

Ernst A. Heiniger

Good Morning, World!

05/06–10/10/2021

Ernst A. Heiniger (1909–1993) belonged to the avant-garde of the Swiss “New Photography” movement in the 1930s. A photo retoucher by trade, he taught himself the art of photography autodidactically. He quickly developed a keen sense for contemporary and modern aesthetics and soon became one of the first photographers to be admitted to the Swiss Werkbund (SWB). After this initial spark to his career, Heiniger constantly took on new challenges and continued to produce pioneering work. In 1936 he created *Puszta-Pferde* (“Horses in Hungary”), one of the first modern photobooks in Switzerland. He worked with well-known graphic artists such as Heiri Steiner, Herbert Matter and Josef Müller-Brockmann and created innovative designs by combining photography and graphic design, an entirely novel concept at the time. In the 1950s, Heiniger travelled the world as a documentary filmmaker for Walt Disney – two of his short films were awarded an Oscar. He later created Switzerland’s first 360 degree film for Expo 64 in Lausanne.

Even though Ernst A. Heiniger’s visual worlds were admired by a broad public in his day, his name is still largely absent from the canon of Swiss photographic history. In 1986, he left Switzerland determined never to return and lived in Los Angeles until his death in 1993. Since then, the Fotostiftung Schweiz has sought to return his photographic legacy to Switzerland – which it finally accomplished in 2014. The exploration and processing of his archive provide the basis for this first comprehensive retrospective. Ernst A. Heiniger’s diverse photographic and cinematic oeuvre was always at the cutting edge of technology and oscillates between cool perfection and sensual closeness to nature.

1 Early Works – Journey to Russia, New Photography and the Swiss Werkbund

In 1929, at the age of twenty, Ernst A. Heiniger set up his own business as a positive retoucher. In the same year, the exhibition *Film und Foto (FiFo)* by the German Werkbund took place at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich. The title of the exhibition was to be emblematic of Heiniger’s further career, as the two camera-based media, film and photography, defined his entire artistic output. At the time, the international touring exhibition was considered a manifesto for a modern visual aesthetic. The terms “Neues Sehen” (New Vision) and “Neue Sachlichkeit” (New Objectivity) were used to describe those avant-garde tendencies that emphasised genuinely photographic means of design. The characteristics of the new aesthetic included sharpness of image, attention to detail, unusual perspectives such as high and low angle shots, (abstracting) close-ups or multiple exposures. The precise capture of structures and forms was also one of the typical qualities of this “New Photography”, as it became known in Switzerland.

After only a short period as a self-employed retoucher, Ernst A. Heiniger decided to learn how to take photographs himself. He made his customers an offer: for the same price, they would receive a new, better photograph instead of a retouched one. Inspired by visits to exhibitions and publications such as Werner Gräff’s *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (“Here Comes the New Photographer!”, 1929), he adapted the aesthetics of the international avant-garde and became one of the pioneers of New Photography in Switzerland. In 1932 he undertook a study trip to the Soviet Union, where he came to meet a director he admired, Sergei M. Eisenstein. There Heiniger shot a photo series documenting life on the street. Also in 1932, eight of his early photo-

graphic works were shown in a touring exhibition, *Die neue Fotografie in der Schweiz* ("New Photography in Switzerland"), organised by the Swiss Werkbund (SWB). As soon as January of the following year, he was one of the first photographers to be accepted into the SWB Zurich, and over the course of the 1930s he was able to establish himself as a technically skilled photographer and distinguished representative of the SWB.

2 Puszta-Pferde ("Horses in Hungary")

In 1936, Ernst A. Heiniger ventured into a new medium – the photobook. For his first essayistic photobook *Puszta-Pferde* ("Horses in Hungary"), he travelled to Hungary to take pictures of the wild horses of the Pannonian Steppe over the course of several weeks. While designing the book, he experimented freely with his photographic material and composed lively and varied photo pages. In 1937, the book was published in high-quality rotogravure by the Zurich publishing house Fretz & Wasmuth. With a total (German) print run of 23,000 copies, it was a great success and showed for the first time that Ernst A. Heiniger was not merely an aloof representative of avant-garde photography, but also had a talent for inspiring a wider audience with his pictures.

3 Swiss Landscapes – Tessin ("Ticino") and Viertausender ("Four-Thousanders")

Heiniger was able to build on this success with his next two books *Tessin* ("Ticino", 1941) and *Viertausender* ("Four-Thousanders", 1942). Both were produced during the Second World War against the backdrop of closed borders and a revival of sentimental homeland imagery. In the context of "spiritual national defence", the "Heimatbuch", a genre of books painting an idealised image of Alpine nature and culture, was encouraged by the authorities as a means to inspire the moral uplift of a beleaguered nation.

For Heiniger, however, high alpine landscape photography was also a fresh opportunity to translate a subject he was passionate about into book form. The overly romantic transfiguration of the local landscape was kept in check by the fact that he remained true to his detached, objective style. With a firm belief in the documentary power of photography, he wanted to convey the experience that was revealed to the alpinist upon reaching a mountain peak. The many enthusiastic book reviews give an indication of the entertaining, escapist potential of his books in an age when a destructive war was raging outside Switzerland's borders.

4 Commissions: Industry, Object Photography and Photographics

The medium of photography experienced a boom in the 1930s in the form of printed images. The quality standards of the printing trade were high in Switzerland, and photography was increasingly used for magazine illustrations, poster designs and commercial art. Important innovators in typography and graphic design such as Max Bill, Anton Stankowski or Jan Tschichold resided in Zurich; Ernst A. Heiniger worked in a creative and innovative environment. Under the terms "Fotografik" or "Typofoto", photography entered into a new kind of combination with graphic and typographic elements. The progressive, neo-objective aesthetics of New Photography was ideally suited to applications in the field of advertising. Heiniger supplied images for well-known graphic artists such as Herbert Matter, Richard Paul Lohse and Josef Müller-Brockmann and also practised graphic design himself. From 1934 to 1939, he managed a studio for photography and graphic art on St. Annagasse in Zurich together with Heiri Steiner. As a duo with Steiner, and later as a solo artist, he designed visionary posters that still have a timeless and modern effect today.

Heiniger's technically precise photography was also used in the fields of object photography and industry. The brochure *1/2 Jahrhundert Rüegg* ("Half a Century of Rüegg"), a product catalogue for compression springs and spirals, demonstrated the successful synthesis of precision product, accurate object photography and reserved, clearly designed Swiss commercial art.

5 Pro Telephon and Sül Bernina

After parting company with Heiri Steiner, Ernst A. Heiniger was fortunate to have the opportunity to work for a loyal client that was open to modern advertising. The Swiss telecommunications company PTT had launched a campaign in 1927 to popularise the telephone in Switzerland. Heiniger worked for them as a photographer and graphic designer throughout the war and beyond. From 1942, he also started making his first short promotional films for “Pro Telephon”, and in 1946 he was behind the camera for the 20-minute documentary *Sül Bernina* (CH, 1948). The film uses impressive scenes and modernist imagery to show how the heavy telephone cable was joined together from the north and south at the Bernina Pass to replace the telephone poles that were susceptible to interference.

6 The World Exhibition of Photography in Lucerne

The year 1952 marked a turning point in Heiniger’s life and career. The *World Exhibition of Photography* was held in Lucerne – a universally oriented exhibition that aimed to show the medium’s areas of application as comprehensively as possible. Heiniger was involved in the major event in various capacities: as a graphic designer, he won the competition for the poster design, and as an expert in the field of object photography, he was entrusted with the curatorial task of organising the “Sachwiedergabe” (“object reproduction”) section. His own pictures were omnipresent at the exhibition. A prominent visitor recognised Heiniger’s talent, and in the summer of 1952 he and Walt Disney met for the first time at the Hotel Palace in Lucerne. Disney cut right to the chase and offered Heiniger a job as a cameraman for his planned documentary film about Switzerland. While working with the American media company, Ernst A. Heiniger met his future wife Jean Feaster. After their marriage in 1953, the two became an inseparable team, not only in private but also professionally.

7 Masterpieces of Photography

In addition to the platform offered to Ernst A. Heiniger at the Lucerne world exhibition, he produced an illustrated book in the same year to draw attention to his photographic work. He edited a portfolio of sorts comprising 52 of his best independent and applied works that he had produced since the 1930s. The publication appeared in two languages; he called the German edition *Das Jahr des Fotografen* (“The Year of the Photographer”). On each double-page spread he arranged two pictures that are characterised by contrasts in form or content, but have something in common in their juxtaposition, which the lyricist Albert Ehrismann pondered in the captions. The English edition contains picture commentary by the British writer R.A. Langford and bears the self-confident title *Masterpieces of Photography*. Heiniger’s estate includes almost all the original prints of these *Masterpieces*, which were used as print templates at the time. The objects laminated on photo mounting board form the core of the exhibition and provide an insight into Heiniger’s appraisal of his own work at a time when the focus of his activity began to shift from the static to the moving image.

8 Plant still lifes

Heiniger’s multifaceted work is characterised on the one hand by its connection to nature, but on the other he was always driven by the ambition to produce images demonstrating a high level of technical perfection. In a series of plant still lifes that came into being in the studio under artificial light in the early 1940s, he combined his interest in nature with his fascination for technique. Heiniger probably shot the series of native plants without a commission to do so, and without any predetermined purpose. The formalistically reduced staging plus precisely directed lighting, which virtually transform the plants’ surfaces and structures into a haptic experience, are perfect examples of his “New Objectivity” photography. The majority of these plant still lifes did not survive in the *Ernst A. Heiniger Archive* as vintage prints, but rather as negatives. For the exhibition, digital fine art inkjet prints were created from a selection of the

large-format negatives. The subject matter is complemented by a series of vintage prints of plant photographs, which were taken outside in nature.

9 Light Art

After Ernst A. Heiniger dedicated himself ever more to the medium of film, beginning in the 1950s, from 1970 he began to work intensively with photography again – now, however, in an abstract form. Up until that point, blurring had hardly ever been used in Heiniger's photography as a design medium. But his so-called *Light Art* photographs explored motion blur as a photographic design tool in minute detail. When photographing lights in the darkness, he opened the aperture for several seconds, so that outlines could be captured on film when moving the camera. Although he created his first "light art" way back in around 1950, it was only a few years later that he really tackled the topic, with his non-commissioned creative works being presented in various exhibitions in Switzerland and Austria. In 1973, as part of the group exhibition *Struktur, Schwingung, Dynamik. Naturform – Kunstform* ("Structure, Vibration, Dynamics. Natural Form – Artform") at the Helmhaus Zürich, as well as large-format prints he also presented a slide projection, in which the changing slides were underlaid by electronic music by Morton Subotnick. How this progressive synthesis of image and sound was structured in detail has unfortunately not been passed on. For this exhibition, the Fotostiftung therefore ventures to attempt a reconstruction.

10 Films for Walt Disney (gallery)

In the early 1950s, Walt Disney launched the documentary film series *People & Places* for the supporting programme of his animated films – an anthology of half-hour short films designed to introduce foreign countries and peoples to American audiences. One of these countries was Switzerland. While searching for a suitable cameraman, Disney became aware of Ernst A. Heiniger. *Switzerland* (CH, 1955) was to be the third film in the series and also the first to be shot in Cinemascope. The pronounced wide format of Cinemascope and Technicolor film were new, previously untested creative tools for Heiniger. But he never shied away from a challenge and quickly learned to work with the format and colour, and so he was immediately rehired for further films by Walt Disney Productions. From 1955 to 1957, Jean and Ernst A. Heiniger travelled extensively in Asia. They shot two new *People & Places* films in Japan: *Ama Girls* (USA, 1958) follows the lives of a fishing family from Inatori with a special focus on the unusual profession of the 18-year-old daughter, who earns her living as a seaweed diver. For the second film *Japan* (USA, 1960), the Heinigers documented Japanese festivals, traditional crafts and a Shinto wedding. Disney's so-called "edutainment" films were designed to inform and entertain a broad cinema audience. Although Walt Disney gave the camera teams travelling all over the world for him a great deal of creative freedom, the films were eventually edited according to commercial criteria under the supervision of his producer Ben Sharpsteen, featuring narration that was didactic in tone, aimed at the general American public. The foreign countries and their peoples were depicted in an extremely stereotyped way, being treated as exotic. The result could barely be described as being progressive.

In 1958, the Heinigers spent another whole year in the Colorado River area for the film project *Grand Canyon* (USA, 1958), a film adaptation of the extremely popular suite of the same name by the composer Ferde Grofé. The short film was shown in 1959 as a supporting film for *Sleeping Beauty*. In the same year, the two films *Ama Girls* and *Grand Canyon* both won an Academy Award ("Oscar") – one for Best Documentary (Short Subject), the other for Best Live Action Short Film.

11 Rund um Rad und Schiene ("Magic of the Rails") (gallery and darkroom)

After film was plunged into crisis by the spread of television, the industry steadily introduced new film formats to enhance the viewing experience at the cinema. Following the various

widescreen formats, Disney's patented "Circarama" technology set new standards in the 1950s. The system, consisting of a camera and projection display, enabled the capture and reproduction of a full 360 degree angle.

In the early 1960s, Ernst A. Heiniger was commissioned by the SBB to produce a 360 degree film for Expo 64 in Lausanne. He was not only responsible for the production, cinematography and direction of the project, but also developed the script for *Rund um Rad und Schiene* ("Magic of the Rails", CH, 1964) in cooperation with the client. The 20-minute film was shown every half hour at the Expo in a round auditorium with a diameter of 26.5 metres and a capacity of 1500 people. Around 4 million people had seen the film by the end of the Expo. The Fotostiftung is showing this first Swiss 360 degree film, which was restored and digitised in 2014 as part of a Memoriav project, on a smaller scale as a walk-in circular projection.

12 Swissorama (gallery)

Despite the success of *Magic of the Rails*, Heiniger was only partially satisfied with the result; he was bothered by the technical shortcomings of the Circarama system, which did not allow seamless projection. He therefore began developing his own 360 degree recording and projection technology in 1965, which was ready for use under the name "Swissorama" at the beginning of the 1980s. From 1982 to 1984, he used his system to produce the film *Impressions of Switzerland* (CH, 1984), a total image of Switzerland, which was shown continuously from 1984 to 2002 at the Museum of Transport in Lucerne in a custom-built auditorium.

The exhibition was curated by Teresa Gruber and Katharina Rippstein.

The publication *Ernst A. Heiniger – Good Morning, World!* accompanying the exhibition, and edited by Katharina Rippstein/Fotostiftung Schweiz, is published by Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich.

Film tip: *Der Boss, Walt Disney und die vergessenen Oscars* ("The Boss, Walt Disney and the Forgotten Oscars", CH, 2019, 48 min). Patricia Banzer's documentary film about Ernst A. Heiniger is available at www.srf.ch/play.

The *Ernst A. Heiniger Archive*, which is maintained by the Fotostiftung Schweiz, has been comprehensively indexed and digitised and is accessible to the public via an online database: fss.e-pics.ethz.ch.

Special events and guided tours

The Fotostiftung Schweiz offers a programme of special events and free public guided tours to accompany the exhibition. Due to the unpredictable development of the pandemic, we kindly ask you to check our website fotostiftung.ch for up-to-the-minute information before your visit. You can also make reservations there.

The Fotostiftung Schweiz receives regular financial support from the Swiss Federal Office for Culture, the cantons of Zurich, Thurgau, and Ticino, and the city of Winterthur. The exhibition has also been made possible by lottery funds from the canton of Thurgau, as well as with the support of Memoriav and the Dr. Werner Greminger Stiftung.

A Biography of Ernst A. Heiniger (gallery)

- 1909 Born on 4 August in Engwang (canton of Thurgau)
- 1925–1928 Apprenticeship as a positive retoucher at the Anderson & Schneeberger Stereotype Academy
Attended the School of Applied Arts Zurich (evening classes)
Dropped out of both the apprenticeship and evening classes
- 1929 Self-employed positive retoucher in Zurich
Inspired by the “New Vision” and “New Objectivity”, creates his first photographs
- 1932 Study trip to the USSR
Acquires a Rolleiflex, a Miroflex and a large-format camera, and offers his customers new photographs instead of retouching, but at the same price
- 1933 Ernst A. Heiniger becomes a member of the SWB Zurich
- 1934–1939 Partnership with Heinrich (Heiri) Steiner, founding of a joint studio for graphic art and photography at St. Annagasse, Zurich
- 1937 Publication of the photobook *Puszta-Pferde* (Fretz & Wasmuth, Zurich)
- 1939 Publication of *LA – Das Fotobuch der Landesausstellung* (Orell Füssli Verlag, Zurich)
- 1941–1942 Photobooks *Tessin* and *Viertausender* (Fretz & Wasmuth, Zurich)
- 1942–1945 First short PR films about telephony, commissioned by Pro Telephon
- 1943 Relocation to Bahnhofstrasse 110. Heiniger remains in his live-in studio until 1986
- 1946 Camera for his first longer documentary film *Sül Bernina* (CH, 1948)
- 1952 *The World Exhibition of Photography* in Lucerne
Publications *Das Jahr des Photographen* (Fretz & Wasmuth) and *Masterpieces of Photography* (English edition, Transatlantic Editions)
First meeting with Walt Disney in the Hotel Palace, Lucerne
- 1953 Marries Jean Feaster
- 1953–1958 Jean und Ernst A. Heiniger work together on documentary films for Walt Disney Productions
- 1959 The films *Ama Girls* (USA, 1958) and *Grand Canyon* (USA, 1958) are distinguished with an Oscar (Academy Award)
- 1962–1964 Production of the 360 degree film *Rund um Rad und Schiene* (CH, 1964), commissioned by the SBB. The film was seen by 4 million visitors to the Expo 64
- 1973 Presentation *Light Art* as part of the exhibition *Struktur, Schwingung, Dynamik. Naturform – Kunstform*, Kunsthalle Nürnberg (Nuremberg)/Helmhaus Zürich
- 1975–1977 Construction of the seamless 360 degree system “Swissorama” (camera and projector)
- 1979 Solo exhibition *Ernst A. Heiniger. Von der Retusche zur Light Art*, Fotostiftung Schweiz, Kunsthaus Zürich
- 1982–1984 Realisation of the first Swissorama film for the Museum of Transport in Lucerne
- 1984–2002 *Impressionen der Schweiz* (CH, 1984) is shown in a specially constructed 360 degree cinema, and is seen by a total of around 1.8 million people
- 1993 On 23 July, Ernst A. Heiniger dies in Los Angeles, at the age of 84