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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**NEW EXHIBITION MARKS A CENTURY OF FREDERICK SOMMER'S INFLUENCE  
ON AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY  
Part of the Getty's *American Visions* series**

***The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute*  
At the Getty Center, May 10–September 4, 2005**

*"...through photography I have a knowledge of things that can't be found."*

— Frederick Sommer

LOS ANGELES—One of the most venerated American photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Sommer (1905–1999) expanded the conventional definitions of photography with his bold, experimental vision. This was marked by his radical move towards cameraless photographs, and his cross-fertilization of the medium with drawing, sculpture, music, and philosophy. ***The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute***, at the Getty Center, May 10–September 4, 2005, looks back at the achievements of this influential innovator on the centenary of his birth. The exhibition features 37 photographs selected from the Getty's collection, which contains the most important art museum holding of photographs by Sommer.

***The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute*** is part of *American Visions*, a sequence of four exhibitions featuring works by some of the country's preeminent practitioners drawn from the Getty Museum's renowned photographs collection. Together, the exhibitions offer insight into 75 years of photographic innovation, exploring the medium's versatility as a new creative language used to document reality and as a means for artistic expression. The

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Sommer presentation will be on view concurrently with *Three Roads Taken: The Photographs of Paul Strand*, offering a rare opportunity to explore and contrast the almost parallel growth of two very different creative sensibilities. In September, *American Visions* will focus on photojournalism with *Scene of the Crime: Photo by Weegee* and *Pictures for the Press*, featuring sometimes sensational tabloid pictures by the great crime photographer Weegee and memorable news images recording key events in American history from the 1940s to the 1970s.

In a long and influential career that spanned seven decades, Sommer pushed photography into new territory with his endless search for new ideas and expressions. Sommer created paintings, drawings, and collages; composed musical scores; and mastered photography. He saw his work as a reflection of his own living, an expression of the sum of his evolving knowledge and body of experience. He was drawn to the subtle range of gray tones achievable with silver-rich photographic materials, and with the practice of contact printing—making prints the same size as the negatives. In the 1950s he developed a process of painting on glass to create cameraless negatives. Later he experimented with other processes such as cliché verre, paint on cellophane, and smoke on foil. He would paint oil or deposit smoke from a candle onto a transparent surface and then place it in an enlarger to create “negatives” of his abstract compositions. The resulting images are filled with mystery and poetry. Designed only for use as negatives, he typically destroyed these transparent paintings after realizing a satisfactory print.

Influenced by his love of natural forms and informed by the principles of Surrealism, Sommer's work centered on imagination and transformation. He reveled in making people see one thing in the shape of another. In a photograph of an Arizona landscape, Sommer avoids the postcard convention of expansive vistas and scenic beauty. Instead, he isolates an austere, rocky hillside peppered with vegetation, and reduces it to a pattern of seemingly repetitious forms. Devoid of human scale, the image denies a single point of focus and seems to exercise the very act of seeing, calling into question what is considered worth looking at. In a series featuring chicken parts discarded by his local butcher, Sommer manages to offer

images of visceral beauty. Shot from close vantage points against a pristine white background, the mutilated parts are arranged for the camera in a kind of parody of the classical still life.

Over the years Sommer also collected scraps of billboard posters, children's toys, patches of torn wallpaper, fragments of rusted metal, and a host of other castoffs, which he would study and assemble to arrive at combinations of elements that seem to connect, complete, and expand his vision. His photograph *Valise d'Adam* consists of an unlikely configuration of disparate artifacts precisely arranged to suggest some dramatic, totemic figure from a long-lost civilization. The exhibition will include three such artifacts Sommer collected, in relation to the photographs he made of them.

Sommer's photographs are the embodiment of his love of ideas and represent his constant investigation into new ways to extend what he referred to as "the margin of the unknown, which is much more friendly than we can know." His photographs do not simply describe and classify their subjects, they display an investigative attitude that invites focused consideration from viewers, challenging them to abandon the limits of their knowledge and enter an unknown world.

### Biography

Frederick Sommer was born in Angri, Italy, in 1905, and raised in Brazil. He learned to draw at an early age and assisted his father as a draftsman in the design of parks and gardens in Rio de Janeiro. In 1925, he was accepted as a graduate student at Cornell University on the strength of his portfolio and his skills in four languages (Italian, German, Portuguese, and French). He went on to pursue a successful career as a landscape architect until 1930, when he contracted tuberculosis. After recuperating in Europe, Sommer returned to the United States, eventually settling in Prescott, Arizona, where he lived for the next six decades, becoming a citizen in 1939.

In the 1930s, Sommer spent the majority of his time drawing and painting. Gradually, he turned his attention more fully to photography and began to practice the art in earnest. In 1938, Sommer acquired an eight-by-ten-inch Century Universal

view camera, which he used to try to match the rigor, precision, and sense of spaciousness that he had seen in the photographs of both Edward Weston and the painter-photographer Charles Sheeler. He spent the war years exploring the various desert landscapes he found in Arizona and Utah. In the late 1940s, he began incorporating found objects and backgrounds into his works. His experimentation reached new heights in the 1950s when he developed his breakthrough technique of making synthetic, or cameraless negatives. The first synthetic negatives were made with paint on cellophane in 1957, followed by smoke on cellophane in 1961 and smoke on glass in 1962.

Although working outside the urban centers of mainstream art and living in Arizona, Sommer hardly lived in isolation. He traveled regularly, and his home in Arizona became a destination for artists, students, collectors, and friends, including the German painter Max Ernst. Sommer continued to experiment and teach in the decades that followed, producing artistic works until the year before his death in January 1999 at age of 93.

#### **RELATED EXHIBITIONS**

##### ***Three Roads Taken: The Photographs of Paul Strand***

May 10–September 4, 2005

This exhibition explores the development of the aesthetic of Paul Strand (American, 1890–1976) as he sought to express the principles of modern art through photography, convey a sense of place, and create truthful portraits of people. Drawn from the Getty Museum's collection, the exhibition presents more than 70 of his photographs, including his Cubist-inspired still lifes, experimental New Mexico landscapes, and heroicizing portraits from Italy and Scotland. These exquisite photographs are presented along with a continual screening of Strand's experimental short film *Manhatta*. The exhibition coincides with the Getty's publication of *In Focus: Paul Strand*.

#### **RELATED EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS**

All events are free and are held in the Harold M. Williams Auditorium, unless otherwise noted. Seating reservations are required. For reservations and information, please call 310-440-7300 or visit [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu). Tickets are available on-site or by phone.

### **CURATOR'S GALLERY TALK**

Wednesday, June 1, 1:30 p.m., Museum Galleries

Julian Cox, associate curator of photographs, the J. Paul Getty Museum, leads a gallery talk on the exhibition. No reservations required. Meet under the stairs in the Museum Entrance Hall.

### **PERFORMANCE**

*Consent to Gravity*

Saturday, June 4, 8:00 p.m.

Join us for an evening with contemporary ballet troupe Island Moving Company as they perform "Consent to Gravity," blending music, dance, and visual acoustics into a singular, dramatic form. The piece is inspired by the art and writing of Frederick Sommer, who believed all art forms are interconnected. Tickets are \$20, students/seniors \$15.

### **POINT-OF-VIEW TALKS**

Friday, June 24, 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. in the Exhibitions Pavilion.

Pioneering Los Angeles photographer Robbert Flick talks about the exhibition *The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute*, exploring how Sommer's work "sets up a deep resonance that extends far beyond the frame of what is depicted." Sign up at the Museum Information Desk beginning at 4:30 p.m. the day of the talks.

**Note to editors: Images available on request.**

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**The J. Paul Getty Trust** is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that includes the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Foundation. The J. Paul Getty Trust and its programs are based at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

#### **Visiting the Getty Center:**

The Getty Center is open Tuesday through Thursday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. It is closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to the Getty Center is always free. Parking is available for \$7; no reservation required. Reservations are required for event seating and groups of 15 or more. Please call 310-440-7300 (English or Spanish) for reservations and information. The TTY line for callers who are deaf or hearing impaired is 310-440-7305.

**Additional information is available on the Getty Web site at [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu).**