

## **“I Step Out of Myself: Portrait Photograph in Special Collections**

Photographs—and more specifically, photographic portraiture—are an important component of the archival and manuscript collections held in the Special Collections Research Center. Photographs make their way into the repository alongside correspondence, diaries, film, reports, memoranda, minutes, and much more. The study of this original documentary material can reveal much about the activities and relationships of a person, a life fixed in records. *I Step Out of Myself* offers up one piece of that biographical puzzle for closer consideration: faces fixed in a photograph. The portrait photographs displayed here range widely in technique, style, subject matter, and emotion, but the questions remain the same. Who is revealed, and who hidden? The poem "I Step Out of Myself" was composed by photographer and writer Layle Silbert during a pivotal time in her creative life. Silbert had been taking photographs for over a decade when, in the late 1960s, she attended the founding meeting of the New York Poets' Cooperative and turned the camera on her fellow writers. Thus began Silbert's life-long passion for photographing poets, novelists, and playwrights as they spoke, thought, grinned, grimaced, and posed for her camera. The shutter parted, and someone— who?—emerged.

Silbert is one of ten photographers whose portraiture is featured in this exhibition. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century fine art photographers Eva Watson-Schütze, Alice Boughton, Tina Modotti, and Librado García Smarth romanticized their subjects through careful framing, soft textures, and warm tones. Carl Van Vechten dialed up the glamour in the 1930s with tightly-framed photographs of celebrities against bold backgrounds. With the help of studio lighting, Yousef Karsh created iconic portraits of powerful politicians and artists from the 1940s through the 1960s. During this same period, Mildred Mead turned her camera away from the faces of the powerful to the faces of impoverished people living in Chicago's slums. Like Mead, Joan Eggan worked in a photojournalistic style, photographing persons from all walks of life, and from around the globe, as they went about their daily business in the 1970s. Layle Silbert utilized multiple photographic styles in the 1970s and 1980s for her portraits of writers in New York City.

*I Step Out of Myself* forms part of a recurring exhibition series highlighting important or recently received materials in the archives and manuscript collections. Additional information about the collections from which these photographs are drawn is available in the Special Collections Research Center. *I Step Out of Myself* was curated by Ashley Locke Gosselar, Brittan Nannenga, Laura Alagna and Eileen Ielmini.

### Who?

Parted like a mummy case  
Opened down the middle,  
I step out of myself.

There I am  
Unknown,  
Bare.  
Who knows me now?

— Layle Silbert circa 1966-1970

### **Alice Boughton(1865-1943)**

Alice Boughton was an early twentieth-century American photographer and a member of the Photo-Secession movement led by Alfred Stieglitz. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Boughton studied painting at the Pratt Institute, and in Paris. After an apprenticeship in the studio of photographer Gertrude Kasebier, Boughton's interests turned to portrait photography. She became well-known for her many portraits of literary and celebrity figures including William and Henry James, William Butler Yeats, Myra Hess, Yvette Guilbert, Maxim Gorki and Dr. Abraham Jacobi. As her talents evolved she became known for her photographs of female nudes in allegorical settings, utilizing the technique known as photogravure.

### **Joan Eggan (1906–1999)**

Joan Rosenfels Eggan was born in 1906 to Russian Jewish immigrants. She received a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1934, and continued her education at the Smith School for Social Work, where she studied with the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. Eggan practiced psychotherapy for over twenty-five years, as a therapist with the students of the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago, and as a psychological consultant to the school's administrators and pediatricians. It was her background in psychotherapy which led Eggan to begin studying photography in the 1960s, believing that it would allow her to learn more about her patients.

Eggan first became well-known in anthropological circles for her remarkable portraits of anthropologists. After her marriage in 1969 to noted anthropologist and University of Chicago professor Fred Eggan, the range of subjects in her photography increased greatly. Eggan accompanied her husband on several of his research trips to the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and England. Eggan documented these trips through photography, focusing on capturing images of local people and their everyday lives. Her photography was informed by her training as a psychotherapist: Eggan's portraits often depict relationships between people, or focus on people going about their daily routines. Women and children were frequent subjects in her work.

### **Yousuf Karsh (1908-2002)**

Born in 1908 in the former Ottoman Empire (now Turkey), Yousuf Karsh immigrated to Canada at the age of sixteen. Karsh lived with his uncle, Geroge Nakash, a photographer in Quebec, and assisted in his uncle's studio. With encouragement from his uncle, Karsh moved to Boston in 1928 and apprenticed with portrait photographer John Garo. After several years, Karsh returned to Canada where he opened his own studio in 1933 in Ottawa, not far from Parliament Hill. Karsh was soon discovered by Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King and other dignitaries, and was often invited to photograph visiting politicians and celebrities. In 1941 Karsh photographed Winston Churchill, creating what would become the iconic image of the leader.

Throughout his career, Karsh photographed a wide range of political and military leaders, writers, artists, and entertainers. Karsh published many books of his portraits, including descriptions of his experiences photographing each subject. He aimed to capture the essence of the person, and his works are notable for his use of studio lighting. Karsh received many awards in his lifetime, including being appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and a Companion of the Order of Canada.

### **Mildred Mead (1910-2001)**

Mildred Mead a resident of Hyde Park, was a professional photographer working in the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Her photographs document neighborhoods in Chicago targeted for urban renewal and informed the reports of the Metropolitan Housing and Planning Council, the Chicago Land Clearance Commission, and the Chicago Housing Authority. They also record activities associated with the South East Chicago Commission, The Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, Michael Reese Hospital, the Fort Dearborn Project, and the study of Maxwell Street Market. Mead crossed boundaries of class and race by entering poor neighborhoods and living spaces in an effort to establish empathy for those captured in her images and build a case for the renovation of dilapidated housing. Images of slum conditions and overcrowding dominate much of Mead's work, but her photographs also depict homes in revitalized areas and other aspects of community life in Chicago, including street markets and children at play.

### **Tina Modotti (1896--1942)**

Tina Modotti has been described as a photographer, model, actress and revolutionary activist. Born in Italy, Modotti came to the U.S. in 1913. Attracted to the arts, Modotti appeared in several silent films but began her pursuit of modeling and

photography in 1920. Though her father and uncle both ran photography studios it wasn't until she began a relationship with photographer Edward Weston that photography took hold. One of Weston's favorite models, Modotti soon developed a talent as a fine-art photographer and documentarian. The bohemian lifestyle of Mexico drew Modotti, Weston, and other artists and photographers in the mid-1920s. However, the political and anti-communist environment forced Modotti to leave the country in 1930. Modotti spent the rest of her life on missions for Workers International Relief and Comintern, eventually returning to Mexico City where she died.

### **Layle Silbert (1913–2003)**

Layle Silbert photographer and writer, was born in Chicago where her father was a journalist and editor for the city's Yiddish press. She began composing poetry and literary essays in childhood, and remained devoted to the literary arts throughout her life. Following a career in social service, she transitioned to creative writing in the 1940s, going on to publish poetry and prose in numerous distinguished literary journals, anthologies, and books. Silbert first picked up a camera in the 1950s while living in Pakistan. "Then and there," Silbert told *Poets and Writers Magazine* in 1990, "I fell in love with the human face."

She continued to photograph friends and family after her return to the United States, and in the late 1960s Silbert discovered her passion for photographing fellow writers when she attended the founding meeting of the New York Poet's Cooperative, camera in hand. She went on to photograph hundreds of writers from around the world. Her portraits have been widely published in books and national media, and exhibited in more than thirty one-woman shows in the United States, Ecuador, and Mexico.

The photographs on display are a small sample of Silbert's encounters with authors through the lens of her camera. Formal or informal, they hint at the life of the creative mind. Said Silbert, "I have this sense that I want to crawl inside their heads and under their skin. I discovered that for me, photographing writers is something like photographing family. Writers are my familiars."

### **Smarth (Active 20th century)**

Librado García adopted the artistic pseudonym Smarth early in his career. He was associated with a strong tradition of photography in Jalisco, Mexico, starting his freelance studio career around 1911. In the late 1910s and 1920s Librado Garcia was associated with Pictorialism and Mexican avant garde photography. This style was described as "idealized, bare in a light mist that provides them the maximum of expression, which makes them beautiful no longer photographically....but pictorially, because each of them has the importance of a painting." Some feel his best

period was in the 1920s when the pictorial style was at its height. Other artists also active during this period were Antonio Garduno, Gustavo Silva, Tina Modotti, and Hugo Brehme as well as artists represented in the 1907 journal *Camera Work*.

### **Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964)**

Carl Van Vechten was an American writer and photographer and a graduate of the University of Chicago. Post-graduation, he spent a brief period of time working as a reporter for *Chicago American* before moving to New York. There, as a music and dance critic for the *New York Times*, he was at the center of the city's cultural scene in the 1920s, and was a patron for many of the most prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. He also had a career as a novelist, publishing seven works of fiction between 1922 and 1930. Most of his novels are strongly autobiographical, evoking his love of art, music, and literature, as well as parties, nightlife, and vibrant personalities.

It was not until the 1930s, after nearly twenty-five years in New York, that he concluded his writing career and began taking portrait photographs. Van Vechten's subjects include many of the leading personalities of the era in opera, literature, theater, painting, and journalism. Among them are Aaron Copland, Philip Johnson, Georgia O'Keefe, Diego Rivera, Gertrude Stein, and Alfred Stieglitz. He knew many of his subjects personally and chose specific props, backgrounds, postures, and expressions to emphasize their character. Van Vechten's use of lively backgrounds and dark shadows combined with simple and direct poses are distinctive elements of his style.

### **Eva Watson-Schütze (1867–1935)**

Eva Watson-Schütze enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia at the age of sixteen, and before the age of thirty-five, established her own portrait studios in Philadelphia and later in Chicago. She was a member of the prestigious Philadelphia Salon and of the London-based Brotherhood of the Linked Ring photographic society. Together with Alfred Stieglitz, Watson-Schütze was a founding member of the Photo-Secession movement in 1902 which championed photography as a fine art and promoted a pictorialist style.

The pictorialist emphasis on photography as an artistic and creative - rather than a commercial and mechanical - process was a reaction against the industrialization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Watson-Schütze's later association with the American arts and crafts colony, Brydcliffe, in Woodstock, New York was therefore a natural extension of her aesthetic philosophy.

The pictorialist influence can be seen in the photographs on display; carefully

constructed framing of the figures, soft textures, warm tones, and foreground interest all play an important role. She attracted an intellectual and influential clientele in Chicago that included the Dewey, Mead, and Tufts families and the Hull House group, many of whom shared the artist's idealism.

### **Edward Henry Weston (1886-1958)**

Edward Henry Weston was considered one of the most innovative and influential American photographers of the twentieth century. Over a forty-year career he explored genres ranging from landscape, to nudes, to portraits. Born in Highland Park, Illinois, Weston migrated to California in 1907. His interest in photography developed early, and after his move west he adopted pictorialism, a popular artistic form at the time. In 1922, Weston's attention turned in new directions leading him to produce sharply-focused, highly-detailed photographic images. This portrait is a late example of Weston's pictorialist style.