

MASI Lugano

Museo d'arte
della Svizzera italiana,
Lugano

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After Nature

Swiss Photography in the 19th Century

03 April – 03 July 2022

Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano

MASI | LAC

Curated by Martin Gasser and Sylvie Henguely

PRESS RELEASE

Lugano, 16 March 2022

MASI Lugano presents "After Nature. Swiss Photography in the 19th Century". The exhibition is the first comprehensive survey of the initial fifty years of photography in Switzerland, and boasts a number of historic works that have never been exhibited, such as the first ever photograph of the Matterhorn and the oldest photos taken in the Canton of Ticino. Some of the themes explored include the impact of this new visual experience, the immediate connection between art and photography, its key role in developing tourism, and how it was used to record local customs and traditions, as well as industry and science. The show documents the spread of photography in Switzerland in detail, offering a fascinating and very engaging journey through over 400 images dating from 1839 to the 1890s – many of which have never been presented to the public – from more than 60 public and private collections. The different aspects captured in the country's diverse language regions channel the progressive spirit and dynamic development of the young federal state in nineteenth-century Europe.

The exhibition is co-produced with Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur and Photo Elysée, Lausanne and it is presented in the LAC venue of MASI Lugano.

The exhibition

Described as "the mirror with a memory", the daguerreotype was a photographic process that involved creating unique, non-reproducible images on a copper plate. Its arrival in Switzerland, where it even reached rural areas, was thanks to itinerant photographers whose heavy cameras produced clear, precise images of real scenes, "after nature".

The opening sections of the exhibition are devoted to the early days of photography and therefore the daguerreotype, introducing us to Swiss masters of this art such as the Geneva banker, diplomat and hobby photographer Jean-Gabriel Eynard, and the etcher Johann Baptist Isenring, famous for his "life-size" daguerreotypes.

It is evident that in Switzerland too, in terms of the choice of subjects, compositional principles and way it was used, early photography was still closely linked with other arts, and painting in particular, to which it gradually came to represent a valid, cheaper alternative for portraiture. Not to mention the graphic arts, which it came to serve. Indeed it was Isenring who popularized the use in Switzerland of photographs as a model for etchings, a technique also used by the first female photographer, Franziska Möllinger, in her Swiss views published as lithographs from 1844 onwards. This section includes one of the few known daguerreotypes of Ticino, which dates to 1842: the portrait of an elegantly dressed young man (name unknown) – a shining example of the rising bourgeoisie – taken in Lugano. The gaze of outsiders, visiting travellers, led to the grandeur of the Swiss landscape and its mountains being immortalized using the new medium. The incredibly modern angle of the spectacular daguerreotypes by the English artist John Ruskin, who took the first photographs of Ticino, including one of a rocky promontory by Castelgrande in Bellinzona (1858) and the first ever image of the Matterhorn, in 1849. Photography was soon set to become a very powerful vehicle for promoting tourism, an activity also favoured by the developing transport infrastructures. And in this period the photographic process was getting simpler, with the use of glass negatives and albumin prints. This led to the rise of popular images of tourist "destinations", such as the Staubbach waterfall in the Lauterbrunnen valley, immortalized by the English photographer Francis Frith in 1863. Dating from the following year is a breathtaking image by the famous French photographer Adolphe Braun, which captures the endless expanse of the Rhône glacier being crossed by a group of climbers, one of whom is a woman.

While on one hand photography was helping to give the country an international outlook, on the other it was also being used to create an idealized Swiss identity, designed to be distinguishable from foreigners. This can be seen in Traugott Richard's series "Costumes Suisses" (circa 1875), which features peasant types and young girls dressed in traditional-looking costumes that are not a reflection of the real world. But in Switzerland, more than elsewhere, photography was employed to identify those who were foreign and "other" present in the country. The exhibition also includes a unique corpus of portraits on salted paper which are early examples of mug shots: portraits of homeless people and wanderers taken in 1852-53 by Carl Durheim. After the state was founded in 1848, these individuals tended to be moved from one canton to another, and were not a welcome presence. Another section highlights photography as a profession and the advent of portrait studios in the 1850s, which gave to a flourishing market in images that gradually became standardised. The Taeschler brothers of St. Gallen capitalized on this trend. Yet the most impressive image in this section is one belonging to a completely different register, taken by their half-brother Carl, who captured, snapshot-style, a group of French soldiers interned in the Church of St. Mangen in 1871, during the Franco-Prussian conflict.

A large section at the end of the exhibition highlights the role of photography from the late 1860s onwards in documenting science, medicine, technical progress and the development of urban areas and waterway management in Switzerland. In the field of medicine, extraordinary images include Emil Pricam's photographs of patients before and after operations, and Robert Schucht's systematic documentation of malformed ears. The construction of the Gotthard railway in 1872-82, documented,

among others, by Adolphe Braun himself, was hailed as the first modern, ground-breaking civil engineering project in nineteenth-century Switzerland. It was a massive undertaking that was destined to permanently change the country's development in terms of both urban areas and waterways.

The show also includes video interviews with the curators Martin Gasser and Sylvie Henguely and a video on daguerreotypes and photographic techniques, with restorer Sandra Petrillo. It is accompanied by a comprehensive publication available in German and French, published by Steidl Verlag, Göttingen.

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Exhibition venues

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MASI | Palazzo Reali

Via Canova 10

CH – 6900 Lugano

Main partner



Scientific partner



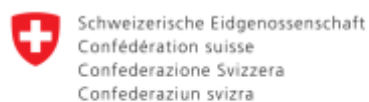
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Institutional partner



Dipartimento federale dell'interno DFI
Ufficio federale della cultura UFC

Press images

01.

Anonym

Giovanni Sassella, 23 Years Old, Lugano

24 March 1842

Daguerreotype

Private collection Mendrisio



02.

Rudolph Heinrich Ernst

Valérie and Emilie Meyer-Bischoff

1844 c.

Daguerreotype

Sammlung W. + T. Bosshard



03.

Jean de Humnicki

Unknown Woman with Two Children

1845 -1850

Daguerreotype, coloured

Sammlung W. + T. Bosshard



04.

John Ruskin and John Hobbs

The Matterhorn and Reflection in Alpine Lake

8 August 1849

Daguerreotype

Courtesy of K & J Jacobson, UK



05.

Carl Durheim

Unknown Woman

1850 -1860

Salted paper print, coloured

Sammlung W. + T. Bosshard



06.

Anonym

Telegraph Office Employees, Lucerne

1856 -1857

Salted paper print

Museum für Kommunikation, Bern



07.
John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley
Bellinzona. Castelgrande. Walls and Towers
1858 c.
Daguerreotype
Courtesy of K & J Jacobson, UK



08.
Anonym
The Aspiring Missionary David Asante
1862 c.
Ambrotype
Archiv der Basler Mission



09.
Francis Frith
Staubbach Falls in the Lauterbrunnen Valley
1863 c.
Albumen print
ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv



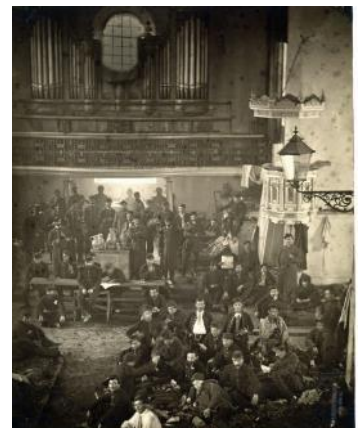
10.
Adolphe Braun
Rhone Glacier
1864
Albumen print
ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv



11.
Jean Geiser
Veiled Woman, Algiers
1870 c.
Albumen print
Thomas Walther Collection



12.
Carl Taeschler-Signer
Interned French Soldiers in St.Mangen Church, St.
Gallen
1871
Albumen print
Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürgergemeinde St. Gallen



13.

Gebrüder Taeschler

Portrait of a Child, St. Gallen

1873 c.

Carbon print

Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur



14.

Johann Linck

Sulzer Brothers Machine, Winterthur

1880s

Albumen print

Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur



15.

Adolphe Braun

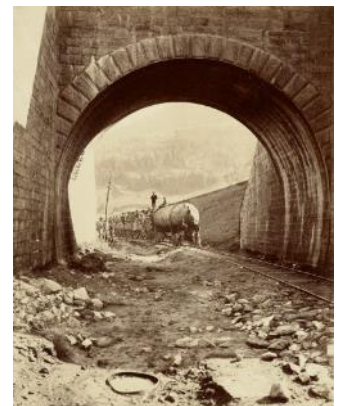
Construction of Gotthard Railway, Tunnel

Entrance in Airolo

1881-1882

Albumen print

Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur



16.

Traugott Richard

Bernese Costume, from the Series «Costumes
Suisses»

1883 c.

Albumen print, coloured

Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur



17.

Bulacher & Kling

The M[ü]nchenstein Railway Accident

1891

Albumen print

H. R. Gabathuler, Photobibliothek.ch,

Diessenhofen



Current exhibitions

James Barnor: Accra/London – A Retrospective

Until 31 July 2022

MASI | Palazzo Reali

Antonio Ciseri

Until 01 May 2022

MASI | Palazzo Reali

Sentiment and Observation. Art in Ticino 1850-1950

The MASI Collections

Permanent collection

MASI | LAC

Upcoming exhibitions

Vedo Rosso

26 March – 12 June 2022

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

Marcel Broodthaers – Industrial Poems

01 May – 13 November 2022

MASI | LAC

A Collection of Italian Modern Art.

Carrà, Sironi, Campigli, Rosai, Manzù, Scipione

22 May 2022 – 29 January 2023

MASI | Palazzo Reali

Paul Klee

04 September 2022 – 08 January 2023

MASI | LAC

Bally Artist of the Year Award 2022

10 September – 02 October 2022

MASI | Palazzo Reali

Pietro Roccasalva

18 September – 18 December 2022

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

Manor Award Ticino 2022

23 October 2022 – 09 January 2023

MASI | Palazzo Reali