

# The Trials and Tribulations of Erwin Blumenfeld 1930-1950

October 13, 2022 – March 5, 2023

In the 1940s, Erwin Blumenfeld, approaching fifty, established himself in New York as one of the leading photographers. His covers for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* are classics. But before achieving such success, Blumenfeld had endured many trials and tribulations. Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin in 1897, he was destined for higher education. But his father's death in 1913 caused the family ruin and he became an apprentice. He was mobilised in 1916. In 1918, his brother Heinz died on the front, and he was almost executed for desertion. He joined his fiancée, Lena Citroen, in Amsterdam, where he opened a leather goods shop that went bankrupt in 1935 while he spent more and more time photographing. He left the Netherlands for Paris in 1936 but, as he was beginning to make a name for himself there as a fashion photographer, the war and German Occupation led him into two years of itinerant existence and internment,

before he was able to reach the United States with his family in August 1941. The 1930s and 1940s revealed Blumenfeld's talent as he pursued his artistic experimentations with the same originality and intensity in Paris and New York. Influenced by the compositional techniques of modernist photography, he experimented in the darkroom with solarisations, reticulations, superimpositions, optical and mirror effects and contrasts of light and dark to create a personal grammar in which female beauty and the nude have pride of place. In the United States, he was also a pioneer in his innovative use of colour photography. The exhibition focuses on this fertile period in Blumenfeld's career, revealing little known series such as his pictures of a gypsy community or Native American ritual dances, and a life journey emblematic of that of many European Jewish artists caught in the upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

# The effervescence of the avant-gardes

Paris, 1936-1938

Erwin Blumenfeld's career as a photographer began in Amsterdam when, his leather goods shop on the verge of bankruptcy, he offered to take portraits of his female clients. In 1932, moving into a new shop, he discovered a folding plate camera and a darkroom in which he could develop and print photographs. Geneviève, the painter Georges Rouault's daughter, on her honeymoon in the Netherlands, saw his pictures in the shop window and promised to introduce him into Parisian artistic circles. When he arrived in Paris in January 1936, he began taking portraits of personalities. From the outset, he adopted a modern pictorial grammar – tight framing, daring compositions – and experimented with techniques such as superimposition and solarisation.

## Gypsies

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1928-1932

Before making photography his profession, Blumenfeld had practiced it as an amateur since an American uncle gave him his first box camera at the age of ten. These early images include pictures of the gypsies who congregate for the annual pilgrimage at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, taken on a trip to the Camargue in 1928. Blumenfeld photographed their caravans, the funfair and its carousels, a fortune teller and mothers with their children. A few pictures of young women taken against a plain backdrop were probably taken later in his studio in Amsterdam.

# Experiments and fashion photographs

Paris, 1938-1939

As soon as he arrived in Paris in 1936, inspired by Man Ray, Blumenfeld began experimenting prolifically. The female body became the principal focus of his formal explorations. He employed accessories – veils, opaque glass, mirrors – and sophisticated lighting, then reworked his images in the darkroom using masking, superimposition, solarisation and reticulation. He declared: "For me, the greatest magic of the 20th century is the darkroom". Combining effects, he depersonalised his models in compositions verging on abstraction. In 1938, admiring his work, the British photographer Cecil Beaton introduced him to Michel de Brunhoff, editor of *Vogue* Paris, who hired him immediately. He demonstrated his talent in series of images such as the model Lisa Fonssagrives's vertiginous poses on the structures of the Eiffel Tower, published in the May 1939 issue of the magazine.

## The Dictator

Amsterdam, 1933 – Paris, 1937

In 1933, Blumenfeld produced a series of photomontages in reaction to Adolf Hitler's rise to power: on a portrait of the Führer, he painted tears of blood and superimposed a skull. Although these compositions critical of Nazism are comparable to those of the Berlin Dadaist John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld, 1891-1968), Blumenfeld's message differed. Heartfield's Marxist-motivated photomontages for the review *AIZ* insisted on Hitler as an instrument of industrial and capitalist power, whereas Blumenfeld portrayed the Führer as an embodiment of death. Around 1937, he entitled an image of an antique bust with a calf's head *The Minotaur* or *The Dictator*. The image of the Minotaur, a mythological monster with a man's body and a bull's head, was then fashionable among artists fascinated by man's animality. This creature rapidly came to symbolise the brutality of the dictatorships that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

# The war, from camp to camp

France, 1939 – Morocco, 1941

In August 1939, Blumenfeld returned to Paris from a stay in New York having obtained a contract with Harper's Bazaar. But when war broke out in September 1939, he was classified "indesirable alien" by Édouard Daladier's government. He spent the "phoney war" with his family in a hotel in Vézelay (Yonne). In May 1940, like all German nationals he was interned, but with the status of "prestataire", in the camp at Marmagne in Burgundy. After the Wehrmacht marched into Paris in June, he was transferred to Lorient (Drôme), then to the sinister camp at Vernet d'Ariège, and finally to Catus-Cavalier (Lot). With his family, he could reside in town, before being placed under house arrest in Agen, where the Blumenfelds stayed during six months. Thanks to connections and to his obstinacy, Erwin succeeded in obtaining visas for the United States and the family embarked on the Mont-Viso in Marseille on 10 May 1941. The ship had to remain in quarantine for a month in the port of Casablanca. The passengers were then interned in a camp at Sidi-el-Ayach. In August 1941, aided by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish relief organization, the family reached New York.

# Freedom of forms and colours

New York, 1941-1950

As soon as he arrived in New York, Blumenfeld joined the staff of *Harper's Bazaar*. His career in fashion photography took off gathering increasing momentum, he set up his own studio near Central Park in 1943. Over the ensuing decade, he perfected his Parisian techniques, developing a highly original repertoire based on simplified lines and economy of forms. Colour photography, that he had always wanted to adopt, opened new horizons. In 1944, he left *Harper's Bazaar* and he shot his famous covers for prestigious magazines. He deplored his difficulty in imposing his ideas on artistic directors obsessed with commercial aims. Yet he prided himself on "smuggling art" into these

images, pursuing in parallel, with increasing freedom, his personal exploration of forms, colour and movement, always centered on the female body.

# Artistic references

Paris, 1930 – New York, 1950

The autobiography Blumenfeld wrote in German late in life, *Eye to I: The Autobiography of a Photographer (Einbildungsroman)*, published posthumously, is full of quotes showing his knowledge of literature, just as his photography drew on the visual arts from Antiquity to the present day. He sometimes "recreated" famous pictures. More frequently, he included subtle allusions in his images, little winks at the past in which models borrow poses from famous works. From the outset, his draped or veiled nudes convey a certain fascination for sculpture. The dialogue with the masters that he maintained throughout his life reflects his desire to place his work in the grand tradition of western art.

# San Ildefonso

Nouveau-Mexique, 1947

Blumenfeld's little-known photographs showing ceremonies of New Mexico's indigenous peoples have been put in context thanks to the anthropologist Bruce Bernstein in Santa Fe. He interviewed active members of the San Ildefonso community, who were able to situate these visual records of ancient ritual celebrations in time and document them. San Ildefonso is one of the six Tewa pueblos ("villages") to the north of Santa Fe. Its name in the Tewa language, Po- Woh-Geh-Owingeh, means "There where water passes". Most of the ceremonies shown in these images took place at the pueblo's annual festival on 23 January, during which animal dances (buffalo and deer) alternate with One-Horn and Comanche dances.

## Publication

The exhibition catalogue  
*Les Tribulations d'Erwin  
Blumenfeld, 1930-1950*

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## Guided visits

6 November  
by **Nadia Blumenfeld Charbit**  
1 December, 8 January,  
25 January, 16 February  
by **Yaële Baranes**  
or **Cécile Petitet**

## An exhibition, a work

*The Dictator.*  
*Premonitions of war*

19 January  
by **Nicolas Feuillie**

## Images of bohemia: Gypsies

8 February  
by **Cécile Petitet**

## Panel discussionn

**Erwin Blumenfeld,  
Story of a Photographer**

17 November  
with **Nadia Blumenfeld  
Charbit, Nicolas Feuillie,  
Emmanuelle de l'Écotais,  
Christine Barthe,**  
chaired by **Brigitte Patient**

## A Photographer in History

11 January  
with **Ilse About, Anne  
Grynberg, Dorothea  
Bohnekamp**  
chaired by **Corinne Bensimon**

## Family workshop

**Snap! In Erwin  
Blumenfeld's studio**  
20 November

## Children's workshop

**Snap! The apprentice  
photographer**  
27 October, 23 February

## Writing workshop

**From Photos to Words:  
Immersion in the World  
of Erwin Blumenfeld**

13 - 17 February  
by **Maïa Brami**

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