

Umbo, Ohne Titel (Selbstporträt), um 1930
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Umbo Photographer

Works 1926–1956

21.2. – 20.7.20

Umbo (Otto Umbehrr 1902–1980. The name was a sensation in the avant-garde photography of the 1920s. He stood for everything new: a new type of portrait, a new image for women, a new take on street life, new photo-journalism. With a selection of about 200 works and many documents, this first major retrospective in 24 years is now coming to Berlin. “Umbo. Photographer. Works 1926–1956” is an exhibition by the Sprengel Museum Hannover created in partnership with the Berlinische Galerie and Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau.

Umbo’s photographs are experimental, imaginative and above all just like the photographer himself: unconventional. In 1921 the young artist applied to the Bauhaus in Weimar, where he met his most important mentor: Johannes Itten above all taught Umbo to see things, trained his sense of composition and form and an ability to play with contrasts of light and dark that was to be a hallmark of his work. Even if he only stayed there for two years, it is fitting that he is known today primarily as a Bauhaus photographer. And yet: while he was there he was considered an enfant terrible and expelled for not conforming. From the early Bauhaus in Weimar, which laid the foundations for Umbo’s work, he was drawn in the mid-1920s to Berlin. The city was in the throes of becoming an international melting-pot, a media metropolis and a mecca for the avant-garde. The hub of bohemian life in Berlin was the Romanisches Café near the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, and Umbo was soon a regular. Although the urban atmosphere was stimulating, Umbo was living in dire poverty, sometimes homeless, and still on a quest for ways to express himself artistically. He eventually found the answer in photography, thanks to his Bauhaus friend Paul Citroen. Almost overnight, Umbo shot to fame as one of the most sought-after photographers in the Weimar Republic, and very soon he had founded a new approach to portraits.

In particular, it was these portraits depicting the ladies of bohemian Berlin that gave such powerful expression to a type known as the New Woman, not least due to Umbo’s striking visual style. The writer and actor Ruth Landshoff, for example, posed in ever new roles for him. Now she was a fashionable beauty, gaze upturned, extreme chiaroscuro picking out only her eyes and mouth – and now here she was with a mask, untamed, self-assured and staring straight into the camera. Just one reason why Herbert Molderings called Umbo’s work a “big bang” in modern photography.

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Less spectacular, but no less significant, were Umbo's innovations in press photography. The 1920s triggered a regular boom in pictorial magazines. Simon Guttman founded the picture agency Dephot, and Umbo was its first and leading photographer. Overturning the convention for single illustrations, he began publishing serial photographs that told a story of their own. In the late 1920s, for instance, readers were able to observe the Swiss performer Adrien Wettach transform himself into the world-famous clown Grock.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Umbo lost the creative habitat that had inspired his outstanding output in the 1920s. His pictures from this period suggest that he had withdrawn into a shell, a kind of 'inner exile'. The illustrated reportage he produced now focused largely on fairly harmless themes, allowing him to preserve his passion for the circus and vaudeville theatre. Only the 180° images he took with the new Sky Camera and the series "Reacting Salts" confirm that the creative spark had not faded. But by the end of the 1930s he was on trickier ground, with pictorial reports from on board the "Wilhelm Gustloff", where the "Kraft durch Freude" movement was taking a cruise, and from a college run by the "Bund Deutscher Mädchen" to educate loyal female citizens. These demonstrate how even an apolitical, tolerant person like Umbo could bow to pressures under a totalitarian regime.

In 1945, with his archives ravaged by war, Umbo was literally left standing amid the ruins of his photographic oeuvre. He moved to Hannover, where he had to start again from scratch professionally. Although he was still working as a press photographer, he could not replicate his success of the 1920s. Even in advanced years, casual jobs helped him to make ends meet. In the 1970s, when photography was admitted to museums as an art form, his works gradually came to light again. Gallery manager Rudolf Kicken, in particular, tried to reconstruct the oeuvre. Not until the mid-1990s did ground-breaking research by Herbert Molderings introduce Umbo to a broader public and grant him a place in the annals of photographic history.

The Friends of the Berlinische Galerie played a major role in funding the exhibition "Umbo. Photographer. Works 1926–1956" by raising € 100,000. The Friends have been supporting their museum for 45 years. Thanks to their membership fees and donations, 1,600 art lovers are helping to make the Berlinische

Galerie one of the most exciting places for modern and contemporary art in Berlin. "That is record membership in the association's history. We hope to carry on persuading more and more young Berliners to make this commitment to art and culture in their city. It's the only way to fund things like our Art Sunday with free admission for families, which we have begun this year," says Jens-Rainer Jänig, chairman of the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie e.V.

The exhibition "Umbo. Photographer. Works 1926–1956" at the Berlinische Galerie celebrates an extraordinary photographic artist with a moving oeuvre and life story reaching from the 1920s into the mid-1950s. Moreover, this show pays tribute to the acquisition of Umbo's estate. This was completed in 2016 together with partners Bauhaus Dessau and the Sprengel Museum Hannover, and it was made possible by funding from many benefactors (Kulturstiftung der Länder, The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, LOTTO-Stiftung Berlin, et al.). After decades of stewardship by his daughter Phyllis Umbehre and Rudolf Kicken (Galerie Kicken), Umbo's artistic estate was purchased jointly by the three institutions.

An exhibition by the Sprengel Museum Hannover in collaboration with the Berlinische Galerie and the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation. It has been generously supported by the Sparkassen-Kulturfonds of the German Savings Banks Association and the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie e.V.



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Accompanying events and outreach in English

Guided tours in English take place every Saturday at 4:15 pm. No extra charge to ticket-holders. No advance booking required.

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berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/umbo-photographer/

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