JOURNEY TOWARD ABSTRACTION:
ALVIN LANGDON COBURN'S VORTOGRAPHS

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Abstract

Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966), an American-born British photographer of the late 19th and early 20th century who sought to explore the potential of modern art in the medium, eventually became the first photographer to make abstract images with the camera. In order to understand his journey to such achievement, this paper explores Coburn’s early talent, celebrated involvement in Pictorialist photography, and inspirations that led him to join the Vorticist movement. Particular focus is paid to Coburn’s career-long portraiture project and relationships with revolutionary authors, poets, and artists. Central to this analysis is *Vortograph of Ezra Pound* (ca. 1917), which can be seen as the magnum opus of his career.
In an era dominated by dreamy landscapes and portraits, art photography was in grave danger of growing stagnant, especially in comparison to painting, music, and literature, which were advancing in a flight from reality. Alvin Langdon Coburn, “a major figure in Pictorialist photography for over a decade” recognized photography’s desperate need for progression and challenged his fellow photographers “to ‘Wake Up!’ and shed the old rules of their medium, to explore the potential of modern art.”¹ The Vorticist movement, “the English variant of cubism”, consisted of a group of artists who shared Coburn’s views about the necessity of modernizing photography.² In conjunction with the Vorticists, Coburn gained credit as the first photographer to consciously construct abstract images, and created photographs such as *Vortograph of Ezra Pound* (ca. 1917), which are arguably the most profound of his career.

From a very early age, Coburn proved to be a prodigy of photography. He received his first camera, “a 4 x 5 Kodak camera with 50 exposures in it”, as a gift at the age of eight.³ Coburn picked up the photographic process quickly, learning to coat his own paper and even experimenting with techniques such as gum and glycerin. By the time he was a teenager, he “manifested a striking talent in photographic printing”.⁴ In 1898, when Coburn was fifteen, his images were already being exhibited in Boston, and thanks to the connections of his distant cousin, F. Holland Day, Coburn was able to “show his prints in London within the exhibitions of the ‘New School of American Pictorial Photography’ and the British-based Brotherhood of the Linked Ring, the two most radical movements working with photography and striving to promote it as a fine art,” at just seventeen years of age.⁵

When Coburn returned to the United States after exhibiting his work in Europe, he soon moved to New York, where he became acquainted with the newborn Photo-Secession, a “group of the most brilliant and dedicated photographers in America” including Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen,

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⁵ Branchini and Romer, *The Photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn at George Eastman House*. 
Clarence H. White, and Gertrude Käsebier, who “strived to have photography accepted as an art in its own right: each image would not be seen as a document or snapshot but as a singular object to be contemplated for the personal expression of the artist”. Coburn’s body of work, which consisted mostly of soft-focus, picturesque landscapes, fit seamlessly with the aesthetic of the Photo-Secession, who were famous for their painterly landscapes, figure-studies, and portraits, and was “elected...to membership on December 26, 1902”.

Coburn’s first one-man show was held at the Camera Club of New York in 1903. Stieglitz announced that there was “much that was original and unconventional” in his work. Coburn, however, did not let the praise go to his head. Instead, he elected to study in Käsebier’s studio, and then with Arthur Dow, a painter and friend of the Photo-Secession, in order to expand his knowledge and keep his eye sharp. Sadakichi Hartmann, a critic who went by the pseudonym Sidney Allan, commented that during this time in his career, Coburn was “beginning to see objects, insignificant in themselves in a big way”.

Coburn continued to receive acclaim for the images he created, especially when his work appeared in Camera Work, Stieglitz’s quarterly photographic journal, and he was hailed as photography’s “youngest star”. Again, Coburn humbly continued learning, studying light until its mastery when critics commented he lacked keen observation of it. Coburn was nothing if not intent on grasping every ounce of information he could about photographic methods, technique, and composition. This pursuit of knowledge certainly paid off though; Hartmann even expressed that Coburn had “a natural gift for line-and-space compositions and has solved various problems which would have set a Stieglitz or a Steichen thinking”. However, Hartmann was less fond of his portrait work, which he claimed was unsatisfactory and lacked "the gift of characterization".

Just as with the criticism about his use of light, Coburn was motivated rather than discouraged by Hartmann’s

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid, 27.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
remarks. In fact, his words sparked the inspiration for what would become a career-long project for Coburn.

Through the connections he had made in the field of photography, Coburn was able to set up portrait sittings with many of his idols, “the pioneers and advanced thinkers and artists of that time.”

12 He began by composing a list of literary figures he wished to photograph, and subsequently formulated a course of intensive reading for himself. Coburn later said of this process, “it was my practice before meeting my subjects, to saturate myself in their books so that I might previously come to know something of the inner man”.

13 Within three months of beginning his portraiture project, Coburn had already photographed seven authors and a painter, a pace that did not slow for quite some time. Coburn did face some difficulties in his project though, most of all his own “shyness and hesitation to intrude”, but was sometimes able to use this to his advantage.

14 For instance, by means of his “perfect gentle courtesy”, Coburn was able to convince George Meredith, a novelist who was said to have a fear of having his picture taken, to pose for a family portrait.

15 This was the least of Coburn's accomplishments though. In 1905, Coburn’s portraiture had become so admired that “he was commissioned by Century Magazine to do a series of portraits of American authors, including Mark Twain and Henry James.”

16 Photographer and playwright George Bernard Shaw remarked of these images that Coburn had the unique ability to adapt technique to the subject and “is not seduced by the picturesque, which is pretty cheap in photography and very tempting; he drives at the poetic, and invariably seizes something that plunges you into a mood”. Coburn certainly proved Hartmann wrong; he was able to not only create images of inner character, but excelled at the practice.

17 Meanwhile, the mission of the Photo-Secession was coming to a close. The “chief purpose for which the Photo-Secession was established [had] been accomplished—the serious recognition of

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12 Newhall, From Adams to Stieglitz: Pioneers of Modern Photography, 27.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 28.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
photography as an additional medium of pictorial expression”¹⁸ Now that that hurdle had been overcome, Coburn recognized the need for another advancement in the medium—modernization.

In 1915, Coburn organized an exhibition at the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York and the Royal Photographic Society in London that “shocked pictorialists on both sides of the Atlantic”.¹⁹ The images were chosen from Coburn’s own personal photographic collection; he showed work from Hill and Adamson, Julia Margaret Cameron, Dr. Thomas Keith, and Lewis Carroll and christened the exhibition “The Old Masters of Photography”.²⁰ The exhibition was not merely a celebration of this work, but rather a critique of the advances, or lack thereof, that the Pictorialists had made in the creation of photographic images in the last half-century.

Coburn was inspired by the emergence of the radical, avant-garde movements in painting and sculpture, and urged artists of his own medium to follow suit. Cubist artists were revolutionizing the art world with their flattened use of space and multiple views that looked as if subjects were viewed through a prism, while Futurists were creating works of art that gave the illusion of dynamic movement. Upon Coburn’s study of these modern artistic advancements, he summed up his argument as such:

It is this progress of the arts that has interested me. Where is it leading us? There are “moderns” in Painting, in Music, and in Literature...if we are alive to the spirit of our time it is these modern who interest us. They are striving, reaching out towards the future, analyzing 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 utilized 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 was the bottom!²¹

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¹⁸ Newhall, From Adams to Stieglitz: Pioneers of Modern Photography, 30.
¹⁹ Ibid, 39.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Nordström, Padon, and Luca Ackerman, TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 127.
Coburn found solace in a group of artists, authors, and musicians who shared his progressive notions and labeled themselves “Vorticists”, a term deriving from Wyndham Lewis' view of “the 'great English vortex' as the centre of a whirlpool or the eye of the storm.” Vorticism developed from Cubism and Futurism, but differed in the way it sought to capture movement in an image. Instead of merely displaying dynamic movements, Vorticism aimed to expose the inner energy of them.

Influenced by the beliefs of the Vorticists, Coburn continued on his portraiture quest, photographing Vorticist painters including Lewis, who was the founder of the movement. He also made portraits of literary contributors such as Ezra Pound. Through Pound, an American poet and critic, “Coburn found himself getting deeper and deeper into ‘the Vortex’.” During a sitting with Pound, Coburn decidedly “clamped three mirrors together in a triangle, poked his lens into it, and photographed the multiple reflections...The principle was similar to the old kaleidoscope.”

[Figure 1: Alvin Langdon Coburn, Vortograph of Ezra Pound, ca. 1917]

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24 Ibid, 40.
deemed the device the “vortoscope” and with it, Coburn made a series of images deemed “vortographs.”

The term vortograph, however, came to envelop more than just images made with the vortescopic mirror device. For Coburn, vortographs included abstract images that made use of horizontals and verticals, reflections, multiple exposures, and so on. Among the most famous of Coburn’s vortographs are his portraits of Ezra Pound, many of which consist of “a two-dimensional set of lines with...multiple exposures.”

In *Vortograph of Ezra Pound* (Figure 1), Pound’s “silhouette profile is framed by a pattern of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal beams.”

The image itself holds no deeper meaning other than highlighting the fact that the artist “no longer [needed] photograph what is in front of the camera, but [could] use one’s element of design” instead. Due to its resemblance to the fractured space Cubists dealt with, the image served as a testament of the newfound notion that the camera could produce abstract images. Even Mike Weaver, an art historian who has a partiality for detecting religious and freemasonic symbolism in photography, comments that “the vortographs represent a momentary lapse in favor of abstraction, when evoked meaning gave way to pure form.”

Although the image leaves little room for interpretation, its impact is extensive in the medium of photography and perhaps even served as the high point of Coburn’s photographic career. Through his vortographs, Coburn was able to singlehandedly bring photography up to speed with painting by creating “images along the lines of Cubism.” He was credited as “the first person to make an abstract photograph’ and his vortographs mark the moment when photography first realized its potential as an avant-garde intervention.”

Because the celebration of the vortographs was short lived at the time it was introduced, Coburn may not have instantly recognized his profound contribution to the medium. However, he

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26 Ibid.
31 Antliff and Greene, *The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World*, 90.
more than likely still felt an inner confidence in his vortographs. After all, it combined everything he had worked toward in his career into one group of photographs. Looking at Figure 1, the influence of Pictorialism, Vorticism, and Coburn’s portraiture project are evident. Coburn’s vortographs have a foundation in Pictorialist aesthetic, and were achieved through the use of the vortoscope, the device which facilitated the shift of photography into modernity. The subject matter of Figure 1 is also in connection with Coburn’s ongoing portraiture project, an endeavor he proved to have an overwhelming passion for, especially when it came to photographing literary pioneers, which Pound was. If all that weren’t enough, *Vortograph of Ezra Pound* also served as proof that Coburn had succeeded in his mission to create abstract images with the camera. As can be observed in Coburn’s past, mastering methods and techniques in photography motivated him more than anything. There’s no doubt that achieving the feat of abstraction in the medium must have pleased him greatly, despite his humble nature. Although Coburn retired from the photographic scene soon after his vortographs were created, his career’s success was paramount. As a member of the audience at an exhibition of Coburn’s vortographs once reported, “No one member could explain what Mr. Coburn was aiming at. What greater success could any modernist desire?”³²

Bibliography


