



Edward Steichen
American, 1879 - 1973

Le Tournesol (The Sunflower)

c. 1920

tempera and oil on canvas

overall: 92.1 x 81.9 cm (36 1/4 x 32 1/4 in.)

framed: 95.9 x 85.9 x 2.4 cm (37 3/4 x 33 13/16 x 15/16 in.)

Inscription: on stretcher: Edward J. Steichen / Voulangis par Crécy-en-Brie S. et M.
/ (Agént Lucien Foinet 19 rue Vavin)

Gift of the Collectors Committee 1999.43.1

© Estate of Edward Steichen

ENTRY

During the first half of his career, Edward Steichen was the leading exemplar of the painter/photographer in the group of artists who gathered around Alfred Stieglitz in New York. Steichen's early tonalist paintings correspond with the evocative pictorialist style of his photographs. Devoting himself to both disciplines, Steichen promoted photography as a fine art equal to painting at a time when photography's status as an art form was still questioned by many.

After pioneering the use of aerial photography for the army during World War I, Steichen suffered bouts of depression, endured a bitter divorce, and faced serious financial challenges. Seeking solace, he returned intermittently to his beloved house and garden in Voulangis, France. In 1923 Steichen burned his backlog of paintings there in a bonfire and abandoned the medium to pursue a lucrative career in commercial photography with Condé Nast. In doing so, Steichen distanced himself from his mentor Stieglitz, who continued to explore the relationship between painting and photography and to disdain popular, commercial art.

While the numerous accounts of Steichen's life during the 1920s provided by himself, by his great friend and brother-in-law the poet Carl Sandburg, and by many other scholars and commentators vary somewhat, the sequence of events surrounding the making of *Le Tournesol* is quite well documented. [1] After his

official discharge from the army on October 31, 1919, Steichen traveled to Paris, where he wrote to Stieglitz about the abysmal state of the contemporary art world there. By the spring of 1920, Steichen was ensconced in Voulangis and had set about putting the war behind him by energetically engaging in a number of interrelated activities. He tended his magnificent garden, cultivated, painted, and photographed sunflowers, and delved deeply into a variety of complex theories purporting to explain the universal rule of ratios and measurements known as the Golden Section or Golden Measure.

In the spring of 1921, Steichen’s idyll was interrupted when he was summoned back to the United States in response to a lawsuit filed by his estranged wife, Clara. Relying on money he had earned in New York from portrait commissions, Steichen was again living in Voulangis that fall. A year later, soon after his divorce had been finalized and just as *Le Tournesol* went on view from November 1 to December 17, 1922, at the Salon d’Automne in Paris, Steichen, burdened by alimony payments and other debts, embarked for New York in search of more stable sources of income. In March 1923, Condé Nast hired him as chief photographer for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* at the then extraordinary sum of \$35,000 a year.

On assignment for *Vogue* in France in late 1923, Steichen made the fateful decision to destroy all his paintings in Voulangis. Back in New York, he soon slashed and threw out the paintings he had stored there as well. Fortunately, however, by that time Steichen had already given *Le Tournesol* to his friend, the noted artist and furniture and interior designer, Francis Jourdain. Executed in a startling, hard-edged modernist style, it is the only finished canvas of its kind to survive from this volatile period in Steichen’s personal and creative life.

Steichen recalled his time in Voulangis following the trauma of the war as “three of the most productive years of my life.” [2] The variety and depth of the interests that animate *Le Tournesol* confirm this. Exploring the sunflowers he grew in his garden with his camera and with his brush, Steichen, with “deep, earnest soul-searching,” pursued “a feeling that, perhaps, in the field of art, there might be some way of making an affirmative contribution to life.” [3] His goal was nothing less than understanding the relation of nature to art:

I set out to try to understand nature’s discipline. I decided to make a study of the ratio of plant growth and structure. . . . I found some form of the spiral in the most succulent plants and in certain flowers,

particularly in the seed pods of the sunflower, of which I had made so many photographic studies. I decided there must be a relationship between all these things and what had been known for a long time as the Golden Section, or Golden Measure: the proportion of the extreme and mean ratio. [4]

Perhaps the most vivid expression of Steichen's ambition to synthesize horticulture, photography, and painting is the circular burst of yellow in *Le Tournesol* that simultaneously evokes the sun, the sunflower, and flash photography.

In addition to Steichen's many photographs of sunflowers, there are at least three works, all in the National Gallery of Art collection, that are directly related to *Le Tournesol*: a pencil sketch [fig. 1], a tempera and oil study on canvas [fig. 2], and a small tempera on paperboard [fig. 3]. [5] The pencil sketch shows Steichen exploring the shifting contours and the expanding and contracting volumes suggested to him by the essentially female vase form. The tempera-and-oil study contains recognizable leaves—the only explicit plant imagery found in any of the sunflower works. These are in turn set against a backdrop of rectangular forms that overlap and cut across each other in ambiguous ways. In this case, Steichen appears to have intentionally represented the iconic, swelling form of the vase not by modeling it in tempera, but instead by leaving the relevant portion of the ground of the painting untouched, allowing negative space to take on positive form. [6] Finally, the small tempera on paperboard, *Rabbit*, shares the two long-ear forms that protrude from the top of the circle in *Study for Le Tournesol*. However, in this instance its rectangles are more rationally divided and symmetrically arranged in contrast to the curving, stylized shapes of the vase and sunflower. The scale and medium of *Rabbit*, as well as its metamorphic qualities, are further related to Steichen's contemporary illustrations for an unrealized children's book about an imaginary land inhabited by fanciful creatures called Oochens. Like *Le Tournesol*, the Oochens' stark geometries were also inspired by the artist's fascination with the Golden Section. [7]

Le Tournesol's vibrant color, sharp lines, pristine forms, and carefully calibrated, dynamic design place Steichen among the vanguard of American artists, most notably Charles Sheeler (American, 1883 - 1965), Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887 - 1986), and Charles Demuth (American, 1883 - 1935), who practiced the modernist style of the 1920s that would come to be known as precisionism. *Le Tournesol* also

reflects Steichen's firsthand knowledge of contemporary developments in European art and the emphasis on machine aesthetics in the work of painters such as Fernand Léger (French, 1881 - 1955) and Francis Picabia (French, 1879 - 1953). Steichen was, moreover, personally and directly inspired by the sculptures of his close friend, the Romanian artist Constantin Brâncuși (Romanian, 1876 - 1957). Steichen had acquired and installed Brancusi's magnificent bronze *Maiistra* [fig. 4] in his garden at Voulangis in 1913, the year before World War I erupted in Europe. [8] Perhaps in an attempt to resurrect the brighter outlook of the prewar era, in *Le Tournesol* Steichen has skillfully translated the language of sculpture into the idiom of painting with the golden patina, glowing polished surface, and ovoid body of Brancusi's bronze bird becoming the brilliant color, radiating light, and expanding shapes of Steichen's painted vase and sunflower.

Le Tournesol presents art historians with the unusual and puzzling case of a prominent painter creating what is arguably his most original and significant achievement at the very moment that he decided to forego painting for photography. Because Steichen destroyed so many of his canvases and stopped painting soon after completing *Le Tournesol*, this remarkable work, instead of clearly initiating a new path in Steichen's painting career, heralds its demise. Addressing this ambivalent ending, in 1929 Sandburg observed: "So now he could be surer of himself when saying, 'I'm through with painting'—though he knew the Oochuns [*sic*] might be laughing at him." [9]

Charles Brock

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Edward Steichen, *Untitled (Preliminary Study for "Le Tournesol")*, c. 1920, graphite on paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Francesca Calderone-Steichen



fig. 2 Edward Steichen, *Study for "Le Tournesol (The Sunflower)"*, c. 1920, tempera and oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Joanna T. Steichen



fig. 3 Edward Steichen, *Rabbit (Le Tournesol)*, c. 1920, tempera, metallic paint, and graphite on paperboard, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Joanna T. Steichen



fig. 4 Constantin Brancusi, *Maastra*, 1911, bronze on limestone base, Tate Gallery, London. Image: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

[1] The most salient accounts are: Carl Sandburg, *Steichen: The Photographer* (New York, 1929), 36–45; Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York, 1963), n. p.; Anne Cohen DePietro, “The Paintings of Eduard Steichen,”

in *The Paintings of Eduard Steichen* (Huntington, NY, 1985), 19, 39–42; Mary Ann Goley, “From Tonalism to Modernism: The Paintings of Eduard J. Steichen,” in *The Paintings of Eduard J. Steichen: From Tonalism to Modernism* (Cleveland, OH, 1988), 21–23; Patricia Johnston, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen’s Advertising Photography* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 22–24; Joanna Steichen, *Steichen’s Legacy: Photographs, 1895–1973* (New York, 2000), xx, 265–267; Barbara Haskell, *Edward Steichen* (New York, 2000), 27–29; William A. Ewing and Todd Brandow, eds., *Edward Steichen: In High Fashion: The Conde Nast Years, 1923–1937* (New York, 2008), 19–20; and Todd Brandow and William A. Ewing, *Edward Steichen: Lives in Photography* (Minneapolis, MN, 2008). The primary source for Steichen studies is the Steichen Archive at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

- [2] Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York, 1963), n. p.
- [3] Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York, 1963), n. p.
- [4] Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York, 1963), n. p.
- [5] Among the series *Sunflowers from Seed to Seed*, executed by Steichen from 1920 to 1961, the work most directly related to *Le Tournesol* is *Sunflower in a White Vase*. The image is reproduced in Joanna Steichen, *Steichen’s Legacy: Photographs, 1895–1973* (New York, 2000), pl. 304.
- [6] Steichen’s intent is not entirely clear. He may also have been holding the ground in reserve to apply metallic leaf or a metallic paint of some kind, media he had used in other works.
- [7] The fifteen Oochens are all owned by the National Gallery of Art: Mushton Shlushley, the Lyric Poet and Aestheticurean, The Pup-Who-Sacrificed-a-Piece-of-His-Head-So-He’d-Have-a-Tail-to-Wag, Madame X and Johnny Marine, The Pink-Faced Politician, Khor, the President of the Oochen Republic, Thinkrates, the Philosopher, Khor, in His House on Top of the World, The Colossal Deep Sea Ludicrocerous, The Cinnamon Bun B’Ar Stalking the Dish of Fruit Bush, The Radio Gull, The Lugubrious Mysterious Midnight Hour Phantom Green Cheese Moon, The Peeping Gagaboo, The Pie-Faced Squilk and Her Pink-Nosed Neighbor, The-Duck, and The Golden Meadowlark.
- [8] On the Brancusi *Maiastra* installed at Voulangis, see Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery’s Collection of Modern Art Other Than Works by British Artists* (London, 1981), 71–73.
- [9] Carl Sandburg, *Steichen: The Photographer* (New York, 1929), 45.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, light-weight, pre-primed linen that is still attached to the original six-member, keyable stretcher, and therefore the work is still at its original dimensions. A good amount of this canvas is wrapped around to the back of the stretcher and stapled. The support is unlined, but there are seven small, thin, linen patches glued to the reverse with animal glue to support small tears and punctures. The paint is applied in a geometric pattern laid out by a precise pencil drawing; the pencil lines are visible in some places at the edges of these shapes. Infrared examination shows the full extent of this drawing. [1] The paint within these lines is of a more or less uniform medium thickness that is very opaque. However, the artist's brushstrokes within the solid color passages still create some nuance, particularly in the alizarin shape in the lower left. The painting appears to be executed in both oil and tempera media, but no analysis has been done. According to the Gallery's conservation files, the painting was treated in 1985. The conservation report for this treatment states that distortions in the canvas were pressed out and tears were repaired. Because there was a considerable amount of very fragile lifting and flaking paint, the work was treated again in 2002. In this treatment, the flaking paint was consolidated, the painting was cleaned of a good deal of overpaint, and losses were filled and inpainted. The original strip frame applied by the artist received a similar treatment at this time. Although the painting was well conserved in this later treatment, some light scuffs and other marks are still visible on the surface. These are likely the result of the poor storage conditions that led to the distortions removed during the 1985 treatment. There is no varnish coating on the painting.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Gift c. 1920/1922 from the artist to Francis Jourdain [1876-1958], France; by descent in his family; acquired 1985 by (Robert Miller Gallery, New York);[1] purchased 18 May 1999 by NGA.

[1] Provenance provided by Robert Miller.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1922 Salon d'Automne, Paris, 1922, no. 2163, as Tournesol.

1988 From Tonalism to Modernism: The Paintings of Eduard J. Steichen, Federal Reserve System, Washington, D.C., 1988, no. 34, repro., as Le Tournesol.

1999 The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–2000. Part I, 1900–1950, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1999, not in catalogue.

2000 Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000–2001, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2018 America's Cool Modernism: O'Keeffe to Hopper, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 2018.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1985 *The Paintings of Eduard Steichen*. Exh. cat. The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, New York, 1985: 41, repro. 39.
- 1997 Niven, Penelope. *Steichen: A Biography*. New York, 1997: 495.
- 2000 Haskell, Barbara. *Edward Steichen*. Exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000: 28, color pl. 30.
- 2001 Weinberg, Jonathan. "The Family of Stieglitz and Steichen." *Art in America* 9 (September 2001): 54, color repro.
- 2021 Brock, Charles, Jay Krueger, Suzanne Quillen Lomax, Kathryn Morales, and Linda Owen. "Back to the Garden: Edward Steichen's Sunflower Paintings." *Fracture: conservation, science, art history* 5 (2021): 4–29, 5 unnumbered fig. (detail), fig. 1, fig. 8, fig. 9 (detail).
-

To cite: Charles Brock, "Edward Steichen/*Le Tournesol (The Sunflower)*/c. 1920," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/109766> (accessed April 18, 2024).