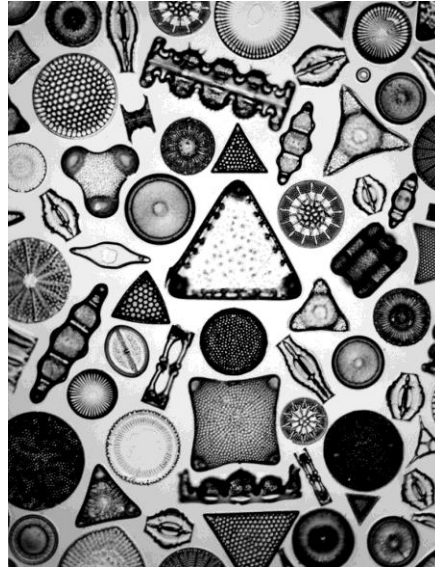


WIRED

The Designer Who Peered Into Microscopes and Saw High Art

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CARL STRÜWE TOOK only two kinds of photographs. The first was typical enough: Italian sculpture and architecture he saw on vacation. The second was far less typical: close-ups of diatoms, butterfly wings, snail tongue, whalebone—all taken through a microscope.

By simply zooming in, Strüwe took the familiar and made it alien. The German photographer wasn't the first to place the lens of a camera into the eyepiece of a microscope, but in the 1920s, he was among the first to do so as art rather than science.

The view from a typical microscope is circular. Strüwe cut out paper and stuck it inside his microscope to create a rectangular view. "It was to draw a distinction between what we usually see and use for science and the way we see images in art," says Anais Feyeux, who is curating an exhibition of Strüwe's work next month in New York.

Carl Strüwe: Microcosmos showcases more than 50 black and white photos from the photographer's archive. They're a fascinating blend of art and science—despite the fact that Strüwe didn't consider himself a scientist. A self-taught photographer, he worked as a graphic designer for most of his life in Bielefeld, Germany. In the waning days of World War II, a bomb fell on Strüwe's studio and destroyed most of his prints, but the end of the war saw his career take off. He had solo shows in the US and Europe and in 1955, published a compilation of his micrographs in the book *Formen des Mikrokosmos*.



Strüwe made his first micrograph in 1926 by simply placing the lens directly against the eyepiece of the microscope. The microscopic curios he photographed came from a biology company that typically sold to scientists and doctors. As he grew more adept with his camera-microscope setup, he used multiple exposures to arrange diatoms of all different shapes into a single tableaux. And Strüwe rigged together lights and mirrors—just like a regular photographer would—to get the light just right.

He is clearly a designer first—you can see his eye in the abstract forms and shapes he captured. But like a scientist with a lab notebook, Strüwe kept meticulous records. With each micrograph, he noted the length of exposure, degree of magnification, and the species photographed.

To obsessives of tiny creatures, Strüwe's photographs might bring to mind the drawings of the German biologist Ernst Haeckel. In the late 19th century, Haeckel took drops of sea water, peered at them through a microscope, and drew what he saw. A whole world of creatures—fantastical in color and shape—appeared, and those drawings influenced painters and architects in the early 20th century. Feyeux can't say whether Strüwe drew inspiration from Haeckel's drawing, but if he didn't—perhaps especially if he didn't—their convergent works show that science and art quite naturally overlap.

Strüwe began making his micrographs at a time when abstract art was making an insurgence against realism. "Strüwe shows in fact that both are linked," says Feyeux. "That's why when exhibited later he was sometimes exhibited as abstract experimental photography and sometimes as documentary photography. Nobody knew exactly where he should be." The show Feyeux curated just calls Strüwe a photographer, though a photographer of unconventional subjects.

Carl Strüwe: Microcosmos will be on show from April 15 – June 4 at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York.