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The Lartigue Hoax?

A new book offers a controversial take on the famous photographer.

By Jim Lewis

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[Jacques Henri Lartigue](#) was granted a childhood of great privilege: On this, and it seems on this alone, everyone can agree. He was born in a Parisian suburb in 1894, his father was an enormously wealthy banker, and in keeping with the conventions of the belle époque, Lartigue was expected to do nothing of consequence but live his life elegantly and honorably. Amusements, sports, travel, fashion: These were the diversions suitable to his day and station, and Lartigue took to them enthusiastically, and in particular to the then-new hobby of "instantaneous" photography—that is, pictures taken with cameras quick enough to freeze motion and stop time, to show, say, divers in midair.

Lartigue began taking photographs at a very young age—6, according to some accounts, 8 according to others. By the time he was in his teens he was selling them to popular French photo-journals. He took pictures of the kinds of things boys like to see pictured: cars, airplanes, athletes, and so on. But he also took more private pictures of his family, his dogs, and some candid shots of fashionable ladies promenading in their finery. He liked the glamour, he enjoyed the scene; he took pictures of everything he wanted to remember, a photographic diary that he arranged into enormous scrapbooks.

Cut forward a half-century or so—and this is where the story becomes so improbable that it starts to seem like a fiction. In 1962, when Lartigue was in his late 60s, he visited America for the first time. In New York he stopped by the offices of a photo rep to see if he could hawk a few of his vintage prints; the rep, sensing something extraordinary, called John Szarkowski at MoMA's department of photography, who jumped at the chance to show Lartigue's work. The exhibition was the following year, and with it Lartigue achieved late-life fame as one of the first masters of the medium, an unschooled amateur who achieved genius entirely by naive instinct.

It's a great tale, and Lartigue's renown endures in part because of it. Last year, Abrams printed a deluxe 400-page volume of Lartigue's work, which joined a half-dozen or so studies and portfolios already in print; an exhibition just closed at the Hayward Gallery in London. And here comes a Harvard scholar named Kevin Moore with a book called [Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist](#), which claims that the story was little better than a canard, perpetrated by Lartigue and seized upon by Szarkowski in a determined effort to rewrite the history of photography.

In fact, Moore argues, Lartigue was well-versed in the conventions of turn-of-the-century picture making. His father was a camera buff, and the son was given every possible advantage: the newest

equipment, lots of leisure time, and a thorough education in the ways of the medium. Moreover, it was an era when amateur photography was all the rage, when magazines and books were full of instruction, debate, and example.

Still, Lartigue presented his work as the innocent expression of a wonderstruck boy amateur, and MoMA was happy to promote it as such. It was just the sort of thing they were looking for. Szarkowski, a curator of unequalled influence, was trying to establish a new style of photography, based on an aesthetic of spontaneity, contingency, intimacy, and autobiography. Robert Frank was the progenitor of this kind of work, and Garry Winogrand was the heir apparent, but the style needed roots in the origins of the medium if it was really going to stick. It had to be presented in a way that made it seem both completely unexpected and entirely inevitable; that's what museums do, and Szarkowski was unusually good at it. Lartigue was the photographic equivalent of the missing link, the bridge that connected prehistory to our modern selves.

Unless, as Moore argues, he was the photographic equivalent of Piltdown Man: a hoax foisted upon a credulous public. Szarkowski presented Lartigue as childlike and intuitive; Moore describes him as "probing, observant, sophisticated, and mocking ... out to prove his insider knowledge—to show that he knew what was in fashion, that he noticed how people scrutinized each other, that he understood the humor of personal vanity." Which one is right, and why does it matter? Neither is quite accurate; both are exaggerating; and it matters because the answer reveals some unexpected truths about the nature of photography.

In most arts the label "amateur" would be dismissive at best, but in photography, which was born not knowing whether it was art, science, or commerce, amateurism suggests both lightheartedness and purity of intent, and it's this aestheticism which is at stake in Szarkowski's insistence that Lartigue was an amateur. An amateur painter is not skilled enough to make a living at it; an amateur photographer is not crass enough to try. Lartigue sold a few pictures here and there, but making a living was not his concern. He was both too rich and too young to care about such things. Score one for Szarkowski.

Still, we should be clear about one thing: In an important sense there are no naifs in the arts. It simply doesn't happen. There are disturbed people, like Henry Darger or the practitioners of *art brut*; there are shut-ins like Joseph Cornell; rustics like the Rev. Howard Finster; eccentrics like [the Douanier Rousseau](#); and plenty of artists who, for one reason or another, simply choose not to participate in the art world as we understand it. But no one has attained adulthood, still less made pictures, in anything like a state of visual innocence. The world of images is too much with us; if you know what a picture is at all, you know most of its conventions. And if you're an impassioned student like Lartigue, you probably know almost all of them. Score one for Moore.

It is, I think, the last point Moore earns. Lartigue was 11 when he shot the earliest of the pictures in the MoMA show, and most were taken before he was 18. There's a limit to how sophisticated he could have been at that age, and Moore's efforts to recast him as a canny professional run aground on the shallows of Lartigue's incontrovertible youth. Certainly Lartigue was curious and quick: He absorbed conventions effortlessly, and he knew how to see the world through a viewfinder. But we ought to believe him when he says that he was motivated by nothing more than wonder and delight, and it is this that makes his work so appealing. (He may be the only 20th-century artist to be famous for his happiness.) There is no guileless eye, but there are guileless boys, and Lartigue was one: a prodigy.

Now, there are some arts where prodigies are relatively common, and others where they're almost

unheard of. There are plenty of brilliant children in show business, for example—musicians, composers, dancers, actors—but there are none that I can think of in painting or sculpture, and very, very few in literature. Photography, oddly enough, seems to belong in the former category; on this level, anyway, it's closer to music than it is to painting. Certainly, Lartigue qualifies as a prodigy, and so does a video-maker named [Sadie Benning](#), who made some extraordinary tapes when she was 16. Cindy Sherman was 23 when she began her Film Stills series—not a child, to be sure, but far younger than any modern painter who's produced a comparable body of work. Even Picasso didn't really start producing Picassos until he was in his mid-20s.

Taking pictures is, in many ways, a kind of performance, and a camera is more like a musical instrument than a paintbrush or a pen. So, looking at a Lartigue print is very much like beholding, say, one of those brilliant child soul singers who come along every so often. You know they can't possibly have the wisdom that their work suggests, but it doesn't seem to matter. The miracle of such artists isn't a question of intuitive technique, for as I say, that's a contradiction in terms. But neither is it simply an illusion. It's something altogether astonishing and inexplicable, an expertise beyond experience, and sometimes all you can do is stand back and admire it.

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