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Kevin Moore, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004. 272 pp. Plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-691-12002-1.

Review by Charles Rearick, The University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

For anyone who enjoys visual evocations of the *belle époque* and wants to know more about French photographic history, Kevin Moore's new study has much to offer. I will go further: it is a delight of a book, at once scholarly and beautiful. In its wide-ranging treatment of cultural history as well as photography and art history, it covers much more ground than the title suggests. In part one, Moore recounts the "formation" of photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue (the period 1902-1922) and explicates his photos in their cultural and social context. Part two, much shorter, is "Transformation: Lartigue as Artist, 1963-1979." It takes the story from the pivotal year 1963--when the American public discovered Lartigue and a selection of his early photographs--to the artist's donation of his albums and photos to the French state in 1979.

That debut in the United States was a life-changing breakthrough for Lartigue--at age sixty-nine. He had never succeeded in persuading French museums or the Bibliothèque Nationale (Cabinet des Estampes) to take an interest in his photographs from his pre-1914 youth, although he had sold some pictures of early automobiles and fashions to magazines. Then, in 1962, he visited the United States for the first time and fortuitously met with the right people in New York. The next year, the Museum of Modern Art introduced him to the arts world with a major exhibition. In the MoMA catalog, curator John Szarkowski hailed the superb artistic accomplishments of an untutored boy early in the century--a child prodigy, a modernist "primitive" (p. 191), a naïf working creatively outside photographic traditions. Later that same year, a November issue of *Life* magazine featured Lartigue and his early work, introducing him to a still wider public. *Life*, offering pleasant daydream relief from Cold-War anxieties, showcased his pictures as glimpses of "The Last Years of Splendor."

On the cover of *Life* late in November 1963, a Lartigue photo was slated to appear, but events in Dallas on November 22 made it necessary to substitute a portrait of an assassinated president. Still, *Life*'s article on the long-neglected photographer, together with the MoMA exhibition, was enough to bring him fame. From 1963 to his death in 1986, Lartigue enjoyed renown as a major figure in the arts--celebrated not for the paintings that he prized most and had sold through the decades of his adulthood, but for the old photographs he had taken as a youth.

France's art establishment joined in recognizing Lartigue more than a decade after his success in the U.S. The reluctance in France was due largely to dismissive views of photographs as "low art" or as simply documentation. But the enthusiastic American reception of Lartigue stirred French interest, and the brisk sales of his pictures abroad aroused concern about the loss of the nation's photographic *patrimoine*. Consequently, Lartigue's photographs and memories were regularly in the public eye in France of the late 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the newfound favor of French book publishers, museums, and galleries.

Kevin Moore's excellent book provides several important revisions of long-standard understandings. Through four of the five chapters in the book, Moore builds a persuasive case against the art-historical interpretation of Lartigue established by Szarkowski. In well-documented argumentation, Moore

demolishes the notion of Lartigue as a naïve and innocent child prodigy and a “primitive” working outside art-historical influences. Young Lartigue benefited greatly from the photographic know-how and equipment of his father, a wealthy banker and avid amateur photographer. The elder Lartigue was, in fact, an excellent photographer (as reproductions in the book show) with state-of-the-art cameras. Father helped son at every step, giving him new cameras every year, showing him what could be done, and developing and printing photos. Father was certainly there to help with the first camera that Jacques received at age eight in 1902, as the large wooden camera was too big for the boy to handle alone. Further, the author maintains, some of the photos attributed to the boy were more likely taken by his father. In one particularly egregious case, the boy photographer himself appears in a photo commonly identified as one of his “boyhood photographs” (without the benefit of a remote shutter release).

Another part of the boy’s artistic acculturation came from the rich visual milieu surrounding him—the abundance of illustrated magazines in his home and the cinema that he attended regularly. In his later teens, he extended his enthusiasm for picture taking to making his own motion pictures. He received his first movie camera and projector for Christmas in 1911; by late 1912 he had three more movie cameras. In his albums and diary henceforth, he organized his visual experience into sequences following the model of cinematic narrative. In short, Lartigue was hardly a naïve or unsophisticated lad. Furthermore, Moore points out, the “boy photographer” was not a child when he took most of the well-known photographs. After an early period of understandable “ineptitude” (p. 48), he came into his own as a noteworthy photographer at age sixteen—in 1910. For the photos displayed at MoMA, Lartigue’s age ranged from eleven to twenty-eight, with the average being seventeen (p. 191).

A second major revisionist argument in the book targets the view of the photographs as primary-source documentation of the *belle époque*. Although that period label does not fit well any long stretch of years for French society as a whole, for the Lartigue family and their social circle before 1914, life certainly appears to have been “belle” in the photographs that have become so famous. We see only Parisians whose lives centered on the avenues of the sixteenth arrondissement (where the family home was) and the Bois de Boulogne, frequent holidays in seaside resorts (Deauville and Nice), a family château, and Alpine skiing lodges. Certainly Lartigue’s camera captured privileged, fashionable men, women, and children busily pursuing their favorite leisure activities, riding bicycles, swimming, strolling on the beach, playing with go-carts, automobiles, model airplanes, and early aircraft. Yet the images that we now have, Moore points out, are not simply and purely documentary records of a pre-1914 social world. Rather they are photos reworked a half century later, in the 1960s and 1970s, to suit the tastes of a time indulging in a love affair with a *belle époque* of dreams and selective memories. The pictures were reframed, drastically cropped down to the most dramatic part of a large picture, and reprinted for the best effect. Responding to nostalgic interests of that later time, Lartigue also retouched his youthful journal, remade his early photo albums, and wrote his memoirs (1975). Further, while Lartigue did concentrate on high society, elite sport and fashion, his lens was often not aimed at the best face of the *gratin*. Many of the photos seem inspired by a satirical or mocking humor, Moore points out—such as the pictures of oh-so-stylish women in their lavishly garnished hats and furs, with suitably accessorizing dogs in tow. For the cover of the book under review, Moore has chosen an unforgettable photograph of a high-society couple dressed in their finest, looking quite ill-at-ease, if not downright unhappy, the woman tensely biting her lip, the swarthy gentleman staring askance and frowning pensively.



Moore's correctives about Lartigue's work and the beautifully reproduced photographs make this book a valuable contribution. Yet it offers only scant information about most of Lartigue's life. Perhaps the documentation that would be required for that does not exist. Or has Moore downplayed the biographical in order to give maximum effect to the historical context? In explaining the visual culture of Lartigue's youth so fully and so well, the author comes close to asserting an argument of cultural determinism, making the boy appear a kind of empty puppet figure. "Lartigue was photographically programmed," Moore declares (p. 8). That seems to be Moore's answer to the question that he raises at the very beginning of his introduction: "What makes an artist?" His second question--"Talent?"--remains a question. With so much of the book devoted to "historiographic critique" (p. 216), a fulsome appreciation of Lartigue's youthful talent (and the beauty of the photos) falls to the wayside. Some scholar in the future is left with the task of putting that element back into the story. When that happens, that scholar will doubtless use Moore as a foundational work. Just as Moore has identified as a period break "Lartigue after MoMA," making it a major subheading in his book, a future historian will have reason to devote a section to "Lartigue after Moore."

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