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«Lartigue entre amateurs»

When I began my study of Lartigue as a graduate student, I was very interested in the ideas of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes – that is, in institutional critique and questions of authorship. Such perspectives are important; they allow one to understand Lartigue as a photographer constructed by a certain discourse of photography prevalent in America during the 1960s, the period of his debut as an artist-photographer. Lartigue, I figured, was not the «true primitive» promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1963, a child genius who had accidentally discovered the values of Modernist photography¹ (fig. 1). No one lives in a cultural vacuum and one glance at Lartigue's photographs makes clear that he was an intensely social being. But where did his sensibility come from? I knew that in order to prove my theory – in order to demonstrate that Lartigue was not a naïf – I needed evidence to the contrary. What I did not know when I arrived in France on a Fulbright scholarship, in 1998, was how much evidence I would find. Indeed, I found not only that Lartigue was a sophisticated photographer; I found a complex culture of amateur photography that had been little studied – not, at least, in relation to Lartigue. Lartigue was an amateur photographer, but the larger question is: what kind of amateur was he?

Amateur photography is a problematic subject in the history of photography. The vagaries of the category – «amateur» serving as a term for such diverse photographic sensibilities as Excursionist, Pictorialist, and Kodaker – has exacerbated the problem, both in the primary and secondary literature. At one time, amateur held a distinct and useful meaning: it denoted «nonprofessional». This was before photography was revolutionized during the 1880s by the widespread success of the dry plate, a commercially manufactured, pre-sensitized glass negative, which dramatically simplified photography, set off a wave of innovation in cameras and processes, and brought a larger public in on the secrets of the «dark chamber».

1. John Szarkowski uses this phrase in his seminal MoMA catalogue essay on Lartigue: *The Photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue*, exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1963.

The «serious amateur» was a figure conceived during the first wave of enthusiasm surrounding the dry-plate process. The commercial viability of the process alone did not spark such widespread interest. Rather, it was the highly publicized, scientific investigations into the nature of movement by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, during the 1870s and 1880s, that spurred the vogue for «instantaneous photography» – stop-action images of people and objects splayed provocatively in mid-propulsion. Photography assumed a role as a legitimate tool of science, showing what the eye could not see. At the same time, photography offered a fashionable entertainment. For men of a certain mind-set, one matured in an environment of popularized science, photography was the obvious leisure activity, combining rigor and reverie in a single pursuit.

The visibility of the serious amateur movement can be discerned in the many publications that came into being during the 1880s and 1890s. There were many how-to manuals, such as Albert Londe's *La Photographie moderne* and Josef Maria Eder's *La Photographie instantanée par les appareils à main*, both published in France in 1888. There were also reviews, annuals, and bulletins, such as *Annuaire de la photographie*, *L'Amateur photographe*, and *Photo-Revue*, only to name a few.

This was the textual milieu of Lartigue's father, Henri Lartigue, who was heavily immersed in amateur photography during his son's childhood. Descended from a family of engineers, Henri Lartigue was a man with feet in both science and business. For him, like many men of his class, photography was more than a hobby. Outside the medium's evident capacity to amuse, photography was part of a broader field of technological advances in engineering, chemistry, and industrial manufacture – all of which, in the eyes of Henri and other entrepreneurs, suggested impressive investment potential. Indeed, it was men like Henri Lartigue who collectively invented the photographic techniques and processes that would become widely used in the twentieth century.

By definitions of the period, Henri Lartigue was the archetypal serious amateur². He photographed frequently, if not daily, in a variety of modes, producing sophisticated portraits, landscapes, genre scenes, documentation of his family's leisure activities, and stop-action photographs, much like those that would become the trademark of his son's œuvre. By 1911, when Lartigue *fil*s began keeping his diaries, he notes that his father owned at least six serious cameras. These were not cheap Kodaks but state-of-the-art mechanisms, proffered by Gaumont and outfitted with the highest-quality lenses and shutter releases by Krauss-Zeiss and Klapp, respectively. Besides handling a variety of sophisticated cameras,

2. For example, in the *Annuaire des amateurs de photographie* for 1903, the editors define the serious amateur thus: «For us the amateur photographer... is someone who makes of photography a daily, or at least a frequent, occupation or distraction, who possesses one or several «serious» cameras and knows how to use them, who is interested in the diverse manifestations of our Art and seeks to turn those to good use, who follows the progress of photography, and who applauds and insures its dissemination.» Introduction, *Annuaire des amateurs de photographie des sociétés photographiques et des hôtels ayant chambre-noire*, 1903, Paris, Charles Mendel, 1903.

Lartigue père owned several versions of the Cinématographe, an early motion-picture camera. He also regularly tested the capacities of new processes, like magnesium flash and autochrome plates; built his own photographic equipment; had equipment constructed according to his own needs; and repaired equipment fallen into disrepair. Most important, Henri Lartigue developed and printed his own photographs in his own darkroom, which is to say that he understood not just the aesthetics and mechanics of photography but also the chemistry³.

Henri Lartigue was at the center of a band of passionate photo-amateurs and his son was thus positioned to absorb all of the knowledge and conventions of serious amateur photography. Marius Aubert, professor of mathematics at the Sorbonne and tutor to young Lartigue, was a regular guest at the Lartigue home in Paris and Rouzat, where he joined efforts to photograph every billiard match, go-cart run, and game of water polo. Aubert was an assistant to Gabriel Lippmann, one of the inventors of color photography. Lartigue notes having seen examples of Lippmann's color photographs and once took home a liter of distilled water to use in his next developer⁴. Another important figure was Henri's private secretary, Monsieur Folletête, nicknamed «Plitt» by Lartigue. One of Folletête's specific duties was to play gadabout with Lartigue on his junior-society ramblings. In Lartigue's diaries, one reads of Lartigue and Folletête participating almost daily in a variety of photographic activities, photographing lightening, developing pictures, arranging photographs in albums, and attending and photographing athletic competitions and drag races. Folletête was with Lartigue when he took his famous racecar picture and made a series of photographs himself that day, although these have not been located. The extent and complexity of amateur activities can be seen in a photograph of a Lartigue family outing, taken in Rouzat in 1913 (fig. 2), which shows Lartigue behind the wheel of a go-cart, his father on a ladder filming his son with a Cinématographe, and Lartigue's friend Louis Ferrand photographing the entire scene with one of Lartigue's own cameras.

Besides the serious amateur, whose lifespan lasted from the 1880s to about 1910, there were two other classes of amateur photography, these emerging out of the ashes of serious amateur culture around 1900. There were «artistic amateurs», or Pictorialists, who insisted on the aesthetic potential of photography. Artistic amateurs were high-society practitioners, «les snobs de la photographie», a phalanx among serious amateurs with artistic sensitivities and a social station to protect⁵. As specialists in elegant portraits and murky landscapes, which mimicked the aesthetics of etchings, artistic amateurs were highly critical of their serious amateur peers, whom they dismissed for their fixation on technique over artistic effect. Artistic amateurs were particularly disdainful of the new hand-held camera, which they viewed as a reckless instrument. Because of its portability and its capacity to hold multiple plates, the hand-held camera, they argued, en-

3. Lartigue's unpublished *agendas* are housed in the Association des Amis de Jacques Henri Lartigue, Paris.

4. Lartigue, diary entry, 28 Jan. 1911.

5. See Robert Demachy, «Les maîtres de la photographie», *Photo-Magazine*, 23 avril 1911, pp.129-136.

couraged careless shooting, impolite shooting habits (women in swim attire were a favorite target), and a willful disregard for established pictorial conventions⁶.

There was, of course, another type of amateur photographer, this one more prevalent and perfidious than either the serious or artistic amateur. This was the « mass amateur », the Sunday snaphooter born out of the success of Kodak, and looked upon by some circa 1900 as the Frankenstein's monster of the amateur photography world. Paul Nadar, son of the famous portraitist, and an Eastman Kodak representative in France, presented the first Kodak camera, the 100 Shot, to the Société Française de Photographie in December 1888. Other models soon followed: the Daylight Kodaks, the Bull's Eye, the Folding Pocket Kodak, and the famed Brownie, appearing in 1900, so easy to use and priced so low that it set a whole new standard for mass-market capitalism. George Eastman's most daring innovation was to eliminate all the post-production work – the tasks of developing and printing exposed negatives. « Today photography has been reduced to... three operations », he wrote: « 1: Pull the String, 2: Turn the Key, 3: Press the Button⁷. »

A pitfall in associating Lartigue with this simplistic mode of photography is to believe that, like mass amateur photographers, he did not understand photographic technology and was unaware of aesthetic standards. Neither is true. Although Lartigue's work would evolve beyond the motifs and conventions of his father's generation, by the time he turned 16, in 1910, Lartigue had mastered all the major challenges of serious amateur photography.

Technical challenges associated with lighting, trick photography, and stereoscopic photography preoccupied the serious amateur who, more than other amateurs of his day, contributed – if unwittingly – to the assemblage of a modernist iconography as it came to be known. Lartigue, who has often been held up as a pioneer of such innovations, was actually an heir to a much larger movement. Here I'd like to touch on one important aspect of this movement: instantaneity.

During the 1890s, the instantaneous photograph, *l'instantané*, became the main obsession of technically minded practitioners. How might one achieve a pleasing, well-composed image out of flux? Or was such an image even worth attempting? The debate tended to divide along lines separating serious and artistic amateurs. Serious amateurs pursued instantaneous photographs like hunters shooting grouse and the amateur press displayed their quarry on a regular basis. Criticism of the trend was couched in just such terms: Frédéric Dillaye remarked, « Instantaneous photography is only a kind of sport⁸. » Dillaye

6. As one example, one writer advises, « The photographer shouldn't be like a hunter, shooting all game that passes [in front of] the end of his barrel. », H. Emery, *La Photographie artistique, comment l'amateur devient un artiste*, Paris, Charles Mendel, 1900, p. 7.

7. Quoted in Douglas Collins, *The Story of Kodak*, New York, Abrams, 1990, pp.59, 60.

8. Dillaye quoted in Cédric de Veigy, « La Main-d'œuvre de la photographie: petite histoire de la saisie de la photographie par des amateurs non avertis munis d'appareils à mains », Master's thesis, Université de Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 1999, p. 67.

and other proponents of Pictorial photography deplored the serious amateur's simpleminded quest for such images, a venture that vaunted the primacy of the negative and contradicted Demachy's famous dictum, «The shot is nothing, the print is everything⁹.»

The note of contention here lays in the denotative aspect of photography – in its literal, mechanical transcription of the exterior world onto the light sensitive plate. Art, evoked as a fundamentally idealizing endeavor, was seen to be at odds with the awkward poses found in most instantaneous photographs. Examples frequently showed men in flying squat positions, or stooped below the body of a leaping dog. From the perspective of an art tradition that favored classical nudes and picturesque landscapes, such images were beyond the pale.

Perhaps the most common form of criticism leveled against instantaneity was the assumption of chance it conveyed. Chance was the Achilles heel of photography, a medium regarded increasingly as a procedure so simple even a child could do it. Chance signaled the very antithesis of skill, knowledge, intentionality, and taste – all the things serious photographers claimed as vital to their art. And chance, it was argued, was a crutch relied upon especially by the devotee of the instantaneous photograph. The perception was one of excess and ignorance: bands of reckless photographers shooting wildly at moving targets, taking hundreds of random shots, then rushing back to the darkroom to see if anything had been caught. Experts advised careful planning; for example: stand a good distance back, compose a pleasing landscape, and catch your subject as it performs some action in the center of the viewfinder (fig. 3). Images produced by following this method (as both Lartigue father and son did) (fig. 4) could thus be considered a product of calculation and strategy, regardless of how one ranked the aesthetic merits of the result.

The debate over instantaneity, however, was shifting. By the final years of the nineteenth century, recognition of the value of chance, accident, and surprise in picture making was growing as an iconography of instantaneity took root, especially among enthusiasts cognizant of modernization and the impact of technology on modern vision. Serious amateurs, supplied with dry plates by the 1890s, effectively nurtured the seeds of an iconographic revolution through the widespread production of instantaneous photographs. By opening up photography to a broad range of animated subjects, they created a new visual code. And as modernity, speed, and technology became increasingly recognized as flash points for a distinct aesthetic iconography, the impulse to discover modernity through the accidental was consciously pursued¹⁰.

9. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp.67, 68.

10. See André Gunthert's introduction in *La Révolution de la photographie instantanée, 1880-1900*, exh. cat., Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France/Société Française de Photographie, 1996, pp.6, 7.

By the time Lartigue started photographing seriously and on his own, around 1910, the instantaneous photograph had been put to work, functioning now in the illustrated press as a method for representing the increasingly dynamic modern world. If *L'Amateur photographe* and *Photo-Revue* constituted the photographic milieu of Henri Lartigue, his son's inspiration came through another set of publications: magazines on sports, fashion, and high-society life. Though not about photography per se, these were publications replete with photographs. Photographs, which began appearing in magazines at the turn of the century, provided something that other forms of illustration could not deliver: visual authenticity. If the bold, seductive graphic images produced by well-known illustrators such as Fauret, Scott, and Sabattier motivated people to buy copies of *L'Illustration* and *Le Petit Journal*, photography's contribution was to show the actual – the faces of murderers, the clothes of royalty, the smashups of aviators – to an expanding audience of shamelessly voyeuristic «readers».

Lartigue's first published photograph, a picture of an airplane in the skies above Paris (fig. 5), appeared as a frontispiece in *La Vie au Grand air* in January 1912 (Lartigue was 18 years old). The magazine published five more of his photographs over the next several years. *La Vie au Grand air* was one of numerous magazines produced by the publishing house Pierre Lafitte. With offices on the Champs-Élysées, Lafitte managed an elite media empire. By 1910, Lafitte had six magazines in circulation, operated a theater, ran a photography gallery and studio, and hosted a series of bimonthly *galas sportifs*. The company's motto, «for all tastes», was no mere boast – especially where the Lartigue family was concerned: Lartigue's mother read *Femina* and *Musica*, the father *L'Excelsior*, the boys *Je Sais tout* and *La Vie au Grand air*, and the entire family attended *Les Vendredis de Femina*, a variety show held each Friday at the Théâtre Femina on the Champs-Élysées¹¹. Although many other periodicals gained entrée into the Lartigue home, it was the worldview conjured by Lafitte that best represented the interests and aspirations of the Lartigues and others of their class.

Lartigue's belated fame as a photographer has blinded posterity to the fact that, as a young man, his identity was formed in the image of a different social type, that of «amateur sportsman». Lartigue participated in many kinds of sports, such as tennis, ice-skating, and swimming. He also enjoyed the mechanical sports, such as cycling, auto racing, and aviation but, sensibly, as a spectator. Lartigue practiced another sport that today is not normally thought of as a sport, one that received considerable coverage in the sporting magazines: photography. On the masthead of the first issue of *La Vie au Grand air*, photography was included with cycling, hunting, boxing, fencing, and other sports. Even knowing that Lartigue's camera, the Nettel, was advertised as «the sports camera» and that he read not photography journals but sports magazines, it is still startling to realize that the

11. Lafitte also published numerous series titles, such as *Sports-Bibliothèque* and *Lilliput Bibliothèque*, portfolios of art, and collections of literature, many of which Lartigue perused. An advertisement demonstrating the scale of Lafitte's ambitions appeared in *La Vie au Grand air*, 30 Aug. 1913, iii.

distinction between Henri Lartigue and his son was less a difference between types of photographers than between photographer and sportsman. Put simply, Lartigue was first an amateur sportsman and, second, an amateur photographer.

Lartigue, of course, drove this pastime into the realm of art by adding the satirical sensibility of the illustrator Sem who, in his book *Le Vrai et le faux chic* of 1914, lampooned the fashion for ridiculous hats. Lartigue's photograph, taken in the Sentier de la Vertu, shows women in a variety of ridiculous hats, resembling nun's habits and hot-water bottles.

As in photography, the distinction between amateur and professional held great meaning. With the proliferation of sports of all kinds in France circa 1900, creating a platform for staging social frictions, amateur and professional became polarized terms. The strongest advocate of amateur sportsmanship was the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, known today for his revival of the Olympic Games. Coubertin propagated the English prep-school idea of sport, which promoted attitudes such as « fair play » and « what matters most is having played the game ». Participation was valued over winning, personal improvement over material gain¹².

Coubertin's ideas represented the interests of the *rentier* class, for whom sport offered a rare opportunity for personal exertion, a chance to pursue something – to pursue it passionately, even – without actually getting one's feet wet in, say, politics or business. Though not strictly forbidden to work, *rentiers* were little compelled toward these realms. A bit like show dogs, bred for appearance and not utility, young men of Lartigue's class fulfilled the one duty that was placed upon them, to cultivate a superior bearing, and sport provided an arena for accomplishing this.

Amateur sport was essentially a form of art for art's sake. Like avant-garde artists of the period, amateur sportsmen were more concerned with form than content – that is, the figure one cut on the playing field was more important than winning or even playing well. Sporting attire, as one example, was an important aspect of the amateur sportsman's life. Here, the more binding and cumbersome the uniform, the more suavely non-competitive the wearer seemed. A portrait of Edward VII by the artist Sem, titled « Sportsman », shows a fat man in a top hat, smoking a cigar, bundled into a coat, supported by a cane, eyes swollen shut, exercising his indifference at the horse races¹³.

Lartigue's identity as a photographing amateur sportsman emerged out of this convergence of sport, style, and satire – of dynamism, fashion, and irreverence igniting on film. The institutionalized form of this sensibility was something

12. On Coubertin, see Eugen Weber, « Pierre de Coubertin and Organized Sport », *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 5, 1970, pp. 207-225.

13. Sem, cover illustration, *La Vie au grand air*, 2 mai 1903.

called the «gymkhana», which was an outdoor society ball with sporting events – it was sack races for the very rich¹⁴. Here was sport as spectacle with no real consequences in terms of winning. Many of Lartigue's photographs document his friends engaged in gymkhanas, such as Simone and Golo doing gymnastics (fig. 6). The world these photographs convey was one of sport, privilege, elegance, and frivolity; combined, these elements produced a distinctive ornamental dynamism, which Lartigue merged into a photographic style.

While the instantaneous photograph offered serious amateurs of the 1890s a pseudo-scientific glimpse into the previously imperceptible world of movement, it satisfied a more overtly mischievous and voyeuristic impulse for amateurs a decade later. The portrayal of the ungainly, the ungraceful, rather than simply scandalizing nineteenth-century laws of aesthetic beauty, became the means of constructing a new modern self image, a casual self presentation. The casual body, as exemplified in the bungling, slapstick routines of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, held a specific cultural signification: it announced the self-image of a new generation¹⁵. In Lartigue's photographs, such as *Oléo and Zissou Trying to Dance the Cakewalk* and *Simone, Rouzat*, awkward gestures served as expressions of modernity, identifying their subjects with that smart set who associated spontaneity and physical dynamism with progress, contemporaneity, and ultimate urbanity.

In creating such images, Lartigue not only defined the attitude of a new generation; he did, in fact, forecast the future of photographic modernism. In the 1960s in America, Lartigue was linked to photographers such as Garry Winogrand, who engaged in a similar kind of socially based, stop-action photography. It is intriguing to consider that Winogrand, who also made his debut at MoMA in 1963, looked at Lartigue's photographs of women in Paris and began making his own as a kind of homage. Such connections represent a kind of art-historical time travel, with influences leaping over half-centuries, crossing cultures and technologies with reckless abandon¹⁶. While Lartigue never could have foreseen this specific destiny for his photographs, and was in many respects completely misunderstood, in all other aspects of his photographic life, he knew exactly what he was doing.

14. See André de Fouquières, «Qu'est-ce qu'un Gymkhana?», *Je sais tout*, 15 août 1905, pp. 100, 101.

15. See Tom Cunning, «New Thresholds of Vision: Instantaneous Photography and the Early Cinema of Lumière», in *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photographic Era*, ed. Terry Smith, Sydney, Power Publications, 2001.

16. See Chapter Four of my book on Lartigue: Kevin Moore, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004. Also see K. Moore, «Lartigue et la naissance du modernisme en photographie», *Études photographiques* 13, July 2003, pp. 6-34.



1.
Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition
The Photographs of Jacques-Henri Lartigue.
1963.
New York, The Museum of Modern Art.



2.
Louis Ferrand, September, Rouzat.
(Photo taken by Louis with my camera, Papa filming Rico and me).
1913.
Glass stereo negative.
H. 0,06 ; L. 0,13 m.
Paris, Association des Amis de Jacques-Henri Lartigue.



3.
Mercury, from « An Original Way
to Dive ».
L'Illustration, 23 October 1909.
Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University
Library, Harvard University.



4.
Jacques-Henri Lartigue.
Zissou Takes Off.
1904.
Glass stereo negative.
H. 0,06 ; L. 0,13 m.
Paris, Association des Amis de Jacques-Henri Lartigue.

5.
 Jacques Henri Lartigue.
 Frontispice for *La Vie au Grand air*.
 10 February 1912.
 Paris, Association des Amis de Jacques-Henri Lartigue.



6.
 Jacques Henri Lartigue.
Simone and Golo, Parc de Saint-Cloud.
 1913.
 Glass stereo negative.
 H. 0,06 ; L. 0,13 m.
 Paris, Association des Amis de Jacques-Henri Lartigue.

