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# Erwin Blumenfeld Vintage

Exhibition 14 June - 17 July 2010



Fashion Photograph for **Vogue** New York ca. 1945, vintage gelatin silver print, 34.1 x 26.6 cm

### Erwin Blumenfeld – Vintage

In den vierziger und fünfziger Jahren zählte Erwin Blumenfeld (1897-1969) zu den gefragtesten Mode- und Werbefotografen in New York. Anlässlich seines 100. Geburtstages würdigte das Kunsthhaus Zürich 1997 das Schaffen Blumenfelds. Gezeigt wurde eine umfassende Retrospektive, die einen fundierten Blick auf sein gesamtes künstlerisches Werk ermöglichte.

Erwin Blumenfeld hielt seine Aktstudien für einen wichtigen Bestandteil seines Oeuvres. Beeinflusst von surrealistischen Fotografen wie Man Ray und Brassai, erkundete Blumenfeld die Welt seiner Träume. Einige seiner Akte leben von der Wirkung ihres Schwebezustandes zwischen Fleisch und Stein oder zwischen Haut und Gips. Oft drapierte der Fotograf seine Modelle mit Schleieren, um das Gefühl der Erotik und des Unerreichbaren zu verstärken. Starke Lichtkontraste, Verzerrungen und experimentelle Entwicklungstechniken wie Solarisation, Negativ-Druck und Mehrfachbelichtung sind ein wesentliches Kennzeichen seiner visionären Inszenierungen.

Wir freuen uns ausserordentlich, in enger Zusammenarbeit mit dem Nachlass von Erwin Blumenfeld, Vintage Prints aus den Jahren 1937-1958 ausstellen zu dürfen. Ich möchte an dieser Stelle meiner langjährigen Freundin Marina Schinz Rubin für ihre Unterstützung bei diesem wunderbaren Projekt ganz herzlich danken.

*In the 1940s and 50s Erwin Blumenfeld (1897-1969) was among New York's most highly regarded fashion and advertising photographers. The Kunsthaus Zürich celebrated his 100th birthday in a 1997 retrospective that covered Blumenfeld's artistic oeuvre in great detail.*

*Blumenfeld considered his nude studies an important part of his work. Inspired by Surrealist photographers, among them Man Ray and Brassai, he explored dream worlds. The oscillation between flesh and stone, skin and plaster makes some of his nudes extremely powerful. The photographer frequently draped his models in veils to enhance a sense of eroticism and inaccessibility. His visionary stagings are characterised by strong light contrasts, distortions and experimental development techniques such as solarisation, negative prints and multiple exposures.*

*We are delighted to present Blumenfeld's Vintage Prints from 1937-1958 in close cooperation with the Erwin Blumenfeld Estate. Allow me to take this opportunity to thank my long-standing friend Marina Schinz Rubin for her support in this exquisite project.*

*Carina Andres Thalmann*

Carina Andres Thalmann  
Galerie Andres Thalmann

Cover - front: **Wet Silk** Paris 1937, gelatin silver print, 35 x 28.1 cm

Cover - inside: **Marua Motherwell** New York ca. 1941, gelatin silver print, 50.5 x 40.5 cm

# Erwin Blumenfeld – Vintage

Erwin Blumenfelds Ankunft in Paris im Jahre 1936 markierte den Anfang seiner Laufbahn als professioneller Fotograf. Bis anhin war er verschiedenen Tätigkeiten nachgegangen, hatte Amateur-Fotografie betrieben, Dada Collagen kreiert, Bilder gemalt und Kurzgeschichten geschrieben – sofern ihm seine kaufmännische Tätigkeit Zeit dazu liess. Nach der Pleite seines Ledergeschäftes in Amsterdam – verursacht durch Hitlers Propaganda – öffnete sich dem 1897 geborenen Berliner eine Tür in Paris. Auf dem fruchtbaren Boden der «Ville Lumière» schlug der kulturhungige Zeitgenosse Man Rays rasch Wurzeln, ergatterte sich seine ersten Aufträge und publizierte Fotos. Auf den eindrucksvollen Seiten der neuen Kunstzeitschrift VERVE wurde sein Werk einem anspruchsvollen französischen Publikum vorgestellt. Über VOGUE und HARPER'S BAZAAR gelang ihm schliesslich der Sprung nach Amerika, der sich als lebensrettend erweisen sollte.

Blumenfeld hatte oft Glück in seinem Leben. Nicht nur, weil er als deutscher Soldat den Ersten Weltkrieg überlebte und im Zweiten Weltkrieg den Nazis entglitt, sondern vor allem auch, weil es ihm gelang, seiner Bewunderung für das Ewig Weibliche Gestalt zu verleihen und diese Neigung in einen erfolgreichen Beruf zu verwandeln. Seine Stärke als Fotograf waren die Frauen: er hatte eine Schwäche für sie. Er betete sie an mit der glühenden Scheu eines romantischen Jünglings, suchte ihre Seele und fand sie manchmal im schlafenden Antlitz der im Traum entrückten Muse.

Seine unnahbaren Schönheiten hat er oft verhüllt dargestellt. Nicht aus Prüderie, sondern spielerisch das von Freud entdeckte, verschleierte Unterbewusstsein andeutend und gleichzeitig eine Aura von Erotik verbreitend. Gerne zitierte er das Bonmot von Karl Kraus, dass der normale Mann das nackte Frauenbein liebt, der Erotiker das seidenbestrumpfte Bein vorzieht, der Perverse hingegen den Strumpf allein begehrte. Blumenfelds Liebe zu Tüll und Seide führte 1938 zu seiner berühmten Ikonen-Serie des «Nassen Schleier» («Nude under Wet Silk»). Auch Solarisa-

tionen dienten dazu, eine magische Barriere zu errichten. Ebenso brachte Blumenfeld zahlreiche weitere Techniken, Spiegelungen, Doppelbelichtungen, Schattenbilder, Screens usw. meisterhaft zur Anwendung, um seinen Subjekten eine surreale Note aufzuprägen.

Blumenfelds idealisierende Höherstellung der Frau unterscheidet ihn unwiderruflich von der heutigen Fotografie. Seit den Siebziger Jahren sind viele Fotografen dazu übergegangen, Erotik mit krasser Pornografie zu übertrumpfen. Der allseits verbreiteten Darstellung von Brutalität und Perversion ist es weitestgehend gelungen, jedes ästhetische Feingefühl im Keim zu ersticken. Im Gegensatz dazu führte in den 40er und 50er Jahren des vergangenen Jahrhunderts gerade Blumenfelds bewundernder Respekt für alles Weibliche zu einer langjährigen, brillanten Karriere in New York. Als Modefotograf und Vorgänger Richard Avedons und Irving Penns machte er Tausende von Aufnahmen, die dank seines Einfallsreichtums und seiner Mitarbeit bei der grafischen Gestaltung heute noch als Vorbilder dienen.

Neben den vielen Mode- und Werbeaufträgen fuhr Blumenfeld bis an sein Lebensende fort, Frauen und Akte zu fotografieren. Ihnen wusste er oft etwas Skulpturales oder Abstraktes zu verleihen, genau so, wie es ihm früher gelungen war, Skulpturen zu animieren und ihnen Leben einzuhauchen. So sind seine Fotos weiblicher Schönheit zu einem Zeitdokument und zu einer Rarität geworden – und dies werden sie mit Bestimmtheit auch in Zukunft bleiben.

Marina Schinz  
Zürich, Mai 2010



# Erwin Blumenfeld – Vintage

Erwin Blumenfeld's arrival in Paris in 1936 marked the beginning of his career as a professional photographer. Prior to that year, the photographer born in Berlin in 1897 had tried his hand at a variety of disciplines, doing amateur photography and creating Dada collages, painting and writing short stories alongside work in his leather goods shop. When his Amsterdam business went bankrupt due to Hitler's propaganda he escaped to Paris. Man Ray's contemporary soon established himself on the fertile ground of the Ville Lumière, landing his first commissions and publishing professional photographs. VERVE, the new art magazine, introduced his impressive works to a highly discerning French audience. Commissions from VOGUE and HARPER'S BAZAAR eventually enabled him to reach America, and to save his life.

Luck was often on Blumenfeld's side: he survived the First World War as a soldier and later slipped through the Nazi grip. Most importantly, however, he was able to give artistic form to his admiration of feminine beauty and to carve a successful career from his inclination. The photographer had a weakness for women – they were his strength. He adored them with the fervour of a romantic youth seeking their soul, which he occasionally found in the sleeping countenance of the dream-enraptured muse.

His beauties were aloof and often veiled, less from prudishness than in a playful evocation of the hidden unconscious – Freud's discovery – and exuding an erotic aura. Blumenfeld liked to quote Karl Kraus, who quipped that a normal man loved a lady's naked leg while an erotic man preferred it sheathed in a silk stocking, but a pervert craved the stocking itself. In 1938 Blumenfeld's love of silk and tulle blossomed in his iconic Nude under Wet Silk series. He also used solarisation to erect a magic barrier, and made masterful use of various other techniques – mirror-images, double exposures, shadow images, screens, etc. – to endow his subjects with a hint of surrealism.

Blumenfeld's idealisation of women sets him apart from contemporary photographers, many of whom have taken to swamping eroticism with crude pornography, a trend that goes back to the 1970s. The ubiquitous presence of brutality and perversion has all but smothered any aesthetic sensibilities. In contrast, back in the 1940s and 50s it was the admiration for and respect of all things feminine by someone like Blumenfeld that led to a long and brilliant career in New York. As a fashion photographer and precursor to Richard Avedon and Irving Penn he took thousands of photographs, which have been all the more exemplary for his imagination and the fact that he was directly involved in graphic design.

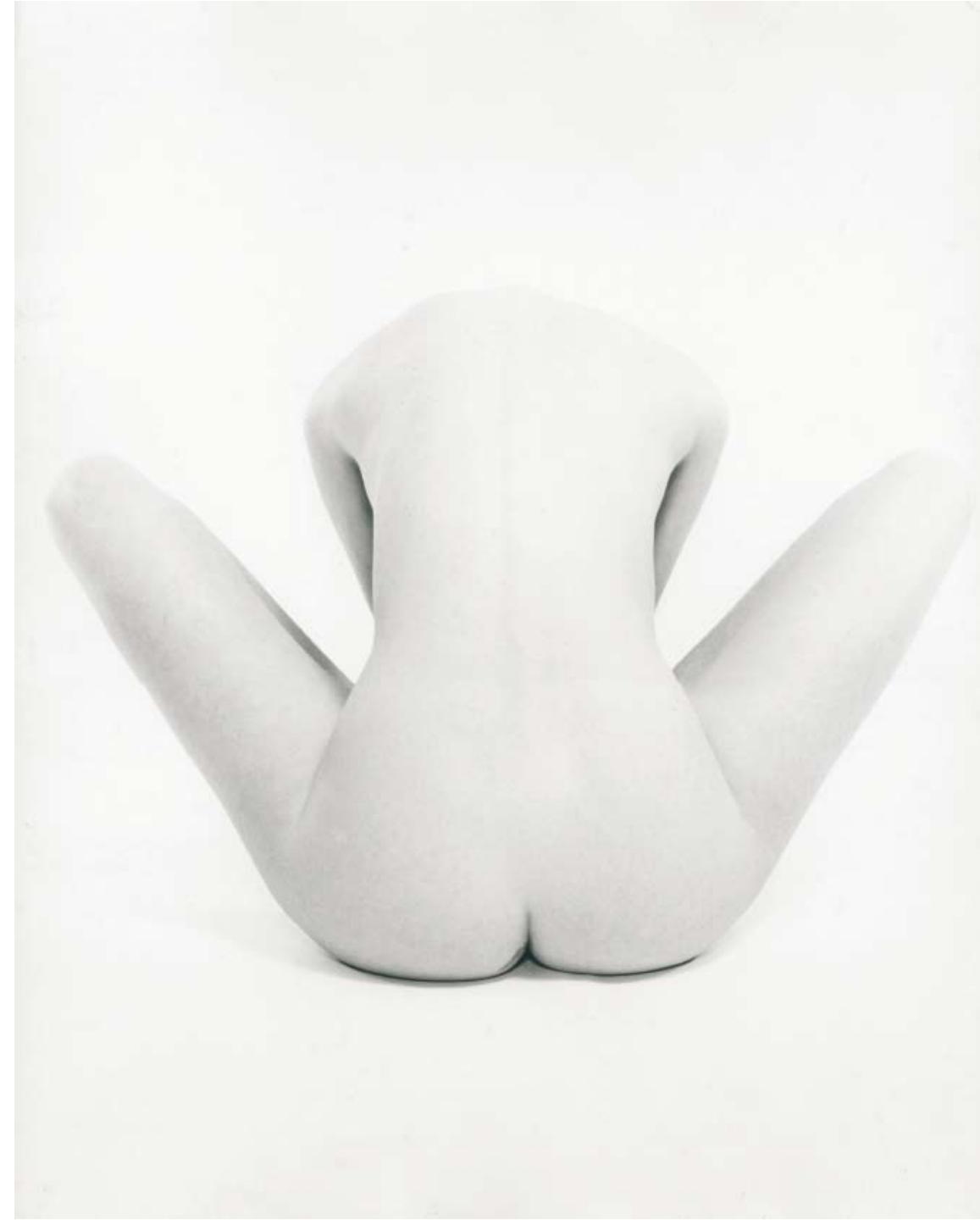
Alongside his many commissions for fashion and advertising photography, Blumenfeld always continued to photograph women and nudes. Just as he had earlier animated sculptures by breathing life into them, he would often imbue his photographs with hints of the abstract or the sculptural. His portraits of female beauty are time-capsules of their day. They have become valuable rarities and will remain so in the future.

Marina Schinz  
Zurich, May 2010





**Untitled** New York, ca. 1949, vintage gelatin silver print, 34 x 26.3 cm



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1955, vintage gelatin silver print, 33.6 x 26.5 cm

10



11

**Untitled** New York 1955, vintage gelatin silver print, 50.6 x 40.4 cm



**Untitled** New York ca. 1958, vintage gelatin silver print, 50.4 x 40.6 cm

12



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1947, vintage gelatin silver print, 35.2 x 27.1 cm

13



**Manina** Paris 1936, vintage gelatin silver print, 29.9 x 24 cm



**Anonymous Portrait** Amsterdam ca. 1932, vintage gelatin silver print, 30.2 x 24 cm



**French Statuette, 15th Century (Detail)** Paris 1937, gelatin silver print, 33.6 x 26.6 cm



Fashion Photograph for *Vogue* Paris 1938, vintage gelatin silver print, 21.4 x 29.1 cm



Fashion Photograph for *Dayton's* New York ca. 1960, vintage gelatin silver print, 50.5 x 40.4 cm



**Leonor Fini** Paris, ca. 1938, vintage gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.3 cm



**Untitled** Paris ca. 1937, vintage gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.2 cm



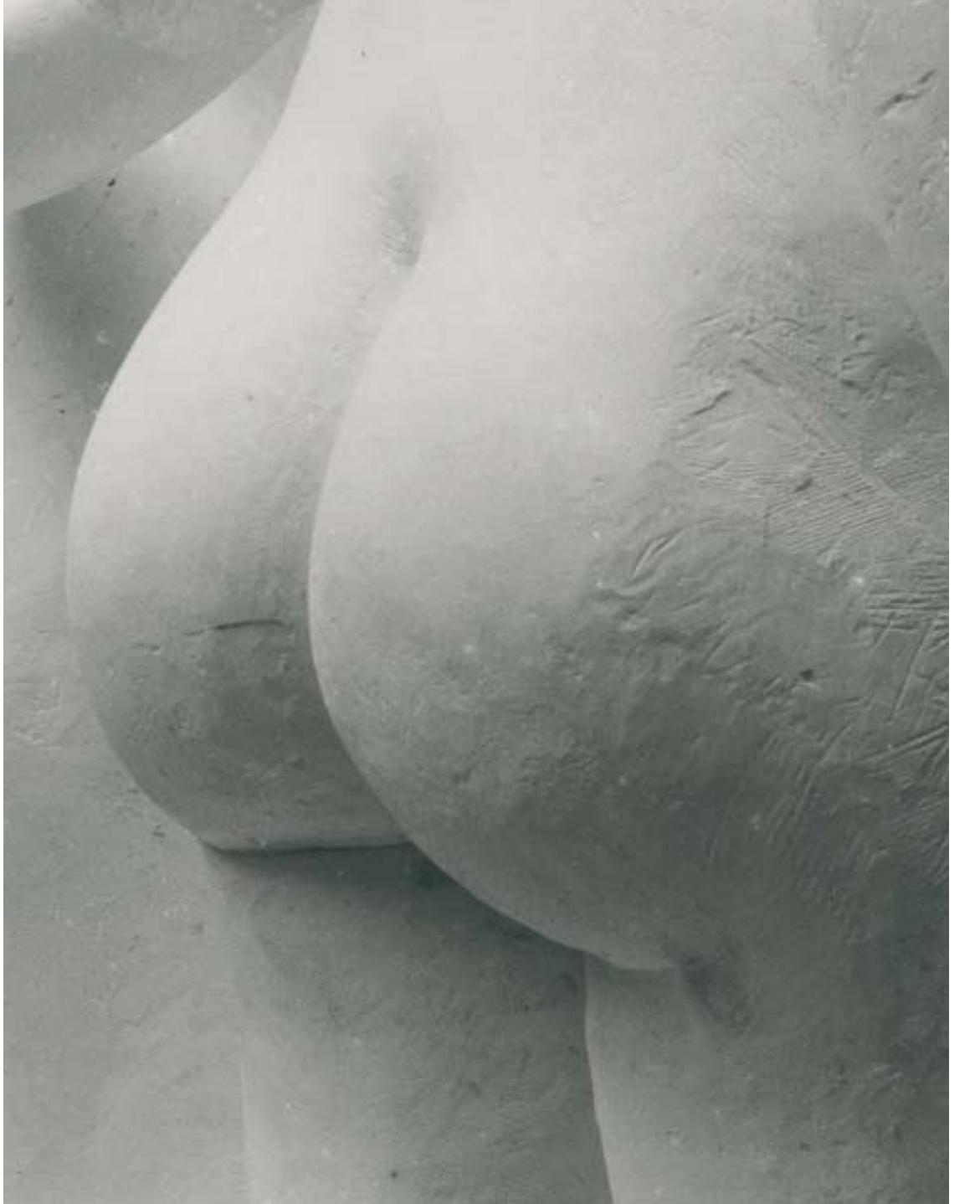
**Untitled** New York 1943, vintage gelatin silver print, 34.7 x 27.8 cm



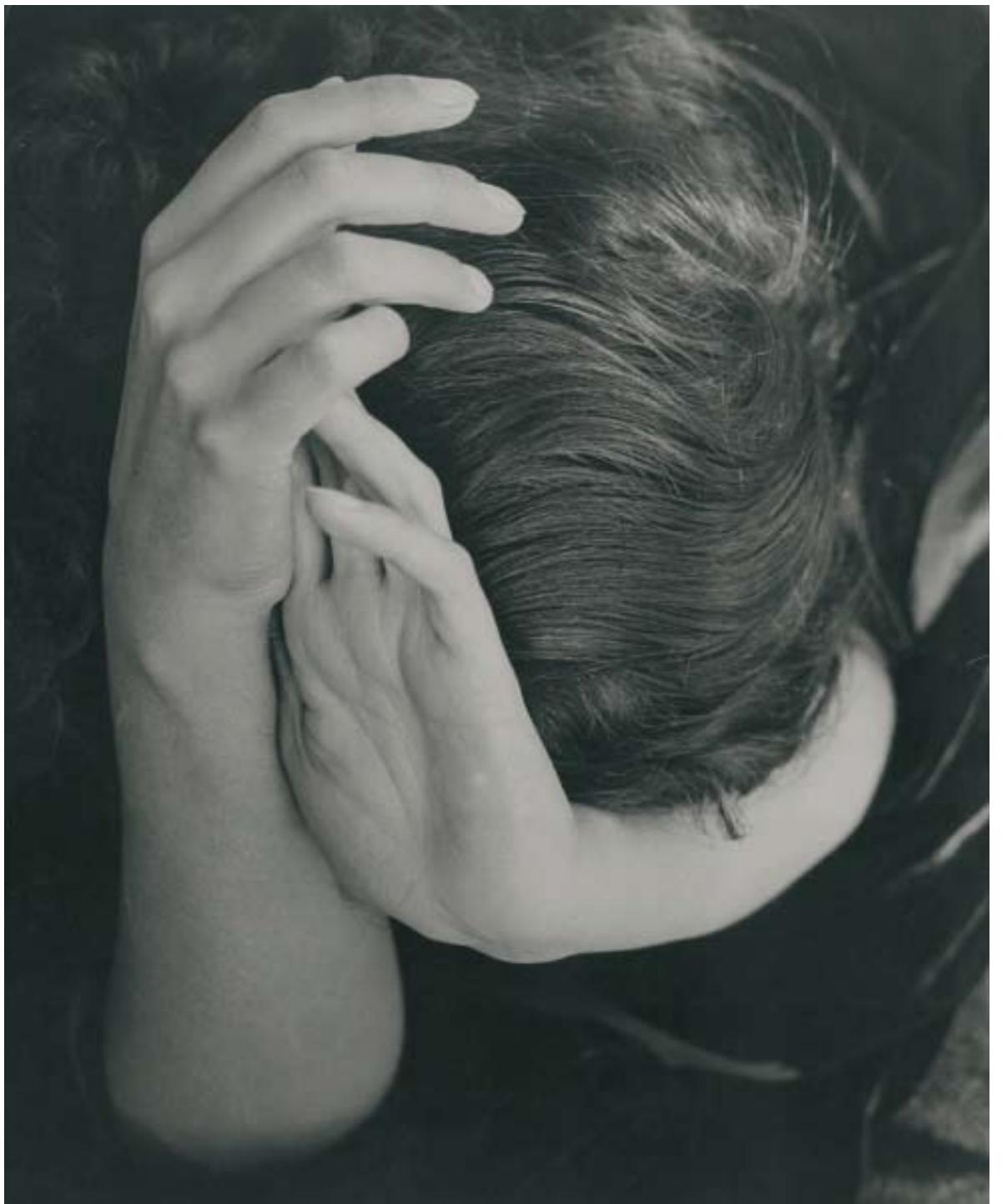
**Muth** Paris ca. 1937, vintage gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.2 cm



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1950, vintage gelatin silver print, 34.2 x 27.2 cm



**Sculpture by Maillol (Detail)** Paris 1937, gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.2 cm



**Untitled** Paris ca. 1937, vintage gelatin silver print, 29.5 x 24.2 cm



**Sculpture by Maillol (Detail)** Paris 1937, gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.2 cm



**Untitled** Paris 1936, vintage gelatin silver print, 29.8 x 24 cm



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1943, vintage gelatin silver print, 50.6 x 40.5 cm



**Untitled** New York ca. 1949, vintage gelatin silver print, 32.5 x 26.1 cm



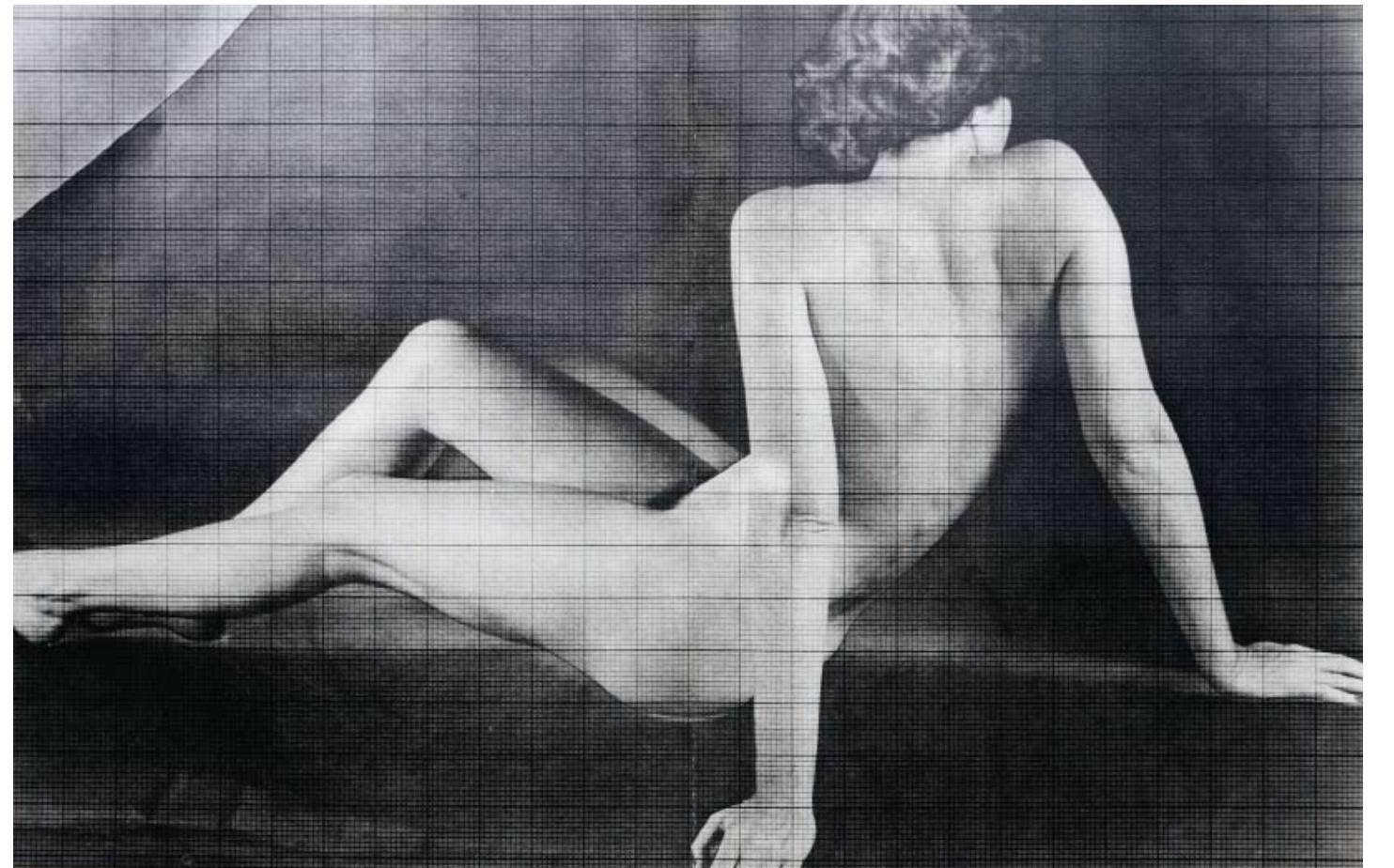
**Untitled** New York ca. 1944, vintage gelatin silver print, 32.8 x 25.9 cm

34



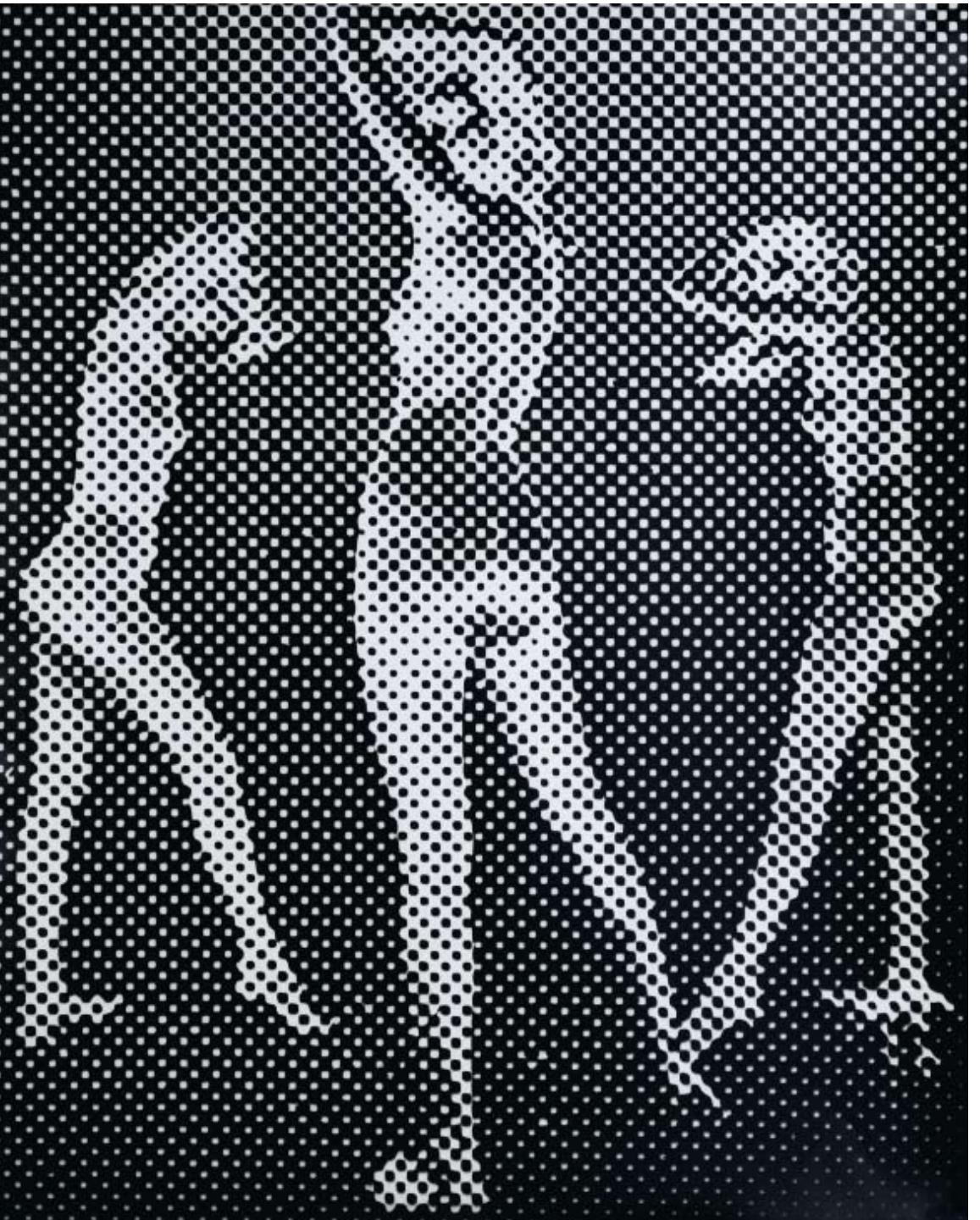
**Untitled** New York ca. 1944, vintage gelatin silver print, 32.7 x 24.6 cm

35



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1945, vintage gelatin silver print, 30.2 x 47.2 cm

36



**Untitled** New York, ca. 1952, vintage gelatin silver print, 50.8 x 40.4 cm

37



**Manina** Paris 1936, vintage gelatin silver print, 30 x 24.3 cm

## BIOGRAPHY

1897 26 January: Birth of Erwin Blumenfeld in Berlin, Germany, to Emma (Cohn) and Albert Blumenfeld; second of three children (Annie, b. 1894, and Heinz, b. 1900)

1903 Enrolls at the Askanisches Gymnasium in Berlin. Meets Paul Citroen.

1907 Takes up photography on receiving a camera as a gift. Experiments enthusiastically with a chemistry set and a magic lantern.

1911 Photographic self-portrait as Pierrot, using a mirror to obtain simultaneous frontal and profile views.

1913 Finishes his formal education and leaves with secondary-school certificate. Gives up thoughts of further education on the death of his father; the family is virtually bankrupt. Starts a three-year apprenticeship in the women's garment trade at Moses & Schlochauer in Berlin.

1915 With his best friend from school, Paul Citroen, begins to frequent the Café des Westens, favourite meeting place of the Expressionists; meets a number of the key figures, including the poet Else Lasker-Schüler and the artist George Grosz, who will become a lifelong friend.

1916 Meets Lena Citroen, cousin of Paul Citroen, with whom he has conducted a lengthy correspondence; they become engaged soon after. Writes poetry and draws, and plans to become an actor.

1917 Conscribed into the German army in March; sent as an ambulance driver to the Western Front; wins the Iron Cross (Second Class) for bravery; also serves for a brief interlude as a bookkeeper in the army's "Field Brothel 209" near the Belgian border.

1918 On home leave in June plans to desert to Holland but is arrested and imprisoned before he can put his plans into effect; released, he is returned to his unit at the Front; there he learns of the death of his brother, Heinz, near Verdun. At war's end he returns briefly to Berlin; in December he goes into self-exile in Holland in order to join his fiancée, Lena.

1919-22 Makes various attempts to secure a livelihood, including working for a bookseller; joins Paul Citroen, who has set himself up as art dealer, but abandons this attempt when it becomes evident that there is virtually no market in Holland for contemporary art. Becomes "a Sunday painter", makes collages and drawings, and

participates in the Dada Movement along with Paul Citroen. Photographs family and friends strictly as an amateur. Continues to write poetry and also composes short stories.

1921 Marries Lena Citroen and honeymoon in Berlin. Produces „Charlie“, his best known collage.

1922 Birth of his first daughter, Lisette.

1923 1 June: Goes into the leather goods business, opening a shop at 116 Kalverstraat under the name "Fox Leather Company".

1925 Birth of his son Heinz (Henry).

1929 August: Arrested on Zandvoort beach for allowing a strap of his bathing suit to slip; this dashes chances of Dutch citizenship, for which he has applied.

1932 Birth of his son Yorick. Moves premises further down the street to 151 Kalverstraat and discovers an operational darkroom on the premises; begins to photograph female customers (for the most part portraits but also some nudes) both out of rekindled interest in photography and with the idea of making money. Exhibits at the art gallery, Kunstzaal van Lier, Amsterdam. Submits work to the Ullstein Verlag publishing house in Berlin for appraisal, without success.

1934 Second exhibition of photographs at Kunstzaal van Lier. Still photographer on Jacques Feyder's Pension Mimosas (1935).

1935 Bankruptcy of Blumenfeld's leather goods store, Fox Leather Company. Moves his portrait studio to the Keizersgracht. His first few photographs are published in the French magazine *Photographie*. Exhibits at the Esher Surrey Art Galleries in The Hague. His work is included in a group show organized by Paul Citroen at the Nieuwe Kunstschool (New Art School) in Amsterdam, along with Grosz, Umbo, Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy, Arp, Delaunay, Léger, Mondrian, Schwitters and others. Meets George Rouault's daughter Geneviève, a dentist, on a visit to his shop; she arranges to exhibit his work in her waiting room near the Opéra in Paris.

1936 Leaves Holland and settles in Paris with the aim of becoming a professional photographer. Geneviève Rouault helps him secure clients for portraits. Photographs Georges Rouault and Henri Matisse, among other well-known Parisians. Takes on advertising work: Mon Savon, Dop Shampoo, Pathé Marconi and other clients. Exhibits his portraits at Galerie Billiet, Paris. Rents a studio

at 9, rue Delambre, where he continues with his personal work in addition to his commercial activities.

1937 First magazine cover: *Votre Beauté* (February). Photographs published in *Verve* (Winter 1937 and Spring 1938) and again in the annual *Photographie* (also in 1938 and 1939); some 50 photographs are also sold to the U.S. magazine *Coronet*. Makes one of his best-known images, *Nude under Wet Silk* (possibly 1936). Photographs Aristide Maillol's *The Three Graces* and other of this sculptor's works. Photographs Carmen, Rodin's female model for *The Kiss*. His 1933 photocollage of Hitler is exhibited in a group show in Berlin but is withdrawn following a protest by German ambassador.

1938 Meets Cecil Beaton, who helps him secure a contract with *Vogue*, the two become life-long friends. First of many images appear in French *Vogue*, October 1938. Photographs Rouen Cathedral.

1939 May: Takes his best-known Parisian fashion photograph, showing model Lisa Fonssagrives on the Eiffel Tower. Work for *Vogue* continues through June but contract with *Vogue* not renewed; sails to New York to investigate possibility of work for *Harper's Bazaar*, secures a contract with the magazine to cover Paris fashions. Returns to Paris on the eve of the war, but fails to make plans to flee. When war breaks out, interned in French camps, Montbard-Mernagne, Vernet D'Ariège and Catus, as an alien.

1941 Flees from France. Arrives in New York, where he is immediately put under contract by *Harper's Bazaar*. Finds an apartment at the Hotel des Artistes, 1 West 67th Street, where he remains for the rest of his life. Shares the studio of Martin Munkaci for almost two years. Maintains production of his personal work, with particular interest in the subject of the nude. First colour cover in December *Harper's Bazaar*. In the 1940s and 1950s his work will appear in *Look*, *Life*, *Coronet*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Popular Photography* in the USA and in many foreign publications, including *Lilliput* and *Picture Post* (UK) and *Graphis* (Switzerland).

1943 Secures a duplex studio at 222 Central Park South where he will remain for the rest of his life. His 1933 photocollage of Hitler is used as an Allied propaganda leaflet and is dropped in its millions over Germany by the American Air Force.

1944 Leaves *Harper's Bazaar* and begins work as a freelancer with *Vogue*, once again thanks to the intervention of Cecil Beaton. Over the next 15 years produces scores of *Vogue* covers and

works for *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *House & Garden* and a number of other mass-market fashion and photography magazines. Begins to build a lucrative business in the sphere of advertising with such clients as Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden.

1944-55 Produces dozens of cover images for Condé nast and other magazines.

1947 A selection of personal work included in *In and Out of Focus: A Survey of Today's Photography*, curated by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1948 Work included in *Seventeen American Photographers* at the Los Angeles Museum (now the Los Angeles County Museum). Begins to travel extensively in Europe, North America, Mexico and The Caribbean.

1950 Produces what has become his most famous cover image, that of the January issue of *Vogue*.

1952 Begins long involvement as photographer for the Oval Room of the Dayton Department Store, Mineapolis, which gives him considerable creative freedom.

1954 Buys a house on the dunes at Westhampton Beach, Long Island, New York.

1955 Relationship with *Vogue* comes to an end; last of his *Vogue* covers (though he works for the magazine sporadically after this date). Starts work on his autobiography. Kathleen Lévy-Barnett becomes his agent; the business expands considerably. Buys his own colour printer for C-prints but finds the colours unstable.

1962 Experiments with film out of interest and with an eye to commercial possibilities.

1963 Secures his final major client, L'Oréal. The Westhampton House is washed away in a storm.

1964 Marina Schinz becomes his assist and begins to edit the autobiography.

1969 Completes the autobiography. Selects the images for his proposed book, *My One Hundred Best Photos*, and organizes the juxtapositions. Fatal heart attack when in Rome; he is buried there.

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