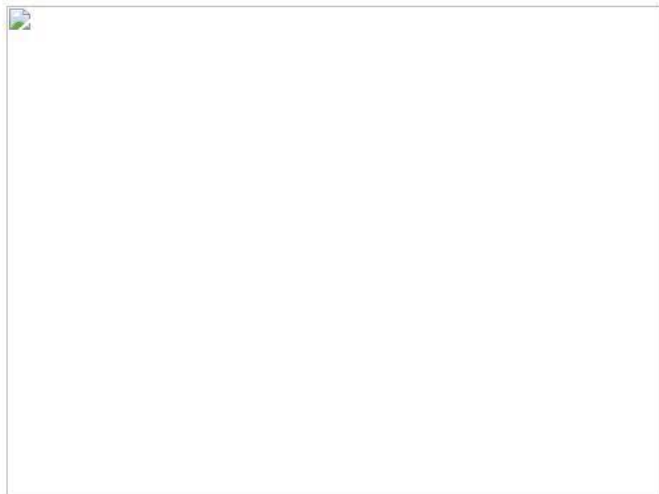


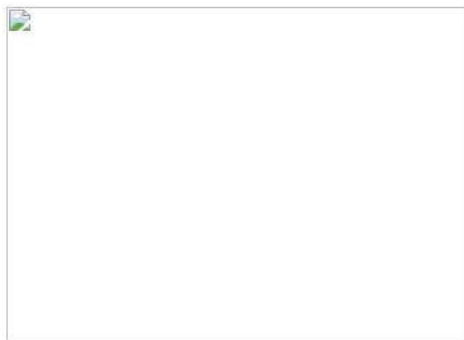
SNAPSHOT CHRONICLES: INVENTING THE AMERICAN PHOTO ALBUM



Installation view, Cooley Gallery

At the turn of the 20th century, the emergence of inexpensive, portable cameras made it possible for many people to record their lives in pictures for the first time. *Snapshot Chronicles* begins with the premise that the sudden access of the camera into public and private domains--the home, the workplace, at special occasions--meant that men, women, and even children became the authors of individualized visual biographies. Unlike a single snapshot that focuses attention on a single moment, photo albums offered people the challenge of assembling their photographs into sequential narratives. The albums in this exhibition, drawn from the collection of Barbara Levine, reveal the creativity, whimsy, and curiosity of early amateur photographers. Album makers freely experimented with visual and material techniques, from creative cropping, shredding, silhouetting, and patterning, to the addition of witty text and the arrangement of photos into compelling narratives. Some albums are notable because the photographs are exceptional, demonstrating a technical and aesthetic sophistication for the medium. Other albums are remarkable as forms of folk art, and for the recognizable influence of the fine arts, graphic design, and early cinema. Within albums, people sought new ways of representing themselves and their experiences. The tradition of self-chronicling has evolved from personal photo albums shared among family and friends, to digital and web-based forms that allow people to instantly publish their visual stories to worldwide audiences.

Snapshot Chronicles is curated by collector and curator Barbara Levine and Stephanie Snyder, director, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery



A fully illustrated 200-page exhibition catalogue is being copublished by Reed College and Princeton Architectural Press. The catalogue is designed by Martin Venezky of Appetite Engineers and contains essays by Barbara Levine, Stephanie Snyder, Matthew Stadler, and Terry Toedtmeier. Publication date: Winter, 2005. The catalog is currently available through pre-order on Amazon.com. [Please click here to open ordering information.](#)

ART EXHIBIT

Photo albums offer a window into the past

Here's a snapshot of how the Portland art world works.

Stephanie Snyder, who runs the Cooley Gallery at Reed College, was showing her own art at the Jewish Museum of San Francisco in 2002. After they got to know each other, curator Barbara Levine invited Snyder to her home to see her secret passion: a collection of 400 American photo albums from 1880 to 1930, the early days of the cheap snapshot.

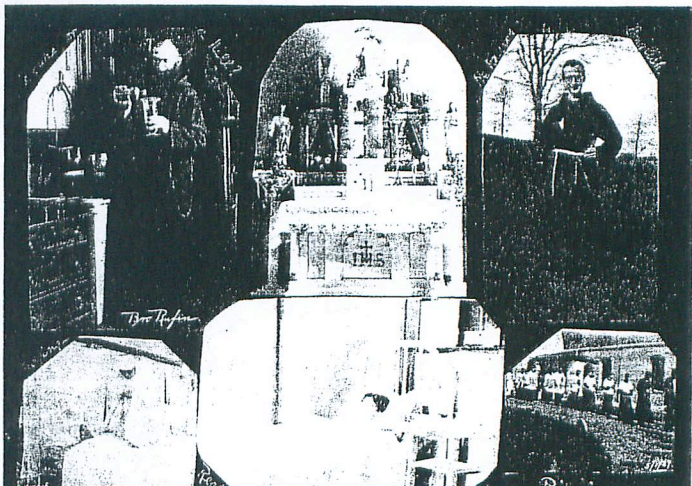
Back in the day, there were no rules for the middle-class photo album. Some people tore the edges of photos into spiky cloud shapes, cut them up into collages (sometimes bizarre — an arm here, a face there) and annotated and even drew on them in white ink using fountain pens.

The result is an exhibit at Reed of the anonymous photographers' efforts, "Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album."

"We're interested in showing the albums as another form of expression people took when cameras first became accessible and portable, specifically when Eastman Kodak introduced the Brownie camera for a dollar," Levine says. "It was the first time people could document their own lives, and the photo album became the hobby, the ritual of what you do after you take all those pictures."

Snyder points to an explosion of imagery.

Brownie cameras could hold 100 images, she says. "You'd send it back to Rochester (N.Y.), they would process and reload it for you, and return it with your prints," she says. "Suddenly people had hundreds of im-



COURTESY OF COOLEY GALLERY

Barbara Levine's collection of photo albums, some of them on exhibit at Reed College, include this one from 1926. The album's origins are unknown.

ages in their lives."

Anyone with a hard drive groaning with unnamed digital photos will be able to relate to that. However, in this show you don't get to see everything. The 60 albums on show must remain under glass.

Three albums have been scanned and are viewable on computer screens, so you get "the immersive experience," as Levine calls it. "This exhibit highlights the under-recognized creativity and folk art that these albums express."

One man's album includes drawings, photos cut into shapes and a hand-cut leather cover. He worked in the logging industry, and his images include early clear-cuts. Both women wonder whether the photographer was proud of the destruction, or appalled.

Formal questions also occupy them. Levine calls the shredding and cutting an attempt by people to free themselves from the confines of the picture, and an early form of animation.

Another album shows "images of children and babies and picnicking right next to the ravages of war," Snyder says. "Everything is placed next to each other." She's particularly fond of a soldier's World War I album from France that includes burned-

out tanks and piled-up helmets.

"Then there's this woman that keeps reappearing who's obviously an erotic interest," she says of a *femme fatale* in a bucolic setting, holding a revolver. "There are obvious areas where desire and violence overlap."

So what were those salty old Edwardians up to? Almost exclusively taking portraits, usually outdoors for the natural light. Not much porn — or "erotica," as Snyder delicately corrects — aside from a naked man washing his wife's back beside a lake.

One of the best albums shows another young couple's honeymoon, where the woman, an actress and dancer, cavorts on the sand. Lighthearted captions that explain what's going on are reminiscent of blogging, Snyder says.

The exhibition, two years in the making, will be represented in an art book this fall by Reed College and the Princeton Architectural Press, and then will go on tour. Unmissable.

— Joseph Gullivan

Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday-SUNDAY, through July 11, opening reception 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. June 3, Douglas F. Cooley Art Gallery, Reed College, 3202 S.E. Woodstock Blvd., 503-777-7251, free

Barbara Levine's collection of vernacular photo albums tells countless stories. Most of them are about anonymous people, but some feature a few characters we know. Above is a page from an anonymous collector's album, which includes a photo of the young **AL CAPONE**. Below is the enigmatic final page from Wilbur B. Knies' World War I-era album.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF BARBARA LEVINE

Revolution in a snap

A Reed College exhibit shows that photo albums of the early 1900s, like blogs today, were a hip diary form

By **D.K. ROW**
THE OREGONIAN

For Barbara Levine, the magic moment came at a busy Sausalito, Calif., flea market. Amid piles of furniture and other secondhand knickknacks she saw a small, fragile-looking photo album with no cover. Slowly, she opened the delicate book. "Welcome to my world," a striking photo of a young woman seemed to announce.

"I was mesmerized," Levine says about the photo album, which unfolded page after faded page of vintage snapshots, circa the early 1900s. "Everything around me disappeared into the background." Levine bought the album for \$1.

So began the Bay Area curator and collector's 25-year obsession with the discarded photos of other people's private histories, one that now reaches its pinnacle with "Snapshot

Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album," an ambitious exhibit at Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery.

Curated by Levine and Cooley director Stephanie Snyder, "Snapshot" presents a selection of more than 400 photo albums that Levine has turned into

her personal shrine to people's lost memories. Sixty albums purchased at flea markets, antique stores and estate sales and on eBay are on display at Reed, each mounted and presented like priceless jewels from a Tiffany's store in all of their yellowing and slowly crumbling beauty.

Complemented by a soon-to-be-published book on the show by Princeton Architectural Press and then a stint at the San Francisco Main Public Library in 2006, "Snapshot" is the latest celebration of vernacular photography's enduring allure. Last year, The Getty presented "Close to Home: An American Album," a collection of roughly 200 individual snapshots from the midcentury, also made by nonprofessional photographers and purchased similarly in such outposts of junk and lost ephemera as flea markets.

REVIEW

Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album

Where: Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd.

Hours: Noon-5 p.m. every day except Monday

Closes: July 11



Snapshot: Brownie camera ushered in a new era

Continued from Page C1

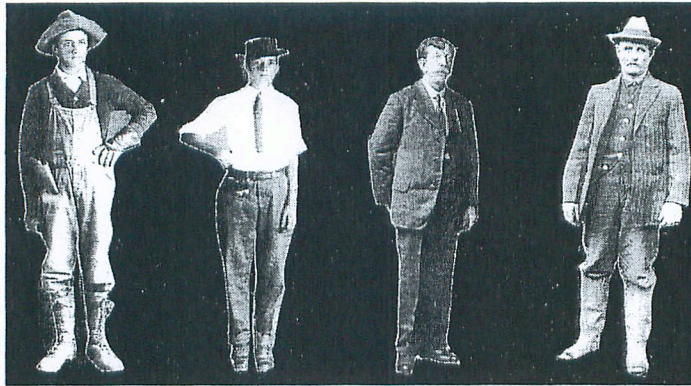
But the Reed show ups the ante through photo albums such as the one Levine, 44, bought in Sausalito. It emphasizes amateur photography's halcyon era from the 1890s to the 1930s, when photo albums emerged as the hip new diary form, the equivalent of such current practices as blogging.

This first great era of egalitarian autobiography was created by technological advances. Small "detective cameras" existed in the 19th century. But in 1900, photographic pioneer George Eastman made the first point-and-shoot box camera that even children could use — the Brownie.

Clunky and crude by today's standards — there's one on view in the Reed exhibit that viewers can touch — the Brownie was both a mechanical and creative revolution for the masses:

It cost a dollar and contained 100 negatives that could be returned for processing and printing. It also sated an unexpressed hunger — the collective, instinctive human desire to capture and chronicle our lives as they are being lived.

And the Brownie had an even greater impact than that. The influence of such photographs made by the masses would become apparent in the work of famous professional photographers that followed in later generations. Documentary-style photographers such as Gary Winogrand, Robert Frank and Nan Goldin absorbed amateur photography's colloquial shooting style, turning its casual way of looking at the world into art.



FROM THE COLLECTION OF BARBARA LEVINE

Many photo albums featured collage elements, like this series of portraits that were cut out and glued onto the page from Mable Pendleton's book, which is dated 1920.

But Levine and Snyder aren't solely interested in making such art historical connections for viewers. For Levine, especially, the exhibit is an opportunity to show off her best vintage photo albums and also a chance to opine about what distinguishes a good photo album from a bad one.

The curator isn't interested in ordinary baby pictures or high school and wedding-day photos. Instead, she's drawn to ingenuity, complexity and expressiveness — the unique ways in which a photographer represents his or her life and personality.

"I'm not interested in genealogy," says Levine, who also collects dime-store novelties and dexterity games. "I'm interested in the albums as objects, as visual explorations, concepts and storytelling. I look for albums where the voice of the maker is palpable."

Those voices are dizzyingly varied in the show, a rich, panoramic sampling of attitudes and techniques. "Snapshot" homes in on two common album types of the early Brownie period: books where photographs have been unusually juxtaposed with bits of humorous or witty textual commentary and those composed of pictures that

have been cut up and spliced like strips of confetti, diamond shapes and even numbers.

Of course, the most thrilling and revealing albums are the ones that simply tell good stories, albeit fragmented ones. One particularly exquisite book is filled with pictures of parades, fishing trips, railroads and boats. It's a story of scenic bliss that is abruptly and surprisingly interrupted by several shots of devastation: the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake that reduced much of the city to rubble.

Another is a young woman's extensive celebration of the many people, places and events in her life. Interspersed with the dozens of portraits of unknown young men and women are several of a boyish Al Capone, seemingly still years away from becoming the chubby, infamous Chicago crime boss known as "Scarface." Levine says she bought this album at an auction.

Perhaps the most striking album belongs to an American serviceman during World War I, identified as Wilbur B. Knies through an inscription in the front of the book. The specter of Knies' military service — it's not clear whether he died in the war — showers the photos

with a slight perfume of dread, but Knies' affection for men and women in the ardor of vigor ultimately rises above.

What's especially memorable in Knies' album is the last page, three vertically arranged photos that punch the viewer in the gut with their strangeness and eeriness. Pictured are, first, a beautiful woman seated next to Knies, though at a curious distance; next is a photo of two men in a bunker during the war; and then, once again, the beautiful woman resting on a rock, holding, nonchalantly, a pistol.

Co-curator Stephanie Snyder says a key reason early photo albums resonate at a gut-level has nothing to do with the photographers' witty text or ingeniously spliced images.

"In some way we're not supposed to be seeing these albums," she says. "They weren't made for us. We are eavesdropping. We are voyeurs, which makes the presence of these lives so strong."

The exhibit also reminds us of a time when personal documentation was so much purer and less gaudy than the *Sturm und Drang* of today's relentless media activity, and ultimately that may be its greatest lesson.

"It's insightful to look at the tradition of how people told their stories when photography was first invented," Levine says. "People weren't taking pictures for fame or recognition. They were doing it for posterity. I think we should appreciate that."

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