

Berenice Abbott

Paris Art Studies – Berenice Abbott 1898 -1991

1898 – Born Bernice Abbott in Springfield, Ohio. Unhappy childhood living with 5 siblings and divorced mother.

1917 – Studies briefly journalism at Ohio State University.

1918 – Leaves for New York City, settles in Bohemian world of Greenwich Village. Acts in Eugene O'Neil plays, frequents anarchist Hippolyte Havel.

1919 – Nearly dies of Spanish flu. Begins studying sculpture.

1920 – Friendly with New York Dadaists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray with whom she learns “how to dance”.

1921 – Embarks for Paris in the spring. Continues sculpting and also studies in Berlin.

1923 – Hired by Man Ray to work as his dark room assistant in his photographic studio in Montparnasse. First experience with photography, she will never look back: “I took to photography like a duck to water. I never wanted to do anything else. Excitement about the subject is the voltage which pushes me over the mountain of drudgery necessary to produce the final photograph.” Along with developing Man Ray's photographs she begins taking her own.

1926 – Rather than raising her salary Man Ray gives her working space in which she now shoots her own portraits of Paris luminaries: Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Peggy Guggenheim, Jean Cocteau, James Joyce, André Gide. First solo show at the gallery Sacre du Printemps. She is noticed by French critics. Meets the old French photographer of Paris Eugène Atget (1857-1927). Buys a few of his prints.

1927
– Death of Eugène Atget.

1928 – After 2 months of negotiation with Atget's testamentary executor, André Calmettes, she buys several thousands of the master's prints and negatives. Exhibits in first independent Photography

salon, the Salon de l'Escalier at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées along with Man Ray, André Kertész, Gemaine Krull. This is the first important rebellion against the "Pictorialist" tradition of art photography represented by figures like Edward Steichen. Abbott lends some of her Atget prints to the show.

1929 – Returns

to New York in January hoping to pursue her portrait career and publish a book on Atget. The Wall Street crash forces her to close her New York studio. Inspired by Atget's photos of Paris she begins photographing New York, which during her absence had become the world's skyscraper city.

1930

– Exhibits her work and Atget's at the Weyhe gallery. Publication in New York and Paris of the book "Atget, Photographer of Paris" with a preface by Pierre Marc Orlan. Faced with increasing financial difficulties she signs a contract with gallery owner Julien Lévy for sharing the exploitation of her Atget prints and negatives. Shows in "Photography" an exhibition organized in Harvard by Lincoln Kirstein, the first American exhibition to show the "new" photography, including the young American documentary photographers Walker Evans and Ralph Steiner.

1931 – Approaches various institutions to find

financing for her project of photographing New York: The Guggenheim Foundation, Museum of the City of New York, New York Historical Society. Her efforts fail.

1932 – Participates in 4 exhibitions organized

or curated by Julien Lévy who specializes in modern photography and Surrealism, including "Murals by American painters and photographers" at the new Museum of Modern Art.

1933 – Teaches photography at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village (until 1938).

1934-35 – Road trip with architectural historian

Henry Russel Hitchcock to photograph American Victorian architecture and the buildings of Henry Hobson in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Her photos will be shown at Yale and MoMA. Exhibition in 1934 of her New York photos at the Museum of the City of New York. Meets art critic Elizabeth

McCausland ("Butchy") who will become her partner until her death in 1965. Her photo project "Changing New York";

finally receives support (\$ 145 a month and a 1930 Ford roadster in 1936) from the Federal Art Project. Abbott will produce 300 8x10 negatives of great precision between 1935 and 1939 working in collaboration with assistants and researchers who document her urban views.

1937 – A selection of the "Changing new York" photos are shown at the Museum of the City of New York.

1939 – Publication of "Changing New York" in time for the 1939 New York World's Fair as an illustrated guidebook for visitors much against the will of Abbott and McCausland.

1941 – Publication of her "Guide to Better Photography";

1944-45 – Artistic director of Science illustrated where she publishes photos illustrating scientific concepts, inventing a new process of direct photography baptized “super-sight”.

1954 – Travels along route 1 from Maine to Florida photographing provincial America.

1958-61 – Hired by MIT for an educational project aimed at improving scientific teaching in American high schools. Produces a series of beautiful yet simple photos on speed and magnetism widely used in school textbooks.

1960 – Exhibition of her scientific photos “Image of Physics” organized by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

1964 – Publication of 3 books: “The World of Atget”, “Magnet”, “Motion”.

1965 – Death of her companion Elizabeth McCausland.

1968 -
MoMa buys the entire Atget archive from Abbott and Lévy for \$80,000, the highest price ever paid for a photographic collection. Abbott moves permanently to Maine.

1991 – Dies in Monson, Maine.