



Mi prima Bichonnade. 40, Rue Cortambert, Paris, 1905. Fotografía de J H Lartigue © Ministère de la Culture – France / AAJHL

A FLOATING WORLD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE
(1894-1986)

Press Dossier

CaixaForum Barcelona
5 May - 3 October 2010

CaixaForum Barcelona presents the first major exhibition in Spain devoted to a crucial figure in 20th-century photography

A Floating World

Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)

“To be a photographer is to trap one’s own amazement”. Throughout his life, Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986) was faithful to the constant quest of doing just this. From his early childhood, he photographed everything that moved him, touched him in some way, made him happy, seemed beautiful to him and helped him to combat the passing of time, oblivion. Unanimously recognised today as one of the great names in 20th-century photography, Lartigue’s work forms a unique chronicle of a period and a lifestyle. *A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)* is the first major anthological devoted to this photographer in Spain. The show features more than two hundred works from the Donation Jacques Henri Lartigue in Paris, including both modern copies and original shots that Lartigue took and developed himself, some using a stereoscopic camera. The exhibits also include cameras, notebooks, agendas and several volumes of the diary he kept all his life. *A Floating World...* focuses particularly on the themes he explored throughout his career: photography as an instrument of memory, a tool for capturing the fragility of existence; and the short-lived nature of happiness. The works shown here also reflect Lartigue’s peculiar vision of women and of a rapidly-changing world. All this enables the visitor to discover, through Lartigue’s unmistakable images, a portrait of long-lost world, the work of a master who, though his career spanned nearly 90 years, never ceased to consider himself an amateur.

The curators of the exhibition *A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)* are Florian Rodari and Martine d’Astier de la Vigerie, director of the Donation Jacques Henri Lartigue, assisted by Maryam Ansari. The show will be open to the public at CaixaForum Barcelona (Av. de Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8) from 5 May – 3 October 2010.

Barcelona, 4 May 2010.- On this date, Jaime Lanaspá, general manager of Fundación "la Caixa", officially opens *A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)*, accompanied by the exhibition curators, Florian Rodari, Martine d'Astier de la Vigerie, and their assistant, Maryam Ansari. The exhibition was organised and produced by "la Caixa" Social Outreach Programmes in cooperation with the Donation Jacques Henri Lartigue, the body established to conserve and disseminate the donation that the photographer made to the French government in 1979, and which loaned all the pieces in the exhibition at CaixaForum Barcelona.

As part of its cultural programmes, "la Caixa" Social Outreach Programmes focuses particularly on the most contemporary art, work created in the 20th and 21st centuries. In exhibitions devoted to the cinema and photography, "la Caixa" seeks to illustrate the influence that images exercise on contemporary sensibilities and to highlight the role that the great 20th-century visual artists play in defining our vision of the world. To this end, "la Caixa" has organised anthological exhibitions devoted to such great names in photography as Eugène Atget, Robert Doisneau, William Klein, Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Willy Ronis and filmmakers like Charles Chaplin and Federico Fellini.

On this occasion, "la Caixa" Social Outreach Programmes presents the first major anthological exhibition devoted in Spain to Jacques Henri Lartigue (Courbevoie, 1894 – Nice, 1986), without doubt one of the greatest photographers of the last century. Entitled *A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)*, the show illustrates the interests of a man devoted to exploring, with the greatest sensitivity and under an appearance of happiness and nonchalance, the emerging concerns of a period marked by radical change.

Lartigue's photographs date to a period that was shaken by events and great social changes (World War One, the Russian Revolution, the Nazi occupation of France, and so on), yet he does not focus on such conflicts. On the contrary; he seeks to portray innocence, spontaneity and the joy of being alive.

Reflecting the artist's fragile, moving gaze, the exhibition *A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)* also depicts the new lifestyles that emerged during the early-20th century, when women began to play an active role in society and technological progress generated new forms of leisure.

The fact that Lartigue took photographs for his own pleasure has made it impossible for either curators or critics to really classify his work. As a result, his photographs are usually presented in chronological order, or grouped by theme. On this occasion, however, the organisers have decided to go one step further and to demonstrate, from a approach never before taken with this artist, the extent to which these images, admired for their grace and beauty, form a unique document that illustrate a period and a way of life that have since disappeared; that of the French bourgeoisie in the last century.

A Floating World. Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986) features more than 230 exhibits. Of these, 182 are modern prints of Lartigue's photographs, whilst the show also includes 18 modern recreations of his stereoscopic pictures with their original three-dimensional effect. Lartigue took these pictures with a stereoscopic camera, a device very much in fashion at the time, in the attempt to capture reality in all its dimensions.

The show is completed by a section entitled *The Supports of Memory*, whose aim is to give visitors an insight into the different techniques that Lartigue used to create and organise his works. The section includes 23 vintage prints, produced between 1905 and 1926, as well as 3 cameras that belonged to Lartigue, some stereoscopic glasses, 8 autochrome prints (coloured photographs), four albums of original photographs and 6 volumes of the diaries and agendas that he kept throughout his life.

1894-1986: a lifetime devoted to taking photographs

Jacques Henri Lartigue occupies a very special place in the history of photography: that of a talented amateur who always spoke of painting as his principal passion and regarded photography as a secondary occupation. However, from 1902, when he was eight years old, until his death in 1986, taking photographs was like breathing for him.

Lartigue was born in Courbevoie, near Paris, in 1894, into a family of industrialists. His father bought him his first padre camera when he was eight years old, and at a very young age Jacques Henri began to keep a diary formed by photographs and short texts. This habit stayed with him all his life, and the diaries now form an extraordinary document portraying the lifestyle of a generation that discovered, amongst other things, fashion, sport, and motor racing.

Lartigue was a sickly child who soon learned how quickly his happiness could disappear. For this reason he decided to narrate his life and, through the story he told, to construct his own persona, just as, by constantly portraying it, he built his own happiness. For Lartigue, happiness is indissociable from its preservation; this joy must be retained through writing, photography, and albums – the final stage in creating his autobiography.

Throughout his life, Lartigue conserved the fresh outlook of childhood and the insatiable curiosity of youth. His photographs celebrate the present moment whilst concealing the anguish that the passing of time caused him.

Discovered by chance, late in life, in 1963, when he was nearly 70 years old, by John Szarkowski, then curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in Nueva York, Lartigue became known and recognised in his native France and throughout the world thanks to the glory he achieved in the United States. In 1974, the French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, invited Lartigue to take his official photograph. It was the firm friendship that grew up between the two that persuaded Lartigue to donate his entire work to the Republic in 1979.

EXHIBITION SECTIONS

The Passing of Time

Even from childhood, Jacques Henri Lartigue was obsessed with remembering all his experiences, and it was this obsession that led him to make **photography an instrument of memory**. This need to remember, so deeply rooted in the young Lartigue, was closely related to his **desire to “trap” happiness**. He saw memory and happiness as two realities that are exposed to the same threat of disappearing, and his genius was in photographing neither memory nor happiness, but what constitutes their essence: fragility. In Lartigue's photographs, happiness is always related to the human body and its interaction with the space around it. Happy people are buffeted by waves or gusts of wind, struck by sunlight. Bodies constantly lose their verticality and rise up again from the ground. To photograph happiness, the artist needs the ability to capture almost imperceptible movements: a sudden, fleeting gaze, a gesture made whilst falling off-balance.



A Modern Gaze

Lartigue's gaze as a photographer comprehends the ambiguous nature of reality, that what is infinitesimally small can be larger than what is very big, and that what is slow can reach the same speed as what is fast. His photography captures that essence, and this is where the truth resides in his work, for Lartigue is a veritable

master at conjuring up the instant. Although they appear static, his photographs always point to the possible continuation of time, a way of escaping ordinary restrictions and perspectives.



To accentuate this impression of ambiguity, Lartigue makes **masterful use of framing** at different stages in the photographic process. Firstly, at the moment he presses the shutter release. At that moment, his camera is a prolongation of his body. At times, the camera is at ground level, reproducing a child's amazed vision of the adult world. At others, it adopts the pace of a passer-by or a cyclist shooting down a slope. At yet other times, his framing is the result of a reflection, particularly when Lartigue is working in the dark room: this is where he manipulates his images, enlarging a detail or cutting part to intensify the overall effect.

Lartigue gradually took framing more and more into account when taking his photographs. His works feature countless architectural elements – doors, windows, plays of shadows, gaps discovered, mirrors – in which his characters appear trapped. Rather than finding anything to hold onto amidst the lines all around them, though, his subjects seem to float through them unchecked.

Speed

In the early-20th century, a great transformation completely redefined our perception of reality: the idea of speed. Distances were reduced thanks to the technological revolution in transport whilst, thanks to Einstein, time became relative.

In his youth, Lartigue attempted to **capture the physical reality of speed**, to translate, through his images, his feelings about machines. He pursued this goal above all at automobile racetracks, where his father, a great motor racing fan, used to take him. In his photographs, Lartigue manages to show us what

he felt about the experience of speed: **a reduced, compressed space**, often deformed, the violent transformation of the field of vision.

Born at the time of the first modern Olympics, into a family in which sport played an important role in education, Lartigue was an excellent tennis player as a young man, as well as one of the first people in France to regularly practice winter sports. Speed fascinated him, and he spent his whole life combating the body's rigid restrictions. He also sought to reflect this aim in his sports photography, and to this end, **lines move, spaces become enlarged** and new perspectives emerge constantly.

Lightness

Lartigue's most frequent dream as a child was of **flying**. It is no surprise, therefore, that aviation should have fascinated him from an early age. In 1904, he was in Normandy to witness, with his camera, Gabriel Voisin's attempts to take off, capturing the aviator's first flight a few metres above the ground. From 1907, moreover, he began to regularly visit airfields with his brother, and his childhood dream finally came true in 1916 when he flew in an aircraft for the first time. It would be no easy task to count the number of **jumps and take-offs** that we can find in Lartigue's work; for him, these leaps are an image of life itself, a symbol of vitality.



However, every jump is followed by a fall, every ascent by a descent. Leaps, somersaults and climbs nearly always end in the crash to earth, in a big splash, and in laughter. Lartigue's photographs are imbued with a **light tone** as they defy gravity.

Feminine Beauty

There are only young, beautiful women in Lartigue's universe. The constant quest for happiness and beauty that he had embarked on in youth completely excludes all deformity, all sign of aging, staying at arms-length from anything that might mar a sunny day or remind us of ugliness and death.

In spring 1910, when he was not yet 16, Lartigue discovered fashion and, above all, models. For months, his camera slung over his shoulder, he patrolled the avenues around the Bois de Boulogne, near his home, where distinguished ladies used to walk out at particular times to show off their new dresses.

However, what our young photographer sought to capture was not their fashionable garments but, rather, the **elegance of the women themselves**.

His first portraits of these promenading ladies are marked by new distance, revealing the fear he felt towards the female universe, a fear caused by the difference in ages and by his sexual desire. Affected by his erotic feelings, Lartigue hides. Hence the oblique framing he uses to portray these women, the very low angle he adopts. As he gains in experience, however, Lartigue's gaze changes, and he looks his lovers in the eye. In contrast to the rest of his work, Lartigue explicitly asks these **languid ladies** to do nothing, not to move.

In Search of the Unknown

In the early-20th century, everyone dreamed about enjoying the new pleasures offered by speed and sport and of exploring the new territories that this modern age was constantly discovering. The young photographer and his brother Zissou also played out such dreams as children, dressing up as their favourite heroes: aviators, racing drivers, explorers of distant worlds, etc. Caps, goggles and fur coats turn their wearers into extraterrestrials. This group of photographs features a new type of **explorers**, masked figures weighed down by their peculiar attire, practically unable to move.

Finally, the last section in the exhibition illustrates Lartigue's fascination with the **infinite** and nature, where people confront their solitude. In this part of Lartigue's work, individuals appear to have little more consistency than a blade of straw; they are like ghosts swayed by winds or drifting at the mercy of the waves. Our time on earth is ephemeral; that is what these images repeat to us constantly as they show the impossibility of holding onto happiness and remind us that we are but transitory inhabitants of this world.

TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES

The Supports of Memory

Cameras: In 1902, Jacques Lartigue was given his first camera, a 13 × 18 cm glass plate model in waxed wood. This was followed by many more, ever quicker and better, such as a Kodak Brownie 2, which could be loaded in the open air, and a 6 × 13 cm Klapp Nettel. These cameras enabled him to “conserve” everything that made him happy, everything that fascinated or surprised him.

Vintage prints: Several prints, made at the same time as the corresponding photographs, have been conserved. These vintage prints, some developed by Lartigue himself, others at the laboratory, generally take the form of negatives, though there are also several enlargements.

Albums: In 1902, Lartigue started to order and classify his work into large albums. He filled these albums with both his own photographs and others he collected. He continued this practice right up to his death in 1986, building up a total of 130 volumes. These 14,423 pages, each 52 × 36 cm in size, provide testimony to his life or, at least, the mark he chose to leave. Cuttings, frames, collages, dates and annotations show the artist at work, composing the moments that make up his life, adapting them to his sensitivity. These albums represent the final stage in Lartigue’s recreation of his experiences.

Diaries: Lartigue felt at an early age the need to put down his life in writing. Over the years, he used different supports for this task: from scraps of paper on which he scribbled and then hid to exercise books with such titles as *Book of My Dreams* or *Reasons I Am So Happy*. In 1911, he decided to keep an agenda in which he noted down and drew the weather each day so as, as he put it, to palliate the failures in adult memory. He began to add also the activities with which he occupied his time and, little by little, his impressions. He also drew the photographs that he took every day from memory, before he developed them. At the end of the page he gave each day a mark, evaluating its quality.

Techniques

Stereoscopic photography: we perceive the depth of the space around us because we have two eyes; binocular vision enables us to see forms in relief. Sir David Brewster presented his latest invention, the stereoscopic camera, to Queen Victoria and the general public in London in 1851 on the occasion of the Great Exhibition. The invention was a great success, and by the turn of the century hundreds of thousands of stereoscopic cameras and viewers had been sold.

In 1902, Lartigue's father, a keen amateur photographer, lent his eight-year-old son a Spido Gaumont 6 × 13 cm glass plate stereoscopic camera. This enabled young Lartigue to discover a new game: not only could he recreate reality, but he could also capture movement. He inverted his negatives on positive glass plates of the same size and enjoyed mounting them in sequences, carefully writing captions under them in school exercise books. From 1902 to 1928, Lartigue made nearly 5,000 stereoscopic negatives. From 1912, his 6 × 13 cm Klapp Nettel stereoscopic camera also enabled him to take panoramic views by folding one of the lenses. After he discovered this new technique he gradually gave up stereoscopic photography.

Autochromes: at the age of 17 years, to his great excitement, Lartigue discovered colour photography, firstly the technique invented by Lippmann and later that placed on the market by the Lumière brothers. He was enthralled by the new prospects these marvellous inventions offered him. In 1912, he used a 6 × 13 cm Klapp Nettel stereoscopic camera to make his first autochrome plates.

However, Lartigue discovered that the autochrome technique was incompatible with the joy he felt when capturing movement. In 1927, despite his fascination with colour, the impossibility of taking instantaneous photos led him to give up using the technique. Today, the Donation Lartigue conserves around 80 stereoscopic autochrome photographs.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1894** Jacques Lartigue is born on June 13 in Courbevoie, northwest Paris.
- 1900** Helped by his father, he takes his first photographs. He starts noting his thoughts and impressions on scraps of paper. This is the beginning of his diaries.

- 1902-1903** Henri Lartigue gives Jacques his first camera: a 13 x 18 cm wooden studio camera. He develops his first photographs and begins to paste them into large albums, later reordering them.
- 1906-1909** Jacques takes his first photographs of racing cars and aviation themes.
- 1910** He begins to take portrait photographs of elegant ladies promenading in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, showing off their new dresses.
- 1911** Sells his first pictures, of aerial acrobatics, to the magazine *La vie au grand air*. Using a camera given to him by his father, he makes his first film.
- 1913** First photographs of winter sports at Saint-Moritz (Switzerland).
- 1914-1918** On August 3, Germany declares war on France. Jacques Lartigue is not called up due to reasons of health. He enrolls at the Académie Jullian to study painting, which will be the main focus of his activities for many years.
- 1919** Marries Madeleine (*Bibi*), the daughter of composer André Messager, whom he had met in 1917.
- 1921** Son, Dani, born August 23.
- 1930** Meets the model Renée Perle, who will be his companion and model for the next two years.
- 1931** The divorce between Jacques Lartigue and Madeleine Messager is made public.
- 1934** Marries Marcelle Paolucci, *Coco*.
- 1939-1945** On 3 September 1939, France enters into war with Germany. Separated from Coco, he meets Florette Orméa, who becomes his third and last wife in 1945.
- 1955** His photographic portraits of Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau become known the world over, and examples of his work are included in an exhibition by the Gens d'Images association at the Galerie Orsay in Paris, along with pieces by Brassai, Willy Ronis and Man Ray.
- 1962** In New York, he meets John Sarkowski, director of the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art, who is immediately struck by his work and begins to organise an exhibition.
- 1963** Exhibition at MoMA: "The Photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue". He adds his father's name to his own and becomes known as Jacques Henri Lartigue.
- 1966** He meets the photographer Richard Avedon. *Album de famille (The Family Album)* is published, and Lartigue's reputation is established worldwide.
- 1975** First retrospective of his work in France at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. He publishes the first volume of his memoirs.

1979 He signs an act donating his entire photographic output (negatives and original albums) to the French government.

1986 Lartigue dies in Nice on September 12, at the age of 92.

A Floating World.

Photographs by Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986)

5 May - 3 October 2010

CaixaForum Barcelona

Av. de Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8
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Times:

Monday to Saturday, from 10 am to 8 pm

Saturdays, from 10 am to 10 pm

Admission free to exhibitions

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