

# **The Life and Work of American Photographer Berenice Abbott**

Submitted by Julie Cassen, docent

Berenice Abbott began her career before photography was considered a serious art form and women were regarded as serious artists. (National Museum of Women in the Arts, artist profile) Her sixty-year career encompassed an extraordinary range of work: portraits, documentary images of American life, and photographs to illustrate the laws of science. In addition she was an activist, writer, historian and teacher. (O'Neal 1982, 32)

Bernice Abbott was born in Springfield Ohio on July 17, 1898. In Paris in the early 1920's, she adopted the French spelling of her name and from then on she was known as Berenice Abbott. (Yochelson 1997, 10)

Abbott's parents divorced shortly after she was born, and she rarely saw her father. She was raised separated from her sister and two brothers. In an autobiographical note she wrote, "I was an unhappy child, had a fragmented family, but it taught me self reliance. I was forced to be an independent kid." (Mitchell 1979, 12)

In early 1918, when her friends left Ohio for New York, Abbott joined them. She settled in the heart of Greenwich Village and joined the bohemian lifestyle. She enrolled at Columbia University and planned to become a writer, but disappointed by her course work, she switched to sculpture. To support herself she did odd jobs including modeling for artists and playing parts in Eugene O'Neill's plays. "By 1920 she had befriended Dadaists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, whom she boasted having taught to dance." (Yochelson 1997, 10)

After World War I tourists flocked to Greenwich Village to gawk at the bohemian characters living there. As the Village changed, aspiring artists who had come to escape America's commercialism started to flee. Berenice Abbott joined the exodus to Paris in the spring of 1921. (Yochelson 1997, 10)

When Berenice Abbott met fellow American Man Ray in Paris, he was looking for a new darkroom assistant. He wanted someone who could follow his orders and advice. That is how Abbott became a photographer. "I didn't decide to be a photographer; I just happened to fall into it," Abbott once recalled. (MNAWA, artist profile, 2008) In an autobiography Abbott states, "May Ray never showed me how to take pictures but how to do the darkroom, ...Man Ray took magnificent portraits of men, but nearly all of his women were beautiful objects, beautiful still lifes.... I learned mostly by trial and error. ...I think my work in sculpture helped." (Mitchell, p.12) Through her work as May Ray's assistant from 1923 -26, Abbott discovered her talent as a photographer and at May Ray's encouragement tried her hand at making portraits. But, when art collector Peggy Guggenheim requested a portrait sitting with Abbott, not Man Ray, Man Ray was offended. This friction caused a permanent split between the two photographers and Abbott finally resigned as his assistant. She later recalled, "He changed my life...I was

extremely grateful to have a job and to learn...he was a good friend and a fine photographer.” (O’ Neal 1982, 10)

While in Paris her reputation as a portrait photographer grew. Abbott never formally posed her sitters, preferring instead to capture characteristic expressions and natural gestures (Profotos.com). She photographed major literary and artistic figures including James Joyce, Coco Chanel, Edna St. Vincent Millay and French photographer Eugene Atget just to name a few. She also worked for French Vogue. In 1926 she had her first Paris exhibition entitled *Portraits Photographiques*. (O’Neal 1982, 10)

Meeting fellow photographer Eugene Atget shortly before his death had a lasting impression on Abbott. Atget had spent his life photographing the changing Paris street scene. After his death, Abbott rescued Atget’s collection of glass plates and prints and launched a life long campaign to preserve his work and help him receive the recognition she felt he deserved. Atget also provided Abbott with the inspiration for her next major project: the documentation of New York City. (Profotos.com)

In 1929 when Abbott returned to New York she was fascinated by how much the city had changed in eight years. In the manner Atget had portrayed Paris, she embarked on a project to capture the transformation of New York into a modern urban center. Her determination to document what she saw, the old before it was torn down and recording the new construction rising in its place, eventually resulted in the publication entitled, *Changing New York*. (Yochelson 1997, 12) But Abbott had difficulty getting funding for her project.

Shortly after Abbott returned to New York, the stock market crashed. She found it difficult to maintain her portrait studio. People could not afford to pay \$50 for a portrait. Through her friend Margaret Bourke-White she was hired by Fortune magazine to portray corporate executives, but she found her subjects dislikable. (Yochelson, p. 14) To help support herself she started teaching the first photography course given by the new School for Social Research in Greenwich Village in 1933 and remained part of the school staff until 1958. (Yochelson 1997, 17)

After many unsuccessful attempts, she received funding for her New York project through the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the relief agency for artists. From 1935 until 1939 she devoted herself to photographing the city. The resulting *Changing New York* project contained 305 photographs supported by historical data. When funding stopped the body of work was finally published with an accompanying exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. (Yochelson 1997, 20)

Abbott was a documentary photographer. She favored a straightforward, yet dynamic, style that featured strong contrasts and dramatic angles, but no special effects. She often said if you want your picture to look like a painting, use paint. “Photography can never grow up if it imitates some other medium”, Abbott said, “It has to walk alone; it has to be itself.” (The Phillips Collection)

In 1939 Abbott began her most ambitious project. She believed we were entering a scientific age and despite her lack of training in the field, she attempted to photograph scientific concepts. This required her to invent special equipment so that the scientific phenomenon of gravity, kinetic energy and electricity could be visualized. She worked alone for nearly twenty years, became picture editor for *Science Illustrated* in the 1940's and finally in 1958 was hired by a group at MIT to illustrate a series of physics textbooks. Her pictures of soap bubbles, wave patterns, bouncing balls, magnetic fields, and light beams illustrate basic scientific and mathematical principals. Her entire scientific collection of photographs was taken over by the Smithsonian Institute in 1960 and circulated to museums and schools throughout the United States. (O'Neal 1982, 28)

Her scientific photography made her famous and she was the subject of many retrospective exhibitions in her later years. In 1989 she received the International Center of Photography's Lifetime Achievement Award. (NY Public Library's Digital Gallery)

Abbott took on a variety of lesser projects throughout her career such as: creating a book entitled *Greenwich Village Today and Yesterday*, and documenting a changing America by photographing people and places along Route 1 from Fort Kent Maine to Key West Florida and back in 1953. (O'Neal 1982, 170)

When the scientific project ended, Berenice Abbott moved to Maine. There she took on a project to capture the essence of Maine that resulted in her book, *A Portrait of Maine*. Here as in all her work she tried to capture the true life and culture of the people and the place, not the "pretty" images portrayed by the chamber of commerce. (O'Neal 1982, 234)

Abbott's accomplishments are wider ranging than anyone else's in the history of American photography. Other photographers have produced more, or better, portraits, but portraits had been their primary focus. Some have produced a larger body of fine documentary work, but, again, this was their primary focus. Abbott has done both portraiture and documentary work and done them well; her best stands up with the best of any photographer's. Her scientific images are unique and her ability to invent equipment needed for her work is unequaled by other photographers. When historians look back on twentieth century photography, there is no doubt that Berenice Abbott will be judged a dominant photographic force of the century. (O'Neal 1982, 32)

In 1991 Berenice Abbott died in rural Maine at the age of 93.

## **Sources: Print**

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