

Roberto Donetta Photographer and Seed Salesman from Blenio



Female Workers of the Chocolate Factory Cima Norma, Dangio-Torre © Archivio Fotografico Donetta, Corzoneso

Roberto Donetta (1865-1932) from Ticino is one of Swiss photography's great outsiders. He managed to survive as a travelling photographer and seed salesman, and upon his death left almost 5,000 glass plates which were preserved merely by chance. These capture the archaic life of his compatriots in the Blenio Valley, which at the time was totally isolated, and the gradual advent of modern times in a precise and sensitive way. Over a period of 30 years and in an era of great change, Donetta became a unique chronicler. At the same time, he saw himself as an artist who – self-taught – experimented freely and knew how to master his medium. His pictures are penetrating and humorous, cheerful and deadly serious – be they of children, families, wedding couples, professional people, the harsh everyday-life of women and men, or of the photographer himself. The Blenio Valley as a microcosm: with Donetta the mountain valley becomes the stage for a great Theater of the World. The exhibition will display about 120 works from the Donetta Archive, many of them on show to the public for the first time ever.

Roberto Donetta was born in Biasca on 6 June 1865. It is not known where he spent his youth. Towards the late 1870s his family most probably moved to Castro in the Blenio Valley, as his father had got a job there as a military functionary. An official register entry on the occasion of his marriage to Teodolinda Tinetti indicates that Roberto Donetta certainly lived in the valley as of 1886. He is registered there as “contadino”, a farmer, which he most likely never was. In 1892 he opened a small grocery shop in Corzoneso, but he had it for only six months. In 1894 he went to London to work as a waiter, returning just 15 months later, sick and exhausted. He then became a hawker and travelled into the most remote corners of the whole valley selling vegetable and flower seeds.

As of 1900 he lived in the “Casa Rotonda” in Casserio, part of the Corzoneso municipality. He and Teodolinda meantime had seven children, one of whom died at the age of one. It was around that time that Donetta began to be involved with photography. Apparently Dionigi Sorgesa, a sculptor from Corzoneso, introduced him to the profession and also rented him a camera. Now Donetta was not only a seed merchant but also the valley’s photographer.

After turbulent quarrels about the use of their sparse income, he and his family separated in 1912: his wife and children left him in the direction of Bellinzona in search of more lucrative work. Only the youngest son, Saul, remained with his father. On 6 June 1913, his 48th birthday, some of Donetta’s belongings were seized and, for a couple of months, he had no camera, which was a great worry to him: “Not to be able to work for a period of nine months – that severed my connection with my art and made me totally destitute.” Donetta spent the years after the First World War in great solitude, constantly on the road throughout the valley. From 1927 onwards, some of his photographs were published in one of Switzerland’s first illustrated journals, “L’Illustré”, issued by Ringier.

On the morning of 6 September 1932, Roberto Donetta was found dead in his home. All his photographic equipment was confiscated and auctioned so as to pay off his debts to the municipality. The glass plates, however, were all left untouched. In the mid-1980s Mariarosa Bozzini rediscovered them in Corzoneso.

A contradictory personality

Roberto Donetta was a tall, imposing man, and a unusual person who was inquisitive and liked to sing. He seems to have been slightly haughty early on in his life, to judge by his entries in a large almanac in which he recorded things he considered worth knowing about history, religion, geology, technology, housekeeping, and even funny stories, all of which he marshalled against what he saw as the ignorance of his day. It can also be judged from his numerous self-portraits, which show a self-confident and humorous man, someone capable of enjoying life and being fired with enthusiasm. Over time, however, his character changed: the inquiring, open-minded spirit took a turn to the sectarian, the denigrating and the unconstrained; doubt, indeed despair, rose to the surface. Additionally, the more he tried to conceal his goitre with a scarf, the more he retired into a world of his own. He suffered due to his separation from his family and his lack of success in business. In the valley where he lived, he came to be regarded as merely a sinister cranky misfit, a “vagabond”.

Donetta’s personality was full of contradictions. On the one hand, he expressed considerable interest in all the phenomena associated with the advent of modern achievements, such as photography. On the other hand, he was decidedly conservative when it came to the cohesion of the family or his close links with nature. The latter prevented him from leaving the valley to look for more secure work in town. He lamented the constant changes associated with road building and new railway lines, which he did not see as a blessing for the valley. In his capacity as a photographer he succumbed to the fascination of the modern, yet at the same time he expressed a deep respect for long-standing traditions and rituals.

The valley

The Blenio Valley is a mountain valley, quite mild at the bottom and on the western slopes, but alpine and barren up on the heights. It begins in the south near Biasca at about 300 metres and ends in the north near the Lukmanier and the Grein Pass, at 1,900 metres, respectively 2,300 metres. Even today, there is not much Ticino-style tourism here, and no industry worth talking about, nor burgeoning agglomerations, just small, agrarian mountain communities that have had, and partly still have, to struggle with flooding, avalanches and emigration.

The valley was very poor until after the Second World War. The sanitary conditions – like everywhere on the periphery of Ticino – were precarious, the water often contaminated and medical services practically non-existent. Illnesses such as flu, cholera, diphtheria, and later tuberculosis, were frequent – the Spanish Flu in Ticino in 1918/19 exacted more than 900 victims.

One of the reasons for the people's susceptibility to illness was inadequate nutrition – a one-sided diet of potatoes, sweet chestnuts and sweet corn in the form of polenta, often for breakfast, or rye in the form of thin bread. Babies were fed on soup with bacon, milk coffee and even wine. For years there were only two to four midwives in the valley for a population of about 6,200. The men were forced to emigrate for seasonal work in winter, as chestnut roasters, chocolate makers or waiters in Italian, French or English cities; the women, usually peasants, stayed behind in the valley alone and with all the responsibility, and were often totally exhausted. The major technical revolutions – railway, electricity, cars – had little impact on life in the valley.

Just two entities still testify today to a more modern industrialised world: the striking Cima Norma chocolate factory, squashed into a side valley in Torre and decommissioned today; and the hotel Terme di Acquarossa, a sophisticated place for urbanites on summer vacation in Donetta's day. He photographed both buildings frequently as they were fixed points in social life in the valley.

The children

Children have a special place in the work of Roberto Donetta – not only because he photographed them regularly and readily, but also because of the originality of the respective images. With children he was especially able to live out his delight in composition, his talent as a director of small scenes. He took the young people seriously, and they in turn were his accomplices, becoming involved in his creative ideas.

The presence of children in his work can also be explained from a socio-historical viewpoint: children played an important role in everyday life and contributed to their family's economic survival. They had to work on the land or else look after younger siblings when both parents went to work outside the home. Children were workers – and also a kind of old-age insurance. There was no really clear distinction between the world of children and the world of adults. It is no coincidence that Donetta's children often look like adults in their poses and their clothing. Sometimes even the worries of the older people are reflected on their little faces.

The high infant mortality in the Blenio Valley at the beginning of the 20th century also left its mark. The repeated experience of losing a child increased the need for portraits. Roberto Donetta fulfilled the wish of many parents to try and hold on to their offspring, at least in an image. What is particularly moving is when they called on the photographer to immortalize a small child on his or her death bed.

The improvised studio

Unlike the efficient and successful photography shops in cities like Lugano or Locarno. Roberto Donetta worked like a craftsman or hawker: As Donetta did not have a studio of his own, he travelled the whole valley to take his portraits and produced mostly only small modest prints in postcard format (i.e. 7 x 11 cm), which he occasionally stamped with his initials. Often the only ornamentation was an oval vignetting or rounded edges. He regularly delivered the commissioned photographs late because, in order to save chemicals, he only developed his films infrequently. After his rounds as a seed merchant, he then struggled with his business correspondence late in the evening. His works differ greatly from the elegant, classic, gold-edged cards that people could have done those days in the city studios without long waiting periods.

Yet in his own way Donetta did imitate the decorative aesthetic of the late 19th century professional studios: he transformed interior or outdoor spaces into improvised studios by, for example, hanging up fabrics or carpets as backdrops and placing objects like chairs or tables with vases of flowers in the foreground. His portraits are carefully composed and arranged, look uncontrived, calm and archaic. Because of the long exposure times, he was concerned to eliminate chance and spontaneity as far as possible.

In addition to this, he also experimented, or simply took photographs for himself: still lifes, stormy scenes, cloud formations, strangely shaped cliff or tree outlines. These photographs impress us by their modernity and originality and testify to an inquisitive man with an interest in aesthetic issues.

The chronicler and his style

Throughout his life Donetta accompanied life in the valley, taking commissioned photographs of the inhabitants and the representatives of the different professions, as well as of various events: a visit by a bishop, the arrival of a carousel, a flood, a fire, the construction of a railway line or a bell tower. He was also present at life's rituals, the transitions from one age group to another, from one social group to the next, or else the prominent fixed points in the year's cycle, be they secular or ecclesiastical: festivals, weddings, funerals, processions, outdoor church services, these were inconceivable without "il fotografo". Donetta made photography an important part of those rituals, and over the course of time the photographer was as much a part of the valley as the parson was of the church. This is surely the source of the quality of his photographs: the people did not dissimulate, indeed it's almost as if they forgot that someone with a camera was watching, so self-engrossed do they look, serious, at one with themselves.

Did an evolution, a stylistic change occur in Donetta's thirty-year professional career? Only ten percent of his glass negatives are dated and thus chronologically classifiable. Yet it is evident that his technical proficiency grew over the course of the years, as is reflected in the sharpness of the images and their framing. There are also clear stylistic changes regarding the use of backdrops and accessories, which he increasingly did without. Over time, Donetta proceeded to photograph his figures outdoors, in nature, embedded in a scenario that was very familiar to him. In doing so he created a portrait style which became typical of him - expansive and "framed" by landscape, with waterfalls whose streams of water froze into white lines due to the long exposure time, and with abundant foliage or mighty trees. In his later years, these were joined by images of people on a threshold, photographed against the darkness of an interior - as if emerging from oblivion.

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