



Rhone Glacier - 1928
Switzerland



Rhone Glacier - 2024
Switzerland

Glaciers in the alps
The Past and Today

Archive Wehrli &
Jürgen Merz





Matterhorn with surrounding
glaciers; Switzerland
1905

The Archive Wehrli

Around the year 1895, the Wehrli brothers (Harry 1869-1906; Bruno 1867-1927 & Artur 1876-1915) established a publishing company in response to the burgeoning tourism industry in Switzerland. Their focus was on producing landscape images and distributing these as postcards.

Their work was not confined to Switzerland; it extended to various countries across Europe. As pioneers in the creation of postcards, they captured images of well-known tourist destinations but also undertook challenging climbs to remote locations in the mountains.

Of particular significance to this photographic project are the historical images of glaciers in the Alps. These images showcase the expansive reach of Alpine glaciers during that era in a visually stunning manner, serving as a poignant reminder of a time that feels increasingly distant in the context of modern climate change.

The central aim of the project was to revisit the locations documented by the photographers and create comparative images, offering a compelling visual narrative of change over time.

High-end Photography

The Swiss National Library primarily holds the original negatives from the Wehrli company, mainly in the form of glass plates measuring 13x18 cm and 18x24 cm. Based on the information available, it is confirmed that photography was conducted using glass plates, employing the advanced dry gelatin plates of the time (initially gelatin-bromide plates, later a mix of collodion and dried albumen).

The camera used was most likely a typical, cumbersome wooden box camera mounted on a tripod. To create the glass plates, heavy equipment often had to be carried far up into the mountains.

The result are exceptional images of (high) Alpine landscapes and glaciers that continue to captivate viewers to this day.



2181. Nigelsgräbi; Uebergang über den Rhonegletscher.

Wehrli A. & S. Klopfer-Würsch (1905)



Photographer with a camera set on a tripod.
1910

A high-end scan of a typical glass plate with additional information on the plate (~1905)

People enjoying the Eiger Glacier
Switzerland
1907



Amazing details

The historical photographs exhibit an incredible level of detail. When zooming into the high-resolution scanned images, even the finest details, such as facial expressions, can be discerned.

Today, the historical archive is part of the collection of the Swiss National Library, and the images are freely accessible. Their free use is permitted under copyright law.



Jürgen Merz



Jürgen Merz has been photographing the glaciers of the Alps, Iceland, and Norway for several years. His work focuses on capturing the (abstract) beauty of these white giants.

Due to climate change, a significant portion of these glaciers is experiencing dramatic retreat and is on the verge of disappearing.

A key focus of his work as a photographer, in addition to its artistic aspects, is creating historical comparison images. Through these photographs, he aims to raise awareness about climate change and draw attention to the transformations occurring in nature today.

The Wehrli archive's images fascinated him so much that, during the summer months, he travels to the historical locations where some of the photographs were taken in the past.

To identify the historical locations, he relies on both the internet and research in old Alpine club books or historical maps.

Once on-site, it sometimes takes hours of searching to find the exact spot where the original photographer stood over a century ago.

The project is ongoing and will continue to be pursued in the coming years.

There are, however, a number of additional challenges. Some locations are no longer accessible, no longer exist, or the physical site has disappeared entirely.

In some cases, the glacier on which the photographer once stood has melted. When this happens, the historical location can sometimes be reconstructed using drone technology alongside traditional camera photography.



The old hut and the lateral moraine where the location was once situated have completely disappeared due to erosion.



The perspective from the past has now been overgrown by nature.



1905 vs. 2024
Matterhorn with Glaciers, Switzerland



1913 vs. 2024
View from Gornergrat, Switzerland



1906 vs. 2023
Morteratsch & Pers Glacier, Switzerland



1910 vs. 2023
Palù Glacier, Switzerland



1907 vs. 2024
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland



1906 vs. 2024
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland



1907
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland



2024



~1906 vs. 2024
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland

~1907 vs. 2024
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland



1907
Eiger Glacier, Switzerland



2024



1923 vs. 2024
Ischmeer Glacier, Switzerland



1923 vs. 2024
Unders Ischmeer Glacier, Switzerland



~1906 vs. 2024
Aletsch & Middle Aletsch Glacier, Switzerland



~1906 vs. 2023
Aletsch & Middle Aletsch Glacier, Switzerland



1928 vs. 2024
Rhone Glacier, Switzerland



1921 vs. 2024
Rhone Glacier, Switzerland



~1910 vs. 2024
Rhone Glacier, Switzerland



1909 vs. 2024
Rhone Glacier, Switzerland



1909 vs. 2024
Suldens Glacier, Italy



1909 vs. 2024
Suldens Glacier, Italy



1909 vs. 2024
Suldén Glacier, Italy



1909 vs. 2024
Suldén Glacier, Italy



In this case the historical view is overgrown by nature. But due to the high image resolution of the historical image a crop can be taken and combined with another photograph from today to show the dramatic effect of climate change.

1909 vs. 2024
Madatsch Glacier, Italy



1909 vs. 2024
Madatsch Glacier, Italy



1909 vs. 2024
Ortler Glacier, Italy



~1910 vs. 2024
Mer de Glace, France



~1910 vs. 2024
Mer de Glace, France



1910 vs. 2024
Glacier des Bossons, France



2024

For fine details and adaptability to large formats, images are available in high resolution (~7.000 x 5000 px) for exhibitions and prints.

Comparisons can also be included in reel, tiktok or story format for social media content and awareness campaigns.

Historical images are content and copyright of the Swiss National Library, Archive Wehrli. The images are available under public domain.

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References of my photography (Selection)

3. Sustainability Kongress, Berlin (2024)

Keynotespeaker on glaciers and climate change

falstaff Magazine - Interview about glacier photography with selected images (2024)

Solo Exhibition "Gletscherschwund in den Alpen"

Distillery Innsbruck (2024)

Österreichischer Alpenverein - Bergauf #2.2024

Cover image and interview about glacier photography

Einzigartige Gebilde aus Eis und Schnee - Gletscherhöhlen der Alpen (National Geographic Deutschland online 2023)

Double page Zugspitze - Panorama Magazine

Deutscher Alpenverein (Juli 2023)

KLIMA_X Special Exhibition - Glacier Comparison

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt (2022/2023)

Docu Magazine - Abstract Series of Images

(Volume 4; Issue 2; 2023)

Gletscherschmelze in Europa: Die Vorher-Nachher-Bilder des Klimawandels von 1880 bis heute

(National Geographic Deutschland online 2021)

Awards & Honorable Mentions (Selection)

International Photography Awards (IPA)

2 x Honorable Mention (Fine Art - Abstract; Nature - Landscape) 2024

SIENA International Photo Awards 2024

Shortlist Category Nature

International Photography Awards (IPA)

Deeper Perspective; Finalist Category

Conservation 2023

Vienna International Photo Award 2023

Honorable Mention - Our World - The Beauty of Nature

International Photography Awards (IPA)

2 x Honorable Mention (Fine Art - Abstract; Nature - Aerial/Drone) 2023

SIENA Awards - Drone Photo Awards 2023

Shortlist

Vienna International Photo Award 2022

Gold Medal - Our World - The Beauty of Nature