

News Release

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V&A acquires major works by 20th century pioneer Paul Strand

Paul Strand: Photography and Film for the 20th Century

19 March – 3 July 2016

Supported by the American Friends of the V&A

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Ahead of the first UK retrospective on Paul Strand in over 40 years, the V&A has acquired nine rare photographs from the pioneering 20th century photographer's only UK-based series. Taken in 1954 in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, the photographs document the threat to traditional Gaelic life during the Cold War. The photographs will be unveiled for the first time together as part of the exhibition, *Paul Strand: Photography and Film for the 20th Century*, opening 19 March.

Paul Strand defined the way fine art and documentary photography is understood and practiced today through his revolutionary experiments with the medium. The major acquisition, purchased for the V&A with the assistance of its Photographs Acquisition Group, comprise an intimate set of nine exquisite black and white vintage prints originally made for Strand's photobook *Tir A'Mhurain* ('Land of Bent Grass').

A committed Marxist, Strand fled McCarthyism in the U.S. in 1950, pursued by the FBI. He settled in France, and carried out work there and in Italy before arriving on the Hebridean island of South Uist in 1954. Inspired by a BBC radio programme on Gaelic song, and news that the island would become home to a testing range for America's new nuclear missile, Strand raced to capture the sights, sounds and textures of the place steeped in the threatened traditions of Gaelic language, fishing and agricultural life of pre-Industrial times. The photographs reveal Strand's meticulous and methodical approach to photography, much like a studio photographer in the open air. They capture not only a pivotal moment in time, but also the end of a particular way of life for the islanders.

The acquisition encompasses four portraits of islanders staring directly at the camera, exuding strength and dignity. Each was photographed in their own environment, usually in or around

their home, and is framed by weathered walls, doors or window frames – devices used often by Strand and borrowed from his 19th century photographic heroes David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. The V&A has also acquired five of Strand's evocative landscapes, revealing the island's reliance on the land and sea.

John MacLellan was eight years' old when he was photographed by Strand with his two sisters for the picture *Milly, John and Jean MacLellan, South Uist*. Of the experience, he said: *"I was very young when I met Strand, but I knew he must have been a serious photographer because of the quality of his camera. Me and my sisters were lined up and knew to look at the camera. Looking at the picture, my mother had combed our hair and dressed us in our smartest clothes. I've since read that Strand was motivated to take these photographs by the idea that things would change. I know so many people in the photographs, it's wonderful to be able to look at them now and remember the place I used to call home."*

Martin Barnes, Senior Curator of Photographs at the V&A said: *"The photographs made by Strand in the Hebrides are for me a high point in his long and distinguished career. Strand worked slowly yet deliberately and with great poise in his pictures. By this time, his vision for his work had fully matured. His approach to sequencing and editing images in books such as 'Tir A'Mhurain' was informed by his collaborative experience making films for over twenty years. The Scottish book contains establishing panoramas of landscapes and the sea, a cast of characters with memorable faces, details of homes and workplaces and close-ups of the rocks, sands and grasses of the natural environment. The accompanying text by Basil Davidson is eloquent and informative about life on the islands, both in the past and at a pivotal time in the 1950s. The whole is a subtle sequence of meditative, revealing pictures and texts that avoid sentimentality and are yet full of empathy. These pictures make a surprising British link with this major American Modernist photographer and will have a satisfying legacy as part of the permanent collection at the V&A."*

Strand is an important figure in the history of photography not only because his career spanned much of the 20th century, but because he relentlessly trialled and pioneered myriad photographic approaches, subjects and technologies. Ironically it was his variety and failure to coin a signature style, and his belief in the integrity of the photographic print as an original artwork, that have seen him increasingly overlooked in the 40 years since his death. The V&A's exhibition seeks to redress the balance, covering all aspects of Strand's long career, from his trailblazing experiments in abstraction and dynamic views of New York in the 1910s to his final intimate pictures of his home and garden in France made during the 1970s.

The V&A is home to the oldest museum photography collection in the world. Designated as the UK's National Collection of the Art of Photography, it spans the whole history of the

medium. The nine newly acquired photographs join the V&A's significant Strand holdings, including vintage prints, portfolios and first edition photobooks, the majority of which were collected during the photographer's lifetime.

- ENDS -

Notes to Editors

- Admission £9 (concessions available). V&A Members go free. Advance booking is advised – this can be done in person at the V&A; online at vam.ac.uk/paulstrand; or by calling 0800 912 6961 (booking fee applies)
- *Paul Strand: Photography and Film for the 20th Century* is part of an international tour organised by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in collaboration with Fundación MAPFRE and made possible by the Terra Foundation for American Art. It is curated by Peter Barberie, the Brodsky Curator of Photographs, Alfred Stieglitz Center at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with the assistance of Amanda N. Bock, Lynne and Harold Honickman Assistant Curator of Photographs
- The exhibition is adapted for the V&A by Martin Barnes, Senior Curator of Photography, V&A
- The exhibition is accompanied by a substantial scholarly catalogue, *Paul Strand: Master of Modern Photography*, published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in collaboration with Fundación MAPFRE; it is distributed in the trade by Yale University Press. The publication was supported by Lynne and Harold Honickman and The Andrew W. Mellon Fund for Scholarly Publications at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging the exhibition supporters, the American Friends of the V&A.

About the American Friends of the V&A

The American Friends of the V&A was incorporated in 1984 and has traditionally supported London's Victoria and Albert Museum. The AFV&A works to strengthen the Museum's international presence and encourage the American public to engage with this leading cultural institution. The AFV&A are delighted to be supporting *Paul Strand: Photography and Film for the 20th Century*. www.afvam.org

For further PRESS information about *Paul Strand: Photography and Film for the 20th Century* please contact Laura Mitchell in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2503 or email l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk (not for publication).

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk



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