



LEICA Q

Jeanne Taris

LES GITANS DE



PERPIGNAN



With her *Les Gitans de Perpignan* series, Jeanne Taxis manages to achieve something quite exceptional: on the one hand her pictures seem to confirm clichés believed by the outside world about the lives of Roma people; on the other hand her work offers a rare glimpse into the unadorned reality, a glimpse that few people ever see.



At some point during the evening the heels are simply too high. On top: Children are allowed to do anything. Left: The women are expected to have a festive wardrobe for special occasions. Previous pages: Thirteen year-old Maéva has dressed up for the Christmas party. Boys begin drinking alcohol at an early age





Girls are married off at a very young age and soon have children. Using any form of contraception is not allowed





Boys are brought up as masters in the home right from the beginning. They are allowed to smoke and drink, which they are proud to do even as children. Later on they are allowed to have various relationships and drive cars. These things are all strictly forbidden for women



Dressed up as 'little adults' the two six year-olds, Cochon and Oui Oui, must live up to the male image of their father







Life in Saint-Jacques takes place on the streets until the early hours of the morning. Top left: Because city cleaners avoid the district, the locals have to keep it clean themselves. Beneath: 16 year-old Salomé's wedding is celebrated quite simply in an Asian bistro



Children are virtually unrestricted. They are supposed to grow up freely and without rules: at parties they stay on the dance floor until dawn; like Oui Oui, seen here dancing a fiery flamenco number

JEANNE TARIS

A mother of four, Taris began photographing when she was seventeen but showed no one her pictures. She did not consider herself talented enough to study photography; but during a Leica workshop she met a photographer who encouraged her to show her work. This resulted in publications in *Polka* and *Vice*, among others. In 2018 she won the Leica Gallery International Portfolio Award at the *Voies Off* festival in Arles.

The Saint-Jacques district, located in the heart of Perpignan's Old Town, is mainly inhabited by Roma who moved from Spain to the south of France centuries ago. It is the largest inner-city Roma settlement and makes up ten percent of Perpignan's population. This micro-cosmos has its own weekly market, school and its own rules. Almost no one from outside gets access to this world that is increasingly threatened by poverty and criminality.

It was pure chance that first took Taris to Saint-Jacques. She was in Perpignan in 2016 attending the *Visa pour L'image* photo festival when someone warned her to completely avoid the area. It was advice she did not heed. Instead she headed for the disreputable quarter, stood in front of derelict houses, asked questions and got to know a people in whom no one seemed to take an interest. The French photographer approached residents without inhibition, reminding herself not to allow prejudice to come into play. "As a woman and mother it can be difficult to see certain things," she says. The job of a photographer however, is to observe without judgement. For the Roma, she was to become something of a window to the wider world: they could show themselves and their lives, but also catch a glimpse outside as well. Connections were made, especially to women, and friendships quickly formed.

That same year she found herself home alone at Christmas, so she had the idea to return to Saint-Jacques. She was immediately invited to take part in the festivities and remained with the Roma right through to the New Year. Many of the pictures shown here were taken during that time. At a first glimpse they show people partying excessively, wearing fancy but rather old-fashioned outfits. However, take a second look and it soon becomes clear that children are at the centre of most images. The separation of

women from men is also noticeable. This reflects the reality experienced behind the good mood: gender roles within this society are conservatively defined and women are married off when still young, expected to bear children and attend church regularly. Any divergence from this established path is impossible. If a young girl defies these rules she is excluded from the community. In contrast, the men deal in business, drive cars, smoke, have multiple relationships at the same time, and are often violent.

Gender roles are imposed at a young age: fathers are proud when their under-age sons drink beer and smoke. There are few rules for the youngsters: they decide how long they can stay awake and whether or not to attend school. The heavily made-up faces, high heels and tight dresses worn by women for the festivities have a serious background too: there are no other times when they can meet a man alone. This is the time to catch a man's attention. What appears exaggerated and excessive in our eyes, is actually essential for Roma women.

In more recent years a fatal trend has been added to this patriarchal distribution of roles: where alcohol formerly played the most prevalent role among men, hard drugs have now gained the upper hand, leading to even more violence and criminality. Some families are so indebted they are forced to sell their homes. Taris sees this as a great danger, as well as an important societal task. "We have abandoned the Roma. Leaving them alone to their poverty, without any education and prospects. Their situation is a societal problem that is simply ignored." The commune claims to do a lot for the people of Saint-Jacques, but there is no evidence of it. At the same time, the publicity the Roma receive as a result of Taris's work is not appreciated in official quarters. "They want total silence around the problem." In contrast, she garners high praise from Perpignan's regular inhabitants, who otherwise have little insight into the lives of their neighbours. The photographer is increasingly becoming an ambas-

sador for Roma concerns, and at times is overwhelmed. She was even approached by the hospital in Perpignan to establish a connection to the young girls in Saint-Jacques in order to educate them about contraception. "That was too much for me, as I am not a social worker," Taris says with concern. It does reflect however, how helpless the authorities are in the way they deal with the district.

Initially, the self-taught photographer worked exclusively analogue, and even today she still does not crop her pictures. "The photo you see is the photo I took." For a long time, Taris also had difficulty taking herself seriously as a photographer. That is, until she took part in a Leica workshop, "Up until that point I would say that I just take a few pictures. Because I never attended a photography school, I didn't consider defining myself as a photographer." At the workshop she was encouraged to show her pictures. This led to publications in renowned photo magazines and international news magazines.

As a young girl, Taris dreamt of taking photographs with a Leica. She began with the purchase of a Leica camera bag as she did not have enough money for the actual camera. Eventually she managed to get herself an X2, and later a Leica Q, which has now become her favourite camera. "Above all, I love the fact that it's quick, quiet and discrete. I had to get used to the 28mm lens, but now I like it because you're obliged to get up close to people. That suits my approach." Taris's next visit to Saint-Jacques is already planned – however, she first needs to distance herself. To be able to catch her breath, she says. DENISE KLINK

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LFI-ONLINE.DE/BLOG: SLIDESHOW WITH MORE PICTURES BY JEANNE TARIS

EQUIPMENT: Leica Q, Summilux 28 f/1.7 Asph