

Columbia Museum of Art

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works of art as well as camera equipment and archival materials.

“The CMA has a tradition of exhibiting important female photographers. Take our recent exhibitions on Annie Leibowitz and Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe as well as the current Renée Cox show,” says Della Watkins, CMA executive director. “Imogen Cunningham led the way for these powerful artists. We’re thrilled to offer visitors an opportunity to see some of the best photography of the 20th century.”



Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883 – 1976). Magnolia Blossom, 1925, gelatin silver print

Born in 1883 in Portland, OR, Cunningham took up photography in 1901, a mere 62 years after Daguerre invented it. In its early days, the camera was perceived as a copy machine, a tool that served to document what the eye could see. In the early 20th century, some photographers, Cunningham included, moved toward a form of photography that ceased to mimic painting for its legitimacy and embraced its potential to visually capture life’s fleeting moments.

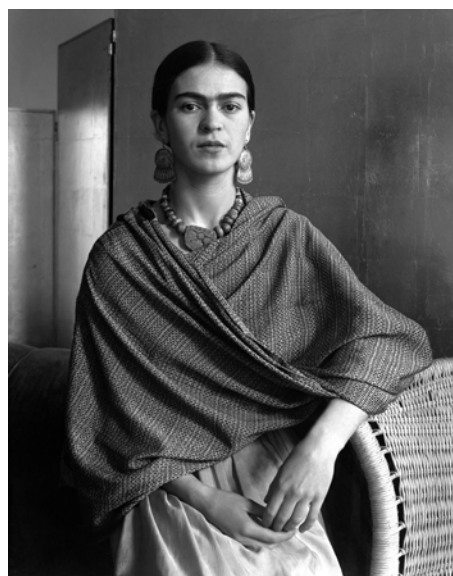
Already a well-recognized professional photographer by 1932, Cunningham, along with a group of like-minded revolutionaries, formed Group f.64 in California. The name, derived from the smallest aperture available on a large format camera, implies images with the

greatest depth of focus and sharpest detail. The original members were Cunningham, Ansel Adams, John Edward, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke, and Edward Weston. Proponents of “straight” photography, or unmanipulated images of clear forms, their goal was to produce photographs that utilized the full technical capabilities of the camera and were contact printed without enlargement or retouching. Though Group f.64 was short-lived, disbanding in 1935, it had a profound and lasting influence on photography across the country.

“Imogen Cunningham is among a group of pioneers who understood that what the artist selected to photograph, out of the infinite possibilities around her, was an artistic act,” says Will South, CMA chief curator. “She was absolutely instrumental in the struggle for the acceptance of photography as a legitimate art form.”

Cunningham was an extraordinary technician who produced deeply poetic work. In her 75 active years, her subjects included botanical studies, urban scenes, nudes, and portraiture. She photographed Hollywood stars including Cary Grant and Spencer Tracy - sans makeup, at her insistence - and cultural luminaries such as Martha Graham, Frida Kahlo, and Man Ray. She shot Alfred Stieglitz, the polarizing prophet of photography himself, with his own camera. She captured Yosemite National Park and New York’s Chinatown. She was a social activist, documenting the beat movement of the 1950s and the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s. She trained her talented eye on flora and fauna, artistry and industry, strangers and loved ones. She experimented with pictorialism and precisionism. Throughout her career, Cunningham valued the importance of light, form, and pattern in her compositions. Her pioneering use

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Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883 – 1976). Frida Kahlo Rivera, Painter and Wife of Diego Rivera, 1931, gelatin silver print.

of platinum printing and often of double exposures are still of interest to contemporary photographers. No matter the subject, the honesty and empathy with which she approached it shone through.

“Imogen is a photographer who looked thoughtfully at the 20th century and showed it back to us,” says South. “She is an artist well worth meeting, whether for the first time or not, to rediscover many of the special moments that have made up our world.”

Free admission to this exhibition for Midlands-area college students with valid ID is made possible through funds provided by the Central Carolina Community Foundation.

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The exhibition was organized by the Imogen Cunningham Trust in association with Photographic Traveling Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA.

For further information check our SC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Museum at 803/799-2810 or visit (www.columbiamuseum.org).