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From *Looking at Photographs: Animals*

A. D. Coleman

(1995)

"The Terminal, 1893"

Alfred Stieglitz, American



When Alfred Stieglitz went out to make this picture one snowy winter day more than a century ago, he was putting his abilities as a photographer, and his equipment, to a test.

He was using a brand-new invention: a small, portable *hand camera*.

The cameras that professional photographers used in those days were big, and so heavy that they had to be held steady by a *tripod*. But few photographers at that time would have tried to work under snowy conditions with any camera, much less with one thought of as a toy. Stieglitz knew that the cold weather could freeze his little camera and his film. And the *available light* he'd be working with was dim. Light is the photographer's basic raw material, a necessary ingredient in the picture-making process, and there wasn't much of it that day.

In New York City at the turn of the century, public transportation was provided by horse-drawn carriages. When the photographer came to the terminal at the beginning of the line, he found a scene that excited him. There were the carriages, being cleaned out for the next run. There was the terminal watchman, checking the horses. And there were the hard-working horses themselves. The sweat from their bodies was turning into steam in the cold air.

It was so dark out that Stieglitz knew his film wouldn't register all the details his eye could see. But he believed that he'd be able to reveal just enough so that we'd understand what we were looking at. The darkness of the resulting image captures the mood and atmosphere of that moment: the feeling of hard work being done, without complaint, under difficult conditions.

Stieglitz's test was a success. He turned the limitations of his film and the light conditions to his own advantage, and proved that even a "toy" camera could be used to make a powerful image. Taking risks and experimenting with new tools and materials is one of the ways in which photographers, like other artists, stretch the boundaries of their medium.

First published in *Looking at Photographs: Animals* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

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