

Photography

A rediscovered prophet of modernism

The first book in a series of titles on the work of the German-born, British photographer Emil Otto Hoppé

This first book in a projected series on Emil Otto Hoppé (1878-1972) unearths rare and little-known images made by the German-born British photographer during his extensive travels across the United States. Further volumes will focus on his photographs of Germany, England and Australia.

Although later eclipsed by contemporaries such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen and Paul Strand, Hoppé's stellar reputation as perhaps the most famous photographer of his day, had certainly preceded him on the first of his three extended visits to America in 1919. His studio in London (once the home of Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais) had become a Mecca, attracting the good and great, with both the capital's most fashionable sitters and distinguished foreign visitors seeking the cachet of a portrait by Hoppé. Much of the appeal lay in the subtlety of his approach. He always strove to empathise with his celebrity clients by reading their books, seeing their films and plays, remembering their anniversaries, even going so far as to read up on their hobbies to put them more at ease. Unlike many of his competitors, Hoppé dispensed with props and painted backdrops. Instead, he deployed the strong rapport built up with his sitters to foster



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a genuine engagement and capture a natural likeness. With good reason the satirical magazine *Punch* jokingly described him as "the photographer who likes to dine with his sitters". So much of the fame of his clients rubbed off on him, that Hoppé soon became a celebrity in his own right.

Hoppé's highly cosmopolitan background and outlook aided his success as a photographer. Born in Munich, he grew up in Vienna, returned to Munich and went on to Paris to finish his studies. His family was of French Huguenot extraction (which accounts for the *accent aigue* on the last letter of his surname, a life-long affectation). His father was a successful banker, who initially opposed his son's artistic yearnings. As a youth in Munich, Hoppé took drawing lessons from water-colourist, Hans von Bartels, who introduced him to celebrity portrait painter Franz von Lenbach. Later, his peripatetic upbringing enabled him rapidly to adapt to other cultures and relate to writers, performers, politicians and businessmen to whom travel was a way of life.

However, still bowing to parental pressure after two years of military service in Germany, Hoppé began, in 1897, a career in banking lasting some ten years, first in Munich and Berlin. Breaking his journey in London in 1900 en route to Shanghai where he was to join his uncle's export firm, Hoppé fell in love with Marion Bliersbach, the sister of a German financier. Following their marriage, England became his permanent home. For some years he continued working for German banks.

Then, in 1903, aged 25, Hoppé met British photographer John Cimon Warburg, who showed him what a "pliable instrument the camera can be in discerning hands" and inspired him to acquire his first professional camera. He soon joined the Royal Photographic Society and started taking part in salons and amateur exhibitions, where his growing success gradually persuaded him that he could turn photography into a viable business. In 1907 Hoppé won the £100 first prize in a contest sponsored by the *Daily Mail* and realised that together with other sales and winnings his photographic income actually equalled his banker's salary. At this point he drew up an elaborate ledger of his financial situation and sent his wife to Germany to meet his father and justify his

intention to leave banking and set up a photographic studio. His father finally relented, and Hoppé opened a studio in Barons Court with E.F. Griffin later that year.

Early in his photographic career his reputation blossomed. Hoppé co-founded the London Salon of Photography in 1909, the year he represented Britain alongside Sir Benjamin Stone at the International Exhibition of Photography in Dresden. Holding his first one-man show at the Royal Photographic Society in 1910, his business grew rapidly and he moved to new premises in Baker Street in 1911. By 1913 he had started showing at London's prestigious Goupil Gallery, having relocated to Millais's former house and studio. In 1916 he contributed to the newly founded *Vogue* magazine.

Hoppé's first trip to America was prompted by a proposal to set up a satellite studio in New York, to be funded by theatre producer A.H. Woods, in return for half the profits. Hoppé declined the deal, but started thinking about the American market. Eventually, he opened a studio on West 57th Street, planning to repeat his success in London. An endless succession of New York socialites paraded themselves before him, wishing to be immortalised by so celebrated a photographer. The pulling power of Hoppé's prolific talent as a transatlantic portrait maker was evident in his 1921 exhibition at New York's Wanamaker Gallery, which displayed 117 sitters in alphabetical order, for easy reference. Among them were screen stars Marion Davies and Lillian Gish, the writers Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells, playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, poet Ezra Pound, singer Enrico Caruso and the dancer Alexandra Fedorova, plus various royals, industrialists, artists and socialites. Also featured were his friend George Bernard Shaw and his own self-portrait, suitably filed under "S". Proof, if any was required, of himself as a celebrity.

However, beyond the studio, Hoppé was drawn to New York itself and its less celebrated, if perhaps more typical, ordinary citizens. Then, beyond the city, he was drawn to survey a whole unfamiliar country. When his book, *Romantic America*, appeared in 1927, few portraits and not one celebrity featured amongst over 300 images.

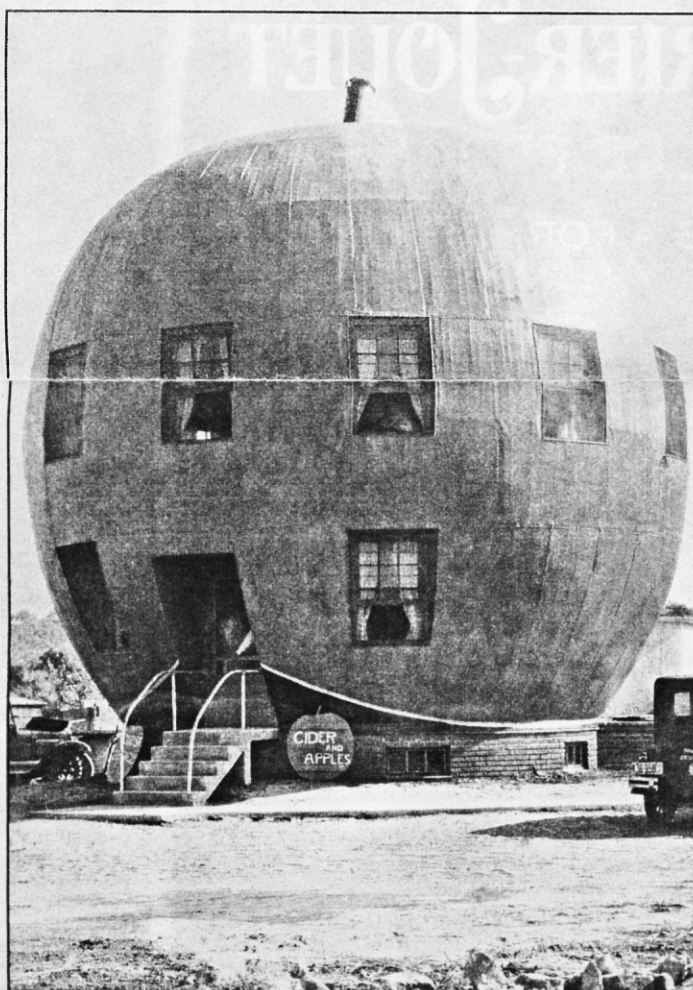
Hoppé was one of the few photographers to make a successful transition from artistic but retrograde pictorialism, to forward looking, unaffectedly graphic modernism. Indeed, in traversing the length and breadth of America, from New Hampshire to the Florida Keys and Seattle to San Diego, Hoppé became the first photographer to apply the concept of a methodical survey to capture the American experience. "My task," he

E.O. Hoppé, *Grand Central Station, New York, New York, 1921*

later wrote "was to discover the real America at that time unfamiliar to so many people, even Americans." His project directly anticipated the Farm Security Administration (FSA) depression era surveys carried out from 1935 to 1943 by such figures as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn and Marion Post Wolcott. His approach even foreshadowed the epic photographs of another FSA member, Walker Evans, whose 1938 exhibition, *American Photographs*, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, is an undisputed landmark in photographic history. As this book is at pains to point out, there are striking similarities, both in modernist ethos and specific subject-matter, between Hoppé images and works by a host of American photographers, such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, Charles Sheeler, Walker Evans, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. In many instances, albeit as an outsider new to the territory, Hoppé appears to anticipate their work, sometimes by years or decades, and the direction that the art of photography would take.

Richard Pinsent

□ Phillip Prodger, *E.O. Hoppé's Amerika: Modernist Photographs from the 1920s* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 176 pp, £28, \$49.95 (hb) ISBN 9780393065442

E.O. Hoppé, *The Big Red Apple Restaurant, Missouri, no date*