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Robert Fishko, *Director*

Alfred Stieglitz

(1864-1946)

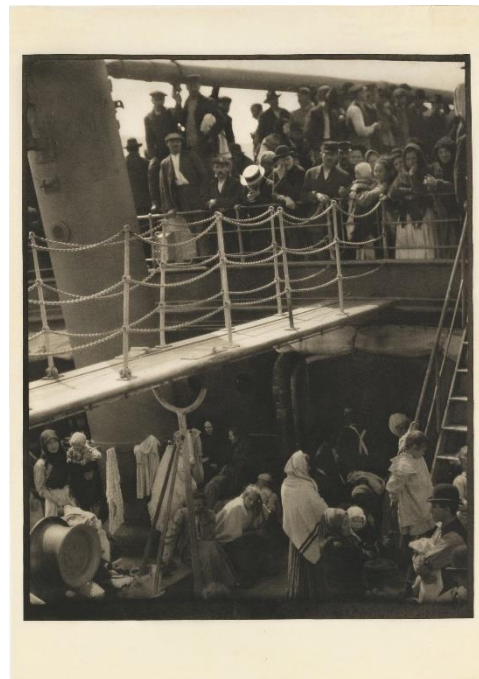
The Steerage, 1907 (printed in 1911)

photogravure

7 1/2 x 6 inches

Provenance

Private Collection, New York



Note

American artist Alfred Stieglitz was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1864. Schooled as an engineer in Germany, he returned to New York in 1890 determined to prove that photography was a medium as capable of artistic expression as painting or sculpture. As the editor of *Camera Notes*, the journal of an association of amateur photography enthusiasts called the Camera Club of New York, Stieglitz espoused his belief in the aesthetic potential of the medium and published work by photographers who shared his conviction. Stieglitz and several like-minded photographers broke away from the group in 1902 to form the Photo-Secession, advocating for an emphasis on the craftsmanship involved in photography. Stieglitz took great care in producing his prints, often making platinum prints, a process renowned for yielding images with a rich, subtly varied tonal scale. And together with his compositional choices – including the use of natural elements like rain, snow, and steam to unify the components of a scene into a visually pleasing pictorial whole – Stieglitz became acclaimed for achieving the affiliation with painting he desired.

In 1902, Stieglitz devoted his energies toward the production of an autonomous, high-quality magazine intended to elevate and promote the art of photography. *Camera Work* was the result and from 1903 to 1917 Stieglitz edited the sumptuous journal while simultaneously organizing exhibitions with the aid of Edward J. Steichen whose donated studio space became the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession in 1905, familiarly known as

“291” for its address on Fifth Avenue. Through these enterprises, Stieglitz supported photographers and other modern American artists, while also apprising artists of the latest developments in early Twentieth Century European modernism with the help of Steichen’s frequent reports from Paris. Stieglitz’s knowledge of this new kind of art is evident in photographs from these years such as *The Steerage*, in which the arrangement of shapes and tones belies his familiarity with Cubism.

For many, *The Steerage*, is considered the first modernist photograph. It was taken by Stieglitz while sailing from New York to Germany on the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* for a vacation in 1907. The photograph marks Stieglitz’s eschewal of Symbolist subject matter for that of everyday life – an image of steerage, the lowest priced quarters on the ship where passengers traveled in harsh conditions. The focus on passengers returning to Europe (some perhaps as a result of unsuccessful attempts to immigrate) inevitably lends the photograph a political charge, but the compositional harmony of *The Steerage* is remarkable for its improbable circumstances of its creation.

The artist narrated that he had only one chance to get the image right, because he was carrying just a single unexposed plate: “Could I catch what I saw and felt? I released the shutter, my heart thumping. If I had captured what I wanted, the photograph would go far beyond any of my previous prints.”