunate attempts at illustrating popular poetry; the same etc., etc., *ad infinitum*.

Such attempts at original composition as we come across are, with some few meritorious exceptions, crude—that is to say, far-fetched and unnatural. In some cases, where the idea is undoubtedly good, the resulting picture shows an entire lack of serious study of the subject, and suffers from want of that artistic sense which loves simplicity and hates all superficial make-up. Simplicity, I might say, is the key to all art—a conviction that anybody who has studied the masters must arrive at. Originality, hand-in-hand with simplicity, are the first two qualities which we Americans need in order to produce artistic pictures. These qualities can only be attained through cultivation and conscientious study of art in all its forms.

**Explanations
and Questions**

What is an
"amateur"
photographer?

In what two ways
does a picture
differ from a
photograph?

The first
deficiency

Stieglitz: A Plea

Another quality our photographs are sadly deficient in is the entire lack of *tone*. Those exquisite atmospheric effects which we admire in the English pictures are rarely, if ever, seen in the pictures of an American. This is a very serious deficiency, inasmuch as here is the dividing line between a *photograph* and a *picture*.

Atmosphere is the medium through which we see all things. In order, therefore, to see them in their true value on a photograph, as we do in Nature, atmosphere must be there. Atmosphere softens all lines; it graduates the transition from light to shade; it is essential to the reproduction of the sense of distance. That dimness of outline which is characteristic for distant objects is due to atmosphere. Now, what atmosphere is to Nature, tone is to a picture. The sharp outlines which we Americans are so proud of as being proof of great perfection in our art are untrue to Nature, and hence an abomination to the artist. It must be borne in mind, however, that blurred outline and tone are quite different things.

The subjects touched upon in these lines would well bear a more detailed treatment.... I sincerely hope, however, that these few remarks, such as they are, will give rise to further thought by my American colleagues.

A second
deficiency

Without tone,
there is no picture
(i.e., no artistic
value)

Artistic value
requires
representational
fidelity (truth to
nature)