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Fondazione 3M

## GHITTA CARELL and the Power of the Portrait

*She photographed only “the best”: aristocrats with their children and aristocratic dogs, poets, writers, intellectual divas, generals, dignitaries, monarchs. She photographed only beautiful people or people she managed to make beautiful: her women always seemed like queens, unapproachable yet exceedingly sweet, her men like dominators, strong and intelligent. It’s only natural that Ghitta Carell was, above all in the Italian thirties, the most sought-after of fashion photographers and portraitists.*

Natalia Aspesi

From **Thursday 18 April to Friday 17 May 2013**, the Pastificio Cerere Foundation presents a vast retrospective dedicated to the renowned portraitist **Ghitta Carell** (1899-1972). Curated by Diego Mormorio, in collaboration with an advisory board presided by Ottavio Celestino, Flavio Misciattelli, Stefano Palumbo and Marcello Smarrelli, the exhibition comprises over 150 photographs that recount the history of an era – the years between the 1930s and 50s – by way of its protagonists.

Initiated and supported by Elsa Peretti, President of the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation, in collaboration with the 3M Foundation – which made the photographs available for the occasion – the exhibition aims to contribute to a reevaluation of the figure of Ghitta Carell within the vital panorama of Italian photography, and Italian culture more broadly. On the one hand, the exhibition investigates the theme of the portrait as a fundamental issue in the history of visual representation and a central concern of modern art, and, on the other, examines the work of Ghitta Carell in relation to Italy’s historical and anthropological developments during the period covered by her activity.

**THE ARTIST** Born in northeast Hungary in 1899, Ghitta Carell received her photographic training in Budapest, at a photography course for “young ladies.” Shortly thereafter, she began to attend the studio of Aladár Székely, a photographer whose collaborators included figures such as the writer Hugó Veigelsberg, aka Ignotus, the poet Endre Ady, and the composer Béla Bartók. Starting with the artists that gathered at Székely’s studio, Carell began to familiarize herself with the intellectual circles of the Hungarian capital, before continuing her photographic apprenticeship in Vienna and Leipzig. In 1924 she moved to Florence, where she socialized with the Central European group concentrated in Fiesole at the house of the sculptor Mark Vedres – a disciple of Rodin, later associated with Cubism and Constructivism – and his wife Matild, an art historian. The Vedres home was not, however, the meeting point of only Central European expatriates, but also of talents such as the musician Luigi Dallapiccola, the writer Alberto Carocci, the sculptor Marino Marini and the art historian Bernard Berenson.

Following the Florentine period, Carell moved to Milan, where she quickly became a highly sought-after photographer, especially popular in financial and aristocratic circles. Her reputation was launched by a 1926 portrait of a child dressed as a *balilla*, used on a propaganda poster. The photograph adorned the walls of the entire nation, and the moment marked the beginning of her ascent to widespread fame. Her renown easily spread to the bourgeoisie, which began to view Carell’s portraits as proof of social status. In the midst of the cult of Rome, Carell moved to the Italian capital, close to Piazza del Popolo, and succeeded in conquering everyone who counted there: Edda and Costanzo Ciano, Benito Mussolini, Alberto Savino, Giovanni Papini, Alba De Cespede, Pope Pius XII, the Gonzaga, Diaz and Borghese families, the Cicognas, the Viscontis, the Colonnas, and so forth. Of Mussolini, she said: “I knew him well and observed him for days sitting at his desk in the Mappamondo room. He was so vain that I could do what I wanted for hours.”

An educated and intelligent woman, she has often been branded *the* interpreter of the world of power, a reputation that her most famous images, taken in the 1930s at the height of the Fascist era, seem to validate. In truth, however, she also photographed ordinary people.

The racial laws enacted in 1938 did not cause her serious problems, but the regime did ask her to avoid drawing too much attention. With the end of the war, her fame was reinstated and all the leaders of the Christian Democracy (from Giulio Andreotti to Giuseppe Saragat, from Giovanni Gronchi to Alcide De Gasperi) stopped to pose under her lights. But she was also the friend and photographer of writers like Cesare Pavese, actresses like Valentina Cortese, journalists like Camilla Cederna and personalities like Walt Disney.

In 1959 Carell became an Italian citizen, but she eventually, and quietly, distanced herself from the country, choosing to reside in Haifa, Israel, where she died in 1972.

Ghitta Carell’s name is widely known, but her reputation and her oeuvre remain heavily marred by clichés and equivocal interpretations.

**THE EXHIBITION** All of Ghitta Carell’s success derived from the composition and the elusiveness of her photographs, the two elements that became the signature of her work. She was an expert retoucher, using a method that consisted in a delicate manipulation of the plates in order to remove shadows, hard edges and voids, thus giving the subjects an air either less surly – for the Fascists – or more seductive, for the socialites.

Despite the new technologies arriving from the United States, Ghitta Carell continued to photograph in her own way – acquired at the photography course for “young ladies” in Budapest – using black and white film, usually with a large format (18x24) camera and less frequently with a 6x6 Rolleiflex.

The exhibition aims to rediscover the work of this artist through a group of 15 original prints and an additional 140 images, almost all of which have been printed for the occasion. The images are presented in thematic groupings: nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, industrialists, intellectuals, politicians, families, common people.

In addition, the exhibition includes a video projection of Carell’s entire output, as well as a selection of vintage magazines in which her portraits were published.

The exhibition is arranged throughout the Pastificio Cerere, occupying the most suggestive spaces of the former industrial building: the original prints are installed in the former grain elevator, now the main exhibition space of the **Pastificio Cerere Foundation**; the photographs of the clergy are in the **Pino Casagrande Gallery**; the female portraits are in the **Pastificio San Lorenzo restaurant**; and the remainder of the work, more substantial in volume, in the **Spazio Cerere**.

This exhibition presents a new occasion to continue experimenting the Pastificio Cerere’s potentialities and strengths as a container for contemporary art, capable of functioning both within the individual spaces that compose it, and as a whole, as it did during the celebrated 1984 exhibition *Ateliers*, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. The desire to be involved in such a significant photography project is in line with the relationship that the Pastificio has always had with this medium – starting, in the 1970s, with the extraordinary presence of Francesca Woodman, who cultivated her inspirations precisely within the walls of this former factory, finding here the ideal backdrops for her most celebrated pictures.

## THE CATALOG

The exhibition **Ghitta Carell and the Power of the Portrait** will be accompanied by the publication of a trilingual catalog (Italian, English and Spanish), with an introductory essay by Diego Mormorio and a substantial illustrated section focused, in particular, on the history of portraiture.

## INFORMATION

### EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

**Exhibition:** *Ghitta Carell*

**Curated by:** Diego Mormorio

**Advisory board:** Ottavio Celestino, Flavio Misciattelli, Stefano Palumbo, Marcello Smarrelli

**Opening:** Thursday 18 April, 19.00 – 21.00

**General opening:** 18 April – 17 May 2013

**Opening times:**

> Pastificio Cerere Foundation, Spazio Cerere, Studio d’Arte Contemporanea Pino Casagrande  
Monday to Friday, 15.00 – 19.00

> Ristorante San Lorenzo: Every day, 19.00 – 02.00

**Admission:** Free

**Location:** Pastificio Cerere Foundation, via degli Ausoni 7, Rome

**Getting there:** Metro Termini (line A), Metro Tiburtina (line B), bus 71

### CONTACTS

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