

Wall Text

The Lost World of ERNST BRUNNER Photographs 1937-1962

A carpenter by training, Ernst Brunner became one of Switzerland's most important documentary photographers during and after the Second World War. With his camera, he captured a world of hard-working peasants and farm laborers far removed from the ideal of pastoral life presented to Switzerland's tourists today. Brunner's photographs are exceptional as both ethnographic documents and artistic creations and parallel the documentary work done by American FSA photographers. They represent a world that has since completely disappeared but the images were of tremendous political significance at the time, bolstering nationalism. A recent rediscovery, Brunner's photographs are now returning to this city, after their first New York presentation in Edward Steichen's seminal exhibit "Family of Man" at The Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

In 1944, even Switzerland experienced some of the more direct effects of World War II. In Schaffhausen, on the border of Germany, an Allied bomb killed forty people. Food shortages increased dramatically, and a sense of fear and exhaustion pervaded the country. At the same time in southern Switzerland, seemingly unaffected by world events around him, the photographer Ernst Brunner continued work on his photo essay "A Bridge for Someo," documenting the construction of a small footbridge across a little stream to the village of Someo. Intermittently, between calls to army duty, Brunner continued his photographic work, most often for the illustrated magazine *Swiss Home*. Series such as this one—and many others that were published in Swiss magazines at the time—illustrate the enormous stretch between an outside world at war, and the concerns of everyday life of many Swiss.

Throughout the war years, Brunner pursued his interest in simple farm life. The result is a portrait of Switzerland during the Second World War, one that is quite oblivious to the War's repercussions for the world outside Swiss borders and therefore all the more serviceable for political purposes. Brunner's photographs were tremendously popular, as they showed average citizens in their struggle to continue ordinary life, describing in respectful terms their efforts to maintain that life in the face of disaster and death.

Born in 1901 in Mettmenstetten, a village of 1,400 people in central Switzerland, Brunner was the son of a carpenter. He studied in Nurnberg at the School of Carpentry from 1923 to 1925, and later in Zurich at the School of Applied Arts, which was then heavily influenced by Bauhaus ideas. Unable to pursue his modern aesthetic ideas in his father's shop in the countryside, Brunner moved to Lucerne and studied to become a draftsman. But during the Depression of the mid-thirties, the entire construction and real estate market suffered greatly, as in the rest of Europe, and by 1936, Brunner had become unemployed. Like many other communities in Europe and the United States, the City of Lucerne offered training for the unemployed. Brunner was assigned to the photographic registration of historic buildings.

Quite independent of the political requirements of the day—but serving them successfully with his regular contributions to important weekly magazines—Ernst Brunner had always favored the simple country life with its traditional forms of agriculture and old-fashioned customs. Usually on foot, Brunner crossed Switzerland from the north to the south, from the east to the west, across fields, rivers and the Alps. He explored hidden corners of the country, deeply fascinated by the cultural pockets he stumbled across, far from city life.

Brunner's photographs are straightforward black-and-white documents, free of an overt aesthetic angle, and focusing on the clearest possible registration of the subject at hand. In that sense, Brunner's work can be compared to the work done by his contemporaries in the United States. The Farm Security Administration with its photographic subgroup, the Historical Unit, employed many photographers, among them Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, foremost for the documentation of the plight of the farmer.

After some critical success in the 1950's, Ernst Brunner began to focus on architectural preservation. He founded the Society for the Preservation of the Lucerne Farmstead, and with his camera catalogued many thousands of houses. He also began collecting farm instruments that were being discarded, leading to the foundation of a farm museum at Burgrain in 1974.

Brunner was never sentimental or nostalgic about the past. From his diaries and his published texts, it becomes apparent that it was a rather practical approach that led him to believe that one needs history in order to progress. He was most interested in this balance between the past and the present, between the little cottage industry that survives in a forgotten corner of society and society-at-large, between people and the environment: A balance that is a tenuous one at best.

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It was curated for its New York venue by Peter Pfrunder.*