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GALLERY

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THE POWER OF PICTURES: VIEWING HISTORY THROUGH
AMERICA'S LIBRARY

By James Estrin, April 13, 2018



Anne Wilkes Tucker was granted special access to the Library of Congress' photographic archives of over 14 million pictures and has curated an exhibit featuring more than 440 images at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles. Ms. Tucker, the curator emerita of Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, chose a wide array of mostly rare and never before exhibited images that highlight the collection's breadth and depth for the show "Not an Ostrich: And Other Images From America's Library," which opens April 21. Ms. Tucker spoke with James Estrin, and their conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

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Q: How did this show come to be?

A: The idea of the show was to represent the Library of Congress collection. By the time I got invited to be the curator, the Annenberg Center had already decided that the show would not be original prints, but would be images on a screen. And they wanted me to pick at least 500 photographs that were previously uncataloged. So all of this was totally new to me. My whole life, I was thinking linearly, on walls or in books.

So, for a year and a half, for a week to two weeks every month, I went and sat in the Library of Congress.

Q: What did you do there?

A: I couldn't go through the catalog and say, 'Bring me this,' because I was looking for photos that had not been cataloged. I just sat there and the staff brought me pictures. I never knew what I was going to get.

I looked at slides. I looked at contact sheets. I looked at prints. I looked at stereos.

Q: That must have been a great deal of fun.

A: I loved it, I got paid to sit in the Library of Congress and look at photographs. It was fabulous. Beverley Brannan and the other staff members love that collection so much. When you would ask them for something, they would be so happy that somebody wanted to see something that was their area — that the work would be seen. The woman who's the specialist in Detroit Publishing Company was so happy to bring out those pictures.

The library has estimated I looked at almost a million images. What I saw ranged from Danny Lyons to Ansel Adams and from stereographs to panoramas.

We ended up deciding that it couldn't just be the uncataloged images because you have to include Dorothea Lange, the Wright brothers and the Hindenburg. Uncataloged didn't necessarily mean previously unknown.

I was surprised and saddened that we keep publishing the same Farm Security Administration pictures over and over and over again when there are so many other great ones out there, especially pictures taken in the Midwest and the West.

Q: Most of these images were not online or even cataloged. Will these in the exhibit be put online?

A: They will be when the exhibit opens. The Library of Congress is called America's library because it's free, it's online and anybody can get online and download free high-res pictures. You can get your own high-res copy of a Dorothea Lange photo. In the exhibition we're putting a little insignia near every image that's copyright-free, which means if you like it you can go home and download it.

Q: It's better than the gift shop. It's free!

A: That's right. We want people to know that if they're doing a history paper, they're going to find the illustrations they need in the Library of Congress.

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The show is also a history lesson. It includes people like Sharon Farmer, who was the first African-American White House photographer — for Clinton. We all think that the most popular picture in the entire exhibition will be this cat with a Wagner Brünnhilde helmet.

Q: I want to say I hope not, but I don't see where there's any chance not.

A: Except with dog people, of course.

Q: How did you organize the show?

A: The structure I chose was the library's own collecting categories, so there are nine sections. And they are icons, portraits, photographers (because they have a great collection of photographs of photographers), social-political, built environment, business and science, and arts and sports. Then I added three more, including the Detroit Publishing Company.

Q: What was the Detroit Publishing Company?

A: The Detroit Publishing Company was operating at the turn of the century, and their goal was to show everyday American life. They were just your basic tourist pictures, but of everything. I also included Carol Highsmith. A hundred years after the Detroit Publishing Company, she is photographing those beautiful, interesting, quirky places in America.

For each section there are some digital prints too, including the portraits of Lincoln, Gordon Park's American Gothic, Dorothea Lange and the Harriet Tubman photo the Library of Congress just acquired.

Q: Tell me something you learned while doing this.

A: Do you know why Harley Davidsons are called hogs? Because one of the early most famous racers for the Harley Davidson team had a pet pig. And when he won, he rode around the track with his pet pig.

The Library owns what is, as far as anyone knows, the earliest made self-portrait, which of course has now been deemed the library's selfie. There was a man in 1839, who read about it happening in Paris, made his own camera, went out in the yard and took his self portrait.

Q: And that's the only way we know this man?

A: Yes.

Q: Which is not surprising. So in essence, an element of the Library of Congress is the equivalent of the internet today, where you can find everything no matter how strange and odd. But it also has all of our history since the camera was invented.

A: And history repeats itself. I picked this picture of a Ku Klux Klan meeting just a few miles from Washington in 1920, with 50 initiates kneeling and being installed. I chose this two years ago — two years ago before Charlottesville occurred.

Q: So how do you choose when you're looking at tens of thousands of images?

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A: I sat there and just looked — first I just picked by my gut, either a strong picture that I knew by somebody, like Gordon Parks's picture of Muhammad Ali's hands right after the fight, swollen and bloody, or lesser known images by famous photographers like Danny Lyons. I think I ended up picking about 3,000 pictures, but as the project took shape I began to realize that we didn't have many Asian or Hispanic people and I wanted to represent everybody.

Then I began to ask the staff to bring me their favorites.

Q: So you responded at first by delight, but at the end of it, how did you make decisions?

A: I kept going back through what had been chosen as preliminary — thinking about life in the United States and communities in the United States. All sections of the country are represented and we have all religions. We have many photos of the civil rights movement and also issues of alcoholism, spousal abuse and anorexia. I tried to show that the library is conscious of what is going on in the United States and trying to build a visual record of our history, so that when people want to research something, it's there.

I tried to get complex pictures and simple pictures, and I was also conscious of the history of photography. So we go from daguerreotypes to digital. We even have a spirit photograph.

Q: So by looking at the uncataloged images, for the most part you're looking at the photos that didn't make the canon. Like the lesser known Farm Security Administration photos.

A: For no particular good reason. You know, part of it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those pictures are uncataloged because nobody's come to the library to see them because they could call up other pictures and get them because they were already online. So there were plenty of pictures from the N.A.A.C.P. collection that had not been scanned and put online. There was a description of them with no picture but they hadn't been put online because that process hadn't been initiated.

Q: What were the most important photos for you that you found that you didn't know, or that weren't online?

A: I think in this time, and in this climate and the whole controversy over the taking down the confederate statues, that Ku Klux Klan picture so near to Washington — taken at the exact time that the Klan was rising in the South — that picture is evidence of the Klan not just being in the Deep South.

That's the power of the pictures.