trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Gisèle Freund: The Life of a Story-Teller with Camera, Retold

Clara Masnatta

This re-appraisal of Berlin-born, French-naturalized, Jewish photographer and sociologist Gisèle Freund's life highlights her transformative years in exile in Argentina and debunks the much-reiterated construction of her career. While her innovative slide show lectures stand out, her status as a concerned photojournalist comes into question.

PUBLISHED	July 7, 2022
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
COLLECTIONS	Women artists
TOPICS	Visual Arts · Cultural Diplomacy
SPACES AND PLACES	Europe · South America
PERIODS	The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	argentina, photography, conferences, exile, photojournalism, intellectuals
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/gisele-freund-the-life-of-a-story-teller-with-camera-retold/

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Gisèle Freund is famous but unknown. A sociologist by training, a photographer by decision, and a writer *manqué*, as she liked to remark, Gisèle Freund was a fabulous woman in more than one sense. Gisèle came into this world not in 1912, as often stated, but in 1908, to a German-Jewish, art-collecting family of the great textile bourgeoisie who lived in the district of Schöneberg, before greater Berlin merged as a metropolis. A ground-breaking critic who authored the first doctoral study on the history of photography in 1936, *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (Photography in France in the Nineteenth-Century), and a pioneer of color photography, Freund is perhaps most celebrated for her color portrait portfolio that came to include the canonical writers and artists of the twentieth century—James Joyce, André Gide, Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges, Frida Kahlo, and Walter Benjamin, to name but a few among over three hundred personalities—and often offers the only existing chromogenic rendition of the person portrayed. Her work as a photojournalist, both in color and black and white, was published across Europe and the Americas, starting in the 1930s with *Life*, *Weekly Illustrated*, *Regards*, *Vu*, *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, in the 1940s, *El Hogar*, *Sur*, *La Nación*, *Excélsior*, *Picture Post*, then, *Look, Du*, *Sie und Er*, *Novedades*, *Points de Vue*, *Marco Polo* and *Weekend Magazine*, in the 1950s. Her photo-reportage of Eva Perón in 1950, which gave rise to numerous myths, capped off Freund's exile years in Argentina.



Gisèle Freund in Buenos Aires, with slide viewer, in 1942 (originally in Zulma Núñez, "Imágenes en colores," *Atlántida*, January 1943)

Source: Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Argentina

Her rejuvenating birth date is the first of many imprecisions that cloak the life of Sophia Gisela Dresel Freund. A recounting of her life experiences is found in her 1970 memoir *Le monde et ma caméra* (*The World in My Camera*, 1974), which preceded the now classic study *Photographie et société* (first published in French in 1936, in English in 1974), a substantial expansion on her doctoral work, cited by Beaumont Newhall, Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu. In 1977, Freund completed

Mémoires de l'oeil ("Memories of the Eye"), a hybrid book with pictures in the spirit of her previous memoir, retracing certain aspects of photography by way of personal experience, containing a short autobiographical narrative that introduces a large photo compendium.

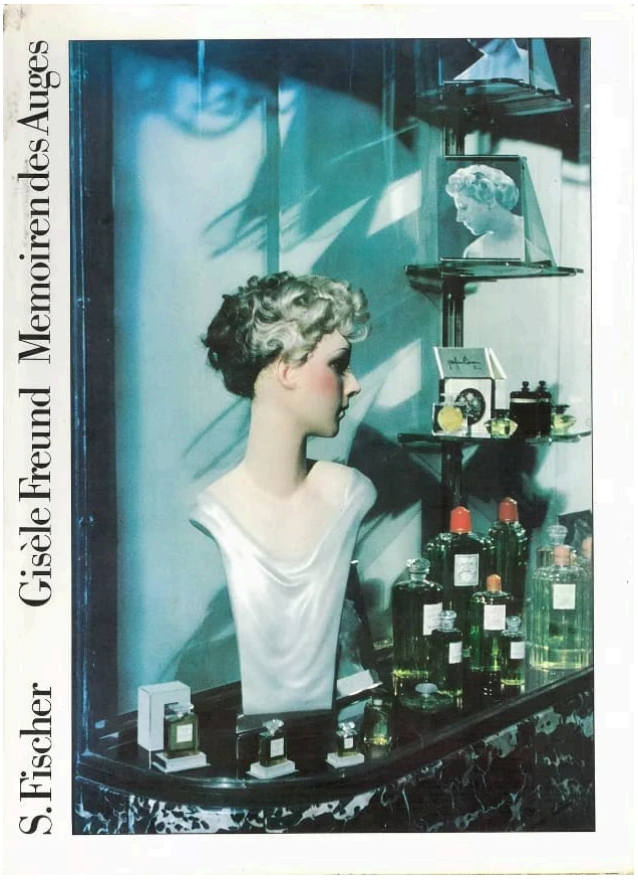
It is this construction of her life and career that critics have ceaselessly echoed by taking Freund's narrative at face value. All autobiographies embellish a lineage, and Freund's is no exception. Nor was her transatlantic exile exceptional; it was a destiny shared by countless émigrés from Europe; among them, many women of the Weimar Republic who made photography their profession in the 1920s and 1930s. For them, photography represented emancipation; the possibility of earning a living and the "chance to participate" (to borrow Ute Eskilsden's term) in the public sphere. In her life story, Freund took this freshly earned autonomy to new levels, and concealed collaboration as her strategy for advancement. People and episodes marking Freund's career were taken hostage by her selective editing. She likewise chose to maintain her queer sexuality undisclosed; yet her partners participated in the development of her career. This biography intends to include neglected figures who were central to her life and works.

Freund's biographical recasting notoriously downplayed her transformative years in Argentina, where she found haven from the Nazi persecution of Jews during the war, just as she had in Paris in 1933, after fleeing Frankfurt, and then in unoccupied Southern France in 1940, following the armistice that brought about the Vichy regime. Argentina was a new lease on life and a game-changer for Freund. But we are jumping ahead and across the Atlantic in the life of a welder of words and images extraordinaire, whose color transparencies probably introduced modern color technology to South America in 1939.

Gisèle's *Bildungsroman*

Gisèle's *Bildungsroman* begins with a gift she received from her father: she was given a Voigtländer 6 x 9 camera as a teenager, then the prized Leica upon her *Abitur* (secondary school graduation) in 1928. Her father Julius Freund's art collection, which featured paintings, watercolors, and sketches by Carl Blechen, Fritz Boehle, Max Slevogt, and Caspar David Friedrich, as well as drawings by the contemporary Käthe Kollwitz, was equally significant for Gisèle's "sentimental education." Ever since Julius Freund, after his marriage to Clara Dresel in 1902, had become co-proprietor of his father-in-law's successful ladies' wear company *Wilhelm Dresel*, he started turning the family fortune he had inherited into artworks, forming a highly reputable collection of over 500 items.

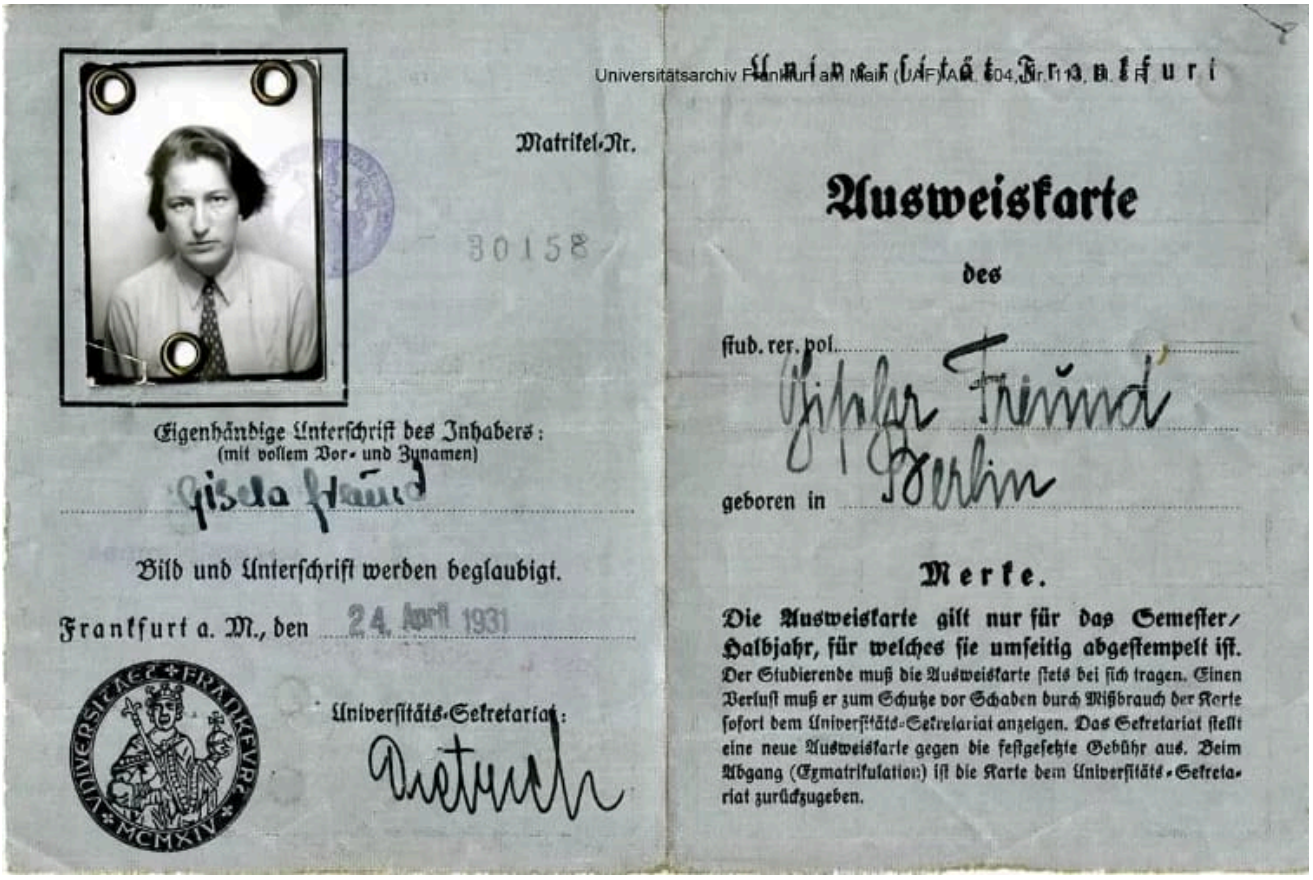
Gisèle's *Mémoires de l'oeil* opens with her birth below Caspar David Friedrich's masterpiece *Kreidefelsen auf Rügen* (Chalk Cliffs in Rügen, 1818), a central work of German Romanticism, and part of the fine art collection which populated the family residence. Between its acquisition and the later fame of the painting mediated her father's keen and disinterested eye for art. Between Gisèle and her future, the paternal gift drew a bridge. An aesthetic eye was her birthright. Such an asset should have compensated for this autodidact's lack of schooling, as Freund had no formal training in photography. Yet the belief that photography was not an art, which Freund held throughout her life, seemed to contradict the artistic aspirations betrayed by foregrounding episodes such as this, or the presumed *ars gratia artis* which should have inspired her portrait portfolio. Contradictions indeed plagued Freund's career.



Front cover of Gisèle Freund's *Memoiren des Auges*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1977

Source: Private Collection

In 1929, Freund went to Freiburg to study Sociology, with Art History as her minor; in 1930, she moved to Frankfurt to continue her studies at the Goethe-Universität, then home of the recently founded *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) led by Theodor W. Adorno. Freund eventually began her doctorate under the tutelage of Karl Mannheim and Norbert Elias. It was Elias who one day suggested to the Leica-armed Freund to write her doctoral thesis on photography. In 1930-1931, with her PhD in mind, Gisèle travelled to the land of Daguerre's invention, France, one of the birthplaces of photography along with England, according to the habitual history on the invention of the medium. From these circumstances sprang the first photo-reportage she published, which credited the pictures to one "Norbert." Freund's snapshots freezing the agitation of traders at the Paris Stock Exchange illustrated a divertimento in the *Kölnischer Illustrierte Zeitung* of January 16, 1931. [1] Freund later repurposed one of these images in her magnum opus, *Photography and Society,* in order to exemplify the power of captions for determining a picture's meaning.



Gisèle Freund's student identity card from Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, 1931

Source: Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Universitätsarchiv

During her student years at Frankfurt, Gisela got involved in left-wing political activism, as students often do, canvassing and putting up posters, in part thanks to her boyfriend, Horst Schade. Back in Berlin, Gisela had started an amorous relationship with this young man of comparatively working-class standing, a liaison that now included the anti-fascist struggle. Her pictures documenting the communist demonstrations around Frankfurt on 1 May 1932 date from the last weeks that Freund spent in her native Germany amidst the rise of anti-Semitism. One particular photo captured the communist dictum "photography, a weapon of class struggle" on a placard; in another one, a banner held by two proud women in the marching masses spelled out the call to repeal the article penalizing abortion, the infamous paragraph 218. Ninety years later, the inscription "FIGHT with the I. W. A [International Worker's Aid] against the DISGRACE OF §218" has lost none of its relevance; the fight for the depenalization of abortion in Germany continues to this day. As for photography, Gisela briefly subscribed to the communist stance, notably in her first concerned (or plainly serious) photojournalistic piece on impoverished Northern England, shot during a trip in August 1935, which combined a pilgrimage to this other birthland of photography with a family visit.

Her cherished brother Hans had emigrated to England in the summer of 1934 to start a life of commercial activities with his family, after having received his *Dr. rerum politicarum* in Sociology in Switzerland. Their parents, Clara and Julius Freund, would not join them and their three grandchildren in London until February 1939. In March 1941, the beloved Julius Freund was to die in British exile from politically aggravated yet natural causes: his hospitalization for traumatic stress, following the air raids in London, ended with a fatal heart attack.

To the turbulent time that Freund experienced as a student, before the outbreak of the Second World War, we likewise owe her contribution to the *Braunbuch über Reichstagbrand und Hitlerterror* (*Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror)*, published in France, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States in 1933. With a cover designed by John Heartfield, this book attacking the fascist regime effectively wielded photography as weapon of class struggle. [2] Freund's published picture of police brutality depicting the wounded body of a student appeared uncredited, in the collective spirit that, at the time, was common and essential to an ethic of the shared image.

Freund's departure from Nazi Germany opened her first book of memoirs, *Le monde et ma caméra* (1970): Picture Gisèle traveling by train from Frankfurt to Paris on the last day of May 1933, smuggling out photographic film capturing images of Nazi power, and a SS officer approaching to inspect her papers. He proceeds to inquire about the purpose of her travel. She refers to research required to finish her doctoral studies. Zigzag stares between passport and passenger announce the dreadful, "Are you Jewish?" The answer comes in the shape of an unheard-of question, "Have you ever seen a Jewess named Gisela?" Freund's rhetorical talent comes into play, it works its magic; she makes it safely to Paris. The scene stages Freund's identity spiel. Gisèle recast her life narrative by starting her two autobiographical writings with tailored beginnings. Each beginning, retrospectively, encapsulated aesthetic sensibility on the one hand, and the social and crudely political on the other.

Vital Networks

Once relocated in Paris, Gisèle first sought to hone what were now vital skills, namely, to master the French language, finish her PhD, and get by as a novice photographer. In July 1932, she was detained for partaking (while merely photographing) in a demonstration of the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire, a trade union, which earned her the reputation of being a communist and, later, trouble with the French authorities, even though she was promptly released. In the summer of 1934, she scored a great gig with the help of German philosopher Walter Benjamin, Freund's fellow exile, intellectual interlocutor, and friend. Benjamin introduced young Freund to Pontigny Abbey, where the celebrated *Décades*—seminars which gathered international writers and intellectuals—took place each summer under the aegis of Professor Paul Desjardins. She would repeat the experience, and attend the "Foyer international d'étude et de repos à Pontigny" regularly until 1939. Freund photographed the abbey premises and seminar participants, as well as director Desjardins himself. With his endorsement, Gisela offered her snapshots for purchase to visitors as mementoes of Pontigny, first in black and white. It was at Pontigny that Freund took off as the writers' portraitist that she would later become. It was there, during the month of May 1938, that Freund photographed Benjamin, now in color, holding a yellow flower in his hand.

Pontigny was a turning point. It was a networking hub for connections that would prove very dear in time; it was an experience thanks to which Freund would find not only a career but also a home, even an adopted family. Paul Desjardins offered to adopt Gisela in a letter of recommendation addressed to the French authorities when Freund's French residency permit expired in November 1935. Pontigny also pointed to the transnational mentoring triad that made up the *dramatis personae* of the story in which Freund was the protagonist. Three friends from each of Freund's three homes—Germany, France, and Argentina—were to be key for worlds both practical and theoretical. These were Walter Benjamin, Adrienne Monnier, and Victoria Ocampo.

Freund had the leading cultural agents in Paris and Buenos Aires as mentors: Adrienne Monnier, the legendary French publisher of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Victoria Ocampo, the founding director of *Sur*, the most important literary magazine in Spanish America. As *agents de liaison*, Ocampo and Monnier opened the necessary doors, albeit to different universes across the Atlantic. Their friendship and literary judgment are part and parcel of Freund's oeuvre. It was thanks to their networks that Freund's portrait portfolio came to include canonical literary and intellectual figures across the Atlantic. To Ocampo in particular, Freund owed no less than her very existence.



Victoria Ocampo, with Adrienne Monnier, at the *Maison des Amis des Livres*, Paris, at the event held in her honor with projection of color photos of Patagonia on 7 October 1946

Source: Secrétariat d'Etat à la Présidence du Conseil et à l'Information - Services d'information à l'étranger - Services photographiques, Archives Nationales de France, Commissariat à l'Information et Services de l'Information, F/41/457 Idem. 1946 II.

Freund met Monnier in March 1935 in Paris at the renowned bookstore, *La Maison des Amis des Livres,* which Monnier had founded back in 1915. It was also *chez Adrienne* in 1939 that Gisèle met Victoria Ocampo, who was then less known for her writings than for her beauty, breeding, brains, and immense family fortune. Along with Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Company,* Monnier's *Maison* was the Mecca of the intelligentsia in Paris throughout the 1920s and 1930s—a bookstore, a lending library, a publishing house, a space for art exhibitions or *séances*. These two facing bookstore-libraries on the rue de l'Odéon fermented the literary scene, served as meeting points for the Anglo- and Francophone public, and delivered James Joyce's *Ulysses* in English and in its French translation, respectively. Monnier opened doors for Gisèle, eventually even those of her own apartment. Their Boston marriage lasted until 1940. It was also thanks to Monnier that Freund's paperwork was eventually arranged in June 1936, through a

mariage blanc with Pierre Blum, an acquaintance of Adrienne's. Months later, the then officially re-named Gisèle Blum obtained French nationality. She often used the initials GF, circumventing the issue of choosing between Gisela and Gisèle.

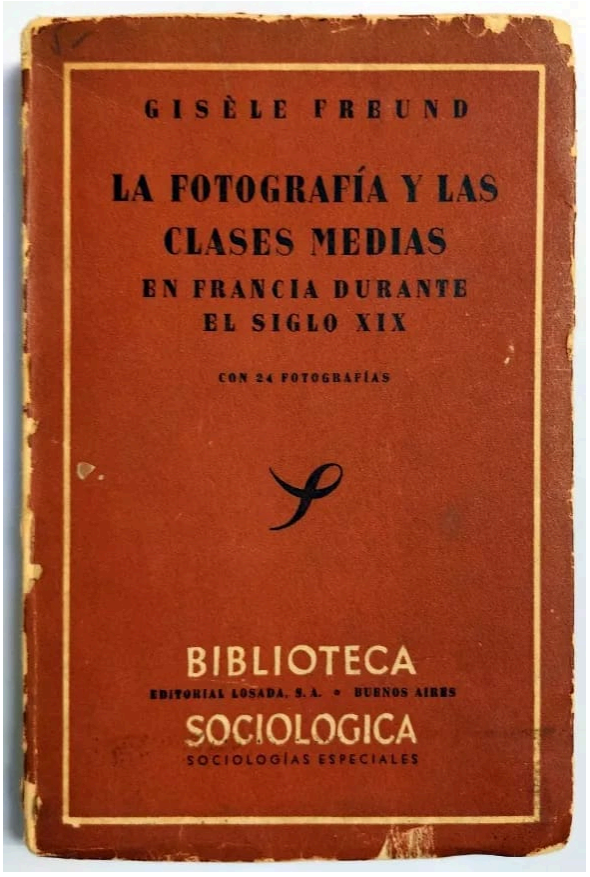
A Doctor for Modern Color

Nineteen thirty-five was a year to remember. In April, Freund made the portrait of the writer André Malraux, commissioned by his publisher Gallimard to illustrate the second edition of *La Condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*, first published in 1933). Freund produced her striking series of a windswept Malraux, drawing on a cigarette, a trench coat hanging over his shoulders. In June, she documented with her Leica the International Writers' Congress for the Defense of Culture. The event was an anti-fascist initiative pivoting around the relationship between literature and politics, which Malraux, together with fellow conveners, comrades Louis Aragon and Jean-Richard Bloch, had summoned. Also in June, Freund submitted her dissertation to the Paris-Sorbonne University. Her thesis focused on the evolution of photographic portraiture in France, in contrast to earlier drafts, written in German, sketching a general history of photography as a mirror of society.

Monnier's Maison des Amis des Livres published *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle. Essai de sociologie et d'esthétique* in 1936. The publication sanctified the precious *Docteur ès lettres* title that Freund had obtained *sine laude*. Her dissertation defense at the Sorbonne was attended, and her book then reviewed, by Walter Benjamin, whose presence in this text has been mostly overlooked, as have Freund's other mentors. Credit for her study, which inaugurated the socio-critical discourse of photography jointly with Benjamin's essay "*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*" (1931), should not be attributed solely to Freund's efforts.

Freund's pioneering dissertation looks at the history of portraiture with a clear objective: To make the case that the rise of photography happened in sync with the rise of the bourgeoisie, through the "democratization" or expansion of the portrait through photographic reproduction. From ivory miniatures to silhouettes, through the *physionotrace* to the modern *photomaton*, the portrait's evolution in France follows an arc of simplification. Portraiture's progressive "mechanization" is linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie. Formerly an elite art practice, portraiture by photographic reproduction comes to satisfy the rising class's desire for self-representation. Sociological conditions—economic dependence and the public's taste—shape the technique's development, following a rather mechanical or commonplace materialism. The ensuing democratization amounts to an eventual decline in the artistic quality of photographic portraits. The early, faithful rendering of individuals, a conjunction grounded in the ties of strict friendship between photo-portraitist and sitters, comes to be sacrificed through the standardized posed shots and retouched prints that commercialization entailed. For Freund, this process accounts for both the flourishing of photography and its decline or decadence.

In 1974, Freund rewrote and significantly expanded her book into what remains a work of reference to this day, *Photographie et société*. Beaumont Newhall, Walter Benjamin, Louis Aragon, and Siegfried Kracauer relied on the original 1936 version. The 1974 edition would be cited by the likes of Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu. Between 1946 and 2011, Freund's book appeared in forty-two editions and eight languages. Of the many to come, the first edition rekindling interest in Freund's dissertation was the Spanish translation, propelled by Victoria Ocampo, which was published in Buenos Aires, Gisèle's second home in exile, on 4 October 1946, under a revised title: *La fotografía y las clases medias en Francia durante el siglo XIX*.

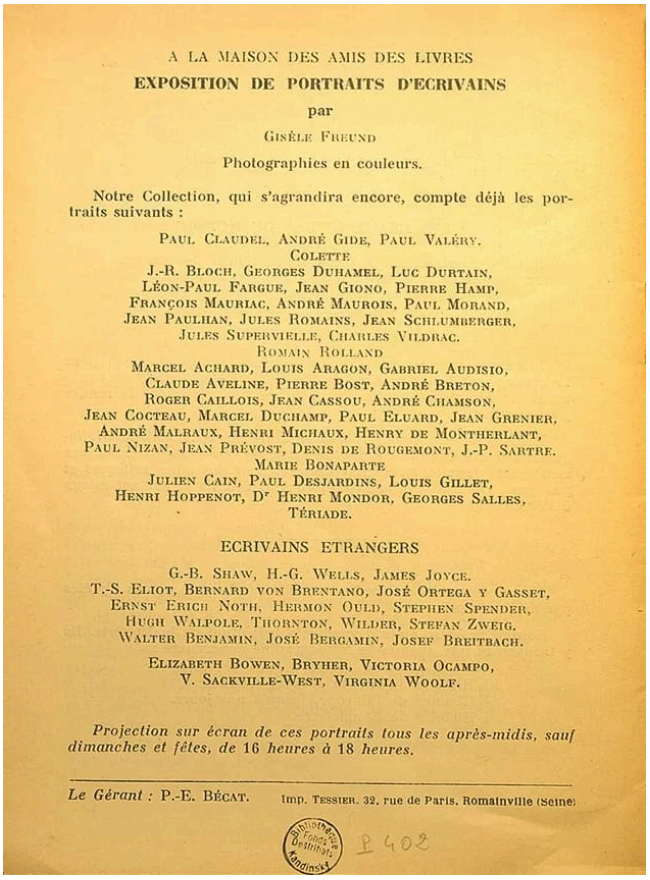


Front cover of *La fotografía y las clases medias,* Buenos Aires, Biblioteca sociológica, Editorial Losada, 1946

Source: Private Collection

It is no exaggeration to affirm that Freund went on rewriting her doctoral study throughout her entire life, across various writings and interviews. She repeated her thesis' tenets and even some of the lines verbatim. Freund also rewrote *La Photographie en France* across the two previously mentioned autobiographical hybrids. Here and elsewhere, she envisioned herself as a photographer with two facets. The disinterested photo-portraitist was at odds with the professional photo-reporter. The double economy of portraitist and photo reporter that Freund described in her memoirs was really rooted in the condemnation of manual retouching and posed shots. Yet her writers' portraits did include paid commissions as well as concessions similar to those she condemned in her writings. All of photography's invoked myths failed in practice.

As early as 1938, Freund started photographing in color with the newly commercially available 35-millemeter color film. In time, Gisèle would compose an impressive portfolio of portraits of twentieth-century writers and artists—comparable only to the feat of Nadar, her protean nineteenth-century model, who featured Baudelaire, Georges Sand, and Courbet in a catalogue of "all the leading lights of the age." André Gide, Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel, Jules Romains, André Malraux, Jean Cocteau, André Breton, Jean-Paul Sartre, Colette, José Ortega y Gasset, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, Stephan Zweig, Marguerite Yourcenar, Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Vladimir Nabokov, Boris Pasternak, Iris Murdoch, Herman Hesse, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Neruda, Silvina Ocampo, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Huidobro, Cândido Portinari, Nicolás Guillén, and Alfonso Reyes are some of the portrayed in an impressive list of personalities—mostly literary, predominantly French—from Europe and the Americas.



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FRANÇOIS MAURIAC, ANDRÉ MAUROIS, PAUL MORAND,
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ANDRÉ MALRAUX, HENRI MICHAUX, HENRY DE MONTHERLANT,
PAUL NIZAN, JEAN PRÉVOST, DENIS DE ROUGEMONT, J.-P. SARTRE.
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T.-S. ELIOT, BERNARD VON BRENTANO, JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET,
ERNST ERICH NOTH, HERMON OULD, STEPHEN SPENDER,
HUGH WALPOLE, THORNTON, WILDER, STEFAN ZWEIG.
WALTER BENJAMIN, JOSÉ BERGAMIN, JOSEF BREITBACH.

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Bibliothèque Kandinsky Centre Pompidou
P 402

Advertisement for the permanent exhibition of Freund's portraits of writers at *La Maison des Amis des Livres* in *La Gazette des Amis des Livres*, dir. by Adrienne Monnier, January 1940

Source: Fonds Destribats, Kandinsky Library, Pompidou Center, Paris

The early color film that Freund starting using in Paris, first Agfa, then Kodachrome, to portray her intellectual stars was slide film. This means that it had to be projected in order to be viewed. Given that no color photographic paper was available at this point, printing on paper was only possible using the complex carbro (as in "carbon-bromide") technique, and of course, the onerous photogravure process for press reproductions, particularly for magazine covers or special features. Freund pulled off a major coup when her Joyce portrait was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on 8 May 1939. It may have been on the pages of the *Life* magazine issue featuring Freund's own black-and-white photoreportage on England ("Depressed Areas of Northern England" published on 14 December 1936, just the fourth issue of *Life*) that Freund first saw and loved color photographs.



Kodak Planox Projector used by Freund and Monnier (reconstruction of portrait projection)

Source: Installation shot of Gisèle Freund: Exposición-Espectáculo, Museo Sívori, Buenos Aires, 2019

Slide shows remained Freund's favored form of staging her color transparencies of intellectuals throughout her life. She developed slide-show talks to liven up the technical necessity of projecting her slides. The performative presentation of her color portraits became an enduring way of making a living: the slide-show lecture. This hybrid practice—in the long run, an art form—started in Buenos Aires, where Freund lived between 1941 and 1950, residing there beyond her wartime exile. Gisèle wanted her traveling show to deliver entertainment with a tint of cultural propaganda to audiences yearning for the popularization of culture the world over.

Going Global in 1939

The emergence of slide talks for Gisèle was directly linked to the unparalleled lecture scene that enlivened Buenos Aires in the opening decades of the twentieth century and, more specifically, to her mentor Victoria Ocampo. It was Victoria, upon their acquaintance in 1939, who informed how Freund's series was presented, introduced her to new sitters, and promoted Gisèle's sojourn in Argentina. Freund's portfolio gained breadth beyond Paris and Gisèle herself a new breath of life. New additions such as Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, and Virginia Woolf came to enrich Freund's pantheon thanks to Victoria. Of greater importance is the fact that Ocampo was the first to enliven with her artful rhetoric the projection of Gisèle's photos.



Victoria Ocampo giving a lecture at *Asociación Amigos del Arte*, Buenos Aires, 1927

Source: Collection Fundación Sur, Villa Ocampo, Buenos Aires

A commented projection was the form Freund's transatlantic debut took in Buenos Aires on 1 September 1939, yet with Gisèle *in absentia*. On the day World War Two broke out, with Victoria's words accompanying the portraits on screen, Gisèle's work became global in its own right. Ocampo's illustrated talk on "Writers' Faces" took place in the framework of the intense and extended practice of *conferencias* in Buenos Aires. Victoria was a distinguished performer as well as producer in the intellectual theater of lectures and talks. In October 1940, Ocampo reprised "Writers' Faces" with Gisèle's color slides in Tucumán, introducing color film in this remote region of Northern Argentina.

In Buenos Aires, Gisèle found a scenario to elaborate her own intellectual theater as well as strengthen her French identity. Her illustrated talks offered the attraction of literary celebrities mixed with French cultural proselytism, elevated to the monumental power of projection. Word and image blended with the body for these performances that Freund practiced regularly until at least 1990, often in cultural venues such as the French Institute or Alliance Française. On these occasions, Gisèle acted as cultural ambassador for France. These slide-show lectures channeled the marriage of words and images that Freund mastered, as both photo-historian and photo-reporter.

Following the discursive innovation introduced by Ocampo in 1939, Freund incorporated a guiding text for her slide shows. There was no commentary for the public slide show debut of Gisèle's portraits in Monnier's *Maison* on 5 March 1939, nor for the reprise that took place in London at the Guggenheim Jeune gallery's farewell party on 26 June 1939.

Another highlight of 1939 was Gisele's extended stay in Britain, from June to October, which included a portrait tour alongside the visit to her family, now reunited. In the summer of 1939, Freund photographed British writers, with the help of Ocampo, who introduced her to Vita Sackville-West and even acted as a Trojan horse in the case of Virginia Woolf, whose diary annotation accused them of having gatecrashed. [3] These portraits contributed to the constant enlargement of her portfolio. Yet the repertoire of personalities for which Freund became famous started with an inanimate rehearsal. Freund's first color photo in 1938 captured not a famous writer, but a hairdresser's window display. [4] The orchestration of commodities captured by Freund was a form of spectacle in tune with the spectacular mode of presentation of her transparencies, which combined artistic and commercial aspirations.

Freund returned and remained in wartime Paris as late as 7 June 1940. Like many others, she left Paris for unoccupied Southern France. Roughly a year later, thanks to Ocampo's doings, Freund was lucky to sail away from Marseille, furnished with a new French passport, probably on board the *Mendoza*. She disembarked at the port of Buenos Aires on 16 July 1941. Under the wing of the influential Ocampo, she explored her new surroundings and led a life of comfort marked by personal and professional developments. Formal innovations for her slide shows—namely, a guiding text and the new genre of landscape photography—took shape next to the consolidation of her French identity among the Francophone elite and multiplying émigrés in Buenos Aires.

The Argentine Transformation

Gisèle enjoyed good years from 1941 to 1946 and long spells, in 1947 and 1949 -1950, based in Buenos Aires. This cosmopolis of the margins offered Gisèle a rich cultural scene, social exchanges, even romance, and employment opportunities; it also opened the door to Latin America. In September 1941, Gisèle met Élisabeth Prévost, then on tour with the French theater company of Louis Jouvet, who became her partner for years to come.

In tandem with Victoria (later on with Élisabeth), Gisèle took trips around Argentina and started photographing landscapes; in July 1941, the coastal city of Mar del Plata and the estancias of Buenos Aires' pampas; in August and, again, in November, the Patagonian lake district around Nahuel Huapi—all color shots originally intended as homeland propaganda and to fortify the new slide-talk format. In the meantime, Gisèle continued taking photo-portraits of writers, who often overlapped with the upper echelons of society that she also portrayed, always for queenly sums. In early December, Freund made a trip to nearby Montevideo with the idea (unrealized) of holding a slide show of her European writers' portraits and her latest Argentine color shots, landscapes as well as intellectuals, with the help of her diplomatic hosts, Helène and Henri Hoppenot, then French Ambassador to Uruguay. On different occasions, especially during 1944-1945, Freund was to return to neighboring Uruguay and also to Chile, where she photographed poets Jules Supervielle, Rafael Alberti, María Teresa Léon, Vicente Huidobro, and Pablo Neruda.



IMAGENES EN COLORES

por Zulma Núñez

Zulma Núñez, "Imágenes en colores," *Atlántida*, January 1943, pp. 38-39

Source: Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Argentina

The extended *Sur* journal group came under Freund's lens, composed of Argentine writers like Adolfo Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Eduardo Mallea, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, María Rosa Oliver, artists like Noemí Saslavsky de Gramajo or Norah Borges (Jorge Luis' sister), foreign visitors like Swiss writer Denis de Rougemont, US novelist and critic Waldo Frank and film producer Walt Disney, and international *Porteño* residents such as writers Pedro Henríquez Ureña (Dominican Republic) and Roger Caillois (France), artist Toño Salazar (Salvador), and even Mrs. Armour, née Princess Myra Sergeievna Kudashev, who, after ceasing to be the Imperial Duchess of Russia, became the wife of US Ambassador Norman Armour. Most of them were included in the slide-show featuring existing European and all-new Argentine portraits, along with landscapes, that launched Freund's exhibition at the *Asociación Amigos del Arte* on its opening day on September 2, 1942, with comments by Ocampo. Also included were her photos of the Humahuaca gorge in Jujuy, a series which attests to her close collaboration with Ocampo and the (unrealized) photo-book project depicting Argentina that Ocampo entertained.

A Photo-Reporter in Latin America

Years later, in December 1955, a "picture story" of this trip to Northeastern Argentina was published in black and white, with one color as the cover, in the French travel magazine *Marco Polo*. "On the Inca Trail" ("Sur la piste des Inca") expressed Gisele's extractivist view of the landscape and a vision of the local indigenous population as scattered paupers ("une population misérable et clairsemée"), unable to exploit the richness of this otherwise "empty country" ("pays vide"). The text was, however, kinder than her (unpublished) travel diary bemoaning the South American aborigines' "lack of culture" ("keinerlei

Kultur"). [5] Such was the overall tone, with minor variations, of the ethnographic reportages that Freund published on her earlier travels to Tierra del Fuego (1943), Ecuador (1950), and the Chamulas in Mexico (1952).



LES Lamas, animaux domestiques des Inca, hantent toujours la région. A cause de leur laine, la plus fine du monde, ils constituent encore la meilleure ressource d'une population pauvre disséminée dans les villages des Hauts-Plateaux.

La terre est ingrate et aride. Mais les montagnes colorées recèlent d'énormes richesses minières : le fer, l'étain, l'or.

C'est un trésor encore inexploité : une des réserves mondiales de minerai. Les hommes manquent pour mettre en valeur toutes ces richesses.

Des cactus, comme des doigts gigantesques s'élèvent sur les pentes pierreuses, dans un pays vide.

Photos Gisèle Freund.

Gisèle Freund, "Sur la piste des Inca," *Marco Polo*, December 1955 (unpaginated)

Source: Private Collection

In her own life narrative, Freund envisioned her two-fold career as photo-portraitist and photo-reporter through a pecuniary divide. The equation conveniently divided her European and Latin American experiences. "I did hundreds of portraits for my own pleasure and many reportages to make a living," Freund repeated in *Mémoires de l'oeil*. [6] Photo-reporting was a viable activity for Gisèle to honor her passion for photo-portraits while avoiding making concessions on her choice of sitters, viz., photographing high society, or yielding to embellishing prints with retouching. Yet the exhibition in Buenos Aires, overall, Freund's Latin American experience, disproved the story retold.



Giselle (G. Freund), "Waldo Franck en Buenos Aires," *El Hogar*, 19 June 1942

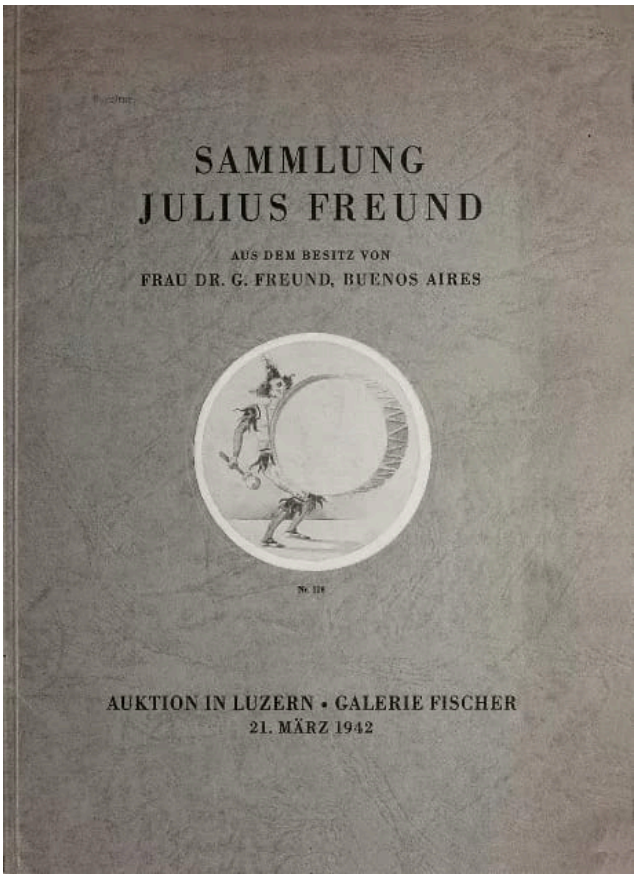
Source: Private Collection

Back from Humahuaca, Freund photographed a welcome banquet given at the *Asociación Argentina de Escritores* in honor of the Jewish-American, socialist writer Waldo Frank, who was on an extended lecture tour across Latin America. "Giselle"—as she signed the publication "Waldo Franck (sic) en Buenos Aires" in *El Hogar*—portrayed Frank as a celebrity, with candid shots of the Argentine *haut monde* guests, without including any reference to his anti-fascist talks, which resulted in Frank eventually being declared *persona non grata* by the nationalist Argentine government, or even his ensuing assault by a group of fascists.

Freund was or, rather, could have been witness to historic socio-political change in Argentina. The crowds that Freund targeted were not the working-class people who rose up in Buenos Aires on 17 October 1945, and marked the official birth of the Peronist movement. Nor do we have any trace of the historic moment when female suffrage was established in Argentina in 1947, and also found Freund in Buenos Aires. It was rather the denunciation contained in Freund's early photojournalism from 1934-35 that appeared exceptional in her repertoire, not the lifestyle photojournalism of the 1940s and 1950s. Freund's stance appeared banal or conservative, far from that of the traditionally described figure of the "concerned photographer."

While "the Argentine perspective," or lack thereof, was revealing, Freund's view on women was plain reactionary. Her features with female protagonists offered a gender-normative catalogue of the most traditional roles for women. We find women as seamstresses, actresses, or witches, as wives baking in Patagonia and Paris or fostering the adoration of art in Mexico. In 1954, in the specialized pages of *Camera* (Lucerne), Freund spelled out her view regarding women in photography:

> *Photography is an expressive art, particularly suitable for the female mentality. Women are excellent observers, and in photography this quality is required above all others. Sensitivity, intuition, and a recreative, rather than a creative power, are typically feminine qualities, and artistically speaking the most important gifts for photographer. I think that is one of the reasons why so many women choose photography as a profession. A woman takes interest in the essential character of objects; she is easily swept away by the intensity of her feelings; she reveals her experiences through pictures, often subjective, but therefore full of reality.* [9]



Galerie Fischer (Lucerne), Auction catalogue, 21 March 1942. *Sammlung Julius Freund: aus dem Besitz von Frau Dr. G. Freund, Buenos Aires...* [*The Collection of Julius Freund, from the property of Dr. G. Freund, Buenos Aires* ...]

Source: Kunstbibliothek, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin

On 21 March 1942, the political neutrality of Switzerland and Argentina, seats of the Julius Freund art collection and its lawful owner, respectively, made it possible for the "collection of Julius Freund owned by Dr. G. Freund, Buenos Aires" to come up for auction in Lucerne, and for Gisèle to receive the proceeds of 198,860.50 Swiss francs in her account at Bank of London South America Ltd Buenos Aires by May. With these monies Freund bought a three-story apartment building on a central yet quiet street that initiated her life as a rentier. In July, Freund flew to Rio de Janeiro when Prévost, on tour, had a car accident. Gisèle feared for her partner's already delicate health following accusations of being a Vichy agent—a stigma attached to Jouvet's company, made even worse by Prévost's recent decorations for her actions on the front with the Red Cross. After Prévost's dismissal from the company, they returned to settle in the top apartment of Gisèle's new property, and planned their trip together to southernmost Patagonia to last

from January to April, 1943. Her epic picture story on Tierra del Fuego appeared in *La Nación* in September 1943 (with later reiterations, sometimes not penned by her, in *Picture Post* in 1946 or *Geographical* in 1949). Her illustrated talk on the voyage in tandem with an amateur 16mm short film in color (then wisely discarded in the commented projection set-up) became the attractions for an evening at the Instituto Francés de Estudios Superiores later in November.



Freund's property on 436 Tres Sargentos Street, Buenos Aires, in 2021

Source: © Clara Masnatta

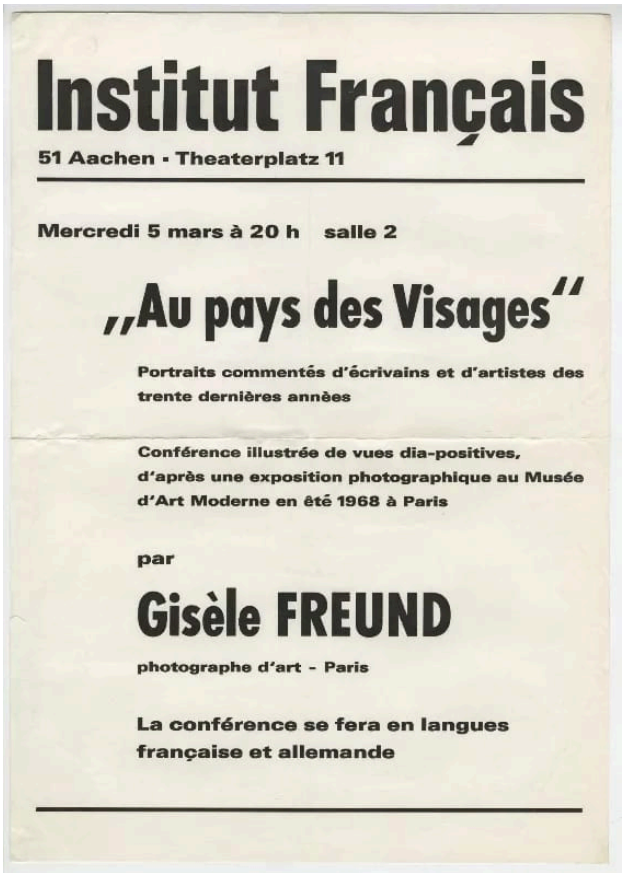
Living in Francophile circles in peripheric Argentina got Freund strong French bona fides. She worked in Patagonia as an assistant for the Franco-Chilean production *Le Moulin des Andes* ("The Windmill of the Andes," 1943), directed by Jacques Rémy, which Prévost instigated. In Buenos Aires, Freund helped to bring out the book *France* upon the country's liberation in 1945, a hymn to the French nation by the ad hoc publisher *Ediciones Victoria* located in Freund's house. She also participated in the catalogue for an auction to benefit writers in Paris, held on 25 April 1946, organized by the humanitarian *Comité de solidaridad con los escritores franceses*, led by Ocampo, for which Gisèle acted as secretary. The enterprise furnished around three hundred writers in Paris with three tons of victuals, clothing, and other necessities in the aftermath of WWII, all duly distributed by Monnier.

This, along with the translation of Freund's *La Photographie en France* in Spanish (1946), and of course, the illustrated talks on French writers that she had given in Chile and Argentina, gave the naturalized Freund solid French cultural credentials when she returned to Paris in the summer of 1946.

Cultural Diplomacy

In January 1947, having held the obsequies for her mother in the UK and procured her divorce papers in Paris, Freund returned to Buenos Aires. She obtained a minor post as "ambassadeur volontaire" which paid her travel expenses plus a modest honorarium within the *Association française d'action artistique* (AFAA), an international relations organization created after the First World War for the purpose of promoting French culture overseas. The diplomatic path for Gisèle's activities was also legitimized by an exhibition at the newly created *Maison de l'Amérique Latine* in Paris, which included Freund's photographs of Argentine landscapes among the local artworks and crafts on display. While Freund failed to mount a similar exhibition of French arts and crafts in Buenos Aires, the beaming pantheon in her slide talks on French writers was her most enduring contribution to French cultural action.

First held at cultural venues across Latin America (in Lima and Quito in 1947, then in Mexico City in 1948), Freund's propaganda slide talks on "Les Grands Écrivains de Notre Temps" ("The Great Writers of Our Time") traveled extensively in the mid-1960s around France, sponsored by the Alliance Française, and, later, in different French Institutes across Germany, Italy or Sweden. Freund's presentations were her ticket for new travels and a source of income. She held them frequently, and adapted variations according to contexts. Their structure remained quasi-unchanged, even when these presentations became the material for academic conferences and included retrofitted monochrome pictures. Variations concerned mainly the protagonists.



Poster for Freund's slide talk "Au Pays des Visages" at Institut Français of Aachen, Germany, 5 March 1969

Source: Fonds Gisèle Freund/IMEC/Fonds MCC

By 1968, Gisèle had turned her slide performances into an art form. The first major exhibition of her work at the Museum of Modern Art of Paris, *Au pays des Visages. Trente ans d'art et de littérature vus à travers de la caméra de Gisèle Freund* ("In the Land of Faces. Thirty Years of Art and Literature Seen through the Camera of Gisèle Freund"), looked back on thirty years of portraiture with a central audio-visual component, accordingly subtitled "exposition-spectacle." The retrospective traveled to dozens of municipal museums in France between 1968 and 1975.

To postwar Latin America, Gisèle equally owed her engagement with the Parisian Musée de l'Homme. A mission for gathering "photographic documents in color" gave rise to her photobook *Mexique Précolombien* (1954), featuring black and white pictures that were previously on display in the 1952 Mexican art exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne. [7] Following her debut trip in October 1947, Freund settled in Mexico in 1950, and remained there until 1952. There she met American journalist Verna B. Carleton de Millán, her partner in pursuits—they co-authored the book *James Joyce in Paris. His Final Years* (1965)—and in life, until death separated them in 1968.

Eva Perón, Magnum Photo and other Myths



"Eva Perón Intime" [Intimate Eva Perón]. Text and photos by G. Freund, *Point de Vue, Images du monde*, 31 August 1950, pp. 9-12

Source: Private Collection

Before the Mexico interlude, Freund closed her Buenos Aires chapter. In June 1950, she put her house on the market and completed a photo reportage on Evita Perón. Her so-called "intimate portrait of Eva Perón" was a picture story produced out of her own daring, as Freund did habitually, for sale. Yet this title hyping intimacy was perhaps Freund's last noteworthy journalistic endeavor, mostly due to the defamatory story subsequently fabricated for a *succès de scandale*. Gisèle's essay on Eva first appeared in *Point de vue, Images du monde*, on 31 August 1950, then in *Sie und Er*, and was later re-sold, without Freund's text, to *Life*, thanks to Maria Eisner at Magnum Paris, and to *Novedades*. [8] It is false that Freund's images portraying Eva with her luxurious apparel produced a censorship attempt on behalf of the Argentine government or a diplomatic incident between the latter and Washington. *Life* magazine was banned, but only in March 1952 in relation to an Argentine media conflict unconnected to the First Lady. Neither was the Eva story commissioned by *Life* magazine, nor did it eventually precipitate Gisèle's departure from Magnum in 1954, since she was associated only as a contributor (not a member) since 1947. These are Freund's own claims to make the news, an incohesive story formulated years later as part of her subsequent career retelling, fostering her reputation through her association with *Life*, Magnum,

and scandal. The photos were taken in accord with the public image of Evita as the rags-to-riches model for the nation. The publication was equally unrelated to the revocation of Freund's US Visa, which occurred on 23 October 1950, amid the revision of Freund's communist past in the rise of McCarthyism—which induced Freund to prolong her ongoing stay in Mexico.

Restaging and Retelling

Freund moved back to Paris for good in 1952, and found a new home for herself on the rue Lalande in 1953. While continuing the construction of her portrait pantheon, having completed one new photo-reportage on Paris' fortune-tellers, this return was chiefly about retelling, rewriting, and restaging for Freund. With the publication of books—photographic and autobiographical books, and her magnum opus *Photography and Society*—next to the production of exhibitions, and, of course, the slide shows on writers, the 1960s and 1970s represented the codification of Freund's career. The decline of weekly illustrated magazines with the advent of television required such alternative activities for photojournalists overall. In 1970, Gisèle's photographs were hung or cast as far as Tel Aviv or Tokyo, often with diplomatic support. Freund practically stopped photographing in the 1970s—with the notable exception of taking the official portrait of French President François Mitterrand in 1981.

Freund's work was also consecrated in her native Germany with an exhibition at Bonn's Rheinisches Land Museum in 1977, a participation in Kassel's Documenta 6, and, later, another retrospective in Berlin's Werkbund-Archiv in 1988. Across these curated retrospectives, Freund retained control over the narrative, as she did later in a French TV film. In 1978, honors started to multiply: She obtained the Kulturpreis of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Photographie and was subsequently decorated in France as Officier des Arts et Lettres (1982), Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur (1983), Officier du Mérite (1987), and Officier de la Légion d'honneur (1991). In 1987, Freund was appointed a Getty Scholar at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, USA, to write the sequel to her study on photography in the age of computers. Freund did not undertake the task but took advantage of the fellowship to be close to her last love, Natalia Danesi Murray, as well as to visit her family in Canada, who had emigrated to Quebec in 1955.



Gisèle Freund in her home on Rue Lalande, Paris, 1988

Source: Private Collection

Returns

In 1991, France's National Museum of Modern Art honored Freund with a retrospective—a first for any living woman photographer—at the Centre Pompidou. The elderly Freund, already suffering from dementia, was the subject of an interview book, and then was the protagonist of three smaller exhibitions across Germany during the 1990s, where she also held her last slide talk, on James Joyce. Her health condition tragically translated into fraud concerning her estate. These vicissitudes are recounted at the Pompidou's Kandinsky Library. Gisèle's posthumous return in exhibition form to her homes in Berlin and Buenos Aires was likewise eclipsed by irregularities, recorded in the files of Nicolai Verlag and the Ministry of Culture, respectively. Gisèle Freund passed away robbed of her faculties by Alzheimer's disease and without the company of the friends who had made her who she was, as this biography has endeavored to show. She lies buried in Montparnasse cemetery, not far from where she died on 31 March 2000.

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NOTES

1. Hill Gilland, "Mangels guter Geschäfte: Szenen an der Pariser Börse die früher undenkbar waren" (Ph: Norbert [GF]), *Kölnischer Illustrierte Zeitung*, 16 Jan. 16, 1931, 605.
2. *Braunbuch über Reichstagbrand und Hitlerterror*, ed. Willi Münzberger (Éditions du Carrefour: Paris, 1933). The English edition was published in Great Britain in September 1933 (with a foreword by Dudley Leigh Aman, Baron of Marley) and does not contain Freund's picture of a student victim of police brutality, incorrectly labeled in the German version as "worker" ("misshandelte Arbeiter").
3. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 5 1936-41*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Penguin Books, 1985): 220.
4. "My first three images in color were: a light signal, a Byrrh poster, and the shop window of a hair salon," Freund declared in *Au pays des visages, trente ans d'art et de littérature à travers la caméra de Gisèle Freund: exposition-spectacle du 9 avril au 5 mai 1968*, (Paris: Musée d'art moderne, 1968), unpaginated.
5. Gisèle Freund, "Sur la piste des Inca," *Marco Polo*, Dec. 1955, n. p. "Voyage en Argentine," Unpublished typoscript, Fonds Freund, IMEC.
6. "j'ai réalisé des centaines de portraits pour mon plaisir et nombreux reportages pour gagner ma vie," Gisèle Freund, *Mémoires de l'œil* (Paris : Seuil, 1977), 19.
7. *Art Mexicain du Précolombien à nos jours* [Mexican Art from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present Day] was presented at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, May-July, 1952; then staged in Stockholm and London's Tate Gallery between 1952 and 1953. The exhibition travelled to eleven European countries under various names, and returned to Paris a decade later. It was financed by the Mexican Government in cooperation with the French, also part of the cultural exchange program of AFAA.
8. The varying publications are as follows: "Eva Perón Intime," *Point de vue, Images du monde*, 31 August 1950; "Eva Peron vor dem Toilettenspiegel," *Sie und Er*, 5 September 1950; "Eva Perón. A First Look at the Private Life of a Controversial First Lady," *Life*, 11 December 1950; "La vida privada de Evita Perón," *Jueves de Excélsior*, 25 January 1951; "Evita und der Tod," *Münchner Illustrierte*, 20 October 1951.
9. I am referring to Freund's articles "Arrayán tea cabin," *El Hogar*, 10 April 1942, 35- 36; "Housekeeping: French Style", *Weekend Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 50, 1954, pp. 8-9; "Cómo ejercen las mujeres mexicanas su culto por el arte," *El Hogar*, 5 May 1950, 40- 41; "Ginette makes her mark in Paris," *Weekend Magazine*, 4 Nov. 1961; "Les femmes photographes/ Photographinnen/ Women as Photographers," *Camera*, May 1954, 227-229.