

Peter Knapp – Mon temps 29/10/2022 – 12/02/2023

“Fashion photography is made to be printed. There is always a commission behind it. It is applied art. A fashion photograph for the magazine *Vogue* has a different attitude to one for *Elle*. A shot for a fashion designer is different to a picture for advertising. If a photographer fails to perceive this difference, they are making a mistake. It is about specific social information.”

With this credo, Peter Knapp, born in 1931 in Bäretswil, Zürcher Oberland, became an influential figure in the international fashion world during the 1960s and '70s. After studying at the Zurich School of Applied Arts, he had great success, especially as art director at Paris-based magazine *Elle*. In a time of social upheaval, which was reflected to no small extent in fashion, he found the right images for the liberation of the body and mind. *Elle*, a leading medium of emancipation under editor-in-chief Hélène Lazareff, contributed significantly to a buoyant democratisation of women's clothing: *prêt-à-porter* instead of *haute-couture*, *minijupe* instead of corset, functionality instead of stiff elegance, self-confident women on the streets instead of models in the studio. Peter Knapp's layouts and photographs conveyed this new attitude to the body and to life, which many women in the 1960s identified with. The same creative freedom and playful delight with which Knapp has realised countless of his own art projects, films and exhibitions over the decades also characterise his work in the field of applied photography. “What drives me is the act of translating ideas into images. I want to visualise my thoughts, to express my fantasies and stories pictorially. *Je ne prends pas de photos, je les fais.*”

From Zurich to Paris

In 1947, Peter Knapp began to acquire his skills at the Zurich School of Applied Arts, which was primarily oriented towards design concepts from the Bauhaus: Form and function were to be coordinated, based on geometric principles and without any superfluous ornamentation. The all-rounder principle was also highly regarded. The combination of typography, photography, painting, sculpture, printing techniques and layout left a lasting impression on Peter Knapp, as did the search for reduced, simple forms.

In 1951, shortly after graduating, the artist and designer moved to Paris, so as to further his education and to undertake freelance commissions. His style and talent attracted attention, as the graphics seen in France during those years were *démodé*. Before long, this young man from Switzerland, just 24 years old, was offered the position of artistic director at renowned French department store Galeries Lafayette. He not only changed all of its typography, but also replaced the drawings used for posters and advertisements with photography.

Art director at *Elle*

In 1959, Peter Knapp became art director at *Elle*. This magazine's progressive editor-in-chief Hélène Lazareff, who had previously worked with legendary designer Alexey Brodovitch at *Harper's Bazaar* in New York, gave him the task of radically modernising its appearance. The idea was that *Elle* should appeal to new generations of women in a sophisticated but easily accessible way and also advance emancipation – by featuring female literary voices, conveying a modern image of women and democratising fashion. *Elle* presented clothes that suited the woman working outside the home and could be worn in everyday life or on the street.

The magazine's look changed in what was actually a very short time. Peter Knapp attached great importance to the photography and collaboration with photographers; he hired models who impressed as strong personalities first and foremost, rather than as *haute couture* models; he abandoned illustrative fashion drawings; and he used each double page as a playing field on which images and texts could be arranged freely. The departure from the strict layout grid was one of Knapp's innovations. The art director created an overall sequence, the so-called *chemin de fer* or flatplan, but left the design of the double pages to his graphic designers. Week by week, this teamwork gave rise to a new magazine that was rich in variety, fresh and surprising, without the identity of the publication being called into question.

Lively images for a lively era

Whenever the photographers whom Peter Knapp wanted were unavailable, he would step behind the camera himself. The central element of his fashion photography was movement: The new freedom of the mind and body also had to be expressed with visual dynamics. It is true that some individual photographers, such as Martin Munkácsi, had already created new kinds of fashion pictures with shots depicting motion back in the 1930s – showing models running across a beach and dresses fluttering in the wind; in the 1950s, Richard Avedon had also experimented with capturing movement and prepared the terrain for the following decade. However, it was not until around 1965 that dynamism prevailed over static fashion photography. The models whom Knapp captured bounding across the street or rushing up flights of stairs moved so naturally and light-heartedly that the magazine's readers could see them as equals. In 1966, Peter Knapp began to use single frames from footage filmed with a 16mm camera: blurring, snapshot-like framing, details and unintentional movements all contributed to an airy dynamism in keeping with the zeitgeist.

Fashion as pretext

Creatively and inventively, Knapp kept looking for new approaches: His experiments were sometimes reminiscent of surrealist works by Erwin Blumenfeld or Man Ray, or brought to mind the Bauhaus artists operating with multiple exposures. As he did not want to idealise the models themselves too much, he worked with close-ups, for example, projected fabric patterns onto the female body or used a wide-angle lens – which was another innovation in fashion photography. By arranging the figures in the space or emphasising diagonals, he succeeded in creating striking images and scenes. He photographed models hanging in the air and lying on the ground, or had them climb onto bicycle saddles mounted on long poles: The women sitting aloft were photographed individually from below, then cut out and pasted onto a black surface so that they actually seemed to become airborne. This illusion was fascinating because it had no clear perspective and offered no view of depth. Fashion often served Peter Knapp as a pretext for giving his own creative urges free rein.

Art as inspiration

As a trained typographer and graphic designer, Knapp had a special affinity with the graphic forms and optical effects that not only played a significant role in 1960s art, but also influenced fashion designers. The geometric structures seen on their fabrics found their way into his visual compositions. Despite being critical of the overly rigid design principles that he had learnt in Switzerland, Peter Knapp remained committed to clarity and minimalism – for instance in high-contrast austere compositions in black and white. Artists such as Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, whose works are based on a system of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines, were also important sources of inspiration for him.

From applied photography to free art

In 1966, when H el ene Lazareff fell ill with cancer and had to give up her post, Peter Knapp also left *Elle*. He became a freelance photographer for magazines such as *Vogue*, *Stern* and *Sunday Times Magazine*, as well as art director for collections by outstanding fashion designers such as Andr e Courr eges and Ungaro. Together with Daisy de Galard, who was also from *Elle*, he produced films for the legendary TV show *Dim Dam Dom*, a kind of translation of *Elle* into a format suitable for television, which had a cult following in France. From 1974 to 1977, Peter Knapp worked at *Elle* once again as art director; but in the years and decades that followed, he concentrated more and more on his own cinematic and artistic projects. Looking back, fashion photography and his time at *Elle* seem to constitute only a relatively short chapter in his biography, which now spans more than 90 years. However, it is a chapter that has left a deep imprint on collective memory, because for generations of women from the post-war period, *Elle* symbolises a happy and upbeat turning point. Few others in Paris were as precisely in tune with the spirit of the 1960s and '70s as Peter Knapp. He both witnessed and participated in a historic moment of upheaval and change.

Elle – fashion and emancipation

The magazine *Elle* is much more than a fashion journal – it is an institution, at least in France. It was founded by Russian-French journalist H el ene Lazareff a few months after the end of the Second World War, at a time when, in France, the prevailing view of a woman's role was still defined by the three Cs: children, cooking and church. Lazareff had spent the war in exile in New York, where she worked for *Harper's Bazaar* and *The New York Times*, for instance. She now returned to Paris full of drive, to give women a wake-up call. French women, having secured the right to vote in 1945, were finally to stand alongside their men as equals in daily, professional and public life.

Elle wanted to encourage them to do so. The new magazine was committed to emancipation from the very start. As editor-in-chief, H el ene Lazareff filled three quarters of the posts on her editorial team with women: Only they could know what topics interested their female readers. She exercised restraint with regard to advertising, as she did not consider her readers to be consumers, but *citoyennes*. She gave fashion a prominent position because she saw this as a way to propagate a new image of women. In addition, *Elle* offered up-to-date information, commented on current events, fought for the right to abortion and professional opportunities for women via sociopolitical debate, and supported female literature: Fran oise Sagan, Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras were among the authors who used *Elle* as a platform. After successfully launching the magazine and achieving high circulation, H el ene Lazareff brought in Peter Knapp as art director, to give it a fresh and modern look. From 1959 onwards, Knapp shaped *Elle* in such a way that it became a role model with broad appeal in the media landscape of the 1960s. With over two million readers, it was, in the words of journalist Pascale Hugues, the pioneer of a *feminism   la fran aise*: "Gentler, more cheerful, more conciliatory and above all less dogmatic than German feminism. Women go to the barricades to defend their rights, but they don't stop loving men and lipstick."

Publication

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Mediation

Information on talks, guided tours and workshops can be found on the website:
fotostiftung.ch/en/guided-tours-workshops/guided-tours-and-workshops