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Jean Painlevé

Feet in the Water

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French film director Jean Painlevé (1902–1989) had a passion for scientific cinema. He was interested in engaging a broad audience in the discovery of natural science through film and devoted most of his life to documenting fauna – especially species from the underwater world. Over a period of more than 50 years, Painlevé shot over 200 short films, marked by his characteristic approach, which he developed through meticulous observation, technical mastery and experimentation. The works in the exhibition – a selection of numerous black-and-white and colour films, photographs and documents – reflect not only his engagement with science but also his desire to share the mysteries of living matter and creatures that inhabit Earth.

Painlevé used film to explore living organisms using certain techniques to reveal characteristics of their life cycles and their anatomy. He made precise observations of his subjects and recorded their movements and processes of development. Painlevé began by concentrating on marine life: crabs, shrimps, octopuses and sea urchins. These creatures inhabit the coast, especially the foreshore – the border zone between land and sea that is washed by the tides.

Painlevé's films include shots that show the animals filmed full-size but also at microscopic scales. These graphic images, the careful editing and his use of both slow motion and time lapse offer us an unusual journey into the curious world of underwater creatures, their bodies and their habitats.

'It is obvious, that movement, which is specific to cinema, adds a grace or astonishing power to forms. Simple or complicated, the lines and rhythms are recorded like a form of the eternal. It is one of cinema's missions to communicate ... what is most ineluctable and cosmic about this evocation of Nature.'

Jean Painlevé in *Formes et mouvements dans le cinéma scientifique*
(typescript, undated, Les Documents Cinématographiques)

Many of Painlevé's films were made together with his lifelong partner and collaborator Geneviève Hamon (1905–1987). They met in 1922 and the Hamon's family home, which was located in Port-Blanc in Brittany, became an important location for Painlevé. He set up his first studio there and made his first ten films on marine crustaceans with Hamon's assistance and André Raymond or Eli Lotar as operators. From the 1960s onwards, Hamon



was credited as co-director. The exhibition also shows Hamon's creative work beyond film: drawings, prints and jewellery designs of the brand jHp (Jean Hippocampe Painlevé), which she launched with Painlevé in 1936 after the launch of his famous film *The Seahorse* (1931–1934).

After 1930 Painlevé's public films included informative and evocative voice-overs. However, he also used silent versions for educational purposes. Tailored to a broad audience, they convey – even now – an enhanced understanding of nature, that may lead us today to reflect on the fragility of various ecosystems.

His surrealist spirit and non-conformist approach were undoubtedly the driving force behind his lifelong engagement with film. The ease with which he moved between scientific and artistic fields relates to his interest for both spheres. He was friends with Surrealist artists such as Jacques-André Boiffard and Ivan Goll, but also Alexander Calder and Fernand Léger, for example. From the late 1920s, Painlevé's work was screened in avant-garde cinemas and film clubs.

The exhibition places Painlevé's work in a historic and scientific context, showing his scientific and educational films together with his public films for the first time. His films continue to immerse the viewers, disrupting their senses of reality and still inspire artists and the public alike.

This exhibition is conceived by Jeu de Paume, Paris with the participation of Fotomuseum Winterthur for its presentation in Winterthur. Curator: Pia Viewing in association with Brigitte Berg, Director of Les Documents Cinématographiques / Archives Painlevé, Paris.

About Jean Painlevé

Jean Painlevé was born in Paris in 1902. In 1930 he founded the Institut de cinématographie scientifique with the idea of promoting scientific cinema and supporting its distribution. He also started the production company La cinégraphie documentaire (later known as Les Documents Cinématographiques, which still exists today). In the 1930s and 1940s, he directed a number of different institutes, departments and associations and taught at Vincennes University from 1968 to 1982. Painlevé died in 1989.

Information about the Museum

Fotomuseum Winterthur plays a prominent role in presenting and discussing photography and visual culture. Its temporary solo exhibitions and thematic group shows present works both by young photographers and by those established in the field. In addition to this, the institution also studies photographic phenomena in the context of new technologies and digital media and reflects on them from a critical perspective. The museum explores a diverse range of artistic, applied and cultural photographic forms. Dialogue and the exchange of ideas are of key importance here. Fotomuseum Winterthur advocates a use of



the medium that is considered, autonomous and creative. The museum's collection (which dates back to 1960) has helped to shape the history, narratives and understanding of photography as a multifaceted medium.

Fotomuseum Winterthur was founded in 1993. In 2002, it joined forces with Fotostiftung Schweiz to create the Centre for Photography – Switzerland's leading specialist institution for photography.

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