

Permanent Collection work:

Imogen Cunningham

The Magnolia, 1925

gelatin silver print

Helen Johnston Bequest, Focus Gallery Collection

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Essay written by student, Margaret Kunk, Spring 2001

Margaret Kunk

Imogen Cunningham's *Magnolia*, 1925

"If you visit the state in the spring, you will be stunned by the beauty of the magnolias."
(*Federal Writer's Project, Introduction, 1*).

This description of the beauty of the Mississippi state flower is meant to entice one to visit the state - the plant indeed produces a beautiful flower. Mary Weston Fordham describes the beauty of the magnolia in her poem "Magnolia": "and tenderly these garlands spread, bright emblems of a stricken flower, / now blooming in a sunnier bower".¹ The magnolia, which can stand up to heat and drought, blooms well in conditions such as those in Mississippi, when summer comes early and lingers late. It can take full sun to light shade, with various types of soil.² The tree itself can be harshly affected by winter very easily, sometimes not producing flowers due to winter's frost. Fordham writes, "Life's stormy surge had scarcely touched / Her blooming, beauteous brows".³ To the U.S National Arboretum Plant Introduction on "Magnolia," the "plants grow as multi-stemmed large shrubs or small trees bearing slightly leathery leaves." The plant's architecture is "highlighted by smooth, gray bark, and fuzzy flower buds."

It is in this tradition that Imogen Cunningham, a great photographer in her time, took her photograph entitled *Magnolia*. Margery Mann notes that when visiting Imogen's house for an interview in the 1970s, the house was distinguished because it was "the only

¹ Fordham, Mary Weston. Magnolia Leaves. Tuskegee Institute: Tuskegee, AL., 1897. 45.

² U.S. National Arboretum Plant Introduction. "Magnolia." Floral and Nursery Plant Research Unit.

³ Fordham, Mary Weston. Magnolia Leaves. Tuskegee Institute: Tuskegee, AL., 1897. 85.

house in several blocks with a garden in front of it” (Mann). Cunningham had a long history with plants, cultivating them since she was quite young. Cunningham’s love for plants is demonstrated in her relationship of the subject matter to the camera. She has taken several plant photographs including *Magnolia*, *Two Callas*, *Rubber Plant*, *Hen and Chickens*, and *Amaryllis*. She was also a longstanding member of the California Horticulture Society (Mann).

Magnolia is a very close-up view of the flower, focusing on the bud, with the flower off center in the photograph. The view is not straightforward, but rather slightly focused on the beautiful overflowing quality of the leaves, with the bud unfolding in front of the viewer’s eyes. This imagery is reminiscent of Georgia O’Keefe’s flower paintings, which were seen at the time to represent metaphysical female reproductive organs. Cunningham’s photograph may address the same issue - the unfolding of female genitalia.

Magnolia contrasts greatly with another picture I found taken on behalf of the United States Government which documents the flower rather than showing its aesthetic elements. *Magnolia* invites us to see this image as more than a simple national record. For example, historical documents usually are very sterile and serene in contrast with Cunningham’s *Magnolia*, which is dynamic, fresh, and emotional. The government photo shows the view of the whole flower, not just parts as Cunningham’s does. The government document includes the foliage of the flower, giving an overall view of the plant where Cunningham’s photograph excludes all foliage, hinting at it just a bit in the upper right hand corner of the painting where a tiny bit of a leaf can be seen. Cunningham focuses on the bud very closely while the government documentary photo represents the bud as simply another part of the flower, not the central image.

Imogen Cunningham was born in Portland Oregon on April 12, 1883 and later moved to Seattle, Washington with her family. Her professional career began in 1901 and lasted 69 years. She first began photographing in 1901 when she was in high school, receiving her first camera from her father, who also built her first dark room. The camera came from a mail order catalog with the International Correspondence School in Scranton, Pennsylvania (Mann). Cunningham was the only child out of ten siblings to attend college – she went to the University of Washington where she majored in

chemistry and worked in the biology department making slides. She attended the Technische Hochschule in Dresden for further study in photographic chemistry. She then worked for Edward Curtis' studio in Seattle, printing negatives of his work recording the vanishing tribes of Indians in America. Curtis' studio allowed Cunningham to successfully combine her knowledge and varied expertise: her experience from Dresden in coating printing paper, producing slides for scientific study from her undergraduate days, as well as her extensive knowledge in chemistry. This scientific understanding of photography lead Cunningham to the realistic take she developed in her own professional photographic life, and she eventually opened up her own studio in Seattle. In 1915 she married Roi Partridge, a Paris-trained etcher, with whom she had three sons, Gryffid in 1917, and twin sons Rondall and Padraic in 1918. The couple divorced in the 1930s and Cunningham lived in Oakland until 1947, when she moved to San Francisco (Mann).

Professionally she aligned herself with the “f/64” group, referring to the setting of the camera lens which provided the “ultimate in resolution and depth of field,” providing “honest, sharply defined images” (Mann). The group consisted of Cunningham, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, John Paul Edwards, Sonia Noskowiak, Willard Van Dyke, and Henry F. Swift (Mann). It was, as some critics claim, an organized reform movement aimed at changing photography. Cunningham recalled the group had no officers, no regular meetings, no dues, and only had one exhibit before it disbanded in 1935. Cunningham comments, “it was a casual, informal group of friends who met together from time to time in a photography gallery that Willard Van Dyke and Mary Jeannette Edwards opened” (Mann).⁴ Despite Cunningham's casualness about the group, f/64 is nevertheless considered as a turning point in West Coast photographic vision (Mann). Cunningham reflects back on that time remarking, “I was an awful purist in those days”(Mann).⁵

The group was active during the Depression, a time when photographers triumphed over pictorialism and portrayed the world as it really was. Cunningham comments, “only by facing the world squarely, could one hope to survive it” (Mann).

⁴ Mann, Mary. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs. University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, 1970.

⁵ Mann, Mary. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs. University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, 1970

Since 1910, Cunningham has exhibited widely in galleries in the United States and Europe. Simpson writes, “Cunningham was one of the few women photographers to exhibit nationally and internationally during the first three decades of this century.”⁶ Most of the major museums in Northern California have given her retrospective exhibits, and, although she had a large supply of old negatives to draw from, every show contained a few new prints. In Northern California, this is almost unheard of, for many photographers continue to exhibit show after show of fifteen-year-old work (Mann). Cunningham has received many honors for her work and looks back at her career with professional satisfaction. As to the criticism that surrounds her work, whether it is commercially realistic and privately romantic, Cunningham says, “People will have to look at my stuff and make up their own minds” (Mann).

⁶ Simpson, Pamela H. “Imogen Cunningham: Flora by Richard Lorenz REVIEW.” Women’s Art Journal. (1997) 18:66-67. 66.

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