



ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

**36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**  
**Grand Hyatt, Denver, Colorado, May 1-5, 2008**

**Session: To 'Bay or Not to 'Bay (eBay that is!): Maximizing Online Collection Development for the Savvy Shopper**

**Saturday, May 3, 2008 11:00 am-12:30 pm**

**Moderator:** Terri Boccia, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

**Speakers:**

Terri Boccia, Acquisitions Librarian, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

Inge Reist, Chief of Research Collections and Programs, and Director of the Center for the History of Collecting in America, Frick Art Reference Library

Laura Harris, Associate Museum Librarian, Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Laura Harris, *Snapshot on the Market: Acquiring Photography Books Today*  
[Slide 1]

When Terri asked me to join this panel, she directed me in a gentle way by hinting that the ARLIS talks that she had found the most beneficial were those that gave real practical information, those that intended to be useful and were specific. She suggested I try to give the assembled something that they could take home with them and actually apply to their work.

I thought about it. The collecting of photography books has gotten sort of competitive. Do I really want to tell everybody what I do?

When I submitted a title, as she requested, she sent it back to me, commenting that it was a little vague and elusive. She told me to try again, and make it snappy. Hence the title: "Snapshot on the Market: Buying Photography Books Today."

In a quick take, I could tell you what you probably already know. That bad news concerns the escalation in the cost of out-of-print photography books and the appearance of record prices that make you gasp for breath. I could lament the woeful decline of the dollar vs. the euro. I could introduce you to the new canon of must-have photography books, created by books on photography books that have appeared in the last few years, and that have set us in competition with hordes of new collectors.

I could also present the obvious, that when a Richard Prince photograph sells for 3 million dollars, the price of his out-of-print books is going to change. In addition, we are now competing with collectors who are buying photography books for the investment portfolios of their children, and if they are buying for the benefit of their children, they are willing to pay any price!

On the positive side, I could mention the emergence of catalogues raisonnés of photographers, and the publication of outstanding facsimiles of some of the most desirable, but next to unattainable titles.

[Slide 2]

Then, the other day, I received a call from a dealer, somebody who had been central in building the collection of the Joyce F. Menschel Library in the days of my predecessor in the early nineties, and that I had bought an occasional book from over the intervening years. Last thing I had heard from her was that she was leaving the book business and moving toward selling jewelry. But on this occasion she had a portfolio that she thought might interest me, and it really didn't, but while we were on the line, I asked her what her perspective was on the out-of-print photography book market today.

Her response was that so much had changed that it just doesn't suit her anymore and she has gotten out. In her opinion, the model of building a collection for somebody or an institution doesn't work in this age. First of all, with the book market on the Internet, everybody wants to do the searching

for him or herself, putting the bookseller in competition with the client to find the right books. And now that the business is so much more transparent, there is always somebody out there who can get to it first. When and if she does manage to secure the books, they are harder to sell. She puts a book up on abebooks.com, and there is always somebody out there who is willing to sell the title for a little bit less, and this under-cutter gets the sale. There are so many buyers who just want a select number of titles, the ones that they have seen in the books on photography books. And they want to get every one of them. She likened photography book buying today to stamp collecting. She finds herself out there competing with people that should be her customers. The whole food chain has changed!

She regrets that the context of books is missing. She used to produce original and well regarded catalogs. But now, she's found they are not worth producing. Before, it was an intellectually challenging occupation—researching catalogs, sleuthing for books, talking books with collectors. But alas, the photography books have become just a commodity, like everything else.

The big problem, she said, is the Internet, and she doesn't like to spend her time at the computer. Her relationship with the photography book market is a marriage gone wrong. And it is the Internet that has come between them.

Well, I thought, this isn't a pretty picture. But maybe, between now and the conference, I can take some more informal pictures, or snapshots on the market, and string together some insights and advice for us librarians buying in the field. This image, by the way, is not a picture of the dealer. It's a self-portrait of the artist Janice Guy.

[Slide 3]

But this is a picture of Andrew Cahan, whom I ran into at the New York Antiquarian Book Fair last month. I asked him how he views the market and the changes of the last ten or so years.

His response was not surprising-- that the biggest change in dealing with photography books is the Internet. The Internet has made many a great book--even a hard-to-find book, he said--common. This has resulted in an "escalation downward" in the price of much that the independent dealer generally provides. Take for example, Alfred Stieglitz: an American Seer, by Dorothy Norman. He has several in stock, and has priced them at \$40 to \$50. This title used to be a steady seller. He hasn't changed his prices, and he hasn't sold a copy in eight or nine years. On the other hand, the less common things--modernism, post-modernism, fashion, and Japanese photography--are greatly sought after, and the prices have gone through the roof. This is largely attributable to the books on photography books, and particularly to two of them: [Slide 4]Andrew Roth's The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century (2001) and [slide 5] The Photobook: a History, vols. 1 and 2, by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger (2004, 2006). As a consequence of these books, there is now a canon of must-have photography books and many more self-confident shoppers.

Fortunately for his business, Andrew took to the Internet, and rather than losing contact with clients, he is gaining more. While he used to send out printed catalogs at about \$10 a copy for production and mailing, he now relies entirely on the electronic catalog, with which he can reach thousands instantly. And he can add many, many more pictures to his entries. The response is immediate, and he does most of his selling in the first few days after the catalog is emailed. He lists his books on his own website, on ILAB, Biblio, abebooks.com, and elsewhere, but he is reliant on his catalog.

What is his advice to librarians trying to build a collection retrospectively? Get on his email list so you get his catalog. And I would agree. I'm

somewhat old-fashioned and print them out and mark them up with pen and Post-it, and use the contexts and descriptions to build my knowledge of the market. He might have added, respond to it promptly.

Andrew's other piece of advice: Get to know the dealers.

[Slide 6]

Swann Auction Galleries is having a sale of photographic literature on May 15, so I gave Daile Kaplan, Head Specialist in Photography and Photographic Literature a call for another perspective, or snapshot. [Slide 7] Swann has been holding auctions of photographic literature since 1952, when the collection of Albert E. Marshall was sold in the first photographic literature auction in the U.S. They have held them ever since, for a long time offering a spring and fall auction dedicated solely to Photographic Literature. At the Marshall sale, William Bradford's Arctic Regions sold for a hammer price of \$40. If you had been there and been prescient enough to be the buyer, you might have been the seller at Swann's last fall auction and realized a gain of 300,000 percent.

According to Daile, the new books on photography books--Roth and Parr and Badger, as well as [Slide 8] Stephen Deitch's From Fine to Fair: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Photography Books that Matter (2000) and The Hasselblad Center's The Open Book (2004), have put into play an approach to photography book-buying that has steered the market in a very traditional way. The authors and editors of these books have done their research, and their attractive books have brought in new collectors and made the field open to anybody. These books have heightened a dimension to photography book collecting that was not so intense before—the search for the pristine dust jacket, the obi on Japanese books, the original shipping case, and the association copy. The highest prices realized at auction reflect the premiums placed on such copies. Unless you are the curator of a rare book collection, or buying for

investment, these details may not matter. ( It would be very unusual for me to pay a premium only for an association.)

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Also, a great number of repeats appear in these books on photography books, leading to the concentration on just a portion of what is available. The great thing about collecting photography books, says Daile, is that the field is not strictly about art photography. There are photography books in science, in history, in industry, in transportation—you name the topic. And there are other fine guides and paths to collecting than Parr and Badger. [Slide 10] An example is the excellent Fotografía Pública / Photography in Print, 1919–1939, catalog of an exhibition at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (1999), displaying the great achievements of photography and modernist design in mass produced media in the period between the world wars. [Slide 11] There is also The Books of Nudes by Alessandro Bertolotti (English ed., 2007) which is not strictly about the artistic nude and overlaps little with the other books on photography books. There are bibliographies for other topics, such as Mark Rowley's Photo Illustrated Medical Literature: a Bibliography (2004), and [Slide 12] even children's books, From the Mundane to the Magical: Photographically Illustrated Children's Books, 1854-1945 and Beyond, by Mus White (1999). If you broaden your horizons a bit, you'll find many, many worthy books that sell below market. Many are found at auction, and many are found on the Internet.

According to Daile, "serious collectors of great character" are using the Internet. It is an extremely useful database. Use it to check the market availability and the current prices without going into auction sales indexes. The Internet provides quick and easy reference, and eBay is a great equalizer if you have the time to spend on it. [Slide 13] But I was surprised to find that Swann has a partnership with eBay Live, on which you can register and bid online using eBay's software. If you don't get Swann's printed catalog, and you should, you can check it online two or three weeks before the

auction. Daile says Swann sets their estimates to encourage bidding, based on research of online prices, American Book Prices Current, and dealers' catalogs. Don't get scared if something hits an out-of-sight price, she advises. The first time, it's an accident, the second time a coincidence, only the third time, is it the true price. In any case, auctions are a lot of fun, a great place to learn, a chance not just to see, but to handle the book treasures of photography--and you might get lucky. In any case, you will learn.

As I mentioned before, now that it's possible to find rare and scarce books on the Internet, everybody wants to do it for him or herself. A curator came rushing into my office last week waving a printout from Abebooks.com. "You've got to get it, we have to have it now!" he cried. I looked at the record. It didn't look so great to me. It was the run of a short-lived magazine, a title highly desirable, but it was in merely "good" condition, (which means pretty bad) and from a dealer notorious for overpricing. [Slide 14] I searched Abebooks.com again and didn't find another copy. There was nothing on Marelibri.com, the consolidated site for European dealers. There were scattered copies of some of the issues on Bookfinder.com, so I got an idea of the going prices, but there was no way I could hobble together the run in the short time required by the curator. I checked a few magazine sites (which I don't know well), then on a lark dived into the haystack, and starting searching Google.

Bulls-eye! I hit right upon a beautiful record for the book. It was attractively designed with a complete description of the importance of the work and the copy for sale. The record included informed descriptions of the contents of each issue. This was a seriously good record, and I thought, "What is this site, modernism101.com?" Although not strictly a photography book dealer, photography and modernist design go hand in hand, so I thought I would get two things done at once: buy these magazines, and get a snapshot of another dealer's perspective on the book market and the Internet today.

[Slide 15] Randall Ross of Modernism 101 loves his work. He's a retired graphic designer who took the plunge into book dealing because of the Internet. It was a fresh way to engage with people, and with his history of graphic design and writing ability, a natural choice. The design process—the photography, scanning, and the creation of the web page was easy for him.

He also says that the new books on photography books have set the agenda. If on his web entry he cites Andrew Roth's The Book of 101 Books, it is a sure bet that the book will sell readily. Collectors look for it like a stamp of approval that they are buying wisely.

But what surprised me, and I guess it shouldn't have, was that he sells on eBay. He said that lots of people--"the antiquarian set"--look down on eBay. They see it as the garage mentality at work. But the fact is that customers come looking there, and with his well-designed and informative entries, he picks up serious customers. The Internet levels the playing field, allowing him to present his merchandise to all. The books he sells are not common, and they are found by those who seriously seek them.

The magazine that brought me to Randall and Modernism 101 has a very generic title, but when I searched it on Google, Ross's record popped right up. I asked him, "How did that happen?" I didn't think I had done a search that would find a needle in a haystack, but being a librarian, I probably put in a pretty good search. He said he had never paid for search placement but that the people who need to find him, find him. The magazines I sought were purchased on eBay; a poor description had allowed him to buy them in the first place. Since 2001, his full source of income has been bookselling, and he attributes it to the power of the Internet, and to his approach to using it.

His experience with photography books is a bit different from his experience with design and architecture books and magazines. He called them a breed

apart, and said that owners have a much more intimate connection with them than they have with other books. People tend to use them more, take them down more often from the shelf, and get more attached to them. Estates tend to keep them in the family. Therefore, getting the material to sell is very competitive. His advice to museum librarians: If your museum receives gifts of photographs, be sure to get the books. Urge the curators to ask for the books along with the photographs. His advice echoes my own experience--get the libraries of the photograph collectors.

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When I was at the Antiquarian Book Fair, I stopped to talk with Matthew Zucker. We have a lot to talk about; we both love to fish, and our encounter was around the time of the opening of the trout season in New York. We soon got around to the topic of photography books and the Internet.

His website is attractive and informative, and he presents wonderful books, but you might be disappointed. He doesn't list prices. Matthew doesn't like dealing over the Internet. In his business, he finds that it attracts a lot of people who haven't done their homework. People whose inquiries are pretty stupid: How big is the book? How many pages? He is not interested in undercutting other's prices, but in selling the finest copies of a select group of titles, and he searches for these in multiples. Dependent on condition and other factors, each copy has its own price.

I need an expert guide in buying Japanese books. They inhabit foreign waters to me. I can read about them in books and handle them in auction houses, but to locate and land the big ones, or the right ones for my library, I need the experienced local guide.

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Matthew he has given me a catalog on which he works in cooperation with Antoine de Beaupré of Librairie 213 in Paris: Japan 1968-1982: Japanese Photography, 31 Books. This is a selective list of highly valued key titles that are rapidly disappearing from the market. [Slide 18] For me it's an excellent tool for the assessment of my collection and the identification of desiderata. Matthew can also access my library's holdings. He's my guide, and I hope he can lead me to the big ones for my library. Of course, I also need a generous donor, but with the right lures, I'm more likely to hook one.

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Vincent Borrelli also does a great service. He's an independent dealer handling both new and out-of-print books. He has a very handsome and useful website, on which he features updates of recommendations, newly arrived books, and special copies. His site is very selective and reflects his personal preferences. While a general bookseller would be more likely to buy a whole library; Borrelli is picky and only chooses things that he thinks are really great--and that selection is one of the pleasures and conveniences provided by his website. Selection is difficult when there are so many photography books published each year, and when they vary so widely in quality and approach. (He says there are 800, but I feel like there are more when all the catalogs are included.) He sifts through the majority of the onslaught for us on the basis of his personal assessment of quality. That's a tremendous help. He is also a source for signed copies, and sells everything that Nazraeli publishes because of its consistently high standards.

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He suspects that librarians visit his site to make their selections, and then buy from Amazon, Abebooks.com, and from big suppliers. This is inevitable. But there is a stratification of the market, with association and condition as the determinants. (We can't buy association from Amazon.com, and we have probably all been burned by the condition of some Internet purchases.) Condition is especially important with Japanese books because of the

dampness in some areas of Japan. The condition of these books can make a difference of five to ten fold (or more) in the price.

What strategy does Vincent suggest for librarians? Become a client. Let the dealers know what you are thinking about, and what area you're interested in. Dealers have their specialties--get to know them, and get your lists out to them. For most clients, he finds the lists look pretty similar—they follow Parr and Badger, and Andrew Roth. But your list may be refreshingly different.

Most important to dealers is finding the good books, and the best of these never get into on-line listings. The dealers know who their best buyers are, and most rare titles can come and go 10 or 20 times before a copy ever appears on Abebooks.com. Dealers do a daily match for their wants, so you are competing with them for the choicest items. Make the dealers think of you before they put what you want on the Internet. Dealers want to help you build your collection, so use them. The more you bug them, the more they will respond.

Advice about lists: Target them to dealers. And don't put the dealers in competition with each other. You'll drive up the price for one thing, and if you have two dealers finding the same title, but you only purchase one, you haven't done right by the dealer and you may not get good service the next time around.

As for the big conglomerate sites, use them to find a book and a dealer, and then call directly. These big sites take a commission of 8 percent, and they charge 6 percent for the credit card transaction. At another big site, there is a 16 percent markup for a book!

Find what you want on the conglomerate site, and then go directly to the bookseller's website. Ask for a discount, especially if you are making a large order.

Vincent gave me a tip on buying Japanese books, for which he has good sources. Apparently, a lot of trading takes place on Yahoo Japan. It's their equivalent of eBay. Of course you have to read Japanese to buy this way, and the sellers may be reluctant to ship to you. But if you can find somebody in Japan to help, and you can give them a 10 or 15 percent commission, you can do well. But hurry, the prices are rising in Japan as well.

[Slide 21]

Photo-eye.com is a persistent presence on the web, but, they also provide very personal service. So I called Rixon Reed to find out his take on the market, what he was up to, and what advice he could give to librarians.

He gave me some interesting background about his early days handling books at New York's Light Gallery in the 70s, his move to Texas and development of a mail order business out of his home in Austin. He spent a lot of time and money putting out catalogs in the traditional way, and his business was successful. Fortuitously, he was also an early computer junkie. He had the first IBM PC, as well as programming skills from college.

In 1991, he moved to Santa Fe. He had a combined bookstore and photographs gallery, and was still running the order business in out-of-print, rare and new books. He mailed out quarterly catalogs.

In the mid 90s, Amazon made its appearance on the scene. I think we all have had moments when we know that things were shifting. I remember when I first heard a Beatles' song, and the Doors' "Light My Fire." And I remember ordering my first book on Amazon.com. I had a feeling that something was happening there, and it was.

A staff member suggested to Rixon that he program a website, and in 1997 he launched Photo-eye as e-commerce, and the beginning of a new life. If

you are into photography books, you probably receive the constant updates and the Photo-eye booklists [Slide 22], which for three and a half years have been published as a magazine. For four years, Photo-eye has been holding highly selective online auctions, run by Eric Miles. Eric is always there to answer questions, give details on condition, etcetera. I have bid on books, and have also picked up items that failed to sell. The Photo-eye auction has become one more thing to keep an eye on for a sense of the market.

Their auctions are completely different from eBay's. All material is consigned. They provide estimates and price histories for comparison; most books sell for \$250, or more. Also the auctions are truly live; if a bid comes in at the last minute, the auction is extended, just as it is in the auction room. The company treats the books as art, and they handle and pack them accordingly.

If you are a recent visitor to Photo-eye, you've probably noticed that when you choose a book, you have the choice of buying the book from Photo-eye or buying it from Amazon. Of course, in the bookselling business, Amazon is huge—they are selling wholesale to the public, and it is a huge problem for independent booksellers. (Whereas earlier, Rixon might have sold 200 to 300 copies of a trade book, once Amazon was in play, he would sell 20 to 40 copies of such a book. He was just helping to fill the shopping carts for Amazon.)

Well, Rixon has faced the realization that customers come to his site to shop, then go to Amazon to buy. With the link to Amazon, Photo-eye allows you to buy at Amazon, but it keeps you connected to Photo-eye. It's brilliant.

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Photo-eye has focused on service. They are not just robots that fill orders. Locally they have cultivated a dedicated following, sponsoring signings and other events.

Around the middle of next month, Photo-eye will be changing in exciting ways. I don't want to steal their thunder, but stay tuned to their website for your local photography guide, a compilation of the best of photography book blogs and an online magazine. They aim to be a much bigger resource than "just a book dealer."

Rixon Reed's advice to librarians: Use Photo-eye. Use their search engine to search their offerings or Amazon's. Support a bookseller. They answer the phone. They e-mail you back.

I know I have been asked to tell you how to use the Internet to save money in building your retrospective collection. You can use the Internet to buy, to research, to compare.

But I have one last thing to say: It's not all on the Internet. There are other bargains out there, and there are books that collectors are lined up for and that don't need to be sold. There are also books that one might not know to look for. I purchase a lot of 19<sup>th</sup> century books, and a lot of books on 19<sup>th</sup> century photography. I also buy regional European books on 19<sup>th</sup> century photography, which, for a small, understaffed library such as my own, are hard to find. Without forging relationships with dealers, I wouldn't have much of a collection. [Slide 24] My library's collection would be impoverished if it were not for Fred, of Fred and Elizabeth Pajerski, Literature on Photography. Their business has never gone online. The fact is that there are worlds of photography books that do not appear in the Roth and Parr and Badger. Michel and Michèle Auer, who have a huge collection, have just released their own photography book selection, a little brick of a book with 802 notable photography books.

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Oh no, I thought, yet another list! But their point is that there are plenty of interesting and desirable photography books out there. The independent dealers know of this material.

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Fred Pajerski has also been a source for series and serials, and Roy Flukinger's bibliography Windows of Light (1994) is an excellent tool in this endeavor. But he's been more than a source. Working with independent dealers has been an education.

[Slide 27]

The recent appearance of the much anticipated Imaging Paradise: The Richard and Ronay Menschel Library at George Eastman House, Rochester (2007) is bound to spark renewed interest in the photography books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Are they going to become hotly sought after as well? Can prices go higher, and can the collecting become more competitive? You might consider being ahead of the curve. Make your list and call someone like Fred Pajerski. And be sure you receive his quarterly lists.

[Slide 28]

Yes, use eBay, it's fun and you find all kinds of wonderful things, go Amazon.com--you cannot beat the price, and the service is, for all the impersonality, excellent. But they have you profiled.

[Slide 29]

For a chance to expand your horizons and fill your needs, and to enrich your work experience, get associated with independent dealers. In the long run, it will pay off.