

# City of light and mist

An opportunity to see original prints of some of Hoppé's finest London photographs reveals their unexpected depths and subtleties, writes **Samson Spanier**.



Emil Otto Hoppé is famous as the greatest photographic portraitist of Edwardian London, but his success in that field obscures his subsequent departure into photojournalism, notably the depiction of cities. The National Portrait Gallery in London exhibited his portraits in 1978, but his urban vignettes, although highly respected in his own lifetime, are little known – partly because the originals are now remote from their subjects, in the Hoppé Collection in Pasadena, California. The Michael Hoppen Gallery, London, is filling the gap with a show of 50 London scenes that are being sold by the Collection. Dating from 1910 to 1945, they depict landmarks from Piccadilly

Circus to the docks, and show people from all walks of life.

The exhibition's primary pleasure is the opportunity to view the fine gradations of detail in the original prints. Those who know Hoppé's work from reproductions in such magazines as the *Illustrated London News* or his books published in his lifetime, can look forward to a revelation. Hoppé may have understood the pragmatism of magazine work, but he also borrowed from the Pictorialists, and wrote of 'subduing an aggressive note here, encouraging a reluctant detail there, until the final rendering of tonal values and detail is finished and harmonious'.

The ability to be lyrical in his tonal contrasts but also realistic reaches its apogee in *British Museum, Reading Room* (1927; Fig. 1). The hardness of detail and pigment-like blackness of the metal rails below provide a foil for the burst of light above. From right to left, the frames of the windows are increasingly bleached away, until the window at furthest left has no frame visible at all.

This calls to mind Frederick Evans's photographs of churches, which Hoppé would have known, as he exhibited with the Linked Ring Brotherhood, to which Evans belonged, but Hoppé replaces Evans's

The illustrations to this review are all of silver gelatin photographs by Emil Otto Hoppé (1878-1972). Hoppé Collection, Pasadena. Photos: Curatorial Assistance, Los Angeles/ courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery

1 *British Museum, Reading Room, London, 1927. 7.9 x 9.7 cm*

APOLLO 107



2 *Royal Opera House, London, 1934. 9.3 x 12.4 cm*

symbolic Christian light with a secular equivalent. The picture could demonstrate Mark Haworth Booth's observation in his short but succulent introduction to the exhibition catalogue that Hoppé can be seen as the 'missing link' between Evans in 1900 and the generation of photographers that rose to prominence when Hoppé was no longer young, such as Bill Brandt.

Every picture reveals subtleties. In *Winter in London* (undated), the snow is infinitesimally grey, setting off the true white of the sun. In *Fulham Gas Works* (1929), the subtlety lies in Hoppé's choice of which layer of the buildings should be in focus: the modern gas cylinder behind is sharp, presumably because its clean lines would look odd if blurred, while the terraced houses in front are not. For all the artistry of the prints, however, they were not made for exhibition, as Haworth Booth points out, but for magazine printers, and they bear evocative signs of use.

The exhibition's second, and perhaps greater, pleasure is the chance to see how Hoppé wanted to depict London, a city he wrote of in his memoirs with profound warmth. He loved its cosmopolitanism, which allowed a Munich-born man such as himself to be embraced. Accordingly, there are fragments of foreign lands, such as Chinese restaurants. He saw the Thames as the conduit for immigrants, and often made the river – and its seagulls – his subject.

Hoppé wrote of 'the allurements of the grey haze of London, which makes the contrast of its clear limpid days more remarkable'. This praise of smog, an aspect of London all but lost after 50 years of Clean Air Acts, is borne out by his work. *Dockland, London* (c. 1910), an image of the suspension bridge at the docks suffused in mist, dignifies its industrial subject with softness redolent of Pictorialism. A contrasting view, *Billinggate Fishmarket* (1945), offers a cobbled street which is indeed limpid with reflected sunlight.

What really marks out Hoppé, however, is his imbuing of architecture with what he once wrote of as the city's 'casual large-heartedness', which is partly achieved by using anonymous people as a foil. One tactic was to choose carefully a harmonious viewpoint, but then to enliven the scene with vigour and chance by catching people in movement. In *Fleet Street at St Paul's* (1925), three spires are lined up with an appropriate distance between them, but Hoppé captures a moment precisely by including pedestrians crossing the road.

Buildings are often given a human scale by a witty rhyme. The tower of *Lea Garage, Soho* (1928) might be forbidding if it were not for the milk cart in the foreground, laden with bottles of a congruent shape. Such linear games are also played out by emphasising geometry, for example, the bridge in *London Docks* (c. 1910), although these emphases are gentle, unlike the aggressive lines of, say, Stieglitz. Hoppé wrote above all about the 'secretiveness' of

## EXHIBITIONS

London, which opens itself up to the resident. This he captured by finding unusual spots from which to photograph. For example, in *Royal Opera House* (1934; Fig. 2), the façade is cut off at the top by the dark arch in the foreground: the spectator is in some private space. One is tempted to think here of Hoppé's portraits, which reject stiff, stereotyped poses in order to convey the sitters' private feelings. That there may be similarities in approach between the portraits and cities suggests that a direct comparison might be useful: a subject for another exhibition, perhaps?

'Hoppé's London', Michael Hoppen Gallery, London (+44 (0) 20 7352 3649), 26 September–26 October. Catalogue by Mark Haworth Booth, ISBN 055186307, £12 (Guiding Light).