

GAGOSIAN

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Hands Off the Library's Picture Collection!

Cornell, Spiegelman and Warhol browsed the famous collection of images in the New York Public Library. Now a century of serendipitous discovery is coming to an end.

Arthur Lubow



*A librarian at the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library examines the “Rear Views” file.
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The artist Joseph Cornell once requested a picture of a street urchin with a white cockatoo.

Andy Warhol borrowed hundreds of images for inspiration — and never returned them.

For more than a century, the Picture Collection of the New York Public Library has flourished, gloriously but precariously, as a shape-shifting misfit within a Dewey Decimal grid. Founded in 1915, the collection lends images to library users who are seeking visual information of a mind-boggling range: Praying, Fairies, Expositions, Rear Views — more than 12,000 rubrics from Abacus to Zoology, a history of taste that is still expanding. Its files are classified by subject matter, and available for browsing on open shelves.



Jessica Cline, the current head of the Picture Collection, with the open files in Room 100, where there are more than 12,000 rubrics from Abacus to Zoology. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times



Visitors digging into the files of the New York Public Library's Picture Collection, in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. Like the books and periodicals that constitute the bulk of the library's holdings, the image folders will be available to the public only by specific request. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times

“You see the people go through it and touch it and have the spontaneity of discovery,” said Taryn Simon, the Conceptual artist who has been photographing the Picture Collection’s treasures for nine years, making collages that can currently be seen at Gagosian. “It’s so multidimensional. It just keeps swirling. I think of it as a performance piece or an installation.”

Now, in a development that Simon passionately bemoans, the library administration has decided that by early next year, the collection will be archived, available to visitors only by specific request.

In the longstanding tension between accessibility and preservation, the conservators have prevailed, unwilling to accept the inevitable attrition of borrowed images through wear or theft. “Either it is ephemera and doesn’t belong in a research library, or else it is an archive that should be preserved,” William P. Kelly, director of the research libraries, said in an interview. “We’re trying to move it from being an outlier and satellite to being an integral part of the collection.”



Taryn Simon arranges photographs and images from the folders by hand and then photographs them: "Folder: Rear Views" (2012) is on view at Gagosian. ©Taryn Simon and Gagosian

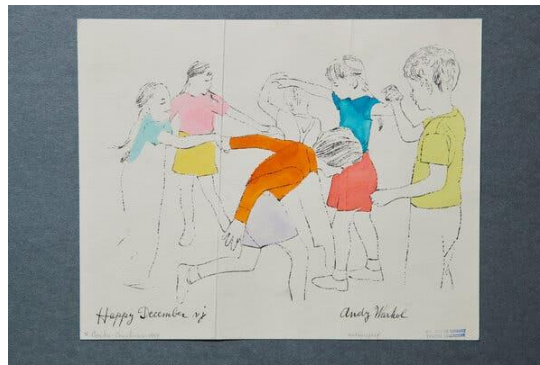


Installation view of "Taryn Simon, The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection" (2021) at Gagosian, featuring a photograph of Romana Javitz and her annual report from 1942. ©Taryn Simon and Gagosian; Robert McKeever

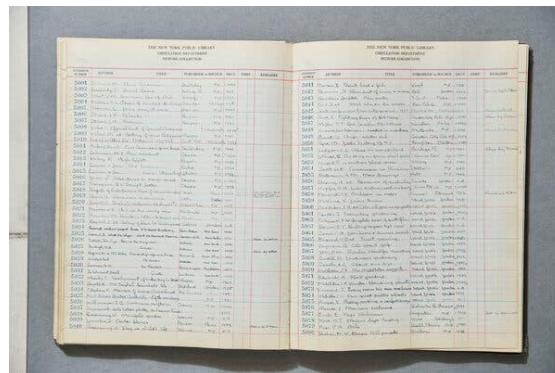
Once the Picture Collection is relocated, its space in Room 100 will house administrators who were hired for educational outreach. That reconfiguration carries with it a rueful irony, because outreach was the fervently held mission of Romana Javitz, who was named curator of the collection in 1929 and for nearly four decades defined and defended it against those who thought that the hodgepodge of vernacular visual material didn't belong in the library.

An immigrant from Minsk, Russia, Javitz shrewdly noted in 1940 that "many facts which require hours to be tracked down in texts can be swiftly and simply discovered by consultation with pictures." The collection evolved as a collaboration between the investigations of the librarians and the demands of the public. With democratic evenhandedness, Javitz and her staff fielded queries from curious nobodies and established artists. (Although they made allowances for artists. When Warhol failed to return borrowed pictures, Javitz accepted that they were being employed to produce art and didn't go after him.)

She responded to requests with the same courteous diligence, whether they came from an anonymous inquirer about "Peg-Leg John" (did he want the real-life abolitionist Peg Leg Joe or the fictional pirate Long John Silver?) or from Joseph Cornell, the master of assemblage. Cornell became a friend of Javitz, as did many photographers — Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange among them — who were charmed by the respect she accorded their work.



*A holiday card made and sent by Andy Warhol to the founder of the New York Public Library's Picture Collection.
©Gus Powell for The New York Times*



Spread from a 1931 ledger of the Picture Collection, listing images that were added to the folders, from circus pictures to "Ladies of the White House." ©Gus Powell for The New York Times

She was ahead of her time, but the world caught up. For the collection, that was a mixed blessing. Javitz had received gifts of hundreds of pictures from Evans, Lange and other photographers who sought wider circulation of their prints, which held relatively little commercial value. In a massive donation, Roy Stryker, who headed the photography project of the Farm Security Administration during the Depression, transferred over 40,000 prints to the Picture Collection.

But after Javitz retired in 1968, photography's status as an art form soared, with an elevation in prices. Thousands of exceptional artistic or historical photographs were moved from the circulating Picture Collection to the Print Room, where they joined Dürer woodcuts, Hiroshige prints and Goya etchings. "You're not coming here to look for Dorothea Lange," said Jessica Cline, the current head of the Picture Collection. "You're here to look for farm life."

From movie-set decorators to handbag designers, the Picture Collection has long served the creative community. "Someone was doing a movie that was set in New York at the turn of the last century," said Jay Vissers, one of four full-time librarians at the Picture Collection, who has been there since 1994. "They looked at pictures to see how much horse poop was on the street."



Darin Mickey, a photographer and chair of the creative practices program of the International Center of Photography, browsing the “Accidents” folder of the Picture Collection. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times



Pictures from the “Friendship” folder. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times



Images from the “Transgenderism” folder on the Picture Collection tables. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times

The veteran Hollywood production designer Wynn Thomas (“Do the Right Thing,” “Malcolm X”) always starts his research at the Picture Collection. Planning for Ron Howard’s 2005 boxing movie, “Cinderella Man,” set in North Bergen, N.J., he came up dry searching for visual records. “The librarian suggested that I look in the Depression-era folders and especially Chicago 1920-30,” he recalled. Not only did he find images of courtyards that influenced his design, but he also chose a palette of blacks, grays and pale colors, responding to the black-and-white photos from that era.

“When the production designers of ‘Mad Men’ needed to know what a shopping bag looked like in 1950, they came here,” said Joshua Chuang, the senior curator of photography at the library. “I think of this as the most radical access to secreted layers of visual culture.”

Art Spiegelman, who used the collection when he was working as a newspaper illustrator — “I’d browse for what a baseball uniform from the 1930s looked like,” he said — relied on it extensively when he was determining how to depict the characters in his graphic novel “Maus,” who are humans in animal form. He was especially concerned about the proportion of head to body. He went through folders of specific animals, children’s book characters, theatrical costumes (the ballet “Tales of Beatrix Potter” was instructive), and anthropomorphized animals

in Chinese and Japanese art. He also found images for the concentration camps in which the protagonists, based on his parents, Vladek and Anja, were imprisoned.



The New York Public Library's Picture Collection, founded in 1915. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times

But then he hit a roadblock looking for images related to the displaced persons camps that Vladek was in after liberation. “I was stumped and went to this librarian and he said, ‘That’s a hard one.’ Then he paused and said, ‘Try Quonset huts.’ And by God, there it was.”

These days, in a Google search for images on the internet, an algorithm spits out the most popular choices in a self-reinforcing stream of predictability. At the Picture Collection, the quirks of human choice dictate what you see. “It’s the high and the low side by side that’s so incredible,” Chuang said. “It has a kind of messy purity about it.”

The stacks behind Room 100 contain rows of recently acquired books and periodicals that will soon be clipped by librarians to supplement the folders. (About 400 pictures are added every month.) The taxonomy of the files itself is constantly changing. “Negroes” became “Black—Life,” and recent additions include “Transgenderism,” “Drones” and, more surprisingly, “Friendship.”



Jay Vissers, a Picture Collection librarian since 1994. "Having people being able to borrow these things and constantly feeding these collections is very important," he said. ©Gus Powell for The New York Times

“Having people being able to borrow these things and constantly feeding these collections is very important,” Vissers said. “Otherwise, it’s like a box in the attic.”

Usage has declined in the age of the internet, but for its devotees, the tactile experience of touching paper images is even more powerful now that it is a novelty. “There is no substitute for that excitement of discovery around the physicality of something in a room that you hold in your hands,” said the photographer Peter Kayafas, who brings his Pratt Institute students to explore it.

The fate of the collection may have been sealed in 2017, when it was relocated to the main library from the Mid-Manhattan circulating branch. Going forward, Kelly wants users of the Picture Collection to be more prepared and less spontaneous. “The model that we’re trying to develop is that more information is transparently available online so they can find it before they come to the library,” he said.



Taryn Simon's photo collage "Folder: Explosions" (2012) at Gagolian. ©Taryn Simon and Gagolian



*Simon's works hang on the wall of Room 100. They include "Folder: Costume—Veil" (2012) and "Folder: Oxygen" (2012).
©Gus Powell for The New York Times*

Without providing the jolt and tickle of serendipity, however, the Picture Collection will be drained of its élan. Simon, the artist, said her own experience with the collection — characterized by “false finishes and evolving and changing” — opened doors to the unexpected.

Her project has also resulted in a huge book, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection.” It includes plates of the photo collages that Simon made in her studio by photographing images from folders that she arranged by hand. There is a rich history of Javitz and the Picture Collection, including correspondence and a list of all folder subject headings.

Inspired by the venerable portraits hanging in the library’s Beaux-Arts Edna Barnes Salomon Room, Simon framed her photo collages to be suspended by visible wires, with some on view in Room 100. In the long-planned second part of the exhibition this fall, in the Salomon Room, New York grandees of the era in which the library was founded will be facing some of Simon’s images from the Picture Collection — from left-wing demonstrations to naked rear ends — that they might have preferred to keep under wraps. “Their looking at each other is very important in the installation,” Simon said.

That face-to-face confrontation is a reminder that the collection — radically democratic in its wide-open accessibility and its agglomeration of the high and low — has discomfited sticklers for regulation and orderliness from the outset.