

Press release**THE WORLD IN COLOUR****Colour Photography before 1915****8 May – 27 September 2015**

A hundred years ago the French philanthropist Albert Kahn sent twenty photographers to Europe, Asia, Africa and America to document people, landscapes and monuments using the latest techniques of colour photography. In an era when the world's nations were gearing up to wage the Great War, Kahn, a French banker, launched this major project as a contribution to world peace. The long-forgotten 72,000 glass plates are today celebrated as milestones in the history of documentary photography and understanding between peoples. For the first time in Switzerland, Museum Rietberg is showing a selection of this treasury of images, which are fascinating as documents of photographic history. The images permit us a gloriously colourful view of a bygone world that we have hitherto only known in black and white.

In 1907 the Jewish banker Albert Kahn (1860–1940), a native of Alsace, attended a slide show by the Lumière brothers, pioneers of film and photography. Kahn was so thrilled with the true-to-life colours produced from a single shot in these large-format colour slides known as autochromes that he immediately launched a worldwide photography project known as “Les archives de la planète”. Over a period of twenty years he sent a total of twenty photographers and film teams to all corners of the world. They travelled to no fewer than fifty countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, so that by 1931 Kahn had amassed an archive of 72,000 autochromes and 183,000 metres of celluloid film in his villa in a Paris suburb. However, Kahn lost his fortune in the great Wall Street crash of 1929 and in 1931 his archive activities came to a halt. He died in poverty in 1940 only a few months after the German occupation of Paris.

Colour Photos for Peace

Inspired by the ideas of the philosopher and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941), Kahn became convinced that only through a knowledge of the world's cultures and through exchange between them would people be able to live together peacefully. His reasoning was that people who had come to know and respect one another would not go to war. The travelling photographers were instructed to capture local scenes, relaxed everyday situations, people in their typical clothing and uniforms, street views and famous monuments on film. Kahn expected them to produce neither reportage nor art photography nor ethnological field research. Rather, he was interested in the traditional world, local customs and peaceful coexistence of the nineteenth century. In his eyes this world was doomed, and almost as if he had had a premonition of the coming war, he made it his mission to document old cultural traditions and the world's many different peoples in a global photo and film archive. His idea that peoples and cultures were simultaneously different and the same is highlighted by the arrangement of the photos in a colourful juxtaposition of numerous historical documents of colour

photography. His peace mission – presenting close-up images of unfamiliar sights so that people from different corners of the world could meet face to face – continued to be Kahn’s main motivation even after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 had become inevitable.

A Laborious Procedure

The technical effort required to take a single photo was considerable. Before a photo was taken, the glass plates had to be meticulously coated first with grains of potato starch dyed red-orange, green and blue-violet and then with a light-sensitive emulsion. Thick filters and non-sensitive film required direct sunlight and subjects who would remain motionless while being photographed. The stiff poses and pensive facial expressions of the people in the images became hallmarks of the autochromes in Kahn’s archive as did the delicately iridescent colours. Because the exposed glass plates are so light-sensitive they can no longer be exhibited for conservation reasons.

Kahn’s “Les Archives de la planète”

Kahn’s “Les Archives de la planète” was set up and run by the human geographer Jean Brunhes (1869–1930). The images were not intended for the general public, but instead were shown to elite circles of politicians, scholars and cultural figures during lectures and discussions. No fewer than 4,000 people are recorded as having visited Kahn’s villa in Boulogne-Billancourt. They included leading politicians and aristocrats from France and elsewhere; Nobel prize-winners like Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Mann, André Gide and Rabindranath Tagore; and other prominent cultural figures such as the sculptor Auguste Rodin, writers like James Joyce and H. G. Wells, and composers such as Gabriel Fauré and Arthur Honegger.

Today Kahn’s villa, along with its Japanese garden, is publically owned and is a popular excursion destination for Parisians. His former residence is now a museum displaying the Kahn archive, which is in the process of being studied and restored.

This is what Albert Kahn himself had to say about his project:

“‘Les Archives de la planète’ allows us to recall past and present in whatever way we choose and thus to regard places and events from many points of view. May this bygone testimony preserved in the archive continue to disseminate everywhere the lessons that can be drawn from these vivid images of history in the making.”

Exhibition

The exhibition shows around eighty colour photographs from “Les Archives de la planète”, the majority of which date from 1913/14, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Most of them were taken by the photographer Stéphane Passet (1875–?), who in 1913 set off on a journey to Asia that took him to Greece, Turkey, China, Mongolia and finally to India.

It also features the first known colour photographs from Ireland. They were taken by the only woman photographer in Kahn’s team, the scholar of English literature Marguerite Mespoulet, who travelled through Ireland in 1913.

The exhibition also includes projected photographs and twenty-five colour prints from another major photo documentation project. These were taken by Sergei M. Prokudin-Gorskii (1863–1944) as part of a project commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II. Prokudin-Gorskii travelled through Russia from the Crimea to Siberia between 1909 and 1915 and took no fewer than 10,000 colour photos of everyday life in the Russian empire.

Finally, a table of original photography books from before the First World War includes images from yet another colour photography project of that era entitled “Images from the German Colonies”. These books were published in large print runs, providing further testimony of the European zeitgeist that can be seen so clearly in “Les Archives de la planète”.

The exhibition was conceived and organised by the LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn and the Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin

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Förderung durch die Kunststiftung NRW und das Ministerium für Familie, Kinder, Jugend, Kultur und Sport des Landes NRW

Website of the exhibition: www.rietberg.ch/worldincolour

Catalogue

The exhibition will be accompanied by a 144-page catalogue published by Hatje Cantz Verlag containing 101 full-page illustrations, many of them being published for the first time. It will be available in the museum shop for a reduced price of CHF 28 or for approximately CHF 38 in bookshops.

Guided tours and workshops

Public guided tours

Guided tours (free in combination with an entrance ticket) in German will be available from 8 May 2015: every Saturday, 2 p.m.

Private tours (in German, English and French)

For further information and online bookings please visit www.rietberg.ch/fuehrungen

Educational events

The mobile Planetarium Zürich will be a guest at Museum Rietberg, transporting participants into the world of astronomy by showing films with live commentaries. The programme for schools in the Canton of Zurich will be subsidised via the "Schule & Kultur" initiative of the Canton's educational department. School classes from the City of Zurich will be admitted free of charge.

Further details of all educational events for schools and the general public can be found on the exhibition website and at www.rietberg.ch/kunstvermittlung

Information and contact

Information, texts and images can be downloaded from www.rietberg.ch/press

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Opening times: Tues. to Sun. 10 am to 5 pm | Wed. 10 am to 8 pm

Admission Exhibition: adults CHF 18 | concessions CHF 14 | Children under 16 free

How to get to Museum Rietberg: Tram 7 towards Wollishofen, alight at "Museum Rietberg" (four stops from Paradeplatz). No parking; disabled parking available.