

CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS PRESENTS

Made in Chicago

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE
BANK OF AMERICA LASALLE
COLLECTION

October 18, 2008 – January 4, 2009

In 1967, the president of the Exchange National Bank of Chicago hired Beaumont Newhall, who had been the first curator of photography for the Museum of Modern Art. The collection of photographs he subsequently collected for the Exchange National Bank is now known as the Bank of America LaSalle Collection. Newhall purchased more than 350 pieces including many taken by famous photographers working in Chicago. Over 100 of those photographs were on public display for the first time at the Chicago Cultural Center in an exhibit called “Made in Chicago.” Whitney Bradshaw, the curator of photography for Bank of America, was interviewed by Allison Cuddy for Chicago Public Radio’s *Eight Forty-Eight*. The following interview originally aired on October 28th, 2008.

WB – Whitney Bradshaw, Curator of Photography, Bank of America Collection
AC - Allison Cuddy, Senior Producer, *Chicago Matters*; Host, *Eight Forty-Eight*

Whitney Bradshaw - The collection really began as a museum style collection that not only showcased Chicago photographers, but also reflected the entire history of photography. They bought an early photograph made in 1839, which was the year that photography was announced to the world and then continued to purchase work over the span of the history of the medium. From this core of 350 photographs, the successive curators, I’m the sixth now, continued not only to fill in the historic gaps missing from it, but also to buy works by important and interesting photographers coming out of Chicago.

Allison Cuddy –Let’s start with this photograph, it is by Lazlo Moholy Nagy from 1939. Describe the photograph.

WB: It’s one of the earliest photographs in the exhibition and it’s an incredibly gorgeous photograph that Moholy Nagy made while here in Chicago after coming here and founding the new Bauhaus or the Institute of Design. I put it as the centerpiece in the show because it is very representative of his philosophy about photography, in that, photography’s essence is really about light. He always taught photography’s foundation courses experimentally in terms of light and photographs in the darkroom.

AC: It's fairly abstract. What is the object in the photograph that he is using to play with light?

WB: I believe it's a piece of paper that he has cut holes into that he has moved and shaped on top of the photograph.

AC: But as you say, Moholy Nagy was also significant because if it weren't for his founding of the center, maybe Chicago wouldn't be a center of photography. Talk about what the center was and how it shaped photography in the city.

WB: The idea was that it would be the new Bauhaus coming out of the Weimer Republic in Germany where Moholy Nagy had taught. He was invited here to start this program and the idea was that it would come out of the Bauhaus ideal or philosophy of the wedding of technology and art to better society. At the time, this was in 1937, there weren't schools that had photography departments in the United States or elsewhere. It was very revolutionary in that respect.

AC: How many photographers did it draw here, or what kind of photographers did it draw here?

WB: In 1946, Moholy came down with Leukemia. That same year, right before he died, he brought in Harry Callahan, a photographer from Detroit. And he relocated here. A few years later he invited Aaron Siskind, who was a photographer in NY who is associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement. The two of them were really the wonder-team of the Institute of Design. They were the photographers that pulled people here to study photography. It was their revolutionary style of teaching that shifted from Moholy's. They moved from the laboratory of the darkroom to the outside, where they were looking at the streets.

AC: That's true of the exhibit overall, right? There's a whole range of different styles of photography in the collection. There's a whole range of different subjects.

WB: Siskind came from a background where he was very interested in socio-political issues and Callahan was much more interested in intimate family relationships. The two of them made a nice pair because they helped push people in many different directions. You can see, walking through the show, very intimate photographs by Callahan of his wife Eleanor. And then you'll see pictures he made on the streets of Chicago of people unawares. You could move around the corner and then see photographs by Wayne Miller who documented Bronzeville.

AC: Let's go take a look some of the other photographs in the collection. Why don't we go look at the photographs by Wayne Miller.

WB: They are right over here. It is interesting to see this wonderfully heroic photograph of a Strike Captain in Bronzeville. His work documents this whole area of Chicago. He

is very interested in representing the African American, the “Northern Negroes,” here in Chicago as Miller referred to the project at that time.

AC: There’s a great photograph of a man sitting at a restaurant or something and there’s a banner below him that reads “cleaners shine.” He’s giving a very wary look.

WB: The picture is of “cleaners” at a shoeshine place. Wayne Miller is photographing them from outside the window. With the direct gaze, he is really taking some agency in the picture. This is one of the things I really love about Wayne Miller’s photography. He is not stepping back. He is actually allowing the sitter to speak.

AC: One of the big themes in this exhibit is portraiture. So let’s go look at one of the contemporary portrait photographers.

WB: Let’s go over here and take a look at Ben Gest.

AC: They are huge photographs, color, a little different than the others we’ve been talking about.

WB: They are very contemporary. These are from 2003 and 2007.

AC: Let’s talk about this one, its called “Chuck, Alice and Dale.”

WB: This photograph is one of his earliest, sort of adventurous pictures. He was interested in making portraits but he wanted to talk about the tension within relationships and within families. How he ended up doing that was by photographing each person in the picture separately within the same space and then with the computer, seamlessly stitching them back together to create this very unsettling photograph. When you look at it you think that it must have been taken in an instant because this is the veracity of photography. But when you look at it you realize that the tension you are feeling has to do with these strange shifts in perspective that results from wedding together, not just three photographs, but maybe twelve or fifteen. He is taking different gestures and stitching them together as well.

AC: Right, the way they are occupying this space, you have an older man sort of crowding the space of this older woman behind him. No one is making eye contact in the photograph.

WB: This is beginning of what he has continued to do today... and now you can see a newer piece by him where he is dealing with the singular figure. I think this is an incredible photograph that has a very painterly perspective in that you are looking directly down at her feet while at the same time you are looking head on to her hands and looking up into her face. You see details that you couldn’t see in just one singular photographic shot.

AC: It's also a scene that you wouldn't normally have access to. I mean, this is a very intimate moment of this woman sitting on her bed. Again, she is not engaging the photographer at all. She is trying on her jewelry and is very focused on that.

WB: These singular ones become a lot more intimate. There's this sort of gap in time that he is interested in. They're on their way somewhere or they are just coming back from somewhere and it's something very important. Maybe something terrible, maybe something wonderful, you are not quite sure.

AC: Is that a shift you are seeing in contemporary photography made in Chicago? This kind of interest in intimate space? This kind of interest in going from outside to indoors?

WB: There are a lot of younger photographers who may be looking more inward in comparison to those earlier photographs from the 30's and 40's where people were fascinated with the architecture of Chicago and the streets of the city. Artists today are looking at their own personal lives and making images that reflect and describe, not necessarily more poignantly, but specifically something that has to do with our disconnection in contemporary times.

AC: What in particular do you want people to take from this exhibit? This is the first time people will be seeing many of these images and getting this perspective on the city. What do you hope they take away?

WB: I think that the legacy of the Institute of Design is something that people have become less and less aware of. One thing I really want people to get out of this exhibition is to see where this foundation in photography came from. Why Chicago is a center and where they fit in as artists in relationship to that history.