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foto

Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945

Central Europe in 1930



The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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In the 1920s and 1930s, photography became an immense phenomenon across Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, and Poland. It fired the imagination of hundreds

of progressive artists, provided a creative outlet for thousands of devoted amateurs, and became a symbol of modernity for millions through its use in magazines, newspapers, advertising, and books. It was in interwar central Europe as well that an art history for all photography was first established. *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* aims to recover the crucial role played by photography in this period, and in so doing to delineate a central European model of modernity.

During and directly after World War I, four great empires (Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottomans) crumbled precipitously, to be replaced by more than one dozen fledgling nation-states. The largely agrarian, in some cases semifeudal, societies of central Europe were thrust nearly overnight into crises of civil war, unemployment, or inflation—and beyond these crises into a world propelled by mass media and consumer economies. Becoming modern was attractive but also anxiety-provoking, and responses to this prospect ranged from jubilation to cynicism, from fond nostalgia to fantastic visions of the future.

Within this context, photography emerged as a consummate expression of central European cultural expectations in the early twentieth century. In the dominant central European view, culture should be instructive and critically engaged with the issues of its day. The photographic image, mechanically generated, reproducible, and reusable, served as the ideal vehicle to promote or question new standards of living, aesthetics, and consciousness. Themes and styles spread through photography became “lessons” in the value of modernity to a public unsure of what modernity might mean or what it held in store.

The tremendous acceptance of photography in central Europe has its basis in a number of shared institutions with strong roots in the region. Among them are applied art schools and polytechnics, commercial studios, and other places where photographic training flourished from the end of the nineteenth century. Of great importance as well were the dozens of amateur clubs, which also grew and diversified around 1900. Through their vast network of publications, exhibition spaces, and communal darkroom facilities for members, these camera clubs spurred the broader middle class to high artistic aspirations, setting a standard of aesthetic ambition that continued on more radical terms in the 1920s and 1930s. Although the avant-garde in these years viewed the amateurs’ often sentimental, atmospheric prints (collectively termed “art photography”) as moribund, the amateur circuit in reality expanded after World War I and provided an impetus or a foil to much new work.

Most significantly, the illustrated press boomed in the 1920s and after. Publishing houses and printers, picture agencies, and graphic design firms multiplied across central Europe, and freelance photojournalists spread from there throughout the world. The press became a vast,

extramural art school in its own right, educating readers in the “look” of modernity. It also created an international chain of proliferating images that freely crossed state borders: Polish photomontages, for example, drew upon German magazines, which in turn were supplied by Austrian and Hungarian photographers and analyzed or imitated by members of the Czech avant-garde.

Each of the eight thematic sections in *Foto* brings together work made between 1918 and 1945 from across the region, comparing individual or local differences against the larger heritage sketched here of common institutions and attitudes toward “the modern.”

THE CUT-AND-PASTE WORLD: RECOVERING FROM WAR

Photomontage—work made from cut and pasted photographic images—was pioneered as a technique for vanguard art in central Europe in early 1919, and it flourished there through the end of World War II. The artists of German Dada, such as John Heartfield, Max Ernst, and Hannah Höch, responded through photomontage to the awful mechanization and fragmentation of bodies during World War I. At the same time, the war resulted

FIG. 1 KAREL TEIGE
(Czech, 1900–1951), *Travel Greetings (Pozdrav z cesty)*, 1923, photomontage (printed matter, sealing wax, ink, and watercolor), City Gallery Prague





FIG. 2 WALTER PETERHANS (German, 1897–1960), *Untitled (Still Life with Flowers, Fabric, and Gauze)* (*Ohne Titel [Stilleben mit Blumen, Stoff, Gaze]*), c. 1928–1932, gelatin silver print, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin

in political autonomy for subject peoples in the region's toppled empires. Thus the Polish group Blok and the Czech collective Devětsil developed constructive, even upbeat themes that turned photomontages into a form of visual poetry or popular street theater. In *Travel Greetings* (FIG. 1), Devětsil leader Karel Teige pastes together a picturesque photograph of the Italian coastline, a map charting a journey through northern Italy, images of the cosmos, binoculars, and an envelope addressed to one of his colleagues: a celebration of postwar mobility across an infinite horizon.

LABORATORIES AND CLASSROOMS

One highly influential legacy of modernist photography in central Europe is darkroom experimentation, which in the eyes of theorists and practitioners represented a key path for “truly modern” photography. Innovative methods were not kept private in artists' ateliers, but instead were taught to rows of willing students in art schools from Berlin to Lviv, Prague, and Bratislava; the results were also put on view in gargantuan didactic exhibitions mounted across the region. Among the schools, the most famous was the Bauhaus, which thrived in various German cities from 1919 until 1933, when it was forcibly closed under the new Nazi regime. Walter Peterhans taught photography classes at the school, encouraging students to concentrate on the subtleties of texture, translucency, and tonal gradations (FIG. 2). For his standards, Peterhans looked to the daguerreotype and other nineteenth-century processes, and he was by no means alone. By linking

exuberance over the present and future with deep regard for the past, advocates for “new photography” helped establish broad legitimacy for their field and, beyond it, for modernity itself.

MODERN LIVING

Scenes of urban bustle or new construction, frequently taken from raking angles or in extreme close-up, typify a modern style of image-making that attained tremendous popularity in the years around 1930. With its dizzying perspective captured from the heights of Germany’s newest steel construction (the site of the first television transmission tests in 1929), Moholy-Nagy’s *Radio Tower Berlin* (*Funkturm Berlin*), 1928, reveals its modernity in both subject matter and style (FIG. 3). The burgeoning image world served not just to propagate modernity but to domesticate it, to render it palatable in a region filled with anxieties over such sudden and massive changes. “New photography” — meaning both pictures of expressly modern subjects and expressly modern pictures — functioned as an advertisement for modernity.

FIG. 3 LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY (American, b. Hungary, 1895–1946), *Radio Tower Berlin* (*Funkturm Berlin*), 1928, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons’ Permanent Fund

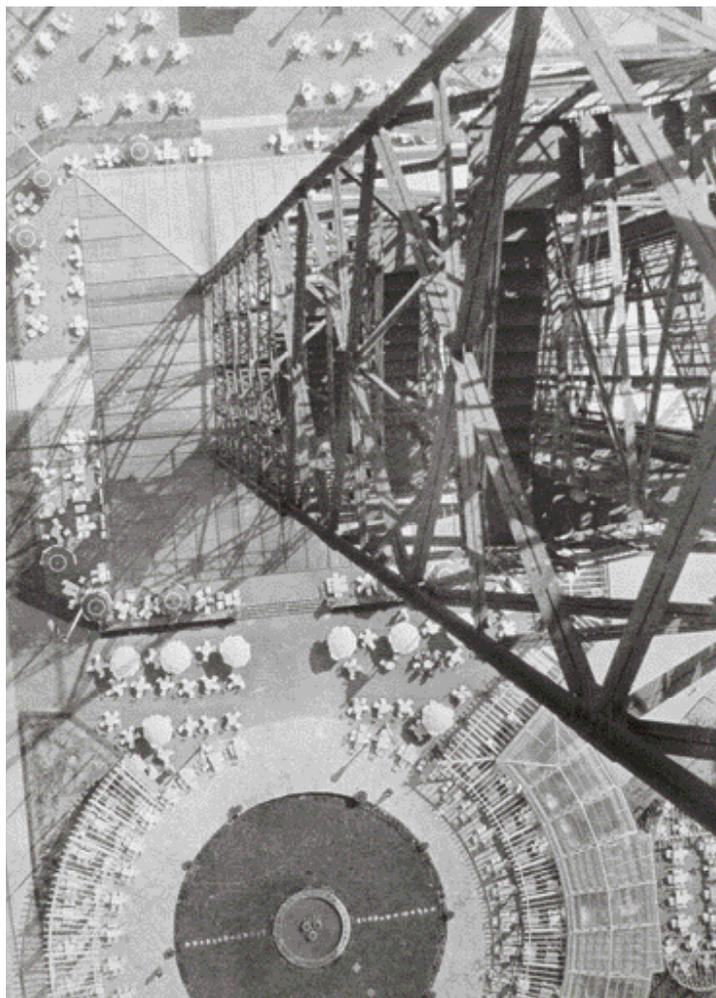




FIG. 4 MARTIN MUNKACSI (American, b. Hungary, 1896–1963), *The Goalie Gets There a Split Second Too Late (Der Torwart kommt den Bruchteil einer Sekunde zu spät)*, 1928, gelatin silver print, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Many great talents of the international illustrated press came out of the central European “photomania”; *Life* magazine and the Parisian tabloid *Vu*, for example, are unthinkable without skilled photographers from central Europe, such as Martin Munkacsí (FIG. 4) or André Kertész (both born Hungary). The daily press also abounded in intellectual commentary of a breadth and caliber unmatched elsewhere: cultural critics such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer (Germany), Josef and Karel Čapek (Czechoslovakia), and Karl Kraus (Austria) all turned to photography in their meditations on the meaning of modern life.

NEW WOMEN — NEW MEN

The *neue Frau* or New Woman was a subject of intense public debate that was reflected and, furthermore, substantially shaped by photography: for example in pictures of female athletes and dancers, or in new genres for the illustrated press, such as the “photo essay” pioneered by studio photographer Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon). The model of the assertive, controversial New Woman upset conventional roles for men and women alike. In male portraits by Lucia Moholy, Trude Fleischmann, and Éva Besnyő, subjects have a distinctly effeminate cast, while others by August Sander or Lotte Jacobi capture the “androgyny chic” of certain German cultural circles (FIG. 5). From the kitsch of the Viennese Atelier Manassé to the extremism of Hans Bellmer, photographers of this era brought an understanding of gender identity as masquerade radically to the fore.



THE SPREAD OF SURREALISM

Surrealism has long been thought of as a mainly French phenomenon, and the tremendous surrealist output in central Europe has been largely overlooked—particularly in photography. Artists in Czechoslovakia and Poland furthered surrealist ideas extensively, even in provincial towns such as Olomouc or Lviv, home to the groups f5 (Czech, 1933–1938) and Artes (Polish, 1929–1936), respectively. These artists pursued pseudo-documentary themes, staged impromptu performances for the camera, and made subversive, hallucinatory self-portraits. Surrealism, with its exploration of private fantasy, offered a means to turn one's back on the public, instructional mission of so much art and culture in the region. At the same time, in 1930s Czechoslovakia, surrealist photography received remarkable visibility. In photomontage book covers for the Czech edition of a French thriller series called *Fantômas*, for example, Jindřich Štyrský portrayed a toxic (and classically surreal) confrontation of seductive beauty and unexpected violence (FIG. 6).

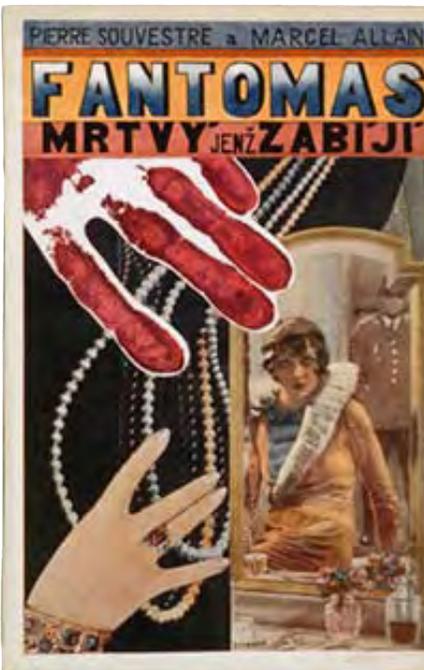


FIG. 5 LOTTE JACOBI (American, b. West Prussia, 1896–1990), *Klaus and Erika Mann*, c. 1928–1930, gelatin silver print, Dietmar Siegert Collection

FIG. 6 JINDŘICH ŠTYRSKÝ (Czech, 1899–1942), cover for MARCEL ALLAIN (French, 1885–1969) and PIERRE SOUVESTRE (French, 1874–1914), *Fantômas (The Dead Man Who Kills) (Fantômas [Mrtvý jenž zabíjí])*, 1929, photolithograph of photomontage, June and Bob Leibowitz

FIG. 7 KATA KÁLMÁN (Hungarian, 1909–1978), *Coal Carrier (Szénmunkás)*, 1931, gelatin silver print, Hungarian Museum of Photography

ACTIVIST DOCUMENTS

Inspired by the explosion in the illustrated press and operating within a broad culture of political dissent, many photographers across central Europe turned to reportage and other documentary modes in the later 1920s and 1930s. Germany is the country best known for political activism in photography, but Austria, Slovakia, and Hungary established strong activist groups as well, and the Czech capital Prague hosted the greatest international exhibitions of “worker” or “social” photography held anywhere in the world. Many of these class-conscious photographs unflinchingly depict the physical and mental toll of labor in heartfelt, if pathos-laden, terms. The Hungarian Kata Kálmán published photographs of the working class (FIG. 7) alongside their biographies, in a plea to recognize her subjects as individuals rather than anonymous laborers. Other contemporaries noted the importance of capturing the full spectrum of a worker’s life, not just hard times, and of communicating the difficulties of agricultural labor rather than concentrating simply on industry, as called for by left-wing politics. Above all, activist documentary in central Europe did not oppose politics to art, but rather very often fused the two in an effort to revolutionize life and consciousness simultaneously.

LAND WITHOUT A NAME

In 1932 Czech writer and journalist Ivan Olbracht used this title for a book about the province of Ruthenia (now part of Ukraine) that had been incorporated into the newly created Czechoslovak state. A remote territory of



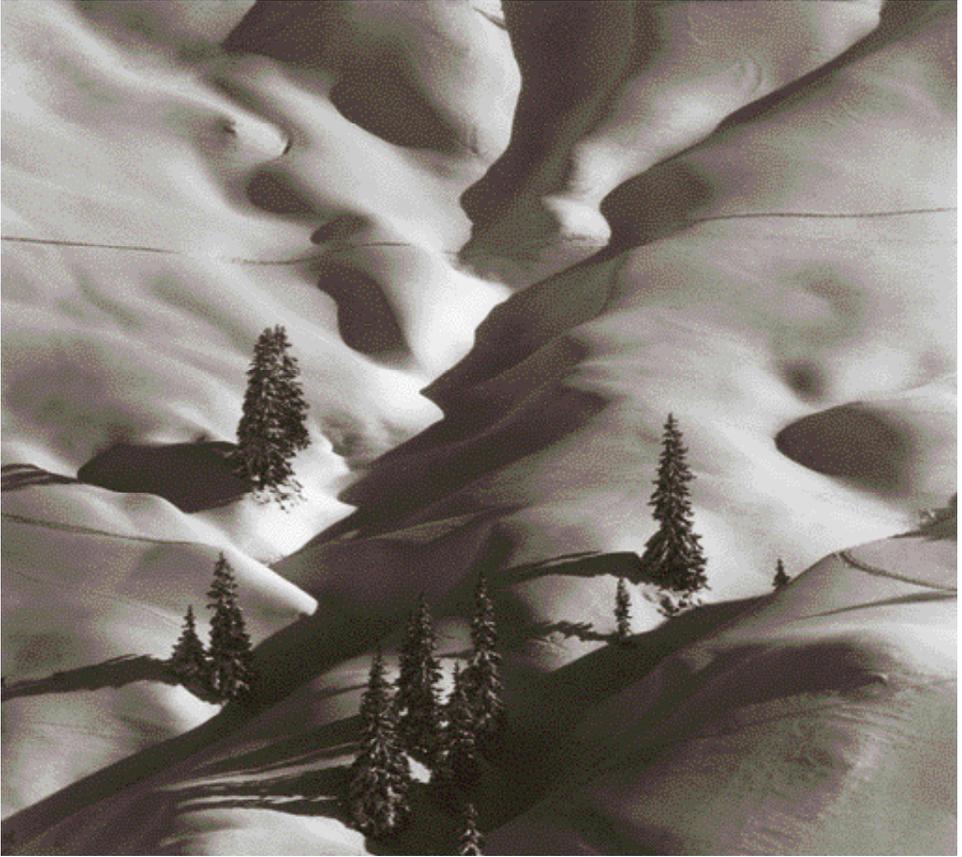


FIG. 8 WILHELM ANGERER (Austrian, 1904–1982), *Song of the Blessed* (*Gesang der Seligen*), 1933–1942, gelatin silver print, Albertina, Vienna

woodcutters and farmers, Ruthenia lacked a name, in Olbracht's view, because it was subject to so many competing nationalist claims. Throughout central Europe, the "land" had symbolized an imagined bedrock of pure and unified national character since the nineteenth century, though in reality it represented a complicated overlay of ethnicities, languages, and religions.

Photography, like writing, served to "name the land," to disseminate a fictive, harmonious image of the landscape and its occupants. Homeland Photography (*Heimatphotographie* in German) developed into a widely recognized and state-supported movement throughout the region in the 1930s to suit this nationalist embrace of the countryside. One significant representative of Homeland Photography, Wilhelm Angerer, produced dramatically cropped and retouched images of the Austrian Alps, offering a rhapsodic interpretation of traditional subject matter using distinctly modern pictorial methods (FIG. 8). As the territorially rapacious Third Reich laid claim to ever more places in 1930s Europe, such work took on an increasingly heavy symbolic charge. Some landscape photographers echoed Nazi ideology outright or implicitly; others turned to the land in foreboding or resignation, having surmised the disaster to come.

THE CUT-AND-PASTE WORLD: WAR RETURNS

Just as World War I shifted central European modernism onto a new plane, particularly in photography, World War II brought that modernism to a horrific conclusion. In these years of renewed catastrophic upheaval, some artists continued to turn to photomontage. Janusz Maria Brzeski, an artist trained in avant-garde circles but working for the press, used photomontage for sensational ends; his masterful, ghastly scenes of a violent modernism teeter between trenchant critique and trivial commentary upon the crises of his day (FIG. 9). Other artists turned during this period to photomontage only privately or in forbidden publications. Teige assembled approximately four hundred photomontages for himself and his closest friends, in which he recycled popular media culture and much of the history of art; his Czech compatriot Jindřich Heisler made photomontages while hiding for more than three years to escape deportation. Begun as a pathbreaking means to describe the promise of modernity, photomontage became, in the later 1930s and 1940s, a way to reflect upon that promise in what, for central Europe, were modernity's twilight years.

FIG. 9 JANUSZ M. BRZESKI (Polish, 1907–1957), *Twentieth-Century Idyll no. 7* (vii. *Sielanka xx wieku*), from the series *A Robot Is Born* (*Narodziny robota*), 1933, photomontage (printed matter), Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi

COVER SASHA STONE (American, b. Russia, 1895–1940), Erwin Piscator Entering the Nollendorf Theater, Berlin (*Erwin Piscator geht ins Nollendorftheater, Berlin*), 1929, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Hendrik A. Berinson and Adam J. Boxer, Ubu Gallery, New York

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MAP Tom Willcockson, Mapcraft, Woodstock, Illinois



Concerts

June 13, 12:10 pm

West Building Lecture Hall
Hartmut Rohde, violist, Mykola Suk, pianist; music by Hindemith and other German composers

June 20, 12:10 pm

West Building Lecture Hall
Vilmos Szabadi, violinist, Balázs Szokolay, pianist; music by Bartók and other Hungarian composers

June 24, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court
Elena Letňanová, pianist; music by Slovak and other composers

June 27, 12:10 pm

West Building Lecture Hall
Elisabeth von Magnus, mezzo-soprano, Jacob Bogaart, pianist; music by Schoenberg and other Austrian composers

July 1, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court
Royal String Quartet; music by Szymanowski and other Polish composers

Lecture with Live Music

June 17, 6:30 pm

East Building Auditorium
Music, Politics, and Avant-garde Aesthetics in Interwar Czechoslovakia
Derek Katz, lecturer, Boris Krajný, pianist; music by Janáček and other Czech composers, with commentary

Sunday Lectures

East Building Auditorium
2:00 pm

June 3

Modernization of Life through Art
Michal Bregant, film historian and dean, Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague

June 10

Foto and Modernity: An Overview
Matthew S. Witkovsky, assistant curator of photographs, National Gallery of Art

June 17

Mirrors, Phantoms, and Memories
Jaroslav Anděl, artistic director, Dox Center for Contemporary Art, Prague

June 24

Between Surrealism and Constructivism: Avant-garde and Film in Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s
Marcin Giżycki, senior lecturer, Rhode Island School of Design

Public Symposium

June 23, 11:00 am–5:00 pm

East Building Auditorium
History and the New Photography
Illustrated lectures by noted scholars, including Monika Faber, Olivier Lugon, Douglas Nickel, Melanie Ventilla, and Peter Zusi; a panel discussion moderated by Steven Mansbach will follow

Film Program

Two film series relate to the exhibition—*Modernity and Tradition: Film in Interwar Central Europe*, screening on weekends from June 24 through September 2, and *Czech Modernism 1920–1940*, which begins May 12 and continues through June 17. In addition, an intermittent documentary program from June 30 through September 3 will focus on topics related to the exhibition. All films are shown in the East Building Auditorium. Please consult the National Gallery Web site or the film brochure for dates and times.

On the Web

www.nga.gov/exhibitions/fotoinfo.htm

Gallery Talks

The Adult Programs department offers a regular series of introductory gallery talks on the exhibition during July and August. Please consult the Calendar of Events or the National Gallery's Web site for schedule and program information.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 312-page catalogue, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945*, by Matthew S. Witkovsky. Produced by the National Gallery of Art and published in association with Thames & Hudson. Softcover \$45; hardcover \$60.

The exhibition catalogue is published with the assistance of The Getty Foundation.

General Information

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 am–6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Art Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

This brochure was written by Matthew S. Witkovsky, assistant curator of photographs, and produced by the Department of Exhibition Programs and the Publishing Office. Copyright © 2007 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.