
MARTIN HOOD

The Family Gos

A Mountain of Heritage



The Gos family, from left to right, Charles, Émile, Camille, Albert, Juliette and François.

Included in the Alpine Club's collection is an oil painting of a moonlit Matterhorn. A century ago, members would have instantly recognised the artist's name, a doyen of Alpine painting. His sons too were busy making names for themselves in the mountain arts, respectively as a painter, a writer and a photographer.

An exhibition in Switzerland recently celebrated the oeuvre of this talented dynasty. 'Les Gos: une montagne en héritage' opened at the Médiathèque Valais at Martigny in June 2020 and ran until the following January.

On a rainy August afternoon last year, we were welcomed into the exhibition by larger-than-life portraits of a remarkable family. These were the artist Albert Gos (1852-1942), and his three sons, François Gos (1880-1975), the eldest and likewise a painter, Charles Gos (1885-1949), the writer, and Émile Gos (1888-1969), the photographer who made the very portraits we were looking at. There were also two daughters, who like their brothers enjoyed all aspects of mountain life, but left behind no artistic legacy.

All four men loomed large over the Alpine culture of their time. Albert learned his craft between 1870 and 1872 at the Geneva School of Art under Barthélemy Menn (1815-1893), who introduced the principles of plein air



'Le Cervin', by Albert Gos.¹



Albert Gos (1852-1942) at his atelier in Clarens, outside Martigny. (*Émile Gos*)

painting into Swiss art. After absorbing that teaching, Albert Gos ran with it. Preferring to paint in the open air, he left the school before graduating. He concentrated on painting mountains, particularly in the Bernese Oberland and the Valais Alps.

Importantly, he could make a decent living with these works. This mattered even more from 1878, when he married Jeanne Monnerat. François, the first of five children, arrived two years later. The couple settled first in Geneva before moving to Clarens, a village near Montreux.

During his most productive decade, the last of the 19th century, Albert was justifiably known as the 'Matterhorn artist'. Indeed, one of these paintings appears in Charles Gos's story 'Gladys', which portrays an aristocratic English lady climber who comes to grief on the Matterhorn.

In the Martigny exhibition, a painting by François Gos was placed close to his father's work. Modest in scale, its style is a touch more modern than Albert's, as if the artist had imbibed at the same sources as, say, Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), who also made an artistic pilgrimage from Canton Vaud to the French capital. François studied for five years at the Geneva School of Arts and Crafts and at the city's art academy before moving to Paris. Unlike Vallotton, however, Emil had to work for his living in a factory as a decorative artist.

On returning to Switzerland, he gave drawing lessons in Clarens. In 1910, he settled in Munich, and later spent three years in Holland before returning

1. 'Le Cervin', A Gos, 91cm x 74cm, oil on canvas, undated, Club Alpin Suisse.



A family en plein air. Albert Gos, the 'Matterhorn artist', on the Riffelalp, Émile Gos (1888-1969) filming *La Croix du Cervin*, and François Gos at Zermatt in c1920. (Émile Gos/famille Gos/Émile Gos)

to Geneva, making a living with illustration, sculpture and writing, as well as painting. Travel posters were a forte. In 1913, he helped to start up an art school in Lausanne. Like his father, he showed a predilection for the mountain world, both as a climber and a painter.

Charles Gos, after studying in Lausanne and Paris, established himself as an author and journalist, focusing on military affairs and alpinism – mostly the latter in his short stories and novels: *Pres des névés et des glaciers* (1912), *La Croix du Cervin* (1919), *Propos d'un alpiniste* (1922), *Alpinisme anecdotique* (1934), and *Solitude montagnarde* (1943). Several of his books were translated into English, including *Song of the High Hills*, a novel that uses the mountains above Zermatt as the backdrop for a love triangle. Again, the plot is resolved by a fatal accident. In 1918, Gos married Edmée de Coulon, who died in 1930. In 1934, he took over the management of the mountain books department at the Victor Attinger publishing house in Neuchâtel. He remarried in 1947, and a son was born two years later.



Left: Charles Gos (1885-1949), alpinist and author. (*Émile Gos*)

Above: 'La cabane du Mountet', by Albert Gos.²



Left: The photographer *Émile Gos* was Albert's youngest son. His film *La Croix du Cervin* was from a script written by his brother Charles. His interest in dance, theatre and portraiture shows in the energy he brought to his climbing photography.

Above: 'Mont Cervin avec la Riffelsee', by Albert Gos.³

The Gos brothers climbed at a high standard, often without guides. Indeed, Charles Gos led the first guideless ascent of the Matterhorn's Zmutt ridge. He knew everybody in the world of alpinism, from the local guides to the prominent climbers who visited the Alps from abroad. He was elected a member of the Alpine Club in 1935, and once secured a half-hour audience with the 'climbing pope', Pius XI, this without the benefit of a Catholic upbringing – the Gos family came from a sternly Protestant background.

2. 'La cabane du Mountet', A Gos, 1876, Club Alpine Suisse.

3. 'Mont Cervin avec la Riffelsee', A Gos, 35.9cm x 47.4cm, oil on canvas, 1875, Musée d'art du Valais, Sion.



Charles Gos at his desk. An Anglophile and honorary member of the Alpine Club, he was between the wars a crucial source of information for the *Alpine Journal*. After his premature death, Geoffrey Winthrop Young wrote: 'I don't know anyone in the world of whom it can be said more truthfully that the mountains are his refuge, his hope, his inspiration and even the breath of his everyday life.'

For his part, the youngest son, Emile Gos, completed an apprenticeship as a photographer in Montreux, in the workshop of Rodolphe Schlemmer (1878-1972). He continued his training in German-speaking Switzerland, in Paris, Munich and London before moving back to Clarens and later starting his own studio in Lausanne. In 1939, he married Claire André, who gave him two children. Making a living with studio portraits and newspaper photography, he left a more durable legacy in landscape and mountain photography, sampled in the exhibition by a compelling slide show of his masterly medium-format images.

In 1922, he filmed his brother Charles's short story about the Matterhorn cross (*La Croix du Cervin*). This was one of the first films to be shot in the high mountains, predating Arnold Fanck and G W Pabst's *The White Hell of Piz Palü* by more than half a decade. Alas, only fragments of the original footage have survived.

Writing in the exhibition brochure, the art historian Maéva Besse points out that, in their day, the Gos family was by no means unique in passing the torch of mountain culture from father to son. On their own doorstep, there were the Töpffers and the van Muydens of Geneva, whose artistic productions spanned two generations. And, over in Chamonix, the Tairraz and Gay-Couttet clans presided for even longer in the world of mountain photo-



'Sommets dans le Brouillard', by François Gos (1880-1975).⁴

graphy. Even so, the golden age of the mountain artist may have ended with the First World War. From the biographical sketches given in the exhibition brochure, one surmises that François and Emile Gos had to scabble harder than their father to eke out a living from mountain art.

As for Charles, his fiction dwells frequently on human fallibility and the dark side of mountaineering, even while recreating the glittering social and alpinistic scenes of the Belle Époque. And one non-fiction work concerns itself entirely with mountain accidents. This might signify no more than a saturnine streak in the author's personality, burdened as he was by a long and ultimately fatal illness. Or was he oppressed by a sense that the civilisation he grew up in, and its genial ways of living, were sliding into the abyss, never to be retrieved?

References

'Les Gos: une montagne en héritage', Médiathèque Valais, Martigny.
 'La famille Gos: une famille d'artistes', the website of the Gos family, is at famille-gos.ch.

4. 'Sommets dans le Brouillard', F Gos, 78.5cm x 117cm, oil on canvas, before 1914, Musée cantonal des Beaux-arts de Lausanne.