

Permanent Collection work:

Lisette Model
***Sailor and Girl*, 1940**
gelatin silver print
Helen Johnston Bequest, Focus Gallery Collection
6.45.1989

Essay written by student, Kristin Durkin, Spring 2001

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Lisette Model

Lisette Model, a Viennese photographer, photographed *Sailor and Girl* in 1940. Many events that Model faced in her life influenced her career and photographs. She was born in Vienna in 1901 to an Italian/Austrian Jewish father, a doctor, and a French Catholic mother. Lisette, her older brother, and a younger sister were all baptized and raised Catholic. Model had a traumatic childhood, as she faced and had to overcome many unfortunate situations. When Model was a child, she was molested and sexually abused by her father. When she was 23, she struggled with his death. These two tragic events impacted her life and the subject matter of her photographs. From her childhood until she was in her 30s, Model studied music and voice with well-known composers. She was dedicated to the "art of the ear," the beauty of the sound of music. After her father's death, she went to Paris and two important events took place. She married Evsa Model, a painter, and she began taking photographs. Model randomly picked up a camera one day, and with the help of a friend she learned how to use it. Her interest quickly switched from music to "art of the eye." Model said she learned her most important lesson of her

photographic career in her early days: to "never take a picture of anything you are not passionately interested in."¹

In 1937 Lisette and Evsa Model came to the United States to visit Evsa's parents and ended up staying. However, for over a year she took no pictures because "she was blind because it was all too different."² The newness of New York and its "fantastically" different visual aspect was an overwhelming experience at first. By 1940, her first pictures were published in *Cue*; a weekly magazine devoted to activities in New York City.

Lisette Model was one of the foremost photographers of our time. Her prints "record a relentless probing and searching into realities among people, their foibles, senseless sufferings, and on occasion their greatness."³ In all of Model's photographs, she creates a direct, straightforward relationship to her subject matter with the intent to create a "feel good" reaction. Her objective is for the viewer to "recognize them as real people because real people express a bit of the universal humanism in all of us."⁴ Therefore the majority of the time the viewer knows exactly what Model is depicting. Because of the traumatic events in her life and her sense that she was deprived of love, she is consciously in an intimate relationship with all her subjects with the intent to recognize them as individuals. Model was often found photographing leisurely scenes, showing the various "boulevardiers: displaying one and the same - more or less degenerated- attitude of life, despite all differences as regards age, clothing, and gestures, evoking an almost surreal drama."⁵ One may also describe her work as frightening, touching, and sometimes even humorous. Her trademark style is close-up, biting, and satirical- almost like photographic political cartoons. Her prints are often very large because of the

massive subject matter that seems to demand this large scale. When one asked her about her own work, she commented, "I have often been asked what I wanted to prove by my photographs. The answer is, I don't want to prove anything. They prove to me, and I am the one who gets the lesson."⁶

Sailor and Girl is a typical image from Model's early works from 1940. Although little is known about this photograph, it is easy for the viewer to decipher what is being photographed. The subject matter of the photograph is made obvious through the title. In this particular photograph Model caught two people in a candid moment, as they are embracing each other, focusing on one another instead of the camera. Model captured an inter-racial couple, a sailor and girl, in an intimate moment of saying their farewells. The sailor is heading out to sea and saying good-bye to one relationship, his girl, as he is facing another relationship, his love and dedication to his country. Inter-racial couples were unusual during the time of WWII, and depicting them in a moment of intimacy was a new subject at this time. The emotional expressiveness that is seen in the photograph is typical of Model's photos, but appears shocking because of the subjects. One can see their inner emotions and their sadness as they leave each other. Patriotism is also seen through the navy uniform, which represents war and his dedication to leave a loved one to go and fight for his country. Stylistically, it is a typical example of her work. The photo focuses on the couple and their monumentality draws them to the center focus of the photograph. Their faces and upper bodies fill the entire frame. Model has a straightforward direct relationship with the couple, capturing their intimate moment, as she shoots the candid photograph from just a few feet away. The sailor embodies her

typical subject, style, and photographer Model relationship. Although it is one of Model's earlier works, it is an example of Model's outstanding photographic vision.

¹ "Lisette Model." <http://www.photo-seminar.com/Frame/lisette.html>. 18, April, 2001, 1.

² "Lisette Model." 2.

³ Wien, Kunsthalle. "Lisette Model, Press Review." <http://kunsthallewin.at> 18, April, 2001, 2.

⁴ Porter, Allan. "Lisette Model." Camera. Dec 1977, 21.

⁵ Wein, 1.

⁶ "Lisette Model." 3.