

DEL PICTORIALISME A LA MODERNITAT

Centenari de l'Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya

A hundred years of intense activity in Barcelona by an association made up of "lovers of photographic art", as per the first article of the Statutes approved on 15 June 1923. The emergence of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya firmly established a tradition of societies and photography clubs that, from the mid-19th century onwards, supported the technical —and above all artistic— practice of photography in the city.

The culture of associations was the backbone of the expansion of a leisure society at the beginning of the 20th century, and it encouraged contact among enthusiasts, who could now have a social centre as a place to practice and meet. At the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya, collaborative synergies allowed for the establishment of learning dynamics not only in the specialised training courses but also in the strong mentoring relationships between veterans and newcomers. Thus, it became a gateway to photography and a breeding ground for new generations of photographers in the city of Barcelona.

In addition to this educational role, it stood out for its leading role in organising outreach activities, such as exhibitions and fairs both locally and internationally. The success of its years of activity can be seen today in the quality of the works that make up the organisation's photography collection, some of which are preserved at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. The collection features a broad representation of the pictorialist movement, which expanded during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the new aesthetic approaches that emerged during the renovation of the 1950s—two key moments in the history of photography in Catalonia.

The Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona is joining in the celebration of the hundred-year anniversary of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya with this exhibition.



Carme Garcia Padrosa. AFC collection

Discovering the Country

At the beginning of the 20th century, a fever for discovering the country and taking an interest in its natural and cultural heritage swept Catalan society. In 1923, when the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya, (AFC) was founded, the popularity of outdoor recreation, was on the rise. And photography played a significant role in this activity, as can be seen in the creation of photography sections in the main clubs and other organisations. It was in this environment, specifically in the Excursions Section of the Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular, that the ideas of the founders Salvador Lluç and Joan Rocavert materialised and a small group of enthusiasts came together to start the AFC.

The early years of the AFC were shaped by the dynamics of these excursions, which favoured collective outings both to the main tourist spots in the city of Barcelona and to the surrounding countryside. Its members were enthusiastic about working on nature photography, which showed the magnificence of the mountains and forests, as well as the activities and sports that took place there. As this theme is present in all periods up to the present day, it is often impossible to date the works accurately. We also see how it coexisted with a wide range of aesthetic creations produced in the organisation throughout its history.

Landscape as Inspiration

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, with the mass marketing of simple cameras, which expanded the use of these devices in a family, everyday context, the pictorialist movement called for photography to be included as part of the fine arts. In contrast to the banality of so-called "kodakists" and the utilitarianism of professional photographers, these advanced amateurs wanted to be guided solely by their creative spirit and to capture their inner world in unique works that were markedly artistic in nature. They came together in photographic societies and promoted an approach to themes typical of painting, the predominance of traditional aesthetic values and manual printing using the so-called "pigment processes". Thus, the impersonal automatism of the camera gave way to the use of craft techniques such as gum bichromate, bromoil and transported bromoil, which allowed the artist to intervene directly with brushes and etching presses.

In this approach to beauty, nature became a source of inspiration for amateurs in many societies and for the members of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya. Forests, rivers, trees and beaches fill idealised landscapes, where this poetic vision is often intensified by the appearance of difficult lighting conditions, such as fog or the use of out-of-focus or soft focus.

Contests were held regularly throughout the year, encouraging the work of the association's members, who could be distinguished with medals, runners-up awards and other honours. Furthermore, the exhibitions constantly being held all over the world, with strict admission criteria, made it possible to bring the work of the most outstanding amateurs to major cities and even highly influential specialised magazines.

Return to the Traditional World

At a time when Catalonia's traditional way of life was clearly on the decline, with the growth and modernisation of the big city, pictorialism celebrated the rural landscape and work in the countryside and fishing, while showing an environment that was in the process of disappearing. Small towns in particular were reclaimed, through photographs of the traditional layout of the streets, activities strongly rooted in the countryside and the most representative characters.

The photographs included in the association's bulletin attest to the expansion of pictorialism among its members and the achievement of important awards in competitions organised by photography societies and organisations of all kinds. With the beginning of the presidency of Dr. Joaquim Pla Janini in mid-December 1927, the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya definitively took off: its activities grew significantly, achieving great success with the public thanks to the growing artistic skill and the prominent location; if the new Saló de Primavera had opened in the Sala Parés, in 1929 the first Saló Internacional de Barcelona was part of the International Exhibition located on Montjuïc.

In the early 1930s, the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya became the backbone of Catalan pictorialism and played a leading role throughout Spain. It was always connected with similar societies, especially those in Europe, and it became the point of entry for the new trends slowly arriving on the international scene. In a gradual hybridisation, more modern themes appeared, such as everyday objects and urban and industrial scenes, a harbinger of the modernity that was on its way.

The Perpetuation of Beauty

Unwilling or unable to witness the collapse of the world of the Republic, the cruelty of the Civil War and all the ensuing difficulties, the apolitical nature of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya, established in the first statutes of 1923, enabled it to go through this period in silence. The members concentrated once again on rural traditions and on highlighting beauty, especially feminine beauty, which was often accompanied by folk dress and elements.

The country's isolation during the early years of Franco's regime accentuated this local focus. Furthermore, the dynamic international travel of enthusiasts and photographs that had characterised the Republican period was also interrupted by the Second World War, which, furthermore, caused problems in the supply of photographic material. The AFC gradually resumed its regular activity, increasing its exhibitions and competitions. Its thorough training course resumed as early as 1941 and, in a Barcelona lacking in organisations and associations, played a key role as the main gateway to the world of photography for anyone interested in it. The number of members began to increase: it reached 796 at the end of 1952 and passed the one thousand mark in the mid-1950s.

Willingness to Experiment

In the 1950s, the world of photography left behind the difficulties of the post-war period and embarked on a period of renewal, which brought profound changes to the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya. In late 1952, AFC member Luis Navarro, under the pseudonym Conde Vélez, wrote an article in the magazine *Arte Fotográfico*, criticising the stagnation of the aesthetic approaches of associations, which were still stuck in late pictorialism. He urged young people to break the moulds, flout the rules and bring about the regeneration of Spanish photography. In 1953, he succeeded in getting the AFC to organise a new competition that would give way to innovation: the first modern photography exhibition, which, after the sudden death of its creator the following year, became known as the Luis Navarro Trophy. Despite the constant arguments among the members and the reluctance of the more conservative in the group, it gradually emerged as the epicentre of the most innovative proposals, and recognised work by new photographic talents such as Marcel Giró, Xavier Miserachs, Oriol Maspons, Ramon Masats, Paco Gómez, Gabriel Cualladó, Carme Garcia, Juan Dolcet, etc.

During the 1950s, a second innovative initiative became a reality in the AFC: the creation of the Women's Group. In order to counteract the masculinisation that was typical of these types of associations, in 1956 Salvador Llach began to offer photography courses exclusively for women. In a weekly gathering, these women supported each other and managed to carve out a space for themselves, giving rise to an exceptional generation of amateur photographers including Carme Garcia, Gloria Salas, Milagros Caturla, Montserrat Vidal-Barraquer and Rosa Szücs.



Rosa Szücs del Olmo. AFC deposit at the MNAC

A New Look at the Surrounding Environment

The most innovative members of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya took to the streets and put a changing Barcelona in their sights. Following the documentary tradition, they sought to map the architecture and spaces of the city they lived in, abandoning more artificial approaches to describe the reality that surrounded them. In the 1950s, Francesc Català Roca, the son of the great photographer Pere Català Pic, began to make a name for himself, winning the City of Barcelona prize in 1950 and 1951. He received numerous commissions that allowed him to document life and his surroundings with his innate talent for capturing the most expressive moments. This new vision coincided with the needs of an expanding publishing industry and with the constant appearance of books in which photography played a fundamental role. The most restless members thus began a determined professionalisation and broke new ground in the world of photography.

Under the umbrella of the AFC, the Women's Group, which had much more limited options due to the social customs of Franco's Spain, was maintained. Despite all the difficulties, the women managed to show their work at solo and group exhibitions, as well as to obtain the necessary funding through photography competitions. They were also at the forefront of the innovation, and they particularly valued the construction of a style of their own, one of great sincerity, that led them to depict an environment that was their own, but also shared by thousands of women: people and places that had been silenced and subsequently forgotten.



Antoni Crous Serdà. AFC deposit at the MNAC

Reality Without Artifice

In the 1950, a type of photography that revealed the reality of life around us, just as it is, without artifice, became popular. Beyond stereotypes and antiquated attitudes, we see people depicted as they are: in the small everyday events that enlighten us about their lives, but also about society's main characteristics. As Cartier-Bresson said, photography captures the decisive moment—it records the authenticity of life and bears witness to its time.

This new understanding of the environment led to a generational change in associations that already had a long history, such as the AFC. While the old masters had not wanted to let go of the search for beauty and sweetened their vision of the world, in documentary photography, the new generation found a reportage as a way of drawing nearer to reality. Joan Colom's work in Barcelona's Chinatown, for example, presents an unfiltered view of the situation on the street in the most visually expressive way. The camera became an instrument for recording and analysing the present that went beyond the superficial layer to reveal the depth and meaning of human situations.

Authenticity is also key to the paths of the members of the Women's Group of the Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya, who established direct relationships with the life that surrounded them, often women and children in their daily lives. Here, too, they went beyond the conventions, defied the critics who wanted to limit them to an artificial femininity and were able to find their own way. Their pioneering work has been recognised over time and has become a source of inspiration for new generations.



Jordi Munt Farré. AFC deposit at the MNAC