

Photographer Spotlight: Markus Brunetti by
Michael Kurcfeld



Anyone who has traveled in Europe has marveled at its abundance of ornate churches, from Romanesque and Gothic to Renaissance and Baroque. Photographing them is nothing new, but Markus Brunetti has for 10 years now brought the most advanced digital-imaging techniques to the task of revealing their facades with a comprehensive clarity. By painstakingly compositing many high-resolution shots of these magnificent edifices — while scrubbing them of blemishes and superfluous add-ons (pigeon defenses, lightning rods, cables, etc.) — Brunetti transforms them into the most exquisite of time capsules, laden with the coded iconography of bygone centuries. We see them as their architects conceived them, in their most pristine form. At the same time, Brunetti takes ancient structures and sees them through modern eyes.

After forging a career as a highly paid contract photographer and image-processing specialist in advertising, in 2005 Brunetti decided to break away from “a classical life” and become an artist-nomad, living out of a customized truck with his wife and assistant Betty Schöner. They undertook the prodigious project of photographing as many first-rate churches and cathedrals across Europe as possible, using the latest technology to transcend the conventions of scenic views. Now he’s compiled a set of finished images into a traveling exhibition and book, *Markus Brunetti – FACADES*.

As with any great art, it is only by standing in front of the photographs that one experiences their true virtuosity. Brunetti creates oversized, eye-filling prints that owe a debt to fellow countrymen Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Candida Höfer, whose own imposing works broke the scale barrier in photography. He also acknowledges the influential earlier series of Bernd and Hilla Becher — though laboring in analog and black-and-white, they too exhaustively rendered architectural typologies (mostly in the industrial vein of water towers, refineries, grain silos, and the like). From them, Brunetti has borrowed a dispassionate objectivity and the practice of shooting in indirect daylight to avoid shadows — favoring overcast days and early morning shoots. But taking advantage of today's ease of printing gargantuan images in the most exacting, granular detail, Brunetti believes that media-savvy audiences are hungry for the greater amounts of information that a large print can provide. He prizes the luxury of reading an image slowly, investing the time to explore the wealth of artistry captured and preserved in his pictures. At this scale, the eye must literally travel distances to absorb what's on view.

Brunetti's images are devoid of people. This distills the image to its essence, monoliths of sublime beauty that transport the viewer to past eras without the deflating distraction of tourists with selfie sticks. As a result, they possess a glistening perfection that is hallucinatory, electric, alive. Brunetti reduces the structure to the primary facade, not only because it is usually an opulent showcase of period artisanship in itself, but to exploit its graphic two-dimensionality on the picture plane rather than present the building as an architectural volume. Perspective is flattened in favor of enlivened surfaces, as though it were an elaborate theatrical backdrop or some monumental heraldic crest. The final image is closer to an architect's elevation drawing. Brunetti's touchstones were classical paintings and engravings, as well as earlier photographers of sacred sanctuaries such as Baldus. "He was one of those doing orthogonal images, creating new technology to do his work, rearranging negatives to achieve a new kind of view." As did Baldus, Brunetti plays with perspective in a way that overturns the very laws of photographic "sight" — so the real becomes the ideal.

Holy as these edifices are to many, religion for Brunetti is almost beside the point. "Everyone is free to see religious stuff or not, but for me it's mainly the craftsmanship, the architecture, and the culture." Markus Hartmann, the organizer of the exhibition, asserts that the series is not limited to Christian churches, a matter of the region in which he happens to have traveled, but to "sacred buildings" in general. There are plans to do synagogues and mosques as well. Is there an end in sight? "As long as it continues to be a challenge, and isn't boring, I'll never stop." Imminent destinations: Eastern Europe, St Petersburg, Moscow, Istanbul ...