

The artist was no pro, but would you know it?

Blake Gopnik

There aren't any masterpieces in "Jaromír Funke and the Amateur Avant-Garde." You won't find photographs that changed the world, or innovations that changed photography. That's what makes this small show, now in the West Building of the National Gallery, so worthwhile.



A 1939 landscape by Jaromír Funke, who succeeded in channeling the flourishes of far more famous figures. (National Gallery Of Art)

By showing us how good the second drawer of modern art can be, this exhibition gives a great example of the trickle-down theory of artistic innovation: How art's geniuses matter because they change what counts as a compelling image for other, lesser artists -- the Funkes of this world. (It also shows the courage of curator Matthew Witkovsky, willing to commit to such an esoteric venture, and of his bosses at the National Gallery, who let him go ahead with it. Unfortunately, Witkovsky recently left to become head of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.)

Funke, born in 1896 in the Czech town of Kolin, started taking pictures in the early 1920s, as part of his era's flourishing amateur photography movement. Most amateurs in the newly independent Czechoslovakia were dedicated to perfecting photographic craft and to making attractive, unchallenging, "poetic" work. Funke, a law student, started out there, too: He could do soft focus as well as anyone. What makes him worthy of a National Gallery show, however, is his precocious conversion to the tougher ideals of photographic modernism, as perfected at the Bauhaus in Germany and around Alfred Stieglitz in the United States.

By 1924, Funke was turning out still lifes that were studies in light, line, tone and form, and that came close to abstraction. They were inspired by the radical American photographer Man Ray -- from the Stieglitz circle -- who had shown in 1923 in Prague. By 1930, Funke was taking crisp pictures of modern life (in the mode of Stieglitz himself, whose *Camera Work* magazine was a huge influence). Funke's photos came to favor peculiar viewpoints (shades of André Kertész, a Hungarian who had made his name in Paris) and compositions full of angles, shadows and asymmetries (trademarks of the Bauhaus work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, another Hungarian). Within a few years, when leading photographers were moving toward surrealism and social documentation, Funke was on top of those movements, too, as a teacher in some of his country's major design schools. (Funke's students and colleagues produced more than half the photos in this exhibition; they're often as good as he is.) Funke made gorgeous, dreamy images of urban streetscapes, in the mode of Eugene Atget, darling of the surrealists, and also photographed the urban worker. He kept taking stylish pictures right through World War II, dying of an untreated illness just as it was ending.

Stieglitz, Kertész, Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Atget: If Funke channels them so well, why not simply look at their originals? We do, of course, all the time. The thing about Funke is that he lets us in on how their innovations panned out and took root.



Funke, in a mid-1920s portrait by Josef Sudek, came out of the era's amateur photography movement. (Private Collection)

They were able to do that thanks to the arrival of high-speed, low-cost photographic printing, which let the latest photos spread across the world as no pictures had before. The latest paintings could circulate that way as well, of course, but only in unreliable reproduction -- which is what made cubism's more remote disciples so much weaker than the masters in Paris. With modernist photography, and unlike the fussier hand-crafted prints of the earlier amateur movements, what you got in the magazines was more or less the art work itself, as it was supposed to be seen. The immaculate photogravures in *Camera Work* were every bit as valid versions of the work of Stieglitz as his own darkroom prints. (Some people still prefer them.)

Modernist photography, with its up-to-date subjects, its suspicion of craft, its love of industrial processes, ideals and looks, was the perfect medium to take advantage of mass communication's speed. That speed itself was one of modernism's subjects; its photography wanted to play an active role in that speedy new world. You could even say the new photos, as the most efficient propaganda arm for all things modern, helped that world come about. In this exhibition we see modernism's global vision reaching out and pulling Funke into its orbit.

Some of Funke's best photos hint that this amateur understood this process at least as well as any of the pros. Funke's almost-abstract still lifes depict the very same bottles, mat boards, rubber hoses and glass plates that he used to make his modernist photos. He depicts the tools of his new trade as being inseparable from the radically modern vision they bring about.

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