



Institut
Néerlandais

Centre culturel
des Pays-Bas

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BREITNER

PIONEER OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

3 NOVEMBER 2011 - 22 JANUARY 2012



Het Kolkje and OudezijdsAchterburgwal in Amsterdam, 1894-1898. Rijksmuseum AmsterdamCollection



**For the first time in Paris:
A large retrospective exhibition of
Breitner's photographs**

**Breitner - pioneer of Street
Photography**

3 November 2011 - 22 January 2012

For the first time in France, the Institut Néerlandais, in collaboration with the Rijksmuseum, has mounted a large retrospective exhibition of photographs taken around 1900 by the Dutch artist George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923). Breitner is known mainly as a painter of cityscapes, nudes and genre studies. In the present exhibition, however, he emerges as one of the most intriguing photographers of his day, who recorded life in Amsterdam and other large cities such as Paris and Berlin in an eminently modern and personal style. The exhibition runs from 3 November 2011 to 22 January 2012, during Paris Photo, as part of the VIP programme of this major international photo fair.

Precisely a century ago, it became clear that Breitner was not only a major painter but also an excellent photographer. Since then Holland has staged numerous exhibitions of his photos, but in France he is less well-known as a photographer. His photographic work has been compared to that of such well-known French contemporaries as Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Eduard Vuillard. Like them, he had a penchant for city streets as well as the intimate family circle.

Breitner's earliest photos probably date from 1889, a year or two after he settled in Amsterdam.



Bridge over the Herengrachtfacing Gasthuismolensteeg,
Before 1900
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection

He was one of the first to explore the possibilities of the new hand-held cameras, which were easy to carry and inconspicuous. He photographed life on the streets of that dynamic city. In the approximately 30 surviving photographs taken during his various stays in Paris, we see a great many horses, which at the time dominated the street scene. In the photos featured in this exhibition, we see how Breitner 'experimented' with various photographic techniques. By photographing against the light, for example, he created powerful silhouettes. And by adopting a very high or very low standpoint, he lent his photos an unusual perspective. Not only was he successful in evoking the vitality of a large city and the liveliness of its passers-by, he also knew how to create an alienating effect

by photographing individuals at very close quarters. Breitner was a voracious photographer, unflinching and impulsive. These qualities lend his photos an intensity that is lacking in the work of the professional photographers active in his day, who as a rule produced images that were more static and perfunctory. Breitner broke with all the traditional rules and regulations.

Additional information on Breitner and his work may be found on page 5



Two women in Dam square, Amsterdam, 1901-1908. RKD Collection

Breitner: pioneer of street photography consists of a broad selection of photos taken by Breitner, mainly cityscapes and images of street life in Amsterdam. The Rijksmuseum has contributed 33 original enlargements, as well as one painting, one watercolour, two sketchbooks, and a well-worn, paint-spattered camera that belonged to Breitner. The Musée d'Orsay owns two paintings by Breitner. One of them, the early *Clair de lune*, will be on display at the Institut Néerlandais. The exposition also features several dozen original small-format prints, as well as modern enlargements of Breitner's negatives, all on loan from the Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague.

The exhibition is mounted in close collaboration with the Rijksmuseum. Curator Hans Rooseboom of the Rijksmuseum will give a talk on Breitner's photographic work.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Exhibition dates

3 November 2011 - 22 January 2012

Opening hours

Everyday from 1 pm to 7 pm

Press Opening

Wednesday, 2 November from 12 pm to 2 pm

Public Opening

Wednesday 2 November from 6 pm to 8.30 pm

Admission

Adults: 4 €

Discount: 2 €

Friend of the Institut Néerlandais (S.A.I.N): free of charge

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Access

Métro 12: Assemblée Nationale
Métro 13: Invalides
Bus: 63, 83, 84, 94, 73
RER C: Invalides of Musée d'Orsay

Information

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Press Images

Please contact the Press Office for a link to download from:

<https://institutneerlandais.wetransfer.com>

Images available in high and low resolution.

Breitner elsewhere...

The Netherlands Institute for Art History has now published a digital overview of the photographs of the artist G.H. Breitner. For the first time, no fewer than 2,300 original photos from the Institute's own collection are now accessible to an international audience.

www.rkd.nl

At the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, photos by Breitner feature in the exhibition 'Snapshot. Painters and photography 1888-1915' from 14 October 2011 through 8 January 2012. The exhibition will then travel to the United States: the Philips Collection, Washington D.C. (4 February - 29 April 2012) and the Indianapolis Museum of Art (June - September 2012).

www.vangoghmuseum.nl

A closer look at Breitner: pioneer of street photography

From painter to photographer

Although he was first and foremost a painter, Breitner's photographic work is so extensive and of such significance that he can justly be referred to as a photographer.

Although it was known that he took photographs, he seldom referred explicitly to this aspect of his work. It was in 1961, some 38 years after his death, that a large number of his nitrate negatives – around 2000 in all – reappeared. Judging by this new material, Breitner recorded life on the streets of Amsterdam in an early-modern 'snapshot' style.



Boat wharf on Bickersgracht in Amsterdam, no date.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection

Much later, in 1995, an additional 263 glass negatives turned up in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives. These views of the city, which are more tranquil, supplement our view of Breitner and enhance his importance as a photographer. In 1995 some 263 additional prints were discovered in the

collection of A.B. Osterholt, who had acquired them through Breitner's colleague KeesMaks. In 1974 Osterholt published these prints in book form, and in 1984 he sold them to the Leiden Print Gallery (today Leiden University Library, Special Collections).

George Henry Breitner was a child of his time, and like other painters active in the late 19th century – Degas, Bonnard, Toulouse-Lautrec and Vuillard – he embraced the new medium of photography. In 1886 he exchanged the relative calm of The Hague for Amsterdam, and from 1890 on, he focused his attention on the metropolis. He used his camera to capture the life of the city: servant girls and nudes, portraits and cityscapes, military manoeuvres, and marvelous studies of horses. He found his inspiration in city life, as he would later do in Paris.

Breitner the painter

Breitner was born in 1857 in Rotterdam, and after finishing school he moved to The Hague to study painting at the Art Academy. During those early years, his role model was the well-known Rotterdam historical painter Rochussen. Gradually, however, Breitner disengaged himself from the influence of his mentor and the Academy. Attracted by realism and impressionism, new movements which emerged towards the end of the 19th century, Breitner gradually developed his own painting style. His striving was to portray mankind against the background of everyday life. This set him apart from the artists of the Hague School who, under the influence of the Barbizon painters, gradually focused on the landscape.

Breitner was a dynamic and extravert figure, and before long The Hague was too rustic for him. In 1886 he moved to Amsterdam, where he was in his element. He plunged into the bohemian life of the city, dominated by young poets and

painters of the Eighties movement. From that moment on, he began to photograph life in his city.

Breitner and photography

In the second half of the 19th century photography came into its own. Thanks to new technical possibilities and the simplification of the process, it was now accessible to a much larger group of amateurs.

Cameras became lighter and no longer required a tripod. And in 1882 the first Kodak appeared on the market: 'You press the button and we do the rest!' Nitrate negatives, known as roll films, became increasingly light-sensitive, and the lenses had a greater intensity of light, making possible the so-called *instantanées*. Thanks to the shorter exposure time, fragmentary elements could be captured, and this new aesthetics had immediate consequences for painting.

Photographers experimented with the diagonal and other unconventional cut-offs, unusual perspectives that heighten or lower the horizon, or mirror the impression of motion. In Breitner's art we find all these and other novel compositional elements that are rooted in photography.



Two women in the snow, no date. RKD Collection

As we know, Breitner was not the only 19th-century photographer to embrace photography. In 1889 art critic Karl Raup wrote: 'Today open-air

photography imbues the artist's work with fresh, pulsating life, offering him a thousand valuable hints ... The camera now forms an essential part of studio equipment: out of doors it stands next to the painter's easel.'

On only one occasion did Breitner briefly discuss photography, and even then he did not refer to the medium in relation to his own painting. In the late 19th century, a vehement debate flared up concerning the use of photography in painting. There was strong opposition to artists who regarded photography as a 'tool', and many people saw this as a threat to the art of painting.

After the discovery of Breitner's nitrate negatives in 1961, a new image of the artist emerged. He had indeed made use of photos in various paintings and watercolours, although he seldom copied a photo literally. He would borrow certain elements, such as a face, a figure, or a particular perspective. In art, photos served the same purpose as sketches and impressions.

Breitner's style was direct and impulsive. The large number of photos he left behind and the passion with which he captured those images testify to his passion for the art of photography.

Dynamism and tranquility: two constants within Breitner's photos

In the late 19th century, Amsterdam gradually transformed itself from a rural city into a modern metropolis, where space had to be created for trams and trains, and urban renewal and expansion were on the order of the day. Breitner recorded all these changes on film: demolition, expansion, filled-in canals, and preparations for new districts. With his hand-held camera, he also portrayed the Amsterdammers themselves: barrow-men, maidservants, passers-by, children playing alongside the canals. Often he photographed his subjects at

close range and from below, as if he was walking up the bridge alongside the barrow-men. For these street scenes, Breitner made use of the more sensitive and thus faster films, such as the *Plaques photographiques Extra Rapide*, sold by L'Avenir.

Breitner roamed the streets of Amsterdam like a true 19th-century *flaneur*. While immersing himself in the hustle and bustle of the city, he was still able to maintain a certain distance when he peered through the camera lens. His photos suggest the aesthetics of snapshots: they are not chance hits, but rather compositions that mirror the dynamics of city life.



Four girls, location unknown, no date. RKDCollection

These images are characterized by diagonal compositions, low viewpoints, strong light contrasts, cropping, and the use of blur to suggest movement. Such techniques create the illusion that the servant girls, children and workmen are walking into or out of the image, and that the viewer is being 'drawn into' the photo.

Alongside these lively street scenes, Breitner also painted more tranquil pieces: portraits, studies of nudes done in his atelier, and cityscapes devoid of passers-by. The latter featured buildings, quays and canals, trees reflected in the water, the walls of half-demolished houses where the original paint is still

visible, reclining nudes, and frontal portraits. It is clear from his studio work – the nudes and portraits – that Breitner paid careful attention to lighting, and made a study of both the proportions of the images and the light contrasts.

While Breitner used these images as study material for his more subdued photos, he seldom reproduced the entire image. As a result, the photos are more like personal impressions, moments of quiet in a bustling city, in his studio, and in his life.

Horse studies and military manoeuvres

A special category within Breitner's work consists of horse studies and military manoeuvres. These lie somewhere between dynamism and tranquility. Breitner made a considerable name for himself with his cavalry paintings, and in his photographic work one also senses his fondness for this subject matter. In 1887 an art critic writing in the newspaper *NieuweRotterdamse Courant* suggested that Breitner's cavalry paintings were also influenced by the medium of photography.

'How marvelous the sight of the horses springing towards us! We know what singular and unexpected images of horses have been produced by *photographie instantanée*. No doubt Mr. Breitner was inspired by those photos.' The new techniques and materials which emerged within the field of photography during the second half of the 19th century made it possible to study motion in detail, including the complex movements of horses. This appears to have had a direct effect on the way artists – including Breitner – portrayed horses in motion. Some thirty-odd photos taken during his stay in Paris have survived, and in many of them a prominent role is reserved for horses, which at the time still determined the street scene in the French capital.

We may assume that when he took those photos, Breitner had no idea that they would one day be exhibited as works of art in their own right. He was an enthusiastic photographer with a dynamic and personal style, but he was somewhat careless when it came to preserving his photos and negatives.



Girl playing in a garden, no date.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection

Apparently he was more interested in the result – the image – than in the technique itself. For Breitner, photographs were a tool in the service of his paintings: they represented not only study material for light and composition, but also a mirror reflecting the impressions he gathered on the streets of Amsterdam.

PRESS IMAGES



Krom Boomssloot near Koningsstraat in Amsterdam, no date.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection



View of Damrak, Amsterdam, 1890 or later. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection



Man and two horses outside the slaughterhouse on Cruquiusstreet, Amsterdam, no date. RKD Collection



Corner of Kalverstraat and Spui, facing the Rokin, no date. RKD Collection



Military manoeuvres, no date. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection



Barrow-men with sand carts on the Jacob van Lennepkade; in the background the office and factory buildings of the Fijnhout sawmill factory (under construction), 1900-1901. RKD Collection



Portrait of Marie Breitner-Jordan with a cat, no date.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection



Marie Jordan, nude, no date.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection