

Album

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIOT ELISOFON

Top from left, "Untitled, from Playgrounds for Manhattan," 1938; "Untitled, most likely Anna Sokolow," circa 1937; center, "Model and Crane," 1937; bottom from left, "Luminous Paint for Safety During Blackout," 1942; "Circus," 1940; "Ladders Under Manhattan Bridge," 1938; "Antique Shop, 53rd St. Between 6th and 7th Ave.," circa 1937.



New York, to His Scale

THE QUIET STILLNESS of Eliot Elisofon's pictures of New York can be deceiving. Mr. Elisofon, who died in 1973 at age 61, was neither quiet nor still. An early member of the Photo League and a staff photographer for Life magazine from 1940 to 1964, he called himself the "world's greatest photographer" and hired a publicist to spread the word. He was a painter, writer, teacher, chef, cookbook author and traveler who by his estimate logged two million miles, including at least nine journeys across Africa. Smithsonian magazine called him the "real 'Most Interesting Man in the World,'" and Gen. George S. Patton called him simply Hellzapoppin'.

Yet his early photographs of New York in the 1930s and early 1940s, which are part of an exhibition at the Gitterman Gallery on East 57th Street until April 18, have not been shown in more than half a century and display a side of his work that is less known. "He's been in mothballs for such a long time," said his older daughter, Elin Elisofon, an artist who lives in Maine. Like other members of the Photo League, Mr. Elisofon (pronounced EL-eh-sof-en), a child of immigrants on the Lower East Side, believed that photography could be an instrument of social change, just by showing people the world as it was. But in these images, he created a world of his own design.

To view them is to wonder as much about the man behind the camera as the subjects in front of it. The city's scale, so pressing in much of the work of the Photo League, is nowhere in these pictures. The boy making a play space of an isolated concrete block and the woman extending her black-gloved arm in a visual rhyme with the industrial crane behind her could be giants or toys, finding their weight only within the pictures' frame.

Ms. Elisofon said her father never displayed any of his photographs at home, though the walls teemed with his watercolors or artwork that he collected. "He and Gordon Parks were the two renaissance men at Life," she said. The early images show his "painterly" side, she said, adding, "He really loved being alive, and his work showed that." JOHN LELAND

LENS: For more of Eliot Elisofon's New York photographs: nytimes.com/lens

