

Jean Painlevé 15 March – 4 June 2017



Left: Promotional photograph for Jean Painlevé's seahorse jewellery, 1936. Photo: Philippe Halsman © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris / Philippe Halsman Archive. Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris

Right: Jean Painlevé, *Rostrum on the nose of the shrimp*, 1929 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris. Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris

This is the first UK solo exhibition of work by French filmmaker and photographer Jean Painlevé (1902 – 1989). His moving imagery of marine life, in particular, commanded the respect of many renowned avant-garde artists working in 1920s Paris (Luis Buñuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Man Ray and Alexander Calder), at the beginning of a life-long career that almost spanned the 20th century. This exhibition, presents a number of seminal films alongside a selection of photographs and jewellery, exemplifying Painlevé's passion for making science accessible.

Jean Painlevé studied Biology at the Sorbonne University and started to socialise and associate with the Surrealists in his early twenties. In 1924, he published an article, '*Neo Zoological Drama*', in the journal *Surrealisme* in which his characteristic use of specialised science directed at a lay audience and tongue-in-cheek sense of humour can already be found:

Good for Chironomus plumosus to outline their intestinal arborizations in red lace; what spherical astonishment: he flees and ruptures the phlegmy threads reserved for the Bythotrephes longimanus, that good old little crustacean with close-cropped hair.

The following year, Painlevé set up a studio on the coast of Brittany, in Port Blanc. Working with the same equipment he had used as a student in the science laboratories (“micro cinema” - the pairing of a microscope with a camera); he was able to achieve extreme magnification, exceptional sharpness in the separation of details and ultimately abstraction. Painlevé started to produce large scale photographs and short films of his lifelong models and muses: the octopus, sea urchins, crabs, shrimps or lobsters from the seaside nearby. The exhibition presents a selection of prints of these iconic ‘portraits’ including *Lobster Claw*, *Rostrum on the Nose of a Shrimp* and *Shrimp Tail*.

The modernity of Painlevé’s work immediately appealed to the Surrealists, to the splinter group led by George Bataille, with its focus on minuscule animals normally considered unworthy of attention and more generally to the emerging documentary style present in the “new vision” of German photography and the American photography of Paul Strand or Walker Evans. But although his photographs were largely published and exhibited within the Paris avant-garde circles, Painlevé never wanted to be pigeonholed into a single camp or faction, and sought to continue in his uncompromising and independent spirit to challenge himself to continue making unique works that would appeal both to his radical artist friends and the general public.

An example of this can be found in the seminal *L’Hippocampe (The Seahorse)*, his first and only film using underwater footage Painlevé shot in the Bay of Arcachon, equipped with a rudimentary waterproof case for his camera, then in a gigantic seawater aquarium of his Paris basement studio). This film is also the only one which benefited from a mainstream theatrical distribution in 1934. The seahorse signified a kind of ethical positioning. Specifically, Painlevé was concerned to draw attention to the inversion of sex roles as a way to address the balance between genders. It is the male that fertilises the hundred eggs passed to him by the female and gives birth in a way reminiscent of human labour. Painlevé wrote on the subject of the seahorse

To those who are ardently striving to better their daily lot, to those women who long for someone free from the usual selfishness to share their troubles as well as their joys, is dedicated this symbol of a tenacity which unites the most masculine efforts to the most feminine maternal care.

This sea creature was also the occasion to revive his youthful provocative and conceptual tendencies through the launching of a fashion brand associated with the film; he sent a letter to the press entitled ‘*I’ve become a jeweller*’. For this project, he fully embraced the codes of the fashion industry, opening retail boutiques and a stall in the department store Printemps. He produced professional advertising photographs shot by his close friend photographer Philippe Halsman, and offered a range of bracelets, necklaces, printed fabrics and silk scarves made by the industry’s best manufacturers. A selection of the original 1936 jewellery involving the stylised motif of the enigmatic creature is displayed in a room of the exhibition entirely wallpapered with the patterns of one of the seahorse fabrics.

The exhibition also features films made by Painlevé after the war, including *Calder's 1927 Great Circus* (1955) which documents a performance by his lifelong artist friend, American sculptor Alexander Calder, *Sea Urchins* (1958) - Painlevé's first colour film – and his extraordinary abstract ballet of sound and light in *Phase Transition in Liquid Crystals*. These works testify to Painlevé's interest and engagement with new developments in music, even late in his life, with commissions for film scores to electronic music pioneer Pierre Henry or cult movie composer François de Roubaix. Pierre Jansen's original music score for the 1978 film *Acera* or *The Witches' Dance* will be performed live by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group during the screening of the film as part of the Birmingham Flatpack Film Festival.

A catalogue accompanies the exhibition with an introduction by Ikon Director Jonathan Watkins and an essay by Marie Jager. Available from Ikon's Shop.

This exhibition is curated by Marie Jager and Jonathan Watkins. It is organised in collaboration with the Archives Jean Painlevé, and produced in association with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the Birmingham City University School of Jewellery and Flatpack Film Festival.

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Social Media Handles:

Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #IkonGallery

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon exhibition opening: 15 March 2017, 6-8pm.
2. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. www.ikon-gallery.org
3. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 5pm. Admission is free. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).
4. For more information or high-res images please contact Sam Skillings, Head of Communications (Maternity Cover) or Emily Luxford, Communications Assistant at Ikon on 0121 248 0708 or email s.skillings@ikon-gallery.org or e.luxford@ikon-gallery.org

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Jean Painlevé in Roscoff Brittany, circa 1960 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris.
Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris



Jean Painlevé with Debie camera in waterproof box, 1935 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris
Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris



Jean Painlevé, Crab Claw, 1928 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris.
Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris.



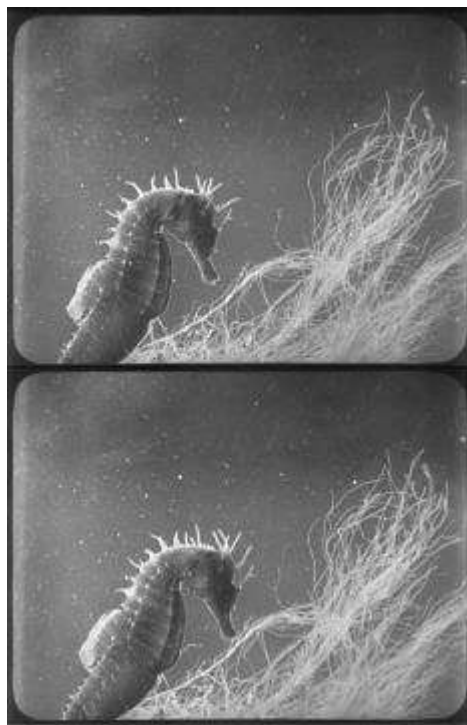
Jean Painlevé, Female Seahorse, 1936. © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris. Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris.



Jean Painlevé, Lobster Claw, 1929 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris. Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris



Jean Painlevé, *Shrimp Tail greatly enlarged*, 1929 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris
Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris



Jean Painlevé, film stills from *The Seahorse*, 1931 © Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris. Image courtesy of Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris.

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0121 248 0708 / www.ikon-gallery.org
Open Tuesday-Sunday & Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm / free entry



Jean Painlevé, Seahorse Wallpaper, reproduction
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