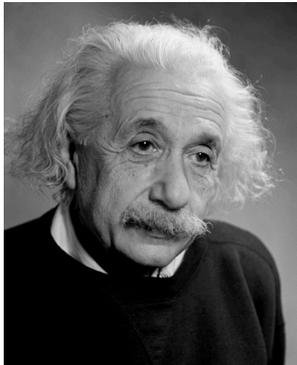


The Poet-Photographer: Jewish Museum Showcases Work of Fred Stein

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Albert Einstein by Fred Stein

By Kaspar Heinrich

You might not know the man behind them, but you surely know his images. Fred Stein fled Germany and became a talented photographer of both street scenes and the famous. His first major German retrospective opens Friday at the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

A photo session? No thanks! In 1946, Albert Einstein turned down a request by photographer Fred Stein to shoot pictures of him at Princeton. But it wasn't long before Einstein relented, agreeing to a meeting that he insisted should last no longer than 10 minutes. It turned into a two-hour encounter during which they swapped jokes, and which produced an image that has been branded into the collective consciousness, that of the physicist in his mid-sixties with his trademark tussled hair and sad, lonely gaze.

This famous photograph, as well as anecdotes from the 1946 shoot, can now be viewed at Germany's first-ever comprehensive retrospective of Fred Stein's work, which opens Friday at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. As part of the "In an Instant" exhibition, the museum showcases not only photographs taken by Stein, but also a number of his personal documents.

Stein was born in the eastern German city of Dresden in 1909 as the son of a rabbi, and he only became a professional photographer after fleeing the Nazis. Before that, he had intended to become a lawyer after studying law in Leipzig. His hobby at the time, though, was photography, and he took his shots during his legal traineeship with a 35 mm Leica camera, which he and his wife had bought themselves as a wedding gift.

As the Nazis became more powerful, Stein became an outcast in two senses: as a Jew and a politically active socialist. In October 1933, he and his wife, Liselotte (Lilo), managed to make it to Paris under the pretext that it was a honeymoon trip. But they had no plans to return to Germany.

Once in France, Stein found himself in an unknown land with a strange language. Since he couldn't find work as a lawyer there, he was compelled to find another career. His choice: photography. Although he was really little more than a dedicated amateur, it wasn't long before he started a business and opened Studio Fred Stein in a small apartment whose bathroom doubled as a darkroom.

An Eye for the Bizarre in the Banal

Stein discovered Paris through the camera lens. The same thing would happen later in New York, where he, his wife and their young daughter fled in 1941, and where he died in 1967. In both places, he captured everyday scenes full of odd and subtly melancholy moments. He was most interested in photographing poor people but also liked to capture the joy of children playing.

Stein's black-and-white photos record life in the big city without robbing his subjects of their dignity or putting their poverty on display for voyeuristic purposes. He often encountered his impromptu subjects with an eye for finding the comic aspects of generally normal situations. There is the sleeping shoeshiner, men laying bricks and a group of women in Little Italy, some looking with amusement, and others with skepticism into the camera, as if the German with the Leica had barged into their conversation. Then there is the simple depiction of three empty chairs in the spray of a lawn sprinkler, or an eye-catching advertisement on a billboard. These poetic moments found in normal, everyday moments provided Stein with his motifs, and his main challenge was to snap the shot on his handheld camera at precisely the right instance.

The show's title, "In an Instant," is meant to bring to mind both the split-second nature of photography and its resulting imperfections. At times, the subjects of Stein's photos are out of focus, or his images appear excessively granular. In fact, says Theresia Ziehe, the exhibition's curator, some of the original prints had not been done properly, so new prints were developed from scanned negatives. A few of the real contact sheets can be inspected with a magnifying glass at the Jewish Museum.

Ziehe describes Stein's pictures from his time in Paris as lighter and the later ones from New York as more multilayered. She also says that the exhibition's organizers made a point of interweaving images from both phases throughout the exhibition. Instead of creating "thematic islands," she says that they wanted to focus to be on Stein's particular style.

A Master Portraitist

Stein's obsession with authenticity extended to his portrait photography, as well. He shunned elaborate arrangements and retouching his negatives. He also rarely used a flash, preferring natural light and simple compositions.

Most of the more than 1,000 portraits Stein shot were taken during his time in New York. In addition to the Leica, he also worked with a medium-format Rolleiflex camera. He photographed politicians and writers, intellectuals and artists, including Salvador Dalí, Marc Chagall and Willem de Kooning. In addition, there were members of the German émigré community in the United States, including novelist Thomas Mann and actress Marlene Dietrich. As far as portraits are concerned, the exhibition goes for a bulk effect, grouping most of them together on a single wall.

In the eyes of German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt, Stein was "one of the best portrait photographers" of his era. Stein shot the philosopher on several occasions between 1941 and 1966. His photograph of Arendt in three-quarter profile, lying down on her elbows and smoking with a determined gaze, provided Stein with yet another image that would grow more famous than the man who took it.

Another prominent fan of Stein's photography was Willy Brandt, Germany's Social Democratic chancellor from 1969 to 1974. The two met in Paris while they were both in exile from the Nazis, and they remained friends for the rest of their lives. Brandt thought Stein was a "brilliant" photographer. "He truly was a man of vision," Brandt said of Stein, "and his choice of people and subjects is the obvious proof of it."

The "In an Instant: Photographs by Fred Stein" [exhibition](#) opens at Berlin's Jewish Museum on Nov. 22 and runs through March 23, 2014.