On recent books and a career retrospective at the National Gallery of Art.

“I was born in Hoboken. I am an American. Photography is my passion. The search for truth my obsession.” No succession of statements in the history of photography appears so simple or resounds with such significance. In it Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) conveyed an origin, a nationality, a means of expression, an ability to love, and a mission. The first sentence begs for biography. The second demands a look at the circle of American artists around Stieglitz who were trying to articulate and demonstrate a uniquely American sensibility—the painters Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O’Keeffe, the writers William Carlos Williams, Sherwood Anderson, Hart Crane, Paul Rosenfeld, and Waldo Frank, the photographers Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, and Eliot Porter. The third sentence calls to mind not only Stieglitz’s photography but also his efforts to bring about the recognition of photography as art. The ambiguity of the last sentence (“The search for truth my obsession”) and of similar remarks made during the course of a long career helped produce the myth of Stieglitz—the heroic visionary, perfectionist, sage. His search for truth did indeed lead to such contributions as the introduction of modern art (Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, Cézanne, Picabia, Rodin, Brancusi) to America, the discovery and support of major talents, and his own art. But anyone who made his voice heard as often as Stieglitz did, who allowed himself to be quoted and misquoted and contradicted himself so often, who performed so many good deeds and won the adoration of so many prominent people is naturally ripe for renewed appreciation and reappraisal.

This is not the centennial of Alfred Stieglitz’s birth or any commemorative year, yet Stieglitz is currently the focus of considerable attention. The National Gallery of Art has mounted a retrospective exhibition drawn from its set of Stieglitz photographs. They have also published a magnificent catalogue tribute.¹ In addition, Sue Davidson Lowe’s Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography and William Innes Homer’s Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession have been published recently.²

The prints, not exhibited since Stieglitz’s death, and the oversized catalogue, with its sublime reproductions,³ are the most important contributions to our understanding of Stieglitz’s life and work. The exhibition covers almost the entire range of Stieglitz’s photography. It offers his life at
its most passionate, intellectual, and creative moments. In 1892 Stieglitz wrote: “My sole aim in making pictures is to reproduce what I see.” Thirty-two years later he continued: “Could I but photograph what I see!” In the exhibition’s catalogue Sarah Greenough argues convincingly that Stieglitz “equated ‘seeing’ not simply with the process of looking, but more specifically with the act of experiencing.” The exhibition is divided into seven parts—Early European, Early and Later New York City, Portraits, Georgia O’Keeffe, Lake George, and Equivalents. The earliest photographs were made in 1887, the last in 1935. They show fifty years of Stieglitz’s thinking about the nature of the photographic medium.

After her husband’s death in 1946, Georgia O’Keeffe selected what she considered to be the finest print of every mounted photograph in her possession. If there were significant variations in cropping or other aspects of a particular image, a second print also went into the “key” set. She then offered sixteen hundred mounted photographs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Metropolitan agreed to take them, but stated that they would have to cut the mounts to fit their standard storage cases. Knowing that Stieglitz had spent hours, days, deciding on the correct relation of mounts to images, O’Keeffe rejected the arrangement outright. (To this day she dictates exactly how the pictures are to be used.) The National Gallery, however, having no photographs and hence no standard-sized photographic boxes, accepted the “key” set in 1949. Despite Stieglitz’s emphatic belief that imbuing a print with life was a difficult and rare event and that no two photographic prints could be identical, duplicates were then distributed to selected museums across the United States. The “key” set remained uncatalogued until 1978, when Sarah Greenough did the work.

Alured Stieglitz’s father, a German immigrant, amassed a fortune in America in the wool import business. In 1881 he retired and took his family—wife, sister-in-law, three girls, and three boys, of whom Alfred was the eldest—to Europe for an extended holiday and in order to enroll his sons in German institutions of higher learning. In 1882 Alfred began studying engineering at the Polytechnikum and auditing classes at Berlin University, where, in the following year, he took a course in photochemistry taught by Hermann Wilhelm Vogel. Vogel, who invented orthochromatic plates (photographic emulsions sensitive to almost the full spectrum of light), gave the young Stieglitz an advanced scientific understanding of the chemical reactions in photography. Around this time Stieglitz bought his first camera. He spent the next few years following two parallel paths: the scientific study of the photographic medium and the exploration of the picture-making possibilities of the camera.

Stieglitz’s enthusiasm for the camera was of course shared by many people, but his technique was exceptional. He soon started sending his prints to exhibitions and winning awards. The principal merit of the prizewinning photographs appears to have been the way they caught people in a spontaneous, spirited moment—hardly common to photographs of the time. Some have a directness and vividness of expression far removed from Victorian sentimentality.

Of the photographs on exhibition from Stieglitz’s student days in Germany, the most famous
example, *Sun Rays, Paula* (1889), comes as a surprise to those familiar with the picture in other collections. The platinum print made in 1916 is heavier, darker, and fuller framed than later ones printed in gelatin silver. It has a metallic quality, like an early tintype. Its sobriety is disconcerting.


*Sun Rays, Paula,* is discussed in an article by Rosalind Krauss entitled “Stieglitz-Equivalents” in *October* (Winter 1979). She cites this photograph as an example of such exact internal framing that
the “cut” or “crop” (“the implied presence of the rest of the world”), which is prevalent in most photographs, is here missing. To illustrate her point she carefully analyzes the photograph. But what photograph? The reproduction accompanying her article is composed differently and is printed with much greater contrast than the one currently on exhibition. Even allowing for the printers’ having taken “a bit off the edges,” we are still not looking at the same picture.

Stieglitz sometimes made hundreds of prints before he deemed one worthy of mounting, discarding the rest. He described the uniqueness of his prints in a reply to James T. Soby, who in 1942 wanted examples of fine photographs to send to soldiers in the camps. His words are worth quoting at length:

You seem to assume that a photograph is one of a dozen or hundred or maybe a million,—all prints from one negative necessarily being alike and so replaceable. But then along comes one print that really embodies something that you have to say that is subtle and elusive, something that is still a straight print, but when shown with a thousand mechanically made prints has something that the others don’t have. What is it that this print has? . . . It is something born out of spirit,—and spirit is an intangible while the mechanical is tangible. . . . If what I feel about life is not in a print of mine, then I might just as well say that any machine can take a picture and turn out a print mechanically. You might get wonderful pictures as a result, but they would not contain that something called love or passion, both of which are the essentials needed to bring forth a living print—or any other living creative expression. A print lacking these elements is simply an illustration. And I have no objection to illustrations, but I am assuming that you have in mind something more than mere illustrations. Something life-giving, something inspiring. Something with a spiritual message . . .

Please do not assume that I want to have prints treated as something more precious than life itself. I do not. But either you show the prints in a living condition, or they should not be shown at all. Wouldn’t it be better to send around reproductions of good photographs, which retain some of the spirit of the originals, than original prints which are neither fish nor fowl?

Now as far as I am concerned, I would either send you the best I am able to produce or send you nothing at all. The “good enough,” which is nearly a religion in our country . . . I not only cannot subscribe to, but hate with all the hate within me . . . .

Stieglitz never made many prints at a time. If, years later, he wanted to reprint a negative and the quality paper that he loved had gone off the market, either he did not make any more prints of that negative or he attempted to find whether something else could be expressed through that negative to bring a new and different life to the print. This aspect of photography is more important to Stieglitz’s photographs than to those of almost any other photographer.

Not all Stieglitz’s early European photographs were taken during his student days. The exhibition, unfortunately, groups the work done after his return to America with the photographs of the early period, without acknowledging that he had already begun to find a voice—and something to say—in the streets of New York. When he returned to Germany in 1894 with his young and, as described by Sue Davidson Lowe, horrid new wife, he sought briefly the antithesis of the life his father had forced him to return to four years earlier. He wrote later that the rural community of Gutach offered the artist all he “could desire, and no tall factory buildings with their modern
rectangular lines of bricks and windows to disturb, no railroads with smoky locomotives to dim the pure atmosphere." Yet what he described was exactly what he himself would seek as he entered the twentieth century—symbols of modernization and industrialization, and of American life.

Stieglitz wanted to know if there was or was not an America: “Are we only a marked-down bargain-day remnant of Europe?” In 1902 he took a shot at modernism. The picture entitled The Flat-Iron looms large in the exhibition. A long vertical, like the skyscraper itself, this photograph shows a slingshot of a tree aimed at the building that represented the uniquely American and the boldly conceived. Stylistically the picture offered nothing new, but the message was clear. Times were changing and new shapes and forms could be found to elucidate modern life. This was the year Stieglitz founded the Photo-Secession and produced the first issue of Camera Work, published in early 1903. The twentieth century was the machine age, and photography was the art of the machine. Stieglitz was determined to make it the art of America and to place his country in the forefront of pictorial photography. He succeeded.
In the 1890s in Vienna, London, and Paris, photographers had “seceded” from the institutions that dictated what photographs would be exhibited where and when. These individuals wanted freedom from making the sharpest, most technically correct salon art. They were part of the fin de siècle aesthetic of mystery and mood and looked to Japanese painting as a guide to “spiritual” composition. They wanted to be recognized as artists, and they manipulated their prints and negatives. The Americans that Stieglitz championed were closely allied to them. Jonathan Green in his book *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* described the general attitude:
The reality that lay before the camera’s lens was not a poetic enough subject. If the camera was to produce art, it must be freed from the tyranny of the visible world. The photographer could become an expressive artist only by reshaping the sharp, optically corrected image, or by consciously arranging in front of the lens the accepted symbols and devices of the world of feeling.

In retrospect it is remarkable that Stieglitz would champion this cause. His own photography did not go in this direction. But he often spoke approvingly of letting photographers go to their own photographic hell as long as they went there with all the conviction and spirit they could muster. His own efforts at editing magazines, arranging exhibitions, and “discovering photographers and fighting for them” were, as he explained, attempts to “establish for myself an America in which I could breathe as a free man.” His most creative efforts—aside from his own photographs—were directed toward establishing environments in which people, himself included, could work and develop.

In Sarah Greenough’s essay, she explains that although other Photo-Secessionists “cultivated an oblique, suggestive art, employing subjects which were neither geographically, temporally, nor physically specific,” Stieglitz’s pictures of New York City were “definite and explicit.” Misty landscapes and “ethereal, virginal women” had no place in Stieglitz’s modern metropolis. Unfortunately, Miss Greenough did not include, in the exhibition or the book, a thorough survey of these seminal pictures of Manhattan taken between 1902 and 1910. To see the sixteen photographs hung together—a concurrent and complementary exhibition at the Lunn Gallery in Washington, D. C., offered one the chance—is to witness Stieglitz arriving at a new definition of self and society.

By 1911 Stieglitz had been running the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (291) for six years. In addition to showing Gertrude Kasebier, Clarence White, Edward Steichen, and the other Photo-Secessionists, he exhibited Matisse, Rodin, Dove, Hartley, Marin, Max Weber, and Cézanne. He recognized that photographers who wished to be regarded as artists, to exhibit in museums, and to have their work collected would have to face the same questions asked of modern painters and sculptors. They would have to familiarize themselves with radically new work. Greenough argues it was Cubism and specifically Picasso that had the greatest effect on Stieglitz’s understanding of “the idea of photography” in the 1910s. The other Photo-Secessionists’ refusal to change their style in light of these new movements and their unwillingness to support Stieglitz’s shift to showing modern art at 291 and in Camera Work led to a severing of relations. In 1913 Stieglitz complained that they had “not developed mentally but have stood still during the past six or seven years,” and, since he claimed 291 was “devoted to ideas,” he could no longer exhibit their work.

In Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession, William Innes Homer does little to extend our appreciation of the pictures of the Photo-Secessionists or to encourage us to care about them. (We may note that it is Atget, the Photo-Secessionists’ contemporary, who is in favor in photographic circles these days.) He does give a competent overview of the precedents in European
photography (although he is wrong to say there was no amateur photography before the mid-
i88os). And some of the facts are interesting: for example, during the 1905-6 season of 291, fifteen thousand people visited the gallery, and some sixty-one prints were sold—for a total of $2,797.49. But his biographies of the main participants add little new information, except in the cases of Anne Brigman and George Seeley.

What we need is a careful analysis of individual artists of this movement to see whether there is not something more substantial here than the mists, crystal balls, flowing dresses, and shadowy backgrounds have led us to believe. The finest discourse in this direction is by Mike Weaver, professor of American Literature at Oxford University and an authority on William Carlos Williams. In a short catalogue published in 1982 by the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain marking the centenary of the birth of Alvin Langdon Coburn (whose photographs were recently seen at the International Center of Photography in New York City), Mr. Weaver tells us that Co-burn, “having made his contribution to the medium in the period 1900-1914, realized that the endless striving to keep up with changes in sensibility and technology would impair the essentially religious nature of his own individuality.” We learn that for him the quest for beauty and the study of comparative religion were inseparable. Mr. Weaver tells us precisely which authors Coburn read (something Sue Davidson Lowe fails to do for Stieglitz). It turns out that Henry James, Arthur Symons, and Edward Carpenter were among the most influential figures in his life. James, for example, commissioned him to do the frontispieces of the American editions of his novels and carefully instructed him as to “types.”

Arthur Wesley Dow, the foremost art teacher in America, whose foundation course was taken by both Max Weber and Georgia O’Keeffe, accompanied Coburn to the Grand Canyon in 1911. Dow taught printmaking in the Japanese tradition and thought the key elements of composition to be line, notan (dark and light as opposed to chiaroscuro), and color. Mr. Weaver writes:

The result of this new art of spacing was a photographic design that was eccentric—off-centre—and triangular. The oblique and the elliptical were favoured because (it was claimed) Hokusai believed that all shapes in the universe were fundamentally triangular or round. The four-square or frontal approach to be taken later by Walker Evans was rejected in favour of the indirect or oblique angle preferred by Henry James as well as the Japanese.

Through Mr. Weaver’s search for the underlying significance of Coburn’s imagery, we begin to learn something of the common concerns of the other Photo-Seccessionists, such as Clarence White and Gertrude Kasebier, and the basis of their philosophical and aesthetic goals. What appears to be unique with Coburn is his knowledge of the seventeenth-century verbal-pictorial art of the West. In a lecture given in London last year, Mr. Weaver showed slides of pages of texts from Coburn’s library that show that there was a hieroglyphic key to uncovering the meaning of his photographs. Arches, domes, castles, portals—all had symbolic significance that, when the images were organized, could approach the metaphysical truth that Coburn sought not only in his photography but in every aspect of his life. This obviously appealed to Stieglitz in the first decade
of this century, when he supported Coburn and the others who were following Maeterlinck’s dictate: “Emotions gain in intensity by not being expressed openly, absence can mean presence . . .”

Openness, clarity of vision, photography in its purest sense—these became Stieglitz’s objectives as he diverged from the Photo-Secessionists. He liked to say his works were devoid of “isms,” that unless “one has eyes and sees, they won’t be seen.” But he didn’t have to seek out the extraordinary. He needed only to look at the people and things that were integral to his life, to look more consciously, more creatively, and more profoundly than anyone had looked at anything before. Stieglitz asks us to share only his most vital concerns.

His portrait of O’Keeffe, composed of hundreds of studies, is profoundly poetic. Her slender, full-breasted body, intelligent, enigmatic face, and graceful movements make her an ideal model. Every part of her that he photographed year in and year out shows the energy of the whole being. Sue Davidson Lowe writes:

> Alfred’s happiness with Georgia was transcendent. Beyond shared insights and attitudes, beyond matching impulses of creativity, passion for work, and insistence on careful craftsmanship, beyond the steps each took toward self-revelation, followed by declarations to rights of privacy, there was for both Georgia and Alfred an erotic tension that heightened and informed everything they did together.

Stieglitz used excruciatingly long exposures—three or four minutes—for his portraits. Julia Margaret Cameron had used long exposures in the nineteenth century to evoke mental energy. Stieglitz used them to suggest fluidity; he sought to work with time rather than against it. This, the flatness of the lighting, the richness of his platinum and palladium prints, and the carefully chosen backgrounds make all his portraits—not just those of O’Keeffe—subdued and dignified. Yet the reason they succeed—they fill the viewer with the sitter’s presence—is ultimately mysterious. One knows only that it has something to do with form, texture, and light, and with concentration on the part of both artist and subject.
Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, Hands, 1918.
The composite portrait of O’Keeffe is neither all Stieglitz nor all O’Keeffe. She was a willing accomplice; he a patient observer. In 1978 the Metropolitan Museum of Art filled a small room with these studies, carefully chosen by Weston Naef, and produced a flawless exhibition. In it we saw O’Keeffe in her first eye-to-eye encounters with Stieglitz, tentative, young; again in the full blossoming of womanhood; then as the strong, decisive artist; the wife who smiles knowingly at her husband; and the individual who needs to move on. This chronicle has never been more satisfactorily shown, and the O’Keeffe group in the present exhibition does not builds in tension as the earlier one did. There are snapshots, never before seen, of O’Keeffe painting and pruning, but there is no cohesiveness in the curators’ choice.

Mrs. Lowe tells us that from the age of nine until the age of eighty-two Stieglitz missed only eleven summers at Lake George—six while a student in Germany, one for a honeymoon, and four for trips to Europe. Even when O’Keeffe started spending summers in the Southwest, he never joined her. Lake George as a retreat was always counterpoised with New York, and the pictures Stieglitz made there provided an important balance both for the man and the artist. Some strong pictures, such as *Apples and Gable, Lake George* (1922), are not included in the exhibition, however. In Bram Dijkstra’s *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* we read of the sentiment that informed this picture and others. Williams articulated it best: “Nothing more wonderful than to see the pears attached by their stems to the trees. Earth, trunk, branch, twig and the fruit: a circle soon to be completed when the pear falls . . . the only means [we have to give value to life] is to recognize it with the imagination and name it.”

The Lake George pictures are normally neither Cubist-inspired nor abstractions. It is through the imagination that these quietist pictures live. Whether long underwear hanging on the line, or halos of light circling a young girl’s ankles, the details in them translated through the imagination take on universal significance. Dijkstra explains:

The members of the Stieglitz group [writers and painters] argued that because the intuitive contact between humanity and his native soil had been rooted out of the American consciousness, the artist who wished to be truly American would have to make a conscious effort to re-establish that contact. This could be done only by going back to the very basis of nature, the object. All concrete forms, natural as well as man-made, should be seen in terms of their relationship to the artist, and the artist should establish from the things about him the meaning of his own existence. By transmitting what he saw as accurately as possible in terms of his individual vision, he would then be able to inculcate an awareness of the universal emotions underlying the materials of his environment to his fellow Americans, while yet reflecting the specific elements of his local consciousness.

The Stieglitz group was quite insistent that in advocating this return to a direct attention for the position of the object as such within nature it reestablished a concept of objective realism which had nothing to do with the familiar romantic concept of a return to nature. Rather, they felt, they were advocating an attitude which, it is true, had been lost through the development of industrialism, but which had none of the vague generalized sentimentality which guided the response of a city-bred person taking a trip out into the country and heaving sighs over the exquisite beauty of it all. Indeed, what they were advocating was the obverse of escapism, an attention only to things as they are.
Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler, Paul Outer-bridge, Ralph Steiner, Karl Struss, Paul Haviland, and Alvin Langdon Coburn were all consciously isolating details and employing lessons learned from Cubism in their photographs, simultaneously and prior to Stieglitz’s most modern expressions, his “Through My Window” and “Equivalent” series dating from 1922-1935. In the skyscraper photographs a brilliant technique gives definition to the subject. The question the photographs posed was whether the image was, in Stieglitz’s words, a reality “so subtle that it becomes more real than reality,” or the thing as it is. It is a uniquely photographic dichotomy.

The buildings seen through the windows of Stieglitz’s last gallery (An American Place) and of his apartment at the Shelton Hotel yield rectangles and squares piled high, strong graphic images employing large areas of black and white yet very real and specific. They show brick upon brick, the cranes and scaffolds helping them go higher and higher. As densely packed as a microchip, this is the city of hide and seek. It is also man making mountains, asking God to yield his province.

In the skyscraper photographs Stieglitz is high up looking across and looking down. In the “Equivalents” he has his feet firmly on the ground and looks to the heavens. The present exhibition permits a full savoring. We are able to confront and understand this seminal work better than at any previous time. The “Equivalents” are not easy to consider, but once the viewer recognizes the freedom with which Stieglitz approaches his subject, the liberation from all rules and constructs is euphoric. He gives us the universe in its formative stages—whirling masses of gasses and vapors before gravity tells us what is top and what is bottom. In the “Equivalents,” Stieglitz wanted to show everything he had learned about life and art. He wanted people to look at the pictures and hear music, he wanted the forms to equate to his deepest feelings. In the article cited previously, Rosalind Krauss discussed the risk involved in making and exhibiting these studies, failure, naturally, being seen as fraudulence:

*Relationship* cannot mean anything here that has much to do with its conventional meaning within the traditional arts. Just as a readymade stakes everything that it might signify on the single gesture of its recontextualization and placement, so these images, which come to us as unanalyzable wholes, stake everything on the single act of cutting out—the gesture that makes them by cutting . . . .

In their verticality the clouds echo or double the initial meaning of the cut, or rather, each reinforces and doubles the other. For both are involved in displaying the world only by means of an image that is radically cut loose from its moorings, an image that is about being unmoored.
What Miss Krauss’s thesis leaves out is that in almost every “Equivalent” the sun is present—perfectly white and circular or hidden behind the clouds, a source of understated illumination. Emotionally we are attracted to this constant light-giving body, symbolic here of the soul. Stieglitz had the whole sky to select from. He did not have to include this heavenly, life-sustaining star when it was not of critical importance. Once again, as with the example of the fruit on the limb, it is William Carlos Williams whose thought approximates Stieglitz’s most closely. More than ten years after the last “Equivalent,” he wrote the poem entitled The Clouds, of which these are the final stanzas:

Thus each
is valued by what he carries and that is his soul
—diminishing the bins by that much unless replenished.

It is that which is the brotherhood:
the old life, treasured. But if they live?
What then?
The clouds remain
—the disordered heavens, ragged, ripped by winds
or dormant, a caligraphy of scaly dragons and bright moths,
of straining thought, bulbous or smooth,
ornate, the flesh itself (in which
the poet foretells his own death); convoluted, lunging upon
a pismire, a conflagration, a . . . . . .

Sue Davidson Lowe in her memoir/biography tells us much more than we ever wanted to know about her great-uncle Alfred Stieglitz, but she also gives us much to be grateful for. Her dedication through many years of interviewing and of reading correspondence has produced the most thorough account of Stieglitz’s life to date. But, because Georgia O’Keeffe refused access to the Stieglitz/O’Keeffe letters at Princeton’s Beinecke Library and permission to quote from unpublished Stieglitz material, she must often leave the reader unconvinced of her conclusions. That by the last page we feel somewhat like a supersaturated solution is the result of our being offered too many incidental facts. We start to get bored with Alfred, something that I believe did not happen frequently in real life. Being herself a member of the Stieglitz clan, she pays great attention to the family members, though they rarely merit it. And, except for O’Keeffe, the intellectual weight of Stieglitz’s friends is not realized fully enough to establish the interplay of ideas that was so central to his life.

In the introduction to her book, Mrs. Lowe writes: “It is my hope that I have succeeded in humanizing Uncle Al, whom I loved but did not idolize. He was a cantankerous, inspired, whimsical, candid, insightful, naughty, sweet, dynamic, and outrageous man.” This effort on the part of present-day writers not to “idolize” Stieglitz is a response to a contrary mode which goes all the way back to the 1914-15 issue of Camera Work on the theme “What is 291?” to the book America and Alfred Stieglitz, the seventieth-birthday tribute to him published in 1934, and to the writings of Dorothy Norman, especially her 1973 monograph titled Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer. It is to Mrs. Lowe’s credit that she has now emerged as an authoritative source for the bits and pieces of his life and has shown complete disregard for his argument that his home life was off limits by virtue of irrelevancy. She has also done a superb job putting together the chronology of his life, a bibliography, a list of exhibitions he organized from 1902 to 1946, and of the photographic equipment he used.
Mrs. Lowe highlights her great-uncle’s infatuation with the childlike Dorothy Norman, who adored him from the time of their first encounter through the years of daily contact at An American Place. Their exact relationship is never spelled out but their intimacy is apparent. It appears that then, as now, O’Keeffe wanted none of it. The Stieglitz photographs of Norman are central to his career. That not one appears in the present exhibition raises questions as to how much control O’Keeffe had over the selection and whether the curators, perhaps especially Juan Hamilton, her close friend, thought their inclusion would still be an irritant. The curators’ argument that Norman’s portraits did not fit any category of the exhibition is unconvincing.

The omission is especially unfortunate as these works refer to the “Equivalents” from the same period. Stieglitz cuts out portions of her face, and even the texture of the skin approaches that of the amorphous clouds. The Norman portraits have a softness and pliability that is diametrically opposed to O’Keeffe’s hard-edged intelligence. We learn in the biography that in the 1930s Stieglitz “confessed to having once considered making a motion picture to reveal the whole emotional range of a woman’s life through alternating close-ups of her nude body with footage of clouds in motion.” It is far more likely that the woman would have been Norman, who then had both the time and inclination to sit for him, than O’Keeffe.

There are many other marvelous revelations in the book, and some fine and funny family photographs. But ultimately Mrs. Lowe’s failure to understand Stieglitz’s photography diminishes her contribution. A statement such as the one describing his summer at Lake George in 1930—“He had almost no work to show: a few cloud prints, some portrait shots of Kalonyme and Zoler, some candids of Peggy and Sue”—makes the reader feel that her attempts to “humanize” him have stripped him of his greatness both as an artist and as a leader in the art world.

Georgia O’Keeffe once wrote: “I believe it was the work that kept me with him—though I loved him as a human being.” And it is the work that keeps each generation caring about Stieglitz. Neither his words nor his deeds would have rung true had there not also been the great photographic experiments—the far-reaching works of art that stand at the center of Stieglitz’s being.

1. “Alfred Stieglitz,” organized by Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art from January 30 to May 8. It will be shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from June 14 through August 14 and at the Art Institute of Chicago from October 11 through January 3, 1984. Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings, edited by Mrs. Greenough and Mr. Hamilton, is published by the National Gallery of Art and by Callaway Editions, New York: 246 pages, $70 ($35 in paperback).

3. "Stieglitz was meticulous about printing and matting, and equally meticulous about reproducing works of art, his own and others’. It is a rare pleasure to note that the plates in the catalogue meet Stieglitz’s high standards. The original photographs were sent in batches to the printers over the course of a year so that the proofs could be matched against the originals."