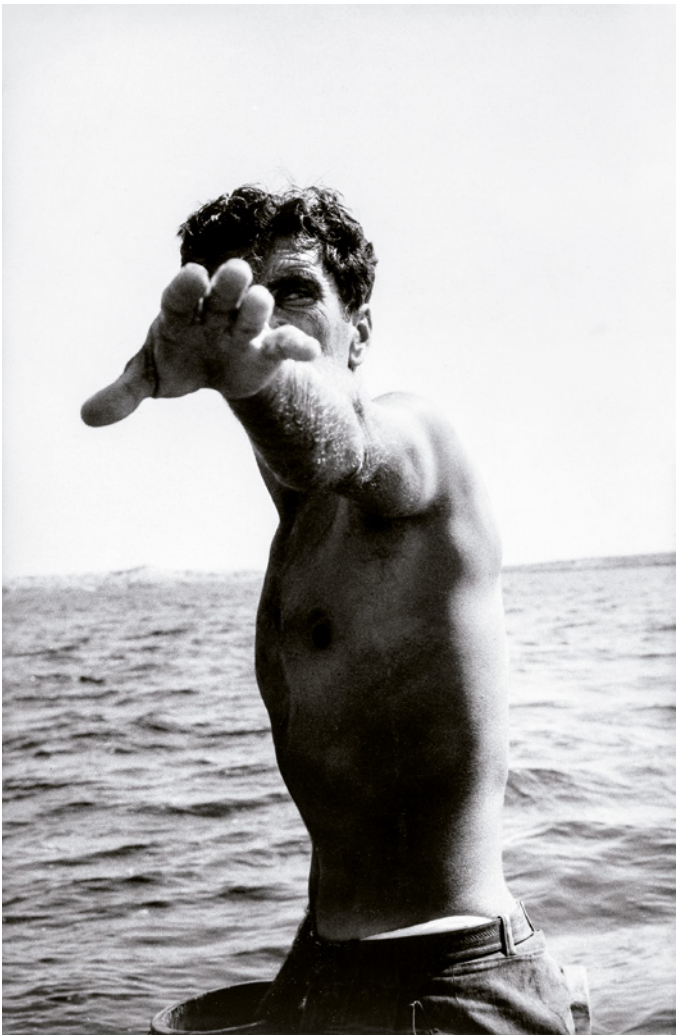


June 6th

Eng

– September 15th, 2024

Louis Stettner



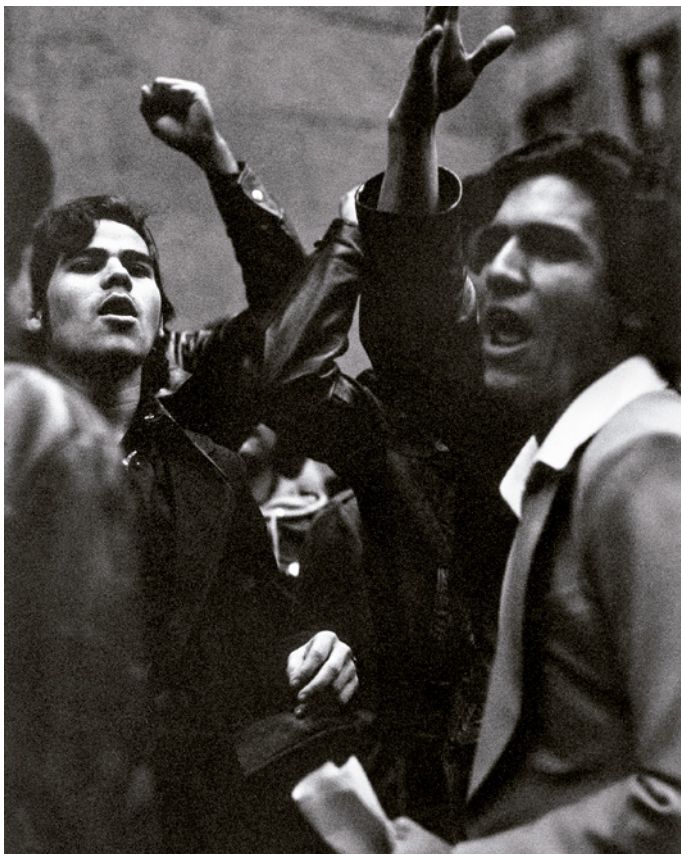


Woman Holding Newspaper, New York, 1946. Fundación MAPFRE collections

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1922, Louis Stettner created thousands of images over the course of a career that spanned almost eighty years. Acquiring his first camera as a young teenager, he was soon drawn to the streets of his native city. Stettner quickly made a name for himself at New York's famous Photo League, where he formed friendships with Sid Grossman and Weegee. He served as a combat photographer in World War II, and the experience of fighting fascism left him with a lasting belief in the fundamental humanity of the common man. After the war, Stettner arrived in Paris in 1947, intending to visit for three weeks, but ultimately staying for five years, studying cinematography on a G.I. Bill. During this time, he forged a lasting relationship with Brassai, the city, and its people.

Throughout his career, he moved between New York and Paris, before finally settling in Paris in the 1990s until his death in 2016. His work defies categorization, containing aesthetic elements of both New York street photography and French humanist photography. Straddling these two cultures, Stettner bridged the socially concerned American approach with the lyrical French tradition to create a uniquely humanist approach to photography.

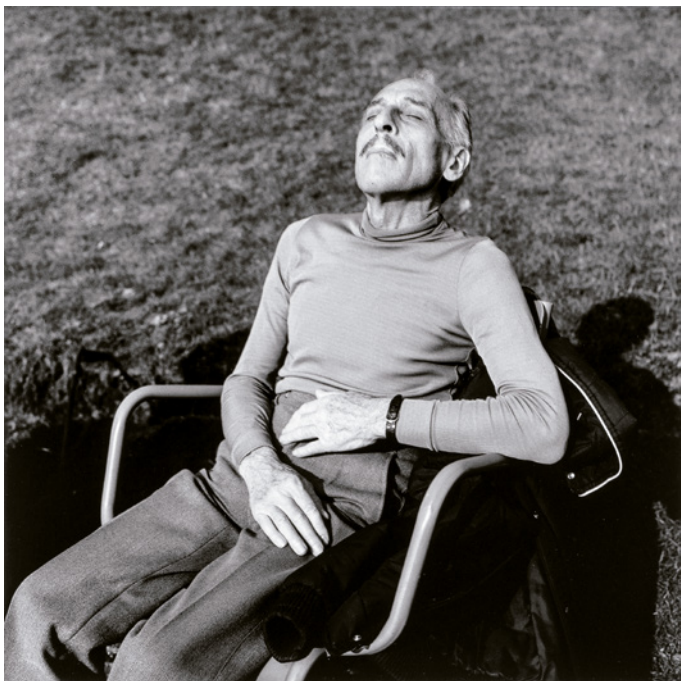
A poet with the camera, Stettner drew perhaps his greatest inspiration from the literary world, in the writings of Walt Whitman most notably. He embraced Whitman's faith in his fellow human beings and his belief in the triumph of the human spirit, a conviction that drew him constantly to the streets in search of the inner humanity of the common people. A prolific writer and critic of photography, Stettner wrote candidly and extensively about his own



Demonstrators on March in Support of United Farm Workers, New York, 1975-1976.
Fundación MAPFRE collections

artistic personal vision, his leftist politics, and the fellow photographers of his circle. A lifelong Marxist, he was equally influenced by the writings of Karl Marx; he celebrated the working class and produced a great body of photographs of workers at work. As the exhibition shows, he explored a range of subjects, often returning to the same themes many years later. For all its diversity, however, his work is thematically consistent: he sought out beauty in common people and their everyday life. His profound respect and admiration for them unifies his entire oeuvre, a visual ode to humanity that reflects his deep empathy and generosity of spirit.

The exhibition is organized chronologically and charts his work from his early days in Paris, photographing the empty post-war city, and in New York, capturing commuters in the subway, to his later use of color photography, and ends with his final meditations on the landscape of Les Alpilles, in the south of France. Bringing together works that reflect the richness of Stettner's artistic vision, the exhibition sets out to underline his importance within the history of photography and to secure for him his rightful place within the canon.



Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris, 1997. Courtesy Louis Stettner Archives, Paris

KEY THEMES

The Photo League. The Photo League (1936-1951) was a New York photographers' collective which had its origins in the German association known as the Workers-Photographers (VdAFD). It met regularly to discuss the connections between photography and politics – without ever adopting a programmatic stance although it was technically Left wing – and to promote photography as a tool of social critique. It was in this context that Stettner met photographers such as Sid Grossman and Weegee and at the age of just twenty-two he accepted a position as the association's youngest teacher.

A photographer-writer. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a certain mistrust of photographers who wrote, possibly because they appeared to be located in a position mid-way between the two disciplines. Stettner always engaged in literary activity as well as photography, writing not just about himself but also about many of his artist friends and colleagues and not only those whose work he admired. His texts were to some degree comparable to his photographs: abrupt, spontaneous and impetuous. In the 1970s he wrote a monthly column in the magazine *Camera 35* published by the Photo League, initially with the title "Speaking Out" and subsequently "A Humanist View". Although he was a prolific writer it was not until the late date of 1979 that he published one of his photographic series in the book *Sur le tas*, depicting men and women at work.

Walt Whitman. One of the key figures for Stettner's work was Walt Whitman, with whom he shared the belief that it was possible to find the beauty of the world in everyday, commonplace things.



Nancy Listening to Jazz, Greenwich Village, New York, 1958.
Fundación MAPFRE collections

Leaves of Grass almost became his Bible and he carried a copy with him at all times. In his own words: "Whitman's faith in his fellow human beings, his grasp of the entire life cycle and death, and his cosmic vision has been contagious to me. [...] celebrates men and women and is not afraid, which is perhaps one of the reasons why I have never stopped photographing in the streets, wherever human beings are."

Workers. Stettner's social commitment and his concern for the underprivileged led him to regularly photograph workers and laborers with the aim of showing them as authentic, dignified individuals regardless of the precarious nature of their working conditions. In his own words: "I found them amidst a grinding noise, dirt, fumes and danger of accidents, to be very sensitive, innately human with a wonderful grasp of organization and immediate reality. They have always made me feel welcome and at ease ... my time in the factories was one of the most meaningful experiences in my life." Stettner's workers often appear strong and proud, frequently absorbed in their thoughts and dominating the image in which they appear. They transcend the context of their activities and reveal themselves as autonomous individuals who refuse to be bowed by the harshness of their daily activities.

Dates

From June 6th
to September 15th, 2024

Curatorship

Sally Martin Katz

Opening hours

Mondays: Closed
(except public holidays)
Tuesdays – Sundays
(and public holidays): 11 am-8 pm
Last entry: 7.30 pm

Visitors must leave the galleries
10 minutes before closing time

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Admissions

Standard ticket: 5 €
Ticket with reduction: 3 €
Free standard ticket: Tuesdays
(except public holidays)
Groups: 3 € / per person

Guided tour

(cultural mediation service)

Wednesdays & Thursdays: 5-8 pm
Fridays & Saturdays: 12-2 pm, 5-8 pm
Sundays & public holidays: 12-2 pm
Information at the reception
Not available in August

Audio guide

English, Spanish and Catalan: 4 €

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the exhibition: #KBrStettner

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Cover: Tony, «Pepe and Tony, Spanish Fishermen», Ibiza, Spain, 1956.
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