

# JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE THREE DECADES OF PLEASURE: 1940–1973

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Jacques Henri Lartigue's success story reads like the romantic and just development of a photographer's career. After six decades of taking images all over the globe, John Szarkowski, the director of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, organized the very first solo exhibition on the artist's early body of work in 1963.<sup>1</sup> Until then, Lartigue had taken pictures of private family trips, street scenes or sport events in various locations without the influence of the art world or the public—totally free of any conventions.

Born into an upper-class French family in Courbevoie, a commune in northwest Paris, Lartigue had the good fortune and opportunity to engage with the young medium of photography in his childhood. His father gave him his first camera at the age of eight in 1902.<sup>2</sup> The camera's lens soon became his third eye. All kinds of dynamic or moving situations were captured by his newly acquired stereoscopic camera. Beside his favorite subjects such as airplanes or different sports competitions, he started to take images of anonymous ladies on the streets and in the large public park,

the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, close to his family house, in particular. Many of these early images can be seen as contemporary witnesses of revolutionary mechanical vehicles as well as detailed studies of French fashion history in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Visualizing the young passionate photographer walking around Paris, following his favorite subjects and capturing his family and friends during their daily activities, one would expect that Lartigue was eager to dive into the theory, history, and practice of photography. Instead he decided to attend the Académie Julian to study painting.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1930s, Lartigue had acquired a certain reputation as a painter, especially as a portrait painter, and like other artists he was hired to decorate interiors for various public social events.<sup>4</sup> His success as a well-educated painter did not prevent him though from continuing to take pictures of the world around him. Visits to artist friends such as Picasso, trips with his family to the French Riviera, and still life arrangements of flowers and materials provided him with a wealth of motifs and are only a few examples of his vast repertoire.

In 1942, Lartigue met his third and last wife, Florette Orméa, in Monte Carlo, who became one of his favorite models.<sup>5</sup> The works exhibited in the Nicola Erni Collection document his attraction to Florette a few months after they had met. He captured her in spontaneous poses and tracked her fashion style during different seasons and activities in various places in Cannes, Monte Carlo, and Paris. One can hardly miss the relaxed atmosphere and Florette's beauty that Lartigue sensed and saw when looking at one particular color photograph. It depicts Florette together with another woman in Monte Carlo wearing a little summer beret, high-waist hotpants with a white and blue checkered pattern, and a sleeve-less tie-neck blouse. On thirteen of the total of seventy-seven works exhibited in the Nicola Erni Collection Florette is shown sitting on the Champs Elysées, casually riding a bicycle with Lartigue's brother, Guy, or chatting with the couple's friends. Whilst capturing intimate and private moments with Florette and his family, Lartigue also devoted himself to important historic incidents such as the Liberation of Paris in 1944 during World War II.



The chic and sophisticated atmosphere in cities such as London and Paris seem to have fascinated Lartigue from the beginning of his photographic journey. In the majority of the works exhibited, women are shown walking down the streets of each respective city. On the one hand, these images are two-dimensional time capsules in terms of architecture or fashion styles, but on the other, they give us a bigger picture about social behavior and how people engaged with each other or how individuals experienced the urban environment. Thanks to the spontaneous action of Lartigue walking around with his camera, he either captured women looking like models on a perfectly staged fashion show catwalk or caught them in less advantageous poses or outfits during a casual Sunday stroll. Although some moments are less memorable, he had the empathy and the inner eye to prevent any sort of ridicule toward society.

One can observe in his “street photographs” that Lartigue often pointed the camera from a low angle. This strategy enabled him to take images in a quiet and unobtrusive way without triggering any

reaction of his subjects. Beside the low viewpoint, he regularly photographed people from behind, integrating the street situation such as road axes or shop and street signs. Close-ups of a particular clothing turn our gaze to special fashion items and styles. The golden bikini of a tanned, anonymous woman taken in Monte Carlo, is an absolute eye-catcher in this regard.

Although it is known that Lartigue earned his living with his paintings, he produced even more photographs from an early age onward. It is said that around 117,500 images are registered in the archive of the “Donation Jacques Henri Lartigue” which preserves and promotes the artist's estate.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of his studies and for many other reasons such as working without a studio or assistant, Lartigue can be designated an amateur photographer in the way generations of photographers before him acted. The late canonization of his photographic work was marked by two milestones in the 1960s that brought him international recognition as a truly professional photographer: the solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the early publication of

the monograph *Diary of a Century* in 1970, which were the first to address his entire oeuvre.<sup>7</sup> It was edited by the famous photographer Richard Avedon who finally elevated Lartigue “to the company of the great photographers of the twentieth century.”<sup>8</sup>





All works are archival pigment prints in various sizes  
dating from between 1940 and 1973  
Taken in London, Paris, Cannes, Monte Carlo, New York,  
and other places











