

Gulliver's Travels

Extreme subjects are not the ones that necessarily attract us to photographic images. Subtle plays on the ways things look, like the pictures of Geneva's wine country by Régis Colombo, have infinitely more impact.

The first thing that strikes viewers about Colombo's pictures is that they weren't taken on the ground but from the air. The photographer shoots landscapes either from fast-moving planes or slow-moving hot air balloons; rather like Gulliver in the eponymous Jonathan Swift novel, Colombo takes giant steps over a miniaturized Liliput Geneva. His perspective is in part made possible by a mini-dirigible that's just strong enough to get a 17 mega pixel digital camera air-borne. From the ground Colombo and assistant Nicolas Rigolett hold on to the balloon with a string and when it climbs to anywhere between 40 and 100 meters they can see what the lens is capturing on their monitor. Pictures taken this way range from golden vineyards in the fall, to rows of vines and country roads that create structures and patterns resembling a work by Land Art artist Christo. Mainly the images show the way Geneva's wine country relates to the city, and how in some places – like Cologny – it extends practically right into the city. Some of the pictures taken from Cologny even give the impression that the water from Geneva's iconic water geyser, the Jet d'Eau, is actually falling on the vineyards. Since Colombo places the vineyards in the foreground and the city small in the background – like a little village in the middle of a vast sea of vines – viewers get a perspective of the city that isn't immediately perceptible from the ground. The pictures have another arresting feature: their unusual

sharpness conveys a feeling of stillness. Those shown here were taken on a warm day in late October, 2005.

The other view

Anyone who drives around Geneva's city center, or takes the highway heading either towards France or Lausanne, sees a noisy, built-up, confusing muddle of streets and urban sprawl that is easy to get lost in. There is not much to distinguish it from any typical business, service, tourism and convention hub. Few visitors discover the canton's vineyards – “their loss” anyone familiar with Régis Colombo's images of Geneva's countryside would say. The “real” canton of Geneva is actually a mix of city and rural, classically divided into agriculture, manufacturing (watches, for example) and services. Geneva City is not a separate entity from the surrounding countryside, but linked with it in numerous ways – as anyone who's sat in a trendy city wine bar enjoying an excellent glass of Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Gamaret or Cabernet made in a wine village just a few kilometers away can attest. And this is the message Régis Colombo communicates in his inimitable style.

Wine, deserts and Zanzibar

Régis Colombo was born in 1969 in Montreux. He's been an independent photographer since 1993. His range as a photographer is unusually broad. Not only has he, in a relatively short period

Photographer Régis Colombo sometimes uses a hot air balloon to capture images





A typical view of Geneva's Mandement winegrowing region, with the village of Peissy at the center (above). The earth here is rich in sand and clay, but moraine and alluvial soil among other types predominate elsewhere in the canton (below)





Facts & Figures

In Geneva, 273 winegrowers work the canton's total of 1,426 hectares of vineland. This is increasingly done with machinery, which means that the number of work hours per hectare is a relatively low 500 per year. The vineyards, which are laid out in straight rows, span a space between the Jura Mountains and Mount Salève that is subdivided into three areas: the Right and Left Banks of Lac Léman, and the land between the Rhône and the Arve Rivers



The Chasselas grape is no longer the dominant white in the canton, where growers keen to widen the palette of locally made wines have been diversifying varieties for over 20 years

Photos: Régis Colombo/diapo.ch



This view from Coligny is the only one in the canton showing Lac Léman with both Geneva City (and its iconic Jet d'Eau) and the abundance of vineyards in the countryside

*Town and country –
the “real” Geneva*

of time, turned himself into the leading photographer of Switzerland's wine regions, but his images of the Sahara and the island of Zanzibar have also been published in handsome picture books. What makes Colombo's images stand out is technical perfection paired with his own distinctive stylized aesthetic. His style shines through in spectacular night views of Hong Kong's Bank of China skyscraper, in the bizarre desert formations of Niger landscapes, or in compositions that make rain falling on the spotlights of the Paléo Music Festival in Nyon (Vaud) look like space sculptures. Fact: the amount of work involved in producing his pictures of Geneva's wine country is so great that only about four images

taken on any given day meet his quality criteria. For an overview of Colombo's work log on to www.diapo.ch.

The photographer says his website gets about 20,000 hits a month. "A lot of people send me e-mails telling me that they got so absorbed looking at the pictures that when they logged off they felt as if they were returning from a journey to some far-off place."