

Joseph Breitenbach – Munich Photographer in New York

The photographic oeuvre of Joseph Breitenbach has only gained acclaim over the past few years. There were large exhibitions of his work in German museums in 1996/97, and in American and French ones between 2000 and 2002. Joseph Breitenbach had predicted that he would only be acknowledged as a great artist after his death.

Joseph Breitenbach was born in Munich on April 3, 1886. His parents had moved there during the 1890s from Marktbreit in Franconia, and started a successful wine wholesale business. The family was of Jewish origin, but the father, Siegfried Breitenbach, had abandoned the Jewish religion and co-founded the anticlerical "Free Religious Community" in Munich. He was also a freemason and a social democrat. Joseph Breitenbach went to school in Munich and completed his high school studies at the Luitpold Oberrealschule in 1912. After that he worked with a chemical company before accepting a post as clerk for an insurance association. Politically, he followed in his father's footsteps. He was co-founder of the youth section of the Social Democratic Association, together with such men as Felix Fechenbach. It was here that he made the acquaintance of Pauline Schmidbauer, whom he married in 1918. He attended discussion events on pacifist youth – disapproved of by the SPD leadership – with Kurt Eisner, Oskar Maria Graf and Erich Mühsam. Breitenbach did his military service in 1916, was sent to work for a company in Nuremberg in 1917, and then worked at a factory in Munich again in 1918. During the revolutionary period he stayed close to Eisner, and was also a member of the Provisional Central Workers' Council. In 1918/19 Breitenbach attended the commercial high school in Munich and also worked in his parents' wine wholesale business, which he then took over in 1922. He used his journeys into wine regions as opportunities for photographic studies. In 1928 he won a gold medal in a photo competition in Milan. In 1932, during the global recession, the wine wholesale business went bankrupt, and Joseph Breitenbach opened a photographic studio in Munich. For a self-taught photographer like Breitenbach this was a difficult time, and his post as a photographer for the Münchner Kammerspielen theatre troupe did little to alleviate things. He concentrated on portraits of actors, attempting to convey certain character traits of his sitters by emphasising facial nuance. He photographed Jarmila Novotná, Otto Falckenberg, Karl Valentin, Marianne Hoppe and many others. Even these early photographic portraits reveal his specific strengths. After the Nazis seized power, Breitenbach was forced to emigrate because of his political past and Jewish origins. He went to Paris with his son Hans, born in 1917, having divorced his wife earlier on. In Paris, Joseph Breitenbach opened a studio in 1934, gave private lessons and worked for a time as a correspondent for the British International News Agency. From 1938/39 he was a member of the Société française de la photographie and also of the British Royal Photographic Society. From 1934/35 he taught Ruth Bensinger-

Snowman, then visited her several times in Great Britain before getting engaged to her. Breitenbach quickly managed to establish himself as a photographer in Paris, and his work was featured in numerous exhibitions. During this time he took several major portraits, including those of Bertolt Brecht, Max Ernst, Vassily Kandinsky, James Joyce and many other well-known artists and literati. Breitenbach spent an increasing amount of time with nude photography, something he had begun in Munich, and this was to play a major role in his later work. He also immortalized numerous everyday scenes in Paris, however. Surprisingly, many of these pictures have been preserved, despite his subsequent arrest and escape to the USA.

When war broke out in September 1939, Breitenbach was interned, and held prisoner in various camps (Colombess, Begny sur Craôn, Agen) until the spring of 1941. In May of that year he managed to board a ship to Martinique, but landed in Trinidad after the ship was seized. From there he travelled on to New York, and opened another photo studio there. He worked as a photojournalist, became a member of the American Society of Magazine Photographers and journeyed through the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Canada. In 1942 he separated from Ruth Snowman, and in 1946 made the acquaintance of Gisela Blauner, who later married Oskar Maria Graf. In 1950 he met Yaye Togasaki, who became his wife in 1980. From 1952 to 1953 Breitenbach worked as Chief of Still Photography for the United Nations Korean Relief Association (UNKRA) in Korea and Japan. From 1956 to 1967 he went on numerous photographic trips for the UN, Unicef and international corporations. He visited Europe almost annually between 1957 and 1983. From 1946 onwards he was a teacher at the Cooper Union Art School, and from 1949 at the New School of Social Research. His application for a professorship at the University of Art in Hamburg was, however, rejected in 1965. During his time in New York Breitenbach took several masterly portraits, including those of Oskar Maria Graf, John Steinbeck and John Dewey. He also spent an increasing amount of time on photograms, and also cityscapes such as the skyline of Manhattan in the 1940s. From as early as 1944 his work was already represented in major exhibitions, e.g. the famous "Family of Man" exhibition in the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1955. In 1968 his book "Women of Asia" was published in London and New York. The fact that the first major exhibition devoted to his work was held in the Municipal Museum in Munich in 1965 reveals Breitenbach's close ties with his native city. The exhibition, entitled "Wanderung", featured 275 photographs taken from 1930 onwards. In December 1979 the Munich Municipal Museum purchased the "Breitenbach Collection", the result of decades of photography. In 1983 Breitenbach bequeathed 12,000 individual items to the museum, including many books and valuable photographs. On October 7, 1984, Joseph Breitenbach died in New York. The great variety of the work he left behind becomes clear on closer analysis: "When these extraordinary photos from the 1920s and 30s were rediscovered in

this manner, they appeared just as fresh and vivid as the time during which they were taken – a time they were largely ahead of." (Peter C. Jones)

The estate of Joseph Breitenbach is located at the Collection Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson. It is administered by The Breitenbach Trust, New York.

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Literature

Immisch, T. O. / Pohlmann, Ulrich / Klaus E. Göltz (Hg.): Josef Breitenbach. Photographs, Munich 1996; Jones, Peter C.: The Rediscovery of Josef Breitenbach, in: ebd., p. 8.