Edward Steichen's Photograph of the Flatiron Building:

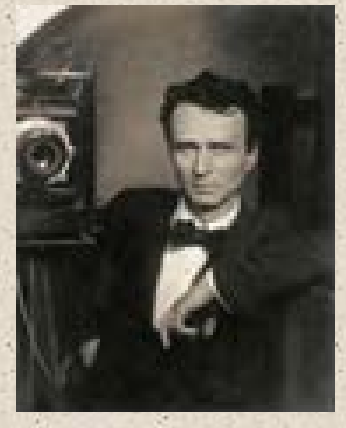
Intensity and Calm

by **David M. Bernstein**

Edward Steichen's photograph, "Flatiron Building, 1909," is iconic. As a photographer, I have always loved and admired it, but I never dreamed I could learn from it about something that troubled me very much in my life: anger. When I began to study Aesthetic Realism, I heard this statement by its founder, Eli Siegel:

> *All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.*

In a beautiful photograph, I've seen, opposites are one—and that is what we need to do to have lives and emotions we are proud of: put opposites together.



1. Logic and Emotion

As Steichen looked at the Flatiron Building his emotion was intense. At the same time, he had to think of what f/stop and shutter speed would be fairest to that relation of dark and light which occurs only at twilight; and of how to frame the composition—should the tree be in the center or on the side? How should the building meet the pavement?

Art, I learned from Aesthetic Realism, always arises from both emotion and perception: the seeing of opposites as one makes for an emotion of respect for the world. It is possible for an emotion of anger to be accompanied by a hope to respect the world. For example, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was angry that people in this country accepted slavery, and that was a beautiful, logical anger. Very often, however, anger is selfish, illogical, and destructive.

2. Intensity and Calm

Intensity in this photograph arises from contrast, and Steichen used physics and chemistry to achieve just the right relation of highlights and shadows in developing this photograph.

The deep shadows of the hansom cabs and the highlights from the glimmer of the street lamps meet the shimmering aquamarine sky. There is intensity in the drama of light and dark—muted tones and bold silhouettes. Steichen had an intense desire to be fair to what was before him, and his intensity is expressed in careful technique. In the mistiness you can see every single twig.

The intensity in this photograph is better than the intensity I usually had in life. Why? When I got angry, I habitually felt the world was against me and I had to lash out against it. And I was suspicious of people who were calm. In this photograph you feel both intensity and calm at once. There is something very quiet and still; the twigs are motionless. The rain-soaked streets are almost empty, except for the three hansom cabs and their drivers. Yet there is a feeling of excitement: the pinpoints of the streetlights become glimmering reflections; the sweeping curve of that bold branch seems to melt at the upper right. There is the sharply defined Flatiron Building with its many neat French Renaissance windows—and then the far-off haze of lower Fifth Avenue. The scene is welcoming, and at the same time there's mystery in it.

In taking this photograph, Steichen broke formal rules of composition: he placed the building in the center, which separates the foreground into different sections; he cut off the top corner of the structure, which in a sense is an attack on its wholeness. Yet we don't feel this is disrespectful—it adds to the beauty of the building. Why?

Steichen was showing that the Flatiron Building was more itself through its relation to its surroundings, not by annihilating everything else. The intensity here is about how things, in their difference, are also related. Is the building intense or calm? It is both. It stands there, quiet and beige. Above the limb of the tree the top of the building seems to loom out of the mist, like the prow of a ship cutting through haze. It is blurry, and there is something almost trembling in it. The bottom is more sharply defined: we can see almost every window. The building dissolves and rises; it is heavier at the top, where we would expect it to be light. The geometry of the Flatiron Building is exquisite and elegant: an oblong with an acute triangular shape that also has curves. It is unique, but also fits in beautifully with its surroundings. And isn't that what we want to do? Don't we want to feel that we fit in with reality without our egos interfering—that the way our bodies and thoughts meet space, objects, and other people is friendly?

3. Sharpness, Vagueness, and Depth of Field

One of the reasons we're affected by this photograph has to do with its depth of field, which is the space between the points nearest to and farthest from the camera's lens, and which also has detail reasonably sharp. Edward Steichen focused sharply on the driver of the cab in the foreground. The middle ground, which is the center of interest—the building itself—is also sharply defined. As we go into the distance, things become vague. The way objects stand out sharply and then melt makes for a feeling of intensity and calm at once. Look at the way the trunk of the young tree merges with the second cab driver, even seems to rise from his top hat, and radiates out to the building and space around it. The driver closest to the camera seems more solid than the Flatiron Building itself. The silhouettes of the three drivers—two-dimensional shapes—form a diagonal line that goes into depth. They are surface moving into depth.

Look at that branch sweeping from left to right. Many people would think of ways to eliminate it as an intruder on a serene landscape. But not Steichen. He shows that art welcomes the jutting, unexpected elements of reality and says, "Look at me, because without me you won't see the whole story." While at first glance the branch seems to be interference, it is really a unifying force in the whole composition. As it cuts across it also reaches out and joins the foreground with the background, the sky with the buildings. It shows that in order to feel pleased in life, we cannot leave out the sharp, the angular, the jutting. We have to see them in relation to the neat and smooth.

4. Momentary and Permanent

As Edward Steichen pointed his camera toward the Flatiron Building on a rainy evening in 1904, he immortalized a fleeting moment: he saw that moment as commenting on the permanent structure of reality.

Steichen took this photograph originally in black and white. Yet he worked for five years to come to the printing technique which added color, to bring out what was there with richness, using bichromate over platinum. The shimmering luminosity of platinum and the dense restfulness of gum Arabic work together for one purpose. This technique, constructed in layers of chemicals and pigment, makes for more intensity in the photograph: something evaporating and something more definitely there. It is wonderful how all this happens on a surface. The layers in the technique of Steichen's photograph are for the purpose of showing things truly, and adding to the beauty of the world.

Steichen is showing the beauty of things through their relatedness. That principle of relatedness is what Aesthetic Realism so kindly encouraged in me. "I am trying to have you see," Mr. Siegel explained, "that the note—the individual that we are—is part of the possible melody of all things; and is that melody. I'm trying to have you change from loneliness to honest melody."