

A keen-eyed connoisseur, a striking photography collection



Gustave Le Gray's "Beech Tree."

By [Mark Feeney](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 24, 2017

PORTLAND, Maine — It's the rare collector who rivals his or her collection for interest and impact. Samuel Wagstaff Jr. was a very rare collector.

"The Thrill of the Chase: The Wagstaff Collection of Photographs at the J. Paul

Begin with the personal. Wagstaff (1921-1987) was a patrician, educated at Hotchkiss and Yale, his family's roots in Manhattan dating to the 18th century. He was also extremely good-looking. That surely played a role in Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe becoming lovers, in the early '70s.

Continue with the aesthetic. Wagstaff's taste was assured to the point of arrogance and venturesome almost — almost — to the point of folly. In his final years, he obsessively collected American silverware. There's an example in "The Thrill of the Chase," an 1870s ice bucket with polar bear handles.

During the '60s and early '70s, he had been a highly influential curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum and Detroit Institute of Arts. How influential? Wagstaff was the first museum curator to exhibit Pop Art, and his landmark 1964 show at the Atheneum, "Black, White, and Gray," has been described as the first museum show devoted to Minimalism. In a nice homecoming, "The Thrill of the Chase" was at the Atheneum before arriving at Portland.

Combine the personal and the aesthetic. Wagstaff's tony background meant he was modestly wealthy, no small thing for a prospective collector. His relationship with Mapplethorpe helped interest him in photography. Not that someone with so keen an eye needed much helping. He began collecting. Actually, to say Wagstaff collected photographs is like saying the sea collects rivers. By the time he was done, he had accumulated no fewer than 26,754 photographic items.

The quality was as impressive as the quantity. The uncategorizability of the collection reflected that of photography itself. Wagstaff's holdings ranged in date

images used as medical illustrations, the work of photographers famous and photographers anonymous. Some preferences emerged: early photography, Paris, the Civil War, the homoerotic, American Indians, the American West. But even here, one can see the ardent eclecticism of Wagstaff's taste.

In being so forthrightly non-canonical, Wagstaff was helping create a larger photographic canon, one in which aesthetic status derives from actual visual appearance rather than artistic intent (or pretension). No less important, Wagstaff did more perhaps than any other individual to demonstrate the acceptance of photography as a fine art. From the medium's beginning, there had been proponents of that view. But the 1970s saw it finally accepted across the board.

Conclude with the financial. The Getty Museum bought the Wagstaff collection for \$4.5 million in 1984. At the time, the figure seemed astounding. Today it would be the bargain of all bargains. Either way, the artistic status of photography found itself declared in the most unmistakable terms, with money being put where museological mouth was.

Along with that ice bucket (at once glorious and grotesque), there are nearly 100 photographs, presented in roughly chronological order. They offer a kind of shadow history of photography's first 140 years, from W.H. Fox Talbot, visiting in Paris, in 1843, to William Eggleston, somewhere in the South, in the 1970s. In between come some of the more celebrated images in the history of the medium — Roger Fenton's "Valley of the Shadow of Death," Edward Steichen's portrait of Gloria Swanson, Edward Weston's sand dunes — and oddities no less cherishable for being so odd: a strip of Andy Warhol photo-booth self-portraits, a NASA image of an astronaut on the moon, a 1918 photograph whose title is self-explanatory, "Human Statue of Statue of Liberty: 18,000 Officers and Men at Camp Dodge, Des Moines, Iowa."

Early photography is the heart of the show. Julia Margaret Cameron's portrait of Thomas Carlyle, Gustave Le Gray's "The Great Wave" and "Beech Tree," Fenton's photograph of a bird-like dinosaur fossil: These are images as beautiful as any ever

produced by a camera. At a time when few thought they offered anything beyond antiquarian interest, Wagstaff saw them as something so much more.

Another of those early photographs is Francis Frith's "The Second Pyramid from the Southeast." It affords one of several chimings with the nearly three dozen pictures in "Artist's Choice: Photographs from the Judy Glickman Lauder Collection." The show runs in Portland through May 29

The chiming is with Richard Misrach's "Road Blockade and Pyramid," taken 130 years after Frith. There's also Wagstaff's Bill Brandt nude and Lauder's Brandt of a maid serving tea. Or that Warhol photo-booth strip and Sylvia Plachy's 1973 portrait. And so on.

The serendipity is fun, but the images are what matter. There's a bracing unpredictability. A trio of bare-chested children (Sally Mann), a bare-chested Muhammad Ali in the ring (John Goodman), and a bare-chested self-portrait by the singer Graham Nash? Richard Avedon's "Chicago Seven" and a Paul Outerbridge nude? Sure, why not.

Like Wagstaff, Lauder knows what she knows, and you're glad to encounter the fruits of that knowledge. Where he brought a curator's eye to his collecting, she brings a practitioner's. The show includes two of her own pictures, one of Venice and an especially fine one of the train station at Theresienstadt, site of the Nazi concentration camp. In a very different chiming, one that's surely intentional, it hangs near a 1938 Roman Vishniac photograph of the Lublin shtetl.



Julia Margaret Cameron's portrait of Thomas Carlyle.

Comments



Richard Misrach's "Road Blockade and Pyramid"

**THE THRILL OF THE CHASE: The Wagstaff Collection of Photographs
at the J. Paul Getty Museum**

**ARTIST'S CHOICE: Photographs from the Judy Glickman Lauder
Collection**

At Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Sq., Portland, Maine, through April 30 and
May 29, respectively. 207-775-6148, www.portlandmuseum.org

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