

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5976

Morrison, Hedda

(1908 - 1991)

Born 19081213, Stuttgart Baden-Württemberg Germany

Died 19911203, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia

Occupation Photographer

Summary

Hedda Morrison was an ethnographic photographer who worked extensively in China, Borneo and later Australia, where she settled in 1967. She was influenced by *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or the 'new realist' style. Morrison's photographs were widely disseminated in books, including the seminal *Sarawak: Vanishing World*, and *Travels of a Photographer*. Morrison was a resourceful photographer, using two car batteries to power her portable enlarger while without power for six years in Sarawak, and storing her negatives in an airtight chest using silica gel as a drying agent to overcome the perils of a tropical climate. Morrison worked largely in black and white, except for in the early 1950s.

Details

Hedda Morrison worked extensively in China and Borneo in the period 1933-67. She moved to Australia later in her life and settled in Canberra where she died in 1991. She was well known for her photographic work in Asia, which was considered ethnographic in its focus. Morrison's photographs were widely distributed in the form of books. Two of her major publications include: *Sarawak: Vanishing World* (1957) and *Travels of a Photographer in China, 1933-46* (1987).

She was born Hedwig Hammer in Stuttgart, Germany in 1908. Her father worked for a publishing company and the family enjoyed a comfortable existence in a large house. Her only sibling, a brother, was the favourite in the family. In 1911, aged only three, she contracted polio, which left her a cripple with ongoing health problems. Following a major operation, which she had as a teenager, she was able to gain some mobility, walking with a limp (as her right leg was shorter than her left); she needed to wear specially designed shoes to get about. This however did not deter her from pursuing her interest in travel.

Morrison was given her first camera, a Box Brownie, when she was 11 years old. It gave her so much pleasure that she was inspired to set up a small darkroom in the family bathroom. In 1929 she completed her secondary school education at the Queen Katherine Convent in Stuttgart and then moved to Austria to study medicine at the University of Innsbruck. Dissatisfied with medicine, she convinced her parents to allow her to study photography instead and in September 1930 she moved to Munich, enrolling in the Bavarian State Institute for Photography. Morrison completed the two-year course, her final certificate referring to her outstanding outdoor photography skills and the fact that she had received third prize in a student competition.

As a student she became familiar with the 'new realist' (Neue Sachlichkeit) photographic style of the time, which was characterised by the capturing of close up shots of everyday objects. It was a style that was to influence the photography she produced in her later career. Some of her earliest works, especially those taken while she was still a student, embodied this style and they were published in a book entitled *Making Pottery* by the potter Walter de Sager. For the book she documented the various stages of his work by focusing on close up shots of the potter's hands.

With little work available for photographers during the Depression years, Morrison volunteered to work at the studio of Adolf Lazi in Stuttgart. The studio specialised in architectural, portrait, landscape and advertising photography in the 'new objectivist' style that in Weimar Germany was the photographic manifestation of modernism. Only 44 negatives have survived from this era. All were portraits and all were entitled 'Trachtenfest' (folk costume festival) and dated Stuttgart 1931. She kept these negatives with her throughout her life taking them with her from Germany to China and Borneo and then to Australia. They reflected her interest in capturing details, shapes, textures, but also her lifelong interest in the exotic.

Morrison spent five months in Hamburg. Aware of the rising strength of the Nazi Party and its policy of co-opting photographers for their propaganda campaigns, she decided to travel to Yugoslavia. These plans did not eventuate as she saw an advertisement in a German photography journal for a photography position in China. Even though she knew practically nothing about China, she submitted an application and was successful.

In 1933 she arrived in Peking and immediately began working as manager of the Hartung Photo Shop, a German owned commercial photography studio. The position required coordinating the work of the 17 Chinese photographers who worked in the studio. The studio was well-established and the clientele powerful, being for the most part diplomats and foreign residents; indeed, the studio was situated in the diplomatic quarter of the city in a two storey building at 3 Legation Street, East Peking. She held this position for five years, after which she worked as a freelance photographer from her home in Nanchang Street. The photographs she produced were theme-based, encompassing handicrafts, temples, imperial palaces, 'lost tribes,' and so on. An especially popular line of work she offered was whole albums filled with her photographs. Her European clients would either order an album or make selections of their own.

From 1938-40 she worked for Caroline Frances Bieber (a wealthy British woman), who was a dealer in Chinese arts and crafts for the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Morrison's knowledge about China was invaluable to Bieber and the partnership proved financially beneficial to Morrison. It was through this connection that she met an American writer by the name of Beatrice Kates. Kates, Bieber and Morrison worked on a project together documenting Chinese household furniture and the group finally published a book in New York in 1948. Morrison took photographs for the book in 1937-1938, with George Kates (Beatrice Kates brother, who was the director of the Brooklyn Museum in New York) writing the text.

Morrison produced two major books relating to her time in China. Both were aimed at capturing the 'Old Peking' that Westerners enjoyed reminiscing over, and they ignored the changing nature of the city, in particular those aspects of life relating to the social, political and economic impact of the Japanese occupation. Nor were the poverty, civil unrest and social conflict that resulted from the Japanese occupation depicted in these books.

Hedda Hammer, as she was then called, met Alastair Morrison (an Australian) in 1940, and in 1946 they married in Peking but left the country soon after due to the increasing political unrest in China. They travelled to Hong Kong where they stayed for six months and then moved to Borneo, where they settled on the island of Sarawak. Alastair worked for the British Colonial Service, eventually being appointed as the district officer of Sarawak, the Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. During 1960-1966, Hedda worked for the Information Office in Kuching, in the photographic section on a part-time basis. Her work involved training government photographers, setting up a photographic library and taking photographs. In 1965 the Sarawak Government awarded her the Pegawai Bintang Sarawak (Officer of the Order of the Star of Sarawak) for her work.

She apparently did not see herself as a photojournalist. Instead, she felt her work had an ethnographic emphasis, her focus being to depict traditional cultures in the process of change. In line with this her subjects included landscapes, architecture, portraits, and handicrafts.

She produced two major books during the time spent in Sarawak, the first entitled *Sarawak* (1957) and the second *Life in a Longhouse* (1962). These documented the traditional lifestyle and culture of the Iban people who live on Sarawak. They are ethnographic books capturing the people's traditional practices and documenting the changes brought about by the British Colonial administration as well as the Malaysian Government. Hedda Morrison recalled that, '[w]henver I visited longhouses I was conscious of the fact that the longhouse way of life is in the course of changing. I have tried to record faithfully in photographs whatever was typical of people, and which might not be there to photograph at all for very much longer' (Powerhouse 9). Morrison had a strong affinity with Asian people. She was known to be respectful and polite and was able to convince people to allow her to enter their homes so as to take the photographs she had in mind.

In 1967 the Morrisons moved to Canberra, Australia, and Hedda continued her photography, producing 24 albums of photographs as part of her *Views of Australia 1961-1988*. These captured views of the ACT, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, the subjects including public buildings, suburbs, people and landscapes.

Hedda Morrison died in Canberra, in 1991, aged 82 and a year later her husband, Alastair Morrison donated an important collection of her photographic works to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

In 1995, eight of her photographs capturing the Flinders Ranges (c.1971) were included in the *Beyond the Picket Fence* exhibition held at the National Library of Australia.

An exhibition entitled *Old Peking: Photographs by Hedda Morrison 1933-46* was held at the Art Museum of the China Millennium Monument, Beijing in May – June 2002 and at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney in November – December 2002.

Technical

Morrison's first camera was a Box Brownie. She went on to use a 6 x 6 cm twin lens Rollei camera for most of her shots and this was to become her favourite camera. On arriving in China she used a 9 x 12 cm Linhof hand camera which she kept throughout her life.

She was known for her inventiveness and whilst in Sarawak used two car batteries to power her portable enlarger as they were without power for six years. She kept her negatives in an airtight chest using silica gel as a drying agent to overcome the perils of a tropical climate.

Morrison worked largely in black and white, except for in the early 1950s. She found that the Ektachrome 120 format roll film which was widely used up until that time, was limiting and it also faded.

Collections

Division of Rare Book and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University. Over 5 thousand of Hedda Morrison's photographs are held in this collection, encompassing the period 1933-1946 that she spent in Beijing

Hedda Morrison, Views of Australia, 1961-1988, National Library of Australia
<https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1585946>

National Gallery of Australia

Hedda Morrison photographic collection, Powerhouse Museum

Hedda Morrison, Germany/China/Sarawak, 1928-1968 archive, Powerhouse Museum

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia

Portraits of Hedda and Alastair Morrison, and a photograph of their wedding in Peking, 1946 [picture] / Reg Alder, National Library of Australia
<https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1585592>

Events

1965 - 1965

Hedda Morrison was awarded the Pegawai Bintang Sarawak (Officer of the Order of the Star of Sarawak) for her work by the Sarawak Government.

1931 - 1931

Hedda Morrison won third prize in a student competition State Institute for Photography

1930 - 1988

Hedda Morrison worked in China, Borneo and Australia.

1940 - 1940

Hedda Morrison's Chinese Photographs

1986 - 1986

Hedda Morrison's work featured in An Asian Experience: 1933-6, organised by the Asian Studies Association of Australia.

1995 - 1995

Hedda Morrison's work featured in Beyond the Picket Fence.

1993 - 1993

Hedda Morrison's work featured in In Her View: The Photographs of Hedda Morrison in China and Sarawak 1933-67.

1994 - 1994

Hedda Morrison's work featured in In Her View: The Photographs of Hedda Morrison in China and Sarawak 1933-67.

2002 - 2002

Hedda Morrison's work featured in Old Peking: Photographs by Hedda Morrison 1933-46.

2002 - 2002

Hedda Morrison's work featured in Old Peking: Photographs by Hedda Morrison 1933-46.

1967 - 1967

Hedda Morrison's work featured in Peking: 1933-1946 – A Photographic Impression

1990 - 1990

Hedda Morrison's work featured in Travels of an Extraordinary Photographer: Hedda Morrison – A Retrospective Exhibition, organised by the Canberra Photographic Society.

1955 - 1955

Hedda Morrison's work was included in The Family of Man at the Museum of Modern Art.

1949 - 1949

Photographs by Hedda Morrison.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

The Family of Life UNESCO Memory of the World, Steichen, Edward,
<http://www.steichencollections.lu/en/The-Family-of-Man>

Book

Nanking, Hoffman, Alfred and Morrison, Hedda, 1945

Chinese Household Furniture, Kates, George N. and Morrison, Hedda, 1948

Children of Melugu, Morrison, Hedda, 1969

Life in a Longhouse, Morrison, Hedda, 1962

A Photographer in Old Peking, Morrison, Hedda, 1985

Sarawak, Morrison, Hedda, 1965

Travels of a Photographer in China, Morrison, Hedda, 1987

Vanishing World: The Ibans of Borneo, Wright, Leigh R., 1972

Fair Land Sarawak, Morrison, Alistair, 1993

Women Photographers at National Geographic, Newman, Cathy, c2000

Journal Article

Craftsmen in a Harsh Environment, Morrison, Hedda

Educating the Peoples of Sarawak, Morrison, Hedda

Jungle Journeys in Sarawak, Morrison, Hedda

The Lost Tribe of China, Morrison, Hedda

Some Musical Instruments of China, Morrison, Hedda

Tribal Crafts of Borneo, Morrison, Hedda

Chinese Toggles: A Little Known Folk Art, Morrison, Hedda and Morrison, Alistair

Hedda Morrison in Peking, Morrison, Alistair,
http://www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/04/EAH04_03.pdf

In Her View: Hedda Morrison's Photographs of Peking, 1933-46, Roberts, Claire,
http://www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/04/EAH04_03.pdf

Archival resources

Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences

[Hedda Morrison photographic archive](#)

Harvard-Yenching Library

[The Hedda Morrison Photographs of China 1933-1946](#)

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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