

# Famous Historical Photo Exhibit Coming to NTID

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The exhibition *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographers 1885 – 1920*, including 50 platinum prints by Frances S. and Mary E. Allen of idealized photographs of country scenes, figure and child studies, and landscapes of New England, California, and Great Britain are on display January 16-March 3 at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf's Dyer Arts Center on the campus of Rochester Institute of Technology.

The Allen sisters' photographs have literally been lost from view for most of the last century. Few people today have seen the depth and breadth of their work, although in 1901 they were praised as being among the foremost women photographers in America. After devoting several years to cataloging the close-to-8,500 original photographs and glass plate negatives, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts is sharing this extraordinary collection as a traveling exhibition.

Beginning in the 1880s, Frances Stebbins Allen (1854-1941) and Mary Electa Allen (1858-1941) of Deerfield, Massachusetts started working as photographers after progressive deafness obliged them to reassess their chosen vocation of teaching. Working within social and aesthetic reforms of the Arts and Crafts Movement, they found Old Deerfield's eighteenth-century houses and furnishings offered an ideal environment for their colonial re-creations, and their family and neighbors further accommodated them by donning period clothes to complete the pictures.

The Allens' earliest photographs appear in publications beginning in the 1890s. Books and magazine publishers readily commissioned the Allen sisters photographs of children, or costumed figures and country life realizing Colonial Revival interests in the past.

Although these romanticized visions of the past are the Allens' best-known photographs, Frances and Mary Allen also mastered less descriptive images with evocative compositions and use of light in the Pictorial style advocated by eminent photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. The Allens' artistic prints with contemplative images and exquisite tonal values were included in exhibitions such as *The Washington Salon and Art Photographic Exhibition, 1896*; *Third International Congress of Photography, Paris, 1900*; *Third Philadelphia Photographic Salon, 1900*; *Canadian Pictorialist Exhibition, Montreal, 1907*; and *Arts and Crafts 7th Annual Exhibition, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1908*.

A 1901 exhibition reviewer admirably wrote of Frances and Mary Allens' artistic vision: *The Misses Allen use their camera in the same spirit with which a painter uses his brush, and their sense of composition, of the dramatic moment, is as eminent a qualification for their art as for his. How greatly they improve in their craft is shown by their present exhibit of new work. Here are groups of portraits which are character studies, of figure compositions that are pictures, and of landscapes that are poetic. [The Home Arts of the Old Street," Springfield Daily Republican, 30 July 1901.]*

Between 1896 and 1916, the flourishing of the Arts and Crafts movement in Deerfield played a critical role in the Allen sisters' careers. Summer exhibitions, national press coverage, and large numbers of tourists provided the Allens with an audience not found in most rural towns. Connections to urban craft communities in Boston and Chicago through Madeline Yale Wynne and Ellen Gates Starr, as well as their friendship with the photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston in Washington, D.C., opened more doors for the Allen sisters. Their exceptional photographs kept those doors open.

The Allen sisters took their cameras with them on trips to Great Britain in 1908 and California in 1916, where they created majestic views quite unlike their New England landscapes. The Californian landscapes, arguably their most artistic prints, compose their last large body of work. Frances and Mary's active work in photography stopped around 1920, the date of their last catalogue, but they continued to sell photographs from their front parlor until 1935. For the last eleven years of her life, Frances was blind as well as deaf. The Allen sisters died within four days of each other in 1941.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book, *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographer 1885-1920*, written by Suzanne L. Flynt, which won the 2002 PNEA Book Prize, with a foreword by Naomi Rosenblum, author of *The History of Women Photographers* and *A World History of Photography*. More information can be found at: [www.deerfield-ma.org/allen.htm](http://www.deerfield-ma.org/allen.htm)