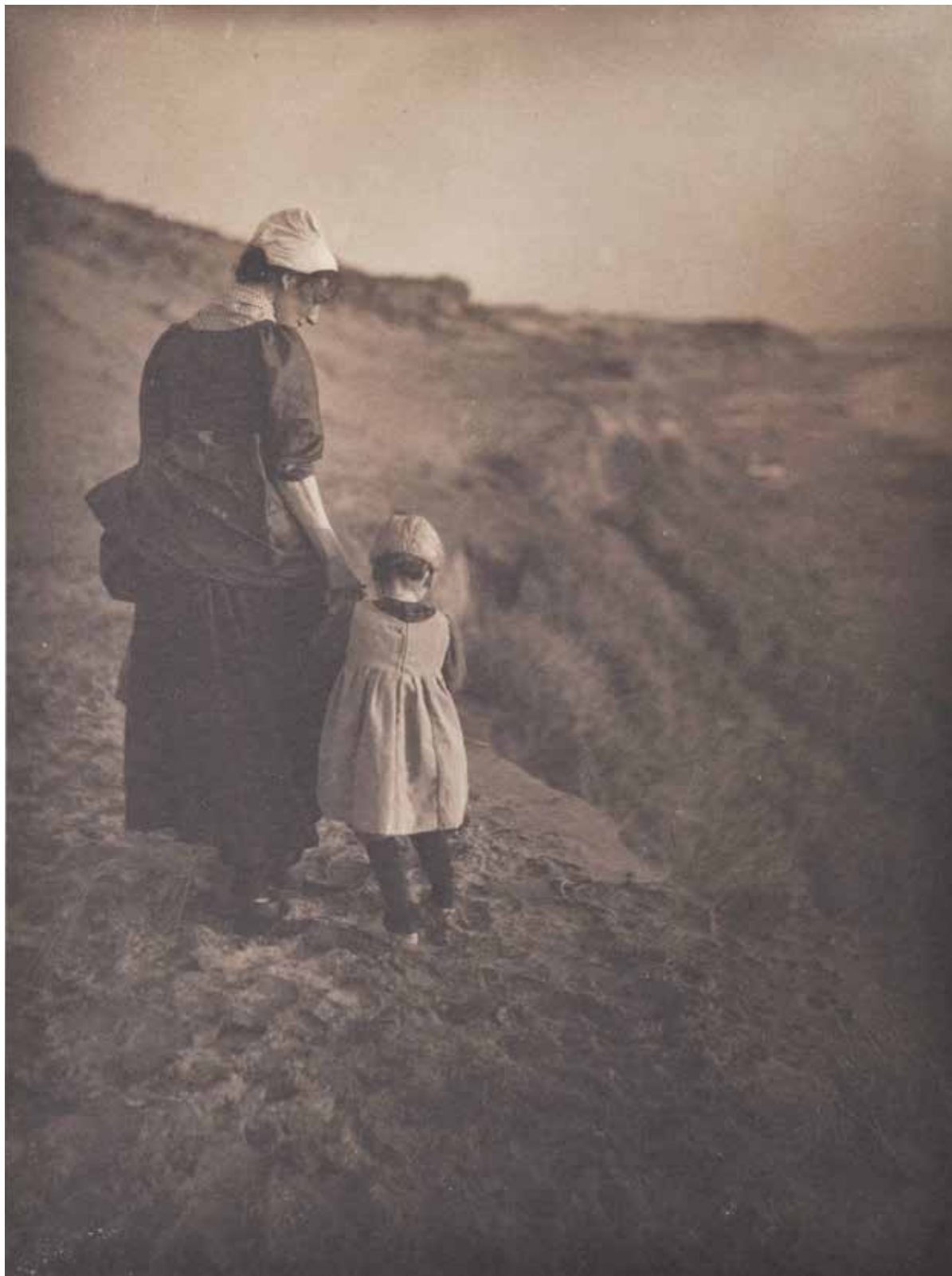


MYRA ALBERT WIGGINS

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S LIFE





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ROGER HULL

CEASELESSLY CREATIVE throughout her long life, Myra Albert Wiggins holds a significant place in the history of Pacific Northwest artistic culture. She was a painter, exhibiting her oils and watercolors at the Oregon State Fair annually from 1886 until 1907 and then at museums and galleries in Seattle, New York, Washington, DC, and San Francisco. She was a prolific poet, a longtime respected member of the National League of American Pen Women. She was a singer who throughout her life studied voice in New York and as a young woman performed public recitals. She taught classes in painting and music. She was an arts writer and lecturer.

But it was as a photographer that Myra Wiggins established herself as an internationally recognized, award-winning artist who exhibited not only in the American Northwest as well as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, but also in Paris, Vienna, and London. From the late 1890s until 1910, Myra Wiggins was a highly lauded presence in the world of artistic, or pictorial, photography. She created most of her photographs on the Oregon coast and at her home and barn studio on Oak Street in Salem, a few blocks south of Willamette University. Arguably, Wiggins was Salem's first international art star.

Myra Jane Albert was born in December 1869 in Salem, the daughter of John and Mary Holman Albert, both from pioneer Oregon families. Myra's maternal grandmother, Almira Phelps, was a member of Jason Lee's "Great Reinforcement" of missionaries who in 1839 sailed on the *Lausanne* to help establish the institution known today as Willamette University.

John Albert was a Salem banker who, as president of the Capital National Bank, became one of Salem's most affluent citizens. He had an amateur's interest in the new medium of photography, while Myra's mother, Mary Holman Albert, was a landscape painter who before her marriage had served as the first art teacher at Willamette. Their daughter Myra grew up in a household that valued the arts, the pioneering spirit, and the belief that hard work and civic commitment resulted in prosperity, as it had for them.

Myra, her older brother Joseph, and their two younger siblings, Harry and Blanche, were thus children of privilege and opportunity and at the same time imbued with a strong work ethic and sense of engagement that helped them thrive. From childhood on, Myra Albert drew, painted, wrote poems, and sang, and in her late teens she took her first photographs with a camera she co-owned with her brother Joseph.

She practiced these arts not as ladylike cultivations (though she was of the social class for which such practices were deemed appropriate for ladies). She practiced and pursued them

because she envisioned an independent life as an artist and saw herself as such from an early age. Her genteel, supportive, and open-minded upbringing provided her with the confidence that she could do pretty much whatever she wanted to do, and she set forth on a life of action that proceeded unabated until hours before her death at age eighty-six in 1956.

Myra Albert attended Willamette University and then Mills College, but it was art school that she desired. Accordingly, in 1891, at the age of twenty-one, she traveled to New York to study at the Art Students League for the next three years. Her teachers there included William Merritt Chase, George de Forest Brush, and Kenyon Cox, leading American painters of the day. Of all her teachers, it was Chase whom she held in highest regard as person and artist, and in her own paintings throughout her life she emulated Chase's style of rich brushwork and painterly description of surfaces and textures, whether brass, fabric, or porcelain.

By the time Myra Albert left for New York, she had been photographing for two years, experimenting with the large wooden glass-plate camera that she shared with her brother. Her earliest significant extant photographs were taken during a pack trip into the Mount Jefferson area of the Cascades in about 1890. In her essay published in a popular photography magazine, she wrote: "I recall a delightful summer trip to Mt. Jefferson, when, mounted on a sure footed Cayuse, our jolly party kept the trail along the snowline, led by an experienced mountaineer to where before

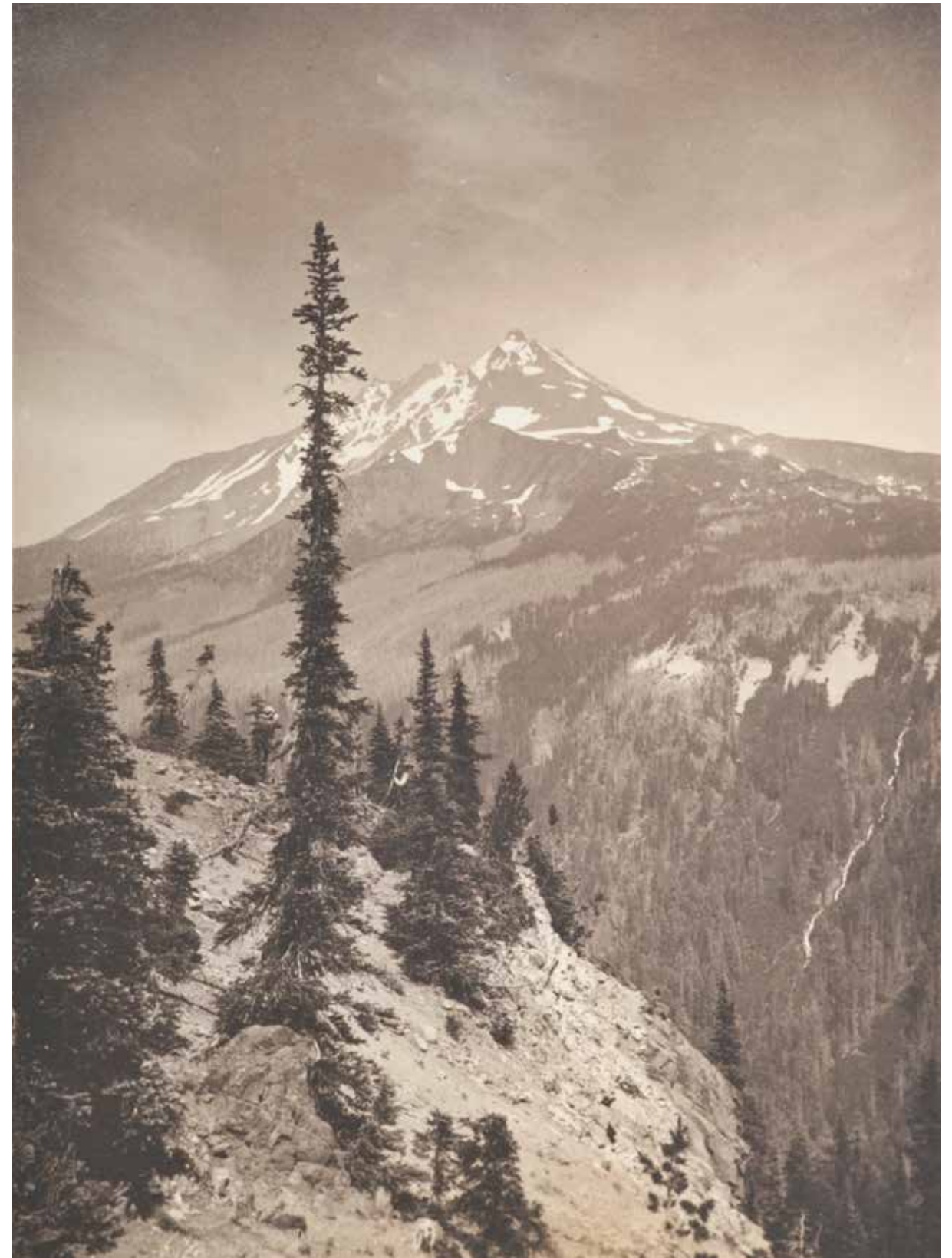
The foot of woman never trod,
Nor feet of camera ever prod."¹

With this essay, Myra Albert began to position herself as an adventuresome Western woman, born of pioneer ancestry and herself an explorer of natural wilds that few if any females before her had glimpsed. She was, her essay implied, a "New Woman," a modern woman, though still a lady. She deftly interpreted her origins and location in a remote western state as a sign of her vital and vivid outlook on life and the basis of a fresh new approach to photography.

From 1891 until 1894, Albert spent a major part of each year in New York, studying at the League, taking voice lessons, and photographing urban subjects that complemented and contrasted with her views of Oregon landscape. Her photographic interests prompted her to join the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York. Alfred Stieglitz, who was to become the dean of art photography throughout the first half of the twentieth century, was also a member of the Society beginning in 1891, and in Stieglitz Myra Albert made a crucial early contact that would help buoy her to international prominence as a fine art photographer.

In addition to photographs of New York structures and streets, and one of children in Central Park, Albert shot pictures of William Merritt Chase's painting class and Augustus Saint Gaudens's sculpture class at the Art Students League itself. These photographs have had a long life as iconic images of the League and were displayed and published on the occasion of the school's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1950.

During her New York years, Albert summered in Oregon, spending time in Salem, the mountains, and on the coast with her family and friends. One of these was Frederick Wiggins, who had been born in Canada in 1869 (the same year Myra was born in Salem), raised in Kansas, and who came to Salem in 1888 with his employer to open a dry goods store. A few years later, Fred Wiggins established his own store selling household items. Soon after arriving in Salem, he



Mt. Jefferson, 1889, matte collodion print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2004.006.001



William Merritt Chase's Painting Class, Art Students League, New York, 1892, gelatin silver print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.027.032

and Myra Albert met, often socialized with friends, and found common interests. After a long courtship, during which Myra conducted her three years of study at the Art Students League, they were married on November 24, 1894, at the Presbyterian Church in Salem. The bride photographed the wedding party, including herself in the picture by means of a delayed exposure device that she had rigged up.

In Salem, Myra Albert Wiggins continued to photograph the town itself and its environs, as she had been doing since she acquired her first camera in 1889. Some of these local shots were documentary, others appealing works of art. One of these is *In the Fog (Salem, Oregon)*, depicting men and a horse-drawn cart at a crossroads on a misty day. Wiggins wrote on the back of a print of this work that William Merritt Chase described it as “very beautiful, . . . the best of all.” Because of her admiration and respect for Chase as a teacher and painter, his praise was an important seal of approval.

Cloudy Monday, another of many photographs that Wiggins took of her hometown and its environs in the 1890s, is a view north from the vicinity of Asahel Bush's pasture (now Bush's Pasture Park), with the steeple of the First Methodist Church in the distance. The pastoral but domesticated scene, accented by the steeple, evokes the paintings of John Constable, whose picturesque views of the Stour Valley in England were of interest to pictorial photographers.

From her home base in Salem, Wiggins was an inveterate traveler, and on a trip to San Francisco in 1897 she took one of her most dramatic, and—in light of the rest of her work—unique images. This is *The Forge*, a scene of men leaning into their work in a steam-filled



In the Fog (Salem, Oregon), ca. 1897, matte collodion print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2004.006.002



The Forge, 1897, gelatin silver print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, gift of Robert and Shirley Benz, 2003.020.001

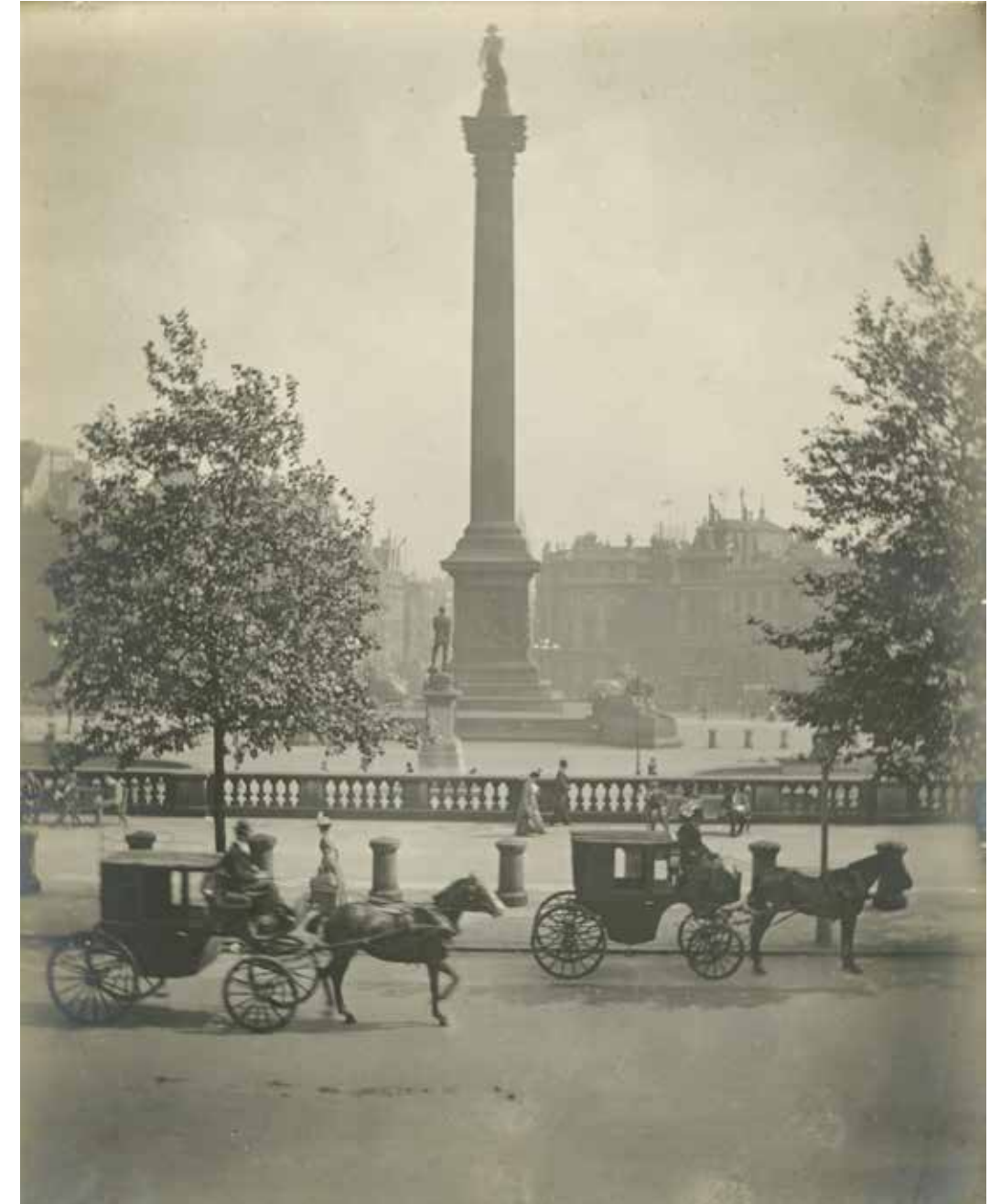


Hunger ist der Beste Koch, 1898, matte collodion print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2000.074.002

industrial zone of machinery, iron components, a wood barrel, and a pile of slag. The scene is lit from above, perhaps from a skylight, illuminating the steam that rises from the forge and the backs of the toiling men. This dramatic work, which George Eastman liked so much that he hung it in his office at the Kodak headquarters in Rochester, New York, could not be more different from Wiggins's pastoral scenes of Salem or her earlier photographs of the men in the natural world of the Cascade range. Apart from portraits, *The Forge* is indeed the last of Wiggins's photographs of the male of the species at play and work. She was about to embark on a series of photographs of domestic life, specifically the world of women and children.

Fred and Myra Wiggins were the parents of an only child, Mildred, born in May 1896, and Mildred was to play an important role in Myra's rise to fame as a photographer. At age two and a half, she was the model for the first of Wiggins's Dutch genre photographs, a category that she believed she had originated. Entitled *Hunger ist der Beste Koch*, it shows Mildred as a hungry little girl waiting for her porridge to cool in a miniature stage set that Wiggins built in the dining room of the family's house on Oak Street. Camouflaging the modern dining room with distressed floor planks, a picturesque table that Wiggins built herself, and cheesecloth walls that cut the window down to storybook cottage proportions, Wiggins as mother and householder invented an imaginative counterpart of her domestic reality that is significantly different from the photographs of labor in *The Forge* or the wilderness of the Cascades.

Her translation of daily domestic life into a doll's-house tableau reflected a changed life and, as it turned out, an astute assessment of the audience for pictorial photographs. Wiggins's Dutch scenes became her best-known work and earned her many accolades. *Hunger ist der Beste Koch* was one of her successful entries in the Second Philadelphia Salon of 1899 and enjoyed a long list of



Trafalgar Square, 1900, Myra Wiggins Papers, Pacific Northwest Artists Archive, University Archives, Mark O. Hatfield Library, Willamette University

additional prestigious showings. It was also pirated for use in an advertising campaign for Maltex cereal, much to Wiggins's chagrin; the company eventually paid her \$100 for the image.

Wiggins's penchant for travel and adventure resulted in two trips abroad, the first to England, France, and Holland in 1900 (she won this trip in a photography contest) and the second to the Holy Land in 1904. She traveled with her father in 1900, with a woman friend in 1904, both times leaving Mildred in the care of Fred assisted by members of Myra's family. On both trips, she took photographs—of London monuments, the Paris Exposition, and the Dutch countryside in 1900, of views in Greece and the Middle East in 1904. Some of the latter were published, with letters she wrote on the trip, in her book *Letters from a Pilgrim*.

In 1903, Wiggins created several Dutch vignettes that, together with *Hunger*, were to be her most frequently exhibited and published photographs. She had inherited antique Dutch clothing from an aunt, and these simple, neutral, yet culturally evocative garments became the costumes for the models of her Dutch photographs. One of these is the lovely *Edge of the Cliff* (see cover), photographed on the Oregon coast near Newport, where the Alberts owned a beach house. Wiggins juxtaposes light and dark costumes and emphasizes the folds in the cloth so that the mother and child are separate, three-dimensional forms as they proceed along the cliff. Wiggins is known for the naturalism of her models' poses, suggesting their immersion in their own imaginative or working world as if unaware of the photographer and camera. In *The Edge of the Cliff*, the little girl's wary posture and the woman's strong arm firmly guiding her make for an entirely believable life moment despite the fictitious Dutch premise. Wiggins's graceful interplay of the woman's cap with the horizon also would have pleased connoisseurs of delicate compositional taste in photography.

In that same summer of 1903, also at the coast, Wiggins made *The Song of the Sea*, using the same setting and possibly the model who posed for *The Edge of the Cliff*. Back in Salem in her barn studio, Wiggins staged and photographed what was to be another award-winning and much-exhibited Dutch picture, *Polishing Brass* (retitled *At Work* by Alfred Stieglitz). *Polishing Brass* appealed, and continues to appeal, on many levels—as an homage to hard and careful work, to domesticity, to an imagined historic Dutch world of tranquil and methodical home life, to the care and appreciation of objects both utilitarian and aesthetic. Combining two of Wiggins's specialties, still life and figure study, *Polishing Brass* is an artful composition of the vertical and horizontal lines of the furniture, the circular shapes of the brass vessels, and the interplay of these lines and forms with the beautifully posed figure. As in *The Forge*, lighting is from above, and, as in *The Forge*, the figure turns from the viewer to immerse herself in the task at hand. But the noisy industrial environment is replaced by a quiet room where work blends with meditation and thoughtful preoccupation.

These graceful Dutch works, the dramatic *Forge*, the bucolic Salem scenes, together with the early pictures of the Cascades, helped keep Wiggins and her work before a wide public—notably of readers of photography magazines that published her photographs, and of viewers of the salons of photographic fine art in the United States and Europe. Alfred Stieglitz knew her work and was acquainted with her personally because of their early affiliation with the Society of Amateur Photographers. When Stieglitz established the famed and exclusive Photo-Secession in 1903, he selected Wiggins as an associate member, along with two other Oregonians, Sarah Ladd and Lily White of Portland. For Stieglitz, the mission was to secede from mediocre photography and from slick commercial production. Instead, he believed that this relatively new medium, in capable and dedicated hands, could achieve the status of fine art. He was particularly interested in artists, such as Wiggins and Edward (then Eduard) Steichen, who were painters as well as photographers: their work helped Stieglitz make the point that artists chose photography as a medium for expressive and aesthetic reasons, not because they lacked the talent to paint or work successfully in other media.

In the summer of 1905, Myra Wiggins's mother, Mary Holman Albert, died as a result of an auto accident (the Alberts owned one of the first motor cars in Salem). In 1907, Fred Wiggins made the decision to enter the nursery business in Toppenish, Washington, making it necessary



Polishing Brass, 1903, matte collodion print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, gift of Del Chinburg, 2003.030.001

for the family to leave Salem. In different ways, these events were difficult for Myra, who was close to her mother and rooted in Salem. Wiggins's creative work slowed, but in about 1908, during a visit to the family home at the coast, she made another of her iconic photographs, which she entitled *Nymphaea* (frontispiece). The graceful, somehow Shakespearean image of a gowned young woman wearing a diaphanous scarf that ruffles in the breeze, standing before a watery field of plants and grasses, is a gentle poem of simple beauty. It resulted, however, from an arduous process that Wiggins later described:

I left the cottage with a retinue of half a dozen helpers . . . all loaded down with supplies. We carried two or three cameras, a large tripod, two costumes, Dutch caps, hats, scarfs of different kinds, scissors, pins, a hatchet to use in case shrubbery or trees would have to be cut down for the right point of view, long ropes to tie around the children's waists when wading in the pond to get for me the necessary lilies . . .”²

Wiggins's figure studies, so natural and unaffected, were at times the result of strategies almost military in nature.

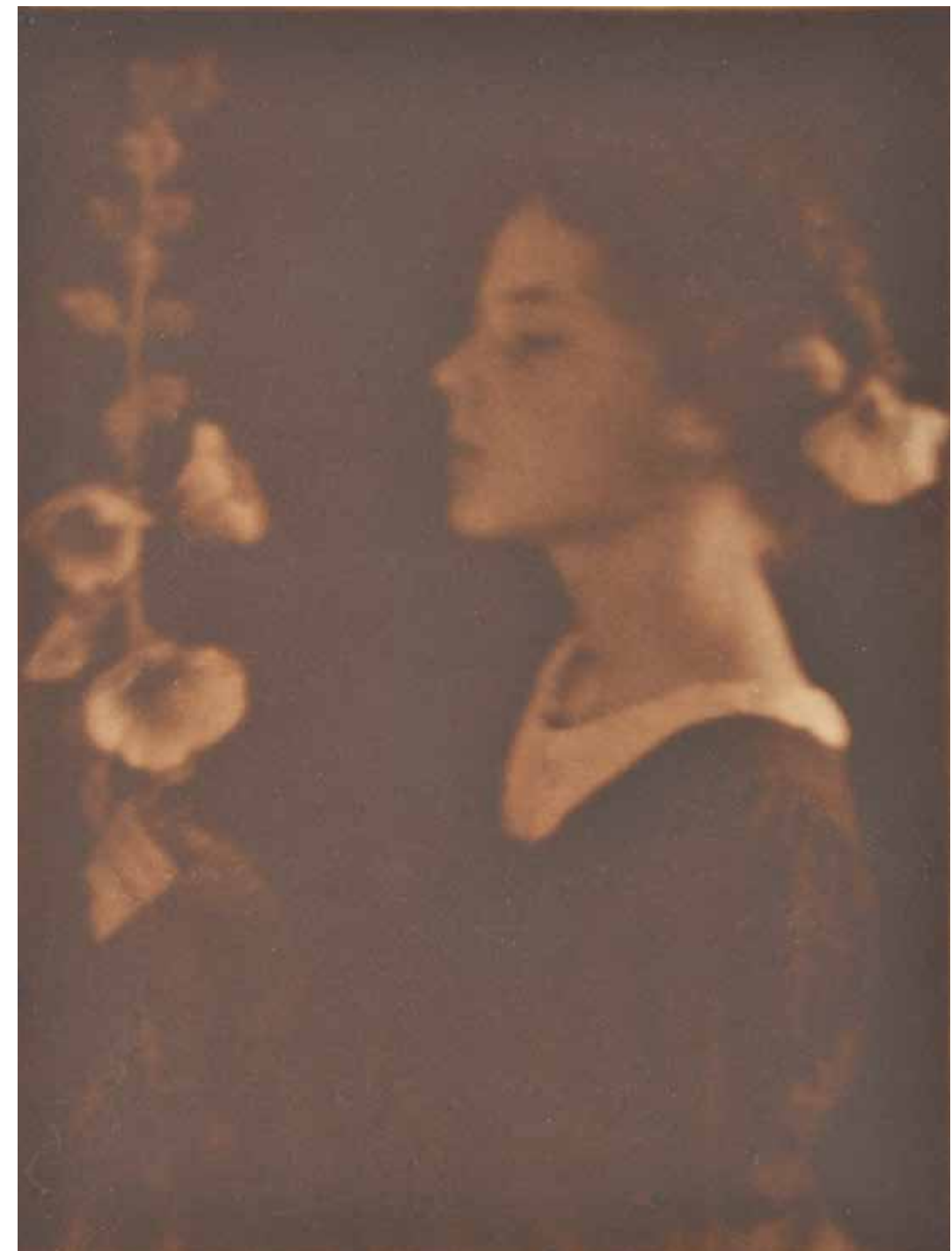
One of the last photographs that Wiggins created in this period of her greatest pictorial accomplishments is *Hollyhock (June Idyl)*, a tonal study of subtle subdued lighting and a composition that recalls Pre-Raphaelite painting: a young girl seen in profile in the right half of the composition addresses and is balanced by a hollyhock plant that reaches from the bottom to the top of the print on at the right edge. Light falls on the blossoms and an echoing blossom in the girl's hair, on her face and neck, on her white collar. It is an image of purity, youthfulness, the fragility of a moment. While not Wiggins's last photograph, it is a culminating piece of almost ravishing beauty. Stieglitz selected it, along with *The Edge of the Cliff* and *Polishing Brass*, for what was to be his last exhibition of pictorial photography, at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo in 1910. This exhibition effectively concluded the era of pictorial photography as a mainstream artistic phenomenon, and it marked the end of a creative chapter for Wiggins, who increasingly focused on painting in her Toppenish studio and then in Seattle, where she and Fred relocated in 1932.

With the birth of her granddaughter, Wiggins revisited the Dutch mother and child theme in photographs she made in the 1920s, and in 1928 she showed her old masterpieces and new photographs in a one-person show at the Seattle Fine Arts Society. She exhibited her photographs again at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 1954. To the end, she was proud of her life in photography and the prestigious presence she enjoyed in the world of early twentieth-century art photography, but painting and poetry were her primary focus in her later years.

On January 13, 1956, a few weeks after her eighty-sixth birthday, Myra Wiggins was at work in her Seattle studio when she suffered a stroke. She was rushed to the hospital, where she died the next day. Never a woman to waste time, she had spent her life using every moment available to her in the pursuit of her creative work. She probably would have acknowledged that it was her photography, created in the early years of her married life in Salem, that assured her a place in the history of American artistic culture.



This brochure was prepared to accompany an exhibition of photographs and archival materials from Willamette University collections at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art and in the Pacific Northwest Artists Archive, a division of the University Archives. Because of Myra Wiggins's birth and creative life in Salem and her family's connections with Willamette from its earliest days, the university has made a point of collecting her work (paintings as well as photographs) and surviving records of her accomplished life. Wiggins material has come from various sources. In 1975, Bonnie Hull, in preparation for an exhibition she curated of Wiggins's photographs, visited and interviewed Mildred



Hollyhock (June Idyl), ca. 1910, platinum print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.027.009

Benz, the daughter of Fred and Myra Wiggins, in Yakima, Washington. Mildred gave Bonnie photographic prints and items of ephemera related to Myra's career in photography. All these items have been deposited at the museum and archives. Myra Wiggins's grandson Robert Benz and his wife Shirley transferred paintings and photographs to the Hallie Ford Museum in the early 2000s. Some of these were donated, others purchased with the Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund. This fund also allowed for the purchase of additional photographs by Wiggins in 2000. A collection



A Corner of My Studio, No. 2, ca. 1930, oil on canvas, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2004.075.002

of Wiggins's Dutch photographs was donated by Del Chinburg in 2003. In 2012, the museum acquired prints and a collection of archival records from Myra's great grandson, Doug Benz. Thus has been assembled a significant range of material, selections of which make up the exhibition *Myra Albert Wiggins: A Photographer's Life*.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

I first learned of Myra Albert Wiggins in the late 1960s while writing my dissertation at Northwestern University. My topic was the journal *Camera Work*, edited and published by Alfred Stieglitz as the official organ of the Photo-Secession. Wiggins, one of three Oregon associate members of the Secession, was occasionally mentioned in *Camera Work*, and my curiosity about her and her work increased when I arrived in Salem in 1970 to begin my teaching career at Willamette University. My wife Bonnie Hull was also interested in Wiggins, and in

a conversation with Dr. Helen Pierce learned that Myra's daughter, Mildred Benz, was living in Yakima, Washington. With information Bonnie gathered from Mildred Benz and that I obtained in other research, I wrote the essay "Myra Wiggins and Helen Gatch: Conflicts in American Pictorialism," published in *History of Photography* in the Summer 1992 issue (Helen Gatch was Myra's friend and neighbor in Salem, and also enjoyed a national reputation as a pictorial photographer). In 1997, Carole Glauber published her book *Witch of Kodakery: The Photography of Myra Albert Wiggins 1869–1956* (Washington State University Press). For the essay in this brochure, I have drawn upon Bonnie's and my research and Carole Glauber's book. —RH

NOTES

1. Myra Albert, "Amateur Photography through Women's Eyes," *The Photo-American* (March 1894): 134.
2. Myra Albert Wiggins, "Trials and Triumphs of an Amateur Photographer," *American Magazine of Art* (September 1926): 9.



Myra Wiggins with her studio camera, ca. 1954, gelatin silver print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.027.044



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Frontispiece: *Nymphaea*, ca. 1908, toned matte collodion print, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2003.024.002.

Above: *Self Portrait at Age 35*, 1904, photograph, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, gift of Robert and Shirley Benz, 2003.020.002.

At left: Portrait of Myra Albert Wiggins with her husband Frederick Wiggins and their daughter Mildred by Pickerill Company, Salem, Oregon, 1899, collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.027.051.



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