

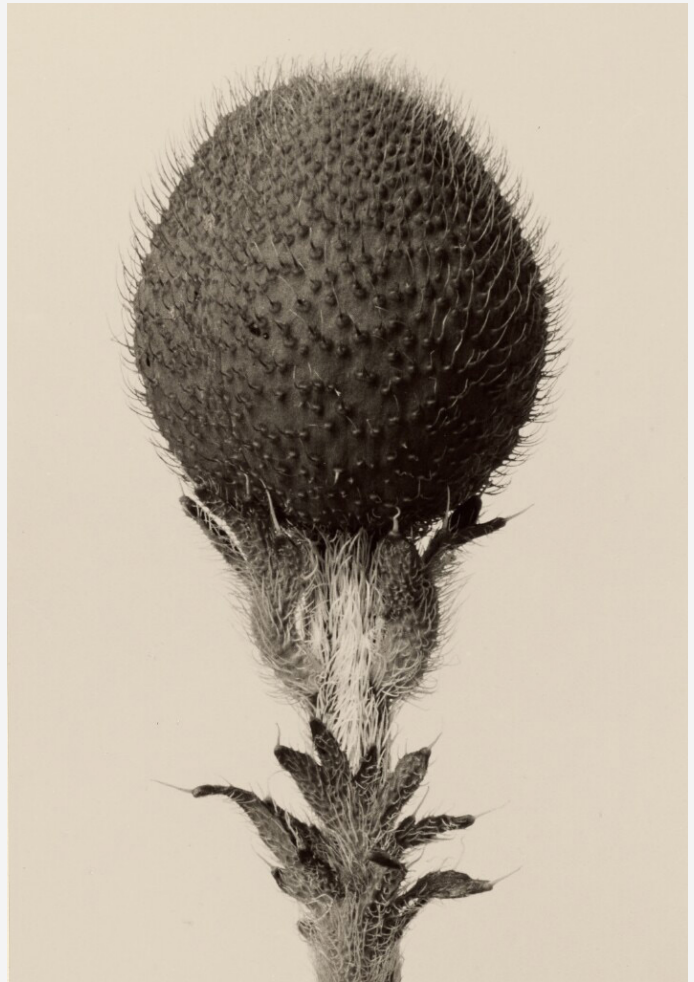
cropped, sharply focused images of botanical specimens. While East Coast photographers such as Paul Strand were also experimenting with similar techniques, Cunningham's inspiration likely came from Germany, where photographers like [Albert Renger-Patzsch](#) and Franz Roh were moving to a form of photography they termed **New Objectivity**. This movement shied away from the overly emotional, dramatic imagery associated with the German Expressionism of the previous decade and tried to return to purely "objective" recording without intervention or manipulation from the photographer.

Cunningham subscribed to magazines including *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* (usually translated as *German Photography Annual*), where Renger-Patzsch published his images of plants. In 1929, *Leaf Pattern* and nine more of Cunningham's photos were accepted to an important international exhibition of New Objectivity, "Film und Foto" ("Film and Photography"), in Stuttgart, Germany. Weston's description of Cunningham's works from the 1920s clearly fits within the goals and aesthetics of New Objectivity. He wrote: "She uses her medium, photography, with honesty—no tricks, no evasion: a clean cut presentation of the thing itself."²¹

In the 1930s, Cunningham exhibited with a group of California-based photographers who banded together in 1932 under the name **Group f/64**. Their name refers to one of the settings on the

large-format cameras that most of the photographers used: the "f-stop," which controls the size of the lens's opening and determines how much light the camera lets in. The setting f/64 allowed images with sharpness across focal depth (the distance of pictured objects from the lens). These photographers included [Weston](#), Cunningham, [Alma Lavenson](#), Consuelo Kanaga, [Ansel Adams](#), and [Willard Van Dyke](#), among others. Their visual style was similar to German New Objectivity: crisply focused, tightly cropped, often dramatically lit with extreme contrasts between deep, velvety blacks and highly exposed whites. Edward Weston wrote in his essay "Seeing Photographically" that photography, though an art, was differentiated from other arts by its mechanical nature. Several elements of a photograph are unique, he wrote, including its "instantaneous recording process," "precision ... in the recording of fine detail," and continuous shading "of infinitely subtle gradations from black to white."²²

Leaf Pattern is distinctively modernist in its high contrast and exploration of its subject as pure form without authorial intervention or manipulation. The leaf itself is not important; it is the interesting shapes that its serrations form, and the high, dramatic shadows cast by the leaf's arrangement that give the composition its visual interest. As fellow f/64 member Willard Van Dyke noted, Cunningham's work is "a reaction against the manipulation of the photographic image" that had occurred in Pictorial practice, where photographers added hand-drawn elements, colors, or other interventions to make their works appear more like paintings and



Karl Blossfeldt (German), Thorned bulbous plant, c. 1928-32. Gelatin silver print. This is an example of the New Objectivity style.

J. Paul Getty Museum.