

A detective story lies behind the re-discovery of an important photographer from the first half of last century. Rob Ditessa looks at the background and lasting legacy of **Emil Hoppé**, a significant recorder of early Australian life.

Hoppé's legacy



Graham Howe talks with enthusiasm about how his re-discovery of Emil Otto Hoppé's photography from the 1910s to the 1940s and its subsequent reappraisal has prompted the re-writing of this era's photographic history.

"Think of it as trying to study Egyptology without the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb. You'd be missing the critical link of seeing the first intact tomb to be found. That is how important Hoppé is, and his significance will become entirely apparent in the next few years," he muses.

According to the established story, Howe explains, art photography from the late nineteenth century, which dominated



the salons of London and Paris, petered out around 1910, “only to explode during the next decade in the United States with new American photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Steichen. Meanwhile, nothing was supposed to have happened in Britain or Europe until 1930 when photographers like the greats Cecil Beaton and Bill Brandt appeared in Britain, Brassai and Henri Cartier-Bresson emerged in France, and August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch came on the scene in Germany.”

He says the notion of American photographers inventing Photo-Modernism was presented in, for instance, Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography*, the prescribed text at Melbourne’s Prahran College of Advanced Education, from which he graduated in 1972.

However, missing from this story was Emil Hoppé, a leading Photo-Modernist who worked in London, Berlin, and New York, and who was extraordinarily prolific and influential during those decades. “This changes the picture entirely. Now we know that Photo-Modernism was realised simultaneously between America and Europe and not by America alone,” Howe says.

Graham Howe’s name will spark recognition in some quarters as he was the founding director, in 1973, of the Australian Centre for Photography. Since graduating from University of California, Los Angeles, in 1979 with a Master of Fine Arts degree in photography, he has worked as an art curator, historian,

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A cluster of sunbathers, Bondi Beach, Sydney, 1930.

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Maggie the Bush Poet, Darwin, Northern Territory, 1930.



and photographer, mostly in the USA. In 1987 in Los Angeles, he established Curatorial Assistance, a major international arts non-profit organisation which produces and tours museum exhibitions. He is currently its CEO. Howe first heard about Hoppé in 1972 when he was working at London's Photographers' Gallery, from the photography writer and historian Bill Jay. Howe remembers Jay had recently interviewed the then 94 year-old Hoppé, and proclaimed him as the most famous photographer in the world in 1920. In 1993, a chance meeting with Hoppé's grandson, who asked if his grandfather was a great photographer, impelled Howe to search out the lost work.

He found that in 1954 the 76-year old Hoppé had sold his photographs to a picture library with an over two million strong collection. Because the library filed its pictures by subject, Hoppé's work was entombed, says Howe, "like needles in a haystack". Howe made a deal with the library, and dug through and hauled out Hoppé's pictures. Then, from Hoppé's heirs in Germany, Howe acquired his records such as diaries and notebooks to reconstitute what would have been the entire body of work had Hoppé kept it intact.

In 2005 Howe opened the archive to scholars and in 2006 he oversaw the start of the creation of a series of books and exhibitions that, he says, "unfold the significance of Hoppé's key role in leading the Photo-Modern era photo history".

Launching into photography

Emil Otto Hoppé was born in Munich in 1878 into a banking family, and attended school in Paris and Vienna. In 1900, he moved to London where he met John Warburg, the masterful photographer and a pioneer of colour photography. Warburg inspired Hoppé with the potential of the medium for art so much that he bought a Goerz-Anschutz strut camera. In 1903, he joined London's Royal Photographic Society, and exhibited his work, done in the Pictorialist style of the day. Buoyed by his success as an amateur, and by his acceptance into the exclusive art photography group, "The Linked Ring", Hoppé decided to become a professional photographer, opening a studio in 1907. He quickly



became successful and in 1913 he moved to the fashionable London suburb of Kensington, renting a 30-room mansion which had once been the home and studio of the pre-Raphaelite painter Sir John Millais. With a showman's flair, psychological insight, and acute business acumen, Hoppé quickly became London's choice portrait photographer of the elite. His subjects were the celebrities, dancers, and literary writers of the period including giants such as Rudyard Kipling, and George Bernard Shaw, as well as members of the British monarchy.

When Hoppé died in 1972, aged 94, *The Times* (London) noted in its obituary that before the First World War he took a series of memorable photographs of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet. Stars like Pavlova, Karsavina, and Nijinsky came to his studio



and danced while he photographed them. In the 1920s, working out of a New York City studio on West 57th Street, Hoppé began to photograph famous American celebrities, supplying stylish images for the new picture magazines.

"One of the points I would like people to notice about Hoppé," says Howe, "is that if you compare his portraits of any particular sitter against those of the same subject by any other photographer, Hoppé's are almost invariably the best. He seemed to get the quintessential persona of the sitter." Said to be a charmer and an intriguing conversationalist, Hoppé would make a point of reading up on his subjects, enabling him to talk to them about their interests and to put them at ease. At a time when much portraiture was somewhat stiff and formal, Hoppe

presaged a new and different approach. The photographic techniques he used were quite innovative, and because he aspired to show his subjects as naturally as possible, he also used daylight as often as possible. In Millais's house, he used the painter's daylight studio, and two electrically lit studios all outfitted with elegant interior decor which created an ambience of stylish living.

Cameras and lenses

His early kit included a custom-made 8x10in reflex camera with a very noisy flip-up mirror which apparently startled the sitters, "but only after the photograph had already been made", adds Howe. Hoppe photographed in soft ambient light using fast

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Sydney Harbour Bridge from the south side, 1930.

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Pearling look-out man, The Great Barrier Reef, 1930.

“Hoppé was interested in how the shapes modulated light and space.”

lenses which enabled him to isolate specific character details of each sitter's face. He also used British full-plate 6½ x 8½ cameras. In the field, his camera of choice was the quarter-plate Graflex camera with a single lens reflex mirror that blacked out the viewing image at the moment of exposure.

Hoppé used many different types of cameras because he believed each format gave him a particular advantage. Howe lists among them 6x9cm roll film cameras such as the Makina strut folding camera, the 6x6cm Rolleiflex, and a 35mm Leica which he used with Double-X film and which in 1930 he used to photograph London's cafes by night, with only available light. “That was quite technically demanding at the time”, says Howe.

He adds, “When I look at his negatives and I see how beautifully exposed and developed they are, it's clear he was a technical virtuoso. He may not have called it ‘The Zone System’ but he was deftly modifying his film exposure and

development to fully capture his grey-scale to exactly the tones he wanted.” Around 1920 Hoppé tired of the demands of the portrait studio and turned to making pictures of urban and country scenes that were rich in story telling elements, fine picture stories, and photojournalism for the new field of illustrated books and magazines. Some years later Hoppé was regularly travelling around England, Europe, and the Americas - and eventually he went further afield - to take photographs for a series of armchair travel books, conceived by the German publishing house Ullstein Verlag. These were the first fine-art photography books which presented comprehensive overviews of countries, depicting cities and rural landscapes. In 1928 and 1929, photographing the beginning of Germany's industrial build-up to WWII, Hoppé fully embraced the idea of modernist expressionism, treating large industrial machines and architecture as pure abstraction in his landmark book *Deutsche Arbeit* (German Work). Hoppé was interested in how the shapes modulated light and space, and how photography could be a purely abstract medium.

On Australian shores

On 22 January, 1930, *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper reported from Fremantle in Western Australia, “Mr E. O.



Hoppé passed through Fremantle to-day on the liner *Orvieto* from London. This is Mr Hoppé's first visit to Australia, and he intends to spend eight months touring the lesser-known districts for information to be used in another book." By the time of his visit, Hoppé was arguably the most celebrated photographer in the world, says Howe. Arriving in Sydney in early February, he began to shoot the city and its inhabitants, the bathing beauties on Bondi Beach, the Royal Easter Show, and, of course, the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

While in Sydney Hoppé was befriended by the department store owner David Lloyd-Jones, who gave him a major exhibition at the David Jones Art Gallery. Howe explains, "Given that Hoppé was such an international figure at that time, every photographer in town would have been sure to see the exhibition, the highlight of which was work from *Deutsche Arbeit*, his newest book."

The legendary Australian photographer Harold Cazneaux attended the opening and was so impressed he included several of Hoppé's photographs of the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in his publication *The Second Bridge Book*, produced in 1932. Cazneaux's first pictures of the Newcastle BHP plant borrow stylistic devices from Hoppé's photographs of German industry. The 19-year-old Max Dupain, then a first-year studio apprentice of Cecil Bostock, went on to become an important photographer of industrial subjects. Howe sums up, "We can reasonably speculate that it was Hoppé's influence that guided these Australian photographers to first consider industrial subjects as part of their artistic repertoire."

Howe emphasises the need to put Hoppé's photographic journey across Australia into historical perspective, saying that he was the first photographer to document the entire Australian continent as a single subject. With his sensitive eye, Hoppé made portraits of aboriginal Australians not as some 'ethnic other', but as individuals. Despite being an outsider, Hoppé was particularly attentive to aspects of traditional aboriginal culture that he was privy to, which made his portraits all the more remarkable when compared to those of his contemporaries.

No photographer had previously attempted such a daunting undertaking, firstly because it was an extremely physically challenging task and secondly because it was a very expensive expedition. Hoppé and his son, Frank, headed out into central Australia with a 12-cylinder all-terrain vehicle. In addition to the difficult terrain, heat, and floods, their biggest problem was the dust which got into everything, including the cameras and films. According to Howe's research, Hoppé's cameras on this project included his ¼ plate Graflex reflex, which he used for most of his pictures, and two 6x9cm roll-film cameras with folding fronts.

Early in his career Hoppé became inspired by observations about class and social structure made by his friend, the English playwright George Bernard Shaw, which propelled Hoppé on a lifelong mission to seek out individuals who typified a particular class within their culture. He made studies of these different types of people around the world says Howe, and in Australia Hoppé found a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, albeit one with enormous gaps between its settlers and its indigenous peoples.

An Australian record

Over his 10 months in Australia, Hoppé made more than 3,300 photographs, far more than he needed for *The Fifth Continent*, which was published in 1931. Howe says, "Later in his life, Hoppé expressed regret that he didn't publish a second book that he had hoped to have made on 'a collective national portrait of the Australian people'. This, presumably, would have included more of the individual portraits of Australians that he had made that year."

Hoppé was not only unusually energetic, he was also far more photographically productive than his peers, says Howe. Near



the end of his life, Edward Weston made prints of over 800 images of his life's best work. As Weston was one of America's most prolific photographers, one could assume that 800 images is a decent lifetime's output. Ansel Adams said once that if a photographer got a dozen good photographs during a single year, it was a good crop. If a photographer had, say, 50 active years with 12 good works per year, then 600 good photographs would be a reasonable measure of success. Howe concludes, "By my reckoning, if Weston figures he had 800 good ones, then Walker Evans seems to me to have about 400, Paul Strand about 600, Alfred Stieglitz about 250. You get the idea? But, based on this applied standard of what constitutes a good photograph, what astounds me is that when one examines the sheer depth of the Hoppé archive there are at least 2,000 photographs that meet this standard. Not only did he have a very long career, his 'capture rate' of good photographs each year was more like 50 per year for 40 years. That's phenomenal." 🌀

ABOVE

William Lane, Woolloomooloo, Sydney, 1930.

OPPOSITE

State saw mill bachelors' quarters, Pemberton, Western Australia, 1930.