

## Female. Focus. Photo Archives. 28/02/–14/06/2026

Exhibition Leaflet English

For a long time, the history of photography was primarily a story of male photographers, conveyed from a male perspective. This was also the case in Switzerland: of the approximately 160 archives at Fotostiftung Schweiz, only 26 can be attributed to female photographers. These archives are as diverse as the women behind them – and the stories of their lives: while the oeuvres of many female photographers appear fragmented due to breaks in their careers, others stand out for their consistency and solidity. Even though some women photographers did manage to establish themselves in the male-dominated profession, they often received little recognition, remaining in the shadow of their male colleagues, mentors and husbands. A number of women had the privilege of pursuing photography as a leisure activity without economic pressure, demonstrating technical skill while creating powerful images that bear witness to their times. Despite their proficiency, they have to date been considered a marginal presence in the history of Swiss photography.

The exhibition *Female. Focus. Photo Archives.* focuses on seven archives from the period between 1900 and 1970. A collective of female curators from Fotostiftung Schweiz examines the peculiarities and commonalities of these archives and the conditions in which these women photographers worked. To what extent was photography a female profession? How did prevailing role models, economic structures and family duties impact the work of women photographers and the recognition they received? How are these circumstances reflected in their archives, and why have they barely been visible until now? And how can gaps in the archives and collections at Fotostiftung Schweiz be addressed?

### Photography as a Female Profession

Ever since the early days of photographic history, women have devoted themselves to the practice. In the 1840s, English botanist Anna Atkins (1799–1871) published her photograms of algae and plants reproduced as cyanotypes in the first-ever book of photography. In Switzerland, Franziska Möllinger (1817–1880) gained a reputation as a daguerreotypist. Photography was regarded as a craft that was suitable for women since less physical strength was required as compared with other professions.

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Sensitivity, patience and precision were called for, most notably in the post-processing of photographs – using techniques such as retouching: these were qualities more typically ascribed to women than to men. As in many other professional fields, men laid claim to the jobs that were more prestigious and enjoyed greater visibility, while happily delegating the routine work and menial tasks going on behind the scenes. A census published in the context of the 1928 Swiss Exhibition for Women's Work (*SAFFA*) revealed that a total of 1,490 people were employed in Swiss photo studios, 313 of whom were women – 21 per cent, in other words. There were 43 self-employed female business proprietors and 270 women in salaried positions.

Even though it was primarily self-assured 'new women' – mostly from middle-class backgrounds – who in the 1920s and 1930s considered taking up photography professionally, among the trades that were seen, in 1928, as career options, training as a photographer ranked below the usual women's occupations such as dressmaker, seamstress, laundress, silk weaver, milliner and hairdresser. **Marie Ottomann-Rothacher** (1916–2002) was one of the women who had apprenticed as a photographer and earned a living in this field, at least intermittently, although this mainly involved helping out in the businesses operated by male colleagues. **Margrit Aschwanden** (1913–2004) worked in her brother's firm and ran her own studio, together with her sister, between 1945 and 1950.

For Ottomann-Rothacher and Aschwanden, taking photographs independently outside the studio could only be done as a sideline. **Hedy Bumbacher** (1912–1992) was also only able to publish a few pictures from her photojournalistic pieces, even though photographs were printed on a massive scale in the period between the 1930s and the 1950s, when illustrated magazines were flourishing. It is striking that the female photographers featured in this exhibition were often called upon to document social institutions and organisations. Another woman who frequently took pictures in this context was **Anita Niesz** (1925–2013), who was active on the scene in the 1950s, publishing her photographic features in the magazine *Du*. Like **Leni Willimann-Thöni** (1918–2002) before her, Niesz attended the specialist photography class at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich, which had been started in 1932 and represented a new way for women to embark on a career in photography.

### Photography as a Leisure Activity for Women

Although the appeal of amateur photography was not limited to the male members of the society, the clubs that helped the artistic photography and pictorialism movement to spread during the second

half of the nineteenth century were dominated by well-to-do men, and only a few of the movement's members were women. Switzerland lagged some way behind in this respect: the movement did not take root there until well after 1900, and women scarcely figured in publications and exhibitions on Swiss amateur photography. **Anny Wild-Siber** (1865–1942), who became adept in early colour photography techniques, lived near Turin and took part in international competitions from her base there. **Gertrud Dübi-Müller** (1888–1980), who, as a young woman, became an influential art collector and patron of the arts, was also a passionate amateur photographer. She not only documented her social milieu, taking pictures of the painters Ferdinand Hodler and Cuno Amiet, but also photographed the mobilisation of Swiss troops along the frontier in 1914 and recorded her hikes through the mountains of the High Alps.

Amateur women photographers were a major consumer market for the industry. In 1888, Kodak's launch of its easy-to-use box cameras – complete with developing service – focused on women as a key target group. If, as one of Kodak's slogans put it, the camera could be operated even by a child, then it was well within the capabilities of the elegant lady in the striped dress, the so-called 'Kodak girl'. Numerous advertisements for photographic equipment show mothers pointing the camera at their children: since it was the wives in any case who were responsible for bringing about a felicitous family life, the task of documenting it was also to be put in their hands.

### Women in Collections and Archives

In a patriarchal social order, girls and young women already found themselves disadvantaged in terms of their schooling and professional training. As a result, they generally lacked the necessary qualifications and did not have the opportunities to work in areas that would generate proof of their talent and leave behind a lasting record, be it in the form of political, scientific or literary texts, works of fine art, music or architecture. However, the fact that women are still under-represented in museum collections and archives is also the product of collecting and archiving policies that have gone unchallenged over a long period. Documentation revolved around individuals who were classed as relevant by scholars, curators and archivists, most of whom were men. The call to map more than just the stories of nations, great men and victors only gathered steam in historical research in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist initiatives that campaigned to make women's history and stories more visible led to the establishment of archives with a specifically female focus. The Archive of the German Women's Movement in Kassel was founded in 1983, and the Collection of Women's Estates at the University of Vienna came into being in

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1990. In Switzerland, women's rights activist Marthe Gosteli campaigned for the creation of an archive on the history of the Swiss women's movement and set up the Gosteli Foundation in 1982. The Archiv für Frauen- und Sozialgeschichte Ostschweiz – an archive of women's history and social movements in Eastern Switzerland – has also been in existence since 1999. Today, many collections and archives are making efforts to give greater attention to women's testimonies. It is all but impossible to make retroactive corrections to the gender gap that has evolved historically, but new approaches to collecting and researching are the basis for authoring a diversified account of history.

### **Women at Fotostiftung Schweiz**

The photographic collections in the Fotostiftung Schweiz archives also reveal a significant gender imbalance. Only 16 per cent of the archives represent women's work behind the camera, even though in recent decades there has been particular interest in accepting the estates of female photographers, and in some cases active enquiries have been made about them. Since exhibition projects often led to archives being reviewed and researched, programming had a twofold effect. The estates of women photographers seemed too insubstantial to be worked up into monographic presentations that would engage the public, and their names were less well known – this was a vicious circle. Thus, between 1971 and 2001, when the Fotostiftung foundation was still housed in the Kunsthaus Zürich, only seven of fifty-three monographic exhibitions were devoted to women photographers. Since 2003, forty-nine solo exhibitions have been shown in the foundation's exhibition spaces in Winterthur, including fourteen female positions, six of which have taken place in the last five years.

Engaging with the archives of women photographers who were active in Switzerland between 1900 and 1970 inevitably involves a critical examination of photography's historical canon. Since its foundation, Fotostiftung Schweiz has been committed to preserving, researching, presenting and imparting information about so-called auteur photography, whose characteristic visual language and creative ambitions set it apart from ordinary image production. Less consideration has been given to fields of applied photography, such as in advertising or private photographic creations. Clearly, limited space and staff resources need to be assessed and choices made – both in the past and now. The foundation cannot collect and archive everything, but from a feminist and sociopolitical perspective and with regard to the history of science, selection criteria need to be constantly scrutinised so that more voices can be included in the historical account of Swiss photography.

### **The Focus on Women in Exhibitions**

Exhibitions that focus on the work of women recapitulate a binary take on gender in the agenda they set. In dealing with historical situations, they cannot avoid reproducing traditional role models. At the same time, women's stories have, beyond question, received too little 'airtime' in the past. The exhibition *Female. Focus. Photo Archives.* has no wish to ignore this ambiguity; instead, it seeks to find ways of handling it. Some of the key curatorial decisions will therefore be revealed here: it seemed sensible to the curators to concentrate on the period between 1900 and 1970, as the introduction in Switzerland of women's suffrage in 1971 confirmed a change in the perception of women, even as photography was being revolutionised as a medium. The selection of the seven female photographers in the exhibition takes account of different generations (their birth years range from 1865 to 1925) and different approaches to photography – as an amateur pursuit, as an apprenticeship and as a study focus in arts and crafts. The photographic works presented here reflect thematic areas that are typical of the individual in question. It goes without saying that the curatorial team's decisions are subjective and are intended to distil, for the purposes of museum exhibition, consistent groups of images of compelling quality, drawn from archives that are to some extent fragmentary.

Interviews with the photographers' descendants also formed part of the research. The fact that the estates are often of a modest size has to do not only with collecting policies but also with the women's careers, which were influenced by the conditions that framed society. Accordingly, the exhibition provides detailed accounts of their lives, taking into account both the home environment they grew up in and the families they started themselves. Both these aspects had a more pronounced impact on their choice and pursuit of photography as a profession or hobby than was the case with their male colleagues. Even their names shed light on the influence of biographical factors: while Anny Wild-Siber, Gertrud Dübi-Müller, Marie Ottomann-Rothacher and Leni Willimann-Thöni used double-barrelled names that combined their maiden names with those of their husbands, Anita Niesz retained her maiden name, Hedy Bumbacher changed her name when she got married and Margrit Aschwanden switched back to her maiden name after she was divorced.

Engaging with the two SAFFA exhibitions in 1928 and 1958 on women's work in Switzerland was helpful as a means to reflect on historical gender norms. These exhibitions show how patriarchy in those periods envisioned women's ideal contribution to the national economy and illustrate the wishes and demands expressed by the organised communities of women themselves.

## What Comes Next?

The questions raised by the exhibition *Female. Focus. Photo Archives.* – some of which are displayed on its walls – cannot and do not need to be answered conclusively. They are meant to encourage reflection and prompt discussion. For Fotostiftung Schweiz, this project is an opportunity to define a position and take stock, to engage with current discourses and examine research approaches relating to appropriate ways of dealing with archives today. The symposium '(In)visibilities – Perspectives on Working with Women's Archives' will be held on 8 May 2026 as a means to inspire exchange with other institutions and researchers. Various events with student groups are also planned to take place during the exhibition run. Since there is, to date, no secondary literature on most of the women photographers featuring in the exhibition, and there has been no proper examination of the overarching theme of working with photo archives in Switzerland, a publication would be welcome to back up, over the long term, the content that has been researched and safeguard the knowledge gained from it.

The proportion of women photographers steadily increased in the period after 1971. On training programmes, both in schools and vocational centres, the gender balance has evened out over the years. When acquiring authors' archives, Fotostiftung Schweiz is now mindful of the issue of equilibrium and looks for opportunities to counteract historical gaps and biases of various kinds. Starting in 2027, it will embark on a comprehensive review project titled 'Bewahren in Bewegung', which will focus on the cataloguing of its approximately 160 archives. The process of re-evaluating and making visible positions that have hitherto been somewhat obscure will be a continuation of the approaches addressed as part of this exhibition.

Curators: Madleina Deplazes, Michèle Dick, Teresa Gruber, Katharina Rippstein

## Events

**Sunday, 8 March 2026, 13:00**

### Another Women's Exhibition?!

Guided exhibition tour to mark International Women's Day with curators Madleina Deplazes, Michèle Dick, Teresa Gruber and Katharina Rippstein

**Sunday, 29 March 2026, 13:00**

### Careers and Children – Archives as a Reflection of the Lived Realities of Women Photographers

Guided exhibition tour with curator Madleina Deplazes

**Sunday, 12 April 2026, 13:00**

### Margrit Aschwanden – Between the Family Business and Female Authorship

Curator Michèle Dick in conversation with Margrit Aschwanden's niece, Verena Aschwanden, photographer and director of Foto Aschwanden until 2010. In German.

**Friday, 8 May 2026, 14:00–17:00**

### (In)Visibilities – Perspectives on Working with Women's Archives

Three talks and a panel discussion with Dr Nathalie Dimic, photo historian and curator, Dr Lina Gafner, director of the Gosteli Archive, and Dr Bettina Richter, curator of the Poster Collection at Museum für Gestaltung Zürich. In German.

**Sunday, 24 May 2026, 13:00**

### Gertrud Dübi-Müller and Marie Ottomann-Rothacher Women Photographers on Both Sides of the Camera

Guided exhibition tour with curator Katharina Rippstein

**Sunday, 7 June 2026, 13:00**

### Women Amateurs, Apprentices and Artisans – Paths to Photography

Guided exhibition tour with curator Teresa Gruber

**The exhibition was made possible by:**

Kanton Solothurn, Dr. Georg & Josi Guggenheim-Stiftung; Giuseppe Kaiser Stiftung; Markant-Stiftung; Stiftung für die Frau; Stiftung zur Erforschung der Frauenarbeit; Memoriav; Gosteli-Archiv; Cinémathèque suisse

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**Fotostiftung Schweiz, fotostiftung.ch**

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday 11:00–17:00

Wednesday 11:00–20:00, with free admission from 17:00

Saturday and Sunday 11:00–18:00, closed on Mondays