

Press Release
Zurich, 10 January 2008

Kunsthhaus Zürich shows 'Edward Steichen. In High Fashion'

From 11 January to 30 March 2008 Kunsthhaus Zürich will be offering a glimpse at an unknown facet of the work of the great 20th-century American photographer. Forty years after the artist's death, original prints by Edward Steichen (1879-1973) for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* are only now available to the public. In the 1920s and 1930s Steichen was at the height of his career as a photographer, and some of the images he created during that period for the magazines published by Condé Nast are among his most striking. While Kunsthhaus Zürich presents some 200 works under the theme of high fashion, the Musée de l'Élysée in Lausanne shows an overview of Steichen's entire career entitled 'Lives in Photography'.

Steichen had already made his name as a painter and art photographer on both sides of the Atlantic by the time he was offered the position in early 1923 that made him one of the best-known figures in commercial photography, as chief photographer for Condé Nast's influential *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* magazines. Over the next 15 years, Steichen brought all of his extraordinary talents to bear on the project of portraying contemporary culture and its foremost exponents, from the fields of literature, journalism, dance, sports, politics, theatre and film, and in particular from the world of haute couture. The result was a grand œuvre.

ART DECO PHOTOGRAPHY

Unlike Man Ray and Erwin Blumenfeld, two other art photographers who lent their skills to the fashion and glamour industry, Steichen eschewed avant-garde touches in his commercial photography, preferring instead to develop a pragmatically professional visual vocabulary that never looks 'arty' and never seeks to impress by way of a modish flavour of the month. His way with Hollywood 'glamour shots', with film stills and eroticised portraits of Broadway stars is similarly aloof. His style is that of a man of the world, the elegantly chilly eroticism of art deco. He had the confidence to demand that Condé Nast publish his work exclusively under his name, with his signature as its 'auteur'.

AS COMPLEX AS A FILM SET

For Steichen, commercial photography represented a new beginning in terms of technique. He realised that a half-tone print required different lighting than did a framed original displayed on the wall, and the use of artificial light became central to his work. Steichen developed a method akin to that of film production, from start to finish involving an extensive crew to manage everything from stage

design, lighting, make-up and styling to copying prints, lithography, retouching, and the integration of finished photos into a given magazine's layout.

The photographer's insistence on this elaborate process was a reaction to the earliest fashion shoots in Paris, with their stress on clothing and their consignment of models to the status of mere window dressing. Instead, Steichen staged little scenarios, as if he had been commissioned to produce a portrait of a personality with a particular social position. In Steichen's new arrangements it was the clothing that was secondary, while his models had their lines and silhouettes set off by furnishings or accentuated by surroundings. His compositions are by turns as representative as a portrait, decoratively alienating, snapshot-like, or soberly realist.

BIRTH OF THE SUPERMODEL

Steichen was in step with the general trend in contemporary popular culture, which was dominated by the star system. Film-marketing wisdom held that it was the star who made the film, to which Steichen might have answered that it was the model who made the dress. Greta Garbo, Gloria Swanson, Gary Cooper, Marlene Dietrich: they were the embodiment of beauty, luxury and the high life. They positively emanated it. Steichen erased the line between the portrait and the fashion photograph, in principle and in conception. He transformed fashion photography into portrait photography. By turning hitherto anonymous dummies into recognisable personalities, he paved the way for the individualised supermodels that have become so familiar since the 1990s.

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHED WITH THE TOOLS OF THE PORTRAIT ARTIST

From its inception in the Renaissance and Baroque periods to the bourgeois fad for portraits and the salon style of art deco, painting has developed an infinite store of techniques for the glamourisation of the individual. Steichen took advantage of this formal abundance, playing with an enormous range of attitudes, gestures and backgrounds. His use of artificial lighting freed him from the duty of descriptive precision. His pictures enjoyed autonomous value, no longer bound by the need to clearly represent a given dress or person. The exhibition shows individual and double portraits in all of the variations available to the traditional portraitist, as well as arranged groups. Viewers will recognise forms used by Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet in their syntheses of portrait and still life, or portrait and interior.

CANONISED AT LAST

'Make Vogue a Louvre' was Steichen's maxim as he lent the fashion industry the allure of established art, and today no one would question the rightness of his mission, what with world-class art museums these days opening their doors to designers. By taking their ephemeral creations seriously and capturing their

souls in his photographic 'tableaux', Steichen made possible the canonisation of fashion (photography) in the sacred halls of the museum.

EXHIBITION AND CATALOGUE

The exhibition has been organized by the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne and the Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography in Minneapolis, in collaboration with Kunsthaus Zürich. In Zurich it comprises some 200 original prints under the title of 'Edward Steichen. In High Fashion'. A catalogue is published by Hatje Cantz and contains high quality prints of works by Edward Steichen (288 pages, 242 colour illustrations), and contributions from the curators William A. Ewing, Todd Brandow, Nathalie Herschdorfer, Tobia Bezzola and Carol Squiers. It is available at the Kunsthaus Shop for CHF 64.-.

Supported by Banca del Gottardo.

FURTHER EXHIBITIONS

From 18 January to 24 March, the Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne, presents the retrospective 'Lives in Photography' of Steichen's œuvre: from his pioneering early work during the Photo-Secession to his brilliant curatorial projects for New York's Museum of Modern Art. Further destinations are Italy, Spain, Germany, the US and Canada (for details please refer to www.fep-paris.org).

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, 8001 Zurich, www.kunsthaus.ch

Open: Sat/Sun/Tue 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed–Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m.

Holidays: Easter 20–24 March 10 a.m.–6 p.m. Closed on Mondays.

Admission incl. collection: CHF 12.-/8.- (concessions), subject to change.

Public guided tours from 18 January 2008: Fridays at 6.30 p.m., except on 21 March 2008 (Good Friday).

Private guided tours: apply on +41 (0)44 253 84 06 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–12 noon)

Advance Sales

RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with reduction on rail travel and entrance to the museum. Available at local stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.), group rates possible. Magasins Fnac, tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch.

For further information and visual material, please contact

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