Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Imogen Cunningham, photographer

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 18th, 2022

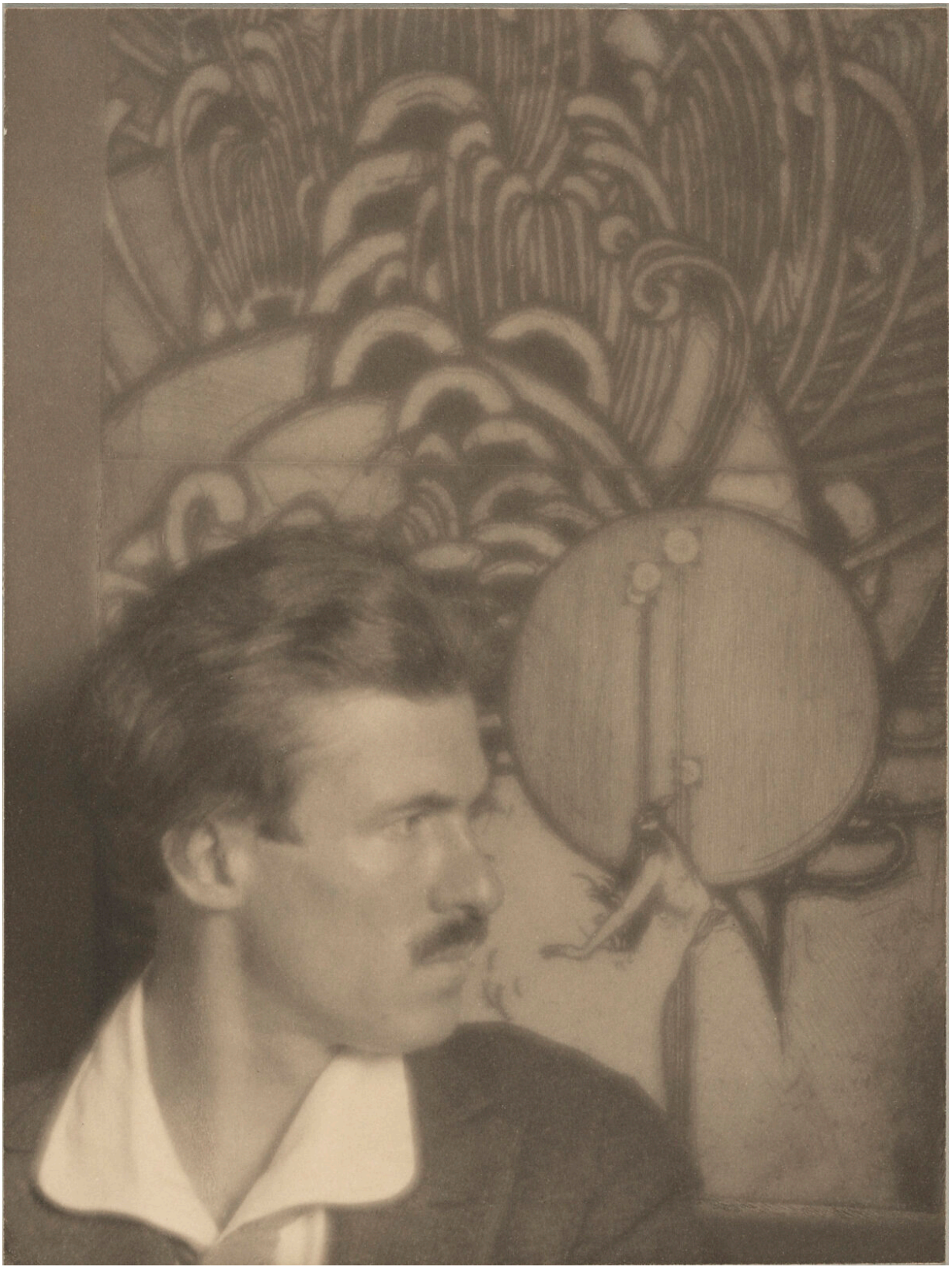
I knew of Imogen Cunningham, having started my career as a professional photographer in 1974, when she was still alive, and I had marveled at the unforgettable photograph by Judy Dater of the 90-year-old photographer with her Rolleiflex looking at a nude model in the woods, but to explore the retrospective of Cunningham's work at the Getty Museum was exciting, particularly because of an interview that she recorded later in life and served as the audio commentary to a 1987 video documentary, *Portrait of Imogen*, directed by her granddaughter Meg Partridge.

Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite. Photo (c) Judy Dater 1974

Born in Portland, Oregon on April 12, 1883, Imogen tells that her father Isaac was “a humanist,” a Theosophist, did not care for the Christian religion, and the family rarely went to church on Sundays. When his teenage daughter was determined to become a photographer, and bought a 4×5 view camera in 1901, he built her a darkroom in the woodshed of their house in Seattle, Washington. Imogen had been named after the heroine of Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline*.

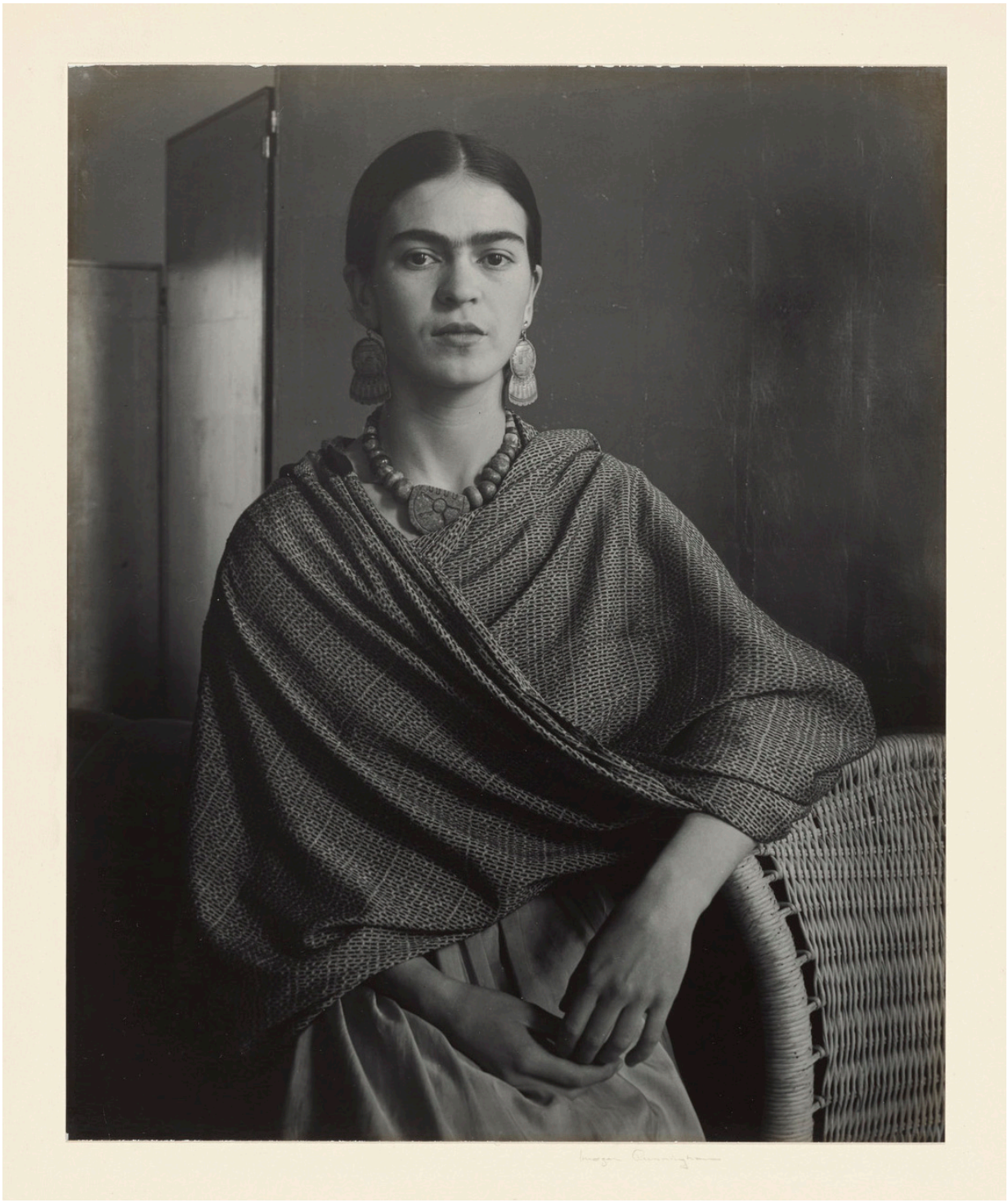
My Father at Ninety, 1936 © Imogen Cunningham Trust

In 1907 Imogen graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in chemistry, her thesis was titled “Modern Processes of Photography.”



Roi Partridge, Etcher, 1915 (c) Imogen Cunningham Trust

In 1915 she married artist Roi Partridge, after arranging an exhibit of his etchings at the Fine Arts Society in Seattle, in 1916 she took a series of nude photographs of her handsome young husband, and she was “condemned as an immoral woman.” She gave birth to three boys in two years, Gryffyd, then twins Rondal and Padraic.



Frida Kahlo Rivera, Painter, 1931 (c) Imogen Cunningham Trust

In 1917 the family moved to San Francisco, where Imogen started shooting still lifes of plants and flowers in her garden, which are still her most famous images. From 1920 they lived in Oakland where Roi taught art at Mills College. Imogen had a studio where she took portraits, and was sometimes sent down to Hollywood by *Vanity Fair* magazine to photograph movie stars, such as Spencer Tracy on the set and Cary Grant in his garden. She photographed artists like Frida Kahlo, writers like Gertrud Stein, photographers like Alfred Stiegliz, dancers like Martha Graham. Imogen said: “I took people’s portraits because they paid me, and I had to make a living, but I have always been glad of a certain amount of poverty.”

In 1932 Imogen Cunningham joined other Bay Area photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston in founding Group f/64, named after the smallest aperture of a large format view

camera, which resulted in sharp photographs with high depth of field, as opposed to the earlier Pictorialist style.

In 1934 her husband Roi divorced Imogen and would go on to marry two more wives. One of her sons, Rondal Partridge, became an assistant to Dorothea Lange and to Ansel Adams, then a photographer himself.

In 1958, when Imogen was 75, she started a project called *After Ninety*, as "visual research, straightforward studies of the way people are at the end of life." Those images would be published in 1977, a year after her death, on June 23, 1976.

Imogen Cunningham, San Francisco 1966 (c) Edmund Teske

My beloved photography teacher, Edmund Teske, photographed Imogen in San Francisco in 1966.

She didn't call herself a feminist, but in a 1975 interview with *Ms. Magazine* she said of the women's liberation movement: "I'm almost ready to join. Of course, I've always belonged."

(Featured photo: Self-Portrait with Elgin Marbles, London, 1909-10 © Imogen Cunningham Trust)

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