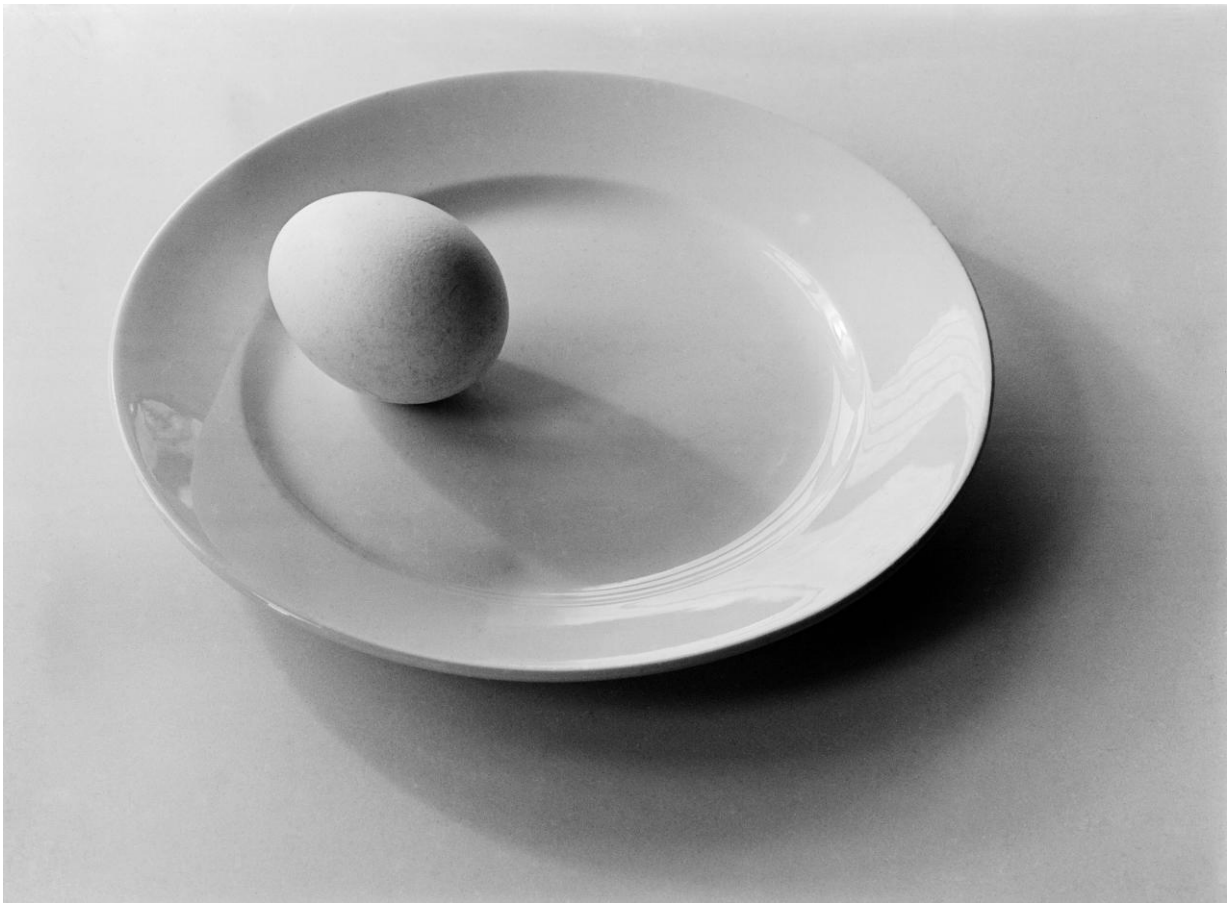
Nederlands

Fotomuseum

Nederlands Fotomuseum to present major retrospective of photographer and resistance fighter Violette Cornelius

Extensive study of her archive reveals unseen work for the first time



Still life with egg on a white plate, Amsterdam, 1939. Study assignment for the Nieuwe Kunstschool.
© Violette Cornelius / Nederlands Fotomuseum

Rotterdam, 15 September 2026

Violette Cornelius (1919-1998) was one of the first generation of women to become professional photographers. A large proportion of her legacy only came to light when suitcases containing thousands of negatives, slides, contact prints and documents were discovered. *Violette Cornelius Rediscovered*, showing at the Nederlands Fotomuseum from 20 November 2026 to 28 February 2027, will finally give this intriguing and overlooked photographer the attention she deserves. The exhibition is the result of an extensive study of her life and work conducted by the Nederlands Fotomuseum. In a show featuring over 200 works, the museum will for the first time show a body of work that was hidden for decades, to coincide with the publication of the first monograph on Violette Cornelius.

From Bauhaus to resistance
Born in Jakarta (then called “Batavia”), Cornelius grew up in a mix of cultures, and trained at the Nieuwe Kunstschool art college in Amsterdam. There, she encountered the ideas of the Bauhaus, thanks to teachers like Paul Citroen and Paul Guermonprez. As part of an inspiring network of Amsterdam-based photographers, graphic designers and visual artists, she evolved into a distinctive photographer. During the Second World War Cornelius was an active member of the artists’ resistance, helping to make forged identity documents, among other things. Her photographs of this resistance work are a unique visual record of the time, and have been listed as important heritage in UNESCO Nederland’s Memory of the World register.

Post-war career in photography and publishing
After the war, Cornelius continued to build her professional career. As a member of the GKf photographers’ association, she produced architectural photographs and reportages for influential photobooks, and collaborated with graphic designer Jurriaan Schrofer. The publication *Letter op straat* (1956) was one of the highlights of her career. Her reportage on displaced Hungarian people, produced with Ata Kandó in 1956, and her input for the corporate photobook *Vuur aan zee* (1958) about the Hoogovens steelworks in IJmuiden, made her a well-known name.

Tour of the world’s major cities
In 1964 Cornelius shifted her focus to the wider world. When she joined the journey to the Tellem caves in Mali, along with architect Herman Haan, she began a series of international reportages on Iraq, India, Yemen, Peru and other countries, documenting the social impact of rapid urbanisation. Living and working among the people of these countries for extended periods, she managed to develop an intimate and personal style. These international reportages, in particular, were almost entirely overlooked for many years. Using her Leica camera, Cornelius photographed in both black-and-white and colour. Following the Mali journey she increasingly worked in colour.

Discovery in suitcases
After Cornelius’ death, parts of her archive were given to the Nederlands Fotomuseum. In 2003 her son gave the museum a number of suitcases containing thousands of negatives, slides, contact prints and documents. The travel reportages were unknown at that point. The donation of a further five suitcases contained another surprise: a collection of unique vintage prints, dummies, notes and books. Together, they provide the key to a body of work that remained hidden for decades.

Nederlands Fotomuseum curator Loes van Harrevelt delved into her archive, studying the collection and tracking down work by Cornelius that had ended up in other collections. This research provides the basis for the exhibition and the accompanying publication, which for the first time bring together the dispersed, unknown work of Violette Cornelius.

"We were astounded at the scale and quality of the work we encountered, work for which no place had yet been reserved in the canon of Dutch photography."
Curator Loes van Harrevelt on the discovery of the archive

The exhibition will feature vintage prints, archive items and unique loans from Dutch collections, plus new prints. New insights from the study of her legacy will also be presented for the first time, as the museum fulfils its mission as knowledge institute of preserving and studying photographic legacies and making them accessible to the public.

Violette Cornelius in the collection
With more than 6.5 million photographic objects, ranging from early daguerreotypes to contemporary digital work, the Nederlands Fotomuseum’s collection is one of the largest museum collections in the world. The archive of Violette Cornelius, consisting of more than 40,000 black-and-white negatives, slides, vintage prints and contact prints, documents, dummies, objects and a small library, is a multifaceted and valuable subcollection. Despite her role as a pioneer of her profession, Cornelius has not received the recognition her male peers received, not even in genres such as architectural photography, which she mastered immediately after the war.

Publication
The exhibition will be accompanied by a lavishly illustrated publication. The release date will be announced later.

Exhibition: Violette Cornelius Rediscovered
Location: Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam
Dates: 20 November 2026 to 28 February 2027
Research, curation and texts: curator Loes van Harrevelt
Lenders: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam City Archives, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision Hilversum, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Maria Austria Institute Amsterdam, Nieuwe Instituut Rotterdam, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies Amsterdam
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The press preview will take place on 19 November 2026. Please register with Hester Gersonius.