

ART OF THE TWENTIES

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IN THE TWENTIES: PORTRAITS FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

WALL LABEL

Prominent photographers who made portraits in the twenties were patriots and expatriates of many countries. Their positions in relation to the primary art "isms" of the early part of this century were varied: they were central or eccentric, partisan or maverick, sophisticated or naive. But these qualifications were local, determined by circumstance. The pictures in this exhibition strongly suggest that these photographers shared with the broader artistic community of the time a collective concern for a formal definition of function.

Unlike the soft-focus silhouettes of the preceding decade, these are pictures taken from the front. The camera has been used directly, head-on, creating a new kind of non-cosmetic, face to face reality. By shifting the distances and directions of the camera spatial relationships within the picture are altered, giving illusions of flatness or of three-dimensionality. Often these pictures are simultaneously realistic and abstract, or realist and surrealist. Light is consciously used to define or erode outlines, patterns, shapes, shadows, tones and textures. Like aerial photographs, recently pioneered, some of these portraits reveal new orders of pattern: the shape of a head unflinchingly fills the picture, and the facial features resemble topographical information on a globe. In others the subjects are shown as central to the worlds of their own creation.

The Museum of Modern Art

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