

A Short History of Photograph Collecting by Penelope Dixon

The collecting of photographs was practically simultaneous with the invention of photography. P and D Colnaghi, a well-established art gallery in London, sold photographs as early as the 1850s, representing both the work of Roger Fenton and Julia Margaret Cameron. People became obsessed with capturing their own likenesses. A popular past-time in the mid 19th century was the exchange of carte-de-visites. People collected cartes of their friends and family and put them into albums, much like children exchanging school pictures today. Much like our present fascination with Hollywood personalities, they were also avid collectors of celebrity images. A recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, *The Beautiful and the Damned. The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography*, [accompanied by a fine catalogue] explores the effects of early photography on society.

Travel photographs were another early collectible. The very wealthy would set off on long excursions, “the grand tour”, and instead of taking their own photographs [the cumbersome and complicated equipment precluded this] they would purchase photographs of each place they visited, later putting them into large albums. An English gentleman’s album of the 1860s might include photographs by William Notman of Canada, Charles Clifford of Spain, Carlo Ponti and Fratelli Alinari of Italy and Felix Bonfils or A. Beato the Middle East.

Many photographs were published in albums in the 19th century, presumably to be sold to institutions or wealthy private collectors. Examples include Peter Henry Emerson’s *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* or John Thomson’s *Street Life in London*. These early albums were precursors to the photographic portfolios produced today by contemporary photographers. Other parallels between 19th and 20th century collecting can be seen in government or corporation sponsored photography. The Glasgow City Improvement Trust hired Thomas Annan to record the Glasgow slums and this work was published in 1874 as *Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow*. Edouard Baldus was hired by the Monuments Historiques in France to document the architecture of the country on his 1851 mission *heliographique*. Many similar projects have been done in this century, beginning with Lewis Hine’s work for the National Child Labor Committee.

Photographic auctions also had their beginnings in the mid 19th century. The first auction of photographs took place in London in 1854. The first auction in America was a century later, *The Marshall Sale*, held by Swann Galleries in 1952. The prices from that sale would make you cry.

Although “photography as art” was still being debated, by the early 20th century photographs had become firmly established as a collectible. Alfred Stieglitz had various galleries in New York from 1905 until his death in 1946. Like many contemporary galleries today, he exhibited photographs alongside the work of modern artists. Along with Stieglitz, Julian Levy’s gallery in New York, open between 1931 and 1949, introduced many photographers to the collecting public, including Weston, Sheeler, Strand and Atget. Famous in the 1950s was Helen Gee’s “*Limelight*” and after a dry period in the 1960s, the early 1970s saw the beginning of the photography market, as we know it today. From a few galleries in New York, London and other major cities, we can now find hundreds worldwide.

A Short History of the Market

Most people know the story of the rise and fall and rise again of the Ansel Adams’ market. In some ways it is a good example of the market as a whole. Photographs by Adams, which were selling in 1975 for \$400 were selling for between \$4,000 and \$16,000 by 1979, thanks to the astute marketing of Harry Lunn. By the early 1980s Adams prices had dropped to between about \$2,000 and \$10,000. Today, they are back up again, but this time coming close to the

\$100,000 mark for particularly fine vintage prints of his signature 1941 image, Moonrise Over Hernandez. What happened? First, the limitation in 1975 of his prints and subsequent creation of rarity, which coincided with a widespread demand for photographs and investors into the market. Then came a bad economy and supply began to exceed the demand.

A related change in the market happened in the early 1990s. Prior to this time, there had been less interest in vintage prints, that is, those prints which were made close to the time the photographer made his/her original negative. Hence, there were extensive reprintings by Ansel Adams, Andre Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson as these photographers, and many others, jumped on the bandwagon.

Other effects on the market have been certain “blockbuster” museum shows which have contributed to a larger public awareness of the medium as well as providing new levels of understanding and an increase in value for a certain photographer, or period of photography. Also, blockbuster auctions, such as the multi-media Man Ray sale at Sotheby’s in London in the mid 1990s where only 1 of the items offered failed to sell, contribute an energy and stability to the market.

Auction houses have changed the structure of the contemporary art market and will continue to do so. More public attends auctions than ever before, the houses now serve as middlemen between buyers and sellers.

Now, Why Should You Collect Photographs?

Investment potential is an obvious answer but aesthetic considerations are far more important to my mind. You might have to live with a particular photograph for some time before you can sell it, so you had better like it. I used to collect photographs because I loved the images, because of the accessibility of so many pictures on the market and the relatively reasonable prices. I stopped collecting and have sold most of my collection, not because any of those reasons changed but because I couldn’t take good enough care of the prints [I live in two humid locations] and any works on paper do need a lot of love and attention. Also, going back to the investment potential, many of my photographs had gone up in value so it was a good time to sell.

How to Collect: (1) What to Look For

My first memory of photographs was Edward Steichen’s Family of Man exhibition and book. I spent hours as a child pouring over the images. Some 20 years later the first photograph I bought was an image by Bill Brandt of the girl on Lambeth Walk, parading in her mother’s high-heeled shoes. I think I paid about \$150 for it and recently sold it for over \$2,000, not a bad investment, although I certainly didn’t buy it with this in mind. So, what should you look for when collecting photographs? There are a number of criteria to follow, which are same ones I use in establishing value in my photographic appraisals.

- *The artist
- *The particular image
- *The dating of the print
- *The medium
- *The signature or identification
- *The condition
- *The size
- *The edition or known extant prints, i.e. rarity
- *The provenance
- *The place in the market of the artist and the particular image

The artist: who is he or she, where do they fit into the history of art, the history of photography, what is their place in the present market and how does their work relate to future trends, is their work exhibited regularly, is it critically acclaimed?

The image: do you love it? Can you say, as did the well-known collector Arnold Crane in responding to the question, "what do you look for in a photographic work?", "I look for nothing! It looks for me! It hits me first in the gut and then in the eye!" How does the subject relate to the particular artist's body of work - Adams made landscapes, but he also took portraits of important artists and some of these are very good -Arnold Newman makes portraits but he has also taken landscape photographs, a few of which are good, but not most, in my opinion. Is the artist's identity inherent in the image? How does this particular image relate to the history of art, the history of the medium, is it a masterpiece, what is a masterpiece? Can you predict the future masterpieces in contemporary photography? Why do Edward Weston's Shells range in value from about \$15,000 to \$150,000, even within the same image?

The Date: When was the print made, is it vintage or contemporary, is it something in-between? Who made the print? Weston's photographs come in four varieties: true vintage prints; prints made later by himself, in the 1930s from 1920s negatives, in the 1940s from 1930s negatives; "project prints" made under his supervision by his son Brett in the 1950s when Edward developed Parkinson's disease and posthumous prints by his son Cole. Is a vintage print necessarily better than a contemporary print? Both Ansel Adams and Irving Penn have made beautiful, large contemporary prints from their earlier negatives. Is one better than the other? Is it not a matter of taste, and in some cases, budget?

Medium: What kind of print is it, what is the process, is it stable? [Platinum always is, early calotypes can continue to fade]. Is the process what this particular photographer did best? Penn's later platinum prints are probably better than his earlier silver prints, which takes us back to the issue of vintage or contemporary. Printing styles in the same medium can also change, depending on the available papers and the age of the photographer [Bill Brandt's prints became darker after the 1970s, due to deteriorating eyesight or the photographer's choice?] What does the photographer himself think of a print? - a valid, but not necessarily the ultimate opinion and also, occasionally a dangerous proposition as photographers are known to have torn up older prints brought to them for authentication.

Signature: Again, what is the norm in this particular instance? An unsigned contemporary Adams photograph is a problem, an unsigned Walker Evans is not unusual. As John Szarkowski once said, "Buy a photograph for what's on the front, not the back" which is good advice, however, what is on the back or the mount helps us date the print [but is not necessarily a guarantee because photographers are known to have sometimes used older stamps on later prints.

Condition: a very important consideration, but again, only relevant to what is normal for a particular photographer's work from a particular period. Most contemporary photographs, with the exception perhaps of the Starn Brothers, are expected to be pristine, photographs by Weegee are expected to be creased or marred [but not in a uniform way which recently tipped off one dealer to a group of fake prints]. 19th century prints are often faded as the richest examples are already in private collections or museums. The key is to buy the finest example of an image, which you can find [and afford].

Size: is only important when considering what is available, what you like and what you can afford. However, certain smaller editions by photographers, such as Sally Mann's 8 x 10 inch prints, will probably never go up in value like her larger, smaller edition 20 x 24 prints. Which brings us to the next point...

Extant prints: The edition or known extant prints, i.e. rarity, is an important factor. For contemporary works this information is often easily available by the edition of the print but prior to the 1980s, most photographers did not limit their prints from a particular negative - there was no need. So when artists such as Ansel Adams, Harry Callahan or Andre Kertesz responded to the rapidly evolving market, they produced a lot of images without numbering their prints as they already made prints of most of their images and couldn't start arbitrarily numbering these new ones. However, by now the market has absorbed most of these images and they are only found on the secondary markets.

A buyer must be aware of how each image is limited, e.g. prior to her new large-format landscapes, Sally Mann used to print each of her images of children in an edition of 25 in 20 x 24 inches and again in 8 x 10 inches while reserving the right to produce yet another 25 in 16 x 20 inch format. So you might never know exactly how many prints of your photograph exist without checking with the artist or her dealers. This is also a good example of the market: Mann's 20 x 24 inch prints are the ones which frequently sold out and so therefore, will be the ones to retain their value. Mann's prints also give us an example of step-pricing: the first five prints sold started at around \$1,500, the next five increased and so on until the final print was sold at around \$7,500.

Provenance: has always been an important factor in the painting and print markets and is fast becoming the same in photography. Besides the possibility of contributing to an increase in value because of the reputation of the previous owner, provenance is also important in determining that a photograph is not a forgery.

Market: The place in the market of the artist and the particular image has been discussed above and knowing the sales records for the artist and for the particular image is an obvious last point to consider before buying a particular photograph.

Other Considerations: Eventually, you should decide on the kind of collection you want to pursue - should it be an "investment grade collection", i.e. well-known photographs by well-known artists or something more adventurous, such as up and coming artists who can often be found in benefit auctions like those held by CPW. Are you interested in a particular period, or genre of photography, do you want to collect a particular artist in depth? Are you interested in anonymous works? One thing to be careful of is trends, what is fashionable today could be in the trash heap tomorrow. Buy what you like, the worst thing that can happen is that you will enjoy it for many years to come.

How to Collect: (2) Where to Buy

Now that you know what to look for in a photograph, where do you go to find it?

First, I always tell new collectors to find one or two dealers or galleries, which show the kind of work they like and establish a relationship. Don't be afraid to go into the fanciest galleries in San Francisco, New York or Los Angeles - they may look forbidding but they're generally run by nice people who want to sell you something! Most importantly, support your hometown dealer. Loyalty to a dealer who has spent time helping you with your collection will pay off with offerings of special prints and good prices.

Secondly, are the auctions. There is a plethora of photography auctions today from Sotheby's and Christies and Swann in New York City to smaller regional houses around the country, benefit auctions in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Woodstock, among others, European sales in France, Germany and England. With the exception of benefit auctions, new collectors should start with the previews, where you can observe the prints close-up make notes

in your catalog, overhear interesting comments by other viewers and then go to the auctions to observe how the bidding works, who the players are, how realistic are the estimates. When you have more of a grip on prices and have previewed very well, then you can go and bid, with firm top bids so that you won't be swayed by momentary auction fever.

One exception to these rules is benefit auctions. Go to as many as you can, buy for fun and your support of the not-for-profit organization will usually result in your acquiring some good pictures at way below their retail values. Almost everything contemporary in my collection is from the annual CPW auction. This year's auction contains wonderful work by Michael Kenna, Joyce Tennyson, William Wegman, Larry Fink, Keith Carter, James Fee, Kenro Izu, Andrea Modica, Ellen Carey and many, many more renowned and emerging artists.

Thirdly, are the dealer's fairs. AIPAD, the largest, is held annually in New York in February. Fotofest is in Houston every other year. Chicago and Los Angeles now have annual fairs, as do Paris and other European cities. These are great places to see lots of work, compare prices, meet dealers from other parts of the country, go to symposiums, and compare notes with other collectors.

Becoming an Informed Collector

Now that you know what to look for in a print and where to buy it, what else do you need to prepare yourself to become a collector of fine, or fun, photography?

Visit museum shows to see the best examples, particularly in 19th century, of photographic prints. This will give you a point of reference from which to judge. Also, museum shows are curated by academics in the field who often help us see work in new contexts. There is one caveat here: we should be aware that the label of "masterpiece" affects our judgment. We should never be afraid to criticize or disagree or find our own masterpieces.

Subscribe to publications such as Photography in New York, which lists exhibitions around the country and The Photograph Collectors' Newsletter, which reports on auctions, analyzes the market and gives the latest gossip. Subscribe to all the major auction catalogs; even if you don't go to all the sales you can obtain condition reports and price results.

Read, read, read more. The website www.photoeye.com out of Santa Fe is a great source for all the latest, and older, photography books.

And finally, understanding value, that it is not solely inherent in the photograph but rather is a result of many market conditions, that the lowest price for a particular image may not be the best buy, that price should reflect quality but does not necessarily do so, that one person's idea of a masterpiece, may not be another's.