

Life, a Sport

Jules Decrauzat – A Pioneer of Photo-reportage



Tennis Tournament, Caux, Canton Waadt, 1921 © Keystone / Photopress-Archiv / Jules Decrauzat

A great find: almost 1,250 glass negatives dating from between 1910 and 1925 that had defied the ravages of time in the archive of the Swiss picture agency Keystone. While the quality of those photographs was well known, the circumstances under which they were taken were largely obscure. Now, thanks to thorough research work, a new chapter in the history of Swiss photography can be written: the glass negatives form part of the extensive oeuvre of Jules Decrauzat (1879-1960), who was born in Biel and was Switzerland's first major photo-reporter. His instantaneous photographs in the fields of sports or early aviation go to the very heart of Swiss society on the threshold to modernism.

Decrauzat's biography can only be roughly reconstructed. He was born on 16 March 1879 in Biel, the middle son of Jules Decrauzat, senior, and Estelle Adèle Lambelet. Having spent his early years in Biel, he moved to Geneva with the family in 1895. Jules studied sculpture at the Ecole des Arts Industriels and, with a diploma under his belt, set off for Paris in 1897, where he initially earned his living as a sculptor, while at the same time attending evening courses at the Ecole Pathé. There he discovered the two young media of film and photography, as well as the new profession of photo-journalist. He also recognised a potential as yet unused by the press:

the possibility of responding directly, dynamically and intuitively to world events. Most of the photographs printed at that time were static, posed and hardly suitable for conveying a lively impression. Jules Decrauzat was looking for a different kind of photography. He envisaged instantaneous photography, recording movement and action within seconds so as to capture decisive moments.

A career as a photo-reporter

In 1899 the young reporter landed a coup in the context of the so-called Dreyfus Trial in Rennes: he caught the perpetrator of an attack on Alfred Dreyfus' lawyer in the act. The magazine *L'Illustration* paid a lot of money for the picture, which constituted the start of an international career – as least that is how Jules Decrauzat himself describes his debut in photojournalism. In 1900 he was sent to South Africa to report on the Boer War. In subsequent years he travelled first to South America, then around Europe as a photo-reporter for French media.

In 1910 Decrauzat accepted an offer from the illustrated magazine *La Suisse Sportive*, which was published in Geneva and for which he worked until 1925. After that he was given various organisational tasks – as president of the national sports commission of the Automobile Club Switzerland, or as a member of the organisational committee of the motor show in Geneva as of 1927. From 1929 to 1931 he was again active in journalism, as editor of the weekly magazine *La Patrie Suisse*, which published many of his images and articles. However sport had then shifted into the background, with Decrauzat reporting on events like the Wine Festival in Neuchatel or the Flower Corso in Locarno. He also wrote articles on art and literature exhibitions and for the section called *Curiosités Photographiques*.

In the 1940s and 50s articles by Jules Decrauzat appeared in the *Journal de Genève*, dealing mainly with issues related to cars or presenting news from the salons in Geneva and Paris. "Uncle Jules", as he was meantime called by people in Geneva, continually proved to be a good observer and a pleasant narrator. But his best years were definitely over. The "pioneer of photo-reportage and sports reporting", to cite the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, died on 29 June 1960. His work then faded into oblivion.

La Suisse Sportive

The largest part of Jules Decrauzat's photo archive, which some sources claim consisted of about 80,000 glass negatives, has been lost – or was destroyed. Only about 1.5% seems to have survived, albeit as anonymous stocks that finally made their roundabout way to the Zurich picture agency Keystone. This archive of glass plates covers the years from 1910 to 1925 and Decrauzat's activities for *La Suisse Sportive*. That sports journal – the first in Switzerland – appeared every 2 weeks and responded to the increasing interest in sports by according photography a major status and involving Jules Decrauzat in the editorial team as the first full-time photo-reporter in Switzerland.

It is easy to understand Decrauzat's move from reporting on politics and society to sport. Around 1910, scarcely any other section of public life more clearly exemplified the times. Whereas sporting activities in the 19th century were mainly for the privileged classes, in the early 20th century they gained more and more supporters among the wider population. In keeping with the English model, on the continent events and competitions were organised that promised audiences both spectacle and entertainment. Anyone who was not involved in sport themselves had the possibility of following the struggle for victory and defeat or choosing their own heroes at home, thanks to the new illustrated reports in newspapers and magazines. The sports press made a significant contribution to the swift popularisation of sports, while vice versa, sports

events and champions caused the circulation of printed media to skyrocket. The figures are impressive: in 1881 there were 21 sports newspapers and magazines in France, in 1900 twice as many. In 1914 the French magazine *L'Auto*, which covered a wide range of sports, sold about 40 million copies.

“The stuff of modern myths”

The success of these magazines had to do, among other things, with the fact that they provided “the stuff of modern myths”, to quote the cultural scientist Kaspar Maase: “In spectator sport it was possible to experience capitalist modernism once again as an adventure. The masses of paying spectators and purchasers of sports reports were attracted not just by the beauty and dexterity, the power and persistence of the sportspeople, the fascination of speed, the deployment of engines and the exertions of man and material. Types of sport and events that measured the achievements in grams, centimetres and seconds had a particular audience appeal; this was about pure competition, victory or defeat, the assertion of the best against all the others. [...] Furthermore, the principle of competition once again showed its equalizing impact, enabling mobility and advancement. Unlike in old etatist and monopolistic incrustations, the only thing that counted here was personal achievement in the struggle of man against man, team against team. The upward path could be taken with energy, endurance, overview and the necessary luck – and quite a few children of labourers and lower middle class families succeeded in doing this. Successful boxers and wrestler, cyclists and soccer players became identification figures for ‘the man in the street’, personifications of the democratic principle of achievement.”

At that time, the term “sport” covered a wide range, expressing and symbolizing a modern future-oriented outlook on life. It even included photography, “photo sport”, to which more and more amateurs devoted themselves, especially as affordable and easy to handle cameras were now available. In addition to body-centred types of sport like football, tennis, boxing, light athletics and gymnastics, it was above all technical sports like flying, driving and motorcycling that attracted attention. The fuel driven machine operating in top gear is nothing other than the mechanical expansion and perfection of the vigorous body.

The frozen instant

By 1910 it was already technically possible to take impressive pictures; the “illustration photographers”, as press photographers were called, could rely on light-weight hand cameras with short exposure times to capture moving scenes outdoors. In 1904, the Berlin Optische Anstalt C.P. Goerz, for example, produced the so-called Goerz Anschütz folding camera: the practical apparatus equipped with fast lenses had a so-called focal plane shutter enabling instantaneous shots at speeds of 1/50 to 1/1000 seconds. Thanks to a quick-change cassette with 12 glass negatives measuring 13 x 18 cm, the time between two takes could be greatly reduced.

A good picture, however requires more than just technology. The photographer’s feeling for the overall scenario must not be underestimated: he must recognise and anticipate dramatic situations, possess a narrative talent, should include peripheral details, assess the interplay of major and minor events and handle light and shade with subtlety in order to bring out the full intensity of a particular moment. Clearly, Jules Decrauzat was often in a position to combine these aspects – even 100 years later, many of his photographs astonish us through their fresh vitality and directness.

In touch with the times

Das Leben ein Sport (Life, a Sport) is the name of a serialised novel by Alfred Flückiger published in the *Schweizer Illustrierte* as of January 1930. Max, the hero of this rather lowbrow story, has a kind of epiphany while skiing: “Life revealed itself to him through sport [...]. The world belongs to those who are prepared, trained, restless, untiring, strong, persistent, young, wiry, swift, sharp, quick witted, non-reflecting, in short: the real sporting aces! Absolutely! Goodness! – Life, a sport!”

The title of Flückiger’s “sports novel” also suits Jules Decrauzat’s sports photographs: the thrill of speed, the cult of the body and a whole new lifestyle, masterfully depicted by Decrauzat, provide great insight into society on the threshold to modernism – and into themes that still preoccupy us today.

In collaboration with Keystone, the Echtzeit Verlag and the PhotoforumPasquArt, the Fotostiftung Schweiz is presenting a first extensive selection of enlargements made from the digitized negatives of Jules Decrauzat. This fractional part of the photo-reporter’s archive devoted to the theme of sport is sufficient to illustrate that “Uncle Jules” was something of a capacity and a trailblazer. Someone who not only took exciting individual pictures, but also raised a photographic monument to his own era.

Peter Pfrunder

Publication:

Parallel to the exhibition, the book *Jules Decrauzat. Der erste Fotoreporter der Schweiz* will be published by Echtzeit Verlag, Basel. Hardback, 240 pages, containing ca. 100 double-page photographs and an essay on Decrauzat’s life and work (CHF 48.- / EURO 45.-).

“Seitenblicke” – Peter Pfrunder in conversation with guests (in German):

Wednesday, 17 June, 6.30 p.m.: “Ist Sport unweiblich?” (cited from the *Schweizer Illustrierte*, 1929). Tour of the exhibition with Elisabeth Joris (Historian).

Wednesday, 26 August, 6.30 p.m.: “Momentaufnahmen zwischen Kunst und Spektakel” with Christoph Ruckstuhl (Head of the NZZ team of photographers).

Wednesday, 23 September, 6.30 p.m.: “Temporausch und Körperkult” with Juri Steiner (Curator).

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