

Press release
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Progress as a Promise: Industrial Photography in Divided Germany

From 10 February 2023 at the German Historical Museum

In the European Month of Photography Berlin (EMOP Berlin)



Dramatically lit factories, glowing steel, seemingly endless conveyor belts, broad smiles on sooty faces: the stock-in-trade of industrial photography is the promise of more and better. Better working conditions and a better standard of living. More attractive, more functional, more plentiful consumer goods. In short, progress. Photography is itself a product of industrialisation, and photographers have been capturing the world of work since the 1850s. In the process they have forged a specific visual canon.

The German Historical Museum continues its series of photography exhibitions in 2023 with **Progress as a Promise: Industrial Photography in Divided Germany**, which will run from **10 February to 29 May 2023**. The exhibition shows photographs taken for industrial enterprises in East and West Germany between 1949 and 1990.

In this exhibition, the photographs are shown for the first time in the contexts in which they were originally used, the diverse print media of the steel, chemical, textile and car industries. They originate from the DHM's own collection and 40 archives and museums. The curators, Stefanie Regina Dietzel and Carola Jüllig, reveal the ideas associated with the historic visual sources, drawing out differences and similarities between East and West in the depictions of progress – and thus in the promise of a better life.

The photographs are a product of their time. While West Germany experienced an unprecedented economic boom from the 1950s, the East German economy was heading for bankruptcy by the 1980s. Such commissioned photographs were always produced to communicate a message – about the enterprise, the industry, the nation and its people. They do not necessarily tell us a great deal about real working conditions or the actual state of industry. What they show is a staged reality designed to convey promises of progress and narratives of growth.



Deutsches Historisches Museum

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As a medium showcasing technical progress and industrial dynamism, the roughly 500 photographs span a broad spectrum of motifs: from workers, processes and machines to the industrial complex itself. Taken by freelance and in-house photographers, the images were used in works magazines, advertising brochures, product catalogues, commemorative publications and trade fair displays. Their function: to attract customers, inform investors and recruit staff – and to impress rivals.

The exhibition presents the work of renowned industrial photographers like Ludwig Windstosser and Wolfgang G. Schröter alongside previously unseen photographs by often nameless in-house photographers. The selection covers Germany's biggest manufacturing sectors – steel, chemicals, textiles and car-making – with a prologue on coal, as the historical foundation of modern industry.

One of the most surprising findings is the continuity of the visual language and motifs, which remains astonishingly constant across the four decades and between the two Germanys. Mining is illustrated by gritty images – mostly in black-and-white – connoting darkness and hard physical labour. Iron and steel is characterised by flying sparks and glowing metal. Seemingly endless rows of spinning machines typify the textile industry, with colourful substances in glassware serving the same function for the chemicals sector. These devices often originate in the early days of the respective industry. That is the dilemma of the genre. Conveying industry and innovative in comprehensible forms means drawing on bold but familiar visual traditions.

The exhibition is part of **the 10th EMOP Berlin – European Month of Photography**, which runs from 2 to 31 March 2023.

A comprehensive catalogue (256 pages, 280 illustrations, in German) has been published by Hatje Cantz. The exhibition is accompanied by educational events, discussions and a cinema programme.