



Edward Steichen (American, born Luxembourg, 1879–1973)

Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette

1902

Gum bichromate print

Alfred Stieglitz Collection

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AIC accession number: 1949.823

Stieglitz Estate number:

Inscriptions: Signed and inscribed recto, lower left, in graphite: "Steichen / MDCCCCII"; verso unchecked

Dimensions: 26.7 x 20 cm (image/paper)

Print thickness: N/A

Surface sheen: Medium gloss (9.4 GU @ 85°)

Paper tone: N/A

Mount: Unmounted

Mount tone: N/A

Ultraviolet-induced (UV) visible fluorescence (recto): None

X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry:
See below

Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectrometry:
N/A

CONTEXT

In 1901 Edward Steichen shared a studio with fellow photographer F. Holland Day. As he recounted in his autobiography, “I dressed up in one of Day’s stocks, draped his mantle around my shoulders, picked up a palette and brush, and posed in the mirror for what I thought was going to be photography’s answer to [Titian’s] ‘Man with a Glove.’”¹ He spent a year working to create a print that reflected his vision.

The visible brushstrokes that create the photograph’s atmosphere of moody darkness and dramatic highlights are the result of the gum bichromate process, a favorite of Pictorialist photographers, although Steichen also altered the surface of the print after development. While Steichen considered himself both a painter and a photographer, he chose to represent himself with palette and brush, not with the seemingly more technical tool of the camera, modeling the belief that successful fine art photography could only be achieved through painterly handicraft and compositional mastery.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This photograph is a gum bichromate print on a thin cream paper. The print is hinged to a nonoriginal mat. At the bottom left corner of the print, Steichen signed his name in block letters and dated the work in roman numerals. Steichen typically dated his prints according to the year they were printed, rather than the negative date. It is therefore not unusual to have the date on the print conflict with other dated prints from the same negative. When the surface of the print is examined under high magnification, the fibers from the paper are visible and the pigmented gum arabic sits directly on the surface of the paper. Some heavy retouching and modifications by the artist are noticeable on and around the figure, by the cravat, next to his ear, and where his fingers meet the brush and palette. The mottled background of the print demonstrates that this method of printing does not allow easy gradations of light and shadow. The print does not fluoresce when exposed to long-wave UV radiation. Chromium and trace amounts of lead were detected using XRF spectrometry. Chromium is used to sensitize the gum bichromate. While lead is less commonly used in gum bichromate printing, the resulting signal is likely from a component of the pigment used in the gelatin layer.

¹ Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (Doubleday, 1963), n.p.

X-RAY FLUORESCENCE (XRF) SPECTROMETRY

XRF spectral readings were taken from the recto of the work and from the mount when available. The elements listed below have been positively identified in the work; elements in bold have been attributed to the processing of the print.

Print: **Cr**, Pb

Mount: Ca, Fe, Cu, Zn, Sr, Ba, Pb

The graph below shows XRF spectra for three distinct measurement areas on the print: the darkest, maximum-density image area (Dmax, purple); the lightest, minimum-density image area (Dmin, green); and the mount, when available (orange). The background spectrum (gray) represents the characteristic contribution of the instrument itself as measured on a Teflon reference and is included in order to discount irrelevant elements from the print's signature. Elements were identified based on the presence of their characteristic peaks. Analysis was performed with a Bruker/Keymaster Tracer III-V+ energy-dispersive handheld XRF analyzer, equipped with changeable Ti and Al filters and a Rh transmission target. Measurements were taken for 120 or 180 LT at 40 kV and 10 µA. The spectrum below illustrates the significant peaks for this print in the energy range from 3 to 15 keV.

Figure 1. (right)
Locations of XRF measurements



Figure 2. (below)
XRF spectra from the Dmax, Dmin, mount, and background signal produced by the analyzer.

