

## A history captured in smiles



Mathesie's works provide a brief anthropological summary of Kreuzberg, Germany.

By **Mariam Hamdy** February 25, 2009, 2:00 am

German Culture Center Goethe Institute is currently hosting an exhibition of a refreshingly simple collection of studio portraits charting renowned German photographer Charlotte Mathesie's lifelong career via her work.

Charlotte Mathesie opened her photography atelier in Berlin in 1945. Determined to follow in her father's footsteps, Mathesie became the youngest professional photographer at the age of 23 despite the financial difficulties she faced in the wake of the World War II.

The atelier was managed by her father, Max, prior to 1945. The works the atelier produced were somehow monotonous, succumbing to the basic requirements of the clients of Kreuzberg, the small town where the atelier was located.

Mathesie's drive eventually propelled her to become one of the most famous photographers of the region, and through the past six decades, she has managed to preserve more than 300,000 negatives of her works. In 1993, all negatives were printed and moved to the Kreuzberg Museum, becoming a historical archive of the area.

Mathesie's photographs don't represent a personal artistic expression as one might anticipate but rather the result of the best possible service she managed to provide her clients. Conservative in nature, the photographs are focused on showing their subjects at their best, perhaps even more so.

The show hosts several posters on which Mathesie's photography has been grouped according to subject matter: Women in flower print dresses, men with cigarettes, couples, children, siblings and even dogs.

Each photograph carries a date underneath it, and the dates are what drives one's mind to reel.

Starting from the late 1940s to the mid-70s, the pictures show startling differences of hairstyles, clothes and even poses. Viewed in chronological order, the works provide a brief anthropological summary of the area, down to the level of immigrants who have settled there.

The beauty of the exhibit is that nothing feels too stagy or art-directed, yet, and in spite of itself, it's exactly just that. The subjects of the photos are working men and women, all of whom wanted to look like movie stars or to capture a moment that was far from their real lives; and it's easy to sense the excitement of the "make-believe experience Mathesie offered them.

Their poses are statuesque and unnatural, but the noticeable lack of comfort is not dissimilar to those you see in wedding ceremonies or graduation photos. There is something quite charming about the genuine innocence behind the blatant posing at which one could not help but smile.

Mathesie admits to retouching the photographs, yet she maintained a very formal and classic approach to her subjects.

Having only introduced color to her work in 1973, the transition from black and white to color was abrupt and scarring: perhaps a commentary on the period as well as on the less-than-smooth transition of art from classic to ultra modern. Predominantly using a green background of cloth, the later works resemble more contemporary approaches at the time, albeit unintentionally.

Mathesie's journey ends in the late 70s, giving the audience's interest to envision what the 80s, 90s and today's



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Mathesie's journey ends in the late 70s, piquing the audience's interest to envision what the 60s, 70s and today's photography would have looked like had she decided to capture them in her own unique way.

I must note that many of our contemporary studio photographers today strive for the authenticity that Mathesie effortlessly captured in her photographs, which is where her talent as a photographer lies. Her work does not rely on effects or a style, but rather on her genuine effort in portraying her subjects.

The show pushes the audience to consider for a moment this dying art of studio photography. With the incessant use of digital cameras, it would be interesting to see how Charlotte Mathesie's studio would've continued to operate, if at all. The Goethe Institute has allowed us, through Mathesie's career and life's work, to believe that it in fact could after all.

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