



THE FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO VANISHED FROM MUSEUMS

By Matthew Ponsford – November 5, 2018



Curator Fannie Escoulen is inviting visitors to Paris to walk across the city and confront the invisible photographic pioneers, whose faces and works have been largely absent from its museums.

"The history of photography has been written, in general, by men," said Fannie Escoulen, the curator who has organized this parcours as part of the annual Paris Photo exhibition, the largest international art fair dedicated to photography, which begins in the French capital on November 8. Her project, named "Elles x Paris Photo," is taking visitors to discover the women who have picked up a camera -- likely numbering as many as men, according to Escoulen -- but many galleries have left out of the picture.

In a phone interview, Escoulen explained the walk will not take the form of a lecture, rather a journey of discovery: "It's not an exhibition. it's a provocation," she said. "I don't know exactly why women, little by little, disappeared."

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The tour takes visitors through the glass-vaulted halls of the Grand Palais, Paris Photo's central hub on the Champs-Élysées, and through a cross-section of the city's art institutions. Stops along the way include the main venue's historic sister gallery, the Petit Palais, photographic specialists such as Photo Saint Germain and Jeu de Paume, and the Fondation Cartier, the fashion house's imposing collection. Each will show works by women photographers, who, curators said, deserve to be rediscovered or better known by the public.

Following a chronological path, the project showcases works from photographic pioneers of the early 20th century, such as Scottish-Canadian Margaret Watkins, one of the first women commercial photographers, and Lucia Moholy, the Czech wife of Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy Nagy, whose remarkable architectural and personal photography is often cast in the shadow of her husband's fame. Visitors will move through the radical feminists of the 1960s to 1980s -- including Japanese experimental photographer Kunie Sugiura and Jan Groover, whose still life shots influenced a generation that includes Wolfgang Tillmans -- and on to under-recognized contemporary artists.

All around the world, largely self-motivated female photographers have built their practice, side-by-side with male counterparts, almost since Louis Daguerre created the first commercially viable photographic process in Paris, in 1839, explained Escoulen.

"Photography was a medium that was very simple and very accessible to anyone who wanted to explore it," she said. "Women photographers were probably many when the medium was created -- then they had to deal with being a professional photographer."

Even in the medium's early days (when clunky cameras and volatile film stocks required optical and chemical expertise), practical complexities paled in comparison to the hurdles of social expectation, with the requirement to raise families preventing most female photographers from maintaining careers.

Despite social barriers, many persisted, with Watkins spending the 1920s photographing pioneering advertising images of domestic scenes for Macy's department stores, and later traveling to document the early Soviet Union. While most roles as war or documentary photographers were taken by men, Escoulen identifies global similarities among early 20th century female pioneers, who often worked in isolation. Countless photographs depict interests that appear surprisingly contemporary -- intimacy, domesticity, tenderness and self-representation -- all of which would later begin to characterize a generation of 21st century photographic artists.

Escoulen said male acclaim was self-reinforcing throughout photography's early days, with men in prominent positions in magazines and museums supporting other men to launch exhibitions and validate their work. Meanwhile, many talented women fell by the wayside, unheralded by institutions or, for myriad reasons, giving up the camera. Despite earning early exhibitions in the US, Watkins skirted the limelight and spent much of her life caring for elderly aunts in Edinburgh. By the time she died in 1969, she was a virtual unknown and it would be decades before her negatives were rediscovered and museums began celebrating her work.

But, by the 1960s and 1970s, feminist movements across the arts explicitly challenged masculine norms. American photographer Joan Lyons, who will discuss her work at Paris Photo on Nov. 8, produced introspective images of her own experience that fought back prevailing beliefs that photos should be universal and objective. Instead, she used Polaroid, Xerox machines and other alternative methods of image making to create personal images that were inseparable from her experience.

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Escoulen said that despite huge changes and tools like Instagram allowing anyone to self-publish photos, there remains worldwide institutional resistance to women succeeding in photography.

"I would say most of them suffer a lack of visibility," she said.

While the erasure of female photographers is a global problem, to Escoulen some countries have been slower to tackle galleries' biases and to give a platform to female photographers.

In Paris, some galleries, such as Jeu de Paume, consciously maintain a gender parity in their exhibition programming. But they are honorable exceptions. Escoulen described one friend, the photographer Lise Sarfati, who left the French capital for the U.S., where, she felt, "the question of being a woman or man is not there."

"I think the problem is not only in Paris," Escoulen said. "It is in France but also in Spain and probably in Italy. They are also south (European) countries, so maybe still more misogynic (sexist) maybe more machiste (chauvinist)."

"Elles x Paris Photo" is part of Paris Photo, at the Grand Palais, from Nov. 8 until Nov. 11, 2018.