



# Smithsonian

## *Archives of American Art*

### Oral history interview with Volkmar Kurt Wentzel

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Archives of American Art  
750 9th Street, NW  
Victor Building, Suite 2200  
Washington, D.C. 20001  
Business Number: Phone: 202-633-7950  
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>  
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/>

## Table of Contents

Collection Overview .....	
Administrative Information .....	1
Biographical / Historical .....	1
Scope and Contents .....	1
Names and Subjects .....	

## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Oral history interview with Volkmar Kurt Wentzel
<b>Date:</b>	2002 October 18-2003 January 24
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.wentze02
<b>Creator:</b>	Wentzel, Volkmar Kurt, 1915-2006 (Interviewee) Berman, Anne Louise, 1975-2016 (Interviewer)
<b>Extent:</b>	6 Items (sound discs (5 hr., 36 min.); digital; 2 5/8 in.) 114 Pages (Transcript)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Digital Content: Oral history interview with Volkmar Kurt Wentzel, 2002 October 18-2003 January 24, Transcript</a> <a href="#">Audio: Oral history interview with Volkmar Kurt Wentzel, 2002 October 18-2003 January 24, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)</a>

---

## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

### Available Formats

Transcript is available on the Archives of American Art's website.

### Restrictions

This transcript is open for research. Access to the entire audio recording is restricted. Contact Reference Services for more information.

---

## Biographical / Historical

Volkmar Wentzel (1915-2006) was a writer and photographer from Washington, D.C.

---

## Scope and Contents

Interview with Volkmar Kurt Wentzel by Anne Louise Bayly Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, at Wentzel's home in Washington, DC on October 18 and 24, 2002; November 12, 2002; and January 24, 2003.

---

## Scope and Contents

Wentzel discusses his childhood in Dresden, Germany, and the devastation during bombing of the city in World War II. He recalls a few stories about his fascination with dirigibles, beginning in childhood through his experience taking his first news photograph capturing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt meeting with Germans who traveled in the Hindenburg to unsuccessfully negotiate for helium in the 1930s. Wentzel discusses how his family endured the devastation of Germany toward the end of the World War I, and he recalls his father, Fritz Wentzel, working as a photochemist in Germany, and setting up photo paper factories in the former Czechoslovakia and Spain. Wentzel talks about how his father travelled to the Balkans to take photographs for his hobby before family life, and how he was a contemporary of Alfred Stieglitz, as they both studied under Hermann Vogel in Berlin. Wentzel speaks about how his family immigrated to Binghamton, NY in 1926 for his father's work with the Ansco Company (which later became Agfa-Ansco). Wentzel recalls how his father's home darkroom was his first influence on his photographic career. He talks about his mother passing away of pneumonia at an early age and the effects it had on his family. Wentzel recalls his ambition to travel to South America after graduating Binghamton High School with a friend, but once he arrived in Washington, DC, he ended his journey there. He talks about meeting architects Arved Kundzin and Eric Menke, who lead him to an artist retreat in Aurora, West Virginia. Wentzel discusses how he started making photographs in West Virginia, and a few of the pictures he made into photographs were purchased by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on a road trip through the area. Wentzel talks about returning to Washington, DC and working in the darkroom for the portrait studio, Underwood & Underwood. He speaks about documenting Washington at night with his hand-me-down Speed Graphic camera. Wentzel explains that a colleague suggested that he send the photographs to the Royal Photographic Society, and walking into the offices of National Geographic to see their darkroom. He discusses applying for and landing a job in the darkroom of the offices of National Geographic. Wentzel talks about founder Gilbert Grosvenor as a pioneer of printing color photography. He describes National Geographic assignments in Kentucky and West Virginia, and talks about the impact of digital photography on the medium. Wentzel describes his air force service in World War II with the First Photo Squadron, where he helped take photographs to create aerial maps, and talks about ending his service in Okinawa and seeing the destruction of Nagasaki. Wentzel discusses returning to National Geographic after from his military service, and then getting assigned to document India. He speaks vividly of his travels in India, about building a traveling darkroom from a junkyard ambulance. He describes meeting Pandit Nehru, and his travels through Bombay, Jammu, Srinagar, Kashmir, Ladakh, Zoji La pass, Delhi, and Jaipur. He also speaks about his time documenting Africa, including the Weeks Expedition to Central Africa in 1952. He talks of his travels in Namibia, the Etosha Pan, Angola, the Congo, and the Cameroons. Lely Constantinople, Wentzel's studio assistant, also participates in the interview.

---

## General

Originally recorded on 6 sound discs. Reformatted in 2010 as 12 digital wav files. Duration is 5 hr., 36 min.

---

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Photographers -- Washington (D.C.) -- Interviews

Types of Materials:

Interviews

Sound recordings

Names:

Constantinople, Lely