

The photographic collection

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The current after-dinner battle cry of the Secretary of State is that the arts in Canada must somehow be "democratized"—without, of course, lowering standards. It is a statement of policy to which no one can possibly take exception, recalling as it does the stock campaign response of the late Dwight Eisenhower. ("This is a problem that concerns us all. We must all move forward together. No one must be left behind.") The only flaw in the Secretary of State's admirable philosophy is that it is extremely difficult to apply. Should the government sponsor acid-rock at the National Arts Center, Norman Rockwell at the National Gallery? How does a museum director "democratize" his acquisitions policy, without, naturally, lowering standards? For the hard-pressed directors of small galleries and museums, I have a modest proposal: emulate the National Gallery and start a photography collection.

Consider what the National Gallery has achieved in the three years since it began buying photographs. With an annual budget of around \$10,000 it has assembled 800 prints into a collection of international stature. Already it is capable of being a useful research tool as well as a source of inspiration to Canadian photographers. And, if the experience of New York's Museum of Modern Art is anything to go by, it will draw many people to the National Gallery who otherwise would stay away.

From the start, the collection has been very much the child of James Borcoman, the Gallery's education programme director and curator of photography. In justifying the idea of a photography department to the Gallery's trustees in 1967, Mr. Borcoman leant heavily on the inter-relationship between painting and photography, especially in the 19th Century. For, as Dr. Aaron Scharf has pointed out in *Art and Photography*, "so inexorably did photography insinuate itself into the art of that era that, even in the works of artists who repudiated it, the unmistakable signs of the photographic image can be detected." Delacroix regretted that "as far as my

work is concerned, such an admirable invention came so late". Millet, Millais, Courbet, Corot, Degas, the Impressionists, Picasso, Duchamp, Ernst, Rauschenberg, Warhol, have all in their various ways been influenced by the photograph. At a much deeper level, photography has changed everyone's way of perceiving the world. As Mr. Borcoman says, "no real study of the visual arts can be complete without a knowledge of the history of photography or an awareness of the profound impact it has had on picture-making".

But the National Gallery's collection is much more than an adjunct to the history of painting. Apart from anything else, it is of great historical interest. The collection includes, for example, 103 items by Charles Nègre (1820-81), the French *genre* painter and photographer. (In fact, the Gallery has the largest public Nègre collection in the world.) There are other treasures, including an extremely rare album of prints by the early archaeologist-photographer Auguste Salzmann, as well as work by Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the positive-negative process, and Eugène Atget, the incomparable Parisian street photographer. With work dating from 1843, the collection spans almost the whole history of photography. Wisely, Mr. Borcoman has tried wherever possible to buy where possible a good cross-section of a photographer's work in order to show the range of his photographic vision. Edward Weston and Aaron Siskind, for example, are represented by more than 40 prints each, Walker Evans and Robert Frank by more than 30.

Surprisingly, the National Gallery's is the only active, historical collection in the country. This may go some way in explaining the generally low standing of Canadian photography. "I feel," Mr. Borcoman says, "that the photographic community is not as lively as it should be. Photographers are not seeing what is happening elsewhere. Nor are they sufficiently aware of the traditions of the medium. Much of the interesting work that is being done now is the product of photog-



raphers who looked back." Unfortunately, few people, let alone photographers, have seen the National Gallery's collection, which is locked away for lack of exhibition space. There is, however, an excellent introductory show of 82 items entitled *The Photograph as Object* on tour in Ontario.

Whether or not other Canadian museums follow the National Gallery's example will depend on how fast they move. For with an increasing number of institutions starting photography collections, the price of prints has soared. Typically, an original Atget, which three or four years ago could be bought for as little as \$15, now would cost \$250. Soon, the limiting factor will not be price so much as availability. For, although photography is the most pervasive of the visual arts, it is also the one that has been most taken for granted. Through neglect, much of value has simply been allowed to disappear.

1. Charles NÈGRE (1820-80). *Le Joueur d'org* 1853. 4 7/16 by 3 5/16 in.
2. Julia Margaret CAMERON (1815-79). *Mrs. Duworth* (Now Mrs. Leslie Stephen), c. 1866. *Albumen print*, 10 13/16 by 8 1/2 in.
3. Alfred STIEGLITZ (1864-1946). *A Snapshot: Pa* 1911. *Hand photogravure from Camera Work*, 1 41. 1913. 5 7/16 by 6 1/2 in.
4. Robert BOURDEAU (b. 1931). *Untitled*. *Ireland* 1967. *Silver chlorobromide print*, 8 1/2 by 6 1/2 in.
5. Alice WELLS (b. 1929). *Sam & Sue Meyers, V Park B.*, 1967. *Silver chlorobromide print*, 4 1/2 by 12 13/16 in.
6. NADAR (1820-1910). *Edmond de Goncourt in Galerie contemporaine*, c. 1865. *Woodbury Type* 9 7/16 by 7 1/2 in.
7. Edward J. STEICHEN (b. 1879). *Portrait Evening*, c. 1900. *Hand photogravure from Camera Work*. *Steichen Supplement*, 1906. 7 1/2 by 6 1/2 in.

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