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**art & man**<sup>®</sup>

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# THE WORLD OF Imogen Cunningham

Who is the woman on this month's cover and why is she holding a pair of garden clippers in front of her face? What do you notice first about this photo? Is it the subject's expression; her clothes; her necklace; her age? Is this a *photograph* of this woman, or a *portrait*?

A good photographic portrait doesn't just record the subject's appearance—it reveals the essence of the person. It is a *collaboration* between photographer and sitter—if the two connect, the portrait will be a success. Twentieth-century American Imogen Cunningham—shown on the cover—said, "A portrait photographer has to be hung up on people—you love them and you hate them."



Can you find the photographer in the unusual self-portrait shown above?

Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976). *Self-portrait with Grandchildren in the Funhouse*, 1955 © 1970. All photos by Imogen Cunningham are © The Imogen Cunningham Trust, Berkeley, CA.

Cunningham photographed people for over 75 years, and her portraits have been reprinted and exhibited all over the world.

The art of photography began in 1839. Imogen Cunningham took her first photo in 1901, and she continued to take pictures until her death in 1976. Her career spans nearly every major period of photography—from the earliest photos, carefully posed to look like paintings—to modern, realistic, sharply focused images. Nineteenth-century photographs were taken with large, heavy cameras, using glass plates and requiring long exposures. In the 1920s, the development of fast, small cameras allowed photographers to take quick pictures in just about any situation.

Imogen Cunningham was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1883. When she was young her father, a self-educated freethinker and vegetarian who had ten children, took his family to a communal farm. This failed, and the family moved to Seattle. During high school, when Imogen became interested in





*“People will just have to look at my stuff and make up their own minds.”*—IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

photography, her father built a darkroom for her. She took a correspondence course and began photographing her family, friends, and surroundings. After graduating from college, she worked in a photography studio and in 1909, was awarded a scholarship to study in Germany. When she returned to Seattle, she decided to open her own portrait studio.

Her business was a commercial success, and in 1915, she married a young etcher who worked in an adjoining studio. Five years later, Cunningham moved to San Francisco with her husband and children. During this period she was unable to do many portraits because she was busy raising her three boys. However, after landscaping the hill behind her house into a rock garden, she made a famous series of abstract photographs of her plants (one of which is shown above), carefully arranged to express

their “personalities.” She stayed in contact with her photographer friends and with them, in 1930, founded a movement that had great influence on the history of photography. After the group disbanded, Imogen was commissioned by the arts magazine *Vanity Fair* to do portraits of famous celebrities.

For the next 40 years (she died in 1976 at the age of 93), Cunningham created hundreds of photographic portraits—including the self-portrait with her grandchildren, all seen in the distorting mirror of a funhouse (left). Cunningham experimented with many photographic styles and subjects, but she is best known for her striking pictures of *people*. In this issue, you'll see more of these insightful portraits, you'll discover other approaches to portraiture, and you'll do a photographic experiment that will capture your personality on film.

**Imogen Cunningham's plant photographs—like *Magnolia Blossom* above—are considered to be portraits as much as her photos of human beings.**

*Magnolia Blossom*, 1925 © 1970.

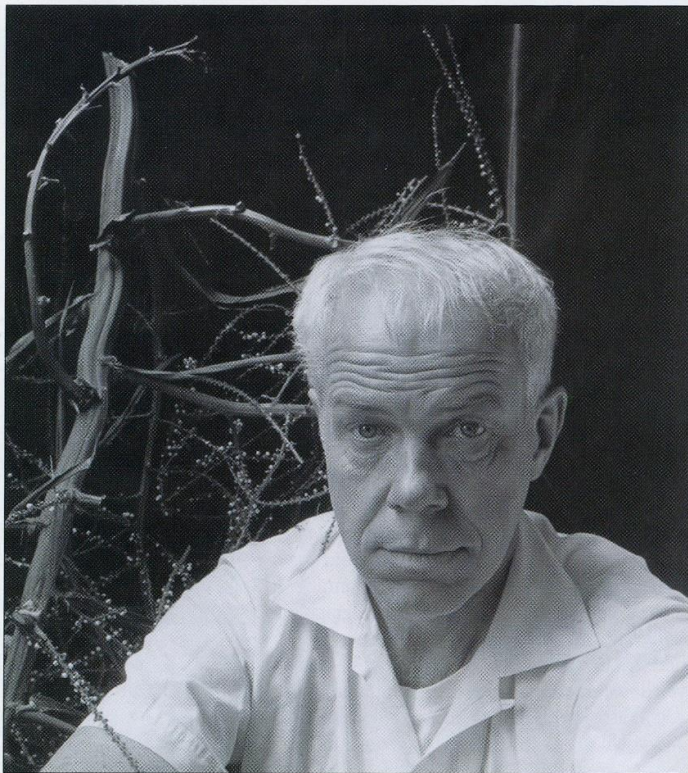


*“I don’t think there’s a formula for a fine photograph. Every person has a different idea.”*

—IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

**What did photographer Minor White (below) mean when he said, “Surfaces reveal inner states. Cameras record surfaces.”**

*Minor White, Photographer, 1963. © 1970.*



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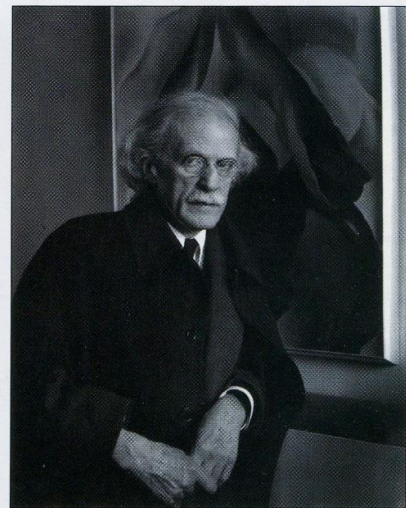
# A Photographer’s

In 1930, Imogen Cunningham was busy with her house, children, garden, and her faculty-wife activities, which included helping her husband with art exhibitions in the gallery of the college where he

taught. She was taking very few pictures, but she did meet regularly with her photographer friends. They all believed in showing the world as it was and, in 1930, they founded a photographic movement that would change the direction of West Coast photography.

Up to this time, in order to prove that photography was “art,” some photographers had tried to imitate paintings. They took pictures of idealized, costumed figures and used soft-focus lenses to get hazy, romantic effects. Many younger photographers felt that since the cam-

era was not a brush, it should not be used as a painter’s tool. What the camera did best was to select a small segment of the real world and reproduce it exactly as it appeared. This *documentary* approach was especially popular—and useful—in the United States during the early 1930s. In 1929, the stock market had crashed and millions of people were out of work. The country had entered the great Depression and people were homeless and surrounded by poverty. Only sharp, clear, straightforward images could capture the hard reality of this world.



**Imogen Cunningham said, “I was terrified when I photographed Stieglitz (above). I wanted to capture that grim little look in the eye, disliking everything and everyone.”**

*Alfred Stieglitz, Photographer, 1934. © 1970.*

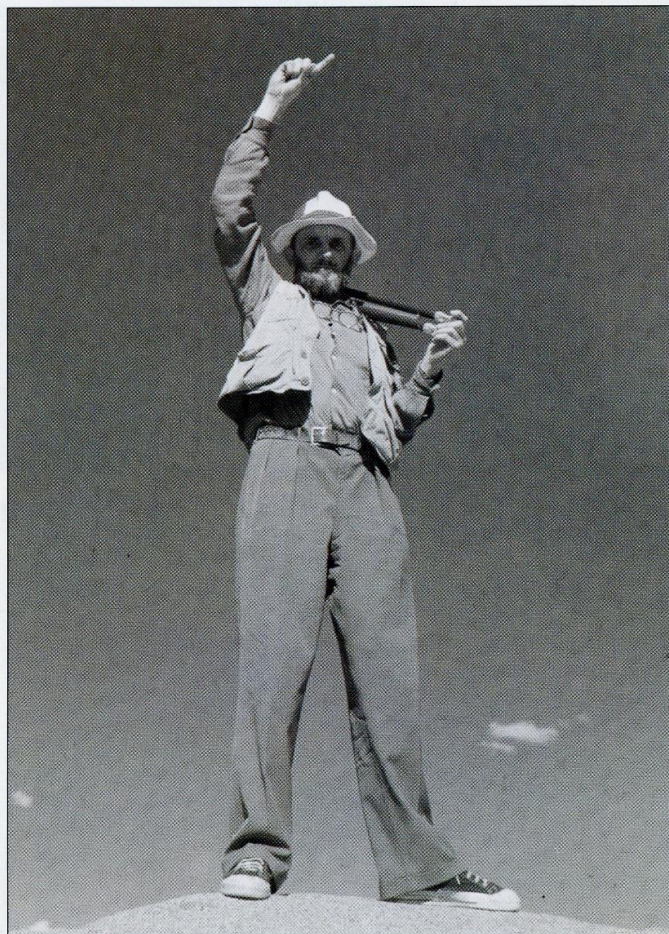


# PHOTOGRAPHER

The reaction against using the camera to make photographic "paintings" had been started earlier during the 1920s by New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz. He used his camera as a window focused on the real world, and his photographs were clear and uncompromising. In 1934, Imogen Cunningham made a portrait of this famous artist (below, center) in which she captured not only his personality but some of the qualities of his photographs. Stieglitz used **contrasts of light and dark** in his work, sometimes **spotlighting** the focal points, or most important parts of the photo. How does Cunningham do this in her portrait, and how does she emphasize the subject's face by **framing** it? Judging by this portrait, what kind of person do you think Stieglitz was? Was he jolly and outgoing or remote, austere, perhaps, as Cunningham put it, "living in a higher world"?

In 1930, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, and several other West Coast photographers began meeting to talk about photography and organize exhibitions of their prints. They called themselves the "f/64" group because they were dedicated to a "clear, honest portrayal of the real world," and they felt that the lens opening *f/64* provided the clearest, most detailed image. The group disbanded in 1935, and many of its members, like Ansel Adams (right), went on to become world famous. Adams is noted for his highly detailed photographs depicting the majesty of nature. To capture the spirit of Adams and his photos, Cunningham has photographed him from **below** which gives him a **heroic and monumental quality**. His figure **stands out against the darker, cloudless sky**, like a tree or rock might in one of his own photos. The **triangular composition** calls the viewer's attention to Adams' raised finger at the top of the picture. What kind of personality does Cunningham suggest in this portrait?

Another photographer whose work was influenced by the *f/64* group was Minor White. He wanted to use the camera as a microscope to reveal his personal thoughts and feelings, and his photos were **clearly focused** with an



emphasis on **texture and pattern**. How has Imogen Cunningham reflected all these qualities in her portrait of Minor White (far left)? Everything is in **sharp focus**, revealing details of each form's texture. Cunningham has photographed her subject from **slightly above** against a **dark, natural background**. Surrounded by thorny bushes, White peers searchingly out at us. What can you tell about this man by looking at this photographic portrait?

**Cunningham once described her portrait (above) of famous nature photographer Ansel Adams standing on a mountaintop as "Ansel getting the word from God."**

*Ansel Adams, Photographer,*  
1953. © 1970.





MASTERPIECE  
OF THE MONTH

Preview

PORTRAITS  
OF  
THE ARTISTS

*“None of us is born with the right face.  
It’s a tough job being a portrait photographer.”*

—IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

**What does the head (above) with many pairs of eyes mean?**

*A Man Ray Version of Man Ray, 1960. © 1970.*

Imogen Cunningham photographed all kinds of people, some of whom were famous and others not so well known. But all of her photographic portraits express more about her subject than just the way he/she looks. What can you tell about the four people shown on these two pages and pages 8-9? Can you find the poet? Who is a well-known dancer? Which one was a famous movie star of the time, and which one did fantastic, *surrealistic* works of art?

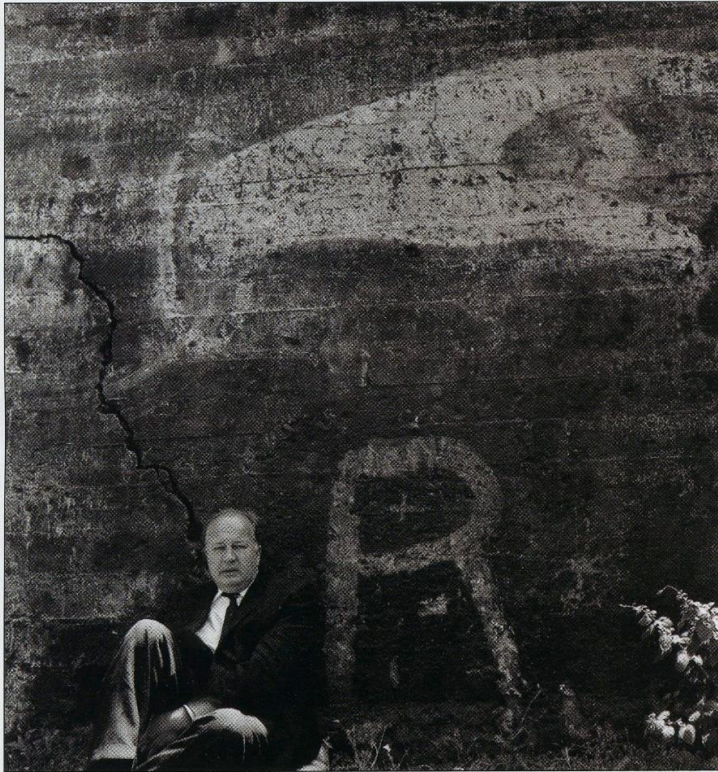
In 1931, Cunningham was assigned by *Vanity Fair* magazine to go to Hollywood to photograph well-known film stars. Every photo she’d seen of actor Cary Grant [1904-1986] had been “glamorous,” but these photos also seemed to her to be remote and somewhat inhuman. She went to the actor’s house, set up her camera, and began to take what she considered to be some very uninteresting shots. After a while, she took Grant outside to the garden. She posed him against a whitewashed wall, in the shadow of large plants. Does the actor look

glamorous in the photo below right? Does he look frightened or perhaps frightening? How does the **asymmetrical composition**—the figure on one side is **balanced** by the dark shadow on the other—add to this feeling? What might Imogen Cunningham seem to be saying about Cary Grant in her photo?

What is the first shape you notice in the photo, top right? Is it the man, or the enormous pointing hand on the wall above him? This is a portrait of American poet Theodore Roethke [ROTH-key, 1908-1963]. His figure, in the corner of the frame, is **dwarfed** by the written words he creates. In his nature poems, filled with **texture and pictorial symbolism**, the poet searches for his identity. How has Cunningham suggested Roethke’s work in this portrait? What might the giant pointing hand mean?

Can you pick out Cunningham’s portrait of the surrealist artist Man Ray [1890-1977]? The American artist was known for his strange and fantastic films, sculptures, and unusual photo-





What kind of artist do you think the man shown on the left is?

*Theodore Roethke, Poet, 1959. © 1970.*

Can you find a famous film star in the picture below?

*Cary Grant, Actor, 1932. © 1970.*

graphic effects. How has Cunningham used **repetition of multiple images to show movement**? How does this technique suggest Man Ray's films? In addition to **repeating and overlapping** her subject's face, Cunningham has heightened the distortion by using a **soft-focus** lens, so the shapes blend into one long, grotesque head. Compare Cunningham's portrait with the photo by Man Ray on page 11.

Most dance photos show the dancer's whole body. But somehow, in her photo of well-known modern dancer/choreographer Martha Graham [b.1894], Cunningham has suggested the quality of movement in a different way. This photo (pages 8-9) looks as though it was taken on stage during a performance. But it was actually made on a sunny summer day in Santa Barbara, California, where Graham was visiting her mother. Cunningham saw Graham standing against the open door of her mother's barn, put the camera close to Graham's face and had the dancer put her hands to her head. The **stark contrast of black and white, the dramatic spotlighting, and the tight cropping** capture the qualities of Martha Graham's innovative style of dance. The **diagonals** formed by the hands **frame** and bring the eye in to the **focal point**, her expressive face.

