

**Alvin Langdon Coburn**  
**The Future of Pictorial Photography**  
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## **THE FUTURE OF PICTORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

**By ALVIN LANGDON COBURN**

An artist is a man who tries to express the inexpressible. He struggles and suffers knowing that he can never realise his most perfect ideal. Occasional moments of ecstasy lure him on, but nothing is final in art, it is always progressing and advancing, as man's intelligence expands in the light of more perfect knowledge of himself and the universe.

It is this progress of the arts that has interested me. Where is it leading us? There are the "moderns" in Painting, in Music, and in Literature. What would our grandfathers have said of the work of Matisse, Stravinsky and Gertrude Stein? What *do* our grandfathers say? They hold up their hand in horror, they show their bad manners by scoffing and jeering at something they are too antiquated to understand. It is the revolutionary of to-day, however, who is the "classic" of to-morrow; there is no escaping the ruthless forward march of time.

Yes, if we are alive to the spirit of our time it is these moderns who interest us. They are striving, reaching out towards the future, analysing the mossy structure of the past, and building afresh, in colour and sound and grammatical construction, the scintillating vision of their minds; and being interested particularly in photography, it has occurred to me, why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried? Why should not its subtle rapidity be utilised to study movement? Why not repeated successive exposures of an object in motion on the same plate? Why should not perspective be studied from angles hitherto neglected or unobserved? Why, I ask you earnestly, need we go on making commonplace little exposures of subjects that may be sorted into groups of landscapes, portraits, and figure studies? Think of the joy of doing something which it would be impossible to classify, or to tell which was the top and which the bottom!

In last year's exhibition of the Royal Photographic Society there was a little group of prints by American workers, mostly entitled "Design"—many of my readers will remember them. They were groups of various objects photographed because of their shape and colour value, and with no thought of their sentimental associations. There were, I believe, tables, golf clubs, portfolios, etc., etc. The idea was to be as abstract as it is possible to be with the camera. Max Weber, the Cubist painter-poet, was responsible for the idea of these designs, and Weber is one of the most sincere artists that it has ever been my good fortune to meet; but of course these experiments in a new direction only met with sneers and laughter—it is always the same with an innovation in any direction. In his new book, "Essays on Art," Weber says: "To express moods that stir the emotion from within, as does music, the plastic artist, when he conceives of energetic rhythmic interlaced forms or units, should be much more moved than even by music. It is like cementing a thought, or arresting a perfect moment of time, or like giving body to space, or

solidity to air, or coloured light to darkness.”

How many of us are moved like this in photography? We think of the camera as a rather material means of self-expression—if we think about it at all; but is it really so? Pause for a moment and consider the mysterious quality of light registering itself in sensitised gelatine—all the scientific poetry in the words “latent image.” In the days when men were burned at the stake for practising “black magic” the photographer would have been an undoubted victim if it had invented in those dark times; but now every “nipper” has a “Brownie,” and a photograph is as common as a box of matches—perhaps even more so, this being war time! Photography is too easy in a superficial way, and in consequence is treated slightly by people who ought to know better. One does not consider Music an inferior art simply because little Mary can play a scale. What we need in photography is more sincerity, more respect for our medium and less respect for its decayed conventions.

All the summer I have been painting, and so I can come back to photography with a more or less fresh view-point, and it makes me want to shout, “Wake up!” to many of my photographic colleagues. “Do something outrageously bad if you like, but let it be freshly seen.” If we go on fishing out our old negatives and making a few feeble prints of them, just as we have been doing for the past ten years, photography will stagnate. I have the very greatest respect for photography as a means of personal expression, and I want to see it alive to the spirit of progress; if it is not possible to be “modern” with the newest of all the arts, we had better bury our black boxes, and go back to scratching with a sharp bone in the manner of our remote Darwinian ancestors. I do not think that we have begun to even realise the possibilities of the camera. The beauty of design displayed by the microscope seems to me a wonderful field to explore from the purely pictorial point of view, the use of prisms for the splitting of images into segments has been very slightly experimented with, and multiple exposures on the same plate called “spirit photographs” —have been neglected almost entirely.

As a start I suggest that an exhibition be organised of “Abstract Photography”; that in the entry form it be distinctly stated that no work will be admitted in which the interest of the subject-matter is greater than the appreciation of the extraordinary. A sense of design is, of course all important, and an opportunity for the expression of suppressed or unsuspected originality should prove very beneficial.

You may think what you like about the modern movement in the arts, but the world will never be the same place again. We may disapprove of modernity in art, but we can never go back to Academicism with the smug complacency of yore. The hollowness, the unthinkable dullness of it all, is now only too clearly apparent. And it is my hope that photography may fall in line with all the other arts, and with her infinite possibilities, do things stranger and more fascinating than the most fantastic dreams.