



Ilse Bing, *Self-Portrait with Leica* 1931, Collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg [Courtesy of National Gallery of Art - cropped]

‘The New Woman Behind the Camera’ Exhibit Celebrates a Gaze of Her Own

The New Woman Behind the Camera, an exhibition of midcentury women photographers, captures the ways they documented a changing world and reimagined their place within it.

By
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In his famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin observes that photography was “the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction”. By virtue of its technical apparatus, which freed the hand to the immediacy of the eye, it enabled new ways of seeing the world and thereby ushered in a new way of understanding our place within it.

Benjamin saw the liberatory properties of photography and subsequently film, in terms of its potential as a means of fostering class consciousness. That potential can also be recognized as it pertains to gender, which is the basis for the groundbreaking photography exhibition, and accompanying catalog, *The New Woman Behind the Camera*.

The exhibition features work by 120 women from 20 countries and covers a range of creative expression, from studio portraiture to fashion and advertising to photojournalism and social documentation to more avant-garde experimentation. In addition to black-and-white and color prints, there are photo books, magazine spreads, and other ephemera, placing the work in context.

Some of the photographers, such as Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, and Lisette Model, may be familiar, but many, though often well known in their time, have been brought back from relative obscurity. Among those are Tsuneko Sasamoto, Japan's first female photojournalist, and Florestine Perrault Collins, likely the only Black woman to operate a portrait studio in New Orleans during the period the exhibition surveys.

The exhibit was curated by [Andrea Nelson](#) of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, where it was supposed to open last fall before COVID interrupted the schedule. But it will be on view there from 31 October 2021, through 30 January 2022, after its run at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, through 3 October. The Met installation was overseen by [Mia Fineman](#), the museum's photography curator.



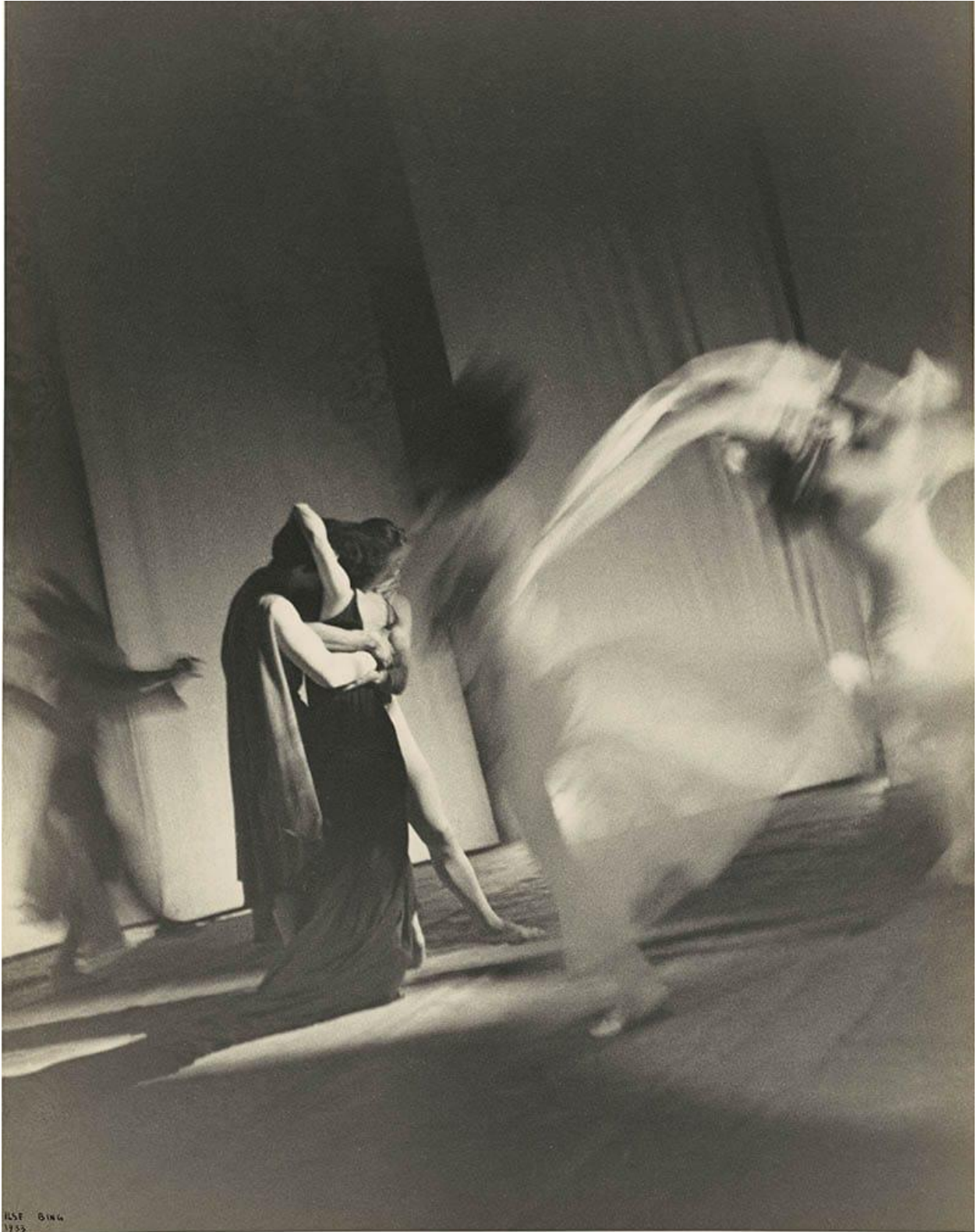
Tsuneko Sasamoto, *Hiroshima Peace Memorial*, 1953, Tsuneko Sasamoto / Japan Professional Photographers Society [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

The concept of the New Woman as a feminist ideal has its origins in an 1894 article by Irish writer Sarah Grand, in reference to the independence of modern women who sought change against the strictures of male-dominated Victorian society. New Woman independence was not just a consciousness-raising exercise; it was an expansion of the activities in which women might partake. The notion found expression in such things as dress reform, an increase in educational and professional opportunities, and most especially in suffragism.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the New Woman became a global phenomenon with trends emerging in the 1920s in Asia and South America, as well as in Europe and the United States. Many women around the world found the camera to be an instrument of empowerment, a

means to assert their independence. In particular, the development of small-format cameras offered opportunities to explore the world outside the domestic milieu. The growth of fashion, advertising, and pictorial magazines provided greater opportunities for women to financially sustain themselves through photography.

Fashion publications, in particular, provided additional openings for women to participate in defining the tastes and aspirations of a female readership and to experiment with photographic form. Among the more prominent practitioners was Ilse Bing, who between the wars was known as “the Queen of the Leica” and shot for *Le Monde Illustré* magazine, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Vogue* before being expelled from Paris by the Nazis. She emigrated to the United States in 1940 where her photographic career waned and by 1959 was abandoned. (She died in 1998 at age 98 in Manhattan but thankfully not before interest in her work had been renewed with museum exhibitions in the United States and abroad.)



ILSE BING
1933

Ilse Bing, *Ballet "L' Errante", Paris, 1933*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

It was the trove of 90 images gifted to the National Gallery by Bing and her estate that prompted Nelson to develop the idea for the exhibition after she encountered them upon first joining the museum as a curator in 2010. According to Nelson, the collection of Bing photographs was one of the few by women whose work was held in-depth by the National Gallery at the time.

Bing was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany, where she initially trained for a career as an art historian. It was while documenting architectural images for her dissertation that she instead switched to photography. She moved to Paris in 1930 where she encountered avant-garde photographers Brassai and André Kertész, as well as the Surrealists. She made self-portraits, shot images of the people and places of Paris, and captured dancers and other performers in action. She also did commercial work for German and French periodicals.

Bing's 1931 *Self-Portrait with Leica* renders the artist simultaneously facing forward and in profile, the latter reflected in a mirror, with the tripod-mounted 35-mm camera mediating her gaze. The entire image is also a reflection of what the camera "sees" in the mirror placed in front of the scene to capture it on film. *Self-Portrait with Leica* is just one of the many self-portraits in *The New Woman Behind the Camera*. Alma Lavenson's 1932 *Self-Portrait* shows only her hands adjusting the lens of her view camera; Germaine Krull's *Selbstportät mit Icarette* (*Self-Portrait with Icarette*) of 1925 hides the artist's visage behind her device. Like *Self-Portrait with Leica*, both assert the photographer as the primary marker of identity.



Germaine Krull, *Selbstporträt mit Icarette* (*Self-Portrait with Icarette*), c. 1925, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library © Estate Germaine Krull, Museum Folkwang, Essen [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

The organizers of The New Woman Behind the Camera have sought to distance themselves from essentialist notions, stating that “women are a diverse group whose identities are defined not exclusively by gender” while acknowledging that The New Woman Behind the Camera exhibit cannot help but delve into how women used photography to reflect on ways in which gender identity might be represented and inhabited.



Claude Cahun (French, 1894–1954), *Self-Portrait*, c. 1927, gelatin silver print, Wilson Centre for Photography [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

Surrealist photographer, sculptor, and writer Claude Cahun specifically sought to efface gender, writing in their autobiography, *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*, first published in the 1930s: “Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that suits me.” *Autoportrait (Self-Portrait)*, c. 1927, one of their many self-portraits, shows the artist looking straight into the camera, hair closely cropped, with their reflection in a mirror, refusing gender definition. The photcollage *I.O.U. (Self-Pride)*, 1929-1930, presents multiple images of the artist in different guises, further complicating the question of their identity.

The Austrian photographer known as Madame D’Ora (Dora Kallmus) worked in fashion and portraiture. Her subjects included Josephine Baker, Coco Chanel, and Colette, among other luminaries of the interwar period. Her 1921 portrait of artist Mariette Pachhoffer (later Mariette Lydis) has come to be seen as emblematic of the sexual self-determination of the mid-century New Woman. Openly bisexual, having thrice-married men but by the 1930s living with a female companion, Pachhoffer is depicted dressed in a man’s trench coat, shirt and tie, breeches, and boots, topped with a fedora.



Madame d'Ora, *Mariette Pachhofer (later Mariette Lydis)*, 1921, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert B. Menschel and the Vital Projects Fund and the R. K. Mellon Family Foundation [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

In keeping with the commitment to representational agnostics, 'The New Woman Behind the Camera' features numerous photographs where the gender of the producer is indiscernible and quite frankly beside the point.

The 1 March 1943, issue of *Life* magazine famously (or infamously as one might have it) carried the headline "'Life's Bourke-White Goes Bombing'", about the first woman to go on a US Air Force bombing mission during World War II. An inset on the spread depicts Bourke-White in a shearling-lined flight suit, smiling for the camera in front of the wing of a B-17 bomber. Though not in the show, the images Bourke-White took of bombers in flight and then images of the aftermath of the bombing on the ground fit seamlessly into the genre of wartime photography, a traditional purview of men.

The view from below is represented in the exhibition with an image by Russian photographer Galina Sanko. Her 1943 *During an Attack* shows two Soviet soldiers rushing into battle, ready to hurl grenades at the enemy, which required the photographer to lay on the ground to get the shot.

There are times when gender is not a barrier but provides access, particularly in situations where social and religious customs barred women from interacting with men outside their families. Working in Palestine, Karimeh Abbud, who owned her own studio and promoted herself as 'Karemeh Abbud, Lady Photographer', shot portraits of women in the privacy of their homes, as exemplified in her *Three Women* from the 1930s.

Particularly interesting is the inclusion of fashion and advertising photography, breaking down the barrier of so-called fine art to encompass the broader field of visual culture production. Arguments about whether photography is art have long been rendered moot. So, it is gratifying to see stalwart institutions such as the Met and the National Gallery present this material on equal footing as part of their project.



ringl + pit (Grete Stern [Argentine, born Germany, 1904–1999], Ellen Auerbach [American, born Germany, 1906–2004]), [Die Ringlpitis](#), 1931, foldout page spread from bound volume of 6 photographs, 12 collages, 8 watercolors, 6 texts, and 1 drawing, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund, © ringl + pit, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

The team of Grete Stern and Ellen Auerbach, who worked under the appellation ringl + pit, demonstrate their creativity in a 1931 advertising photograph for Pétrole Hahn hair-styling lotion in which a mannequin's hand is slyly replaced with a human's to draw attention to the product. Caroline Whiting Fellows shoots up through a glass tabletop upon which are set bottles of vermouth and rye, surrounded by "up" glasses with maraschino cherries in each, the makings of a Manhattan cocktail in a 1930s ad that proffers its products in "value-added" color.



ringl + pit (Grete Stern [Argentine, born Germany, 1904–1999] and Ellen Auerbach [American, born Germany, 1906–2004]), *Pétrole Hahn*, 1931, gelatin silver print, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.100), © ringl + pit, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Resource, NY [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

Purely aesthetic exercises are not to be overlooked and New Women photographers created these types of images, as well. Germaine Krull's 1928 *Eiffelturm* (*Eiffel Tower*), one of many photographs she took of the landmark, looks up the steel-girder structure, reveling in the interplay of diagonals in a composition that borders on the abstract. Elfriede Stegemeyer, Bernice Kolko, and Margaret De Patta experiment with the photogram, a darkroom process that eschews the camera to create compositions of objects laid directly onto photo paper. Other photographers play with double exposure, photcollage, acute angles, and other techniques to mine the possibilities of photographic representation.



Elfriede Stegemeyer *Glühbirne, Spiralfeder, Quadrate und Kreise* (Light Bulb, Spring, Squares, and Circles), 1934, The Sir Elton John Photography Collection [courtesy of National Gallery of Art]

Taken as a whole, *The New Woman Behind the Camera* presents an eye-opening view, as it were, of the range of creative practice undertaken at mid-century by women from around the world in service to new visions and new possibilities. In the hands of these photographers, the medium indeed served a revolutionary purpose, just as Benjamin prescribed.



The New Woman Behind the Camera is on view at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), 1000 Fifth Avenue in New York City, until 3 October 2021. Free with museum admission. Timed entry and social distancing are required. Click [here](#) for details.

The exhibition will be on view at the [National Gallery of Art](#), Constitution and Sixth Avenue in Washington, DC, from 31 October 2021, through 30 January 2022. Admission is free; masking is required.