

"Photography is a strange phenomenon... You trust your eye and cannot help but bare your soul." Inge Morath

Hilde in her time

Why have I referred to my mother, Hilde Lotz-Bauer as an "orphan of Weimar" in my essay in the exhibition book? It is a reference to her holding on to the creative and free spirit of the Weimar republic, when she moved to Italy after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 Germany.

As a child I had no idea that she had been a professional photographer. What I did experience was her thrill in all kinds of beauty – from a cloud in the sky to an architectural space or a beautifully crafted object.

Born in Munich in 1907, she grew up in the Bavarian capital, which in the run-up to World War I was a hotbed of social transformation and artistic ferment, second only to Paris. Munich's atmosphere nourished, among others, the Blaue Reiter artists group, which included Kandinsky, Franz Marc, August Macke and Gabriele Muntz.

Hilde's personality took shape in a turbulent period: World War, revolution and counter-revolution; the Weimar Republic; Nazi takeover; Mussolini's alliance with Germany and its break-up in 1943; Germany's capitulation.



Andiamo a Monaco!

Women were barred from many professions through a lack of admission to higher education and professional training at public institutions, in Bavaria as elsewhere in Germany, until the turn of the century. But women's rights campaigners and female artists fought against ridicule and hostility to educate themselves as well as gain the right to vote. As early as 1882 Women in Munich forged ahead to create their own artists association. Yet it took another 35 years until females were allowed to train at Munich's fine art academy in 1917.

Thanks to these pioneers, Munich became a magnet, drawing artists from western and eastern Europe, as well as Finland and Russia as revealed by outstanding research for a 2014 exhibition at Munich's Stadtmuseum, called "Off to Munich" (Ab nach München).

The predecessor to Hilde's photo school was the *Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Photographie*, founded in 1900 and accepting women as early as 1905. By 1925, half of its students were female with 80% coming from non-German speaking countries. Early students included maverick Polish photographer and socialist Germaine Krull, who features in Walter Benjamin's prescient *Short History of Photography*, written in 1931, the year that Hilde enrolled at its successor, by then taken over by the Bavarian state.



Hilde's school

The noted architect Theodor Fischer designed Hilde's first school, the Luisengymnasium (Höheretochterschule - higher girls' school) in a light-filled art nouveau style, in tune with its progressive educational aspirations. Fischer, who was the first chair of the Werkbund, went on to train famous Modernist architects including Bruno Taut and Erich Mendelsohn. The "Luise" was the first ever school in Germany to allow girls to study for the Abitur ("maturità"), a precondition for higher university education. In 1911, the school introduced Latin, English or Greek, German, French, maths, religion, geography and history as its humanist curriculum, courses that appear in Hilde's school reports.



Photo: Munich revolution

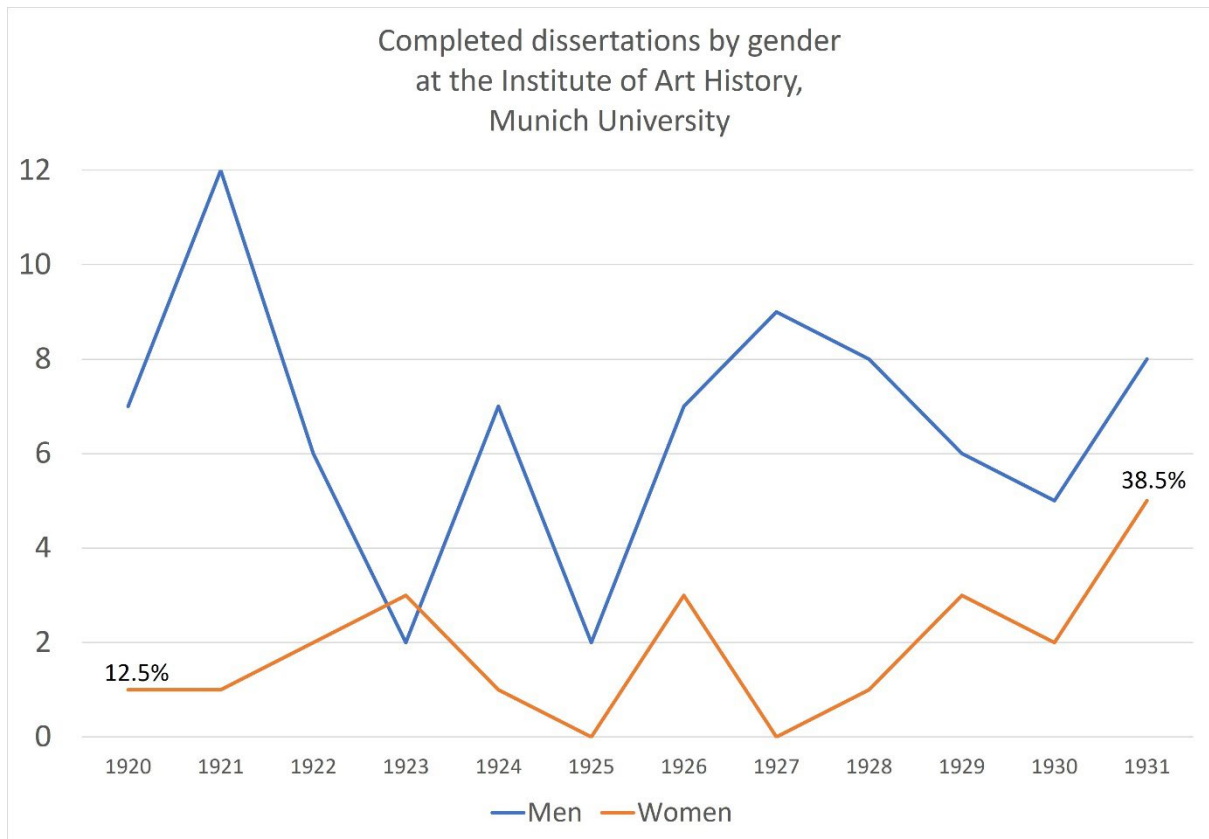
All life was disrupted by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. As a seven-year-old Hilde threw flowers to soldiers marching off to the front. As the war ended, when Hilde was 11, a mass popular movement overthrew the Wittelsbach monarchy which had ruled Bavaria for 738 years. The uprising was led by intellectuals, playwrights and poets, many of them Jewish, saw the creation of the people's state of Bavaria, otherwise known as the council or soviet republic, with Kurt Eisner, a Jewish writer, as its leader. But after the assassination of the President, Kurt Eisner on 19 February 1919, far right forces crushed the revolutionary uprising in Munich. On 9 November 1918 the Weimar Republic was declared throughout Germany and women won the right to vote three weeks later.



Illustration: Photo of Hilde looking androgynous

Hilde's education

Hilde was a restless teenager who preferred sports; gymnastics, fencing and skiing to academic instruction. She left school and her father, August Bauer, engaged tutors who helped her pass her Maturit  . Bauer was an ophthalmologist and his practise provided Hilde not just a familiarity with optical lenses but also funded her admission into Munich university.



Graph of women getting doctorates in Munich

During the Weimar years women began to enter university education in significant numbers.

Hilde's passion for the human body's expressive powers found an outlet in her study of the Zürn family of sculptors, who were wood carvers, in the Inn River regions of Austria, Bavaria and Moravia. She analysed in detail how their saintly figures moved within complex sculptural ensembles, intended to draw worshippers into an emotional human story. Hilde's dissertation earned her magna cum laude doctorate in art history in 1931. It was a visual-technical-linguistic exercise that she would never leave behind.



Braunau am Inn

Holz

Abb. 5. Martin und Michael Zürn, Kopf einer Heiligen

Illustration: Martin and Michael Zürn St Georg at Mattig

Hilde becomes a photographer

Remarkably progressive, Hilde's father August insisted that she learn a practical profession which could lead to a paying job – and therefore independence. With his support, and immediately after gaining her doctorate in 1931 she enrolled at Munich's state of the art photo school, the *Bayerische Staatslehranstalt für Lichtbildwesen*, which already attracted distinguished photographers as teachers and introduced a film department in the early 1920s.

Hilde goes to Italy

Hilde's earliest surviving photos are of tightrope dancers (1927) and a high up view of Florence's Piazza della Signoria (1933) both taken from unusual, diagonal angles that have a modernist feel, as indeed do her other photos of rooftops in Bologna and Florence. Her shots of the Spanish Steps in Rome also have grand sweeping diagonals and also delight in abstract closeups, highlighting texture, lines and volumes.



Foto: Spanish steps;

For her apprenticeship examination in 1933, Hilde travelled to Rome, where she captured lovers, soldiers and mothers relaxing in the spring sun on the Forum. These can be viewed as early examples of street photography / reportage.



Forum photos

But in this case not a city street but the poetic ruins of the ancient Roman urban space. She went on to gain a master craftsman's certificate in 1937, but by this time she had already been settled in Rome for two years, drawn to Italy by her art history fellow student and first partner, Bernhard Degenhart. With his encouragement she won commissions for art historians as the only freelancer photographer based at Rome's Biblioteca Hertziana.

My co-curator, Federica Kappler, grasping the complexity of Hilde's work, has theorised Hilde's "dual" – or, in English, two-fold – vision: both art historian and photographer who recorded artistic monuments and captured people in, largely rural, environments. I would like to show how, what seem to be exclusive approaches to a subject, can inform and enrich one another. In other words, there is a contradictory, but also symbiotic relationship, between these two aspects of her gaze.

Hilde came from the ferment of a new age in Germany to the eternal of the Italian countryside, which remained unchanged for centuries, but was on the cusp of disappearing after the war.

Capturing the life that others ignored

In Hilde's shots of people in rural areas, often taken whilst travelling around Italy with her first husband as he visited art collections or as she carried out commissions for art historians, Hilde viewed the humanity around her as individuals, not ethnographic specimens. These "people" shots differ markedly from most photographers in that era. She excelled in making her subjects, especially women and children, comfortable and non-aggressive. She took time for people to "acclimatise" to her, so they could continue with their own lives, even while she must have stood out as a foreigner.

Whatever the case, her subjects are always individuals, usually ordinary people engaged in daily tasks who she mysteriously endows with an eternal quality, something she had in common with 17th century Dutch painters such as Caspar Netscher and Johannes Vermeer.



Illustrations; the lacemaker (Hilde with Caspar Netscher)

Yet in her strikingly people-free, static shots of Florence as well as those taken in the countryside, her love of symmetry, sensitivity to both simple and complex compositional principles, engage the viewer, aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally.

In marked contrast to her slow exposure shots of Florentine urbanism, taken with a wooden Linhof glass plate camera on a tripod, her small Leica allowed her to slip (*scivolare*, to use Abruzzo author Alessio de Stefano's expression) – sometimes invisibly – around remote rural areas. Instead of Saint Sebastian, floating cupids and God the Father, she focused on shepherds, ploughmen, goatherds, women doing the washing, carrying water or firewood, making lace. In remote parts of the countryside and mountain villages, schoolboys and young girls also gazed into her lens, perhaps unaware that they were being immortalised.

Her gaze was sensitive to children who reflected back Hilde's sense of wonder and curiosity, never posing for the camera, as most would nowadays. It seems that Hilde's subjects may not have realised what her Leica was for, since it was an expensive new gadget that they may not have seen before. The way she depicted countryside people transforms them at times into iconic figures almost like present-day saints or Madonnas. Through Hilde's gaze these poor "Christians" acquire just those auras that Walter Benjamin felt could be lost by mechanical reproduction when writing his *Short History of Photography*, published in 1931.



Illustration: Mother with crib photo from Schlechter



Illustration: children shot from Schlechter



Screengrab from Film: man ploughing

Hilde's working process has a filmic quality, as Madelaine Merino's film has recently revealed in the sequences of the 7,000 images preserved on contact sheets. Hilde took great trouble to set up her compositions, waiting until each component was arranged in a certain way. Sometimes her shots are spontaneous action pictures, as for example the women scurrying with firewood balanced on their heads.



Scanno Firewood image

At other times, she clearly chose a precise moment in time, with her subjects arranged as in a painting or a nativity creche. Her photo of a farmer and his children coming around the corner with

their oxen, mule and donkey calls to mind Dutch painters like those of Nicolaes Berchem, who chose similar themes in his moody pastorales. Like a stage, it is carefully set within the urban architecture of Pescocostanza, whose earlier wealth and prominence are still enshrined in its streets, palaces and churches, which Hilde chose for her “stage”.



Illustrate with Pescocostanza; Subiaco

Hilde goes to Florence

As war broke out in September 1939, Hilde broke up with Degenhart. He took a job in Vienna while she moved to Florence, to work at the German Kunsthistorisches Institut (KHI). She began a passionate love affair with my father Wolfgang Lotz, an architectural historian also employed at the Institute. Still married to Degenhart when the couple moved into the top of a medieval tower in the Borgo San Jacopo, incurring the moral censure of colleagues and defying the precepts of various religions.

Hilde's greatest campaign over the last four years of her Italian sojourn was without doubt her collaboration with the institute's director Friedrich Kriegbaum for whom she undertook the mammoth task of recording the entire wealth of Florence's architecture and artworks. Hilde continued to work on their Florence book project, signing in to her workplace every day right up to the day before giving birth to her first child, Christoph Donatus, in March 1942 and returned just short of a month.

But for Hilde it was not a work of “documentation” in the normal sense of the word. Kriegbaum's strict instructions were that no humans were to appear in these images, and Hilde succeeded in doing this. But, as Walter Benjamin wrote, “the renunciation of the human image is the most difficult of all things for photography”.

Introducing Hilde's first solo show in 1977, the famous Florentine art restorer, Umberto Baldini said that Hilde and Kriegbaum overcome the somewhat surreal absence of human beings in their grand project. In Hilde's “homage” to the city, her object-focused concentration on each aspect of Florence

was so intense, that paradoxically she managed to transform the city itself into a personality, “a timeless protagonist”. And as Baldini said, this singular aspect of her work also allows us, generations later, to become its inhabitants:

“E laddove, appunto direi, non c’è la figura umana, non c’è solitudine, non c’è morte: c’è invece proprio vita, in questo rapporto preciso di una realtà per la quale noi entriamo in campo come precisi personaggi, che entrano in quella latitudine e in quella disposizione a leggere questa nostra città.

“Siamo noi che occupiamo la strada, siamo noi che occupiamo la piazza, siamo noi che entriamo in rapporto con quel palazzo. Siamo noi, cioè, dentro questa città, non è lontana da noi. E questo naturalmente non solo è un fatto positivo di lettura, che il Kriegbaum aveva estremamente capito, pienamente capito, ma è chiaro, diciamo così, che per essere realizzato aveva bisogno anche di chi queste cose potesse capire e vedere insieme, cioè chi potesse trasferire, attraverso proprio l’obiettivo, il momento dello scatto, della posizione, della luce, queste idee e queste sensazioni.”



Florence street image

Hilde's images of Florence are not simply "il fascino di quello che non c'è più", as Umberto Baldini put it, but her gaze, "pictorialism on a clear, bright day", to quote Tristan Weddigen of the Biblioteca Hertziana, endowed the cold stones of this renaissance town, and all its treasures, with a transparency and humanity, which still speaks to us today.

Postscript

Forced to depart Italy in 1943, she settled briefly in Austria, then Munich, where her two daughters my sister Irene and I were born. The family moved to the United States for a decade, as Wolfgang taught at Vassar College, while Hilde brought up the family whilst also

engaging in a whole range of activities, including colour slide photography. With Hilde coming full circle, the family returning to Rome in 1962 when my father Wolfgang was appointed director of the Biblioteca Hertziana.



Haystack images

In the 1970s, Hilde returned to countryside photography with black and white studies of haystack construction in Umbria, Marche and Lazio. She organised her first solo show in Florence followed by others in Bonn and London. In Rome, she renewed her passion for Michelangelo, scaling ladders up to the Sistine Chapel ceiling as it was restored in the 1980s. She remained in Rome until 1987, when she returned to Munich. Even when she was lamed by arthritis and failing vision, over 80 years of age, Hilde continued to seek out the splendid Bavarian architectural interiors thus re-engaging with her earliest studies.