

A.L. Coburn and E.O. Hoppé , Photographs of artists 1912-1923

Special Collections featured item for October 2005 by
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**Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1882-1966 and Emil Otto Hoppé, 1878-1972. Photographs of
artists 1912-1923**

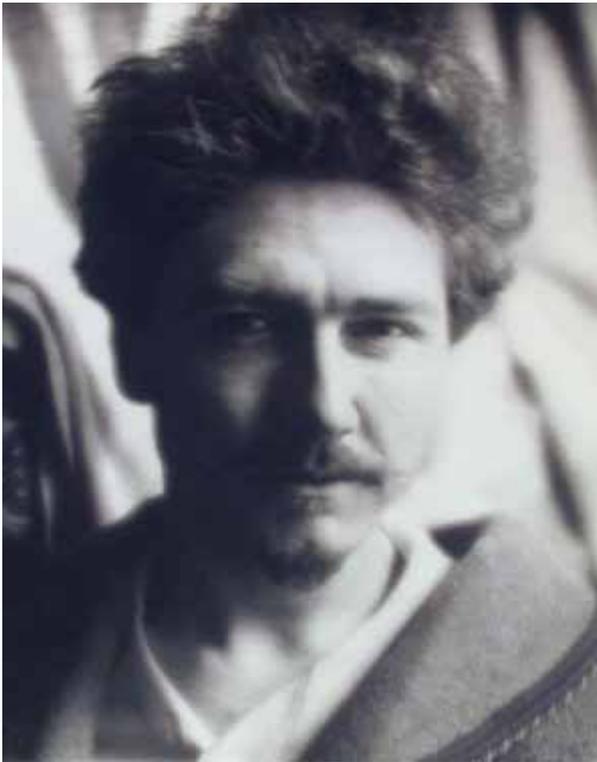
**Selected from material held in the Coburn Collection, University of Reading Library
Archives**

A. L.Coburn and E.O. Hoppé were contemporaries who both in their different ways advanced the art of photography. They were intimately involved in the artistic movements of their times, both photographed many of their fellow-artists and often shared subjects.

Alvin Langdon Coburn

Alvin Langdon Coburn, shown here in a portrait by Max Weber owned by Reading University, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1882. He started taking photographs at the age of eight and by the time he was 15 had exhibited his work in Boston. From 1899 to 1912 he worked and travelled between America and Britain but after his marriage in 1912 he settled in Britain permanently. His work concentrated on landscapes and portraits, particularly of creative people. He produced both prints for exhibitions and finely produced books of photogravures.





In October 1913 Coburn photographed 'that brilliant and truculent figure' Ezra Pound, who had recently defined the Imagist movement in poetry and was soon to champion Vorticism, the English variant of Cubism. 'And then there was Ezra Pound!' wrote Coburn in *More Men of Mark*, 1922. 'But why do I speak of him in the past tense? Is not our Ezra always with us? At almost any private view of the very latest thing in Super-Modern Art are not his Leonine Mane and Large Lapis Coat Buttons to be found at the very heart and centre of the Vortex? ... our Ezra is a fine fellow - a terrible adversary, but a staunch friend'.

Vorticism

Ezra Pound (1885-1972), the controversial American-born poet, was at the beginning of his career and out to make a name for himself when he coined the term Vorticism early in 1914. The movement's arrival was announced with great vigour in the first issue of *Blast*, July 1914, edited by Wyndham Lewis. The Vorticist manifesto claimed that 'we are Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World ... a movement towards art and imagination could burst up here, from this lump of compressed life, with more force than anywhere else'. The aim of the movement was to 'Blast years 1837 to 1900' and liberate art from the influence of the past. This was to be done primarily through painting and sculpture but also through writing and photography. The most prominent members of the group were the writers Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, the painters Edward Wadsworth and William Roberts, and the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, with Coburn being the only photographer.

Vortographs

Coburn invented the Vortoscope late in 1916 by binding together three of Ezra Pound's shaving mirrors and rigging them below a kind of glass light table. The mirrors acted as a prism splitting the image formed by the lens into segments which Coburn then used to produce his vortographs. The objects he photographed were usually bits of wood and crystals and even Ezra Pound himself. In 1917 Coburn held a one man show at the Camera Club in London where he showed thirteen paintings and eighteen vortographs, one of which is shown below. In Ezra Pound's preface to the catalogue he said 'The Vortoscope freed photography from the material limitations of depicting recognisable natural objects. By its use the photographer can create beautiful arrangements of form for their own sake'. They have taken their place in the history of abstract photography with Man Ray's Rayographs and the light experiments of Moholy-Nagy.

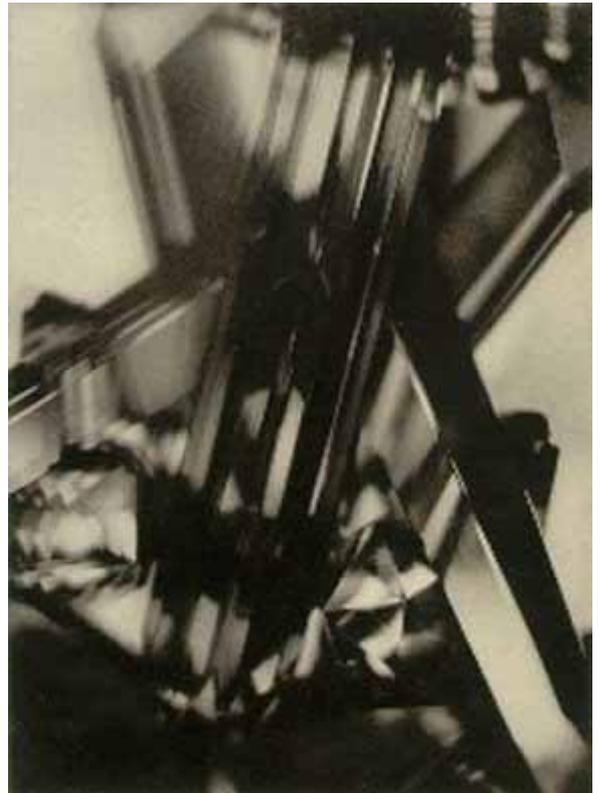
'Why should not perspective be studied from angles hitherto neglected or unobserved? Why, I ask you earnestly, need we go on making commonplace little exposures of subjects that may be sorted into groups of landscapes, portraits, and figure studies? Think of the joy of doing something which it would be impossible to classify, or to tell which was the top and which the bottom! [A.L. Coburn, "The Future of Pictorial Photography" Photograms of the Year (1916)].

Symbolism

Coburn believed that the task of the photographer was to reflect the spiritual and material side of his subjects and in order to do this he saturated himself in the subject's books 'so that I might previously come to know something of the inner man.' This was to enable a recognising of something previously unknown, as Coburn felt that recognition was the discovery of something already embedded in the mind. The technical means that Coburn used to achieve non-realistic effects expressive of an ideal vision were soft focus lenses and platinum printing to produce clarity without sharpness and softness without fuzziness. 'I have studied my men and their works with enthusiasm, and in each instance I have tried to catch and record the elusive something that differentiates a man of talent from his fellows and makes life worth while, worth struggling with towards ever greater understanding.' *Men of Mark*, 1913.

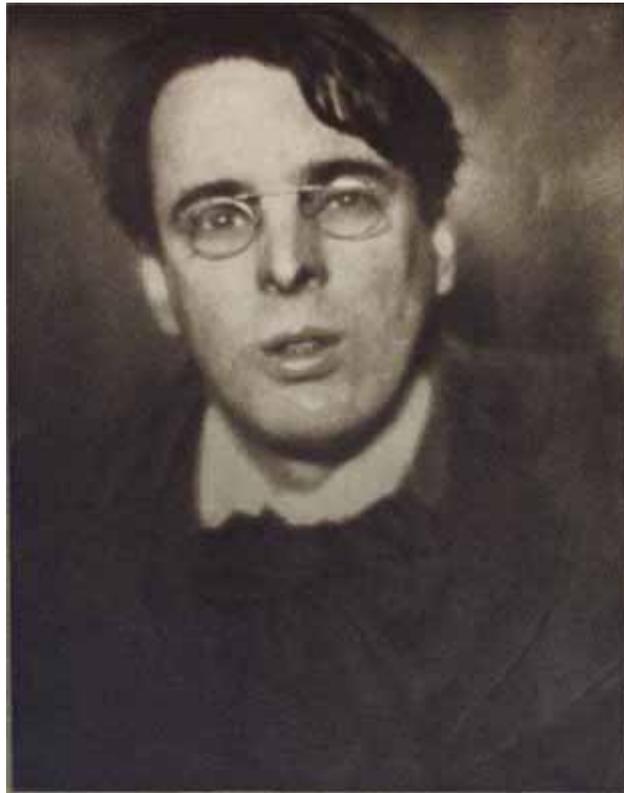
It was in 1905 at the beginning of his career that Coburn first photographed the American author Mark Twain (1835-1910). Coburn described Twain as 'looking, with his wealth of flowing white hair, the real old lion he was.'

This photograph was taken at Twain's house in Connecticut three years later in 1908. Coburn took numerous photographs of the writer both inside his house and outside near a pergola, but of this print Twain wrote 'This is the best yet.'



Coburn met the poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) at a dinner party given by Lady Gregory in 1908. Coburn sat across the table from Yeats and was mesmerised when the writer recited lines of his own verse for the gathering.

The next morning Coburn shot this portrait. He asked Yeats to recite his poetry once again so that Coburn could capture his 'speaking likeness.' Coburn noted that Yeats 'seemed hardly conscious of the people when he spoke'. The result is a perfect impression of the poet in action.



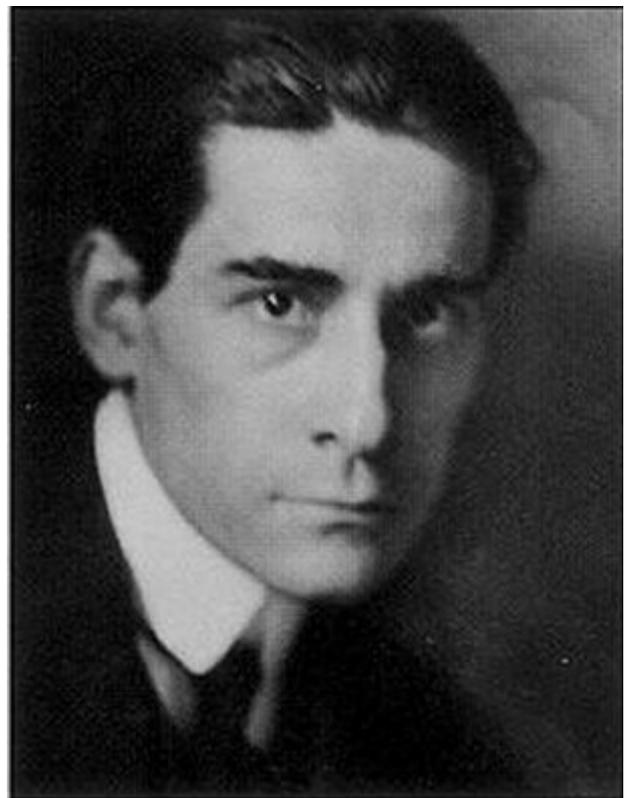
Coburn visited the distinguished novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) at his home, Max Gate, in Dorchester, Dorset, in October 1913. As well as several head and shoulder portraits taken inside Coburn took this full length picture of Hardy standing outside the house which he had designed and which was so important to his work.

Coburn continued his experimental work and the Royal Photographic Society gave him one-man shows in 1924 and 1927. However in 1930 Coburn moved with his wife to live in Wales. Already a mason, here he became a lay reader in the Church of Wales and began to study and compare religions, pursuing mysticism ardently with the same passion he had taken his photographs.

Gradually Coburn sank into obscurity as a photographer although towards the end of his life interest in his work began to revive. He had another show at the Royal Photographic Society in 1957. Then in 1961 D.J.Gordon, Professor of English at Reading University, while assembling portraits of W. B. Yeats for an exhibition, came across the work of Coburn, found out that he was still alive and contacted him, then brought him up to Reading for the opening of the exhibition, which continued the process of revival. Coburn died at his home in Colwyn Bay in 1966.

Emil Otto Hoppé

Hoppé, seen here in a self portrait taken in 1909, was born in Munich in 1878 and moved to London in 1900. In 1903 he was given a camera and in 1907 became a member of the Royal Photographic Society. After winning £100 in a photographic competition he resigned his bank job and opened a portrait studio, then in 1910 he co-founded the London Salon of Photography. Hoppé established himself as a theatre, fashion and portrait photographer publishing work in *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and the *Illustrated London News* among others.



Hoppé's style was very informal by the standards of the time and, encouraged by the success of his portrait of George V and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace, Hoppé went on to photograph world leaders such as the Italian leader Mussolini and Calvin Coolidge, the American president, as well as assorted world royalty. His subjects also included many important artists and thinkers – Albert Einstein, George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy and Ezra Pound.

Hoppé did not use stage props typical of the time but dramatized faces and personalities with strong lighting and unconventional poses, the sitter's face often occupying most of the image; 'character rather than flattery [was] the dominant note'. Hoppé once said of his aesthetic mission 'To confirm the spirit behind the eyes is the test'. This photograph of Ezra Pound is undated but was probably taken at a similar time to the Coburn photograph.

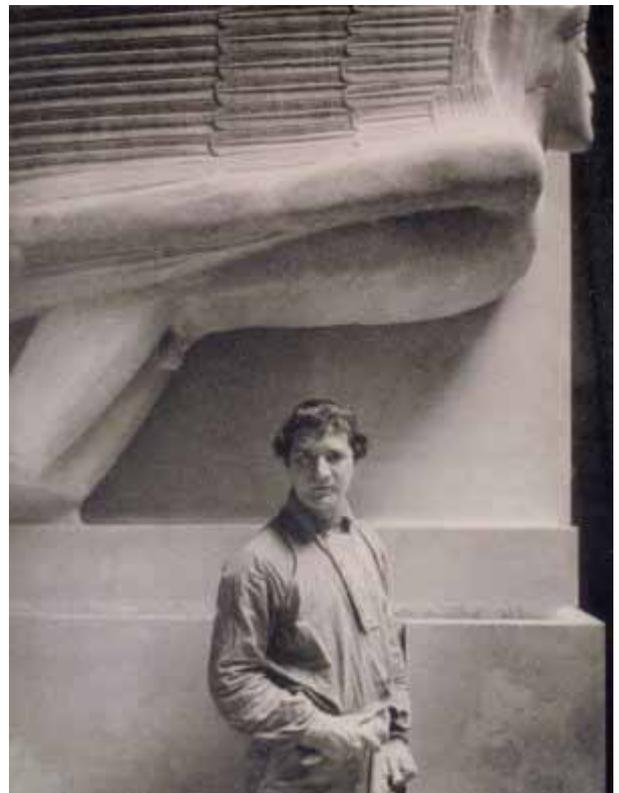


This photograph of Thomas Hardy was taken in his study at Max Gate and may be compared with the photograph by Coburn.

Tamara Karsavina, ballet dancer, was born in St Petersburg in 1885. She was invited to dance with Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris in the ballets choreographed by Michel Fokine who created the title role of a powerful and exotic bird in *The Firebird* for her in 1910. In her book *Theatre Street: The Reminiscences of Tamara Karsavina*, Heinemann 1930, she said it was 'perhaps the most wonderful part I ever had'. Karsavina finally left Russia for England in 1918 though she continued touring very successfully in Europe and America. She died in 1972.



This striking portrait of the sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) was taken in his London studio in 1912 in front of his monument for Oscar Wilde's tomb in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. The stone sculpture, on which Epstein had been working for three years, was inspired by Assyrian tomb carvings seen in the British Museum and bears an inscription from Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.



In his later years Hoppé travelled widely abroad, photographing urban environments and landscapes as well as portraits. He published his work extensively and also ran a picture agency. Like Coburn, Hoppé was a significant figure in the history of photography, so much so that on his death in Hampshire in 1972 Cecil Beaton referred to him simply as ‘the Master’.

References

- Howe, Graham, 'Hoppé, Emil Otto (1878-1972)' [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#). [Accessed 18/10/2005]
- Weaver, Mike, 'Coburn, Alvin Langdon (1882-1966)' [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#). [Accessed 18/10/2005]
- [National Museum of Photography, Film and Television](#)

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