

Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, c. 1927, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Staging the Self **Marta Astfalck-Vietz**

11.7. – 13.10.25

Press Tour
Wed 9.7.25, 11 am

Opening
Thu 10.7.25, 7 pm

BG Summer Fest
Sun 13.7.25, 10 am-6 pm

In a single decade known as the Golden Twenties artist Marta Astfalck-Vietz (1901–1994) authored an iridescent opus of self-enactments, nude and dance photography and experimental images. She worked behind the camera and in front of it – photographer, director and model all in one. Astfalck-Vietz observed gender roles in the Weimar Republic with humour, wielding her camera with confidence to depict the versatile potential for female identity. Incorporating masks, theatrical poses and grotesque elements she forged a style which combined private introspection with social and political issues.

In its 50th anniversary year, the Berlinische Galerie is dedicating an extensive solo exhibition with more than 140 works to Marta Astfalck-Vietz. Drawing on recent research into her publication practice and on feminist perspectives, the exhibition and catalogue present her largely overlooked oeuvre and consider its place within art history. Six chapters address her works theme by theme, turning a spotlight on her avant-garde photography and, for the first time, her watercolours of plants. These were increasingly important to Astfalck-Vietz from the mid-1930s and remained a focus for the rest of her life.

Selected photographs by her contemporaries, among them Marianne Breslauer (1909–2001), Lotte Jacobi (1896–1990), and Cami (1892–1975) and Sasha Stone (1895–1940), illustrate the aesthetic and thematic context within which Astfalck-Vietz operated. Artists Andreas Langfeld (*1984) and Sophie Thun (*1985) have created a single-channel video commenting on the impact of this remarkable personality from today's perspective.

Fabric, lace, cosplay

There are many facets to the work of Astfalck-Vietz. In a conversation with her camera she repeatedly poses for self-enactments of her own conception, deploying fabrics as costumes or as design features in the composition. She creates scenes full of enigma with floral lace, shiny brocade and dramatic illumination. Carefully arranged photographs explore tensions between hiding and revealing, masquerade and identity. Playfully she morphs between different variations of womanhood and styles herself dancing the Charleston, in a bob, in a wig or in a glamorous gown.

Setting the Stage

Alongside her introspective photographs, the artist co-opts friends for scenic narratives. We find her engrossed in an emancipatory book, holding out in a waiting room or preparing for an evening party. With a pinch of humour and self-irony Astfalck-Vietz exposes traditional female roles and contemporary stereotypes. Series and stand-alones grant insights into social phenomena but also into the popular culture of the 1920s. She published these pictures in the widely read magazines of the day, in specialist journals like “Die Aufklärung” and in annual reviews such as “Das Deutsche Lichtbild”.

Shared copyright: the Combi-Phot.

The artist’s almost lifelong friendship with Heinz Hajek-Halke (1898–1983) was a defining influence. They met in 1922 at the college run by the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin. They both worked for the Berlin agency Presse-Photo but also created their own innovative photographs as independent artists. They conceived, designed and implemented these as equals, sometimes stamping the picture “Combi-Phot.”. The motifs reflect social phenomena such as loneliness, alcoholism and a fashionable fad for spookiness.

Bodies in motion and pose

As a professional photographer Marta Astfalck-Vietz accepted commissions for dance photography. She rarely took pictures of stage performances, specialising instead in shots of the body in motion. This was the time when Berliners flocked to see avant-garde performances of free modern dance. Mary Wigmann (1886–1973) was one of the dancers who developed and taught the genre. International acts, not least with singer-dancer Josephine Baker (1906–1975), also provided material. Photographs were needed for media coverage, but also for advertisements, invitations, business cards and the documentation of performances.

Astfalck-Vietz captured not only dancers in expressive poses but also hands, sometimes dressed up in fur or jewellery. This motif gave rise to a body of work in its own right.

Botanical watercolours

Just she portrayed hands in a variety of poses and in motion, so too Astfalck-Vietz used plants as “living models” for her many watercolours from the mid-1930s onwards. Her botanical paintings are naturalist depictions of flora but she was equally captivated by their almost dance-like grace. Over time these arrangements become airier, even ornamental or sketch-like. They include dahlias, lilies, roses, orchids and poppies. In 1936 Astfalck-Vietz began numbering her works and by the end of her life she had produced more than 6.000 watercolours. Her interest in botany led to contacts with well-known gardeners such as Karl Foerster (1874–1970). Some species have even been named after the artist.

About the Artist

Born in 1901 in Neudamm (now Dębno in Poland), Marta Astfalck-Vietz moved to Berlin with her family in 1912. She developed an early interest in painting plants and in fabrics of all kinds. At 17 she began training at a vocational school set up by the textile and garments industry. Then from 1920 to 1924 she studied fashion, book illustration and commercial graphics at the college affiliated to Berlin’s Museum of Decorative Arts.

Astfalck-Vietz acquired her photographic skills between 1925 and 1926 at the studio of photographer Lutz Kloss (dates unknown). At the age of 26, on 1 October 1927, she opened her first studio at Markgraf-Albrecht-Strasse 10 in what was then the Berlin borough of Wilmersdorf.

In 1928, now a freelance photographer, she met the architect Hellmuth Astfalck and married him in 1929. Together they founded their studio for “Photography, Propaganda and Decorative Art”. Self-employment was tough in the 1930s due to inflation and economic crisis. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power, the shift was radical. To evade state influence and the regulation of professional photography, the couple turned to advertising and commercial graphics and to interior decoration. During these years Astfalck-Vietz gave drawing lessons and private tuition to Jewish children and teenagers, who were prevented by Nazi policies from attending state-funded schools.

When the Second World War ended in 1945 Marta Astfalck-Vietz sought a fresh start. Resuming her photographic practice of the 1920s was no longer an option. She taught drawing, worked in social services and devoted more attention to her plant paintings. In 1970, after over 50 years in Berlin, she moved with Hellmuth Astfalck to Nienhagen near Celle, where she continued to teach art.

Marta Astfalck-Vietz died in 1994 at the age of 92.

History of the estate

Astfalck-Vietz's Berlin studio at Treuchtlinger Strasse 10 was destroyed in an air raid in November 1943. By a stroke of good luck, many of her works survived the Second World War in the care of her father, art publisher Reinhold Vietz (1873–1958). In the 1920s she had sent him some of her photographs as gifts. After 1945 he returned them to his daughter with a heavy heart.

For a long time the work of Marta Astfalck-Vietz lay undiscovered. It was only in 1989, when the Berlinische Galerie included two photographs marked "Marta Vietz" in its exhibition "Photography as Photography", that contact could be established with the artist, who was by this time living in Lower Saxony.

The Berlinische Galerie acquired its holdings from her estate in stages. In 1990 the artist gifted a large number of her photographs to the museum. This corpus was expanded after her death in 1994. In 2022/2023 the estate was digitised and partially restored as part of a scheme set up by the State of Berlin to fund the digitisation of cultural assets.

The exhibition has been funded by the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie e.V.

Exhibition catalogue

A bilingual catalogue in German and English will be published by Hirmer Verlag.

Museum Edition: 34,80 €

ISBN: 978-3-940208-86-6

Book Trade Edition: 49,90 €

ISBN: 978-3-7774-4534-2

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.

Press images

berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/

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Online tickets

bg.berlin/tickets

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Admission 10€, concessions 6€
Wed – Mon 10 am – 6 pm
Tue closed

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Press Tour **Accreditation**

We are pleased to invite you to the press tour on
Wednesday, 9 July 2025 at 11 am.

Please accredit until 7 July 2025
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