

Louis Stettner

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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, he 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, Stettner moved between New York and Paris, before finally settling in Paris in the 1990s. His work defies categorization, containing elements of both the New York street photography aesthetic and the lyrical humanism of the French tradition. A lifelong Marxist, Stettner celebrated the working class and was inspired by his reading of Walt Whitman and the inner humanity that constantly drew him to the lives of ordinary men and women. As the exhibition shows, he explored a range of subjects, often returning to the same themes many years later. For all its diversity, however, Stettner's work is thematically consistent: he sought out beauty in common people and their everyday life.

The exhibition is organized chronologically and charts his work from his early days in New York and Paris, includes his later use of color photography, and ends with his final meditations on the landscape of Les Alpilles (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.

Sally Martin Katz
Curator of the exhibition

1

Early New York, 1936-1946, and Post-War Paris, 1947-1952

New York Beginnings

The Subway Series

Post-War Paris: The Empty City

Stettner's career began in his native New York City. He was drawn to its streets and its people, and he returned to them in 1946 after the war. The New York Subway series shows his fascination with everyday life, depicting ordinary New Yorkers traveling to or from work. The subway car becomes a microcosm of the different urban characters and social classes that coexist in the city. Unlike Walker Evans, who kept his camera hidden inside his overcoat while photographing people in the New York subway several years earlier, Stettner kept his Rolleiflex camera in plain sight, pretending to be adjusting it when in fact he was discreetly taking photographs. In 1947, he arrived in Paris and began to photograph the city only recently liberated from Nazi occupation. Many of the pictures are devoid of the human presence, and those that do contain people focus primarily on solitary figures in the urban environment. Stettner frequently captured its empty streets at dawn with an 8 × 10 view camera, creating melancholy images of a depopulated urban landscape that evokes the deportation of Paris's Jewish population a few years earlier. Stettner's Paris is a city struggling to come back to life, a far cry from the bustling, vibrant city seen in the work of other post-war Paris photographers.

2

On Land or Sea: Spain, Europe, and USA, 1949-1969

Pepe and Tony: Spanish Fishermen Beaches and Country

Although much of Stettner's work took place in urban spaces, he was also frequently drawn to natural settings and the people that inhabit them. In 1956 he accompanied Pepe and Tony, Spanish fishermen in Ibiza, on their daily fishing trip over the course of two days. The composition of the pictures is tightly framed, fragmenting their bodies as they undertake their tasks, reflecting his close proximity to them on the small boat. Immersed in the scene, Stettner cleverly used negative space to frame the figures, presenting them engaged in a single action or gesture. The effect is to celebrate their strength and vitality; these are struggling hard-working fishermen, yet the photographer chose to emphasize their individuality and human dignity. He also photographed men at work on the land, children playing, and families at leisure at the beach, enjoying the beauty of the landscape and the serenity of the natural environment. These images capture the respite from work and from the confines of the urban setting. As he himself stated, "We have only to immerse ourselves in a forest or ocean to become revitalized for life in the city."

3

Post-War New York, 1952-1969

Penn Station

City Streets

Nancy, the Beat Generation

In the 1950s, Stettner returned to New York from Paris, photographing the city and other areas within the state. In contrast to his earlier photographs of the New York subway, in his 1958 Penn Station series he photographed commuters from outside of the trains. The windows and off-centered framing establish his exteriority, creating the sense that he is peering into an intimate enclosed space. Stettner captures private, quiet moments of interiority and solitude within the public setting of the station and train cars. His subjects occupy a liminal space, as the commuters prepare to move between the city and their destination. The series shows his remarkable talent for honing in on his subjects, drawing out faces from the crowd, capturing their individual characters and emotions, and inviting viewers to imagine their stories. His photographs of New York, taken in the 1950s and 1960s, employ similar compositional strategies to bring out the isolation and *pathos* of the city, using framing devices to show his subjects as confined within their urban environment. For his series of photographs of Nancy, Stettner spent five days accompanying a Greenwich Village beatnik, drawn to what he described as her “allure” and to the cultural change she represented. These images capture a specific moment in New York’s history, but they evoke more than simply nostalgia. Above all, Stettner’s belief in his native city—what he described as “the smoke, fumes, the bustle and the still moments or stray corners that have sometimes touched eternity”—still resonates with us today.

4

The 1970s

Workers

Demonstrations

Spirit of the City

Stettner was a lifelong Marxist, dedicated to the cause of the proletariat and consistent in his opposition to capitalism. The 1970s saw his activism intensify: he was a supporter of the Black Panther movement, committed to racial and economic justice, and vehemently objected to the war in Vietnam. From 1971 to 1979 he wrote a monthly column in *Camera 35* titled "Speaking Out," offering his personal vision and critique of contemporary photography. Throughout the 1970s he toured factories in the United States, France, England, and the Soviet Union, photographing workers at work. Stettner avowed a "lifetime commitment" to the topic of work, producing images inextricably linked to his political engagement. His photographs do not aim to elicit pity or portray the plight of workers, nor do they attempt to glorify them. Instead, he uses his camera to depict workers in a dignified way, perhaps as they themselves would like to be seen. He celebrates their strength, individuality, and humanity. In particular, his use of tight framing extracts the workers from their industrial environment to focus on the human rather than the machine, while retaining sufficient information to provide context for his images. Likewise, his photographs of protestors and ordinary citizens of the 1970s contain a similar thread of humanism, capturing a range of raw emotions that reflect their strength and aspirations. For Stettner, the common people were a consistent focus of his photographic art, and he saw within them an almost heroic beauty.

5

From the 1980s to the New Millennium

Bowery Series Portraits

Reflections of the City

Stettner read widely throughout his life, and in many ways, he is a uniquely literary photographer. In particular, he was devoted to Walt Whitman, and shared his belief that beauty can be found in the everyday and commonplace. As he himself acknowledged, “I started to read him when I was twelve or thirteen, and have continued to read him all my life, carrying his *Leaves of Grass* with me in my camera bag when photographing in the streets.” Stettner was attracted in particular to New York City’s disappearing Bowery neighborhood, where he befriended and photographed the individuals who made up its homeless population. He saw in their faces our contemporary society “waiting to be deciphered” and a “map of humanity” to lead us forward into the future. Many of his photographs from this period are characterized compositionally by reflections, shadows, and off-kilter framing, as he sought to celebrate city life in all its aspects. Stettner embraced Whitman’s faith in his fellow human beings and his belief that “all truths wait in all things,” a conviction that drew him constantly to the streets in search of the fundamental humanity of the common people. Stettner’s Whitmanesque view of the world and his profound respect and admiration for its people unifies his diverse body of work and lies at the heart of his artistic vision. His entire oeuvre can be understood in poetic as well as photographic terms, an ode to humanity that reflects his deep empathy and generosity of spirit.

6

New York Color: The 2000s

Stettner began to experiment with color photography in the 1990s, and he took several important color images of New York City after he had settled permanently in France. In particular, he returned to Times Square, an inspiration for many photographers of the twentieth century. His use of color captures the sensory overload of the scenes, and the sense of chaos is conjured by his frequent use of off-kilter composition. In many ways, Stettner recalls the same tropes or compositional strategies that he employed in his earlier series. He photographed workers and ordinary people, and his solitary subjects, in particular, evoke the loneliness and alienation of life in the city. Many of his subjects are yawning or sleeping, immune to the stimulus of the city, as if they have learned to block out the noise and the advertising around them and retreat within themselves. As in his earlier work, Stettner sets out to capture everyday life, contrasting the lives of his ordinary subjects with the glitz and tawdriness of the scenes they inhabit.



Les Alpilles, France, 2013-2016

Toward the end of his life, Stettner returned to photographing nature, making thirteen trips between 2013 and 2016 to Les Alpilles, in Provence, using an 8 × 10 large format Deardorff field camera. For him, it was “a magical place,” uniquely photogenic with its combination of light and shadows. As he stated, there is “nowhere else where nature better expresses its imagination.” Alone among the other natural settings he photographed, “Les Alpilles” allowed him to achieve what he referred to as the “humanization of the landscape.” The photographs personify the strength of the trees that have twisted and contorted themselves as they withstand the Mistral and the intimate spaces within the forest that were places of contemplation for him. Then in his nineties and no longer as able to navigate urban spaces with his camera, he would travel to “Les Alpilles” with his family during the summer, working slowly with the assistance of his wife and sons. The images show the natural world in its full beauty and at peace, qualities that reflect Stettner’s state of mind and philosophical reflections as he lived out his final years.