

Press Information

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Herlinde Koelbl: Angela Merkel Portraits 1991–2021

Photography exhibition, opening 29 April 2022 at the
Deutsches Historisches Museum



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When Angela Merkel's tenure as German chancellor came to a close in autumn 2021, it also marked the end of a unique project for photographer Herlinde Koelbl. For three decades, the artist repeatedly took the portrait of someone who became one of the most powerful politicians in the world. Koelbl first photographed Merkel in 1991, just after she had assumed the post of Federal Minister for Women and Youth in Helmut Kohl's cabinet, in the year after reunification. The last portrait dates from 2021, when Merkel's sixteen-year term as chancellor came to an end.



Deutsches Historisches Museum

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In unusually calm and intimate close-ups, Koelbl captured the image of a politician who would gradually evolve into a much-photographed media figure. Here, however, there are no symbols of power to distract our gaze from the sitter herself. Few could ever have predicted Merkel's rise. Before her, only men had held the offices of chancellor, president, or foreign minister in the Federal Republic of Germany. And prior to the founding of the current republic, all government posts had been in male hands, just as the Prussian crown, for instance, had always passed to the oldest male successor. Merkel was the first female head of government in German history.

With its new photography exhibition, **Herlinde Koelbl: Angela Merkel Portraits 1991–2021**, on view from **29 April to 4 September 2022**, the Deutsches Historisches Museum invites visitors to trace the stepping stones and milestones of Merkel's political career up to the closing chapter of her time as Germany's first female chancellor. There isn't a long-term portrait series like it that records the rise of any other such politician on the global stage. What we see are close-ups that not only document an extreme physical and psychological transformation over time but also an unusual encounter between statesperson and photographer.

Statement from **Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum**: "As a history museum, we are particularly interested in this remarkable long-term series because, in German history and politics, there is no other female leader to compare her with. In Angela Merkel, our visitors come face to face with a German politician whose career knows no parallel. And what's more, Herlinde Koelbl has succeeded in capturing this quality in her photographs in a unique way."

Statement from **Herlinde Koelbl, photo artist and curator of the exhibition**: "I quickly got a sense of Angela Merkel's inner strength and her independence of spirit, which is why I selected her in 1991 to appear in my long-term photographic study. I always photographed her with a clear concept in mind: just the head, sitting or standing. There were no instructions on my part either, except: Be open when you look at me. These encounters of ours were always special. Even when she was under great pressure, she always kept our appointments. Maybe, as a scientist, she saw documenting her own transformation as some kind of experiment."

Displayed alongside the 60 portraits are telling quotes uttered by Merkel herself, as well as listening stations and a video collage of excerpts from interviews that Herlinde Koelbl conducted with Angela Merkel in the years 1991 to 1998. Her answers to the question repeated at each sitting in the nineties – "What have you learned?" – trace how Merkel gradually found her feet in the male-dominated political arena.

In 1999, the DHM presented a photography exhibition called "Spuren der Macht" (Traces of Power), for which Herlinde Koelbl portrayed fifteen figures from the world of politics, business, and the media over the period 1991 to 1998. It was on the back of this project that Koelbl chose to continue her series with Merkel. The result is a thirty-year chronicle of what has become known as the "Merkel era".

Barrier-free access to the exhibition is ensured. The photobook *Herlinde Koelbl. Angela Merkel: Portraits 1991–2021* is available from [Taschen](#).

Herlinde Koelbl is one of Germany's most renowned photographic artists. She is best known for her long-term photographic projects that often incorporate in-depth conversations and video recordings.