

Berenice Abbott

Topographies

The MAN Museum
17 February – 31 May 2017

Press Release

The MAN Museum is pleased to announce the forthcoming opening of the **first anthological exhibition in Italy dedicated to Berenice Abbott (USA, 1898-1991)**, one of the most original and controversial figures in the history of photography of the twentieth century.

The third of an extensive cycle devoted to Street Photography, the exhibition at the MAN of Nuoro in Sardinia, curated by Anne Morin, presents for the first time in Italy **a selection of eighty-two original prints that range from the middle of the 1920s to the first years of the 1960s**. Subdivided into three categories - *Portraits, New York* and *Scientific Photographs* - the exhibition provides an overall view of Berenice Abbott's exceptional talent and variegated activities.

Born in Springfield Ohio in 1898, Berenice Abbott moved to New York in 1918 to study sculpture. Here she came **into contact with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray**, leading exponents of the Dada Movement. In particular, **she struck up a friendship with Man Ray**, and this led her to follow him to Paris, where she worked as **his assistant from 1923 to 1926**.

In this period she made her first **portrait photographs**, dedicated to the leading intellectuals of the European artistic and literary avant garde, from **Jean Cocteau, to James Joyce, from Max Ernst to André Gide**. In the opinion of many critics, these portraits represent the expressive channel through which Berenice Abbott - **an avowed lesbian in a period still far from accepting female homosexuality** - narrates her sexual dimension.

She left Man Ray's studio to open **her own photo laboratory, which was frequented by a circle of lesbian intellectuals and artists** such as Jane Heap, Sylvia Beach, Eugene Murat, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, and Betty Parson. Already in 1926 Abbott exhibited her portraits in the Le Sacre du Printemps Gallery. It is at this time that **she came into contact with the French photographer Eugène Atget**, known for his photos of the streets of Paris that aimed to document **the disappearance of the historical parts of the city and the changes in its urban landscape**.

This was a turning point for Abbott. She decided to abandon the themes she had followed up to that time and **adopted the poetics of the neglected Atget**, after whose death she purchased many of his works and made them known in Europe and the United States. **From that time on she devoted herself to the narration of the metropolis of New York**.



Throughout the 1930s, after her return to the United States, she worked on the creation of a **single vast project aimed at documenting the transformation of the city following the Great Depression of 1929**. She focused on architecture, urban expansion and the skyscrapers which were gradually replacing the old buildings, as well as the shops and their signs. The result is a **one of the most celebrated volumes of twentieth-century photography**, entitled *Changing New York* (1939), in which we see a series of extraordinary photographs characterized by strong contrasts of light and shadow shot at dynamic angles to emphasize the force of the shapes and the interior rhythms within the images.

In 1940, Berenice Abbott became the picture editor of the magazine "Science Illustrated". The experience she had acquired in the streets of New York led her to see **scientific images** from a novel standpoint: for her they became a **privileged space in which to observe reality beyond the urban landscape**. In line with her **contemporary artistic research on abstraction**, Berenice Abbott created a series of photos in the laboratory, concentrating on the **dynamism and balance of forms**, producing extraordinary results.

The exhibition at the MAN Museum, made possible also thanks to the support of the Sardinian Region and the Fondazione di Sardegna, **displays the three main periods in Berenice Abbott's photography**, with a **copious selection of shots** that are among the ones most famous of her production, and **documentary material from her archive**.

The MAN Museum

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Open: 10 am to 8 pm every day except Monday

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