

# Memory is an Image

Photojournalist, archivist, agency founder, curator, landscape photographer: during the life of Pierre de Fenoïl (1945–1987), the fascination for photography took on many forms. His own works are now presented in an exhibition at the Chateau de Tours in France. A (re)discovery.



Why is a woman sitting all alone in the middle of a street? Is she posing for a portrait? Why does she not draw the attention of passers-by? And what is the meaning of a small section of hieroglyphs, made visible only by a triangular spotlight? Many of Pierre de Fenoïl's photographs are elusive and full of mystery – born of a magical combination of incidental encounters and precise observation. Fenoïl was no ordinary photojournalist, but a curious storyteller on a continuous search for the unexpected. The second major theme of his work was centred on landscapes. Adopting the classic tradition of 19th century landscape photography, he set

out to capture the majestic stillness of the regions he explored, in dark tones of black and white.

It was a fortuitous coincidence that first led Fenoïl to the world of photography. At seventeen, while working as a bellhop at the Plaza Athénée in Paris, Fenoïl met Louis Dalmas in the hotel's elevator, who offered him a position at the Dalmas press photo agency. Fenoïl soon moved on to the Holmès-Lebel agency, followed by Magnum in 1966. Initially responsible for managing the archive of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Fenoïl eventually became the director of the entire Magnum archival department. He could hardly have found a better way ▶

## PIERRE DE FENOÏL

Born on 14 July 1945 in Caluire-et-Cuire (Rhône). Employed by the Dalmas press agency in 1962, followed by the Holmès-Lebel agency from 1963–64. Military service (1965).

1966–68 archivist for Henri Cartier-Bresson and head of the Magnum archive. Begins to take photographs. 1970–71 founder and director of the Vu agency and the Galerie Rencontre – the first gallery in Paris exclusively dedicated to photography. Spends 1972 in the US; 1973–75 Art Buyer for the Publicis Conseil in Paris. From 1975 curator at the Centre Pompidou. From 1976 founding director of the Fondation Nationale de la Photographie.

1981 and 1983/84: trips to Egypt. First exhibitions of his own work and increasing dedication to landscape photography. Lived with his family in Castelnau-de-Montmiral (Departement Tarn, Midi-Pyrénées). Pierre de Fenoïl died from a heart attack on 4 September 1987. [www.pierredefenoyl.fr](http://www.pierredefenoyl.fr)

Photography: © Pierre de Fenoïl; all quotes translated from the catalogue *Pierre de Fenoïl – Une géographie imaginaire*, Paris 2015

Light and dark: Pierre de Fenoïl saw this photograph as an imaginary conversation with the person who had carved these hieroglyphs into stone over 3000 years ago (Egypt, 1984); left: United States, 1972





Left: Central Park, New York, taken during Fenoïl's stay in the US in 1972; top: A study of light and shadow (Paris, 1985); right: A visual interpretation of the Eiffel Tower (Paris, 1980)

to train his photographic eye. To begin with, Fenoïl took pictures in the streets of Paris during his spare time, before embarking on his first reportage trip to India in 1969 – inspired not least by Cartier-Bresson's photographs of the country. Even in these early works, the characteristic hallmarks of his style begin to emerge: his images centre on people in the street, often depicted in quiet, pensive moments. On his return Fenoïl, together with Charles-Henri Favrod, established the press photo agency Vu (which later became Viva). In 1972, Fenoïl spent a year in the United States, working as a picture editor for Photo magazine in New York and exploring the country on a motorbike. This opened up an understanding of the American photography scene, and fostered his interest in street photography.

A year earlier, Fenoïl had co-established the Rencontre Gallery in Paris – something that had seemed little more than a brief interlude at the time. Now, however, Fenoïl's tireless dedication to the medium gained the attention of the French State Secretary for Cultural Affairs. As a result, Fenoïl was appointed head of the photography department at the Centre Pompidou, and became the first director of the Fondation Nationale de la Photographie, for which he organised numerous exhibitions. When



the foundation relocated to Lyon, he returned to the Centre Pompidou until 1980.

Though his own photography remained important to him, there was little time to pursue it. Consequently, Fenoïl would take his Leica and roam through Paris in the early hours of the morning. Beyond the bustle of the urban day, he created spellbinding images that capture the stillness of a city seemingly devoid of any human life. This is where he truly found his personal style, distilling it even further through the distinctive, dark shades of his prints. His mastery of light, and the great importance it plays in his work, become particularly apparent in these pictures. The images were printed by Yvon Le Marlec, whose understanding of traditional printing methods complemented Fenoïl's visual language: using old techniques, he was able to achieve strong contrasts and dark tones, distinguished by deep blacks and dense shadows. Indeed, many of Fenoïl's landscapes appear to transcend time. In the same vein, his expedition to Egypt in 1983 yielded timeless images full of mystery, striking contrasts and dark shades.

In 1987, Fenoïl's work came to an abrupt end. At just 42, a heart attack tore him out of a life that had, in such a multitude of ways, been dedicated to

photography. Yet in the course of only two decades, Fenoïl had made a significant mark on the history of French photography. His contributions coincided with a time when France, like many other countries, was re-evaluating the status and significance of this particular medium. Consisting of 110 photographs along with a wide range of accompanying documentary material, the current exhibition at the Château de Tours allows us to re-discover a remarkable photographer. A year before his death, Pierre de Fenoïl described his way of working, saying that, "the important thing is to watch time passing, not to pass time watching. On this quest exploring reality, my memory is my style. Memory is an image – it is the image of time." Alluding to Cartier-Bresson, he said, "I am neither a geometrician nor a visionary. I am – I want to be – a chrono-photographer in search of the present moment." ULRICH RÜTER

**EXHIBITIONS:** *Pierre de Fenoïl – Une géographie imaginaire*, showing in Tours, France until 31 October, 2015, [www.jeudepaume.org](http://www.jeudepaume.org); *Pierre de Fenoïl. Paysages conjugués*, showing at the Galerie Le Réverbère Lyon from 5 September to 31 December, 2015, [www.galerielereverbere.com](http://www.galerielereverbere.com)  
**KATALOG:** *Pierre de Fenoïl – Une géographie imaginaire* (Éditions Xavier Barral, Paris 2015; Editor: Virginie Chardin)

From the mid-eighties onwards, Fenoïl increasingly dedicated himself to capturing the French landscape. These pictures are not titled by location, but by date and time: 21.6.85, 18 h and 17.10.85, 18 h (top left and right); 21.1.85, 12 h (below)

Photography: © Pierre de Fenoïl; all quotes translated from the catalogue *Pierre de Fenoïl – Une géographie imaginaire*, Paris 2015

“How illusionary to say that we can grasp reality. Photography is the experience of an inner expression.”