

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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local square
photography

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"FORGOTTEN PHOTOGRAPHERS" EXHIBITION OF PRINTS FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS TO GO ON VIEW

Note change of date:

Press preview Thursday, August 23, 2 to 5 p.m.
Mr. Paul Vanderbilt, Consultant in Iconography
for the Library of Congress who has spent several
years organizing and selecting from the Library's
2½ million prints, will come from Washington to
attend the press preview.

Prints by unknown or unremembered American photographers that have been accumulating in the files of the U.S. Register of Copyrights ever since the early days of photography will be shown in the Auditorium Gallery of the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from August 24 through October 14. They were salvaged from the vast attic storage spaces of the Library of Congress by Paul Vanderbilt, who found among them thousands of prints of historical and pictorial interest; from these Edward Steichen, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography with the assistance of Homer Page, photographer, has selected for exhibition approximately 125 noteworthy prints representing a wide range of subject and interest. The exhibition is being designed and installed by Florence Bezruczyk of the Museum's staff.

Since the photographs were filed only by copyright number and date for purely legal purposes, the records frequently do not even indicate who the photographer was. But because they had commercial value, such as those made for advertising purposes or for sale to tourists; or because they were experimental and newsworthy, such as the panoramic views of San Francisco after the earthquake taken from a captive airship, it was apparently deemed advisable to have legal copyright protection, and for this reason they still exist.

Several entire series of photographs are shown that have in some instances unusual documentary interest, in others entertainment and humor. Many fine studies of the public schools of the District of Columbia were part of a survey made about 1899 by Frances Benjamin Johnston showing the various classroom and outdoor activities of students and teachers all obviously dressed up to have their pictures taken. A series of "Street types of Chicago; character studies," copyrighted in 1891, portrays with humorous over-solemnity the iceman, the rapid messenger, the policeman - "one of the finest," the workman "rushing the growler," etc. Perhaps they were sold to be used for entertaining company or to bring out on a rainy day. A number of line-ups of Anna Held's Sadie Girls, lavishly dressed and padded and smiling, were perhaps the pin-up pictures of the day.

Portraits of idolized people of the time also doubtless found their way into many homes: John L. Sullivan, the heavyweight champion; Julia Marlowe, the Shakespearean actress; popular dancing girls. One wonders at the audacity of the West Virginia photographer of a fully-armed group of the Hatfield family, of Hatfield-McCoy feud notoriety.

A group of news photographs contains prints of technical excellence as well as very considerable historical interest. An unusual composition shows part of the floral decorations on the tomb of General Grant, one of hundreds of photographs taken of all phases of the funeral activities. Fireworks over City Hall, Philadelphia, on New Year's Eve at the turn of the century is a skilful night picture. President McKinley speaking from the balcony of the Cabildo in New Orleans is a fine documentary shot. An excellent photograph of Brooklyn Bridge shortly after its completion is representative of one of the two most popular subjects, according to Mr. Vanderbilt, in the entire Library Collection; the other being Niagara Falls.

A group of photographs of American Indians includes a number by the prolific Indian photographer Edward S. Curtis, whose idealized feathered head of an Indian was to be found hanging on the walls of innumerable homes. Because he himself was Indian he was able to photograph many scenes of worship and festivity forbidden to others, portraying tribal customs that in some instances seem truly surrealist.

A group of small photographs shows the curious, humorous sidelights of late 19th- and very early 20th-century life and custom. "Adgie and her trained lion" stare out from a cage each looking triumphant over the other. Probably used as publicity for a vaudeville act, this photograph was taken by I.W. Taber who maintained studios in both San Francisco and London in the 1890s and photographed "celebrities and beauties" and made "the reputation of the bas-relief system which was conceived and perfected" by him, according to a contemporaneous San Francisco periodical, "The Wave." A graceful large-wheeled tricycle is pictured with a girl in flowing skirts and the caption "The new iron horse with lady inside." Racing cars in blurred motion give speed effects; Mrs. Glenn H. Curtiss sits at the wheel of her husband's biplane; real Texas cowhands slouch over the famous Tascosa bar. And with all these fascinating portrayals of other times there is an unusual degree of skill and a feel for both the medium and the subject on the part of these unknown photographers of America.

Mr. Steichen comments:

"This selected sampling from the several million photographs is, for lack of facilities and funds, in what amounts to dead storage in the Library of Congress. They are not there because the Library loves, cherishes and honors photographs but largely by accident and incidental to the laws of copyright. Some came as gifts from the photographers.

"Included in this selection there are remarkably fine examples of photography, some of them forecasting various phases of contemporary photography. There are records of memorable historical moments and events, documents that are pertinently informative of their period, sometimes dramatic, whimsical, charming and occasionally 'corny.'

"In order to mitigate the possible errors of specialized judgment of even the best contemporary appraisal in any period, it is important that the historical and documentary value of all phases of photography be preserved on as non-selective and as broad a basis as that of the general library system. A Congressional Library for photographs would assure the future preservation of the startlingly meaningful by-products of history recorded by photography."