

Francis Hodgson Photography Critic, The Financial Times

Photographic Art: Beginning a Collection

I'm often puzzled at where collecting photography begins. Tear a picture of a nice outfit from a magazine and pin it to the board in the kitchen, and you have the beginning of a collection. Pass your mobile to a colleague and show him the house you might want to buy, and you're beginning to exhibit the collection.

These are exaggerations, of course, but only just. The basic truth is also the hardest to grasp: The minute you are concerned with the treatment of the subject in the photograph more than with the subject itself, then it is photography itself that is at stake, not merely the things upon which it feeds.

Photography is huge and various and nobody is interested equally in all of it. At the upper end, the market in fine photographic prints has been one of the most consistently successful investment sectors of all the fine arts. But – thankfully – we are all literate in photography. To stretch one's 'general' knowledge of photography until it looks like a specialism is no chore. Photography talk can be blighted – as can every field – by jargon and arcana, but none of that is really frightening. To make a start as a collector, you need only two things. Surprisingly, though, the one which ought to be rare is not and the one which ought to be common is very rare.

You need good advice. But good advice is plentifully available. Any reputable dealer will happily explain what a platinum print is or which artists don't like to publish in limited editions. The minute you find a dealer whose stock you like, engage with him. Dealers aren't magicians. They don't know how much you know or where you

want your collection to go until you start to explain. So maybe before collecting photographs, try to collect yourself a little. Know yourself. If you're trying to put five children through college, you may want to buy emerging artists for a while. But asking never did any harm. It's rude to haunt galleries without ever buying; but it's not at all rude to take a dealer's time. You might as well.

Secondly, any good collection needs taste. And taste, unfortunately, is rare and difficult to cultivate and takes courage to maintain. Collecting is not shopping. I repeat, with the adjective: good collecting is not shopping. You buy pictures to enlarge your appreciation, to challenge yourself, to grow, to be moved, even perhaps to support an artist (or a charity!). I know hundreds of collections which contain only the 'fashionable' on the day they were bought. They're dull, and embarrassingly, they reveal their owners to be dull. It's not necessarily expensive to buy photographs. It's not necessarily 'cool'. But if you have the courage to reject and reject again, if you stretch your taste by thought and learning, if you test your pictures against all that you find finest from among movies



and books and music, you will find to your amazement that photography remains among the great media of our time. It touches everything, and everyone has been touched by it. Make your own way in photography – and it will pay you back a thousand-fold. Dive in. The PhotoVoice auction is as good a place to start as any.

Francis Hodgson is the photography critic of the Financial Times and a former head of the photographs department at Sotheby's. A specialist art adviser in the field of photography, he has a wide roster of institutional and private clients who come to him on every aspect of collecting. Francis Hodgson can be reached on francis.hodgson@btinternet.com

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The PhotoVoice Auction of Exceptional Photographs

Hosted by Reuters
Tuesday 23rd November 2010

The Reuters Building,
30 South Colonnade, Canary Wharf, London E14 5EP

Tickets £20 including catalogue

Available from www.photovoice.org or 020 7033 3878
Guest auctioneer: Lord Jeffrey Archer

The PhotoVoice Auction of Exceptional Prints celebrates the power of photography in all its expressions and is widely supported by the international photographic community. This year's collection showcases photography legends alongside contemporary masters and introduces exciting emerging talent.

Unique and rare lots include 'The Blenheim Oaks' – a one-off series of prints by Simon Norfolk, an editioned print exclusively produced for PhotoVoice by Sarah Moon, and signed, vintage prints by Eve Arnold, George Rodger and Herb Ritts. Other highlights include contemporary pieces from Martin Parr, Dan Holdsworth, Massimo Vitali and Tim Flach.

The prints will be auctioned to benefit the international charity PhotoVoice. PhotoVoice is currently celebrating its 10th Anniversary. During this time, the organisation has been recognised as being at the forefront of participatory photography. It continues to design and develop projects focusing on positive social change, for the empowerment of marginalised groups worldwide. Their projects enable those who are traditionally the subject of photography to become its creator, helping participants find the confidence to speak out about their challenges, strengths, hope and fears.

In 2008, the Schroders Charity Committee generously awarded PhotoVoice a grant of £25,000 towards 'Sights Unseen', a project which helped 60 blind and partially-sighted beneficiaries in London and China experience and explore the world of photography. The project enabled participants to create some incredible images and words through which they were able to build a dialogue with the seeing world. Exhibitions followed in both London and Beijing.

For more information about PhotoVoice's work and events:
www.photovoice.org



Francis Hodgson's Tips

1. There is an enormous difference between a photograph of something and a photograph about something. Keep this in mind in front of every single picture, until it becomes second nature. It is easy (and often trite) to make pictures of things. Whereas to make a picture coherently about something is as difficult and as rewarding as it is to write a coherent poem.
2. Avoid the decorative. Many photographs, it goes without saying, are very beautiful. But photography itself, over a period of many years, completely undid our notions of aesthetics. I have written elsewhere that "ugliness and pain and squalor slide onto light-sensitive paper as easily as grace and proportion and elegance". To buy only those things which conform to a previous aesthetic is to shy away from some of what photography can do. It would be like refusing to buy Mozart's Requiem because it is sad; perfectly possible, but also perfectly missing the point.
3. Buy anonymous or 'junk' photographs at car-boot sales, house clearances, bric-a-brac stores and so on. The process – finding one that grabs you, narrowing it down among many, justifying an (even nominal) expenditure, and then getting it home and trying really to find out about it – is a terrific training in taste. Do it often.

Clockwise from left: Flower 3, 2009, Spinks ©John Spinks. Old Monk, Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet, 2000, McCurry ©Steve McCurry/Magnum Photos. David Hockney, Los Angeles, 1989, Ritts – ©Herb Ritts Foundation.