

**LISETTE
MODEL
RETROSPECTIVE**

Exhibition Facts

Duration	30 October 2025 – 22 February 2026
Venue	Tietze Galleries The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Walter Moser
Assistant Curator	Nina Eisterer
Works	154
Catalogue	Lisette Model. Retrospective Albertina Museum Wien Albertina Online-Shop (German or English EUR 32.90 256 pages)
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Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Lisette Model

30.10.2025 – 22.2.2026

Born into a Viennese family with Jewish roots, Lisette Model (1901-1983) is considered one of the most internationally influential female photographers. The exhibition at the ALBERTINA Museum is the most comprehensive presentation of the artist in Austria to date and brings together her most important groups of works from 1933 to 1959. In addition to iconic photographs such as *Coney Island Bather* and *Singer at the Metropole Café*, the exhibition also includes lesser-known works that have never been shown before.

While Lisette Model initially pursued a musical education, it was only in France, where she lived from the mid-1920s, that she found her way to photography: in 1934, the self-taught photographer took her revealing series of portraits of rich idlers in Nice, which caused a sensation as a biting social critique in the heated political climate of the time. After Model emigrated to New York in 1938, she quickly made a name for herself in the vibrant art scene as a freelance photographer for style-setting magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*. She photographed the diverse and contradictory facets of urban life: Model showed the poor population of the Lower East Side district in unsparing shots, the upper class at their pleasures in confrontational portraits and the vibrant nightlife in bars and jazz clubs in dynamic series. In the late 1940s and 1950s, she created extensive groups of works outside New York.

The photos of the west coast of the USA or Venezuela are characterized by a melancholy and gloomy mood without Model losing sight of social conditions. Due to political reprisals during the McCarthy era, Model began her second, enormously influential career as a teacher. After decades of effort, the publishing house Aperture published her first monograph in 1979. The exhibition *Lisette Model* presents the original design of this publication, which is now a classic among photo books, for the first time.

Introduction

Lisette Model

Lisette Model (1901–1983) brought about a sudden change in photography with her spectacularly direct pictures. Her immediate, humorous, frequently confrontational, yet sometimes also empathetic style of representation revolutionized traditional documentary photography. Her pictures of street-life scenes and portraits combine social realism and emotional expression: “Shoot from the gut!” was her famous credo. This retrospective brings together Model’s most important groups of works from her nearly thirty-year career, from 1933 to 1959, including works that have never been on view before.

Lisette Model was born as Elise Amelie Felicie Stern (Seybert) into an upper class Viennese family with Jewish roots in 1901. She initially pursued a musical education and from 1919 to 1921 attended courses taught by composer Arnold Schönberg at the progressive Schwarzwald School, which had been founded by Eugenie Schwarzwald. Her contact with Schönberg proved formative for Model’s artistic work. After her father’s death, Lisette Model, together with her mother and sister, moved to France in 1926, where she discovered photography. In 1934 she shot her first extensive portrait series of wealthy idlers in Nice, which caused a furor for betraying social criticism in the heated political climate of the time.

Having emigrated to New York in 1938, Model quickly made a name for herself in the art scene as a freelance photographer for such influential magazines as *Harper’s Bazaar*. She photographed the contrasts of urban life: in unsparing images, Model presented the impoverished population of the Lower East Side; in scathing portraits, she depicted the upper classes indulging in their pleasures; and in a number of dynamic series, she captured the pulsating nightlife of the metropolis. In the late 1940s and 1950s she created her first series of works outside New York. Due to political reprisals during the McCarthy era, Model’s artistic work stagnated. She embarked on an influential career as a teacher, shaping an entire generation of photographers, including Larry Fink, Diane Arbus, and others.

If not indicated otherwise, the photographs on display are gelatin silver prints.

Chapter Texts

France

In 1926, Lisette Model moved to France, where she continued her vocal training, which she was forced to discontinue abruptly due to voice problems. In 1933 she turned to photography instead. The threatening political situation in Europe made it necessary for her to learn a profession, and photography offered itself as a modern field of activity especially for women. Model's sister Olga, a trained photographer, and the artist Rogi André provided important inspiration, including the momentous advice to photograph only what aroused her passionate interest.

The economic crisis and the rise of fascism went hand in hand with a debate among committed left-wing artists about documentary photography. The central question was to what extent photography could expose social injustices and serve as a weapon in social conflicts. It is unclear how closely Model followed these debates; in later years, she remained persistently silent on the subject. Her early photographs from Paris clearly reveal a socially critical approach. Going about her work with distinct directness, she photographed sleeping homeless people and blind beggars, whom she characterized as victims of social circumstances through their bent bodies.

In July 1934, Lisette Model used a Rolleiflex to photograph a series of portraits of wealthy idlers on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. It was synonymous with glamour and elite tourism and a popular motif at the time. Yet Model portrayed her subjects as caricatures through their facial expressions, postures, and gestures. The narrow cropping of the motifs suggests that the photographer was in close proximity to her subjects, who look condescendingly into the camera. In fact, however, Model achieved this effect in the darkroom, where she selected radically novel perspectives from the negatives.

Regards

Although Lisette Model was only at the beginning of her career, the respected communist magazine *Regards* published her photographs from the series *Promenade des Anglais* in 1935. The layout of the article juxtaposed Model's portraits with an image of a female worker with a fishing net. The accompanying text also embeds the photographs in the ideological rhetoric of class struggle: "The Promenade des Anglais is a zoological garden where the most abominable specimens of the human

species lounge in white armchairs. Their faces betray boredom, condescension, impertinent stupidity, and at times malice. These rich people, who spend most of their time dressing, adorning themselves, manicuring their nails, and applying makeup, fail to conceal the decadence and immeasurable emptiness of bourgeois thinking.”

Against the backdrop of the repressive climate of the McCarthy era in the 1950s, Lisette Model would later tone down the political content of her images from Nice. Instead, she emphasized the humor and her intuitive approach to portraiture in public spaces.

New York

In October 1938, Lisette Model emigrated to New York with her husband Evsa Model, a Jewish-Russian painter. Her first series shot there reveal her great fascination with the metropolis. The work *Reflection*, which makes use of reflections in shop windows, merges motifs and spaces to create an enigmatic collage. For the *Running Legs* photographs, Model did not point her camera upwards at the skyscrapers as usual, but looked at the feet of passersby at street level. Model experienced New York's hectic and consumer-oriented culture as ambivalent: the dark shadows in the windows of the department stores seem threatening, and the dense crowds of legs have a claustrophobic effect. In portraits of people on Fifth Avenue and Wall Street photographed from below, Model highlights the arrogance of the pedestrians rushing by.

Shortly after her arrival in New York, Lisette Model attracted the attention of several key figures in the art and media world. Her contacts with Ralph Steiner, editor of the magazine *PM's Weekly*, and Alexey Brodovitch, the legendary art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, proved momentous. In 1941, Steiner published Model's biting photographs of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice under the provocative title “Why France Fell” as an explanation for the country's defeat in World War II. Model's first commission for *Harper's Bazaar* took her to the popular leisure destination of Coney Island, where she shot her iconic photographs of a bather with an empathetic eye. As early as 1940, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired one of Model's pictures and continued to show her works in exhibitions in the following years.

Lower East Side

In one of her most extensive groups of works, Lisette Model focuses on the residents of the Lower East Side. Model's attention to physical peculiarities and extremes becomes particularly apparent in it. Retrospectively defined cropping detaches the people from their spatial surroundings and emphasizes the sitters' statuesque monumentality.

Lisette Model shared her interest in the socially disadvantaged with photographers from the New York Photo League, an influential left-wing political association dedicated to socially committed photography. Becoming a member, Model actively participated in Photo League events and exhibited on its premises. And yet she distanced herself from her photography being categorized as political or social documentary. She also rejected accusations of portraying her models overly sarcastically, arguing instead for a humanist point-of-view that focuses on the strength and personality of her subjects. Emotional expression and social realism are inextricably linked in these photographs: the expressive bodies clearly display the burden of tough living conditions.

Entertainment

Similar to her photographs from France, Model also explored disparities in urban life in New York. The harsh images of the Lower East Side are juxtaposed with photographs of people indulging in leisure activities and amusing themselves at all kinds of shows. Model captured these scenes with a keen eye for human contradictions and bizarre moments: dressed-up ladies at a fashion show are just as much a part of this as participants in a dog show bearing a striking resemblance to their four-legged friends. Photographs taken in museums do not focus on the artworks intently viewed by visitors, but rather on the act of vision itself. With a few exceptions, the series *Dog Show* and *Museum* have only survived as negatives. They can now be presented here in digital form for the first time.

Nightlife

Lisette Model's intuitive approach to photography reached its peak in her pictures of nightclubs. Using bright flashes, she snatched the celebrating guests and energetic performers from the darkness and in the subsequent post-editing of the images tilted the motifs to render the compositions more dynamic. The depiction of expressive gestures and people in moments of emotional tension recalls the body images of the early Viennese Expressionists, whom Model got to know through her contact

with Arnold Schönberg. Model, who always vehemently denied the influence of other artists, acknowledged solely Schönberg's impact on her work. His theory of the "emancipation of dissonance," which expands on classical harmony, is echoed both in Model's unorthodox compositions and in her caricatures.

The traumatic experience of exile left deep traces in Lisette Model's work. Like the Lower East Side before, nightclubs were places populated by immigrants. They evoked a sense of social belonging and cultural familiarity in the artist.

West Coast

In 1946, Lisette Model accompanied her husband Evsa to San Francisco on an invitation from the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). She quickly established connections with the lively photography scene on the US West Coast, where famous photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston were active. Model returned several times and in 1949 taught a course on documentary photography at the CSFA's photography department; she continued with her teaching in New York from 1951 onward.

Model did her first major groups of works outside New York. The photographs of visitors to the opera of San Francisco rank among her most striking portraits and illustrate her strategy of bringing out individual characters by exaggerating physical peculiarities.

In 1949 an assignment for the *Ladies Home Journal* took Lisette Model to Reno, Nevada. She photographed women staying at so-called "divorce ranches," waiting for their divorces to be finalized. Thanks to more liberal laws, divorce was possible in Nevada after a waiting period of just a few weeks—compared to the patriarchal rules of other states, this was an uncomplicated way for women in particular to separate from their spouses. Lisette Model's sympathy for her sitters becomes palpable. Unlike the pictures taken in San Francisco, these portraits are less expressive, but more melancholic instead.

Venezuela

In the 1950s, in the wake of Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunt, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) inquired into Lisette Model's activities. Neighbors and even her grocer were questioned about the artist. In February 1954 two FBI agents finally interrogated Lisette Model and accused her of alleged membership in the communist party and of her actual affiliation with the Photo

League, which had already disbanded in 1951 due to political pressure. The agents were unable to prove any wrongdoing on Model's part, but classified her as uncooperative and recommended that she be placed on the security watch list. As a result of these accusations, Model lost some of her most important clients and was forced to supplement her income by working as a teacher.

Plagued by financial difficulties, she traveled to Caracas in 1954, accepting an invitation extended by the Venezuelan government. By then, Venezuela had been under the presidency of Marcos Evangelista Pérez Jiménez for two years—a military officer and dictator who modernized Caracas and exploited the country's rich oil reserves. In photographs that were unusual for her in terms of motif and style, Model captured the technical infrastructure for oil production around Lake Maracaibo. Because of their gloomy atmosphere, the images were unsuitable for use in advertising and propaganda. Unsettled by the paranoia of the McCarthy era, the photographer often found it difficult to relate to her surroundings.

Jazz

As a result of the reprisals during the McCarthy era, Lisette Model photographed significantly less in the 1950s than in the promising decades before. One exception were the photographs she took during a horserace in New York in 1956, where she directed her attention at the audience instead of the competition. Her preoccupation with the subject of jazz was most intense. It is Model's largest body of work, which developed from her photographs of New York nightclubs in the 1940s. Model was one of the few women to photograph jazz events such as the Newport Jazz Festival or concerts of the Lenox School of Jazz at the Berkshire Music Barn in Massachusetts. Highly musical herself, Model knew how to use her straightforward approach to convey the passion and intensity of the musicians' playing as an immediate experience. No musician was photographed by her as often as Billie Holiday. One of Lisette Model's last pictures, taken in 1959, shows the singer lying in her coffin.

In the 1950s, Model planned to publish her jazz photographs. It would have been the first monographic jazz book in history, but the project failed when her former client at *Harper's Bazaar* discredited Model as a "troublemaker" and, due to her "political unreliability," dissuaded potential financial backers.

Book design for the monograph Lisette Model, published by Aperture Books

Starting in the 1970s, Lisette Model was rediscovered in exhibitions and interviews. After years of effort, the first monograph on her work, with an introduction by Berenice Abbott, came out in 1979 with the renowned publisher Aperture. It is now considered an incunabulum within the photo book genre. The Albertina owns the hitherto unpublished dummy with original prints. Originally, the book was to be printed with a comprehensive biography of the artist penned by author Phillip Lopate. Dissatisfied with the text, Model had the manuscript withdrawn and commented on it with scathing remarks: “I thought an introduction was to be written—not that I was to be put on trial,” she noted down on the title page.

Model’s behavior was indicative of the protective shield she had built around her private life as a result of her threatening encounter with the paranoia of the McCarthy era. In her public statements and interviews she obscured facts and details of her biography. She resisted simplistic interpretations of her work, but also concealed and marginalized references to politically explosive works, such as the publication of her photographs from Nice in the communist publication *Regards* in the mid-1930s.

Press Images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Lisette Model
Opera, San Francisco, 1949
Gelatin silver print
34 × 26,6 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
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Lisette Model
Reflections, New York, 1939-1945
Gelatin silver print
26,5 × 33,4 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
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Keitelman, Brussels



Lisette Model
Lower East Side, New York, 1940-1947
Gelatin silver print
34,6 × 27,1 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
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Keitelman, Brussels



Lisette Model
Promenade des Anglais, Nice, 1934
Gelatin silver print
43,2 × 35,4 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
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Keitelman, Brussels



Lisette Model
Singer at the Metropole Café, New York, 1946
Gelatin silver print
49,6 x 39,8 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
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Keitelman, Brussels



Lisette Model
Sammy's Bar, New York, 1940-1944
Gelatin silver print
37,8 x 49 cm
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Lisette Model
Fashion Show, Hotel Pierre, New York, 1940-1946
Gelatin silver print
39,3 x 49,2 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna, Permanent Loan
Austrian Ludwig Foundation for Arts and Science
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Keitelman, Brussels



Lisette Model
Coney Island Bather, New York, 1939-1941
Gelatin silver print
49,5 × 39,3 cm
Estate of Gerd Sander, Julian Sander Gallery, Cologne
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Lisette Model
Woman with Veil, San Francisco, 1949
Gelatin silver print
49,8 × 10,1 cm
Estate of Gerd Sander, Julian Sander Gallery, Cologne
© Estate of Lisette Model, courtesy of baudoin lebon and Avi Keitelman



Lisette Model
Promenade des Anglais, Nice, 1934
Gelatin silver print
50,7 × 40,4 cm
Estate of Gerd Sander, Julian Sander Gallery, Cologne
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Lisette Model
Ollie McLaughlin, Hotel Viking, Newport Jazz Festival, Rhode Island, 1956
Gelatin silver print
27,5 × 34,9 cm
Estate of Lisette Model, courtesy of baudoin lebon and Avi Keitelman
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