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Cover Story-Fred Stein's Photo Odyssey: Eyewitnessing Photographs from Nazism to Mid-Century New York

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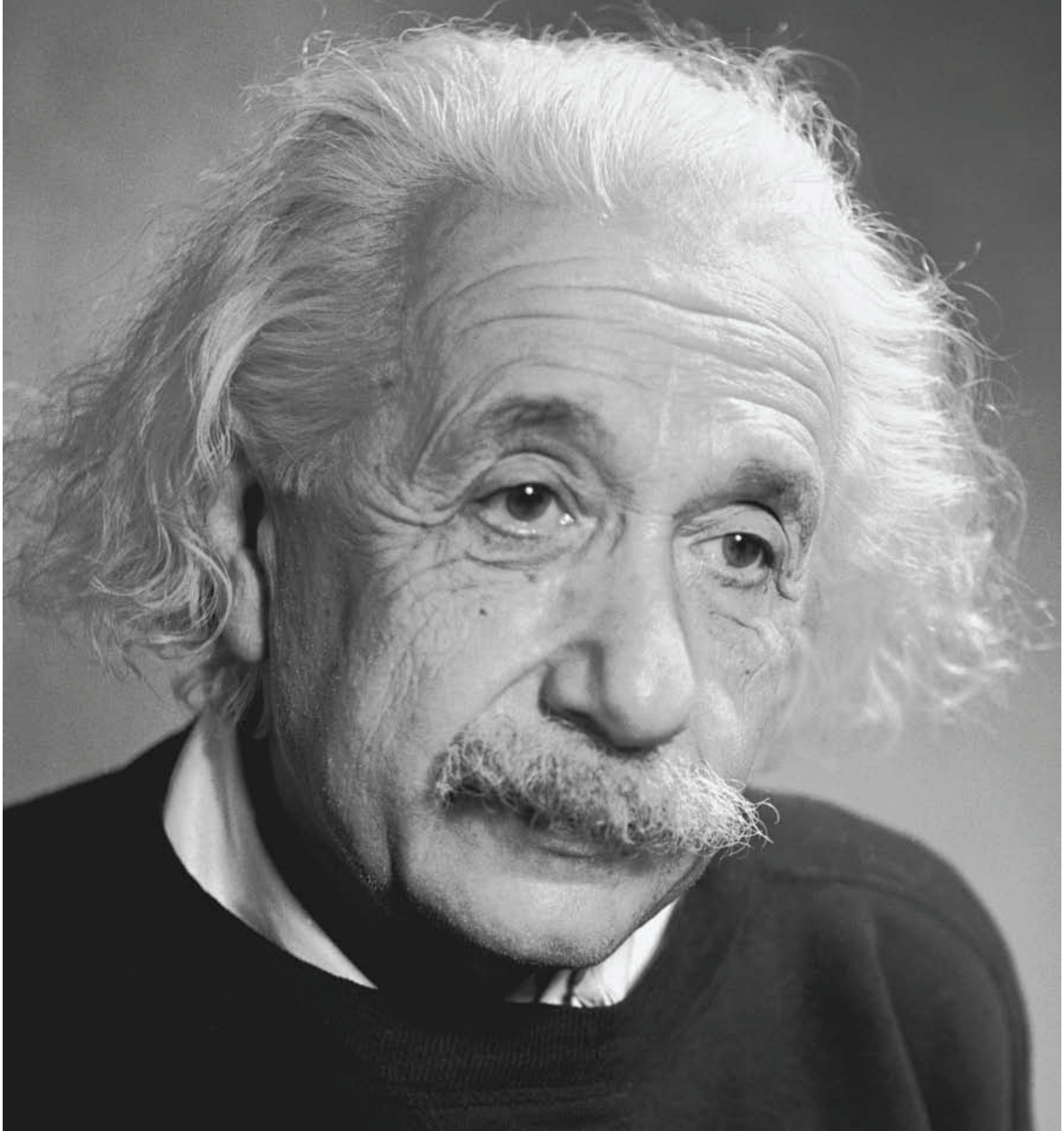
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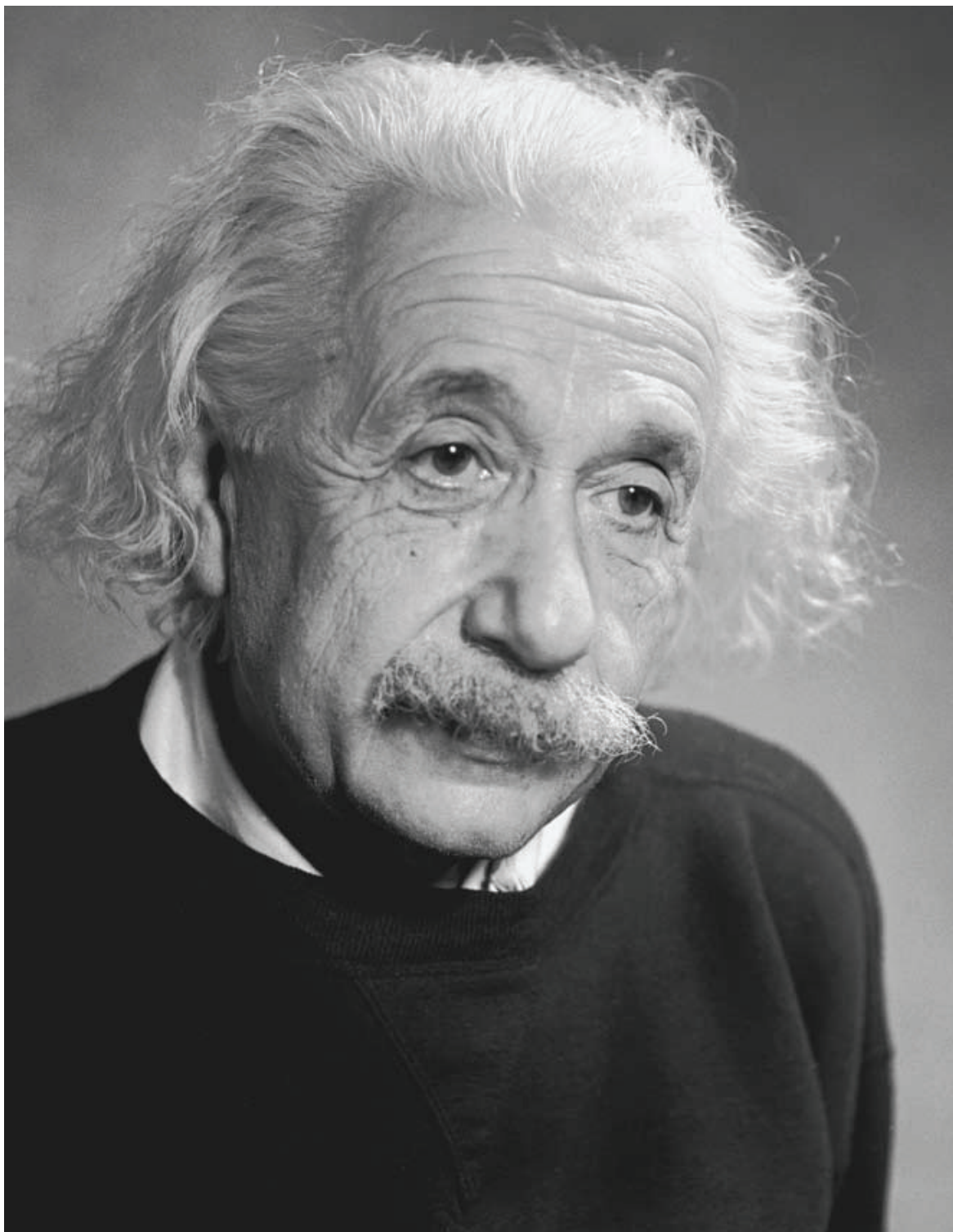
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Albert Einstein, 1946

FRED STEIN'S PHOTO ODYSSEY

**Eyewitnessing Photographs
from Nazism to Mid-Century New York**

by PHILIP ELIASOPH, *Senior Arts Editor*

IN HIS LIFELONG ODYSSEY NAVIGATING FROM

Germany's Weimar republic through the Third Reich's first days of terror, tacking to the balcony 1930s in Paris before the war, and eventually disembarking in New York City, photographer Fred Stein captured an eyewitness account of the 20th century.

Innovative and influential, his indelible contributions are now emerging from the shadows as a clearly defined vision of artistic genius. Fortunately, a revival of interest in his career is offering the art world a well deserved second look. Along the way, he managed to evoke the face of history while memorializing the faces who shaped history.

If Marcel Proust captured "Things of Remembrance Past," a Stein photograph transcends the zeitgeist into the living presence of the person or place depicted. Equipped with his sturdy but flexible Leica, and later adapting a square format Rolleiflex, Stein (1909-1967) forged a monumental visual legacy.

Reviewing his portfolios featuring the cultural milieu — of high art and fashion to raw, unglamorous scenes — spanning his years in Germany, Paris, and New York, my mind's eye is transported to the texture, aroma, and embodiment of places near and far. Instead of faded, nostalgic images — we are confronted with an omni-voyant, sharply delineated unraveling of an era now extinct.

Always spontaneous and consistently expressive, Stein snapped in tune with the giants of his era — Henri Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz, Philippe Halsman. Penetrating beyond mere exterior likeness, as a true portrait artist he deciphered the enigmatic personas of world leaders, literary giants, artistic pioneers, along with anonymous lovers in Paris or street waifs in Manhattan.

"One moment is all you have," Stein once explained. "Like a hunter in search of a target, you look for the one sign that is more characteristic than all the others. The job is to sum up what a man is, according to your understanding of him. The painter has the advantage here, since he can work toward this objective through several leisurely sessions; the photographer as only one, and that one as brief as a split-second."

Stein handled his camera with nearly flawless virtuosity. With spot-on clarity and precision, illumination and shadow streams across the pictorial surface. Instinctively, the complicated design of a Hollywood light-stage or film-noir exterior is captured. The aesthetics of a snapshot transform humble street vendors or a gritty shoeshine stand into heavenly visions from the palettes of Rembrandt or Vermeer.

A homecoming of sorts will celebrate his return to his native Germany this November as the Jewish Museum of Berlin presents over 200 photographs to honor his distinguished artistic achievement. Audiences flocking to Daniel Libeskind's post-modernist museum — an icon of symbolic forms retracing Germany's labyrinth as a twisted path from its downfall to its current resurgence — will finally see his work repatriated. In sync and historic context with other photographic documentary exhibits examining Germany's genocidal "past" versus its return to sanity, Stein's exhibit is a painful, if not obligatory moment of reconciliation.

As both loyal son and spirited advocate, Peter Stein has taken up the mantle of his father's legacy. He has worked as director of photography on over 50 feature productions and is Head of Production at NYU's Tisch Graduate Film Program. "I feel it is critically important now, with all the difficulties of the world, that people see the photography of Fred Stein, hear his story, and realize the remarkable truth that no matter how bad things became, he always retained his humanism and a feeling for beauty." >



1. Notre Dame, Paris, 1938
2. Le Corbusier, 1937
3. Shopkeeper, New York, 1946
4. Georgin O'Keefe, 1961
5. Helen Keller, 1955
6. Foley Square, New York, 1948



1. Marquee, New York, 1947
2. Bonwit Teller Window, New York, 1947
3. Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958
4. Cour du Louvre, Paris, 1937
5. Fountain, Paris, 1935
6. Frank Lloyd Wright, 1952

Born in Dresden, his father was an eminently educated and respected rabbi, Dr. Leopold Stein and his mother Eva Wohlheim was a religious educator. Brilliant, studious, and socially conscious, young Fred attended law school at the University of Leipzig. Despite excellent academic records, he was denied admission to the bar in 1933 the very year when Nazi hoodlums seized control of Germany's political life.

Rejected from gaining a law license due to "racial and political reasons" the atmosphere of personal freedom deteriorated dramatically by the summer of 1933. Using the pretext of a honeymoon with his new wife Liselotte (Lilo) Salzburg, the young couple escaped west to Paris. His mind was set free adopting a new profession: photography. Within a few years – their Jewish friends and family members would find any such travel privileges impossible. The cattle wagons would eventually be loaded with human slaves headed east for the Dantesque Inferno of Hitler's Final Solution.

As if the curtain was about to fall on the "once upon a time" magical world of the City of Light, Stein was the right man at the right place documenting Paris before its fall into abject degradation under its Nazi *strumpftrahers* after 1940. Its medieval monuments are perfect backdrops for young women wearing the latest fashion. The eternal presence of Notre Dame or the Louvre is contrasted with transitory light filtering across its sweeping plazas, lamp posts and bending trees.

Fortunately, Fred and Lilo made another escape from the expanding Third Reich, boarding the SS Winnipeg in 1941 from the Port of Marseilles in transit to the USA. On the last leg of this peripatetic journey, the gifted shutterbug was destined to observe America flexing its muscle at mid-century.

Arriving in Manhattan, his final phase explodes with the energetic dynamism of Gotham at mid-century – a photographer's dream. New York's narrow streets, tall buildings, and deep shadows mark a time and place that later film makers like Eli Kazan, Martin Scorsese, or Francis Ford Coppola would exploit in their searing imagery.

During his final years in New York Stein developed a truly international vision. An innate German sense of formality, was layered with French artistry, and lastly, an American sense of humor, relaxation, and exuberance reaches its fruition. "Bonwit Teller" (1947) bridges the real and surreal of Dali-esque mannequins while "Foley Square" captures the anonymity of Edward Hopper's lower Manhattan streetscape.

Sharing a deeply abiding social consciousness, Stein joined the Photo League, a cadre of left-leaning photographers including Aaron Siskind, Ruth Orkin, and Weegee (Arthur Fellig). Using their camera as a weapon against racism, fascism, and crony-capitalism, their daring exploits were highlighted in a recent exhibit at New York's Jewish Museum called "The Radical Camera."

Senator McCarthy's goon squad of anti-communist paranoids forced their dismantling in 1951 under the threat of un-American activities. History has proven that nothing could have been more patriotic – Stein and his photographer colleagues were exposing underlying truths protected by artistic freedom. Fascist street thugs in Germany and bullying demagogues during the 'red scare' 1950s were best exposed with Stein's straight-up images.

One might argue that Stein's intellectuality mixed with his creative passion most effectively in his unique portrait photographs. Eleanor Roosevelt's compassion, Helen Keller's courage, Frank Lloyd Wright's hubris, or Georgia O'Keeffe's mystery, are the secret undercurrents of these pictorial characterizations. This is the rare gift in a Fred Stein image – an ability to entwine the subject with the photographer in a melodious duet of almost perfectly pitched interactivity.

"These photographs should be seen by people from all walks of life," Peter Stein concludes, "not just the artistic elite." Gazing at Fred Stein's iconic, soulful portrait of Professor Albert Einstein, the joys and sorrows of the 20th century are reduced to one instant click – a snapshot of the universe. □

For additional information please visit a wonderful, user-friendly website with a complete portfolio and overview of his prolific career at www.FredStein.com.

Philip Eliasoph, PhD, is Professor of Art History at Fairfield University and an elected member for the American Section of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art. He is an expert on the social history of American art and Nazi and Fascist era art and propaganda; information at: www.PhilipEliasoph.com