characters might eventually form the basis of a new kind of newspaper comic strip" (*Life*, 9 June 1941 **[19]**).
What befell Tommy Apple or Pasquale Peanut **[31, 32]** in Rox's visual stories could never have happened to drawn comic figures: the humour derived its originality from the material characteristics of the organic materials, for instance the tough skin of citrus fruits. Whether Pasquale's resemblance to Winston Churchill (whose portrait, complete with trademark cigar, appeared in every issue of *Life* in 1941) was intentional or coincidental is impossible to determine; in the story *Flying Carrots* (1942), it certainly seems plausible. This particular type of comic strip did not ultimately prevail, but Rox succeeded in rendering individual members of his troupe unmistakable in standalone images. Miss Onion, for example, became the (not always cheerful) housewife, caught between ironing, gardening and suffering from migraines **[33]** – in contrast to Lady Leek **[12]**, whose inherent elegance led her to appear in the American lifestyle magazine *Mademoiselle*. Rox's fruits had their roles, in other words, and these roles were written into their very skin. Yet, as he acknowledged with some irony, it was easier for him to work with these actors was easier than it was for film directors dealing with human performers:

> "My personages are home-made, dumb, obsequious and flexible. If my star gets a fit of temperament I can turn him out into the rubbish can." —Henry Rox, in *The Artist*, London, July 1937

The Cologne-based photographer Wolfgang Vollmer rediscovered Henry Rox and, in 2020, published the first book of the vegetable sculptures as a "crazy revue with subtle wit", while simultaneously exhibiting Rox's works at the Fotohof gallery in Salzburg.

A collaboration between Wolfgang Vollmer and the Henry Rox Archive, Cologne.

Exhibition catalogue
Wolfgang Vollmer, *Henry Rox Revue. Fotografie/Photography. 1935–1955*, 40 pages (hardcover picture book with 28-page booklet), German/English edition (Salzburg: Fotohof Edition, third expanded edition, 2025).

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BANANA CIRCUS
HENRY ROX'S PHOTO-SCULPTURES

In the hands of Henry Rox, fruit and vegetables did not become still lifes, but rather anthropomorphic figures. Living and working in exile, the sculptor made playful use of the rich variety of forms offered by these perishable materials, arranging them into scenes full of subtle humour (**[1]** *Self-Portrait*, c. 1940). Executed with technical finesse as "photo-sculptures", his figures first appeared as picture stories and illustrations in children's books, before attracting the attention of distinguished periodicals such as *Vogue* and *Life*, which helped draw a wider audience to these unique creations. His "fruit orchestra" even made its way onto record sleeves and into a Hollywood film (**[2]** record sleeve: The Sunnysiders, *Banjo Picker's Ball* (1957); **[3]** film still from *Strike Up the Band* (1940) with Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, and Rox's "vegetable orchestra").
Rox was born Heinrich Rosenberg (1899–1967) in Berlin. His Jewish parents, originally from Poland, ran a flourishing business in fashion accessories. After serving in the First World War, he studied art history and sculpture at the School of Applied Arts in Berlin and at the Académie Julian in Paris. For a time, he worked at the Pathé film studios. In 1927 he married his fellow student Charlotte Fleck, and together they adopted the double surname Rosenberg-Fleck. Early exhibitions bore the promise of a successful career, but after the Nazi regime seized power, which led to the closure of the Rosenberg family business, the couple fled to London in 1934.

Edible Sculptures
In London, Rosenberg, who now called himself Henry Rox, had only a kitchen table as a workspace – a far cry from the spacious studio he once enjoyed. No longer working in wood or clay, he now constructed his figures from fruit, vegetables and modelling clay. Black-headed pins served as eyes: a tomato could thus become a human head, complete with a (rather sparse) hairstyle, having turned red from fear, anger, or simply too much time in the sun. A perfectly spherical fruit, when placed between two pumpkin professors, convincingly played the role of a globe; when cut in half, it could serve as a desk, or transform into a lampshade (**[4]** postcards, 1950–55; all postcards and prints were produced in this period).

> "How did I come to hit on the idea of using fruit and vegetables in this way? I am a sculptor by profession, and I had half a mind to tell you that it was a reaction against the bulky materials we

sculptors use! But seriously, if you consider such things as apples and bananas you will find real sculptural virtue in them." —Henry Rox, in *The Artist*, London, July 1937

Like the Surrealists, who roamed the city as flaneurs in search of inspiration in everyday life, Rox found creative stimulus in the abundance of shapes and textures offered by his edible materials. Instead of trying to imitate reality, he used these found forms directly in his compositions. But while Surrealism attempted to foreground the strange and the uncanny, Rox deliberately embraced the sheer banality of produce from the market, imbuing it with human traits through just a few deft manipulations.
The art historian James Laver (1899–1975), one of the foremost fashion theorists of his day, collaborated with Rox as a writer, inventing children's stories centred on Tommy Apple. Laver's wordplay extended and enriched the humour of Rox's photographs. Lady Leek's rigid arrogance, Tommy Apple's round-faced naïveté, and the sour temperament of Lemon-Lady played on familiar everyday stereotypes, even if this humorous approach failed to conceal the fact that an army of penknives threatened the "soft" bananas (**[5]** *Tommy Apple and His Adventures in Banana-Land*, London 1935; **[6]** published simultaneously in Dutch in The Hague; **[7]** *Tommy Apple and Peggy Pear*, London 1936; **[8]** *Self-Portrait*, c. 1935).
The frontispiece of the sequel (**[9]** *Banana Circus*, New York 1940), published after Rox emigrated to the United States, depicts the family surrounding the twins, BAN and ANA, as an eight-part fruit cluster, an unmistakable allusion to the Hanukkah menorah. Both Rox and the book's author, the Austrian Margaret Fisher (born Margarete "Grete" Fischer, 1893–1977), were acutely aware, in their forced exile, of their Jewish identity and of the immediate danger faced by their relatives who remained in Europe. In the 1980s, the publisher Sifriat Poalim, together with an organisation of Israeli banana growers, issued a Hebrew translation (**[10], [11]** printing proofs from 1939 and ROX postcard from 1955).
The children's books were a great success, and, according to press reports, this was due in no small part to their illustrations [ALL ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS ARE ON VIEW IN THE EXHIBITION AS A PROJECTION]. They were indeed pioneering: instead of following the longstanding tradition of anthropomorphising animals, Rox and Laver used cucumbers, tomatoes and carrots. The use of photographs in children's books was also unusual, and the illustrations, interestingly, were labelled "pictures" rather than "photographs" on the title page. The coarse halftone used for the pasted-in colour photogravures accentuates the manual interventions in the originals and (almost) conceals their photographic source. Yet the peculiar charm of these seemingly hand-coloured images suggests that Rox willingly accepted – or intentionally deployed – the flatness that resulted from the paper's coarse quality.

The Sculptor as Director
To grant his small, perishable sculptures a degree of permanence, Rox required a camera. Thus, he not only embraced new materials but also adopted an unconventional artistic strategy: at Pathé and through his Viennese friend Alex Strasser (1898–1974) – director, cinematographer and screenwriter, likewise exiled in Britain – he adopted and applied to photography techniques of shooting and editing that he learned from filmmaking.

"In arranging my troupe and fixing up the scene I must never forget that a picture is the final purpose–a picture bounded by a rectangular frame. So I must proceed like a film director." —Henry Rox, in *The Artist*, London, July 1937

Placed within simple "stage sets" and lit with sophistication, the fruit-and-vegetable figures took on the semblance of human personalities: they could strike a confident pose, stare in fright, or interact with one another (**[12], [13]**; the latter are the originals for *Banana Circus* **[9]**; **[14]** template for the record sleeve). Inspiration, as well as the expressive potential, lay not only in the fruits' shapes (and the memory of their taste) but also in their surfaces, such as the pockmarked texture of orange and lemon peels **[15]**, from which Rox created, in one example, a portrait of the famed British author W. Somerset Maugham **[16]**. What had long been a tradition in caricature – one need only recall depictions of Napoleon III, typically rendered with a pear-shaped face – assumed a new dimension in photography. Its inherent realism accentuated the absurdity of the scenes depicted: "What is recorded photographically here does not actually exist. Photography implies evidential truth; what's fascinating is the interplay of these perceptions" (Wolfgang Vollmer). Familiar motifs lodged in collective memory, such as Christmas scenes, take on new interest when their protagonists oscillate between depictions that are an absurd embodiment on the one hand and an estranged depiction on the other **[17]**.

Rox's Sculptures in Mass Media
With his humorous stagings of fruit-and-vegetable characters, Rox captivated a growing audience far beyond the art world. After he moved to the United States in 1939, renowned American newspapers and magazines soon took notice and printed his photographs on their covers (**[18]** *Family Circle*, February 1958), as part of editorial content, or as advertising imagery. For the Rox family, this supplementary income proved essential, since his part-time post as Assistant Professor of Arts at Mount Holyoke College (South Hadley, Massachusetts; founded in 1837 as the first institution of higher education for women in the United States) provided only a modest livelihood. Multipage features on his unusual working methods appeared starting in 1940 in *Life* (**[19]** 11 December 1940; 9 June 1941, with two postcards of the same motifs, c. 1955) and remained in circulation for years. In 1956, the international graphic arts magazine *Graphis* devoted six pages to him (**[20]** *Graphis* no. 63, Zurich), discussing his equipment (a small Rolleiflex and a large studio camera). His more unsettling works were less frequently reproduced (**[21]** *Hitler versus Stalin*, c. 1943), though some of his most popular characters skirted close to sarcasm: "His 'egg head' boxers are a classic. What other material could possibly illustrate a knockout so convincingly?" (**[22, 23]** *Detroit Free Press*, 17 December 1944).

"Fashion Is Delicious"
Fashion journals were important clients for Rox. Whether using the "usual ingredients" **[24]** or composite figures made from various leaves **[25]**, his mannequins had a distinctive elegance and grace. As ironic commentaries on contemporary fashion (**[26]** *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1939), in which a celery stalk represented the "crisp" back of a model, and a cauliflower transformed into a voluminous petticoat, or as illustrations promoting vitamin consumption (**[27]** *Vogue*, 1 June 1943), Henry Rox's attention-grabbing images were frequently relied on by editors and advertisers (**[28]** Promotional postcards for the German pharmaceutical industry, c. 1955). Beginning around 1950, at least thirty so-called ROX postcards appeared in German-speaking countries, while similar postcards were printed and widely circulated in Denmark, the Netherlands and France **[29]**. Large-format prints of his best-known compositions were sold by Aaron Ashley of Yonkers, New York, who was a specialist publisher of high-quality art reproductions as well as painted and drawn still lifes **[30]**.

"This Is Not an Apple"
... wrote René Magritte above his painting of an apple in 1929. The same observation applies to Rox's photographs of apples, leeks, peaches or peanuts. Yet, in his case, the transformation went a step further: the photographed apple became Tommy's head, and as such remained an essential and recognisable component of Rox's universe. After his "debut" in children's books, he reappeared in another format starting in 1941: "At *Life*'s suggestion, Rox has photographed his gnome-like creatures in color and has spun their previously unrelated and isolated antics into a series of little plots. These