

IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

18 September 2012 – 20 January 2013



Self-Portrait with Korona View, 1933
©Imogen Cunningham Trust

- Opening:** 17 September 2012, at 8 pm
- Press conference:** **17 September 2012**
SALA CASTELLANA de MODA SHOPPING (CC. MODA SHOPPING, Avda. General Perón, 40, Madrid).
- Exhibition venue:** FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE. SALA AZCA.
General Perón, no. 40.
- Curator:** Celina Lunsford. Artistic Director,
Fotografie Forum, Frankfurt and independent curator
- Website:** www.exposicionesmapfrearte.com/cunningham

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The Instituto de Cultura of FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE is pleased to invite you to the press conference marking the opening of the *Imogen Cunningham* exhibition, at 12.00 on 17 September in Madrid. The conference will be attended by Alberto Manzano Martos, President of the FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE, Pablo Jiménez Burillo, Managing Director of the FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE Instituto de Cultura and the exhibition curator Celina Lunsford.

This major retrospective dedicated to the North American photographer Imogen Cunningham (Portland, Oregon 1883 – San Francisco, 1976) will be presented at FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE's AZCA exhibition room from 18 September 2012 – 20 January 2013.

Imogen Cunningham is regarded as a pioneer in modern photography. Organised in cooperation with La Fábrica, Madrid, this exhibition features the most complete overview of Cunningham's work presented in Europe in the last twenty years.

Imogen Cunningham was a visionary photographer. She enjoyed a long artistic career and gained considerable respect through the quality and constant innovation of her art. A tireless worker, always keen to explore the possibilities of different photographic techniques with each new project, she was a prolific and highly original artist.

The exhibition takes a fresh look at her work, examining the wide range of creative aspects that shaped her life and artistic trajectory over more than seventy years: from her early pictorialist photographs, influenced by Gertrude Käsebier, with their revealing abstract compositions of flowers and plants, to her intimate nudes and her iconic portraits of artists, dancers and actors for *Vanity Fair* magazine.

Cunningham's vast production is represented in the exhibition by a selection of two hundred photographs, some of them shown here for the first time. The prints come from organisations such as the Imogen Cunningham Trust, which has generously contributed with more than one hundred prints. This includes *Agave Design*, a unique composition that the photographer created out of four negatives in the 1920s. The show also includes important works such as *Winter in Cowan Park, Seattle (1907)*, a gum bichromate print, loaned by the George Eastman House in Rochester.

Imogen Cunningham's life, which spanned nearly one hundred years, was marked by both the historic events that took place in the United States at around the turn of the twentieth century and by the new techniques that were developed in the field of photography. Her artistic career, which was influenced by some of the most outstanding photographers of her generation, including Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, is surprising in both its length and her inexhaustible urge to experiment, as seen in the enormous variety of motifs and techniques that she used.



Self-Portrait, 1906 ©Imogen Cunningham Trust

Born in Portland, Oregon, Imogen Cunningham studied Chemistry at the University of Washington in Seattle, this being the academic subject closest to photography available in those times. She bought her first camera from a mail correspondence school in 1906 and began to practice on the university campus. This was where she took one of her best-known

self-portraits, in which she is lying nude on the grass. This image clearly reveals her artistic ability, as well as her independent spirit and precocious interest in representing the human body, an infrequent subject in those days.

After graduating, she worked in the portrait studio of the photographer Edward S. Curtis, where she learned the techniques of platinum printing and retouching negatives. In 1910, she travelled to Dresden to complete her studies at the Technische Hochschule under Robert Luther, a leading expert in photographic chemistry who proposed that she carry out a comparative study of different platinum printing methods. This academic grounding led to the publication in 1910 of her thesis, entitled *About the Self-Manufacturing of Platinum Papers for Brown Tones* ("Selbsterstellung von Platin Papieren für Braune Töne"). Cunningham's original manuscript, conserved at George Eastman House (Rochester), is presented for the first time at this exhibition.

On her return to Seattle in 1910, Cunningham opened a portrait studio. Reflecting the prestige that she was gaining amongst the local community, her first commissions came from members of high society. At the same time, she forged links with the art world and, influenced by Gertrude Käsebier, produced most of her exquisite pictorialist prints. Her expertise in developing photographs enabled her to create the most beautiful images using special filters and manual retouching. An example of this is *The Wood Beyond the World* (1912), a platinum print that, with clear symbolist influences, depicts a pastoral scene in which two female figures emerge from amongst the trees as if from some lost paradise.



The Wood Beyond the World, c. 1912
©Imogen Cunningham Trust

In 1917, having married the artist and print-maker Roi Partridge, she moved to California where her twin sons, Rondal and Padraic, were born. Although motherhood forced a temporary halt in her work, Cunningham continued to photograph her surroundings whilst also keeping abreast of the latest developments in art and photography through such magazines as *Camera Work* and *Vanity Fair*.

Returning to work in 1920, she became interested particularly in the natural environment, which she portrayed through her floral compositions. Her interest in studying form and detail reveals a truly modern vision. Eschewing the soft focus of her pictorialist beginnings, she reduces nature and complex structures to their simplest forms. An amateur botanist, Cunningham often gave scientific titles to her photographs. She constantly experimented with magnolias, callas, aloes and cacti in the garden of her home, which became her main source of inspiration. It was there that she photographed some of her best-known works, such as *Magnolia Blossom* (1925) and *Two Callas* (1925), in which we can observe how she captures a great amount of detail, using sharp focus and dramatic lighting. Such photographs remind us of Karl Blossfeldt's floral compositions

and can even be seen as a harbinger of the later work by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

Apart from this specialisation, Cunningham also felt a certain predilection for portraying the human body, which becomes a symbol of sensuality in harmony with nature. The models she portrayed most frequently were relatives, friends and other artists, whom she photographed repeatedly throughout her life. For instance, a series of portraits of her husband Roi, taken at Mount Rainier National Park (Washington), apart from challenging the social conventions of the time, presents one of the first approaches to the male nude in photography history. Her nudes also feature



Nude, 1939. ©Imogen Cunningham Trust

close-up partial views and exquisitely delicate compositions. This is achieved through her use of light and shade to portray forms in geometric spaces.

In 1929, Edward Weston invited Cunningham to take part in the exhibition *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart. Considered the first major exhibition of modern European and American photography, *Film und Foto* also featured work by the likes of Edward Steichen, Berenice Abbott and Man Ray, amongst others. Cunningham's contribution, a selection of ten works (one nude, one architectural study and eight botanical images), brought her international fame, particularly her floral compositions, known as *Pflanzenformen*, which were widely praised.

In 1932, she founded Group f/64 along with several other photographers, including Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Though short-lived – the group broke up in 1935 – f/64 permanently marked Cunningham's career, leading her to champion a clear, direct, sharp-focused photographic style characterised by great depth of field throughout her life. However, her interest in experimentation prevented her from wholly embracing the

restrictive concept of pure photography, free from all manipulation, defended by the group.



Cary Grant, actor, 1932.
©Imogen Cunningham Trust

In the 1930s, in her portraits of writers and artists, Cunningham frequently used double or multiple exposures, exposing the negative two or more times in order to superimpose images. Particularly outstanding examples of this technique include her portraits of the dancers Martha Graham and José Limón, who are represented as ethereal figures that appear to vanish amidst their own movements. Her innovative photographs soon attracted the attention of *Vanity Fair* and, following the publication a portrait of Martha Graham, Cunningham began to contribute regularly to the magazine. Between 1933

and 1936, she travelled regularly to Los Angeles and New York to portray celebrities of the time, from actors like Cary Grant, Joan Blondel and Spencer Tracy to President Herbert Hoover, as well as countless artists and dancers. In these portraits, we note that she rejects all props, seeking to characterise her subjects by capturing their psychology.

In 1946 she met Lisette Model in San Francisco. The creative style of street photography that Model practised, featuring dynamic detail and close-cropped form, influenced Cunningham and encouraged her to explore her new urban environment and the picturesque scenes she found in neighbourhoods in San Francisco and New York. She continued to cultivate this new style, which she herself defined as “stolen pictures”, until the final years in her career. Her prints are clearly influenced by the work of such photographers as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt, who scoured the streets of Paris and New York in search of artistic images.



Wooden Building, New York, 1956.
©Imogen Cunningham Trust

By the final years of her career, Cunningham was considered one of the most representative photographers of the American West Coast. In 1970, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship to print and restore some of her first photographs. Such institutions as the M. H. Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco and the Witkin Gallery of New York marked her ninetieth birthday by paying homage to the artist's long and fruitful career. In 1975, she founded the Imogen Cunningham Trust, a private institution which catalogues, researches and conserves her photographic archives. At the age of 92, after a life dedicated to photography, she embarked on her final project, a book entitled *Life After Ninety*. This featured an excellent selection of portraits of people who, like her, had reached the age of ninety or over. This work was left unfinished, as she died soon afterwards.

CATALOGUE

To mark this exhibition, the FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE has published a catalogue in Spanish and English that is intended to provide a reference for the work of Imogen Cunningham. Besides some 200 photographs illustrating a career spanning seventy years, the catalogue also contains texts by Celina Lunsford, Artistic Director for Fotografie Forum in Frankfurt and curator of the exhibition, Marisa C. Sanchez, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Seattle Art Museum, and Jamie Allen, Assistant Curator of Photographs at George Eastman House in Rochester. Their texts cast a fresh gaze over the work of the American photographer, studying her work through examples conserved at their respective museums. Finally, the catalogue is completed by a chronology and a bibliography.

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