



VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY, A  
GROWING, COLLECTOR-DRIVEN FIELD,  
FINDS MYSTERY AND MASTERPIECES IN THE  
LENSWORK OF UNKNOWN AMATEURS.

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By Edward M. Gómez

# Snapshot poetics



IN A WORLD IN WHICH PHOTOGRAPHS are everywhere, all the time, what makes a photographic image special? For a small but growing, disparate community of aficionados, the answer is a mix of unexpectedly strong qualities found by chance in an extraordinary old print at a flea market. Made by unknown, non-professional photographers, such images can be emotionally powerful, formally masterful or both, and the hunt for them has fostered one of the most exciting collecting categories to have emerged in recent years. The fact that it has been driven by collectors, based on their own research and nurtured by their passions, and not cooked up by profiteering art dealers looking to score, also makes it one of contemporary collecting's most fascinating trends.

The field is that of vernacular photography, which is also referred to as the collecting of "anonymous photos." That last phrase is somewhat awkward; it is meant to indicate that the identities of the makers of such images are unknown. Often, so are the places where and the dates when such images were created, or the purposes for which they were produced, or even their subject matter. Collectors and curators who are interested in these kinds of photos sometimes prefer to call them "snapshots," a word that alludes to the fact that, very often, they have been made by amateurs.

These images were not intentionally made to be works of art, as are photos in the fine-art photography category, which are handled by commercial galleries and auction companies, and can fetch some very high prices. Nevertheless, ordinary shutterbugs' instinctive aesthetic sensibilities do inform the ways in which they compose their photos, and such sensibilities can be felt or visibly detected in their pictures.

The St. Louis-based vernacular photography collector John Foster, whose background is in graphic design, says of his habitual visits to flea markets: "I look for photos that are exceptional in their subject

*"All the photos made today with digital cameras, cell phones, iPads: they're all ephemeral; they're all pixels on screens. Literally, they're just impermanent light. By contrast, an old snapshot is something tangible, warm, more permanent and packed with history."*

JOHN FOSTER, ST. LOUIS



matter, point of view, conception and composition, and even with regard to technical aspects like tonality and focus. Maybe one out of every 500 images I see is worthy of a second, longer look, and it might take looking through that many before spotting a gem." In New York, the collector and well-known former dealer of photography W.M. Hunt, has observed: "Anyone over the age of 10, at least in the Western world, has seen and considered thousands of images, tens of thousands or more.... From early on, we recognize the successful images and pass on the bad ones. We see them everywhere: newspapers, magazines, television, billboards; they surround us our entire lives." Vernacular photos are only one component of Hunt's collection, which also includes images by well-known

modern and contemporary photographers.

Generally speaking, the kinds of anonymous photos collectors like Foster, Hunt and others seek out tend to be older and were made using pre-digital equipment. Some, like daguerreotypes of the late 1830s and the 1840s, date back to the earliest period of the photography medium. By far, though, the majority of images such collectors acquire were made with inexpensive, mass-marketed cameras and easy-to-handle films, including the Kodak Brownie, which was introduced in 1900; Polaroid's various models, which featured on-the-spot, self-developing film; and lightweight "instamatics."

Why the word "vernacular" to describe the kinds of photos these collectors acquire? Like such better-known classifications as

vernacular architecture (New England barns, Southern houses with broad verandahs, adobe dwellings of the Southwest) or vernacular language (local dialects marked by distinctive accents, words and phrases), "vernacular photography" refers to something that is common and familiar enough to have become a recognizable, definitive form in its own right. Vernacular forms are usually seen as reflections of the culture of a specific people or place.

When it comes to vernacular photography, the place in question is as much conceptual as it is physical or geographic. It is anywhere where anyone who has ever handled a camera, shooting a conventional kind of photo—a family snapshot, an attractive landscape, a casual portrait—has pointed his or her lens. Vernacular photographs are



not intrinsically generic; it is only over time that, as types of images, they become so recognizably familiar that we begin to see certain ones as representative of particular genres.

The vernacular photography field has been driven and shaped by the aesthetic points of view of its most avid collectors. Like Foster, often they have been motivated by their interest in the stories—obvious, implied or never to be exactly known—that the photographs may convey. (This was evident in the images on view, including many of people, in “Accidental Mysteries,” a traveling exhibition of photos from the collection of Foster and his wife, Teenuh Foster, which traveled to several U.S. museums starting in 2005.) In Switzerland, the collector Christian Schneeberger—who has had the innovative idea of a stock photo agency for vernacular photographs, making a portion of his holdings available for commercial use through [timecaps.net](http://timecaps.net)—says he views such images “as documents of certain moments in history. I’ve always been attracted to historical documents.” Schneeberger points out that, “even though we may know nothing about the authors of these photos, they vividly depict real life—how people felt, lived, loved and spent their spare time or work time; in them you can feel the emotion, which, as much as anything, describes and defines the times and places in which they were made.”

Another major collector and tastemaker in the vernacular photo field is Robert Flynn Johnson, curator emeritus of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts within San Francisco’s Fine Arts Museums group and also a lecturer at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Johnson, who authored the books *The Face in the Lens* (Thames & Hudson, 2009) and *Anonymous* (Thames & Hudson, 2004), about photos made by unknown photographers, eschews the “vernacular” label but recognizes that no one term best fits the images that are the focus of this field. He says, “I started collecting these types of images because I could not believe—and still can’t—that such amazing works were out there, overlooked by the marketplace.” He dismisses “those who sheepishly follow” what the art market tells them to appreciate and buy. Instead, echo-

*"[My collection] is my conscious made manifest. These are all photos of me. But they're all of you, too. They are evocative, whimsical, representational.... You have to react, to come to the image, to make up your own story."*

W.M. HUNT, NEW YORK



ing Foster, Johnson notes, "These images take work and patience to find. I'm a fisherman. It's much more rewarding to catch my own fish through my own searches, as I'm sure my fellow collectors would agree."

Indeed, Hunt says, "Collecting photographs is a completely visceral experience: you know you've found one you have to acquire when the hair on the back of your neck stands on end, your heart pounds, and you cannot move your feet. Collectors are obsessed." Through February 19, 2012, an exhibition of images from Hunt's collection, "The Unseen Eye," is on view

at the George Eastman House Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York. As the show and its accompanying book, published by Aperture, make clear, in all of the photos in Hunt's collection, the eyes of the human subjects they depicted are covered, hidden, closed or otherwise obscured, hence the exhibition and the catalogue's shared title.

Seattle-based collector Robert E. Jackson says that each photo he acquires must have a distinct "personality" and a strong enough sense of composition or design to prompt "an immediate emotional response

when viewed for the first time." He adds: "I am not sure that, at the onset of my collecting, I was consciously thinking of them holding together as a collection. That came later." In late 2007, a selection of images from his holdings went on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The exhibition's title: "The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978."

Its catalogue notes that, in the U.S. in the late 1800s, as cameras became smaller and more accessible, "businesses were established to develop and print negatives, freeing photographers from the need to mas-



Several other kinds of photographs are often considered to fit under the “vernacular” label, even if, in some or many cases, the identities of the people who shot them might actually be known. Such photos are included in the category insofar as they are generic in their style, subject matter and appearance, and therefore represent vernacular forms of visual communication. They include school or employee-I.D. pictures; posed group portraits of classmates, sports teams, clubs or company workers; routine news photos; photo-booth strips; and certain kinds of commercial stock-photo fare.

An example of this kind of photography was the work of Bill Wood (1913–79), a photographer who operated a photo-supplies store near Forth Worth, Tex. Along with selling cameras, film and accessories and providing film-developing and photo-



ter complicated darkroom tasks.” Inventor George Eastman, the founder, in 1892, of the Eastman Kodak Company, came up with an advertising slogan for his easy-to-use cameras: “You press the button, we do the rest.” Such developments made photography easier for many Americans who could afford to buy cameras. The catalogue points out that amateur photographers “gravitated toward documenting their private lives and leisure activities,” including “home theatricals, parlor games or costume parties.” For many pic-

ture-takers, after World War I, making photographs became both an expression of modernity and a way of capturing images of modern life, like automobile travel and sports competitions. “By the 1950s,” *The Art of the American Snapshot* notes, “Kodak estimated that two billion snapshots were made annually in the United States. By 1954, more than 70 percent of the country’s 53 million families owned cameras.”

printing services, Wood shot studio portraits and professional photos for various local clients. More than 20 years ago, the actress Diane Keaton, an avid collector of photographs, purchased the archive of Wood’s negatives. Along with Marvin Hei-

*“I love the unusual composition, the mistakes, the wrinkled photo-portrait of a girl, whose boyfriend carried it in his pocket during the war; the fun, the misery, the tragedy and the joy these photos evoked for their authors and, now, for us.”*

CHRISTIAN SCHNEEBERGER, SWITZERLAND

ferman, an independent curator and writer, Keaton organized "Bill Wood's Business," an exhibition of prints of Wood's photos, which was presented at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008. A book with the same title accompanied that show.

The thrill of finding a fantastic anonymous photo has given rise to a lively, growing market, whose sources lie outside the established gallery world. Foster says, "To look for photos, I've always visited flea markets and antique shops, but today there's eBay. I've spent countless hours and thousands of dollars on that website. There are others, too, where serious collectors will compete fiercely for a prized photo."

Foster notes that a compelling snapshot that catches his eye could sell for \$10 or less at a flea market, or for as much as \$350 or more in an online auction. In such a setting, he adds, "If you have an eye and find yourself frequently losing out in the bidding, then you know you're up against some serious collectors." In Europe, Schneeberger says, "I know a few dealers who are very serious about this kind of photography, but it's still a new field here." In Switzerland and France, he says, there are interesting finds to be made at what are known in French as "brocantes"—flea markets or bric-à-brac fairs.

Johnson notes that "much of the art-buying public needs 'names'" to reassure itself that it is looking at and acquiring works of assumed value, and that many would-be buyers believe that "if something is inexpensive," it cannot or must not be "significant." That led-by-the-nose approach, which he disdains, is "great for me and my fellow collectors," he says, adding, "Let them buy their printed-later photographs by Robert Frank or their photos by Irving Penn, Horst P. Horst or Helmut Newton, while I fish for treasures among the unknown and unexpected!"

Similarly, Jackson observes, "I love the fact that the subject matter to be found in a vernacular photograph knows no bounds and can constantly surprise with its inventiveness." He notes, too, that "you can build a collection around the most subtle or esoteric of subjects." One very specific, special-theme part of his collection, he



*"Looking for the images I collect puts me in contact with a wealth of images I have never seen before and may never see again. It forces me to use my eye and judgment quickly and decisively."*

ROBERT FLYNN JOHNSON, SAN FRANCISCO



*“Vernacular work fell within my price range and stimulated my interest in the odd and quirky. There was an abundance of images from which to create a collection. The subject matter knows no bounds and can constantly surprise with its inventiveness.”*

ROBERT E. JACKSON, SEATTLE



explains, consists of “color photos in which one dominant red item is visible, such as a red car or a red dress.”

Hunt, who is interested in “how photographs behave” and who unabashedly admits that, for him, collecting has served a deeply personal, consciousness-raising and therapeutic purpose, says of photographic images in general, “They are our histories.” In a recent magazine article about his collecting activities and the trove of images he has amassed over the years, he wrote, “Great photographs are great photographs: the context is not what is important, it is the image. Insist on engagement. Wrestle with what is difficult. Pretty is boring. Seek intensity. With photographs like these, I say: ‘This is life. Here are the pictures.’”