She was planning to live until she was 102, the American photographer Berenice Abbott told the documentary film-makers 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 as 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 those major projects she made a piecemeal living, teaching at the New School in New York, working for magazines, taking portraits, and travel photography. It all had its place but her heart was in her three decades of New York photography. She was a woman who forged her own career and who had lived through the enormous changes photography and the photography market had undergone in her lifetime.

Berenece 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.
When her friends, like lots of artists and writers, moved to Europe, she saved up for a one-way ticket and sailed to Paris.
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...
She had struggled artistically, financially and personally for much of her life. Between the early 1920s and the mid-1960s, although her work was quite widely exhibited, she had made a precarious living from magazines and portrait commissions, fighting to get grant-aided projects and forfiling the rights to own her negatives in the process. She was, by many accounts, plain-spoken to the point of brusqueness, and Van Haaften describes her as a “barnacle” and she never really escaped him. As Van Haaften puts it, Atget clung to her “like a pincer movement between Atget and Evans.”

Further, 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 a true 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 a major solo exhibition to his work, and he was celebrated as one of the most eminent figures in American photography. In 1936, she sold her own archive to the Museum of Modern Art 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 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 1976, 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 Wheeler. “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…”

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 thing that 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.”

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