

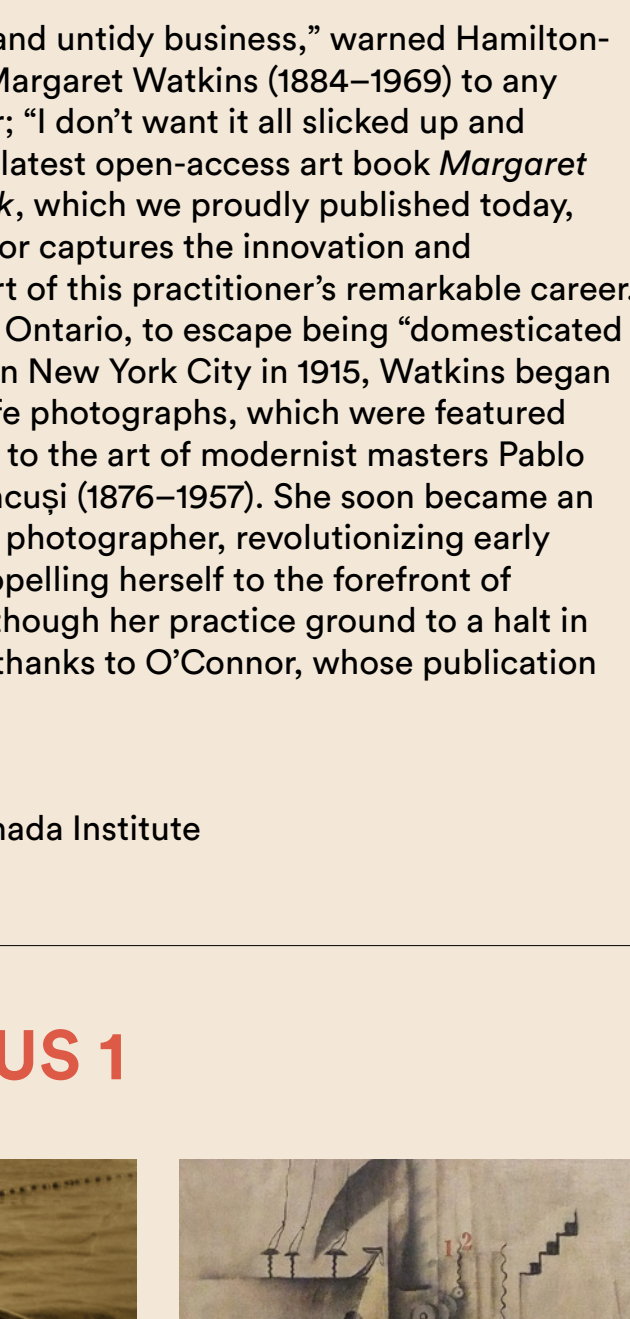
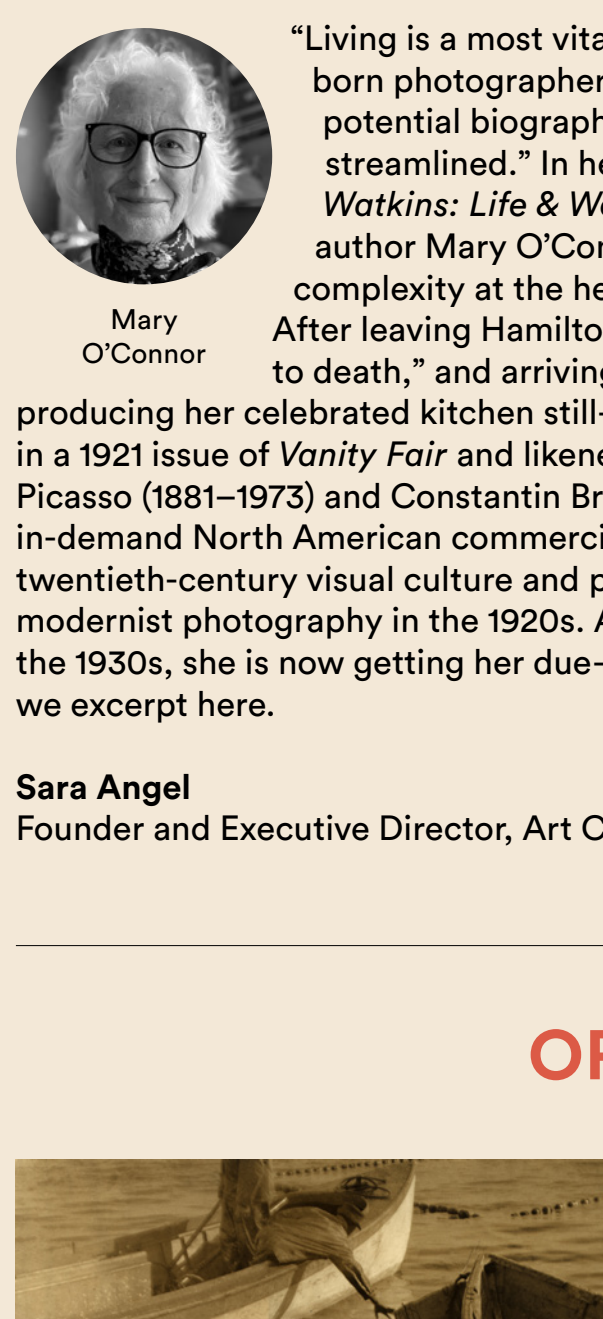
MARCH 8, 2024

# REBEL, GENIUS, PIONEER

## PHOTOGRAPHER MARGARET WATKINS

### ACI'S NEW BOOK RELEASES TODAY

On this International Women's Day, join us in celebrating the release of [Margaret Watkins: Life & Work](#) by Mary O'Connor, the only open-access publication on the pioneering Hamilton, Ontario-born photographer. With her radically experimental compositions, Watkins transformed the worlds of art, lens-based compositions, and advertising.



Mary O'Connor

"Living is a most vital and untidy business," warned Hamilton-born photographer Margaret Watkins (1884–1969) to any potential biographer: "I don't want it all slicked up and streamlined." In her latest open-access art book *Margaret Watkins: Life & Work*, which we proudly published today, author Mary O'Connor captures the innovation and complexity at the heart of this practitioner's remarkable career. After leaving Hamilton, Ontario, to escape being "domesticated to death," and arriving in New York City in 1915, Watkins began producing her celebrated kitchen still-life photographs, which were featured in a 1921 issue of *Vanity Fair* and likened to the art of modernist masters Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957). She soon became an in-demand North American commercial photographer, revolutionizing early twentieth-century visual culture and propelling herself to the forefront of modernist photography in the 1920s. Although her practice ground to a halt in the 1930s, she is now getting her due—thanks to O'Connor, whose publication we excerpt here.

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

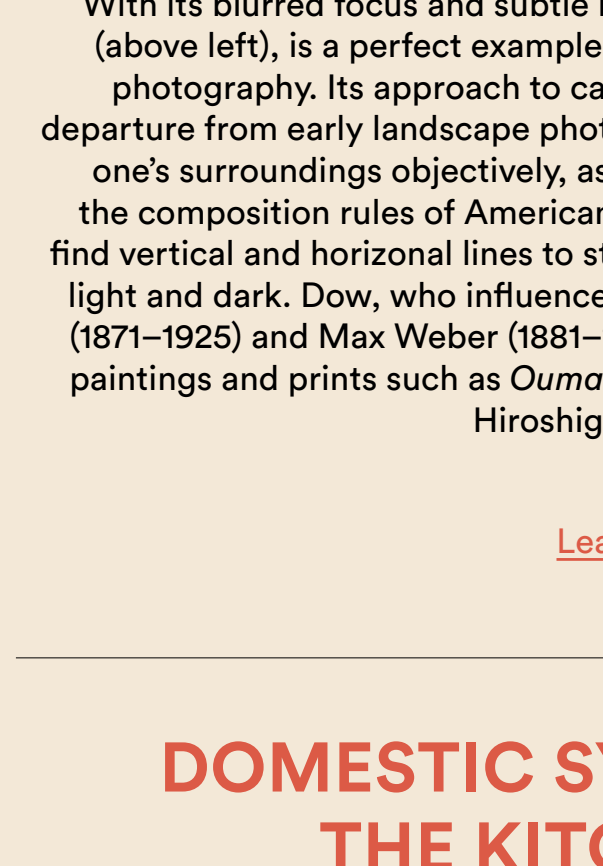
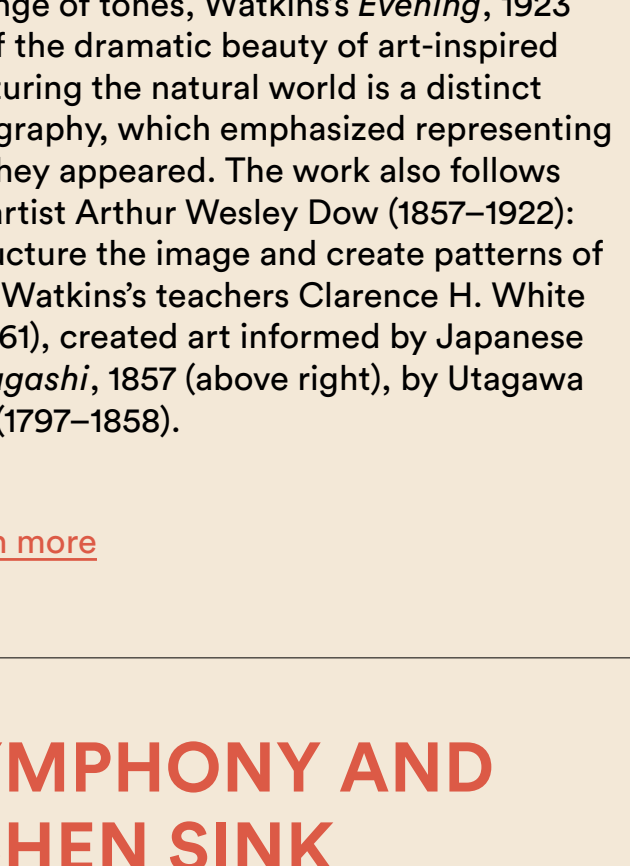
## OPUS 1

Margaret Watkins, *Opus 1*, 1914, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Max Weber, *Avoidupois*, 1915, Baltimore Museum of Art.

One of Watkins's earliest works, *Opus 1*, 1914 (above left), sets up the style she would develop over her photographic career: finding the beauty of geometric form—angles, curves, repetitions—in the everyday. Shortly after leaving Canada, Watkins was first introduced to photography as an artform in July of 1914 as a student at the Clarence H. White Seguinland School of Photography in Maine. Her initial inspiration came from the Pictorialist movement, which sought to emulate aspects of painterly technique using a camera. But she also learned about modern abstract compositions from the Cubist painter Max Weber (1881–1961) (above right), and his influence can be seen in *Opus 1* in the patterning of angles made out of fishing boats.

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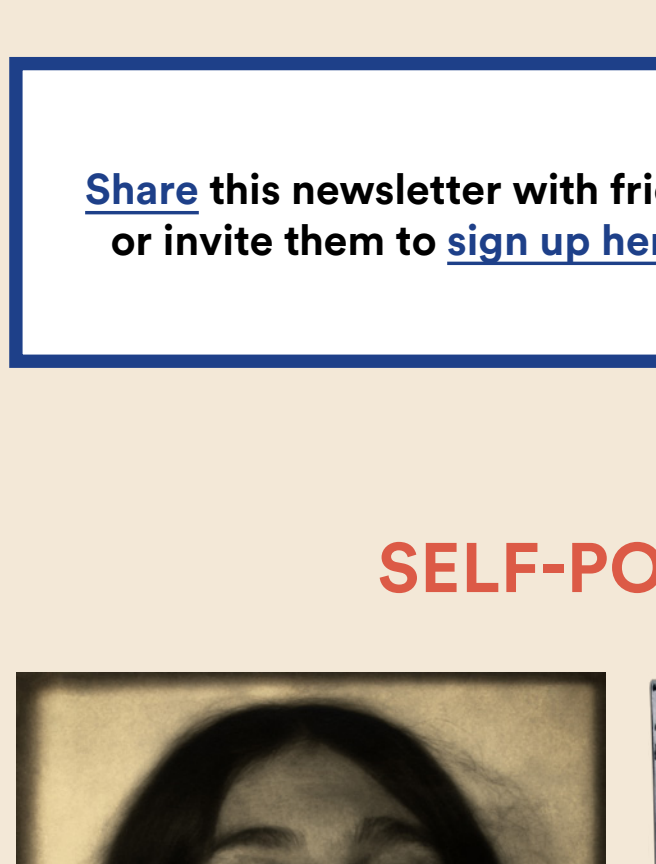
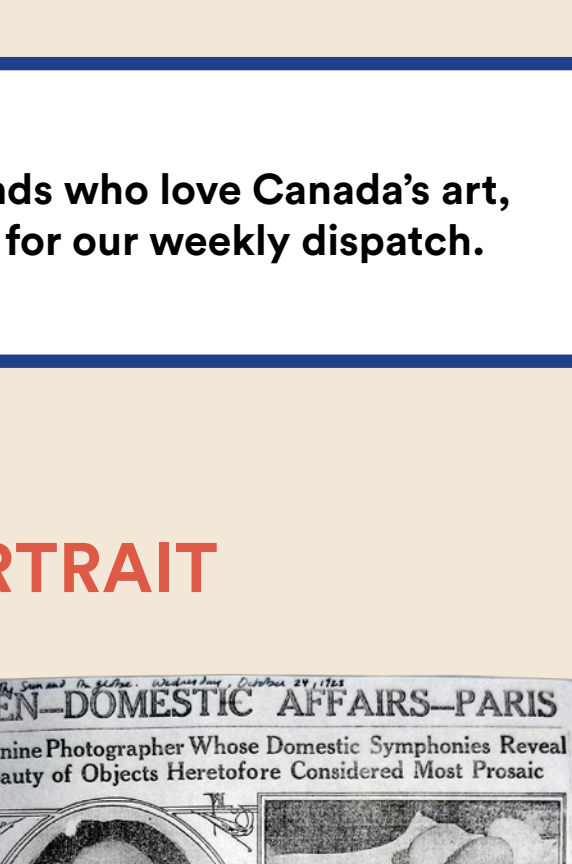
## DUTCH GIRL READING [OLIVETTE FALLS]

Margaret Watkins, *Dutch Girl Reading (Olivette Falls)*, 1918, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Joseph Wright of Derby, *Untitled (Anna Romana Wright reading by candlelight)*, c.1795, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

In 1915, Watkins moved to New York City. There, she became an assistant to Alice Boughton (1866–1943) for \$10 a week, working in the American photographer's portrait studio on East 23rd Street. Watkins's *Dutch Girl Reading*, 1918 (above left), is visually reminiscent of seventeenth-century paintings and demonstrates the influence of Boughton's style of portraiture, which often imitated fifteenth- to eighteenth-century paintings (above right) through the use of period costumes and chiaroscuro lighting. This carefully considered aesthetic approach to portrait photography was a hallmark of the Pictorialist style, which Watkins was beginning to use to push photography into new artistic territory.

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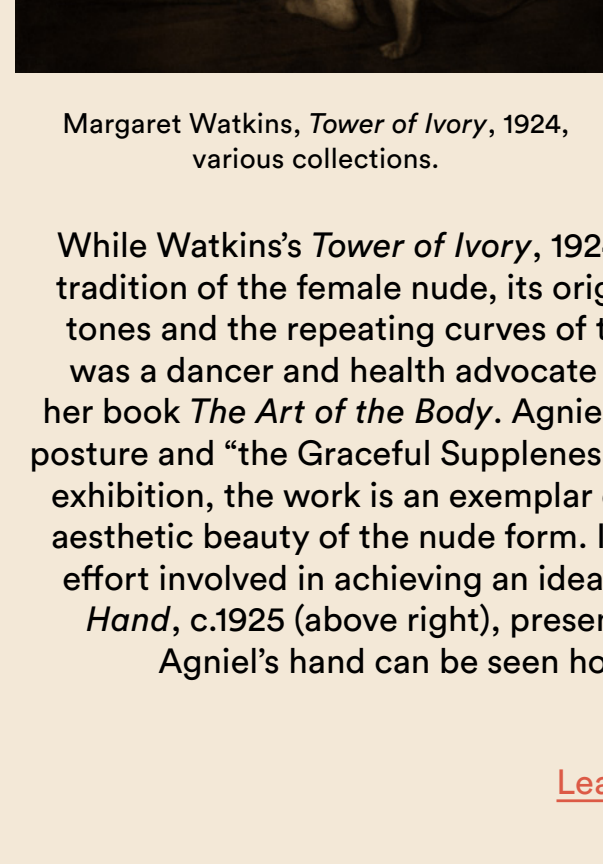
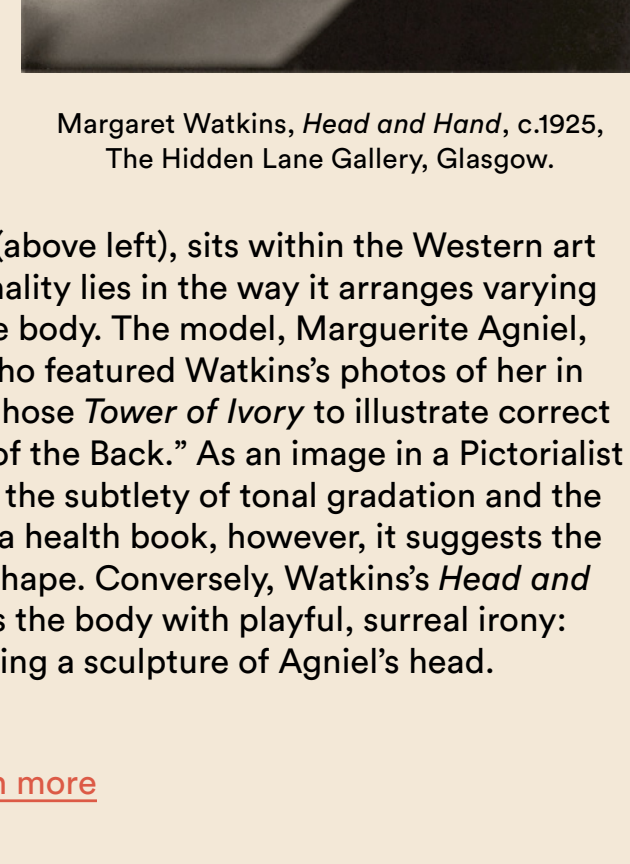
## EVENING

Margaret Watkins, *Evening*, 1923, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Utagawa Hiroshige, *Oumayagashi*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo hyakkei)*, 1857, various collections.

With its blurred focus and subtle range of tones, Watkins's *Evening*, 1923 (above left), is a perfect example of the dramatic beauty of art-inspired photography. Its approach to capturing the natural world is a distinct departure from early landscape photography, which emphasized representing one's surroundings objectively, as they appeared. The work also follows the composition rules of American artist Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922): find vertical and horizontal lines to structure the image and create patterns of light and dark. Dow, who influenced Watkins's teachers Clarence H. White (1871–1925) and Max Weber (1881–1961), created art informed by Japanese paintings and prints such as *Oumayagashi*, 1857 (above right), by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858).

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## DOMESTIC SYMPHONY AND THE KITCHEN SINK

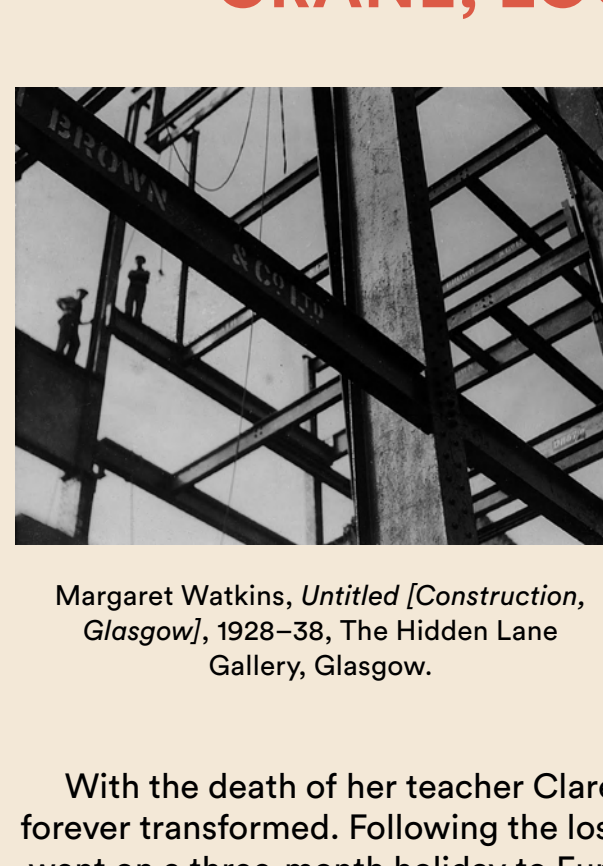
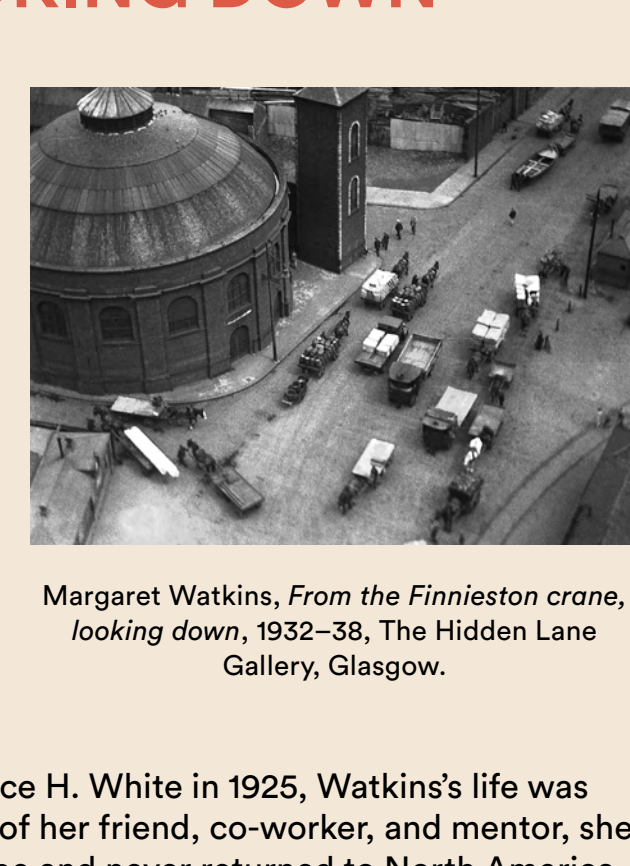
Margaret Watkins, *Domestic Symphony*, 1919, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.Postage stamp from the Great Canadian Photographers series, featuring Margaret Watkins, *The Kitchen Sink*, c.1919.

In 1916, Watkins moved into a garden apartment in Greenwich Village that became both her home and her studio. Recalling the instructions of her teacher Clarence H. White about finding subjects in the everyday, Watkins took her camera into the intimate spaces of her apartment. *Domestic Symphony*, 1919 (above left), a sensuous modernist arrangement of mundane household objects, is one of the most successful examples of her best-known style: the "kitchen still-life." Another exemplary example of the genre, *The Kitchen Sink*, c.1919, is a photograph of dirty dishes, showcasing a milk bottle surrounded by mismatched and chipped crockery. It—and Watkins's—historical importance were honoured in 2013 with a Canadian postage stamp (above right).

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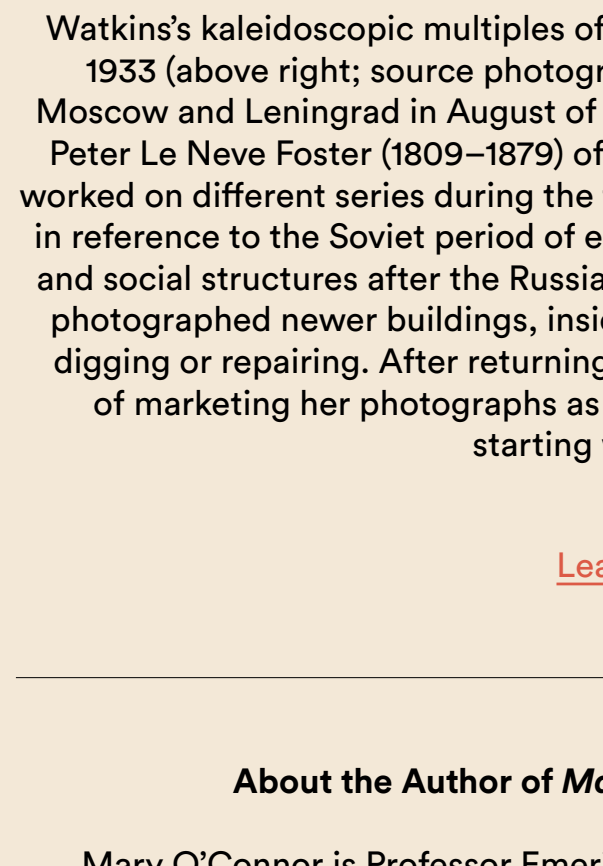
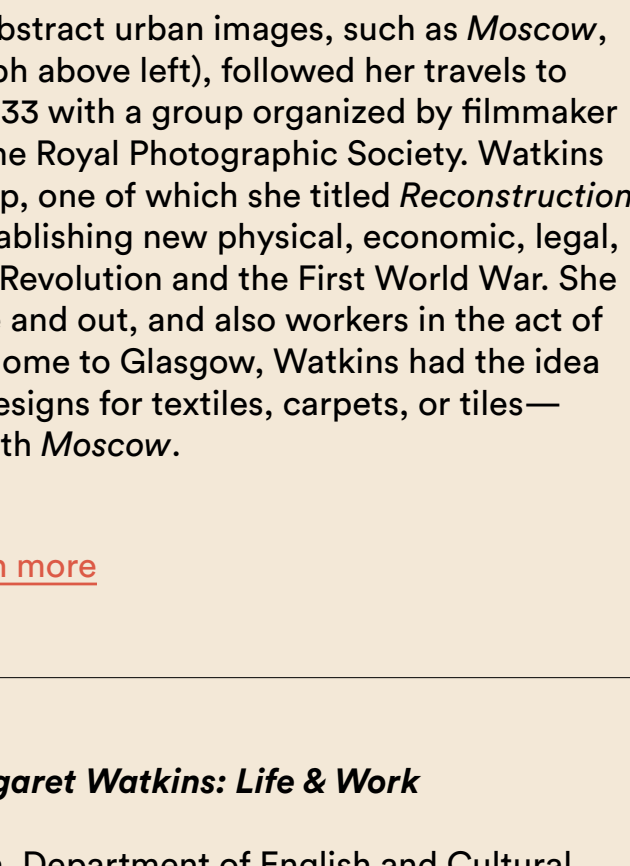
## SELF-PORTRAIT

Margaret Watkins, *Self-Portrait*, 1923, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Newspaper clipping from *Sun and Globe* (New York), October 24, 1923, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.

Watkins provided this striking self-portrait (above left) to accompany a 1923 newspaper article on her work. When the photograph surfaced in the *Sun and Globe* (above right) to signal her upcoming solo show at the Art Center, mascara, eyeliner, and lipstick had been added and the image placed in an oval frame. Infuriated, Watkins wrote on the back of the photograph: "To ye engraver / don't clip prune or put this in an oval. Neither retouch and paint to the semblance of a snake eye vamp." Watkins wished to be viewed as a professional and an artist, not as a femme fatale.

[Learn more](#)

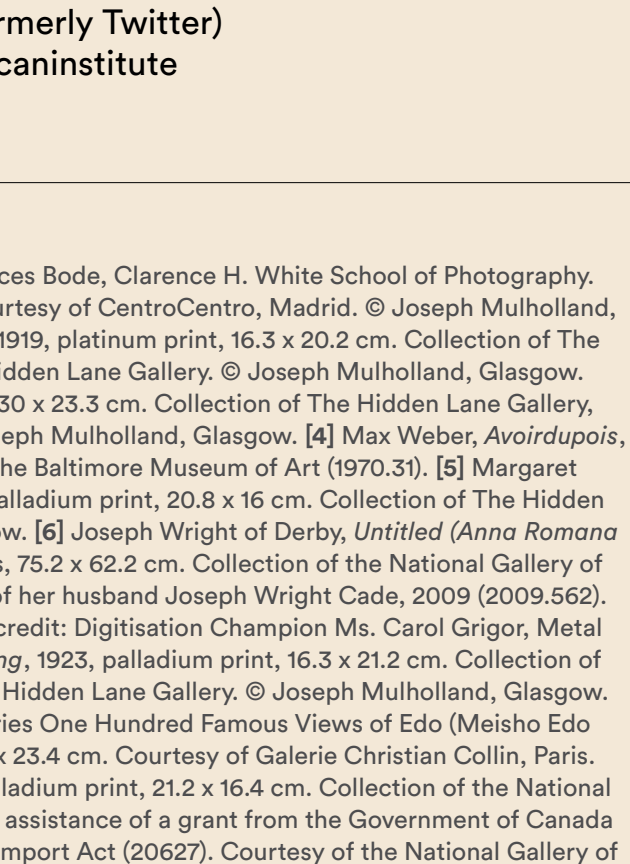
## TOWER OF IVORY

Margaret Watkins, *Tower of Ivory*, 1924, various collections.Margaret Watkins, *Head and Hand*, c.1925, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.

While Watkins's *Tower of Ivory*, 1924 (above left), sits within the Western art tradition of the female nude, its originality lies in the way it arranges varying tones and the repeating curves of the body. The model, Marguerite Agniel, was a dancer and health advocate who featured Watkins's photos of her in her book *The Art of the Body*. Agniel chose *Tower of Ivory* to illustrate correct posture and "the Graceful Suppleness of the Back." As an image in a Pictorialist exhibition, the work is an exemplar of the subtlety of tonal gradation and the aesthetic beauty of the nude form. In a health book, however, it suggests the effort involved in achieving an ideal shape. Conversely, Watkins's *Head and Hand*, c.1925 (above right), presents the body with playful, surreal irony: Agniel's hand can be seen holding a sculpture of Agniel's head.

[Learn more](#)

## UNTITLED [STUDY FOR ADVERTISEMENT FOR CUTEX NAIL POLISH]

Margaret Watkins, *Untitled [Study for advertisement for Cutex nail polish]*, 1924, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Cutex advertisement "The Well Groomed Woman's Manicure," in *Ladies' Home Journal*, 42, issue 2, February 1925, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.

Watkins's ability to portray domestic objects in seductive ways led to her success as a commercial photographer throughout the 1920s. She was a pioneer in developing a photographic language for advertising, which had previously relied largely on illustration. As seen in her 1925 commission for Cutex nail treatment (above right), Watkins understood that the principles of abstract art would sell products. Her great innovation was using the beauty of design, rather than just the product itself, to make an attractive picture. When Watkins was preparing for her Cutex contract, many of her photographs (such as the above left) didn't include a bottle of polish. Extending her kitchen still-life techniques of building patterns out of repeating circles, curves, and angles, and of painting with light and dark, she created geometric designs that immediately attracted potential customers' eyes.

[Learn more](#)

## UNTITLED [CONSTRUCTION, GLASGOW] AND FROM THE FINNIESTON CRANE, LOOKING DOWN

Margaret Watkins, *Untitled [Construction, Glasgow]*, 1925, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Margaret Watkins, *From the Finnieston crane, looking down*, 1932–38, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.

With the death of her teacher Clarence H. White in 1925, Watkins's life was forever transformed. Following the loss of her friend, co-worker, and mentor, she went on a three-month holiday to Europe and never returned to North America, instead becoming the caregiver to aging aunts in Glasgow. In September of 1928, she visited the International Press (*Pressa*) exhibition in Cologne—her first introduction to "New Vision" photography, which experimented with radical perspectives, fragmentation, and other formal methods to find equivalents to the modern machine and the city. Watkins began her own investigations into urban photography: *Untitled [Construction, Glasgow]*, 1928–38 (above left), and *From the Finnieston crane, looking down*, 1932–38 (above right), are striking examples of how she seamlessly transplanted her modernist composition techniques onto the growing industrial world.

[Learn more](#)

## MOSCOW

Margaret Watkins, *Moscow*, 1933, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.Margaret Watkins, *Moscow*, c.1935, The Hidden Lane Gallery, Glasgow.

Watkins's kaleidoscopic multiples of abstract urban images, such as *Moscow*, 1933 (above right; source photograph above left), followed her travels to Moscow and Leningrad in August of 1933 with a group organized by filmmaker Peter Le Neve Foster (1809–1879) of the Royal Photographic Society. Watkins worked on different stories during the trip, one of which she titled *Reconstruction* in reference to the Soviet period of establishing new physical, economic, legal, and social structures after the Russian Revolution and the First World War. She photographed newer buildings, inside and out, and also workers in the act of digging or repairing. After returning home to Glasgow, Watkins had the idea of marketing her photographs as designs for textiles, carpets, or tiles—starting with *Moscow*.

[Learn more](#)

### About the Author of Margaret Watkins: Life & Work

Mary O'Connor is Professor Emerita, Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her research interest in modernist culture (1890–1939) has remained constant since her doctoral work at the University of Toronto. Since 1999, O'Connor's work on Margaret Watkins has appeared in chapters in books, in exhibition catalogues, and in her co-authored monograph with Katherine Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins* (2007). In 2022, she co-created with Tweedie the short film *Archive Traces: Margaret Watkins Photographer*. O'Connor states, "Since seeing the radical arrangement of everyday objects in *The Kitchen Sink* in 1993, I have often returned to Watkins's work, finding new ways to understand this creative New Woman of the 1920s and her pioneering modernist art."

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