

## CELEBRATING A GERMAN LIFE

For **Stefan Moses** the essence of his native country came from its people. From artisans to the cultural elite, he photographed the Germans with an original and insightful eye. Here Michael Birt reports on one of the most distinctive portrait photographers of our time.

All images © Stefan Moses

It's a crisp dark day in an elegant Berlin gallery, on the table lies a history of German life. Viewing Stefan Moses' photographs of artists, political grandees, theatre elite, intellectuals, writers and artisans from the East and West felt momentous. Moses is one of the most significant eyes of contemporary photography and has, for six decades, been a storyteller of German society.

Born in 1928 in Liegnitz, Moses had a disquieting start. His Jewish father was a lawyer who died in a canoeing accident when Moses was only four years old.

Towards the end of World War II Moses was interned at Ostlinde labour camp, but later managed to escape. He entered a Germany emerging from the rubble of war. He could have stayed with his uncle in Chicago but decided not to. 'I wanted to stay, now that there was no war and no concentration camps,' he says. 'To live differently, find new friends, a new freedom, a new home. I explored this Germany, which I barely knew, with my camera.'

Having experienced the hardship of war and incarceration, it is not surprising that he photographed more than 100 emigrants

over several decades – people who formed the political and cultural life of Germany. He explains that, when photographing author Thomas Mann, returning to his half-bombed house in Munich in 1949, 'There was a feeling of mourning, a lost youth but a quiet exultation at this new beginning.'

In the *Emigranten (Emigrants)* portraits there is an acknowledgement between the sitter and the photographer of their shared history. These portraits help keep alive the memory of the people who had been driven out of their country and the ones who stayed behind to help rebuild German society. >

*'I wanted to stay, now that there was no war and no concentration camps. To live differently – find new friends, a new freedom, a new home. I explored this Germany, which I barely knew, with my camera.'*



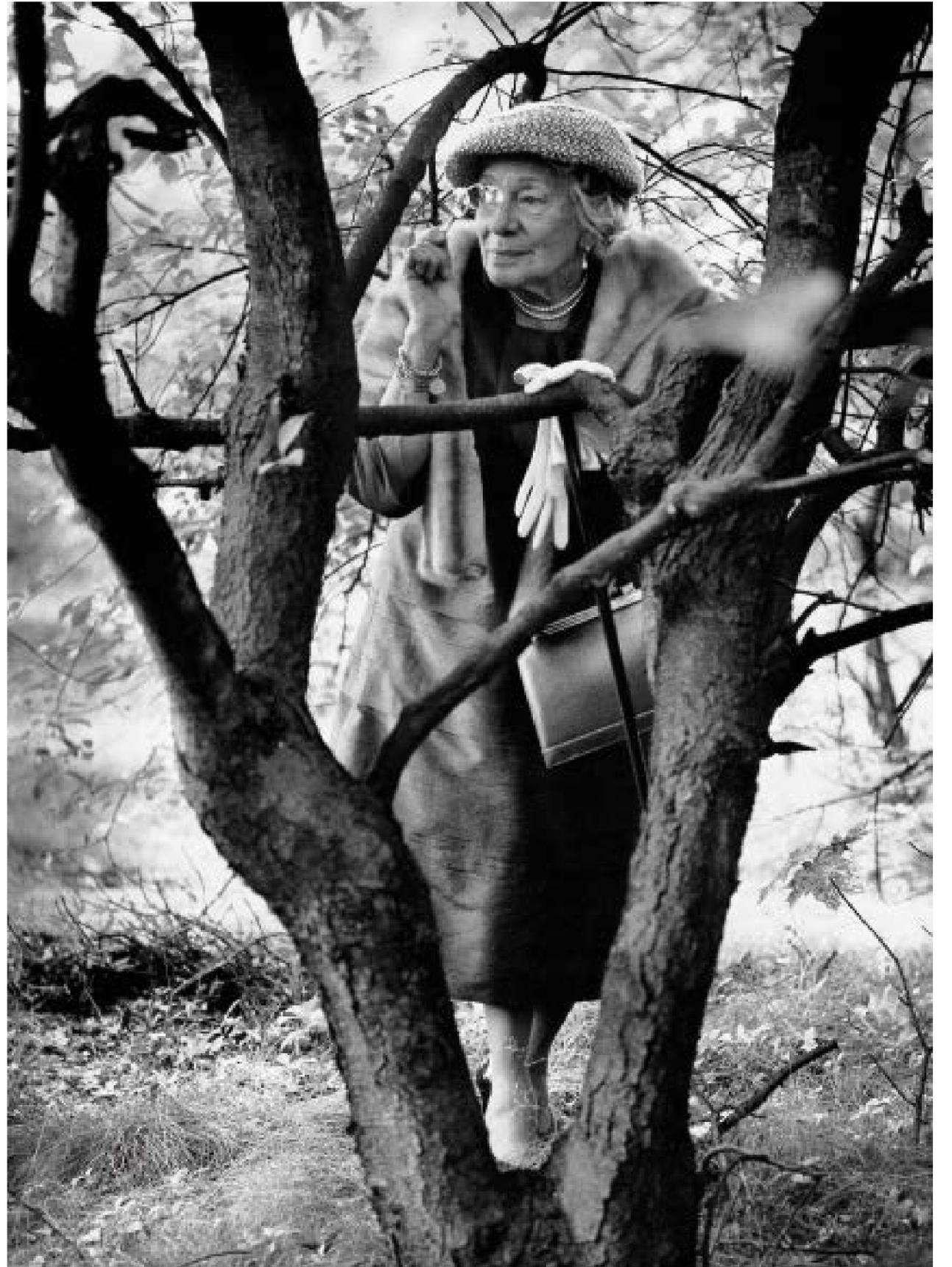
Peggy Guggenheim, 1969.

OPPOSITE Klaus Kinski.





Curt Bois, Berlin 1987.



Tilla Durieux, 1963.



Stefan Moses and the composer Frank Michael Beyer, 1998.

In 1947 Moses was employed by the restored National Theatre to photograph productions, and through this his love of the theatre was born. Three years later, the director of the German Film Corporation, formerly a general manager of the theatre, hired Moses to work at the film studios in Potsdam, near Berlin.

At the time, the newly formed Socialist Unity Party, dominated by the communists, were making life difficult for some and so, in 1950, Moses moved to Schwabing, Munich's bohemian quarter, where he lived with the actors Helmut Fischer and Klaus Kinski.

One of Moses' first important portraits reveals Kinski as painfully youthful and handsome. A coterie of inspiring new minds such as Jean Cocteau, WH Auden and Herbert List passed through his door. It was the turning point in his career, as he describes. 'After the limiting restrictions of a Stalinist doctrine I encountered many free, functioning ideas and much friendly help.' This was the key to where life began for Moses, with a sense of liberation.

German folklore suggests that the forest is perhaps a place of magic, danger and refuge or where heroes and legends meet. In the series

*Die Grossen Alten (The Giants of Old)*, Moses led famous elderly greats into the woods and rooted them, enchantingly, between the trees. Sometimes they seem out of place, as with Willy Brandt in his slick and shiny city suit. The melancholic Brandt, statesman and politician who was exiled in Norway during the war, stands in a forest near Cologne. His gaze allows the viewer in, revealing his conflicting vulnerability and strength.

Then there is the pre-war acting legend Tilla Durieux, theatrically spying through her pince-nez; actor Curt Bois enigmatically has his glasses hanging from one ear and is dressed for the chill; writer Günter Grass shows humour without a smile with two pinecones pressed between his glasses and face.

*Künstler Machen Masken (Artists Make Masks)* is a series in which Moses asked artists to construct a mask and use it within their own picture. In his portrait, artist Otto Dix chooses to peer through a pair of scissors, the handle outlining his eyes – eyes being important in his own work, often boldly drawn with a fixated look. Art collector Peggy Guggenheim glides on her gondola with her Lhasa apso dogs, wearing her iconic butterfly glasses made by Edward Melcarth.

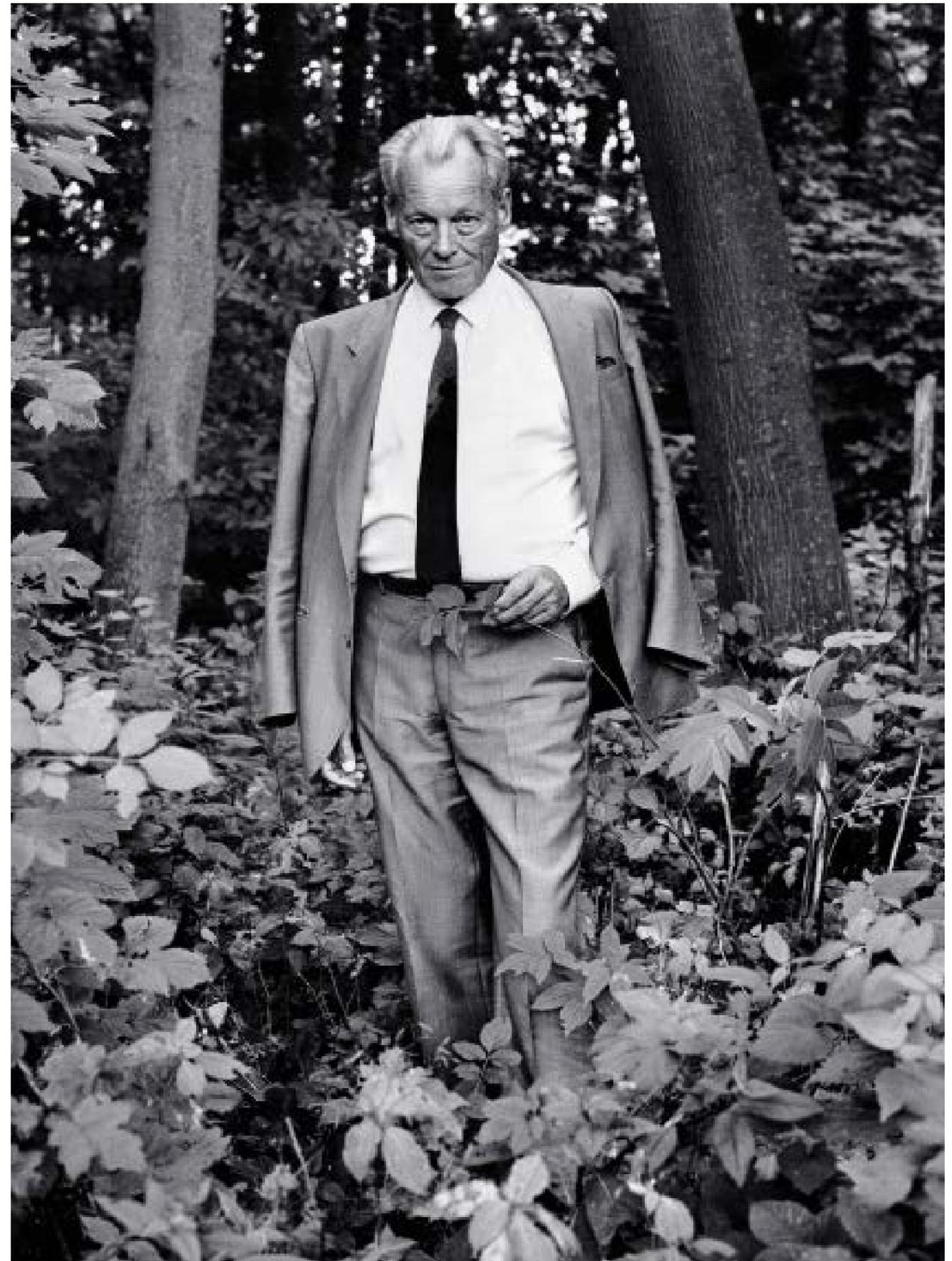
Starting in 1963 he photographed the West German working classes for *Stern* magazine. He used a large neutral canvas, outdoors, which he called his 'magic curtain', a background which isolated his subjects from the world but which allowed them to perform.

His subjects were mostly dressed for work, carrying the symbols of their trade. In *Rollmospackerinnen 1963 (Rollmop Packers 1963)*, three rollmop packers in white aprons hold herrings and a tin of gherkins. 'It takes trust, curiosity and empathy to really understand someone, to communicate with physiognomic tact. And, as always, to save people from getting lost. It is easier to dance with my fellow patients,' he says. He approaches his countrymen with a sensitivity, a curious eye and a profound understanding of human nature.

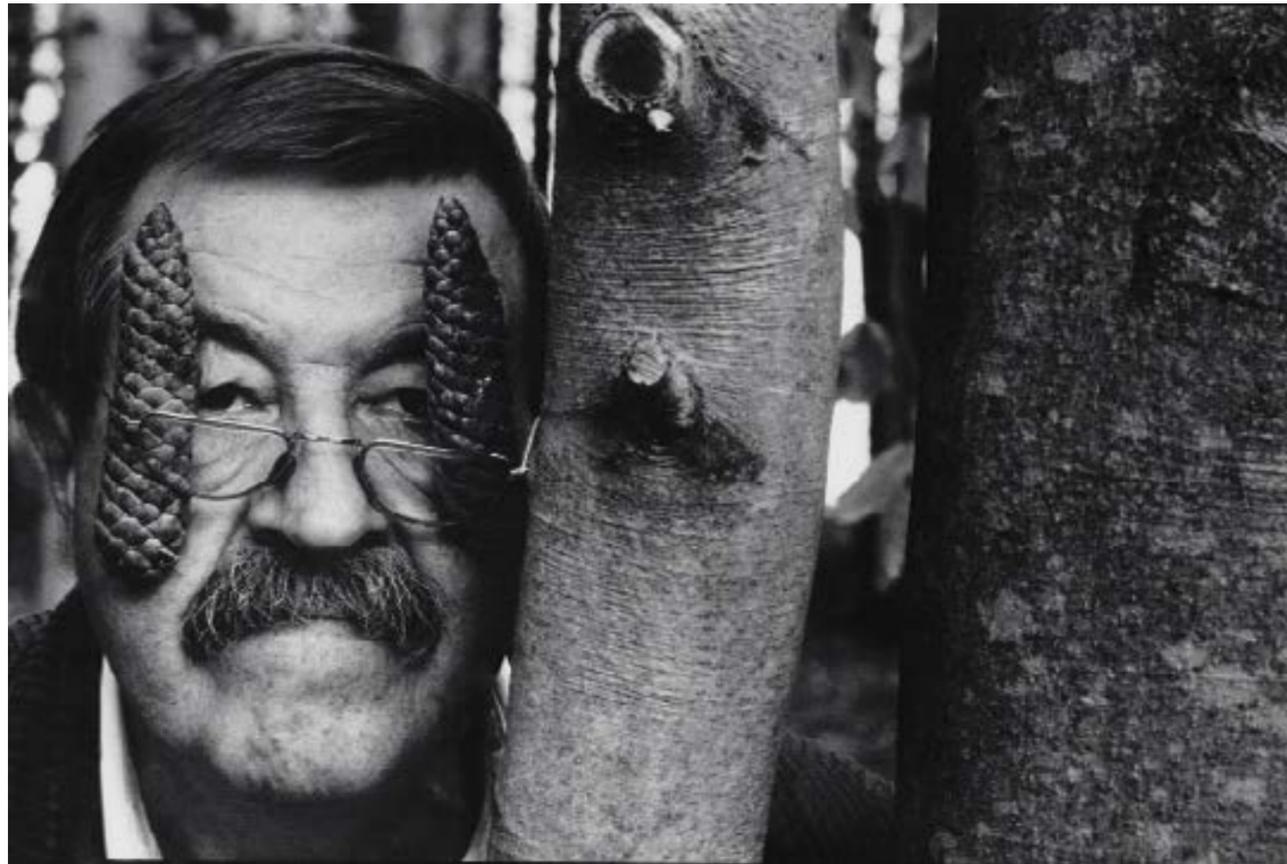
There are influences for these images – Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition, *The Family of Man*, at MoMA. 'It caused great excitement here. Particularly among us young European photographers who, spurred by the enthusiasm and spirit of change coming from the USA, England and France, we wanted to play a role in the new universal language of photography.'

Moses continued this series throughout the 1970s and 80s. With the fall of the Berlin

*'His subjects from across the old border – coalminers, beekeepers, chimney sweeps and cooks, all with the machinery of their profession, stood proud. Moses understood his sitters to be unique, and complex.'*



Willy Brandt, 1983.



Günter Grass, 1996.

OPPOSITE Rollmop packers, 1963.

◀ Wall in 1989, he could photograph the East Germans but he had concerns at the time. 'I had hoped that reunification would happen but it came out of the blue for us all. How would the country, despite its totalitarian wounds, come to terms with the difficulties of becoming new Germans?' His subjects from across the old border – coalminers, beekeepers, chimney sweeps and cooks, all with the machinery of their profession, stood proud. Moses understood his sitters to be unique, and complex.

Moses wheeled out a mirror from a C&A department store in Munich, which started another conceptual series, *Spiegelbilder* (*Mirror Images*). His subjects stood in front of the mirror with a camera on a tripod and a cable release. While they took their self-portrait, Moses photographed them. In his image of sociologist Theodor W Adorno a drama unfolds between the mirror, the sitter and photographer, a disparate view, two worlds in one.

His son Manuel became another subject to photograph. Published as *Manuel*, 1967, the work became a cult book for the 60s generation of parents. It is a poetical record of the boy's young life – timeless,

intimate imagery – Manuel fast asleep after a hard day's play, his first Easter egg hunt, his haircuts, and balancing on the hull of a boat. 'As a child, Manuel saw neither the photographs nor the finished book,' explains Moses. As he grew older, the young man, who had unwittingly become the subject of these archetypal photographs of



Theodor W Adorno, 1963.

happiness, instinctively steered clear of the book that was in a way 'his', but then again not. Nowadays, the 55-year-old searches for first editions online and in bookshops.

Moses journeyed extensively, often for *Stern* magazine, with assignments in Asia, North and South America. He went to Hungary to photograph the revolution in 1956. 'They were the first Europeans to try to free themselves from Soviet repression. I spent a day and a night in the middle of Budapest, taking photographs of the outrage, suffering and violence, to support our neighbours,' he says.

In 1990 Stefan Moses was awarded the David Octavius Hill Award and, a year later, the Cultural Honorary Award of Munich. In 1995 the Munich City Museum, which ranks among the leading collections in Europe, archived 450,000 of his black & white negatives and transparencies, along with 20,000 prints of his work. The Center For Creative Photography in Arizona, one of the most important photographic archives in the world, purchased almost 100 of his photographs from the Deutsche series. In a letter to the curator in 1982, Moses wrote, 'I hope that the American public and visitors to your exhibition will be interested in the Germans.' >





Otto Dix, 1964.

◀ Today Moses still lives in Schwabing, in an apartment given to him by the city of Munich, in gratitude for a lifetime of representing the nation. He reflects, ‘Such were my years –

a lifetime of preserving memories, capturing people before they disappeared.’ He continues to be immersed in his work, exhibiting and reworking his material. ‘I am bound by

photography and will be until I die. I was always a very old child. Nonetheless this era isn’t for old people. As we age, ideas and utopias become obsolete.’

Stefan Moses is one of the most important photographers of the 20th century. If he had been more concerned with celebrity, his profile outside Germany would be very different. That did not appeal and what he photographed was more important. ‘You should only take up one mission in life, so I chose the most interesting, the exploration and familiarisation of my immediate surroundings.’ Germany has been a life issue for Moses and, in his words, the people he photographed ‘shaped 100 years’.



Manuel Moses, 1965.

► Sincere thanks to Johanna Breede at the Johanna Breede Photokunst gallery in Berlin for her help in making this feature possible. Prints by Stefan Moses are available through the gallery ► [johanna-breede.de](http://johanna-breede.de)