



# UMBO BIOGRAPHY

## 1902-1933

UMBO was born in Düsseldorf on 18 January 1902 as Otto Maximilian Umbehrr, the second of ten children of an architect and a teacher. In 1915 UMBO was given a 9 x 12 folding camera for Christmas. In 1916 he and three friends founded a "Wandervogel" back-to-nature youth group. In 1920 he was briefly involved in the Kapp Putsch as a temporary volunteer, dropped out of school and set off on his travels. He worked at a colliery, began an apprenticeship in an art pottery in Goslar, and joined a mystery play group in April 1921 and shortly afterwards the life reformer Friedrich Muck-Lamberty. In autumn 1921 UMBO was accepted at the State Bauhaus in Weimar and completed the preliminary course under Johannes Itten. In 1923 he had to leave the school prematurely, moving to Berlin. He worked as an unskilled labourer, house painter, cinema poster painter, clown, errand boy and tripod guide in film. In 1925 he helped Walter Ruttmann and Lore Leudesdorff in their work in the animation studio. In 1926 or 1927 he produced collages as models for posters for Ruttmann's film "Berlin – Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt (Berlin – Symphony of a Metropolis)". UMBO slept in parks and in the Berlin Ringbahn railway coaches. In December 1926 he was taken in by his Bauhaus friend Paul Citroen. They took photographs of themselves and of friends. He was able to rent a room for himself from the proceeds of these pictures. In the spring of 1927 his first published pictures made him famous overnight. Towards the end of the year, the playwright and amateur photographer Karl Vollmoeller gave him a modern camera. UMBO started to concentrate increasingly on the 'city' as his subject matter. In 1928 he participated in the exhibition "Photo – Painting – Architecture" at the private Berlin art school of his Bauhaus teacher Johannes Itten, and in the following years in all other ground-breaking photographic exhibitions. His pictures were published in numerous magazines, periodicals and books. He took on advertising assignments, while teaching photography at Itten's art school. At the end of 1928 UMBO became the first photo reporter of the "DEUPHOT" "picture agency founded by Simon Guttman, then "Dephot" (later "Degephot"). In 1928 and 1929 he produced reportages in consultation with Guttman, which established the agency's innovative reputation. In 1932, exhibitions at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York showed works by UMBO, among others.

## 1933-1945

After Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, the German publishing houses from which the agencies received their commissions became instruments of conformist propaganda. Many colleagues, including Simon Guttman, left Germany. "Degephot", formerly "Dephot", was wound up. UMBO supported activities of a resistance group under the communist workers' photographer Ernst Thormann and is presumed to have been involved in illegal activities of the Communist International. Erika Koch, a Jew, was an apprentice under UMBO from October 1933 before emigrating in 1936. Photographically, UMBO stuck to familiar themes, mainly picturing artists and urban leisure activities. In 1935 and 1936, he tested the so-called sky camera on behalf of the Berlin AEG. Through the agency of his old "Dephot" colleague Harald Lechenberg, UMBO signed a guarantee contract with the Deutscher (formerly Ullstein-) Verlag publishing house in 1938. For 500 Reichsmark per month, he gave the publishing house the right of first refusal for all of his pictures. His photographs were published in such magazines as "Der Stern", "Modewelt", "Volk und Welt", "die neue linie", "Die Koralle", "Neue Jugend", "Signal", "Erika" and "Berliner Illustrierte". As a freelancer for the magazine "Signal", UMBO was classified as "indispensable" in the summer of 1940 and exempted from military



service. UMBO also worked for Forum Verlag, which mainly published foreign propaganda magazines with predominantly cultural and economic policy content for foreign forced labourers in Germany. In February 1943, shortly before starting service with the armed forces as a result of general mobilisation, UMBO married Irmgard Wanders. Six months later, UMBO's flat and studio were destroyed in a bombing raid. In 1972, UMBO listed his lost business assets as follows:

1. Photo collection from all over the world
2. 10,500 plate and plan films of cultural and historical events from 1927-1943
3. Photo prints of these negative plates
4. Text documents
5. Newspaper clippings of events
6. Document archive of published works
7. 12,000 18 x 24 enlargements
8. Colour photos, about 500 in [slide] frames, 2,000 unframed, mostly unpublished..."

### 1945-1980

After the end of the war UMBO awaited his wife's return to Hannover in the summer of 1945. A friend gave him a Leica, and another lent him an enlarger. UMBO lost his left eye in an accident during renovation work in his future apartment. Until autumn 1947 UMBO was a staff member of the "Hannoversche Volksstimme" newspaper founded by the KPD and offered his photographs to other newspapers appearing in Hannover. Until the mid-1950s, for example, he worked for the news magazine "Der Spiegel", founded in Hannover in early 1947. In October his daughter Phyllis was born. In 1947 and 1948 he took pictures at refugee camps in Lower Saxony and of the vocational school established in Bergen-Belsen for young Jews liberated from the concentration camp. UMBO started photographing for the Kestner-Gesellschaft and remained closely associated with it for decades. Between 1950 and 1951, he produced several reportages for the Picture Post with the assistance of Simon Guttmann and his agency "Report" in London. In 1950, UMBO and his wife separated. In 1952 UMBO took pictures during a three-month trip to the USA at the invitation of the US government. He returned to debts and a no longer functional laboratory. From 1957 until his retirement 14 years later, UMBO held teaching positions at the Lower Saxony Vocational School for the Disabled in Bad Pyrmont, at Hannover's School of Arts and Crafts and at four grammar schools. UMBO's work was gradually rediscovered in the 1970s. His Bauhaus friend Paul Citroen returned about 40 works that UMBO had given him in the 1920s. In 1978 Rudolf Kicken assured the artist that, in collaboration with UMBO's daughter Phyllis, he would preserve the photographer's work for the public in Germany. In 1979 the Spectrum Photogalerie at the Kunstmuseum Hannover staged UMBO's first solo exhibition after 1945 with the Sammlung Sprengel (today Sprengel Museum Hannover). UMBO died on 12 May 1980 in Hannover. In 1995/96 the exhibition "UMBO. From Bauhaus to Photojournalism" under Herbert Molderings' curatorship was held at seven exhibition venues, including the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hannover. In 1996, the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Berlinische Galerie and Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau jointly acquired UMBO's estate.