NICKOLAS MURAY'S COLLECTION
OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN ART

THE COVARRUBIAS CIRCLE

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THE ESSENTIAL TACT OF NICKOLAS MURAY

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The essential tact in daring is to know how far one can go too far.
JEAN COCTEAU, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*

Nickolas Muray's fine collection of work by Miguel Covarrubias and other Mexican artists now brings attention to its collector, whose career has for too long been obscure to historians of photography and art. His success as a master of color photography, advertising imagery, and commercial illustration and portraiture has made him difficult to place within the history of photography as a fine art. Like many commercial photographers who began their careers after World War I, Muray made his best pictures expressly for the printed pages of magazines. He worked for editors and advertisers, for mainstream magazines like *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*, and for luxury publications like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. From his earliest celebrity portraits of avant-garde dancers like Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham to his attention-grabbing color images of starlets smoking Lucky Strikes, Muray's talent lay in knowing just how far his images needed to go in order to look up-to-the-minute without ever crossing the line into the shocking or the difficult. But the same skill that earned him respect (and a very good income) during his lifetime now makes him, and his pictures, artifacts of the past. In 1973, when John Szarkowski looked at Muray's well-known 1927 black-and-white portrait of Babe Ruth (Figure 1), his admiration was colored by regret. Muray was an "excellent and dedicated" photographer, but never an innovator. In Szarkowski's eyes, Muray's choice of form and subject matter gave his images distinction, but he never seemed to transcend the moment; his pictures remain "wholly and contentedly of their time."[1]

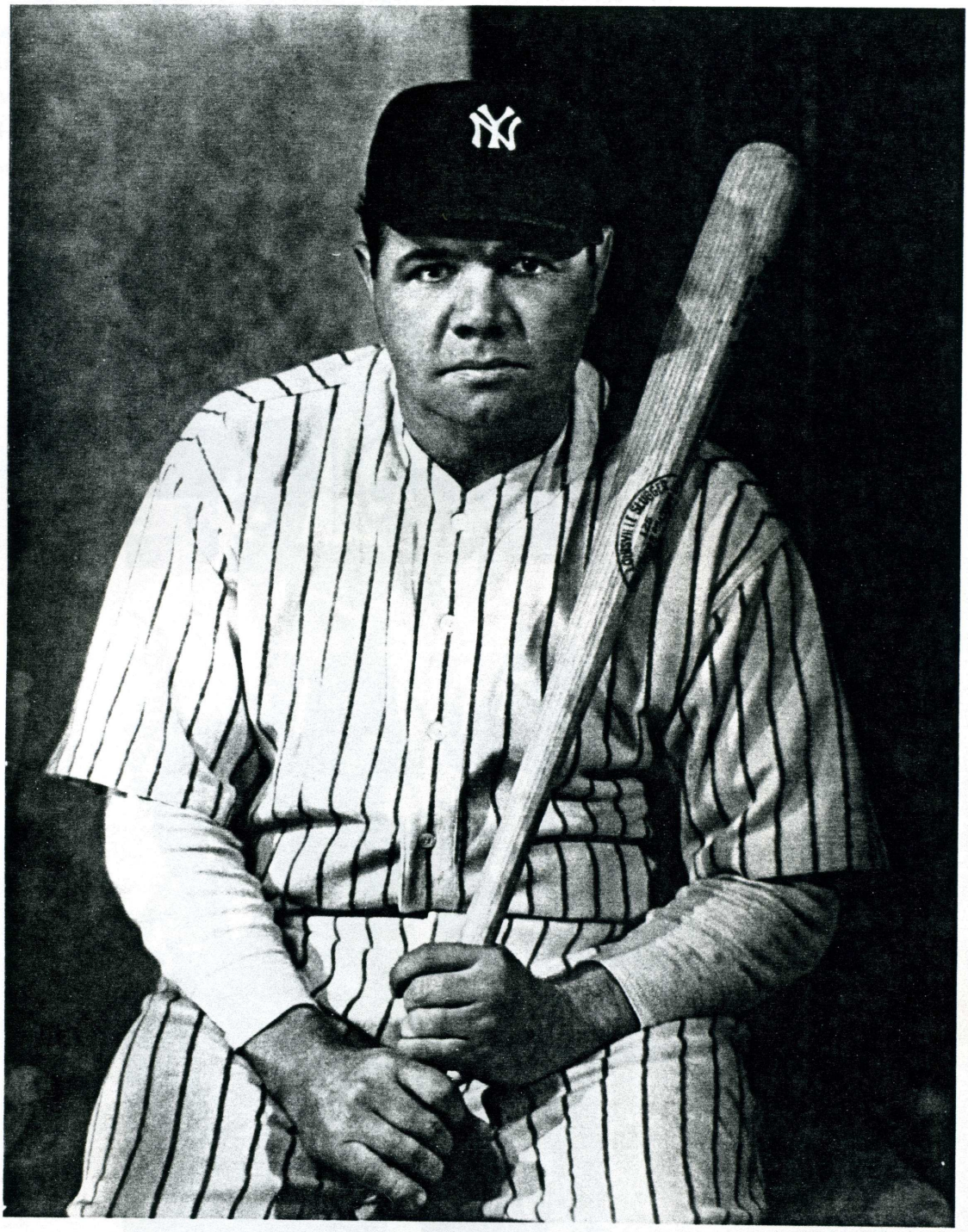

Figure 1. *Babe Ruth*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 36.1 x 28 cm. (14 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Muray's long and close friendship with artist Miguel Covarrubias moves his story from the mundane edge of photographic history to the middle of one of the most exciting periods in the history of American culture and art (Figure 2). Together, in the mid-1920s, Covarrubias the Mexican and Muray the Hungarian rode their youth, charm, talent, and ambition to social and commercial success. They met in 1923, thanks to novelist, essayist, and society figure Carl Van Vechten (Figure 3), through whom they (and most of New York) became acquainted with the stars of the Harlem Renaissance, including James Weldon Johnson, Paul Robeson, and Langston Hughes. According to at least one source, Van

Figure 2. *Miguel Covarrubias and Nickolas Muray,* by Nickolas Muray, ca. 1925. Silver gelatin photograph, 15.1 x 8.9 cm. (5 15/16 x 3½ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Vechten was responsible for Covarrubias's introduction to *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield (Figure 4), the connection which began his brilliant career at the magazine.[2] Muray, who had been working for Crowninshield since 1920, must have been another important connection.[3]

Muray and Covarrubias quickly became famous for Wednesday night parties held at Muray's studio on MacDougal Street, where their guests included Andrés Segovia, Sinclair Lewis, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Jean Cocteau, Walter Lippmann, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Heywood Broun, and a host of other writers, artists, and public figures. Muray and Covarrubias each portrayed many of these figures, though Muray was far more flattering in his approach. Both men worked in theater, on and off Broadway: Covarrubias designing sets, Muray photographing the performers, producers, and writers. In addition, Muray was a serious fan of modern dance and wrote reviews for *Dance* magazine, where his images also appeared. Around 1925 he introduced Covarrubias to one of his favorite models, the dancer Rose Rolanda, who became Rose Covarrubias in 1930.[4] Covarrubias in turn introduced Muray to the community of Mexican artists who entered New York art circles in the 1920s and 1930s, including Diego Rivera, José Orozco, David Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo, and Frida Kahlo. By 1931, Muray and Kahlo were lovers.[5]

From letters in the Nickolas Muray Papers collection at the Archives of American Art, we know that Muray helped Covarrubias secure sales and clients in New York and provided the occasional studio hideaway. Snapshots reveal that Muray and his family made frequent visits to Mexico. When Muray married for the fourth time in 1941, he vowed that Covarrubias would be godfather to his first child, and as a result, his daughter received an unusual name—Michael.

La Vie Bohème

Muray's best biographer is Katherine Ursula Parrott, a minor but prolific novelist (under the name Ursula Parrott) and a confessed "woman Mr. Muray has kissed." According to Parrott, Muray arrived from Hungary in 1913 "an engraver of experience, a photographer of enthusiasm . . . twenty-one, charming, but bad-tempered, unsophisticated, terrifically ambitious."[6] He got a steady job in the composing room of the *New York Journal-American* and lived in the Village because it was cheap. In a late interview, Muray called it "real Bohemian, none of the phony stuff you see and hear about."[7] Muray's friend and fencing partner, the sportswriter and novelist Paul Gallico, remembered it as a time of "vast cultural revolution, a time of emancipation from out-worn and out-moded ideas."[8]

Muray spent the wartime years dodging service in the Austro-Hungarian army, working for a time at a portrait studio in Chicago, learning English, and becoming a champion fencer. He married a Hungarian poet, Ilona Fulon, and joined the cluster of Hungarian artists and writers who found work in magazines, movies, book publishing, theater, and fashion design.[9] Everyone understood that these new opportunities came from the prosperous economy, or in Gallico's words, "those conditions always basic to any sudden cultural leap forward—peace, money, and leisure (Figure 5)."[10]

Figure 5. *Self-portrait*, by Nickolas Muray, ca. 1915. Silver gelatin photograph, 11.1 x 8.5 cm. (4⅜ x 3⅜ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

A contentious body of literature describes the shift in the culture of Greenwich Village at this time. Before World War I, the cheap apartments, bars, and restaurants in the narrow old streets around Washington Square provided a home for radical culture and politics. After the war, the Village became an established Bohemian neighborhood, with the requisite rising rent, picturesque shops, and speakeasies, where mostly middle-class people came to have a good time. (Some chroniclers, including Caroline Ware and Malcolm Cowley, suggest that this shift began even before the war.) By the mid-twenties, many of the political, moral, and aesthetic freedoms Villagers had campaigned for—relaxed codes of social and moral behavior, political equality for women, modern theater, art, music, and literature—had become part of everyday life throughout the country.

True, flocks of newcomers continued to land in the Village every day, hoping to escape the "stultifying effects of a civilization ruled by business." But, as Cowley and many others observed, these new arrivals often settled right back down to business, running "tea shops, antique shops, book shops, yes and bridge parlors, dance halls, nightclubs, and real-estate offices." Though more idealistic artists and writers struggled to maintain their unconventional lifestyle, in the end they too had to make a living and were often happy to sell fiction and art to high-paying magazines like *Collier's* or the *Saturday Evening Post*.[11] Still, the speakeasies, art galleries, shops, and theaters thrived. New generations, lured by the Village myth, rented the old, cheap apartments in the narrow streets. And, as Caroline Ware explains, however far the boundaries of convention stretched, or however conventional the Village became, it was "always the place where one could go farther."[12]

In the mid-thirties, in his memoir of Village life that formed the opening chapters of *Exile's Return*, Malcolm Cowley insisted that the post-war Bohemian Village was mostly a

myth, and that *"la vie Bohème"* had become, primarily, an excellent excuse to support the consumer economy. Bohemian ideals of "self-expression" encouraged the purchase of all sorts of new products no one had needed before: "modern furniture, beach pajamas, cosmetics, colored bathrooms with toilet paper to match."[13] Because Bohemians "lived for the moment,"[14] they were willing to buy now and pay later, making it easy to acquire expensive new consumer goods like radios and automobiles. In Cowley's view, the Bohemian claim of equality for women was mostly a means to double the potential buyers for products like cigarettes, which had long been used by men alone.[15] The rampant pursuit of pleasure got "a jolt of illicit glamour"[16] from the thrills of evading Prohibition, while newly discovered Freudian psychology gave a scientific license to the pursuit of desire. The Village myth, embodied by residents, tourists, and sympathizers, "gave form to [the new style of living], created its fashions, and supplied the writers and illustrators who would render them popular."[17]

Muray was one of these artists. In the teens he joined the New York Camera Club, where his pictures of dancers hung in a group show next to Paul Strand's studies with his Akeley camera. In 1919, Muray opened a studio on MacDougal Street, just south of Washington Square, and began to make his name. In Parrott's words, "One's friends from the old village were beginning to arrive[;] one's connections became influential. One began to arrive, too . . . ."[18] Gallico remembered that Muray was soon "*the* Village photographer and *a* Village character," happy to be famous for his fencing demonstrations and his Wednesday night parties.[19]

Muray's big break came in the form of a commission to photograph the children of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, an art patron and sculptor who had a studio on MacDougal Alley, around the corner from Muray's own studio (Figure 6). This commission led to an exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club, which impressed Frank Eaton, an editor at the *New York Tribune,* who in turn published a full page of Muray's pictures as part of a series on young photographers. The show also attracted Henry Blackman Sell, editor and art director of *Harper's Bazaar* (and a Village neighbor, with a house on Fourth Street). Sell asked Muray to drop by and gave him an assignment for a very good fee ($50 per page—enough to live on for a month).

From the start, the myth of the Village figured large in Muray's story. According to Eaton of the *Tribune,* Muray worked "in a quaint attic studio on MacDougal Street" and found inspiration "in the artist atmosphere of storied Washington Square."[20] The following year, four of Muray's portraits appeared in a *Vanity Fair* story on "The Apotheosis of Greenwich Village."[21] In *Harper's Bazaar,* Muray's portraits illustrated "The Beautiful Side of Greenwich Village."[22] The sophisticated *Harper's* acknowledged that the Village was mostly a "delightful state of mind," but offered Muray's portraits as proof that "many intelligent and hard-working artists" still lived around Washington Square, among them Paul Manship (Figure 7), Winold Reiss, Willa Cather, John Barrymore, and George Bellows.

The hundreds of images Muray published in the twenties, plus those in his archive (now on deposit at the International Museum of Photography and Film at George Eastman House), show that Muray's sitters were much like himself—competent, unpreten-

Figure 6. *Nickolas Muray's studio*, by Nickolas Muray, ca. 1920. Silver gelatin photograph, 23 x 19 cm. (9 x 7½ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archive, courtesy George Eastman House.

tious, successful professionals who cared more about pleasing the audience than they did about posterity. Yet was any audience ever again as open-minded, tolerant, and curious as the New Yorkers of the interwar years? One day they bought tickets for a melodrama by Susan Glaspell, the next for an expressionistic tragedy by Eugene O'Neill. The same folk who came to see modern artists like Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn happily lined up for the Greenwich Village Follies and watched a young dancer like Rose Rolanda swirl her Spanish shawls. Muray photographed many of the authors published by Horace Liveright, who made marketing history by using innovative advertising campaigns to sell everything from sensational fiction to serious literature by Ernest Hemingway, e. e. cummings, and Sigmund Freud.

The first critic to describe the period's convergence of popular culture, high art, and modernist innovation was Gilbert Seldes, who wrote *The Seven Lively Arts* in 1924 while on leave from *Vanity Fair.* Seldes believed that "entertainment of a high order existed in places not usually associated with Art, and the place where an object was to be seen or heard had no bearing on its merits."[23] He praised the Ziegfeld Follies, Krazy Kat cartoons,

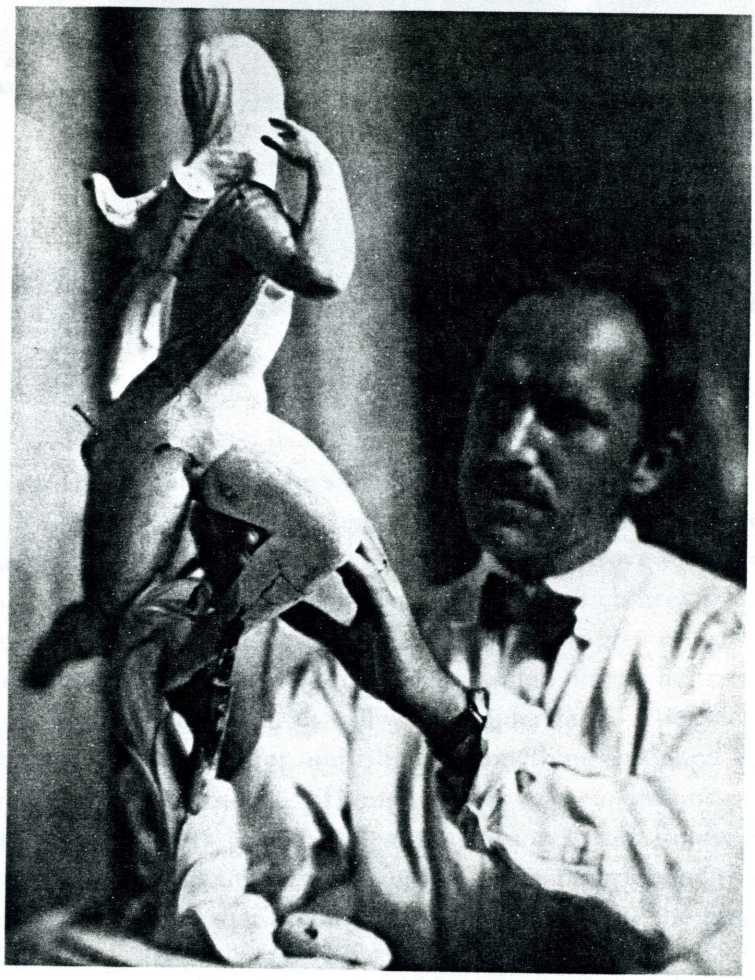

Figure 7. *Paul Manship,* by Nickolas Muray, 1918. Silver gelatin photograph, 36.1 x 28 cm. (14 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Figure 8. *Rose Rolanda as Mexican dancer,* by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 23.5 x 19.3 cm. (9¼ x 7⅝ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Gershwin's music, and Chaplin's humor, offering them as modern improvements on tired versions of "high" art, whether opera, oil painting, genteel waltzes, or Broadway melodrama. Above all, he praised any form of art that strove to represent the present, any works "which specifically refer to our moment, which create the image of our lives." Moreover, according to Seldes, the best work had the greatest value in the present, in the form of pictures, words, and performances "which no one before us could have cared for so much, which no one after us will wholly understand." Their beauty lay in their evanescent quality. "We require for nourishment something fresh and transient," he explained. "There must be ephemera."[24] Though Seldes never mentions photography in his pantheon of lively modern arts, it is clear that Muray's work fulfills the mandate—from the high value Muray's documents held for his contemporaries and the fleeting reputations of his sitters to the fact that his brilliant art was made for the fragile, forgettable printed pages of a magazine.[25]

Figure 9. *Hubert Stowitts,* by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. (10 x 8 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Seldes was a big fan of musical revues, whose stars included Rose Rolanda (Figure 8) and the "Serbian Desha,"[26] as well as many other dancers who came to Muray's studio. Muray also received considerable acclaim for his images of male dancers such as Ted Shawn and Hubert Stowitts (Figure 9). In a late memoir, Muray recalled that he first photographed dancers to impress Frank Crowninshield, for whom modern dance was a "pet project." Crowninshield immediately published one of Muray's barefoot dancers in a translucent costume, and Muray's reputation blossomed.

Today these images reveal the profoundly conservative nature of the aesthetics favored by Muray, Crowninshield, and *Vanity Fair.* The uninhibited (and undressed) poses, the slender bodies, beautiful according to the standards of a new generation, and the obvious pleasure these dancers take in performance all contrast with Muray's old-fashioned photographic style. His lens cannot focus sharply, and he applies Rembrandtesque shadows to add mystery. His dancers pose in exaggerated profile, recalling Egyptian hieroglyphs,

Figure 10. *Doris Humphrey*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 23.7 x 18.7 cm. (9⅜ x 7⅜ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

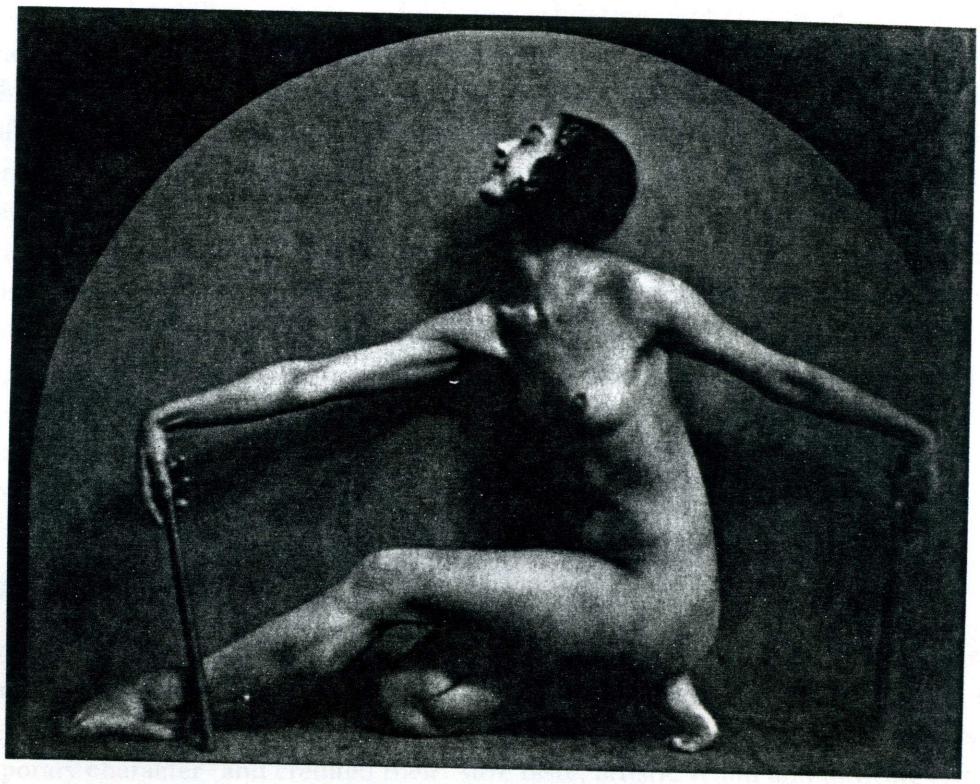

Figure 11. *Rose Rolanda as a nymph*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 18.4 x 23.6 cm. (7¼ x 9⅜ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Greek urns, art nouveau poster girls, or the popular archaic aesthetic exemplified by the work of his Village neighbor (and portrait subject) Paul Manship. Yet the images also stand up to scrutiny. When Muray photographs Doris Humphrey in a translucent veil, he creates an image far more arousing than any nude (Figure 10). Rose Rolanda's conventional pose of a classical nymph provides at once an advertisement and a shield for her sexual confidence (Figure 11).

In 1920, the conventions of popular erotic art got a jolt from Rolanda—called the "dancing sprite with a spark of wickedness"[27]—who, before marrying Covarrubias, lit up a series of revues on Broadway. Muray met Rolanda when publicity man Edward Bernays hired him to make some sexy but safe publicity shots of the cast of "The Rose Girl," a review about to go on national tour (the title was determined before Rolanda joined the road production, but her presence was so vivid that no one recalled her predecessor).[28] Muray remembered Rolanda's unique dance style as "partly Spanish, partly African, partly Mexican."[29] In 1925, when Covarrubias designed Mexican sets for a number in the Garrick Gaieties, Rolanda was hired to be the dancer, and together they stole the show. According to the *New York Times*, in place of the "usual over-swathed Spanish and Italian decoration" the dancer and setting conveyed a "direct sense of the dramatic and a sharp, hot power."[30]

In 1926, *Vanity Fair*'s editors put Nickolas Muray in their Hall of Fame, justifying their selection with a summary of his career: "Because . . . he began his career as a photogra-

pher in a Greenwich Village garret . . . he is now exhibiting photographs of international celebrities in New York . . . he is a skilled fencer and prizewinning athlete and finally because this portrait of him was made by his friend Edward Steichen."[31] (Alas, even in the midst of praise, Steichen cast his considerable shadow over Muray—and almost every other professional commercial photographer who worked during the middle decades of the twentieth century.)

Muray's Village days lasted barely a decade. Around 1925, he moved his studio to 50th Street, just east of Fifth Avenue. Covarrubias designed a series of ads for the new studio, using his trademark geometric style to create a caricature of Muray. As Parrott announced, "He had arrived . . . an incredible distance from Budapest, and almost as far in actuality from the studio on lower Fifth Avenue. He was a success . . . ."[32] This success came largely from his ability to capture Bohemian New York for a wide audience, one with plenty of money and time to spend on the search for pleasure.

Vanity Fair and Beyond

In 1923, *Vanity Fair* put Muray at the top of a select list of "Master American Portrait Photographers," along with Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Arnold Genthe, and six others—all from New York.[33] The magazine praised these "artists and visual chroniclers of contemporary character" and credited their "sure taste, artistic vision and untiring effort" for the wide recognition that *Vanity Fair* had achieved in its first decade.[34]

For most of the 1920s, *Vanity Fair* published Muray's celebrity photographs in nearly every issue. There were full-page portraits of important entertainers like Al Jolson (Figure 12), Eugene O'Neill, and Katharine Cornell (Figure 13), and smaller cameos, often of writers, including D. H. Lawrence, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald (Figure 14), Elinor Wylie (Figure 15), and Franklin P. Adams. In 1926, the magazine sent Muray abroad on an exclusive assignment to photograph portraits of international celebrities such as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Claude Monet, meetings that Muray proudly recalled for the rest of his life. The following year *Vanity Fair* sent Muray to make portraits of President Coolidge and his wife Grace at the White House, where he got surprisingly good results. Muray's last big assignment for *Vanity Fair* was in 1929, when he went to Hollywood to photograph Norma Shearer, Myrna Loy, and Joan Crawford, as well as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, performing together for the first time in *Taming of the Shrew.*

By the end of the twenties, Edward Steichen had moved onto the Condé Nast payroll as a photographer for both *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue,* and photographic fashion had shifted away from the soft shadows Muray favored toward brighter images with a crisp, hard edge. Although Muray quickly took up the new style, he grew restless, and after 1925, when he left the Village to move uptown, his commercial career picked up momentum.

Frank Crowninshield wrote an essay for a brochure promoting Muray's new studio, praising his work for its "great technical mastery, disarming honesty, and very considerable degree of beauty." He also endorsed Muray's personal sincerity: "There is nothing of

Figure 12. *Al Jolson*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 36.1 x 28 cm. (14 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Figure 13. *Katharine Cornell*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 36.1 x 28 cm. (14 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Figure 14. *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, by Nickolas Muray, 1930. Silver gelatin photograph, 26.1 x 33.7 cm. (10¼ x 13⅜ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Figure 15. *Elinor Wylie*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 36.1 x 28 cm. (14 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

Figure 16. *Vanity Fair lingerie advertisement*, by Nickolas Muray, undated. Silver gelatin photograph, 23.5 x 18.5 cm. (9¼ x 7⅜ in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

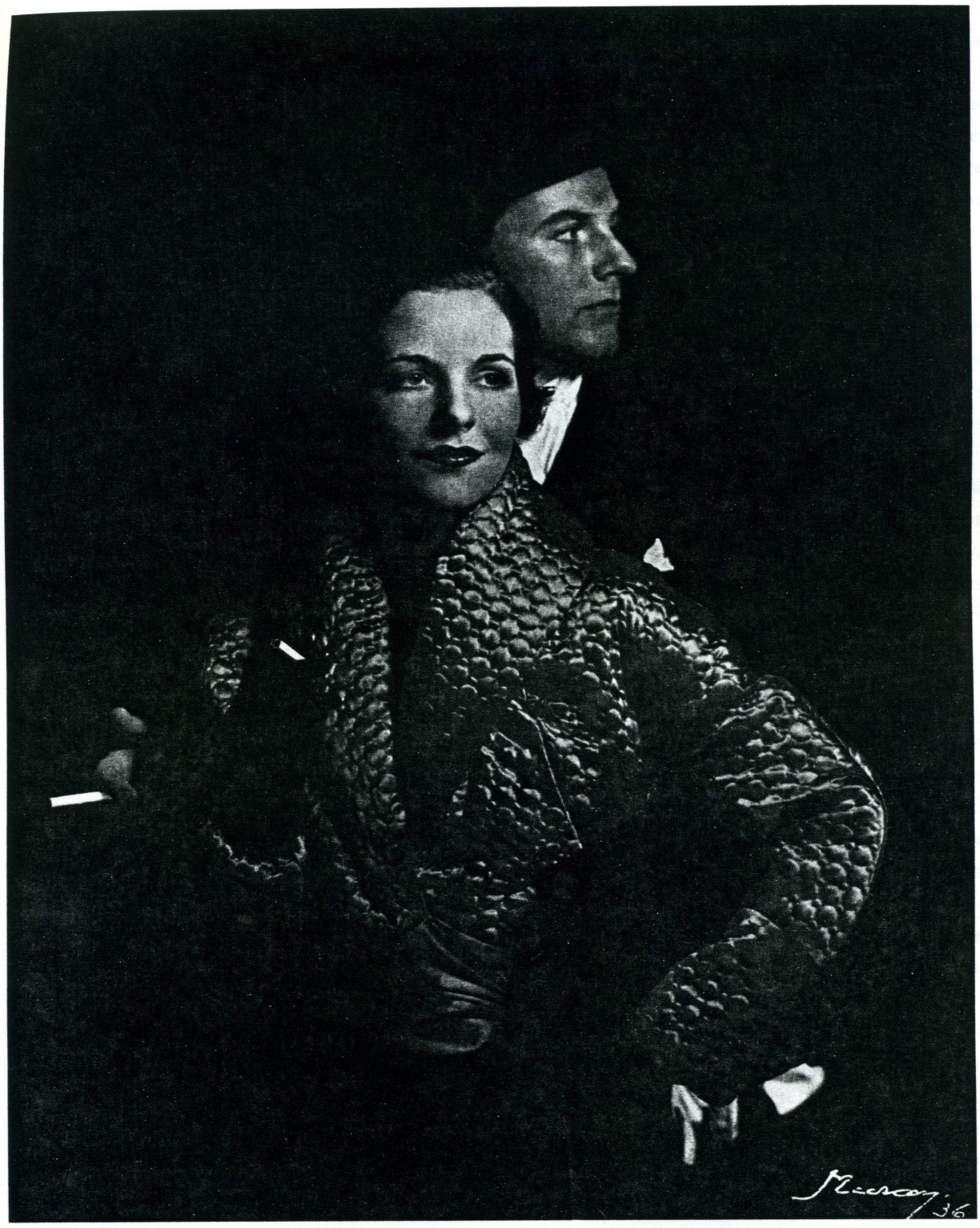

Figure 17. *Lucky Strike girl*, by Nickolas Muray, 1936. Color print, assembly (carbro) process, 35.4 x 28 cm. (13 15/16 x 11 in.). © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives, courtesy George Eastman House.

the charlatan in Muray, or in his work, nothing of the poseur, nothing of the man who likes to dim, sugar or distort Life."[35] Many shared Crowninshield's confidence in the "truthfulness" of Muray's pictures—undoubtedly an asset for any advertiser (Figure 16). Throughout the Depression, Muray worked steadily for advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson and Barton, Durstine, & Osborn, and department stores including Macy's, Lord & Taylor, Henri Bendel, and Bergdorf Goodman. His most memorable advertisements were made for Lucky Strike cigarettes, when his old friend Edward Bernays hired Muray to photograph slim starlets to illustrate the slogan, "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet" (Figure 17).[36]

In 1930, Muray spent several months in Europe studying the difficult new technology required to print photographs in color. The following June, his two large tableaux devoted to Hollywood swimwear appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, the first full-page color photographs to appear in that magazine and among the first to appear in any magazine in America.[37] Muray quickly signed a contract and worked steadily for the *Journal* and *McCall's* through the end of World War II.

Did Muray lose status when he moved from *Vanity Fair* to *Ladies' Home Journal*? At the time, the move seemed both lucky and smart. In 1934, *Vanity Fair* called women's magazines "the most powerful group of periodicals in America." Readers were loyal, and sales were so healthy that "even in these lean-wallet days" the top five magazines for women claimed more than ten million readers.[38] (By contrast, circulation for *Vanity Fair* never exceeded 100,000 a year, and in 1936 the magazine folded.)

In 1934, *Vanity Fair* featured Muray's photographs in a story about "a new art form . . . Commercial Photography." The story highlighted the work of twenty photographers, including Margaret Bourke-White, Anton Bruehl, Lejaren a Hiller, and Steichen, as well as Muray. This new photographic genre conformed to the criteria editor Frank Crowninshield associated with success: it was born in New York and centered around the work of irreverent artists who ignored old-fashioned scruples, made money, pleased the public, and produced beautiful images all at the same time. Commercial photography was the creation of "renegades," whose financial prowess caused "arty" photographers to sulkily accuse them of "selling their souls." While these commercial photographers daily managed "to twist silk hats and steamships into patterns attractive to the consumer," they also "clung quietly to their integrity."[39]

Historian Ann Douglas and many others point out that Muray's contemporaries—both artists and their audience—were happy to find success on these terms. In the decades between the wars, public opinion tolerated—even approved of—close connections between leading artists, writers, and publishers and the world of advertising, magazines, and popular entertainment. Thus, Muray's work did not "represent an artistic compromise or sell out . . . though some . . . later saw it that way."[40]

Photography 1839–1937

Throughout the 1930s, Muray's color photographs appeared in large exhibitions organized by professional groups such as the National Association of Advertising Illustrations (NAII), the Commercial Artists Guild, and *U.S. Camera* magazine. These photographic exhibitions took place in prestigious public spaces, including Rockefeller Center and the galleries at Grand Central Station, and received wide reviews. Photographs in color—a relative novelty—attracted the most notice.

In 1934, the NAII show comprised more than 250 images, mostly of industrial subjects; the star was color photography, "which must come to the layman as a revelation."[41] In 1936, the Commercial Artists Guild held an exhibition in the Grand Central Palace featuring color illustration and advertising images by Steichen, Muray, Bruehl, and others, much of it first published in magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar.* Across town, at the Rockefeller Center, *U.S. Camera* magazine and the camera and film manufacturer Ansco sponsored their second annual competitive exhibition for amateurs and professionals, featuring 600 images by 175 photographers chosen from 10,000 submissions.[42] According to the *Christian Science Monitor,* color photography stood out here too, especially the "brilliant and lifelike" work of Muray, which included one irresistible image of a "sizzling steak."[43]

In 1937, when Beaumont Newhall mounted "Photography 1839–1937" at the Museum of Modern Art, he certainly broke new ground, yet his show can be seen as one of a nearly continuous series of exhibitions mounted in New York in the 1930s. Newhall wanted his show, like the others, to celebrate "the technical improvements which have been made in photography during the course of its existence [and which] have enlarged the camera's uses enormously." In addition, he sought to develop a set of aesthetic criteria, a "common denominator" that could be used to judge all photographs. Using a sophisticated modernist argument, Newhall carefully showed how the aesthetic content of a photograph came from its technical form, with the result that the key to the best photographs "lies in the photographer's knowledge of his medium." Newhall sought to show that all photographs were both documents and expressive records, conveying not only information about the subject but also the emotions and ideas of the photographer. "Our ways of looking change; the photograph not only documents a subject, but records the vision of a person and a period."[44]

Newhall's exhibition was divided into a number of sections. The historical photographs were organized by medium: daguerreotypes, calotypes, albumen prints, and dry plates. Contemporary photographs were divided by function. Many were created by photographers who considered themselves artists and their work art, including Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Man Ray, and Moholy-Nagy. Newhall also celebrated images by photographers who found their audience outside museums, exhibiting X rays, aerial photographs, industrial prints, press photographs, and photographs made as scientific evidence. "Color Photography" received a section of its own. It was partly a technological marvel (like the advances in the photographic process during the nineteenth century), and partly an occasion to celebrate another aesthetic triumph. Newhall refrained from comment and chose the best images he

could find, by the nation's most prominent color photographers: Edward Steichen contributed a portrait of Rachmaninoff, Paul Outerbridge showed a still-life titled "Cheese and Crackers," Anton Bruehl exhibited a "Fashion Plate," and Muray was represented by both "Opera Box," commissioned by Young & Rubicam for the Packard Motor Company, and "Vienna Sausage," made for J. Walter Thompson.[45]

Love Letters

Katherine Ursula Parrott, in her biographic essay on Muray, devoted an entire section to "Women and Mr. Muray," a melancholy defense of a man who has "ecstasy to rent to you, but not happiness on a long term basis." The most interesting passages discuss the way "Bohemian" social codes of the twenties had changed the life of the "modern female." For Parrott, "the responsibility of being a modern female" meant that she spent most of her waking hours simply being "a person. More than a female. One has one's job—and theaters and books and concerts . . ." In Parrott's view, the modern woman treats men as "just occasional companions." However, while this new role is thrilling, Parrott admits it is difficult to maintain, and in the end the modern female gets no more help than her non-modern sisters. Muray—and men like him—"persist in treating you as people, [they know] you are of identical clay with themselves . . . They will try to understand you [and] give you sincerity, tenderness, a relationship never sordid or commonplace—for a time that is. For the future they can promise—nothing whatever."[46]

Muray's many lovers included several women who had important careers: Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Judith Anderson, and Frida Kahlo among them. He saved some of their letters. Most are emotional and endearing declarations which sound terribly familiar to anyone who has ever been in love.[47]

Kahlo's letters say more. No records show precisely when they met, but Kahlo's earliest surviving note to Muray, written in Hungarian on a paper doily, comes from Mexico and is dated May 31, 1931, soon after Diego Rivera's first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Muray and Kahlo remained friends for life.[48] On many occasions, Kahlo told Muray she loved him intensely, "like I never loved anyone—only Diego will be in my heart as close as you—always."[49]

Muray received an especially interesting group of letters from Kahlo during the late winter, early spring, and summer of 1939, following a winter they spent together in New York. In February 1939, shortly after arriving in Paris, she wrote:

> Don't kiss any body else while reading the signs and names on the streets. Don't take any body else for a ride to *our* Central Park. It belongs only to Nick and Xochitl. Don't kiss any body on the couch of your office . . . Play very often Maxine Sullivan's disc on the gramophone. I will be *there with you* listening to her voice . . . I see you shooting at the sculpture near the fireplace . . . and I can hear your laugh just like a child's laugh, when you got it right. Oh my darling Nick I adore you so much . . .[50]

In June, back in Mexico, she received a print of the color carbro portrait he had made, now known as "The Magenta *Rebozo*" (see page 49):

> Nick darling
>
> I got my wonderful picture you send to me, I find it even more beautiful than in New York. Diego says that it is as marvelous as a Piero de la Francesca. To me [it] is more than that, it is a treasure, and besides, it will allways remind me that morning we had breakfast together in the Barbizon Plaza Drug Store and afterwards we went to your shop to take photos. This one was one of them. And now I have it near me. You will allways be inside the magenta rebozo (on the left side). Thanks million times for sending it . . . the only thing I want, is to tell you with my best words, that . . . no matter what happens to us in life, you will allways be, for myself, the same Nick I met one morning in New York in 18 E. 48th St.[51]

The most important information to be gleaned from the correspondence comes in letters Kahlo wrote from Paris in February, March, and April 1939 as she waited for the opening of a group exhibition of surrealist art organized by André Breton, which was the reason for her trip. She wasn't happy. When Kahlo arrived, Breton had yet to find a gallery for the show, her paintings were stuck in customs, and worst of all, she had to spend two weeks in the hospital with an intestinal virus. Marcel Duchamp—she wrote Muray that he was "a marvelous painter"[52]—came to her rescue, retrieved her art, found a gallery, and even brought her back to his apartment to recover after she left the hospital. According to Kahlo, Duchamp was "the only one who has his feet on the earth, among all this bunch of coocoo lunatic son of bitches of the surrealists."[53]

Kahlo's harsh, funny account of Breton and his friends makes an intuitive connection between work, sex, and politics. Diego and Muray receive money for their work, a position that Kahlo associates with both virility and aesthetic power. Kahlo ridicules Breton and his disciples, who spend so much time talking in cafés and so little time making art. But she saves her strongest objections for Breton's economic status: in her view, he is weak because he produces little art and depends wholly upon the support of rich women. His café life seemed especially irresponsible when the rest of Europe could think of nothing but the coming war. As Kahlo moves quickly from her immediate experience of Paris to the larger world situation, her report exposes a serious flaw at the foundation of modernist aesthetic practice:

> I have decided to send every thing to hell, and scram from this rotten Paris before I get nuts myself. You have no idea the kind of bitches these people are. They make me vomit. They are so damn "intelectual" and rotten that I can't stand them any more. It is really too much for my character. I['d] rather sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas than to have any thing to do with those "artistic" bitches of Paris. They sit for hours on the "cafes" warming their precious behinds, and talk without stopping about "culture" "art" "revolution" and so on and so forth, thinking themselves the gods of the

> world, dreaming the most fantastic nonsenses, and poisoning the air with theories and theories that never come true. Next morning they don't have any thing to eat in their houses because *none of them work* and they live as parasites of[f] the bunch of rich bitches who admire their "genius" . . . *Shit* and only *Shit* is what they are. I [have] never seen Diego or you wasting their time on stupid gossip and "intelectual" discussions. That is why you are real *men* and not lousy "artists"—gee weez! It was worthwhile to come here only to see why Europe is rottening. Why all this people—good for nothing—are the cause of all the Hitlers and Mussolinis.[54]

When Frida Kahlo aligns Muray's photography with Rivera's public art, she overturns many conventional assumptions about the aesthetic and political merit of advertising and commercial photography. In her view, the work of photographers like Muray belongs with that of Rivera because it is meant to be seen by a broad audience, not merely a tiny elite. In addition, Muray and Rivera are paid for their art, which Kahlo sees as a virtue—though more conventional modernists (Alfred Stieglitz, for example) considered all payment a form of corruption because it forced the artist to compromise his work to please the patron. In many ways, Kahlo's ability to evaluate commercial photography according to its audience, its public utility, and its value to the marketplace anticipates the vision of postmodern critics of the 1980s, such as Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau.[55]

Today, with *Vanity Fair* back in business and portraits by Annie Leibowitz and caricatures by Bob Risko back in fashion, it has become easier to see and enjoy the humorous, colorful, celebrity-driven art of Nick Muray, with its conservative vision of Bohemian New York and its persuasive use of color to sell new and old commodities. At the same time, however, Kahlo's words offer a cautionary message. As I write in New York in the summer of 2003, daily headlines are full of sobering news from Iraq, Israel, and Afghanistan. It is impossible not to wonder how we might resemble Kahlo's Parisian colleagues, or the first viewers of Muray's work. When future generations look at the new *Vanity Fair,* what will they learn about us?

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Notes

1. John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 90. Muray appears in many biographical dictionaries such as the *ICP Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1984), 348; and *Macmillan Biographical Encyclopedia of Photographic Artists and Innovators* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1983), 438. Information also appears on the Web site of the Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, at http://www.hrc.utexas.edu. See also Therese Mulligan and David Wooters, eds., *Photography from 1839 to Today: George Eastman House, Rochester, NY* (New York: Taschen, 2000), 554–559; and Marianne Fulton Margolis, introduction to *Muray's Celebrity Portraits of the Twenties and Thirties*, by Nickolas Muray (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).
2. Carl Van Vechten remains a greatly understudied figure. On Covarrubias and Crowninshield, see "The Last Gentleman," *New Yorker*, September 19, 1942, 22–33; and September 26, 1942, 24–31.
3. Though sources for Muray's early life vary in the details, they remain consistent about the places and people he and Covarrubias knew in the twenties. See especially Paul Gallico, "The Revealing Eye" and "Memento Muray," in *The Revealing Eye: Personalities of the 1920s in Photographs*, by Nickolas Muray and Paul Gallico (New York: Atheneum, 1978), v–xxv. Muray wrote several autobiographical texts, all of which can be found in the Nickolas Muray Papers collection at the Smithsonian Institute's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. Ann Shumard added much depth and detail to the record by uncovering many contemporary articles and reviews.
4. Rose Rolanda Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.
5. Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias*, ed. Doris Ober (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). See also Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
6. Katherine Ursula Parrott, "A Profile (but not for the *New Yorker*, just for one New Yorker)," Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., roll 4392, frames 0861–0870.
7. Jacob Deschin, "Nickolas Muray, Time Out for Lunch," *Popular Photography* 57, October 1965, 116.
8. Gallico, *The Revealing Eye*, viii.
9. Though their names are not familiar today, Hungarians prominent in New York in the 1920s included illustrator Willy Pogany, playwright Ferenc Molnar, and the *New Yorker* artist Ilonka Karasz.
10. Gallico, *The Revealing Eye*, ix.
11. This and the immediately preceding quotations refer to Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934; repr., New York: Viking Press, 1951), 58–59. Citations refer to the 1951 edition.
12. Caroline Ware, *Greenwich Village 1920–1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 263.
13. Cowley, *Exile's Return*, 62.
14. Ibid.
15. Ware observed that consequences of the claims for equal rights often penalized liberated women, who ended up supporting the household while their husbands or partners remained true to old Bohemian ideals and devoted themselves to "Art." Ware, *Greenwich Village 1920–1930*, 258–261.
16. Cowley, *Exile's Return*, 64.
17. Ibid., 62–63.
18. Parrott, "A Profile," roll 4392, frames 0861–0870.
19. Gallico, *The Revealing Eye*, xvi.
20. Frank Eaton, "Nickolas Muray," *New York Tribune*, April 11, 1920.
21. "The Apotheosis of Greenwich Village: Muses of New York's so-called *Quartier Latin*, who have achieved the Highest Distinction in the Arts," *Vanity Fair*, February 1921, 37.

22. "The Beautiful Side of Greenwich Village," *Harper's Bazaar,* September 1920, 66–67.
23. Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924; repr. New York: Anchor Books, 1957), 3. Citations refer to the 1957 edition.
24. This and the immediately preceding quotations are from Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts,* 293.
25. This argument follows Ann Douglas's in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the* 1920s (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 69. See also Seldes's introduction and notes to the 1957 edition of *The Seven Lively Arts,* and Michael Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
26. "The Serbian Desha" was the stage name of Desha Delteil.
27. *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], untitled, undated, in the Rose Rolanda Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.
28. "The Dancer's Brain Is Not in Her Feet," undated, in the Rose Rolanda Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.
29. Nickolas Muray, "Untitled Memoir [on Dance Photography]," Nickolas Muray Papers, autobiographical texts, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
30. Stark Young, *New York Times,* June 7, 1925, in the Rose Rolanda Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.
31. "We Nominate for the Hall of Fame," *Vanity Fair,* December 1926, 99.
32. Parrott, "A Profile," roll 4392, frames 0861–0870.
33. "Master American Portrait Photographers," *Vanity Fair,* January 1923, 54; and "Laurel Crowns—Freshly Bestowed," *Vanity Fair,* April 1925, 66. The others were Francis Brugière, Pirie MacDonald, Edward Thayer Monroe, Alfred Cheney Johnston, Maurice Goldberg, and James E. Abbe.
34. "Master American Portrait Photographers," *Vanity Fair,* 54. Was this an oblique reference to the fact that wide prestige did not generate deep profits for publisher Condé Nast? See also George H. Douglas, *The Smart Magazines: Fifty Years of Literary Revelry and High Jinks at Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Life, Esquire, and the Smart Set* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991).
35. Frank Crowninshield, "A Word about Artistic Photography," Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., roll 4393, frame 0412ff.
36. On the Lucky Strike campaign, see Edward Bernays, *Biography of an Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 372–398; Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Crown, 1998), 23–25; and Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 96–100.
37. The best single source on the development of color photography is Louis Walton Sipley, *A Half Century of Color* (New York: Macmillan, 1951). On Muray's first color layout for *Ladies' Home Journal,* see pages 87–89.
38. This information and the immediately preceding quotations are from Dora Copperfield [pseudonym], "The Women's Magazines," *Vanity Fair,* January 1934, 22.
39. This and the immediately preceding quotations refer to "Commercial Photography," *Vanity Fair,* December 1934, 22–23.
40. Douglas, *Terrible Honesty,* 68.
41. *New York Times,* September 15, 1934, 13; *New York Times,* September 23, 1934, X8. I am deeply grateful to Ann Shumard for tracking down these reviews.
42. "Through a Lens," *New York Times,* November 8, 1936, X9.
43. "Color Photographs Hold Spotlight at New York Exhibit," *Christian Science Monitor,* October 9, 1936, 8.
44. This and the immediately preceding quotations are from Beaumont Newhall, *Photography* 1839–1937 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 90.
45. Ibid., 121.

46. This and the immediately preceding quotations are from Parrott, "A Profile," roll 4392, frames 0861–0870.
47. We know this thanks to Mrs. Peggy Muray, who kept the letters and gave them to the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art along with her husband's papers.
48. Mimi Muray remembers going to Mexico with her parents to visit Kahlo shortly before the artist's death. Mimi Muray, in conversation with the author, June 2003.
49. Kahlo to Muray, Paris, February 16, 1939. Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
50. Kahlo to Muray, Paris, February 27, 1939. Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
51. Kahlo to Muray, Coyoacán, Mexico, June 13, 1939. Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
52. Kahlo to Muray, February 16, 1939.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau are among the critics closely associated with the postmodernist movement that flourished in the 1980s. See especially Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Media and Society Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Useful and important collections of essays include Richard Bolton, ed., *Context of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) and Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York and Boston: The New Museum and David R. Godine, 1984).