

The American snapshot : an exhibition of the folk art of the camera, March 1 to April 30, 1944, the Museum of Modern Art

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1944

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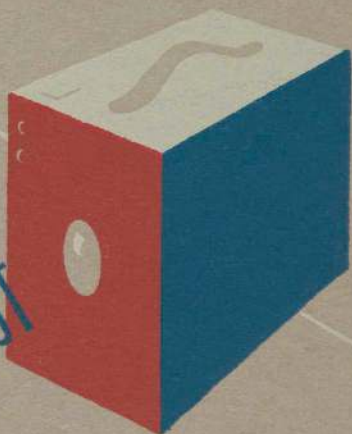
The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

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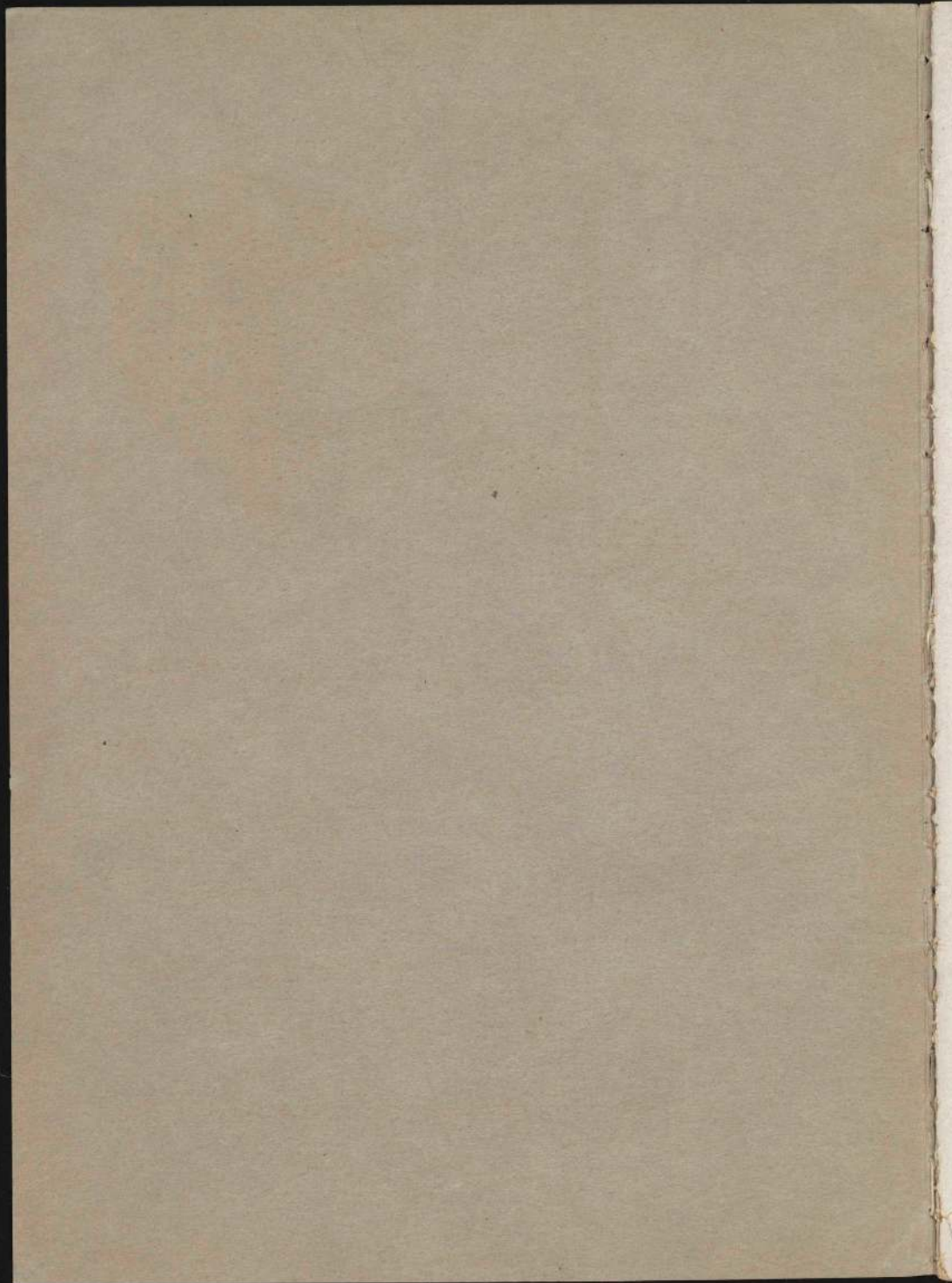
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THE AMERICAN SNAPSHOT

AN EXHIBITION
OF THE FOLK ART
OF THE CAMERA
MARCH 1 TO
APRIL 30, 1944

The Museum of Modern Art



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BUTCH

S. H. Nelson

FOREWORD

Most people take photographs because they want to record and preserve human experience. In making photographs, in looking at them in later years, amateur photographers enjoy the extreme pleasure which comes from having preserved a split-second of their lives. This pleasure is in itself justification

enough for the millions of snapshots which have been produced since the introduction of daylight-loading film made photography a mass medium of expression. Usually, it must be admitted, the pleasure gained is an intimate one, springing from private response and confined to the photographer, his family and friends. But are there snapshots which transcend this narrow appeal and deserve consideration apart from their personal, subjective values? This exhibition, made possible through the coöperation of the Eastman Kodak Company, may well answer the question. It is surely a proper inquiry to make in a century which has so thoroughly investigated the works of amateur artists of all sorts, and has found among them pictures of lasting and wide importance.

JAMES THRALL SOBY

Acting Chairman,

Department of Photography

The Museum of Modern Art

THE AMERICAN SNAPSHOT

Snapshot photography is the medium of the millions—an immensely flexible and expressive medium which speaks a universal language.

For some fifty years now the hand-held camera, with its instantaneous shutter, has been recording the American scene in infinite, spontaneous detail—the new baby, the family group, the home, friends, small and large adventures, discoveries. In so doing, the simple camera has become a real factor in maintaining the unity of the American family, the solidarity of the nation. Snapshots enclosed in letters to the boy in camp, the marine in New Guinea, the soldier in Italy or Alaska, the girl in the Service or away from home in war work, serve to tie the family together more effectively than written words. The wartime function of the snapshot camera is merely an



American snapshot, circa 1890, a product of the first Kodak, which was factory-loaded for 100 exposures. "You push the button, we do the rest" was its slogan.

extension or an intensification of the work it has been doing all these years.

A folk art is born

The casual camera has done another thing. It has given the millions—all of us—a medium of graphic expression. With our snapshot cameras we make pictures of anything that interests us—a cobweb in the morning sun, the Grand Canyon, a timberline tree, or the pattern of windows and bricks in the building across the way. The subjects are as various as our own

... THE BEAUTIFUL SEA
Maker unknown. About 1900



interests; the pictures reveal, as pictures almost always do, whether our eyes are perceptive, our minds alive.

The snapshot has become, in truth, a folk art, spontaneous, almost effortless, yet deeply expressive. It is an honest art, partly because it doesn't occur to the average snapshooter to look beyond reality, partly because the natural domain of the camera is in the world of things as they are, and partly because it is simply more trouble to make an untrue than a true picture.

ROSIE

Maker unknown. About 1900





L'ALLEGRO

Joe May



HELLO ME!
Mildred Ore



FOX AND GEESE
Mrs. A. C. Hamilton

Above all, the folk art of the camera is unself-conscious. It may well be a highly significant form of self expression, but the snapshooter doesn't think of it that way. He takes pictures merely because he likes to. The relatively recent introduction of color film for snapshot cameras does not complicate things for the casual camera user; it only adds to his pleasure. He takes it in stride.

All kinds of people—

All kinds of cameras

Look at the pictures shown in this exhibition. Gathered from the extensive files and picture resources of the Eastman Kodak Company, they present a representative cross-section of snapshotting during the last fifty years. They were made by youngsters, by college boys and girls, by young parents, by grandparents, by people of every age, interest, or status. And they were made with many different types of cameras.

One of the fundamental phenomena of



FUFF

Denton H. Plummer



BEACH RIDERS
Corp. A. Miller

this folk art, by the way, is the almost belligerent confidence of the three-dollar-camera man. He is perfectly sure that he can get just as good pictures as the fifty-



IN THE SPRAY
Mrs. J. L. Zimmerman

dollar-camera man. Within limits, of course, he is entirely right; it is only as he outgrows the admitted limitations of the very simple camera that he appreciates a better camera—not for what it is but for what it can do.

The amateur sometimes has a very genuine fund of picture ideas. He sees a situation and records it with his camera, feeling at the same time that it will be a fine picture. Each individual creates his pictures within the limits of his understanding and technical capacity. To him, the making of a snapshot is a genuine creative act.

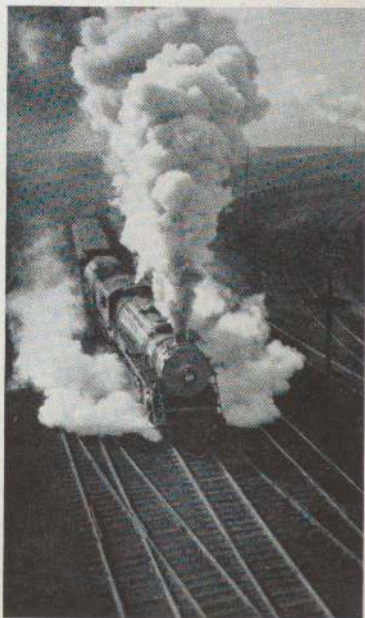
Photography seems so easy

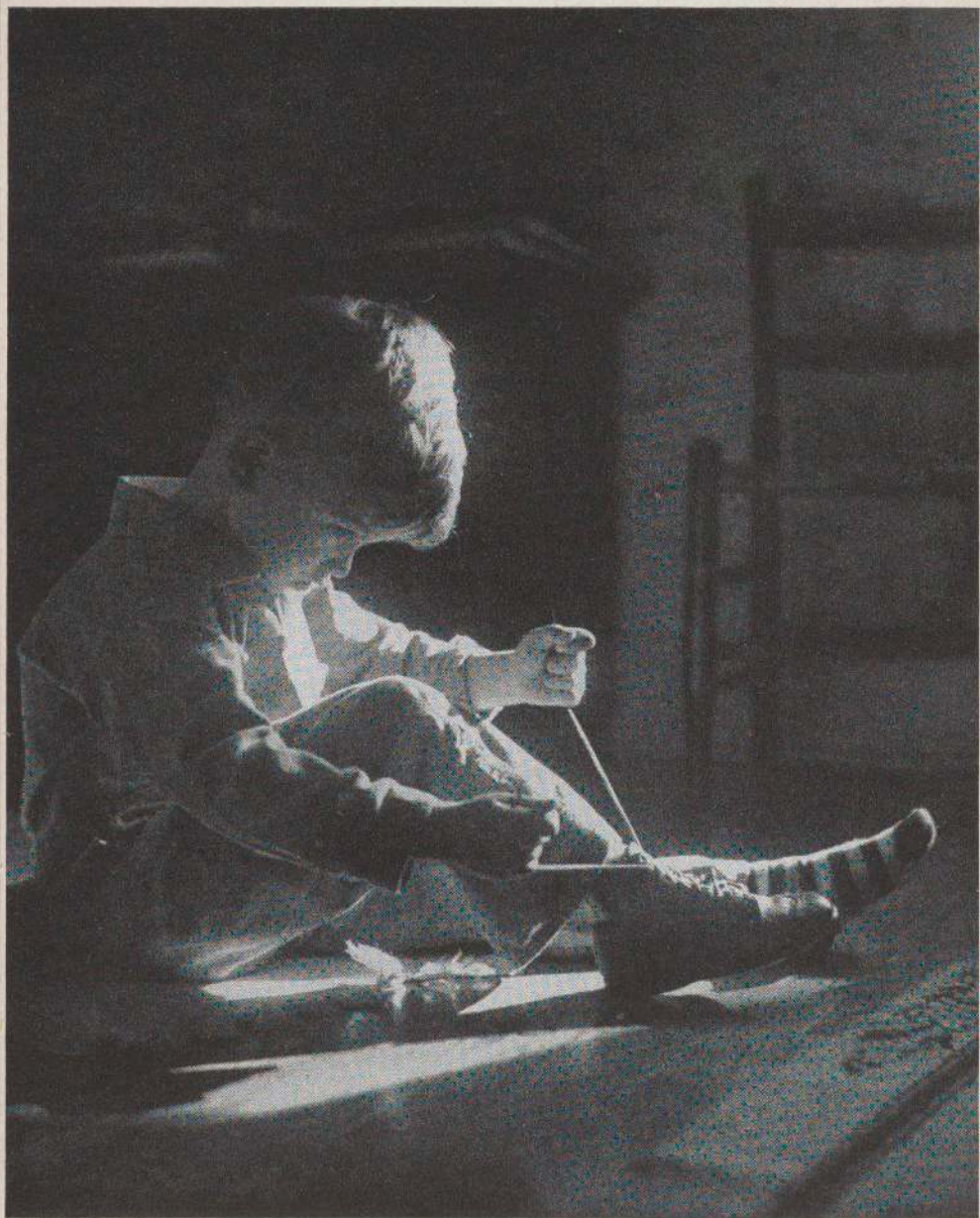
The simple hand camera can be used, and with excellent effect, by those who know or care nothing about optics, chemistry, or the theory of composition. Most of these people, of course, have their photo-

ON THE DUNE
W. A. Oberlin



OUTBOUND
Edmond Velat





MORNING

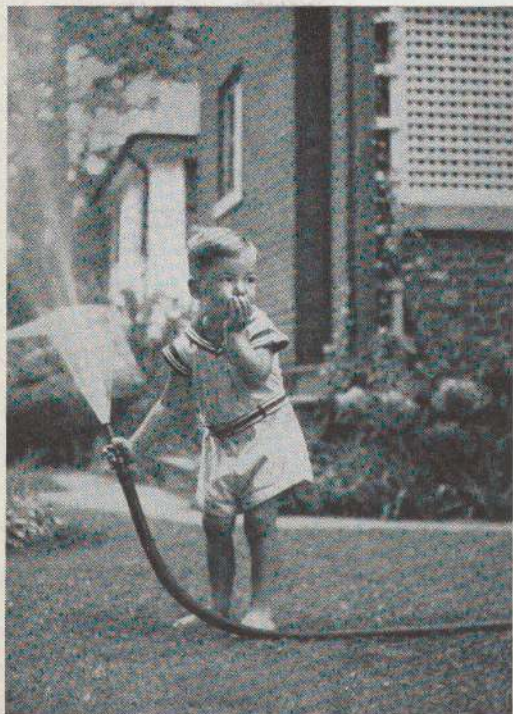
Mildred Ore

finishing commercially done, so that the whole process remains to them a mystery—a mystery tinged with magic. They are a carefree lot.

Others cannot let that mystery go unchallenged. So they improvise darkrooms, and go through the rites of developing film and making prints, thereby adding a secondary creative skill to the one they exercised in selecting a view or a subject.

OOPS!

O. K. Dorn



FRONT GATE
Fred Ford

Many a youngster has discovered chemistry for himself as he watched a print "come up" in the murk of his make-shift darkroom; optics began to mean something to him when he got his hands on an enlarger; and some of the rudiments of pictorial presentation were rubbed into him when his companions began to comment on his work.

Photography, even pure snapshot photography, has served to relate the modern millions to much of the glamour of their day—to the movies, to the aerial map maker in the stratosphere above a Pacific atoll, to the adventurous news photographer, to the scientist, to the designers of ships and planes, to the planners of tomorrow's cities, to those who probe deep in the skies for answers to cosmic riddles. A camera is the common working tool of all of them.

It is the unstudied, spontaneous fresh-

CHORES
H. R. Shulz



ness of the snapshot that sets it apart from the carefully contrived picture of the conventional photographic salon. The question of which is the greater art is unimportant; the significant thing is that here, in this exhibition, the snapshot has come into its own, recognized and presented for what it is—and nothing more.

A triumph we all remember

Inevitably, of course, some of the folk artists of the camera become exponents of the more conscious art of expert photography. It is a commonplace that today's great photographers were yesterday's snapshotshooters. This evolutionary process is still going on. But few of the matured and successful photographers at work today can quite forget the sense of triumph and satisfaction which they knew when, with their Brownies, they captured on film and paper the essence of a moment, or a



'BYE
Florence Higgins

scene, or a face that meant much to them.

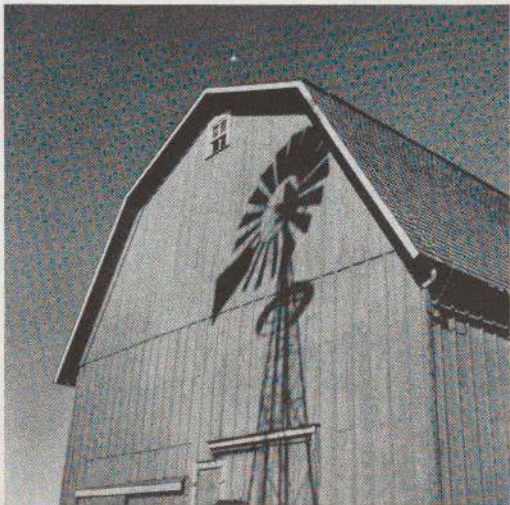
All of us know that feeling, no matter what our present work may be. We remember having produced a picture, maybe several pictures, just as good as those in this exhibition.

But we have stowed those pictures away in albums or in sheafs of envelopes, deep in some desk or bureau drawer. We cherish them for their own sakes. The pictures shown here differ from most other snapshots primarily in that they have been brought to light so that they might be seen and enjoyed by a wider group

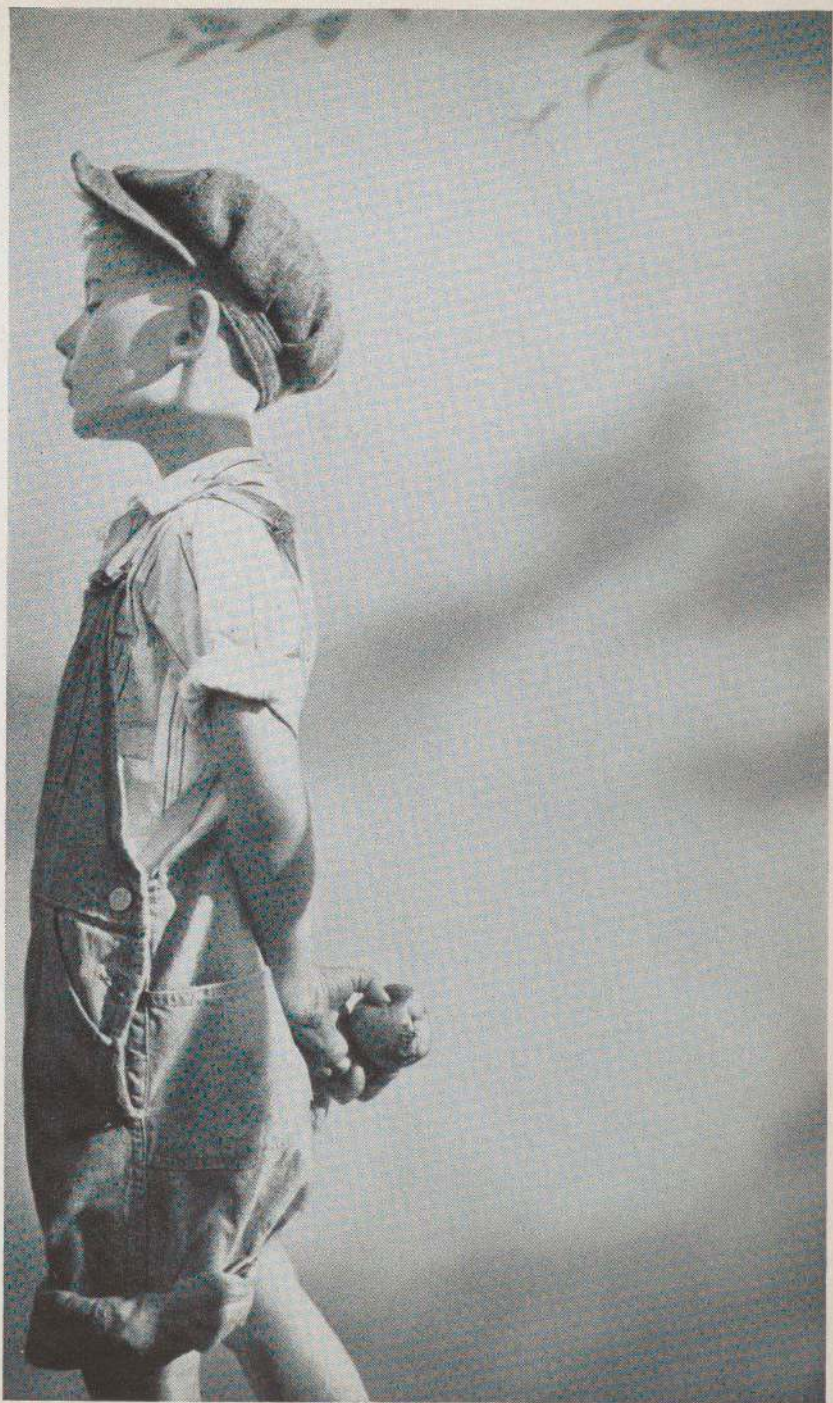
FARM SHADOWS
Allen E. Childs

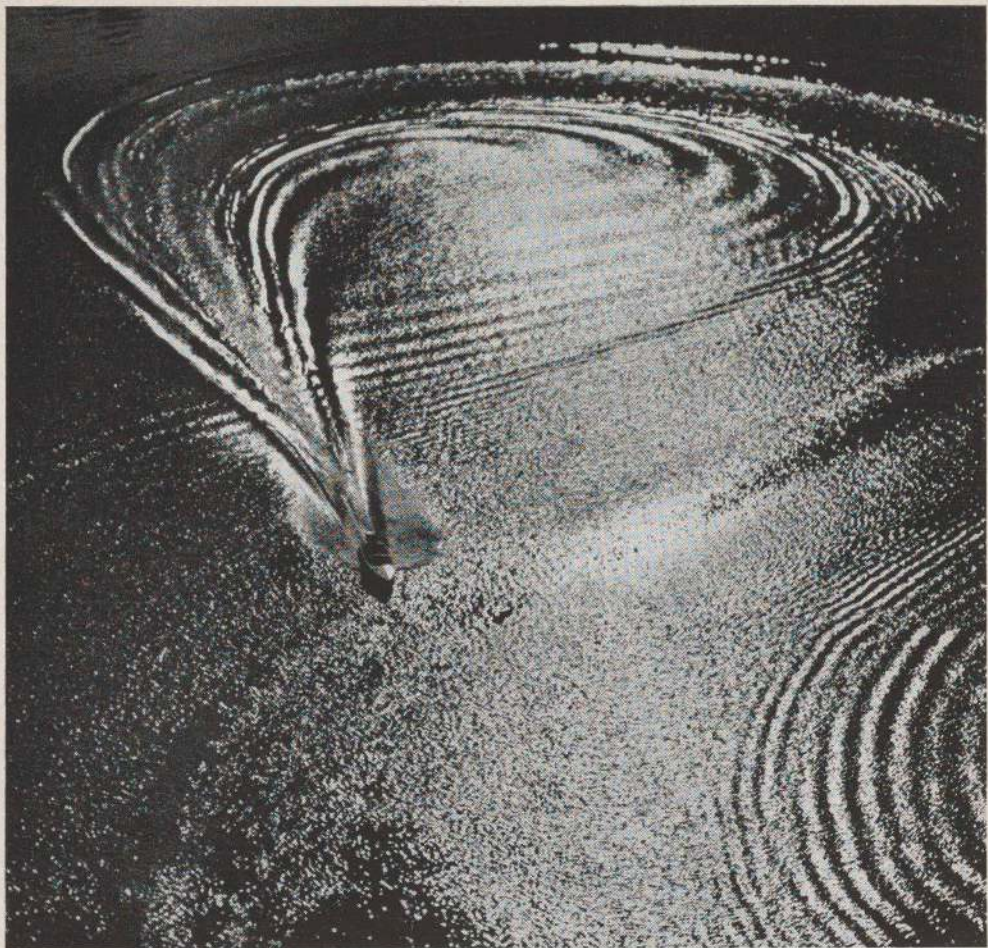


TEASE
Dr. O. C. Posner



THE APPLE
Mrs. G. Miller





SERPENTINE

R. W. DeBrugn

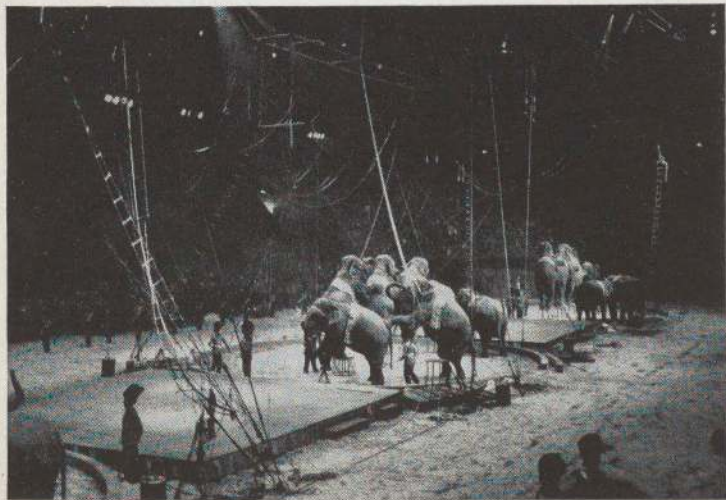
of people. They have been collected, through the years, because of their human interest, their beauty, their acute perception of life and the visible world. None of them was made especially for this showing. They all are essentially blood brothers to those prized pictures of your own making.

They are still snapshots

The necessities of an exhibition such as this may underemphasize the true snapshot character of these pictures. To be seen by the public, the pictures had to be enlarged. In most instances, the en-



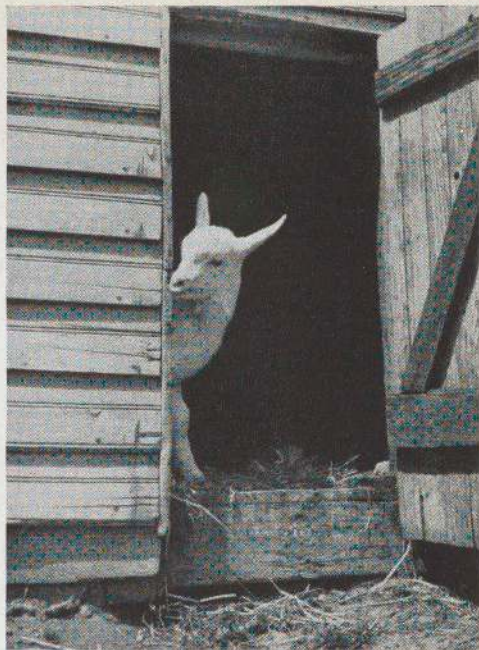
LITTLE MAN, WHAT NOW?
D. E. Behm



HUP!
R. A. Richter



SAY "AH"
J. E. Hogg



HMM?
Charlotte Osmolla

largement has been literal, preserving the proportions and full image of the original. In others, selective enlargement has been utilized to reveal and emphasize the intent of the picture. And, in a few cases, really large "blow-ups" have been made for the sake of the exhibition itself.

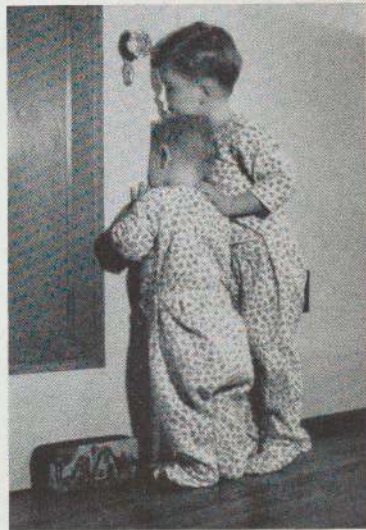
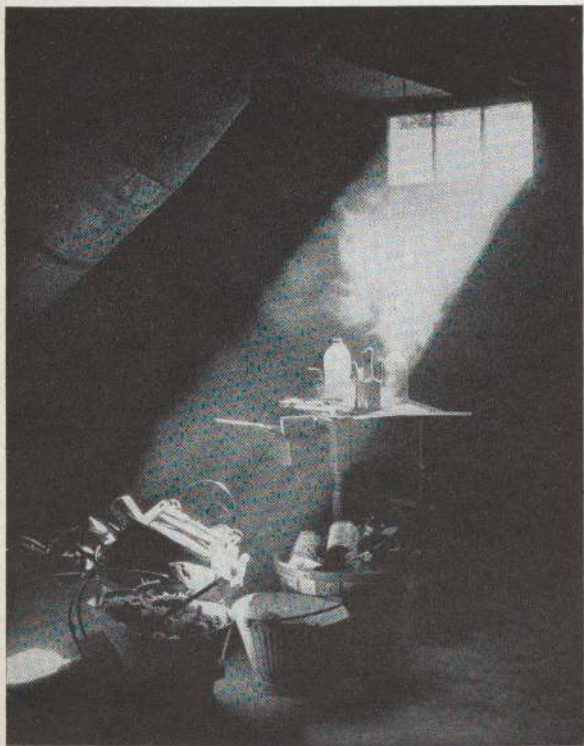
But all of them are snapshots. That is the important thing. Some of them are

casual, some are photographically less than perfect. But all of them have the freedom and candor of the snapshot. And a few of them reveal perception and beauty to a very high degree. They were not entirely matters of luck.

A new role for the people

Out of our common experience with cameras has come a significant phenomenon.

DUSTY BASEMENT
C. Molinelli



IN THERE!
A. W. Peterson



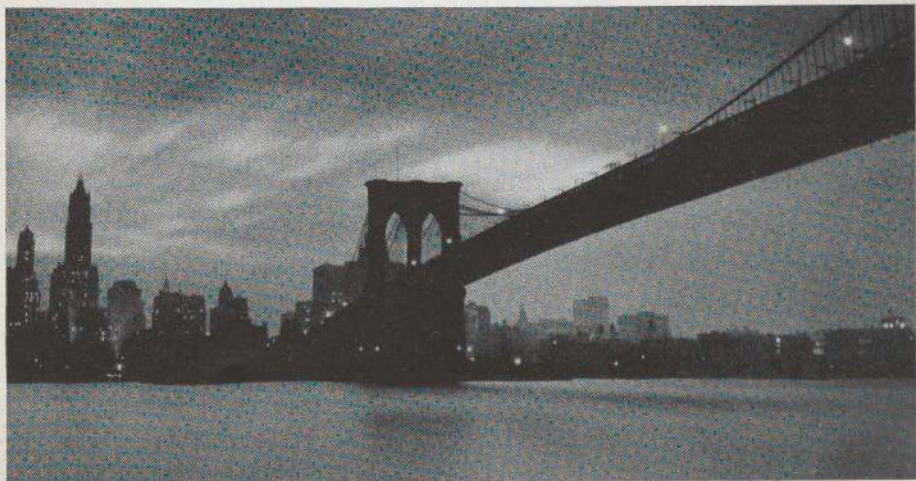
RICE STORM

R. Martin

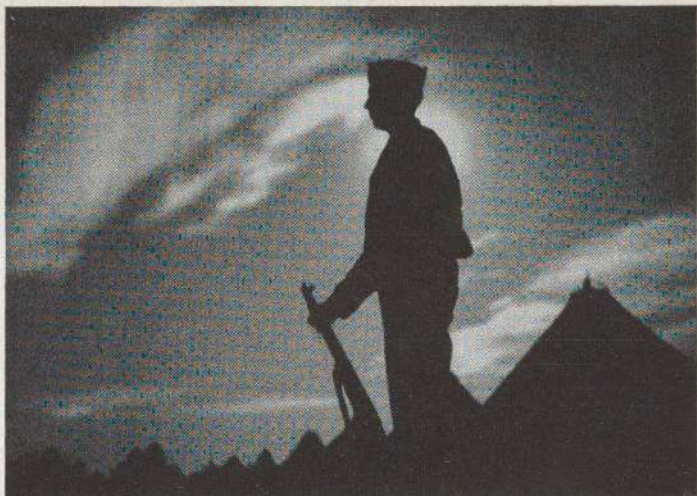
Never has the individual pictured his own life and times as extensively as during these last fifty years since the advent of the snapshot camera. Formerly, the pictured scene was the province of the amateur or professional artist. The great mass of people never had the deep pleasure of personal participation, even on the fringes of pictorial expression.

Today it is possible for everyone to know what it means to see, to enjoy, and to capture for re-enjoyment the outward essence of a moment. The picture the snapshotter obtains may be only on the threshold of art, but in the making of it

MANHATTAN DUSK
Russell Griswold



SENTINEL
Pvt. Walter Karasek



he has achieved something creative and has set in play an interchange of emotions and ideas. The depth and reach of the picture is limited only by the capacity of the individual.

WILLARD D. MORGAN

*Director, Department of Photography
The Museum of Modern Art*

