



# Jewish Museum Berlin

## Background Information

**:“Brought to Light – The Photographic Legacy of Fred Stein”  
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Excerpt from the Publication**

The estate of Fred Stein, comprising an abundance of photographs and documents, is today in the possession of his son, Peter Stein. This material is like a path leading through the different life stages of the photographer, who as a Jewish lawyer and politically active Socialist and Anti-Fascist was forced to leave Nazi Germany and embark on a new career. After his death, his name faded into obscurity. Peter Stein inherited the material in the estate upon his mother's death in 1997 and began the huge task of organizing his photographic legacy, labeling everything and having new contact prints and enlargements made – in order to pursue with energy and enthusiasm the goal of helping his father to achieve belated recognition as a photographer.

Several rooms in his home are dedicated to his father's work, lined with shelves and with materials piled up here and there, all of which deserves to be re-examined time and time again from new perspectives. Hundreds of negatives have been carefully labeled and stored in fireproof cabinets, forming the centerpiece of the collection.

The life of Fred Stein found him moving from place to place, and the photographer's oeuvre can correspondingly be divided into three subject areas: portraits, which Stein produced throughout his career, views of Paris, where he lived in the 1930s, and New York, where he moved in the 1940s.

The earliest photographs in the archive are from Dresden, where Stein was born in 1909, and are among his oldest surviving works. These are portraits of Lilo and Fred Stein; the grave of Stein's father, who died early; and an exterior shot of the Semper Synagogue in Dresden. The son of a rabbi, Stein decided early on to study law, but when the Nazis came to power in 1933, he had to leave



Dresden, and emigrated to Paris with his wife, Lilo. There he found himself faced with having to create a new existence for himself and his family. On a quest for an internationally oriented profession that was not restricted by national borders and offered long-term prospects, he found what he was looking for in photography, which he had regarded up until then merely as a hobby. In a 1954 letter, he writes:

“The years in-between [1933 to 1954] were often lousy. But they forced me to take up a new profession: I was unable to get any further with law in France, not having the necessary funds to continue my studies etc., and so I took up the old Leica purchased before leaving Dresden as a welcome means of production. I became a photographer [...]. I never had any training for this new job; the bare minimum of technical skills – developing etc. – was taught to me by another German lawyer in Paris in two hours.”<sup>1</sup>

His boundless curiosity, his general interest in art, and his visual sensitivity helped Stein to quickly mature from his initial amateur status. The Leica became his constant companion, perfectly meeting his photographic needs. It allowed him to roam the streets as a flaneur, directly capturing the scenes he encountered, interested in the small and seemingly insignificant, yet moving moments of everyday life. He had an affectionate and empathetic way of treating the people he examined through his lens, and took countless photographs on the streets and in other locations in France.

The original contact sheets provide a perfect overview of the photographs, and comprise an important component of the estate. These are divided into the three categories of portraits, Paris, and New York, and are kept in binders. The labels in the binders are almost always the handwork of Lilo Stein and are in a mixture of German, French, and English, corresponding to the three stations in the Steins' lives.

Most of the photos on the contact sheets of street photographs have been cut apart and the individual motifs reorganized according to specific topics such as

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Fred Stein to Will Grohmann on June 23, 1954, collection of Peter Stein.



*work, leisure, beach, street types, children, Jewish, fashion, musicians, parades,* and so on, both in Paris and in New York.

His special brand of congenial humor can frequently be seen running through his motifs. The street photographs illustrate the combination of Fred Stein's interest in the everyday, along with his sense for the precise moment, which makes his view unique.

In 1941, Stein fled the Nazi invasion of France with his wife Lilo and his daughter, who was born in 1938, to travel to their third home city, New York. They brought luggage full of negatives and selected prints, saved for posterity. In the US, Stein resumed his street photography, adding the Rolleiflex while continuing to work with the Leica.

In making the change of residence, he conveyed the essence of each of the two different cities, with their own different atmospheres, in his pictures. Fred Stein photographed his whole life long in black and white only, using the two different cameras, the Leica and the Rolleiflex, both of which unfortunately are no longer part of the archive. The different formats of the negatives indicate which camera was used to create them. The products of the Leica are 35 mm negative strips, about half of which are rolled up, while those produced by the Rolleiflex are in 6 x 6 cm format and usually packed separately in glassine envelopes.

In New York, portraiture became an even more important interest. The contact sheets for portraits have been archived in the binders mostly as uncut negative strips. The images are sorted alphabetically and are usually also labeled with the date and place where the portrait was made. Fred Stein produced over one thousand portraits, and he photographed some of the subjects multiple times over the years, including Hannah Arendt and Willy Brandt, a close friend of Stein's. Looking through the contact sheets of portraits, it is noticeable that, in contrast to the corresponding material for street photography, Stein made more markings in reference to especially successful motifs and special details. Although he took several images of each portrait subject, he evidently had a



habit of being highly prepared, so that he often needed few attempts in order to obtain a satisfactory result.

Authenticity was one of Stein's photographic goals. He was not interested in elaborate scene-setting, keeping any outside influence to a minimum, and working mostly with natural light and only using a flash when absolutely necessary. He was averse to retouching, which led to arguments with his wife, who did the minor retouching work for him. Especially for portraits of women, Lilo Stein wished to enhance the photographs somewhat, a step that certain women also expected – but her husband would not tolerate. He took this so far that he displayed a clear preference for photographing men. Asked by some of his subjects why they looked so old in their portrait, he replied that they should just take a look in the mirror – an expression of both his humor and his intention to produce authentic images.

The pictorial language of his portraiture is straightforward and simple. The pictures are not arranged or staged, and the focus is on the respective person without any accessories or dramatic effects figuring in the composition. Stein worked quickly, as he wanted the sitter to appear natural. He had usually long known the work of the people he portrayed, so that the portrait sessions would involve intense conversations, the actual shooting happening unobtrusively. Stein described his intention as follows: “[...] and I must say, that is also the meaning I attach to portrait photography: to create a substitute (by way of photography) for the living human being, an image that tells us something about the outer and inner individual.”<sup>2</sup>

Two brief anecdotes told by his wife give us a vivid picture of how Stein approached his portrait subjects. The portrait of Albert Einstein was made in 1946 in Princeton. Originally, Einstein did not want to be photographed, but he finally agreed to sit for no longer than ten minutes. Those ten minutes turned into two hours as the two men struck up an animated conversation, having fun exchanging jokes. On another occasion, Stein photographed Egon Erwin Kisch in

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Fred Stein to Will Grohmann on February 24, 1955, collection of Peter Stein.



1936 in Versailles. Stein was an admirer of the journalist's reporting work and spent a long time talking politics with him at the sitting. As he was about to say goodbye, he noticed that he hadn't yet taken a single shot and quickly snapped Kisch wearing his coat and hat and smoking a cigarette.<sup>3</sup>

The diversity of portraits by Fred Stein reads like a *Who's Who* of prominent personalities of the twentieth century, among them Albert Einstein, Georgia O'Keeffe, John F. Kennedy, Salvador Dali, Bertolt Brecht, Marlene Dietrich, Günter Grass, Hermann Hesse, Martin Buber, Walter Gropius, David Ben-Gurion, Frank Lloyd Wright, Marc Chagall, Eleanor Roosevelt, Joan Miro, Max Ernst, Nikita Khrushchev, Willem de Kooning, and Thomas Mann. Many of them were émigrés like himself. He photographed many of them at official occasions in his role as press photographer, while other portraits were made in a non-staged style in various locations, and some were also shot in his studio.

The estate includes, in addition to negatives and contact sheets, numerous original prints, most of them on either matte or glossy photo paper in the format 20 x 25 cm. The prints are stamped on the back with the various addresses where Stein lived, helping to date the photographs. Unfortunately, Stein never signed his prints directly; his signature can be found only on a few brown-colored original mats. Short working titles and the date he took them are written on the labels for the negatives and in some cases on the backs of prints.

A large portion of the estate, apart from Stein's photographic reportage, consists of volumes of detailed correspondence that has survived; both business-related and personal letters. In one letter, for example, Hannah Arendt wrote "[...] I honestly believe that you are one of the best contemporary portrait photographers."<sup>4</sup> Other documents reveal the everyday problems encountered by the photographer. Several payment reminders for very small amounts document his difficult financial situation, while countless requests for

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Interview with Lilo Stein conducted by her son Peter around 1981. The interview is available in transcribed form, collection of Peter Stein.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Hannah Arendt to Fred Stein on March 9, 1964, collection of Peter Stein.



the observation of intellectual property rights furnish an idea of how often his photographs were published without any mention of his name. There is one letter that Fred Stein wrote to friends and relatives in 1946 that reports in great detail on the events he and his wife lived through, with thorough information on the various stations of their emigration and on their difficulties during the war.

References to various memberships Stein held can also be found in the documents, including the *Association de la Presse Etrangère*, the *Verband Deutscher Journalisten in der Emigration* (Association of German Journalists in Exile) and the *American Society of Magazine Photographers*. He also belonged to the *Black Star* photo agency, was a member of the *Photo League* for a year, leaving due to the organization's political orientation. Stein's photographs were published in books, magazines, journals and newspapers, including *Aufbau*, *Time*, *The New York Times* and *Fortune*.

The correspondence also contains many references to Stein's connections to Germany: he returned to his native country for the first time in 1958, making several additional trips until his death. He actively stayed in touch with friends in Germany, and with former friends from his school and university days, but he never returned to Dresden. He wished to do photographic reports in Germany, but was unable to find sponsors. The only exception was his book project *Deutsche Portraits*<sup>5</sup>, which was brought out by a publishing house in Stuttgart.

Family photographs and personal documents in the estate provide important detail by giving a glimpse of Stein's private life. There are pictures of him as a child during his school days and university years, as well as snapshots of him and his wife in Paris and New York. The documents include his birth certificate, a high school report card, his marriage certificate, various identification cards, and his certificate of naturalization as a United States citizen, which he finally received after a long wait in 1952.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Stein and Will Grohmann, *Deutsche Portraits*, Stuttgart 1961.



At the end of his life, he was working on a project with the title *Das war nicht unser Deutschland. Ein Lesebuch für die Kommenden*. (This Was Not Our Germany – a Reader for the Future Generation). He planned the book as an anthology of various text passages by German poets and thinkers speaking out against Nazi Germany, in combination with his portrait photographs. He collected numerous press clippings for the project, along with previously published essays. It was a thoughtful examination of many of the issues raised by his experiences, but the correspondence shows that the book was never published.

In order not to distort this overview of the Fred Stein archive, it is important not to forget about sources that are no longer extant. These include all the politically motivated photographs that Stein reportedly made in Paris. As a Socialist and Anti-Fascist, he photographed many events and demonstrations by *the Front Populaire*. As they were leaving France, Lilo Stein sent these photographs to an archive in the Netherlands. Devastatingly, they fell victim to a war-time fire.

Despite the range and power of his work, Fred Stein never achieved the recognition he desired during his lifetime. Even after his death, his street scenes from Paris and New York were less well known than his portraits. The first comprehensive retrospective of the photographs of Fred Stein is now being presented in Germany at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, in order to make his extensive and multi-layered body of work known to a broad public.

Fred Stein was not only an exceptional photographer, but also an excellent observer and documentarian of his times. His estate affords us a comprehensive and highly personal overview of his photographic work as well as his personal life, shaped as it was by his emigration from his homeland.

### **Publication**

Fred Stein. Paris New York, ed. by Dawn Freer, Heidelberg/Berlin: Kehrer 2013.  
24 x 31 cm, 200 pages, English/German ISBN 978-3-86828-429-4  
49.90 euros.