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Jacques Henri Lartigue

Spectator sport

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JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE became a star at the ripe old age of 69 when, in 1963, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) organised his first solo exhibition. Four decades later, the photographer's exuberant images of Belle Epoque France—society gatherings, car races, early aeroplanes, giant kites and his own eccentric family—are captivating audiences once more in a new show that has travelled to London's Hayward Gallery from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

A passionate photographer from early childhood (he took 250,000 photographs over 85 years), Lartigue compiled and classified his work like an obsessive lepidopterist, sprinkling the margins of his albums with notes while also keeping journals. "Lartigue: Album of a Century" contains facsimile pages from these albums, charting his career until his death in 1986.

Given a camera by his father on his seventh birthday, he started out taking pictures of his nanny, Dudu, his parents and his garden. Aged nine, he persuaded his cousin Bichonnade to leap down a flight of stone steps outside the family home in Paris, catching her in graceful mid-flight, complete with long Edwardian skirt and silk jacket, a theme that he returned to many times. In later photographs, male cousins race around in flimsy home-made airplanes, boats made from rubber tyres, and cars. Several members of the family, including Jacques Henri's brother, were engineers and inventors.

"Suppose I go to the park to photograph the ladies in the most outrageous and beautiful hats", the young boy wrote in his journal, reflecting his lifelong fascination with elegant women. Born into the Paris beau-monde (the family was one of the richest in France before the first world war), Jacques Henri photographed what Colette called "the bustling life of people with nothing to do": the social parade in the Bois de Boulogne; a society lady in her lavish furs attracting a covetous glance from a male passer-by; spectators at the ageing Duc de Montpensier's wedding to a young woman; winter sports in Switzerland and summers spent on the beaches of Deauville and Biarritz where, Lartigue wrote, "Nothing hinders my eyes from roaming, drifting endlessly."

Both MoMA and *Life Magazine* promoted Lartigue as an innocent boy genius raised in a photographic wilderness—the average age at which he took the

Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist

By Kevin Moore



Princeton University Press;
272 pages; \$45 and
£29.95

Buy it at
Amazon.com
Amazon.co.uk

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Thames & Hudson; 400
pages; £48.00

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pictures selected for the 1963 show was 17. But this is misleading, says Kevin Moore, an art historian who is the author of a new biography. Lartigue père was not only a rich banker but also a serious amateur photographer who owned the latest cameras and shared his dark room with his gifted son, guiding him through all the technical intricacies of image-making.

The young boy took consistently first-class photographs from the age of 12 and, as his journal describing his trips to the Bois de Boulogne reveals, he was by then already a perfectionist. He estimated distance, as well as calculating light and depth of field, with the precision of a surveyor as he waited for "she" to saunter by.

In Mr Moore's book, though scholarly and crammed with contemporary detail, Lartigue remains an elusive character. The photographer married three times (his most striking images in the 1920s are of his first wife Bibi, the daughter of the composer André Messager), yet he remained a detached figure, ignoring even the cataclysm of the first world war. "There is a spectator in me who watches", he wrote, "with no concern for specific events, without knowing if what is happening is serious, sad, important, funny or not." Spectators of his work today are left to judge that for themselves.



The carefree leaps of youth

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"Jacques Henri Lartigue: Photographs 1901-1986" is at the Hayward Gallery, London, until September 5th

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