



List, Herbert (1903-1975)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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German photographer Herbert List created images of young men that are at once homoerotic and avant garde in technique and sensibility.

Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1903, List attended the Johanneum Gymnasium. After finishing school in 1920, he moved to Heidelberg to learn the family coffee brokerage business, but he also managed to study art history at Heidelberg University.

List entered the family business in 1924 and traveled on its behalf throughout Brazil, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. In 1929, he returned to Hamburg to run the company's daily affairs. In Hamburg, he befriended the young photographer Andreas Feininger and took his own place among the city's artistic and social avant-garde as a photographer.

List also became an acquaintance of the young Englishman Stephen Spender, who was to draw upon him in creating the character Joachim in his autobiographical novel *The Temple* (written in 1929, but not published until 1988).

In his early photographs, List combines his love of the male figure with an experimental use of double exposure and a quasi- surrealist fascination with masks and draped fabric.

In 1935, with the rise of the Nazis, List handed the family business over to his brother and relocated to Paris, where he had his first photographic exhibition.

From 1936 to 1940, working for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Life* as a photographer of celebrities, List traveled regularly between Greece, Italy, and Paris until the outbreak of World War II, when he settled in Greece to evade the German occupation of France.

List's photographs from this period are particularly noteworthy. In one of his best known images, simply entitled *Athens, Greece* (1936), one sees a mussy headed young man, wearing only white briefs, standing in an arched doorway. Before him hangs a transparent curtain. In it, one sees silhouetted leaf forms surrounding an oval image of two swans swimming before a stylized Greek temple, literally veiling List's own desire. Lit from behind, the shadows seem to press up against the figure and give it form.

The image of the adolescent boy remained a recurring subject throughout List's photographic career. In another photograph known as *North Sea, Germany* (ca 1933), a young boy is set against a clear sky, his crouching form holding a single metal pole. The pole dissects the frame and gives the image a modernist charge.

His body is seen from below, filling the image with all the force of idealized youth. His face is in profile. His blond hair hangs freely in a pose that brilliantly captures the spirit of the *Jugendbewegung*, a popular romantic, nature oriented, anti-bourgeois movement that would later be transformed by the Nazis.

After the German army invaded Greece, List was forced to return to Germany. He resettled in Munich, but in 1944, though part-Jewish and known as a homosexual, he was drafted into the military. He served as a map designer in Norway.

After the war, List became an associate member of the photographic agency Magnum, but he rarely accepted assignments. In 1953, his book of photographs taken in Greece, *Licht über Hellas*, begun a decade before, was finally published. In 1958, his second book of photographs, featuring images taken in the Caribbean, *Caribia* was published.

By 1965, List had given up photography altogether in order to concentrate on his extensive collection of drawings.

Today List is probably best known for his posthumously published book *Junge Männer*, which contains over seventy images of idyllic young men and boys lying in the sun, swimming, wrestling, or innocently staring into the camera's lens. These images beautifully combine eroticism with an avant-garde sensibility and a curious innocence.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Ken Gonzales-Day is a Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, California. His art has been included in solo and group shows in Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and New York. He has published in *Art Journal*, *Art & Text*, *Artissues*, *Artpapers*, and *Poliester*.