

# 'I'M NOT A NICE GIRL – I'M A PHOTOGRAPHER'

Berenice Abbott began her career as Man Ray's darkroom assistant in 1920s Paris, then returned to New York to take the pictures that made her name – dazzling, dizzying views of the city and its soaring skyline. On the eve of a new exhibition of her work, *Liz Jobey* looks at the life of an extraordinary photographic pioneer

She was planning to live until she was 102, the American photographer Berenice Abbott told the documentary filmmakers Kay Weaver and Martha Wheelock when they came to Maine to film her in the summer of 1989. Or a hundred, anyway. "You might say my life has spanned a century. This is my century and I want to see it through."

Judging from her attentiveness to their questions and her quick, energetic, assertive responses, it seemed this solid, poised 91-year-old, with her neatly cropped white hair, sporty get-up – white shirt, red polka-dot kerchief, navy cardigan – and palest blue eyes, might make it.

As it turned out, she died two years later. But there was no doubt she had achieved her ambition to represent the century, both as a woman who forged her own career and as a photographer who had lived through and eventually benefited from the enormous changes that photography and the photography market had undergone in her lifetime.

At her death, *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: A Modern Vision*, which had opened at the New York Public Library in 1989, was still touring, and new exhibitions of her work would open

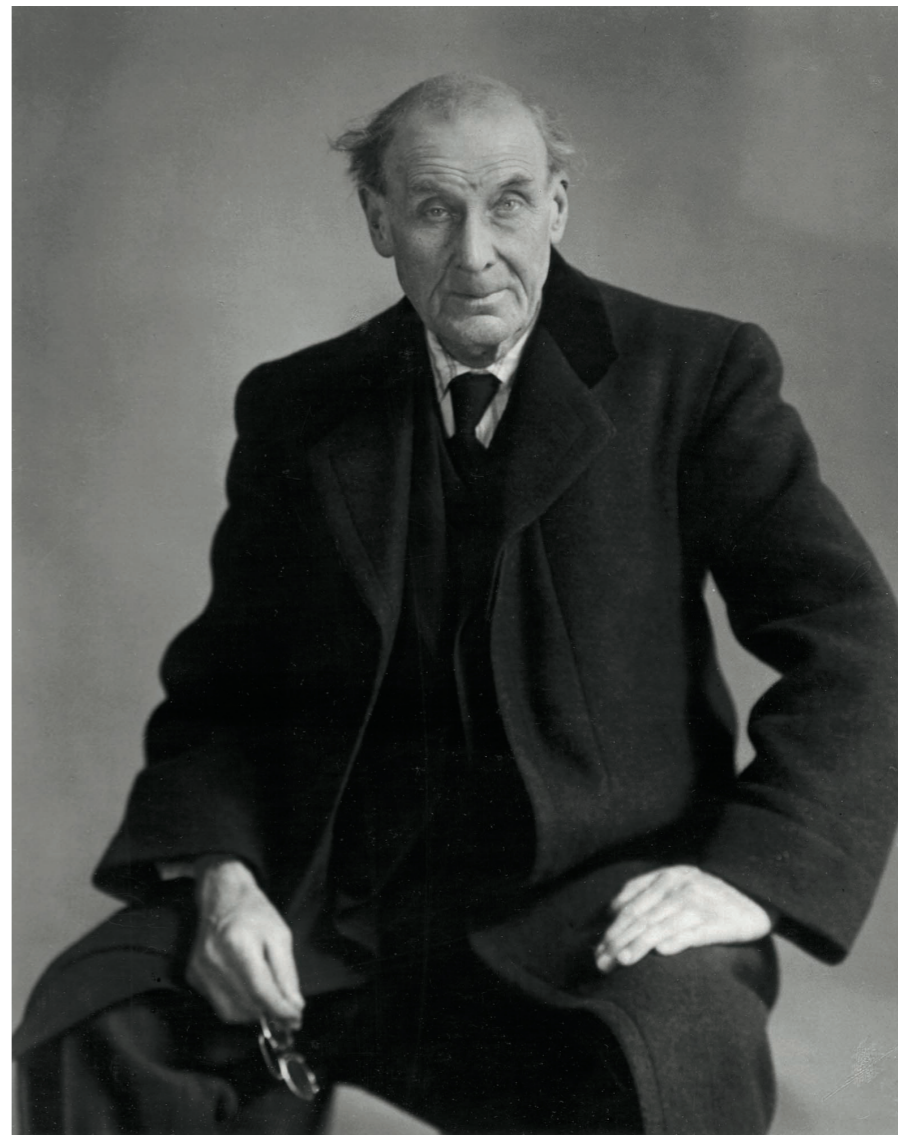
across the country throughout the 1990s. It might have pleased her to know that her centenary was celebrated by an exhibition of the photographs for which she was most famous – *Berenice Abbott's Changing New York, 1935-39*, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. And now, 20 years later, when the empowered women's lobby has brought so many unresolved gender issues to the fore, a new touring exhibition of Abbott's work opens next week at the Huis Marseille in Amsterdam.

It follows the three distinct periods of her work. First came portraiture, most of it done in Paris, where she lived from 1921-29, working as an assistant to Man Ray before setting up her own studio in 1926. Back in the US three years later, she began her decade-long documentation of New York City under construction, the vertiginous views and cityscapes she would ultimately be best known for. And then, during the 1940s and 1950s, her attention shifted to science, a subject that fascinated her and which she felt most ordinary people were ignorant of. She believed she could contribute to their understanding with her photography.

In between these major projects she made a piecemeal living, teaching at the New School in New York, working for magazines, taking ►

Portrait of Berenice Abbott in Paris, 1927, unidentified photographer





◀ portrait commissions and selling prints. It wasn't until the final decades of her life, as print prices rose, that she made any serious money from her photographs. But she was used to a hand-to-mouth existence: when she moved to Paris at the age of 22, she said she might as well be "poor there as poor here".

Abbott was born in Springfield, Ohio, the youngest of four children. Her father was a salesman and her mother, according to her biographer Julia Van Haaften, "hated being married and never wanted children". Before Berenice was two, her father had accused her mother of adultery (it wasn't clear with whom) and they separated: he took his two sons, and Berenice and her sister went with their mother, who swiftly declared herself divorced (though there was no official evidence to support it). Her childhood was spent being passed between her mother, her grandmother and, occasionally, other relatives, as her mother took up with and separated from a "stepfather". Her father died by suicide in 1915, when Abbott was 17. Van Haaften records that, whenever Ohio was mentioned in later life, Abbott remembered "nothing about it without horror".

Abbott enrolled for a few months at Ohio State University, thinking to be a journalist,

but when her closest friend and her boyfriend moved to New York, they sent her \$20 for the fare and she followed them.

At this point, her life seems to have taken off. Scrimping a living from odd secretarial and life-modelling jobs, she found herself in Greenwich Village at the centre of a downtown art scene that included Eugene O'Neill, the writers Djuna Barnes and Edna St Vincent Millay, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. She modelled for Man Ray, and began to develop an interest in being a sculptor. When her friends, like lots of American artists and writers, decided to move to Europe, she saved up for a one-way ticket and sailed to Paris.

She began studying sculpture, and widened her circle of friends, some of whom helped to support her as she continued her repertoire of odd jobs. After a few months away in Berlin, she returned to Paris in 1923 and bumped into Man Ray, who had set up a portrait studio in the city and was looking for an assistant. She dived in: "What about me?"

Working in the darkroom, she learnt the technical side of photography. She discovered she had a natural aptitude for it and became an expert printer. Two years later - not entirely to Man Ray's delight - she set up her own portrait studio in the Rue du Bac. Many of her subjects were also friends, among them

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the artist Thelma Wood, with whom she had a brief relationship, before Wood became the lover of Djuna Barnes; Peggy Guggenheim, who gave Abbott financial support; Janet Flanner, The New Yorker's Paris correspondent; Jane Heap, who was a co-editor, with Margaret Anderson, of the New York-based magazine The Little Review, which first serialised James Joyce's *Ulysses* (for which they were convicted of obscenity); and Sylvia Beach, who owned the Paris bookshop Shakespeare and Company and published the first edition of *Ulysses* in 1922.

The most important portrait she took in Paris, one that would have repercussions for the rest of her life, was of the French photographer Eugène Atget, to whom she was introduced by Man Ray. She visited Atget in his studio, looking through his albums and occasionally buying a print. By this time he was in his late sixties and had been photographing the streets of Paris since the 1890s, making a living by selling his pictures as architectural references for artists. He was taken up by the surrealists, who published his work in their magazines, but as far as Abbott was concerned there was nothing surreal about them. They were, as she saw it, "realism unadorned".

"His compositions are just about perfect," she said later. "He knew about where to put

his camera. And this is art. The art is partly right there. The art is in selecting what is worthwhile to take the trouble about... I just loved him. [His pictures] could even grow on you. They're so good you don't get tired of them."

She took Atget's portrait early in 1927 and it was several months before she returned to his studio to show him the proof prints. But when she got there, she found out that Atget had died. Realising the value of his archive, she set about rescuing it. She negotiated the sale of about 1,500 glass-plate negatives and 8,000 prints for 10,000 francs, secretly loaned to her by her friend and assistant Julia Oppenheim Reiner. Determined to make Atget's work better known in the US, when she sailed back to New York in 1929 she shipped the entire archive with her.

She began to photograph New York as soon as she returned from Paris, amazed by the architecture of the new city in progress and determined to document its every aspect, capturing it from terrifyingly high vantage points.

She was, though, afraid of heights, a fear she determined to master as she hauled her large-format view camera up stairwells and ►

Facing page, left to right: James Joyce, 1928; Janet Flanner in Paris, 1927

Above: Eugène Atget, 1927



‘Climbing up buildings, leaning over roofs, hanging on rickety fire escapes... Boy, I loved it!’

◀ across roofs, buffeted by the wind, to capture a bird’s-eye view of the city. She was rewarded by what would become one of her most famous photographs, “Night View” (December 1932–33), taken from the top of the recently finished Empire State Building. Decades later, the picture sold so well she couldn’t print it fast enough.

It was 1935 before she received funding from the Federal Art Project, part of President Franklin D Roosevelt’s New Deal, and later that year she headed to the Bowery – a place where, an official told her, “nice girls don’t go”. “Buddy,” she replied, “I’m not a nice girl. I’m a photographer... I go anywhere.”

Travelling up and down Manhattan, to the Bronx, to Brooklyn and Staten Island, she put together a collection of skyscrapers, storefronts, railway stations, bridges, the “El” – the elevated track running down Third Avenue – and cityscapes that still define the idea of New York, though they were taken almost a century ago. “Climbing up buildings. Leaning over roofs. Hanging on rickety fire escapes. Boy, I loved it! I’m going to keep doing it as long as I can.”

But in 1939, the funding ceased and she wound the project down. Her New York photographs had been exhibited, however, and written about in the press, and she received a contract

for what would become her best-known book, *Changing New York*. Its project editor was her partner, the art critic Elizabeth McCausland, but their original concept didn’t survive, and it came out in a guidebook format rather than the photographic monograph they’d both intended.

In the 1940s, Abbott made the radical shift to science photography. She had been teaching at the New School since 1934, and her *A Guide to Better Photography*, aimed at amateurs, was published in 1941. She began experimenting in the studio with images to illustrate scientific processes. She invented new photographic techniques, such as the “Abbott Distorter”, whose jokey effects she demonstrated with a self-portrait, and, more seriously, the “Super-Sight” process, which captured enlarged images directly on to the printing paper. She even set up her own company, House of Photography, for which she designed innovations such as a multi-pocketed jacket, the “Kit-Jak” (which she apparently wore for years).

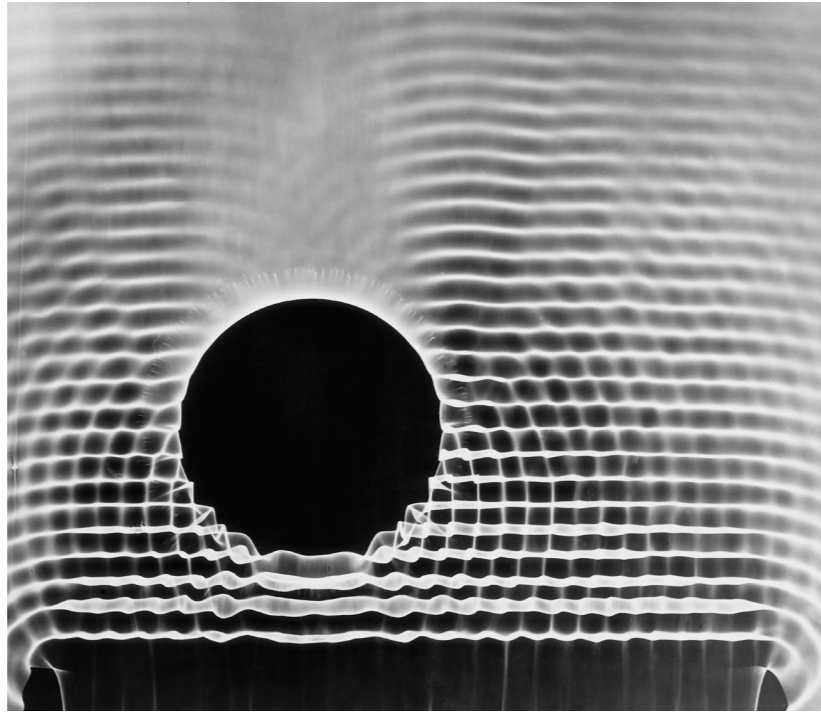
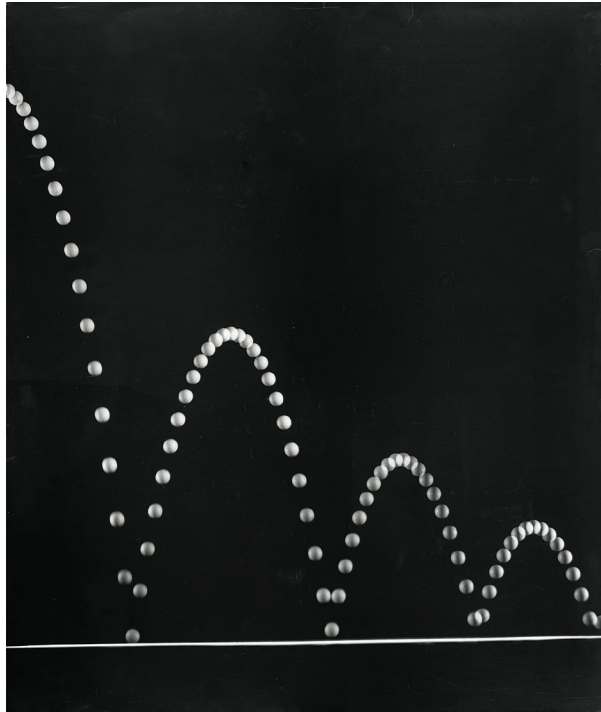
It wasn’t until 1958 that the Physical Science Study Committee based at MIT decided on a new series of textbooks, and Abbott was appointed the project photographer. She loved the work, and thought it would bring her a whole new set of publishing and exhibiting possibilities, but when the project was closed, in 1960, her job was ▶



Clockwise from top left: Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place, 1936; West Street, 1932; Bread Store, 259 Bleecker Street, Manhattan, 1937

Facing page: *Night View*, 1932. Also variously titled and dated. This image: *Aerial View of New York at Night*, March 20 1936





Hers is an exemplary case of a woman artist who made it under her own creative and financial steam



◀ terminated. She was, she told Weaver and Wheelock, the film-makers, “almost suicidal. I was just heartbroken.”

She had struggled artistically, financially and personally for much of her life. Between the early 1920s and the mid-1960s, though her work was quite widely exhibited, she had made a piecemeal living from magazines and portrait commissions, fighting to get grant-aided projects and forfeiting the rights to own her negatives in the process.

She was, by many accounts, plainspoken to the point of brusqueness, and Van Haaften gives plenty of examples of her “difficult” character being seen as a disadvantage by those whose support she sought. In 1951, she was placed under surveillance by the FBI, which listed her as a “concealed communist” with “homosexual tendencies”, citing her relationship with McCausland, “a fellow traveller”; it was a relationship that lasted 30 years until McCausland’s death. And all that time, alongside her own photography, her great mission in life had been caring for and promoting Atget’s work.

Until Abbott finally sold it to the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, Atget’s archive would

be both a blessing and a curse. She made part of her living selling his prints, she produced the first book about him and made sure his work was included in many exhibitions over the years. But at the same time, her name was too often coupled with his. Comparisons with her own pictures became almost reflexive, and Atget was almost always superior.

Furthermore, as soon as she returned to New York, she invited people interested in Atget’s work to come and look through it. One of the first was Walker Evans, in 1930 only just returned from Paris himself. He immediately recognised the quality of Atget’s pictures, the “poetry” he found in ordinary things: “When Atget does even a tree root, he *transcends* that thing,” he told the publisher Leslie Katz much later. While Abbott fought to secure funding for her New York project, Evans’s reputation grew. He was awarded the Guggenheim grant she was turned down for, and in 1938 he was the first photographer to be given a major solo show at MoMA. Even now, though Abbott is firmly established as a major figure in 20th-century photography, critically she sometimes seems caught in a pincer movement between Atget and Evans. As Van Haaften puts it, Atget clung to her “like a barnacle” and she never really escaped him.

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Facing page, from left: *A Bouncing Ball in Diminishing Arcs*, 1958-61; *Shadows Produced by Water Waves*, 1959

Facing page, below: *Self Portrait – Distortion*, c1930

Above: *Berenice Abbott, New York*, January 13 1986, Arnold Newman

Atget’s archive fetched \$80,000, the most MoMA had ever paid for a collection of photographs. It did not all go to Abbott, however: strapped for cash in 1930, she had sold a half-share in the archive to the gallery owner Julien Levy for \$1,000, and the contract with MoMA was split several ways. A year later she joined Lee Witkin’s gallery, one of the first commercial galleries devoted to photography in New York. By the 1970s, photography had gained a new market value and she made increasing amounts of money from sales of her own work, as well as from some of the Atgets not included in the MoMA sale. They went, Witkin said, “like hotcakes”.

In 1970, finally, MoMA dedicated a major solo exhibition to her work, and she was celebrated as one of the most eminent figures in American photography. In 1986, she sold her own archive to Commerce Graphics, which was set up to buy and manage it, and continued to do so after her death.

Abbott never had any truck with “arty” pictures but held fast to her belief in straight photography. “I think all photography is documentary or it isn’t really photography,” she told Weaver and Wheelock. “Most photographs are documents by their very nature – of the

realistic image. When they try to make it a non-realistic image, you’re illustrating another medium. Selecting is the key. I simply think you have to express your subject: if it’s worth expressing; if it’s not a trite subject.

“Something prompts you to take this picture and you have to convey to the person who looks at it what it was that prompted you to take it... I was confident in my selecting. I knew what I saw. If I liked what I saw, I did it.”

In many ways, hers is an exemplary case of a woman artist who made it under her own creative and financial steam. But even so, at the end of her life, Abbott wasn’t convinced that her hard-won independence had been much help. “I think the last thing the world really wants are independent women,” she said. “I don’t think they like independent women much. Just why, I don’t know. But I don’t care.” **FT**

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“*Berenice Abbott: Portraits of Modernity*” is at the *Huis Marseille*, Amsterdam, September 7–December 1, [huismarseille.nl](http://huismarseille.nl); catalogue published by Fundación MAPFRE. “*Berenice Abbott: A Life in Photography*” by Julia Van Haaften is published by WW Norton; “*Berenice Abbott: A View of the 20th Century*” (1992) was released by Ishtar Films, [wildwestwomen.org](http://wildwestwomen.org)