



Horst, Horst P. (1906-1999)

by Caryn E. Neumann

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Horst, a German-born naturalized American society and fashion photographer, created some of the most memorable images of the mid-twentieth century.

Horst P. Horst was born Horst Paul Albert Bohrmann on August 14, 1906 in the eastern German town of Weiseenfels-an-der-Saale as the second son of Max Bohrmann and Klara Schönbrodt Bohrmann. His wealthy parents owned a hardware store.

A mild case of tuberculosis brought Horst's public school days to an end. He spent a year in a sanitarium in Switzerland in the early 1920s. After briefly studying Chinese in Frankfurt am Main, he worked in an import-export firm as a file clerk.

Introduced to the arts by his paternal aunt, Horst longed to find a way into that world. He was particularly fascinated by Bauhaus, a between-the-wars German movement that sought to erase the distinction between the fine and the applied arts.

In 1926 Horst enrolled in the Hamburg Kunstgewerbeschule, or School of the Applied Arts, where he hoped to come into contact with Bauhaus artists. Horst's later use of lighting is reminiscent of Bauhaus photographer László Moholy-Nagy.

To Horst's delight, noted French architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris hired him in 1930 to apprentice at his Paris studio. Known as Le Corbusier and one of the greatest twentieth-century architects, Jeanneret-Gris created the Maison-Domino, a basic building prototype for mass production with free-standing pillars and rigid floors.

While at a Parisian café, Horst met Baron George von Hoyningen-Huene, a Russian emigrant and photographer for *Vogue* magazine. Influenced by Huene, who became his lover, Horst abandoned architecture in favor of photography. He worked as an assistant and occasional model for Huene.

Through Huene, Horst met fashion photographer Cecil Beaton and *Vogue* art director Mehemed Agha. In 1931 Agha invited Horst to the *Vogue* studio in Paris to learn how to photograph fashion models. Initially, Horst's work echoed the cool classicism of Huene, with plain or geometric backgrounds, artificial lights that emphasized chiaroscuro, and an occasional reference to ancient Greek or Roman sculpture.

In 1932 Horst held his first exhibition in Paris. After a brief period of freelancing, he was hired by *Vogue* in 1935 after the temperamental Huene quit the magazine. His affair with Huene over, Horst became involved with Luchino Visconti, the Italian aristocrat who was to become an important filmmaker.

In 1938 Horst met British diplomat Valentine Lawford, who became his longtime companion and biographer. The two remained together until Horst's death.



A portrait of Horst P. Horst by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

The 1930s comprised the high point of Horst's career. His photographs, rooted in surrealism, emphasized mystery and odd combinations of people and objects, but they also added allure and glamour to his subjects.

Horst worked for the British, French, and American editions of *Vogue*. Based in New York, he traveled frequently to Europe to cover the fashion collections and to photograph celebrities.

A Horst photograph is immediately recognizable by its lighting. For dramatic effect, the photographer lit from the ceiling with four spotlights. He used shutters in front of the spotlights to either reduce or open up the light and to bring out the detail of a dress. Adept at both color photography and black-and-white, Horst employed no filters and had little interest in flat light.

Mosbacher Corset is Horst's most famous picture. Taken at four in the morning in September 1939, it shows the rear view of an exhausted blonde model wearing a corset that is coming undone. This photograph was Horst's last before leaving Paris for New York.

With another European war imminent, Horst opted to leave everything behind for a fresh start in America. He joined the U.S. Army on July 2, 1943 as a photographer and became an American citizen on October 21, 1943 under the name Horst P. Horst.

Horst rarely used his surname during the early part of his career and dropped it formally to avoid questions about a possible relationship to high-ranking Nazi Martin Bormann. Subsequently, he was most often known simply as "Horst" and sometimes as "Horst P. Horst."

After the war, photography became less formal. Editors sought a less-studied, more natural look. This was not the sort of photography that Horst enjoyed, but he continued to shoot for *Vogue* and its sister Condé Nast publication, *House and Garden*.

Photos illustrating the lifestyles of international high society became his specialty. He snapped fashion designer Coco Chanel (1937); actress Merle Oberon (1942); artist Salvador Dali (1943); actress Loretta Young (1943); heiress Gloria Vanderbilt (1941); socialite Lady Diana Cooper, 1946; actress Rita Hayworth (1947); actress Tallulah Bankhead, (1948); socialites Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy and her sister Lee Radziwell (1955); opera diva Maria Callas (1952); director Franco Zeffirelli (1964); author W.H. Auden (1970); and fashion editor Diana Vreeland (1979);

In the 1980s, the dramatic pre-war photographic style became popular again, and Horst enjoyed a rejuvenation of his career. Synonymous with the creation of images of elegance, style, and glamour, he was sought out by such stars of the 1980s as pop group Duran Duran.

Failing eyesight and poor health marred Horst's last years. He died at his home in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida on November 18, 1999. He was survived by Lawford and their adopted son, Richard J. Horst.

Horst had a profound influence on portrait photography. Photographers Bruce Weber, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Herb Ritts and many others have been inspired by his highly stylized pictures.

Bibliography

Kazmaier, Martin. *Horst: Sixty Years of Photography*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1991.

Lawford, Valentine. *Horst: His Work and His World*. New York: Knopf, 1984.

Pepper, Terence. *Horst Portraits: Sixty Years of Style*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

About the Author

Caryn E. Neumann is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.