

One moment

He was a virtuoso of street photography, capturing the ‘decisive moment’ with perfectly composed images. But Fred Stein was about more than the street, he was also appreciated for his portraits – a fact that photographic history has only lately rediscovered.



Fred Stein photographed the forlorn-looking woman selling flowers and standing alone next to her wagon in Paris in 1934, yet even today people are impressed by the picture because of its ideal balance between anecdotal expression and formal composition. The bold, graphic mural gives the image an effective visual contrast: it is precisely this ability to capture a chance moment within the framework of perfect composition that defines the photographer's work. Stein discovered his own particular photographic style while living in exile in Paris: during the time he was growing up in Germany his life and professional goals were very different.

Photography was Stein's favourite childhood hobby: his first simple camera had cost just three Reich marks; for the wedding it would be nothing less than a Leica. At age 24 he married Liselotte Salzburg, who shared his passion for photography, a passion Stein had little time to develop while he was establishing a career as an up-and-coming lawyer in Dresden. However, when anti-Semitic laws were introduced in 1933, Stein was forced to give up his professional ambitions. The couple managed to escape from Germany to Paris by saying they were going on their honeymoon. Their savings were quickly used up and so their joint wedding gift of a Leica camera ▶



FRED STEIN

Born in Dresden on 3 July 1909 as the son of a Rabbi. Strongly committed to politics, he joined the Socialist Workers Youth when he was sixteen. After studying law in Leipzig, he continued his training as a court barrister in Dresden, but was dismissed on June 30 1933 because of anti-Semitic discrimination.

After fleeing Germany he worked as a photojournalist in Paris, had exhibitions and became a master of street photography. In 1941 he escaped to New York on one of the last ships to leave France. In addition to a new Leica, Stein started using a Rolleiflex camera.

Fifth Avenue, his first American photo book, appeared in 1947. In New York his portraiture also began to gain importance. Stein passed away aged just 58, in New York on 27 September 1967. His son Peter Stein looks after his archives. www.fredstein.com



Portrait: Lilo Rosemary, Fred Stein with Leica, ca. 1937 (France); all other photos: © Fred Stein Archive

Stein's pictures thrive on the tension between the spontaneous moment and precise compositions. *Chez*, Paris 1934 (left) and *Popular Front*, Paris 1936 (above)



Stein was a precise observer of the urban setting: *Jewish Quarter* (above) and *Le Gaz* (right), both Paris 1935. Further above: *Manhattan Skyline*, 1946



offered a possible solution – a hobby became a profession. “Fred had a good eye,” Liselotte later said of her husband. If asked about his training, Stein himself would say, “the Leica taught me photography.” Stein was able to work freelance and never chose to be employed by an agency. Because of his political views and personal experiences, his work was always underlined by an interest in political issues. Formally speaking, his pictures were precisely composed while at the same time conveying a direct message to the viewer. For example, the man on the roof top with his fist raised was set up to be



Bertolt Brecht, Paris 1935. Many of his subjects were emigrants like Stein. He photographed them at official press conferences as well as on private occasions

“One moment is all you have. Like a hunter (...), you look for the one instant that is more characteristic than all the others.”

representative of spectators observing a rally of the Popular Front. Stein primarily created series to sell to magazine publications. It was only in hindsight that his emblematic images became better known.

His production requirements were simple: all he needed was his Leica and life on the streets of Paris. The tiny bathroom in the seventh floor apartment in Montmartre became a darkroom – the original Studio Stein. Working independently, he soon evolved from interested amateur to accomplished photographer, while the apartment became a meeting place for other people

in exile, including Gerda Taro and Robert Capa. The young Willy Brandt (who later became German Chancellor) stayed with the Steins during his brief time in Paris; Bertolt Brecht and Hannah Arendt were among their acquaintances. So many visitors quite naturally led to the taking of portraits.

Paris was only one of the chapters in the life of Fred Stein. On 5 September 1939, just two days after France declared war on Germany, Stein was ordered to present himself to the authorities because he was a, so-called, enemy foreigner. He spent the next ten months in internment camps till he finally managed to escape to southern France. His wife and their daughter also made it to Toulouse. Fortunately, Liselotte was able to rescue and bring along many of her husband’s pictures and negatives. Escape from France became increasingly difficult and precarious, but they eventually managed to get out with the help of Varian Frey and the Organisation Emergency Rescue Committee. In May of 1941, the family were given passage aboard the S.S. Winnipeg, and left Marseille for the USA.

In spite of the economical difficulties of the post-depression era, Stein managed to re-establish himself as a photographer in the US, by once again primarily capturing urban street life. He was fascinated by New York and not only because of the overwhelming architecture. He observed the diversity of people in the various districts and found a veritable treasure trove of motifs for his increasingly dynamic images. However, because of declining health, Stein had to curtail his street photography and so began to concentrate more on portraiture. In the New York years alone, he produced around 1200 images which constitute something of a ‘who’s who’ of prominent 20th century personalities: Albert Einstein, Marlene Dietrich, Georgia O’Keeffe, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Thomas Mann, Frank Lloyd Wright, John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev.

Stein’s early demise meant that he never experienced the growing appreciation for his photography. While many of his pictures are in renowned museum collections, the current exhibitions are allowing the general public to rediscover his virtually fully-preserved body of work.. ULRICH RÜTER

IMPORTANT PUBLICATIONS: *Fred Stein. Paris – New York* (Kehrer, Heidelberg 2013); *Fred Stein, Portraits de l’exil, Paris-New York, 1933–1942* (Arcadia, Paris 2011); *Deutsche Porträts*, (Ernst Battenberg Verlag, Stuttgart 1961); *Fifth Avenue* (Pantheon, New York 1947).

EXHIBITION: *Im Augenblick*, Jüdisches Museum Berlin, until 23 March, www.jmberlin.de

Photos: © Fred Stein Archive

Anzeige
87 x 122

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