

The making of modern London

When the constructivist architect Berthold Lubetkin arrived in London in 1931 he expected to find a city that, like Paris or Berlin, was on the cusp of modernity. Instead he discovered one which, he grumbled, was "lost in a deep provincial sleep".

Over the next decade, Lubetkin, together with fellow continental European emigres, such as Serge Chermayeff, Ernő Goldfinger and László Moholy-Nagy, helped to modernise London. Their advances in architecture and design were boosted by the achievements of mass-market modernisers, such as Frank Pick, who (improbable though it seems today) built London Transport into the envy of the world, and Allen Lane, who made great literature accessible to all by founding the Penguin Press and selling paperbacks for sixpence each.

These photographs by Emil Otto Hoppé capture London's transformation from the dark, crowded post-Victorian city of the 1910s and 1920s, to the modern metropolis of the 30s, where Pick's buses, trams and trains whisked people from their new homes in the suburbs into the shops and offices in the centre. Hoppé even gives us a glimpse of today's multicultural London in the dapper figures standing outside the Grand Oriental Cafe de Colombo Ceylon in Limehouse.

Born in Germany in 1878, Hoppé began his photographic career in London in 1907 and worked prolifically until his retirement in 1945. Even the waspish Cecil Beaton described him as "the Master". The most famous portrait photographer of his day, Hoppé was best known for photographing movie stars, including Marlene Dietrich and Mary Pickford, royalty and politicians. But his passion was street photography, and he often left his imposing studio in the Kensington mansion, which had once belonged to the pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais, to photograph ordinary Londoners. He took one famous series of London street scenes from the top of a double-decker bus.

We can still glimpse Hoppé's London in historic monuments, such as the British Museum's colonnade and a London Underground arch, and the fading remnants of the hand-painted signs that once lined the streets. The men's Hornburg and bowler hats have disappeared, as, in the era of the mega-brand, has selling plain paper carrier bags for tuppence. Some customs have survived, such as girls dressing up to go shopping, although the contemporary equivalents of Hoppé's young Londoners strolling arm-in-arm along Commercial Road are unlikely to wear white gloves.

Alice Rawsthorn

Alice Rawsthorn is design critic of the International Herald Tribune. Hoppé's London is at the Michael Hoppé Gallery, 3 Jubilee Place, London SW7, from September 12 to October 7 2006. www.michaelhoppengallery.com



Remember when... (Clockwise from above) shopping in London, 1934; children feeding pigeons at the British Museum, c1916; Commercial Road, Whitechapel, 1933; Piccadilly Circus, 1929; the abandoned British Museum tube station, 1937; a girl with young men outside the Grand Oriental Cafe de Colombo Ceylon, Limehouse, 1934

