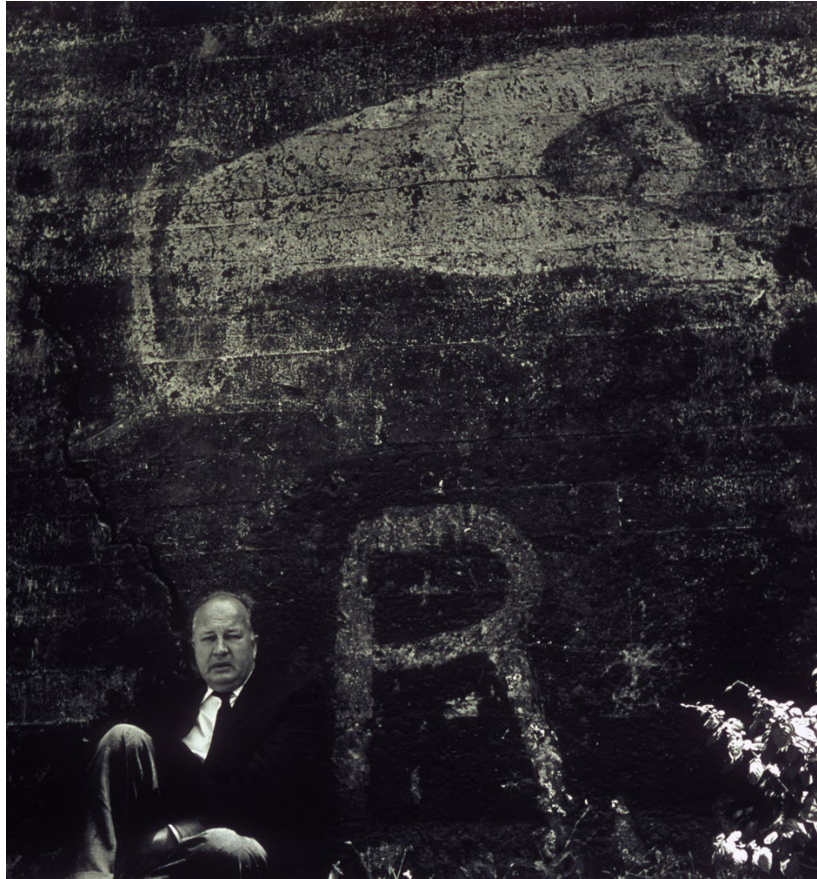


SPOTLIGHT: Imogene Cunningham

Title of Piece: Theodore Roethke



El Presenter: Claudia Lapp

Date: March 17, 2009

Title of Piece: Theodore Roethke

Year created: 1959

Artist: Imogene Cunningham

Five essential aspects of this work of art:

1. Among the prolific oeuvre of Imogen Cunningham, several genres predominate: still life (flowers and plants, bedroom scenes with swirled sheets); reflections and multiple images (as in storefront display windows); landscapes (often urban) and portraits, including self-portraits and many nudes. She is probably best known for portraits of ordinary people and celebrities (many in Vanity Fair) which include artists, performers, her husband Roi Partridge (an etcher) and her family. She loved to photograph hands. This image of American poet and teacher Theodore Roethke (1908-63) was taken in 1959, four years before his untimely death, on Bainbridge Island, WA.
2. Like the JSMA's photo by Cunningham of artist Morris Graves (the poet and Graves were friends) this portrait was taken outdoors with a backdrop that may provide clues about the subject's

psyche. He suffered from periodic mental breakdowns (manic depression) which threatened his survival in the academic world (he taught at Bennington College and the U of Washington). He took refuge in alcohol. . . and in a fierce devotion to teaching and poetry. *The Far Field* was published posthumously by his wife. “Art is our defense against hysteria and death.” He wrote in his notebook.

3. To Ansel Adams (1902-84) Imogen was a dear friend and respected colleague. She was one of the cofounders of Group f/64, which included Edward Weston and Minor White (1908-76). Their first group show was in 1932. Their goal was to present “straight photography” an art form in its own right, independent of conventions and aesthetics of other art forms.
4. This portrait of Roethke belongs in the context of modern photography, one of the most recent of art forms. The work of photographers like Cunningham has helped to create popular acceptance of this form as a valid art, above and beyond documentary and commercial uses. She was a pioneer in the field. In 1909 she traveled to Dresden, Germany to study art. She worked for Edward Curtis in Seattle after her graduation. She managed to find time for photographs even while raising four sons.
5. In Theodore Roethke, Cunningham gives us much more than a snapshot or Polaroid. Her choice of backdrop, posture of the subject (on the ground, leaning against the wall) and facial expression (masklike) raises questions that are left unanswered.

Possible questions to use when discussing this piece with museum visitors:

1. What details are unusual in this portrait?
2. How kind of emotion or mood is shown in the man’s face?
3. Does the letter R or the giant hand painted on the wall tell us anything about the person? Is there a message?
4. Does the photograph give us any clues about the man’s occupation?
5. Do you think this photograph would be used for publicity purpose, or is it one of a private view? Why?

Tour Type: Learning to Look; People, Portraits, and Places

JSMA Collection:

<https://jsmacollection.uoregon.edu/mwebcgi/mweb?request=record;id=12917;type=101>