



BERENICE ABBOTT. PORTRAITS OF MODERNITY

Fundación MAPFRE Recoletos Exhibition Hall (Madrid)

JUNE 1 - AUGUST 25

Fundación **MAPFRE**

BERENICE ABBOTT: PORTRAITS OF MODERNITY

Exhibition dates: June 1 – August 25

Venue: Fundación MAPFRE

Paseo de Recoletos, 23

Curator: Estrella de Diego

Production: Fundación MAPFRE



www.fundacionmapfre.org



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Cover:
Berenice Abbott
Aerial view of New York at Night
58,4 × 45,7 cm
International Center of Photography, Gift of Daniel, Richard, and Jonathan
Logan, 1984 (786.1984)
© Getty Images/Berenice Abbott

After being seen in Barcelona, Fundación MAPFRE presents at its Recoletos exhibition space in Madrid the exhibition *Berenice Abbott: Portraits of Modernity*. The show offers an exhaustive survey of the career of this American photographer, whose body of work is one of the most captivating in North American photography from the first half of the 20th century, acting as a bridge between the avant-garde cultural circles of Paris and New York in the 1920s and 1930s.

The idea of modernity pervades all of Berenice Abbott's work, from her portraits of the avant-garde artists and intellectuals of the day and her stunning views of the city of New York – taken for her project *Changing New York* – to her photographs on scientific themes, in which she gives us portraits of the behaviour of various scientific phenomena and experiments. Abbott's photographs also reflect the nature of the artist herself and show her extraordinary talent for identifying and depicting changes in her surroundings. Taken as a whole, her work provides an exceptional portrait of the modernity of the new century, the premise on which this exhibition is based.

Mounting an exhibition of Berenice Abbott's work in the year 2019 means revising the very notions of the “document,” “artistic photography,” and “autobiography.” While photography's aim of avoiding the supposed artifices of art is palpable in her images, the visual result is so rich and diverse that it is difficult to categorize her photographs as *documentary*, obliging us to consider the ultimate impossibility of there being a “documentary photograph” without cracks.

Berenice Abbott is also a key figure when it comes to understanding the work of Eugène Atget. When the two met in Paris in the mid-1920s, Atget's work left a great impression on Abbott: the qualities that she identified in his output inspired her deepest respect, as well as providing an important touchstone: her photographs, like Atget's, reflect her desire to steer clear of artistic pretensions but are far more than mere document.

Following Atget's death in 1927, Abbott purchased all his personal archives. For several decades she worked diligently – and successfully – to promote Atget and

encourage others to collect his work in the United States, making her a key figure in the critical and historical fortunes of the French photographer's legacy.

This exhibition documents Berenice Abbott's career through almost 200 period photographs grouped together in three thematic sections. It also offers a small selection of works by Eugène Atget, with 11 of his photographs developed by Abbott herself in 1956.

It also includes free access to the screening of *Berenice Abbott: A View of the 20th Century* (1992), documentary produced by Kay Weaver and Martha Wheelock. Several daily sessions in its original version are offered to the public, together with the exhibition. The film, produced with the collaboration of a more-than-90-year-old Berenice Abbott, offers a tour through the 20th Century from the study of the photographer's career.

Produced by Fundación MAPFRE and curated by Estrella de Diego, Professor of Contemporary Art at the Complutense University of Madrid and member of the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts, this is the largest retrospective of Berenice Abbott's work ever organized in Spain. It features photographs from some of the most important US collections, including the New York Public Library, the George Eastman Museum (Rochester, New York), the Howard Greenberg Gallery (New York), the International Center of Photography (New York), the MIT Museum (Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the Museum of the City of New York.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by Fundación MAPFRE and available in Spanish, Catalan and English, with texts by Estrella de Diego; Gary Van Zante, Curator of Architecture, Design and Photography at the MIT Museum; and New York-based novelist Cara Hoffman.

Following its showing in Madrid, the exhibition will go on display at Huis Marseille in Amsterdam (from September to December, 2019) and at Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne (from March to July, 2020).

BERENICE ABBOTT



Berenice Abbott
Autoretrat - Distorsió, cap al 1930
Autorretrato, distorsión, ca. 1930
Self Portrait - Distortion
16,8 × 13,7 cm, còpia de 1945-1950 / copia de 1945-1950
Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery
© Getty Images/Berenice Abbott

Berenice Abbott (Springfield, Ohio, 1898 – Monson, Maine, 1991) enrolled at Ohio State University in 1917 with the intention of becoming a journalist. However, after just a few months there, in 1918 she left the university and moved to New York, where she settled in Greenwich Village, a stimulating hive of artistic and intellectual activity that first brought her into contact with artists such as Marcel Duchamp.

Three years later after having made her first forays in sculpture, Abbott travelled to Europe to live in Paris, where she started work as an assistant to Man Ray. There she discovered her true vocation: photography. It was Man Ray who introduced her to Eugène Atget.

In 1926, Abbott set up as an independent photographer, and her portraits of the most important avant-garde artists and intellectuals of the day met with great acclaim.

On her return to New York in 1929, Abbott embarked on her biggest enterprise: a photographic record of the city's growth, inspired to a certain extent by Atget's photographs of Paris but by no means merely an imitation of his work.

She worked on this endeavor on her own initiative until 1935 when she was able to fund the project with assistance from the Federal Art Project, which hired her on a full-time contract to continue producing the series. The images were published to great critical and commercial success under the title *Changing New York* in 1939.

Berenice Abbott. Portraits of modernity

Meanwhile, in 1934 Abbott had started giving classes at the New School for Social Research in New York, and she continued to teach there until 1958.

Towards the end of the 1950s, she began work on another of her large-scale projects, documenting scientific phenomena in photographs in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Many of these images were widely used during the 1960s to illustrate physics textbooks.

In 1959, the Professional Photographers of America association ranked Berenice Abbott among the ten most important female photographers in the USA.

In the early 1960s, suffering from breathing difficulties, and acting on her doctors' advice, Abbott established a new studio in a former stagecoach inn located in the state of Maine, which became her permanent residence as of 1969.

In 1970, her work was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and in 1983 she became the first female photographer to be admitted to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1988, the French government awarded Abbott the order of the Officier des Arts et Lettres. She received the Master of Photography prize from the International Center of Photography of New York in the same year.

She died in Monson, Maine, on December 9, 1991

TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

PORTRAITS



Berenice Abbott
Janet Flanner in Paris
25,4 × 20,3 cm
The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and
Photographs,
Photography Collection. The New York Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and
Tilden Foundations
© Getty Images/Berenice Abbott

The first section of the exhibition presents Abbott's portraits of some of groundbreaking figures of the period.

The meticulous and formal aspect of these photographs conceals more than just the excellent photographer behind them: each one reveals that Berenice Abbott was engaged in creating an archive of types, documenting the modern age. Her primary subject was a group that she herself was part of: the New Women, that is, women who were willing to live on the margins of conventional society in order to safeguard their freedom. The men in Abbott's portraits also display a less monolithic masculinity than was typical of the time.

Thus, although Abbott sought to represent a set of types in these portraits, we are also confronted with a series of images with clearly autobiographical traits, since the

photographer herself was part of the group she was depicting.

In this way, right from the start of Abbott's photographic career we are able to witness this duality in her work, which is both documentary (offering types recorded as part of an archive) and a beautiful, even autobiographical, project.

CITIES

The second section of the exhibition covers Berenice Abbott's spectacular and dazzling portraits of 1930s New York. Abbott's observant eye was undoubtedly highly skilled at perceiving the infinite opportunities the city offered to capture the unique modernity of which New York is an icon today. Through her lens, New York is transformed into a living being, an extraordinary character that is revealed in its impressive skyscrapers, in the hubbub of its crowded streets, and in the fascinating diversity of its shop windows.

Abbott also takes us into some of the city's most deprived neighborhoods, documenting the situation of the homeless: another sign of the modern outlook of a woman who did not shrink from portraying this other reality.

All of these characteristics make this the most memorable series of her production. Some of the photographs are also a testament to places that no longer exist today, and others show the construction of buildings that have since become emblems of the city.

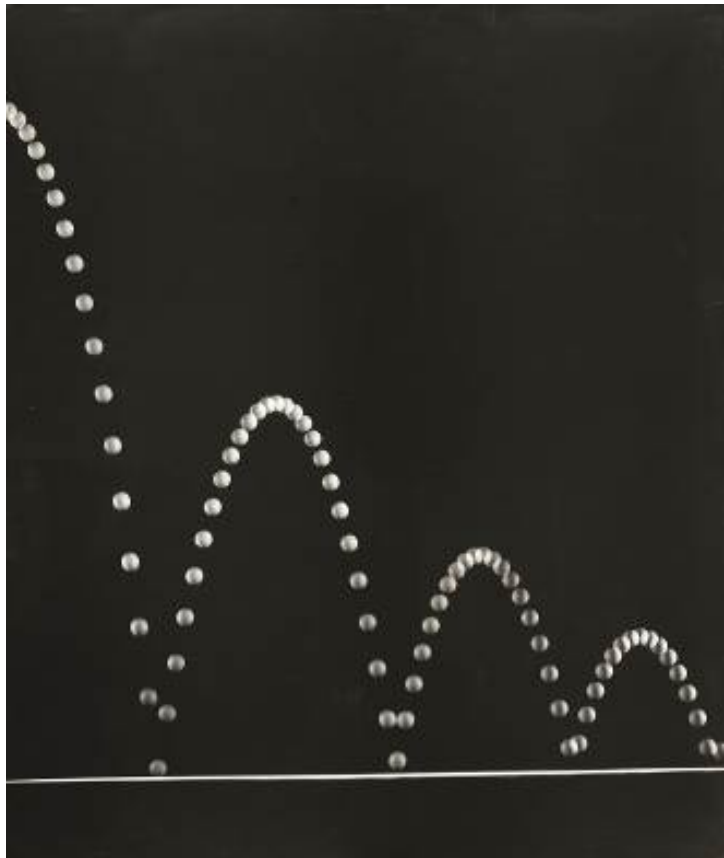
Because of Abbott's fascination for Eugène Atget and the disinterested efforts she made to disseminate his work, we have included in this section of the exhibition 11 images of Paris by the French photographer that engage in a dialogue with the photographs of the American artist.



Berenice Abbott
West Street, 1932
19,1 × 24,3 cm
International Center of Photography, Purchase, with funds provided
by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lois and Bruce
Zenkel Purchase Fund, 1983 (388.1983)
© Getty Images/Berenice Abbott

SCIENCE

The third and final section of the exhibition focusses on the photographs of scientific experiments and phenomena that Abbott began to produce at the end of the 1950s for the Physical Science Study Committee (PSSC) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The archives of this prestigious institution contain a large number of these images, and the 28 photographs on scientific themes in this exhibition are on loan from the MIT Museum. Sixteen of them are displayed in the way that Abbott herself originally prepared them for exhibition: mounted on a Masonite support and with no surface protection.



Berenice Abbott
A Bouncing Ball in Diminshing Arcs
54,6 × 45,7 cm,
fotografía sin protección montada sobre masonita
Berenice Abbott Collection, MIT Museum. Gift of Ronald and Carol Kurtz
© Getty Images/Berenice Abbott

These photographs again demonstrate the duality that runs through all of Abbott's work: they document physical phenomena (they would later be used to illustrate textbooks), yet at the same time they are a tribute to Abbott's exquisite imagination and creativity. Each of them offers unexpected solutions to the documentary task, and in their deft treatment of a powerful, ambiguous play of light they recall her earlier images of New York.

Once again, we see how Berenice Abbott's modern eye was able to identify pure transformation, capturing it with her camera to generate extraordinary and beautiful images.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

LOCATION

Fundación MAPFRE Recoletos Exhibition Hall

Paseo de Recoletos, 23

Madrid

Email: cultura@fundacionmapfre.org

TICKET PRICE

General admissions: €3 per person.

Free entry Mondays from 2 pm to 8 pm

TIMES

Opening times*:

Mondays from 2 pm to 8 pm.

Tuesdays to Saturdays from 10 am to 8 pm.

Sundays/holidays from 11 am to 7 pm.

*Last access: 30 minutes before closing time.

We ask visitors to please leave the exhibition halls 10 minutes before the closing time.

AUDIO GUIDES

Audio guides (English and Spanish):

Price: €3, 50

Sign guides and audio guides with an audio description have free admission

SCREENING

BERENICE ABBOTT: A VIEW OF THE 20TH CENTURY (1992)
produced by Kay Weaver and Martha Wheelock (56')

Monday: every hour, from 2.30 pm to 6.30 pm (last session)

Tuesday - Saturday: every hour, from 10.30 am to 6.30 pm (last session)

Sundays and holidays: every hour, from 11.30 am to 5.30 pm (last session)