

Permanent Collection

EDUCATOR RESOURCE

Ilse Bing



ABOUT THE ARTIST:

[Ilse Bing](#) (b. 1899, Frankfurt, Germany; d. 1998, New York, New York) is considered one of the most important photographers of the 20th century. She lived and worked in Frankfurt, Germany; Paris, France; and New York, New York. Known for her work in Paris before World War II, she is well regarded as an **avant-garde** photographer for her innovative methods of capturing architecture and people in movement (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). Bing studied art history and architecture at the University of Frankfurt but left to pursue photography full-time in 1929. Working in Paris in the 1930s, Bing established herself as a commercial fashion photographer. Her work appeared in major newspapers and magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Le Monde* (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). She was forced to flee France for the United States during WWII. Her prints that had been left in France were shipped to her in New York at the end of the war. Many of her photographs were lost because she was unable to pay the customs fees to ship them (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). In 1959, Bing gave up photography and began writing poetry and making collages (Dryansky & Houk, 2006, p. 59; Kamine, 2009). Bing's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Cleveland Museum of Art, International Center of Photography, and Victoria and Albert Museum, among many others.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

University Galleries' permanent collection includes [43 photographs](#) by Bing, which were generously donated by Yuri and Zoe Gurevich, Frank and Amy Linde, and Steve Schwartz. Focused primarily on people, landscapes, and cityscapes, Bing's work demonstrates her interest in exploring unconventional ways of representing reality. She often blurred the boundaries between commercial and fine art, as well as abstraction and representation. Nicknamed "Queen of the **Leica**" (Kamine, 2009) for the 35mm camera she used for much of her career, Bing commanded the technology and took advantage of the mobility it offered to seek outdoor subjects.

VOCABULARY

35MM LEICA CAMERA

Invented by Oskar Barnack, this camera made photography more accessible due to its small size, affordability, and easier process for developing the film (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.).

AVANT-GARDE

a 19th-century term referencing art that experiments with innovative, and often radical, approaches to art making. Avant-garde artists are well-known for purposefully pushing boundaries of the mainstream.

COMPOSITION

the arrangement of visual elements in an artwork

CURATE

to select, prepare, and arrange images, objects, or artworks for display

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

an image consisting of silver metal particles suspended in a gelatin layer (Wagner, n.d.)

MEDIUM

refers to the type of art – such as drawing, quilting, or photography – as well as the materials an artwork is made from – such as photography or a gelatin silver print (Tate, n.d.)

SUBJECT MATTER

what is depicted in an image or artwork such as people, places, or things

THEME

recurring ideas, materials, or subject matter

REFERENCES

Deedes-Vincke, P. (1992). *Paris: the city and its photographers*. Bullfinch.

Dryansky, L., & Houk, E. (2006). *Ilse Bing: Photography through the looking glass*. H.N. Abrams Inc.

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Smithsonian Institution. (n.d.). *Leica 35 mm 1(A) camera*. National Museum of American History. https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/nmah_834692

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Wagner, S. S. (n.d.). *Gelatin Silver Prints*. National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/research/online-editions/alfred-stieglitz-key-set/practices-and-processes/gelatin-silver-prints.html>

TOURS STREET, 1935:

The influence of Bing's university studies in [Neo-Classical architecture](#) are evident in [Tours Street, 1935](#), as well as her personal interest in the city, and desire to explore time, space, and chance (Lahs-Gonzales & Lippard, 1997, p. 35). Taken while she was working in Paris as a full-time photographer, *Tours Street, 1935* captures a moment of everyday life in the city. The narrow passage highlights architectural details of the buildings and conveys senses of isolation and confinement. A fleeting reflection in pooled water on the mostly vacant cobbled street captures the ephemerality of the moment. When speaking of the camera she was using at this time, Bing described it as "an extension of my eye, going wherever I go, enabling me to convey things in a more solitary way" (Deedes-Vincke, 1992, p. 81).

TREES AND NEW YORK CITY SKYLINE, CENTRAL PARK:

During her first trip to the United States in 1936, Bing captured the imposing quality of New York City from afar in [Trees and New York City Skyline, Central Park](#). Instead of the intimate, close-up architectural details seen in *Tours Street, 1935*, the viewer is situated outside of the city, accompanied again by a solitary figure positioned in the middleground. As described by Bing, the buildings emerge in the background "like crystals in the mountains, little things growing up" (Dryansky & Houk, 2006, p. 39). Their skyward ascendance is mimicked by tall, thin trees in the foreground.

ROCKY MOUNTAINS COLORADO:

Taken near the end of her career in photography, [Rocky Mountains Colorado](#) displays Bing's continued interest in relationships between nature and constructed spaces. Similar to *Tours Street, 1935* and *Trees and New York City Skyline, Central Park*, this image displays clear distinctions between the foreground, middleground, and background. Although situated in nature, the dramatically angled trees are reminiscent of architectural elements seen in Bing's photographs such as *Tours Street, 1935* and [Lamp Post, the Old State Department, Washington D.C., 1953](#).



Left to right: Ilse Bing, *Tours Street, 1935*, 1935. Vintage gelatin silver print. Gift of Frank and Amy Linde, 2017.

Ilse Bing, *Trees and New York City Skyline, Central Park*, 1936. Vintage gelatin silver print. Gift of Mr. Yuri and Mrs. Zoe Gurevich, in honor of their daughter Hava Gurevich, 2015.

Ilse Bing, *Rocky Mountains Colorado*, 1955. Vintage gelatin silver print. Gift of Mr. Yuri and Mrs. Zoe Gurevich, in honor of their daughter Hava Gurevich, 2015. All works: Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.

Questions for viewing *Tours Street, 1935*; *Trees and New York City Skyline, Central Park*; and *Rocky Mountains Colorado*

- Imagine you are standing where Bing was when she photographed each of these locations. What might you hear, smell, or feel? What do you see that makes you say that?
- In what ways are these three photographs similar? How are they different? Consider the **subject matter**, **compositions**, **mediums**, and formal properties (such as shapes, lines, textures, balance, scale/proportion, and contrast).
- Describe what you see in the photographs. Imagine how the images might be different if Bing had taken them a moment sooner or later.
- What clues do you see that suggest when these photographs were taken? Are any of the images challenging to place in a specific time period?
- Look closely and describe how Bing has defined the foreground (closest to the viewer), background (furthest away from the viewer), and middleground (the space between the foreground and background) in each of the photographs.

K-12 ACTIVITIES

The following activities are aligned with National Visual Arts Standards

RESPONDING - After introducing students to [Ilse Bing](#), select and analyze details from three additional works in University Galleries' [permanent collection](#). Ask students what they see in the images. Who and what is captured in each scene? From what perspectives are the photographs taken? What **themes** can they find within the works?

CREATING - Bing used a 35mm **Leica camera** that held film rolls with 36 exposures. Invite students to imagine that they have a limited number of photographs they can take in a day. What would they choose to document and why? Prompt students to create a small series of photographs based on their responses.

CREATING - Introduce students to the [rule of thirds](#) and other [compositional techniques](#). Then discuss their application in a selection of Bing's [photographs](#). Guide students in using the grid function on an iPad, Chromebook, or phone camera. Have students find a **subject** of interest and use the camera grid to explore different **compositions**. Prompt students to take photographs from a variety of perspectives using different **compositional** techniques. Afterward, invite students to discuss what they discovered through their explorations.

CONNECTING - As a class or in small groups, discuss the difference between [natural](#) and [constructed](#) environments. Then analyze a selection of Bing's photographs. Ask students to describe examples of natural and constructed environments in Bing's photographs. What thoughts or feelings are evoked by what they see? Afterward, prompt students to write a list of natural and constructed environments in their school, neighborhood, or community. Guide students in creating a series of photographs, drawings, or collages based on their responses.

PRESENTING - Engage students in the process of **curating** a selection of Bing's [photographs](#) from University Galleries' permanent collection. Assist students in choosing a central **theme** on which to base their selections. After students have chosen works from the collection, guide them in displaying the images in a [digital](#) space. Prompt students to consider how the arrangement, placement, and spacing of artworks will convey meaning to viewers. For example, [Ilse Bing: Doublings](#) paired photographs of the same **subjects** taken from different perspectives. One photograph was displayed on its own to emphasize the "doubling" effect Bing achieved in a single image.

Related works in University Galleries' permanent collection:

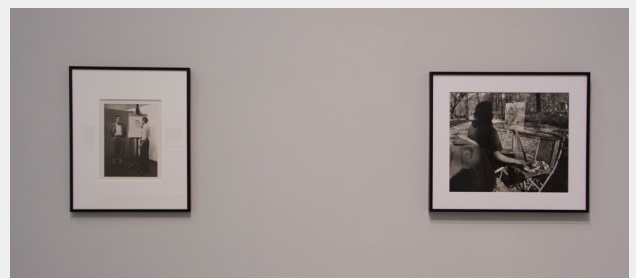
- [Dmitri Baltermants, *Oil worker near the River Ob*](#)
- [Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Car parked next to plow in field, Algeria*](#)
- [Leonard Freed, *Man walks in front of car on bridge over Herengracht canal \(Amsterdam, Holland\)*](#)



Leonard Freed, *Man walks in front of car on bridge over Herengracht canal (Amsterdam, Holland)*, 1961. Vintage gelatin silver print. Gift of Dr. Steven K. Miller and Mrs. Yasemin Miller, 2016. Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.

Related works in University Galleries' past exhibitions:

- [Jin Lee: *Backyard*](#), 2010
- [Picture This: *Picturing Community One Lens at a Time*](#), 2012
- [Rural Documentary Collection Exhibition](#), 2013
- [Lens Based: *Recent Acquisitions to the Permanent Collection*](#), 2019



Installation view of *Lens-Based: Recent Acquisitions to the Permanent Collection*, 2019.