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Confident women were the leitmotiv of Peter Knapp's photography work for French fashion designer Courrèges; Paris 1966.



An unusual photoshoot for "Vogue" fashion magazine; London, 1971.

How a Paris-based Swiss fashion photographer captured the mood of an epoch



Floating like spacewomen – colourful shots for tights manufacturer Dim; Paris, approx. 1968.



Making a statement with the mini-skirt – photoshoot for French department store Monoprix; 1967.



Everything was in motion – fashion shoot for “Elle” magazine; Paris 1967/68.

On finishing his training to become a graphic designer in the 1950s, Peter Knapp, who grew up in the Zurich Oberland, moved straight to Paris to study art. He began a career as a designer and photographer in the French capital, subsequently becoming “an influential figure in the international fashion world” in the 1960s and 1970s, as the Swiss Foundation for Photography puts it. Knapp’s time as art director at “Elle” magazine, where he started in 1959, was particularly momentous – a period of social revolution when female fashion acquired a more casual and accessible off-the-peg look. Models began to wear trousers and mini-skirts instead of haute couture. “Elle” editor-in-chief Hélène Lazareff eschewed the staid, stiff formula. Her women had to be self-confident. Her Swiss art director conceived a magazine layout to match this approach, and often stepped behind the camera himself.

The “Peter Knapp – Mon Temps” exhibition at the Swiss Foundation for Photography in Winterthur takes visitors on a journey through Knapp’s unconventional body of photographic work. Publishing house Scheidegger & Spiess has released a book to coincide with the exhibition. As both book and exhibition explain, Knapp’s photographs captured women in motion on the streets instead of posing in the studio. This meant the models could essentially determine how their photoshoots would look. Knapp’s images brought emancipation to life, writes art historian Laura Ragonese in the accompanying book. The central element of his fashion photography was movement, with visual dynamics expressing this new freedom of mind and body.

Knapp’s work captured the mood of an epoch, as he himself once said in an interview. According to Swiss Foundation for Photography director Peter Pfrunder, Knapp is an artistic and photographic maestro who has continued to embrace the power of images during his subsequent time working as a freelancer. To a ripe old age, in fact. Knapp, now 91, won last year’s Swiss Grand Award for Design.

SUSANNE WENGER

Exhibition: “Peter Knapp – Mon Temps” at the Swiss Foundation for Photography in Winterthur runs until 12 February 2023.
www.fotostiftung.ch/en

Book: Peter Knapp – Mon Temps. Modelfotografie 1965-1980; published by Peter Pfrunder, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2022 (available in German). CHF 49/EUR 48

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