

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM RETROSPECTIVE DEBUTS AT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM NOVEMBER 18**

First major US retrospective in 35 years for the groundbreaking  
20th-century photographer



SEATTLE – The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) presents *Imogen Cunningham: A Retrospective* (November 18, 2021–February 6, 2022), the photographer’s first major retrospective in the United States in more than 35 years. Organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the exhibition is a visual celebration of Cunningham’s immense contribution to the history of 20th-century photography. It features nearly 200 works from her seventy-year career, including portraits of artists, musicians and Hollywood stars; elegant flower and plant studies; poignant street pictures; and groundbreaking nudes.

“We are thrilled to open this important retrospective here in Seattle, Cunningham’s first home as an artist,” says Amada Cruz, SAM’s Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO. “She once said that she ‘photographs anything the light touches’—this is an extraordinary opportunity for our visitors to bask in the glow of her dynamic and expansive body of work and be inspired.”

“Imogen Cunningham was underappreciated for most of her career, only finding recognition in her last years—an unfortunately common tale for many women artists,” says Carrie Dedon, SAM’s Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. “Her photographs reveal an endlessly curious, innovative, and determined mind that places her as one of the most important photographers of the last century.”

### BEGINNINGS IN SEATTLE

Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976) had deep connections to the Pacific Northwest; born in Portland, she grew up in Port Angeles and Seattle. The

precocious child of a free-thinking father, Cunningham decided to become a photographer around 1901, while still in high school. Her father famously asked, “Why do you want to become a dirty photographer?” Yet he built her a darkroom in a woodshed, including the necessary and messy chemical supplies. Her first works were in the soft-focus, Pictorialist style.

Cunningham completed a chemistry degree at the University of Washington in 1907. During these years, she also participated in the artistic scene, becoming the youngest charter member—and only photographer—of the Seattle Fine Arts Society in 1908. She also apprenticed and then worked from 1907-1909 at the Seattle studio of well-known photographer Edward S. Curtis. After a year-long fellowship in Dresden, Germany, Cunningham returned to Seattle in 1910 and opened what is considered the first studio for artistic photography in Seattle. She lived and worked in this ivy-covered building located at 1117 Terry Avenue, making portraits of local figures as well as her own works in the then-popular Pictorialist mode, including some early daring nudes.

Cunningham married a Seattle artist, Roi Partridge, in 1915, and eventually had three sons with him, including twin boys. With her husband on the road, Cunningham struggled to run her studio and household, and eventually set out to join Partridge in San Francisco in 1917.

#### A MODERNIST PIONEER

The next decade of Cunningham’s life saw her balancing her roles as an artist, mother, and mentor to the students of Mills College in Oakland, where her husband taught. Amid the very real constraints of her life in California, Cunningham created photographs that are regarded today as historically radical and groundbreaking, including modernist botanicals and portraits.

Bound to the home while caring for her infant boys, Cunningham planted a garden in 1921 to create subjects for her camera. In these works, including perhaps her more celebrated botanical, *Magnolia Blossom* (1925), she isolates the plant forms, precisely revealing their essential elements in close-up compositions. Their sensuality is heightened by Cunningham’s choice of warm-toned matte-surface papers for printing. These works were included in a momentous avant-garde exhibition in 1925 in Stuttgart, Germany, which brought her international attention.

Her portrait subjects in these years featured people from her artistic community such as dancers Jose Limon and Hanya Holm, musicians from the Cornish College of the Arts, fencer Helene Mayer, and artists Frida Kahlo and Morris Graves. She also made portraits of Hollywood luminaries for *Vanity Fair*, including Cary Grant, Joan Blondell, and Spencer Tracy.

#### ARTIST AND COLLABORATOR

SAM’s iteration of the exhibition highlights Cunningham’s collaborations with artists of many mediums, particularly dancer Martha Graham and sculptor Ruth Asawa. In a section of artist portraits is one of Graham, taken during a 1931 session that resulted in dramatic close-ups of the dancer’s face and body; also in this section is a video of the dancer in her iconic solo *Lamentation* (1930). Cunningham was introduced to Asawa in 1950, and the two, though 43 years apart in age, established a lasting friendship. Cunningham regularly photographed Asawa and her looped wire sculptures and wrote on her behalf

for a Guggenheim Foundation grant. The exhibition features seven Asawa sculptures alongside Cunningham's five portraits of the artist and her work.

Another section of the exhibition features examples from Group f/64, a Bay Area association of photographers begun in 1932 that championed a direct and objective approach. In addition to Cunningham, the group included Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Sonya Noskowiak, and more. Also on view are photographs by Gertrude Kasebier, Dorothea Lange, Listette Model, and more; they were all sources of inspiration for or collaborators with Cunningham.

### THE LIGHT WITHIN

The exhibition also explores the last 42 years of Cunningham's life, as the artist continued to face challenges and late-in-life triumphs in her career. It was only in the final twelve years of her life that she finally began to receive attention, with major solo shows in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco; a 1964 *Aperture* monograph spearheaded by her champion and fellow photographer, Minor White; and a 1970 Guggenheim Foundation grant that enabled her to print a cache of her early glass plate negatives.

During these years, she continued to innovate, gravitating toward street photography and creating cleverly composed examples of the genre. She also taught and mentored young artists, and she became involved in civic issues in San Francisco, as well as the civil rights and the anti-war movements. At the age of 92, she embarked on a final series focusing on aging, traveling with an assistant to document subjects. In 1976, just months before her death, she appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, charming the host and the audience. On view in this final gallery is *Portrait of Imogen* (1988), a short documentary film directed by Meg Partridge.

### ADVISORY COMMITTEE

For major exhibitions, SAM convenes a group of advisors from the community to participate in planning. The Imogen Cunningham committee is:

- Tara Champion, photographer and educator
- SuJ'n Chon, photographer and co-founder of IDEA Odyssey Collective
- Catherine Nueva Espana, Washington State Arts Commissioner
- DaSol Lim, classroom educator
- Maya Santos, SAM Teen Arts Group (TAG) member
- Mayumi Tsutakawa, writer and curator
- Robert Wade, photographer at Robert Wade Photography
- Sasha Welland, University of Washington Associate Professor

### TICKETING

#### **Museum Hours**

- Closed Monday & Tuesday
- Wednesday–Sunday 10 am–5 pm
- Holiday hours on the website

#### **Special Exhibition Prices**

- \$29.99 Adult
- \$17.99 Senior (65+), Military (with ID)
- \$12.99 Student (with ID), Teen (15–18)
- FREE for children (14 and under)

- FREE for SAM Members

### Special Prices

- First Thursdays: Free to all
- First Fridays: Free general admission for seniors (65+)

Details are subject to change. For the most up-to-date information on planning a visit, go to [seattleartmuseum.org](http://seattleartmuseum.org).

### EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

A 256-page catalogue with 199 color illustrations published by Getty Publications will be available for purchase on site and online at [SAM Shop](#) (\$60). Also titled *Imogen Cunningham: A Retrospective*, (ISBN: 978-1-60606-675-1), the catalogue is edited by Getty associate curator Paul Martineau, who also contributes an essay. It also features two essays by independent curator and photography historian Susan Ehrens.

### EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

This exhibition is organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Presenting Sponsor



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**Image captions:** *Two Callas*, 1925/1929, Imogen Cunningham, American, 1883–1976, gelatin silver print, 12 3/4 x 9 3/4 in., Seattle Art Museum, Gift of John H. Hauberg, 89.26, © (1929), 2009 Imogen Cunningham Trust. *Dancer, Mills College*, 1929, Imogen Cunningham, American, 1883–1976, gelatin silver print, 8 9/16 x 7 3/8 in., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2006.25.6, © The Imogen Cunningham Trust. *Self-Portrait on Geary Street*, 1958, Imogen Cunningham, American, 1883–1976, gelatin silver print, 9 3/16 x 6 7/8 in., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Gift of Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauer, 2016.173.21, © The Imogen Cunningham Trust

### **ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM**

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and rededicated as the Asian Art Museum in 1994, and it reopened on February 8, 2020, following an extensive renovation and expansion. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—

and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2017.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM's collection of approximately 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures, and time periods.