

Large Print Labels

**Poetics of the Everyday: Amateur
Photography 1890-1970**

April 26—August 25, 2019

Galleries 234 and 235, Main Building

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

This exhibition draws attention to an extraordinary period, beginning in the late 19th century, when portable cameras became available to throngs of enthusiastic amateur photographers. While innumerable images followed familiar conventions, a handful stand out for their intriguing design, novel approach, or quality of mystery. The photographs on display here, drawn from a recent gift from St. Louis collectors John and Teenuh Foster, showcase some of the most unusual and exceptional examples.

Most of the pictures are by photographers whose identities have been lost to time. Yet, these images transcend their original personal meaning to reveal hidden visual power. They demonstrate the aesthetic heights achieved in

this democratic medium through intention, experiment, or accident. These works are organized into nine sections in two adjacent galleries. Some groupings are specific and thematic, while others are more evocative—inviting discovery of new associations and meanings.

While diminutive in scale, these photographs are rich in detail and complex in composition, entangling us in their small worlds. As unique physical prints, they reflect a different relationship to picture making than we have in our digital era where images flow around us in huge volume, and fleetingly exist on screens. This exhibition helps to tell a larger story about the history of photography—revealing the restless inventiveness of amateurs who

expanded the boundaries of creative expression
worthy of our attention.

Portraiture

These examples reveal the variety of approaches to setting, pose, and facial expression found within the expansive genre of portraiture. What unites most of these images is that they were taken between friends or family members, and the viewer can sense the closeness of this relationship. Unlike more formal images generated in professional portrait studios, these amateur pictures often illuminate aspects of personal experience with an endearing warmth.

These images open doors to informal moments and private spaces of domestic life. Their accessibility speaks to a shared human experience and can be a potent opportunity for establishing empathy. The black-and-white process is particularly well-suited to portraiture: sensitively rendering the way light falls on a face,

Portraiture

highlighting a knowing glint in the eye, or drawing attention to a gesture of vulnerability.

Also included here are images taken in photo booths and makeshift studios, revealing the longstanding desire to construct one's identity. Some of these images are precursors to our present-day smartphone selfies, where one is both the subject and the picture taker, such as an image of a woman who tied a string to her camera's shutter release to take her picture on her front porch.

The Playful Spirit

Photographs in this section reflect lighthearted moments of the everyday and attest to the irrepressible desire to act out in front of the camera. We see children posing in masks and parading in costume, cats and dogs advancing toward the camera, exuberant bar room patrons, as well as people ice skating and pretend fighting. Backyards often served as semi-private backdrops for these shenanigans.

Some images rely upon an element of chance. In one, the photographer managed to capture a fleeting moment when a dog was bounding over a fence directly toward the camera. Other images were carefully posed, such as an individual standing atop a newly installed utility pole or a couple coyly peering out from behind wheat. Like the circulation of today's viral

The Playful Spirit

images, these were printed as postcards and widely shared with friends through the mail.

Even in images that are ostensibly happy in their subject matter, one encounters elements that could be seen as disquieting, as in the photograph of a young girl riding a carousel horse. Blurred by the rotation of the merry-go-round, the wooden horse is transformed into a malevolent presence. Its flared nostrils and bared teeth are in contrast to the placid innocence on the girl's face.

Car Culture

Automobiles have featured in amateur photography throughout the 20th century, particularly in the United States, where they symbolize freedom of the wide open landscapes.

The first cross-country road trip was undertaken in 1904, and a Kodak camera documented the adventure. The frequency with which photographers focused on their cars—reaching its zenith in the heady days of the 1950s—demonstrates that automobiles were regarded as extensions of their owners' homes and personalities.

This selection reveals that cars and their occupants were the subjects of photographs just as often as the outside scenery. Some photographs show passengers comfortably

Car Culture

settled within the interiors of new automobiles, passively gazing outward from the remove of their mobile environment.

The car as a subject also lent itself to exploration with the camera. Many images capitalize on the streamlined geometries of the automobile design and the reflections on shiny paint, glass panes, and mirrors. Like the aperture of the camera, car windows served to frame views outward and were potent compositional devices. For example, an image focused out the back window of a car toward a tailgating Chevrolet convertible provides a wonderfully visceral sense of teenage joyriding.

New Vantages

Amateurs and professional photographers alike utilized the camera to grapple with changes in the physical world around them. The introduction of new technologies—such as telephone poles, steel bridges, and blimps—and the rise of skyscrapers in the modern cityscape all occurred at a rapid pace in the early 20th century.

The potential of these new spaces and objects as artistic elements encouraged experimental approaches. Some individuals pointed their cameras at angles dramatically upwards or downwards. Occasionally these views are so disorienting that they appear abstract, such as an image taken from an early biplane in flight or one framing the geometric outline of rooftops.

New Vantages

Photographers also used new perspectives to enliven the mundane. A woman traveling down her back staircase to take out the trash becomes part of a graphically packed scene—a whirlwind of diagonal lines and rhythmic patterns heightened by the freshly fallen snow. A view of children eating at a table taken from an overhead vista creates a surprising new composition where circles and rectangles stream across the picture.

Swimmers & Beachgoers

Amateur photographers often brought cameras along to summer outings at beaches, lakes, and pools. We find a range of subjects, from professional divers and synchronized swimmers to casual beachgoers and children frolicking at retreats. In addition to the desire to document moments of recreation and leisure, photographers were undoubtedly drawn to the unusual way that the human form was highlighted by water or sand, animated by bright sunlight.

Images of figures lying on the ground, often with limbs intertwined, speak volumes through form and gesture. Bodies at rest yield unconscious poses that the camera could capture, and unexpected moments of elegance and beauty emerge from unusual perspectives and framing.

Swimmers & Beachgoers

In the heat of the sun or the excitement of being in water, people also acted differently. Sometimes there was a leisurely self-absorption and other times dynamic movement. The ability of the camera to freeze motion—which became possible in the 1920s—extended the range of photographic vision, so for example, one could contemplate the varied forms of divers in midair.

Waking Dream

Many images assembled here play off of the notion that photography can blur boundaries between different realities, suggesting that waking reality and the subconscious could intersect. Elements of dreaming can be discovered in images of figures relaxing, especially those with their eyes closed. Whether sleeping or resting, these figures can lull the viewer into a similar sense of reverie.

Other compositions include people whose eyes are covered, or who are mysteriously peering at something beyond the photograph's edge that the viewer cannot see. As slices of particular moments that are now divorced from the contexts in which they were made, these amateur images hint at information that is often

Waking Dream

tantalizingly just out of reach. They are pieces of incomplete puzzles, open to interpretation.

A haunting quality underlies many of these pictures. Some may surprise or challenge us because at first glance they seem so ordinary. Yet, upon closer examination, surreal undercurrents emerge: awkward gestures, ominous shadows, or mysterious gazes that can provoke a sense of unease. Such photographs veer away from the familiar rituals of cheerful picture taking, suggesting qualities such as danger, eroticism, anxiety, or loneliness.

The Fantastic

In this group, we find a strange and otherworldly sense of beauty, often deriving from ambiguous scale, unusual lighting, or atmospheric conditions such as ice and rain. Different photographic results may also come into play, such as blurring and double exposure.

Whether purposeful or accidental, these effects draw attention to the unique ways in which the camera records the visible world. At times images are infused with surreal qualities and disrupt viewers from conventional ways of seeing. A seemingly disembodied hand hovers in the foreground in one image while a baby on blanket appears to be levitating in another.

Sometimes effects that may have initially been

The Fantastic

considered mistakes are now admired for their evocative qualities.

Who might have imagined, for example, the psychedelic graphic explosion that could result from a double exposure of identical twins posed in fancy, ribboned dresses? In another double exposure, a man standing in a wooded area after an ice storm makes for a ghostly presence, his silhouette seemingly transparent.

Hybrid

Many amateur pictures are engaging both as images and objects. Their material presence is fundamental to how they were originally enjoyed and to how we may appreciate them now. A number of these pictures are hybrid objects—prints that have been manipulated by cutting, inscribing, drawing, painting, re-photographing, or collaging.

These activities draw attention to the physical characteristics of photographic prints, as well as to the many ways photography can be customized toward different aesthetic and practical ends. In one photograph, two heads within a family portrait have been cut out—perhaps for lockets—leaving ghostly gaps, while in another, smiling faces improbably pop out from flower stems.

Hybrid

Interestingly, such interventions lead to a good deal of humor and whimsy. In one instance, we see a man posed with rabbits, his head cropped out of the frame. This figure was made whole with the addition of a second likeness snipped from a separate print, one of a comically disproportionate scale. In another, hunters with spears flank an animal that has been painted onto the negative film. The duo was apparently so proud of their prey that they took it upon themselves to recreate it in their drawing, looking more childlike than fearsome.

The Lure of Color

In the mid-1950s, color printing became an affordable alternative to the black-and-white process. Prior to that, the addition of color to an image had to be done by hand. When color film became commercially available, it was widely popular and, by the mid-1960s, overtook black-and-white photography as the dominant medium.

These images show creative uses of color. The juxtaposition of complementary colors, for example, is seen in the view of a prairie dog sculpture at a road side stop in South Dakota. The warmth of the golden lighting on the side of the animal contrasts with the atmospheric blue of the distant sky, giving the inanimate figure an eerie presence.

The Lure of Color

Alternately, a narrow color palette, as seen in the picture of ballerina in a pink tutu, causes the figure to blend with both the drapery and carpeting.

By the 1970s, color printing technologies changed and cost-cutting measures impacted quality. Color saturation decreased, and images were sandwiched between layers of plastic rather than being printed on lustrous paper—a distinct shift away from the allure that earlier prints held.

clockwise from above:

Beau Brownie No. 2,

1931 with leatherette
carrying case

Manufactured by the Eastman Kodak
Company Body designed by Walter
Dorwin Teague (American, 1883–
1960)

E9509.3 a, b

Instructional Pamphlet

*Picture Taking with the
Nos. 2 and 2A Brownie
Cameras*, c.1920 Eastman
Kodak Company

E14744

Hawk-Eye 3A Folding Cartridge, c.1930
Eastman Kodak Company

E9509.166

Leica 111,
1938 Leica
Camera AG

E9509.163

Bantam Special,

1936 Eastman Kodak
Company

Body designed by Walter Dorwin
Teague (American, 1883–1960)

Gift of Morris M. Horwitz, 48:1996

Unknown, American

Untitled (men with box cameras),
c.1900

gelatin silver print

Gift of John R. and Teenuh M. Foster, 356:2018

The portable cameras in this case were commonly used by amateurs in the United States from the 1920s to the 1940s. The Eastman Kodak Company, based in Rochester, New York, dominated the business for many decades after it introduced the first truly portable camera, the Brownie, in 1888. The photograph in this case shows two young men using this camera outdoors. As the viewfinder was on top of the camera body, the two photographers looked down when taking their pictures.

The rose-colored Beau Brownie camera (above) updated this basic design with a two-tone face plate, adding an Art Deco graphic element. The Kodak Hawk-Eye (upper right) was a more expensive camera with some adjustable controls, such as its movable bellows for focusing, to appeal to those invested in the craft of photography. The German-made Leica (center right), introduced in 1925 as the first 35mm camera, and the Kodak Bantam Special (lower right) both featured compact designs, allowing the camera bodies to fit in the palm of the picture taker.