

Swann Galleries, New York City

Photos and Photo Books, Art and Storytelling

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Swann Auction Galleries

“To collect photographs is to collect the world.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977)

“Art & Storytelling” was the title Swann photography department head Daile Kaplan gave to the sale of photos and photo books that took place in the auction house’s New York City gallery on October 19, 2017. At first glance the theme seems to focus bidders’ attention solely on a photo’s subject matter—its plot, so to speak. Diane Arbus’s 1963 *Teenage Couple on Hudson Street N.Y.C.*, for example, is at its simplest level a love story. Likewise, Alexander Gardner’s *Dead Rebel Sharpshooter at Gettysburg* and *Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep, At the Battle of Gettysburg* are war stories. Elliott Erwitt’s *New York City (Chihuahua in a Sweater)* is a comedy. Dorothea Lange’s *Drought*, picturing refugees from Oklahoma, is a tragedy.

Subject matter certainly isn’t a bad place to begin one’s appreciation of photography, and it often provides an entry point for a new collector. “When collectors are drawn to certain images, they don’t always know why,” Kaplan told me at a preview. “They may say, ‘I like flowers.’ Through the subject matter is how they walk into the wonderland.” But as she explained, each photo in the sale—indeed, every photo extant—offers more than half a dozen other storylines. The plot thickens.

There is the photographer’s story, the reasons why he or she was attracted to certain subject matter in the first place. There is the story of how the photograph was made—the creative act of producing the image, which may involve such things as fortitude, trial and error, danger, cajolery, or sheer good luck. There is the story of making the print or whatever other medium of reproduction the photographer has chosen to deliver the image to viewers.

Each photo in the sale—indeed, every photo extant—offers more than half a dozen other storylines.

There is the story of photography itself and how a particular photo fits into that chronicle of technical developments. There is the story of trends and aesthetic styles developed by photo artists and imitated by followers. There is the story of the photo’s exhibition and publication, and its acceptance or rejection by the powers who decide what images enter the canon of visual culture. There is the story of the photo’s ownership, its provenance—why it was bought, why it was sold, or handed down, and to whom—a story that may involve such things as banal as family feuds and as significant as changing tastes.

And there is, finally, the story of the marketplace for photography, which is spanking new by antiques-trade standards. Essentially no marketplace existed for it as late as 1967, said Arthur Lubow in his recent biography *Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer* (2016). By his reckoning, it wasn’t until two years later that a watershed moment occurred, when “a collector and enthusiast named Lee Witkin open[ed] the first New York gallery that succeeded solely through the sale of photographs.” The marketplace storyline—why a particular image, offered at a certain time and place, sells for its estimate, or multiples of that number, or fails to sell at all—is, of course, the one that must most concern me here. But it’s hard not to be captivated by all the rest of it.



***Girls in the Windows, NYC* by Ormond Gigli (b. 1925) went to a collector for \$16,250 (est. \$14,000/18,000). The year of the shoot was 1960; this post-1960 silver print is signed and notated with the edition number, 88/100.**

The first seven lots were Edward S. Curtis photos, and six sold for a total of \$94,375 (including buyers’ premiums). Four were from the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, a consignment that Swann has been offering a bit at a time. The top-priced photo in that group, going to a collector for \$20,000, was a rare orotone of *The Potter, Hopi* in its original frame.

I reviewed the 2012 biography *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis* by Timothy Egan for this magazine (see *M.A.D.*, January 2013, p. 31-A). Its overblown title notwithstanding, it is an excellent life story by a National Book Award winner. One part recounts how Curtis’s magnum opus, the 20-volume *The North American Indian*, came about and then almost didn’t. Egan includes, in his epilogue, the work’s rediscovery. The process began in the early 1970s, after more than 200,000 photogravures and the copper gravure plates that Curtis had used to publish it turned up in a Boston bookstore’s basement. In the photo book section of this Swann sale, *The North American Indian*, volume X, the one that documents the Northwest coastal Kwakiutl, sold for \$12,500. That puts the grand total for Curtis material at \$106,875, approximately 7% of the sale’s \$1,476,675 total.

The photo books themselves were one of the sale’s highlights. Swann offered 26 and sold all but three, eight of them above estimate. A rare first edition of *The Central Park* sold for \$6000. Published in 1864, it is illustrated with 50 of the earliest photos of America’s first major landscaped public park by William H. Guild Jr. with text by Frederick B. Perkins. A collection of 13 of Edward Ruscha’s photo books from the 1960s and 1970s, including his early *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, sold in one lot to an institution for \$16,250. They were all first editions, and five were signed.

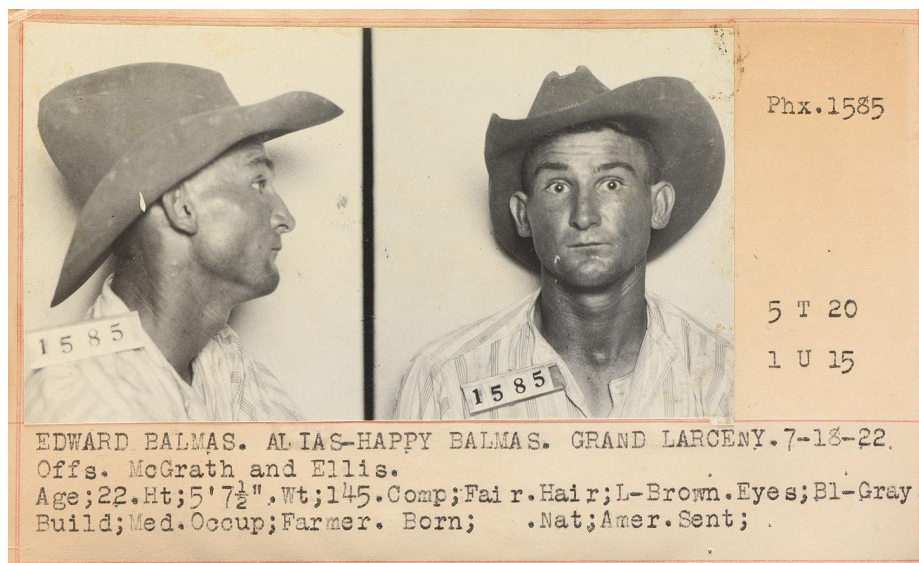
A signed copy of Ansel Adams’s *Yosemite and the Range of Light* was another coveted prize, going to a dealer for \$20,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The Adams photo book was in an extremely

rare deluxe edition published in Boston by the New York Graphic Society in 1979, and the book included a 1979 oversize silver print of the circa 1950 *Forest Floor, Yosemite Valley, California*.

“The photo book has always been an important part of the photography market,” said Kaplan, who has been an advocate for the inclusion of the form in the fine art sphere of the auction marketplace. “Early on, the primary format for distributing photo images was through it. It’s all keyed into the larger history of photography.” And it continues. “Younger artists are today using the photo book as an autonomous art form,” she noted.

There is also evidence of a darkroom revival going on, Kaplan said. “The young people who come to Swann look at the work of someone like Adams and recognize that this is not a digital output. They get inspired.” Ironically, she observed, “The digital revolution has actually expanded the client base.” More people taking more photos increases the odds that some of them will start to get curious, start to learn, and start to collect.

Besides the Adams photo book, the sale offered nine Adams prints, all but one a landscape. The exception was a 1970s silver print of *Political Signs and Circus Poster, San Francisco*, a 1931 image of a section of a corrugated-iron-sided building overlaid with ads. “Collectors sometimes find it hard to make the leap” beyond an artist’s quintessential work, Kaplan said. “Given his identification with the American landscape and his role as a champion of conservation, as environmentalism was then known, [Political Signs] is anomalous.” Similar to Adams’s photos of a Japanese-American internment camp, the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California, during World War II, his Depression-era photos include “a lesser-known body of work for him.” But in Kaplan’s view, Adams would have been uncharacteristically “insensitive” if, aware of the strife going on in the 1930s, he had not made scenes such as *Political Signs* part of his repertoire. For that reason, they’re “admirable” on more than the purely



An album of approximately 2270 mug shots made in Phoenix, Arizona, during the period 1918-28 sold for \$7500 (est. \$7000/10,000). “We have sold many of these [mug shot] albums, but this was unusual for the inclusion of ones that were shot outdoors in natural light,” said Kaplan. Thanks to the captions, the album’s story content is strong. Each one is a cautionary tale complete in three or four succinct lines: name, aliases, birthday, height, weight, hair color, eye color, occupation, crime, and sentence. Unlike more typical mug shots, many of these shots show subjects with varied facial expressions, from “shame” to “callous confidence,” in the words of Kaplan, who felt these expressions may have been the result of the anonymous photographer’s effect on the subjects. Same as a true portrait photographer, he or she got the subjects to reveal themselves.

aesthetic level. Going perhaps to someone who felt the same way, the lot realized a mid-estimate \$5200.

Readers of Mary Street Alinder's 1996 biography *Ansel Adams* will learn that Adams found making an "acceptable" print of what is perhaps his most famous photograph, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, "nearly impossible to achieve." The negative's date is November 1, 1941, and for the rest of his life, according to Alinder, who was Adams's darkroom assistant in his later years, it remained his biggest challenge. "*Moonrise* was so difficult that the master, at the age of seventy-eight, sometimes took two or three days to make the first good print," she reports.

The *Moonrise* offered in this sale failed to find a buyer, passing at \$70,000. Just two weeks earlier, Sotheby's estimated its *Moonrise* at \$25,000/35,000, and it sold for \$81,250, almost exactly what Swann had suggested as the low estimate to its bidders. But Swann's estimate, \$80,000/120,000, was not overly ambitious. The Sotheby's *Moonrise* was a 1978 example; the great majority were made after 1970—hundreds of them. The circa 1965 example at Swann's is rare. So what happened? Suffice it to say that a lot of Adams material was offered at the same time, and bidders made their choices. As Kaplan said, "The print that we offered was a beautiful example of Adams's early printing technique, and as is always true in cases like this one, it was disappointing that it didn't find a new home."

Meanwhile, the record for a *Moonrise* remains at \$609,600. It was set at Sotheby's on October 17, 2006, for a print made in 1948. Adams himself crows about the quality of these very early ones in letters reprinted in *Ansel Adams: Letters 1916-1984*, edited by Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman, published in 1988 and revised in 2001. Both Alinder books are highly recommended.

Swann set several records of its own at this sale, including an artist record for Saul Leiter when a dealer paid \$25,000 for a 1990s chromogenic print of his *Waiter, Paris*. Leiter, who was American, made the image of an elderly server balancing a tray in a crowded cafe in 1959. "It has a timeless quality," said Kaplan. "It certainly says 'Paris,' as would be clear to anyone who has been to Paris. But there is also something about the palette, the composition, that transcends the [medium of the] photographic image." In addition to making photographs, Leiter was a painter, and the work's painterly qualities are unmistakable. "He was using color at a time when it was distinctly unfashionable," said Kaplan. The same work in black and white would not have nearly the same effect.

One of Leiter's hand-tinted nudes was also in the sale, and it achieved \$8125. Numerous other nudes and nearly nudes sold successfully. Among the bestsellers was a lot of three 1935-43 silver prints of young men by George Platt Lynes. Selling online to a collector for \$14,300, his *Bobby Evans & Fred Ritter, N. Mark Pagano*, and *Blanchard Kennedy* were from the collection of Lynes's friend Monroe Wheeler (1899-1988), a Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) director of exhibitions and board member who was, to use the old-fashioned phrase, a longtime companion of novelist Glenway Wescott. Another of the standouts was Horst P. Horst's *Round the Clock III, New York*, whose 1987 subject is the bottom half of a fashion model lifting her long, polka-dotted skirt to reveal a lacy G-string. It sold for \$15,600, a new record for that image, to a collector bidding online.

Yet another record was set when Irving Penn's 1947 image *Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, Painters*, sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$6000/9000). The ferrotype silver print of the two Surrealists, who were married for 30 years, bore Penn's hand stamp, his copyright hand stamp, and a typed caption label on its mount.

Similar to Lynes, Horst, and Penn, Ormond Gigli was a fashion photographer who transitioned into fine art photography. Gigli's *Girls in the Windows, NYC* was hanging behind the auctioneer's podium during the sale. The chromogenic print shows fashion models posing in 41 windowless window frames of a grungy, unoccupied building about to be razed. As Kaplan tells the story, "He saw the picture before it existed," when he happened upon the building one day in 1960 and learned its fate. Quickly assembling his model-wife and a coterie of their model-friends, along with a Rolls-Royce, which he arranged to be parked out front, he made what became one of his first fine art photographs. Theatrical and totally staged, same as a fashion shoot, the photo combined

the best of his commercial instincts with a sure artistic impulse. The post-1960 print sold to a collector for \$16,250.

Arbus was herself once a fashion photographer, but she abandoned the business for the portraiture that made her famous—eventually. In 1969, the MoMA bought three of her prints for \$75 each. At this sale, a silver print of the previously mentioned "love story," *Teenage Couple on Hudson Street N.Y.C.*, sold to a collector for \$22,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 1963 image was printed after Arbus's 1971 death by Neil Selkirk. From London's Zelda Cheatle gallery, the print went to the British photographer and collector Steve Pyke circa 1988. The Lubow biography of Arbus supplies some background. The double portrait of the "strangely old-looking teenage couple" was shot a few blocks from where Arbus lived, in Greenwich Village. The time was near the end of the year, "possibly during the daytime hours of New Year's Eve..." Kaplan said of the couple: "She obviously had their agreement and consent." She also said, of Arbus's continuing, wide appeal: "Her work is bigger than photography."

Like photo books, vernacular photography is a category that Kaplan has pioneered in the marketplace over the last few years. This time, a circa 1915 salesman's album of 86 hand-colored silver prints from the Eberhard Faber Pencil Company of New York was one of the surprise stars of that section of the sale. Showing pencils, pens, chalk, erasers, rubber bands, and other stationery items in bright, vivid colors and clean, strikingly attractive arrangements, the album sold to an institution for \$10,625. "Everyone loved it," Kaplan declared. "People who grew up using pencils could immediately relate to it—the utility, the simplicity, the functionality of the pencil. It's a bygone era," she said of a time when the pencil was central to the story of how a child learned to write. So the lot had its nostalgic aspects, but it also had a substantial aesthetic component. "There's something very beautiful about a still life of pencils," said Kaplan, "and something very contemporary."

Kaplan is gathering material for her next sale, scheduled for February 15. "Because of the stand-alone nature of the sale"—i.e., no photo sales will take place at the big auction houses at that time—"we enjoy having our February sale," she said. Its theme is "Icons & Images." "But even though future sales will have different titles, 'Art and Storytelling' remains the ongoing theme. We're successfully building a new, broader market of crossover and emerging collectors who enjoy discovering the ways in which art tells a story."

For more information, see the website (www.swanngalleries.com).



A collector bidding online paid \$16,900 (est. \$7000/10,000) for *Marilyn Monroe* by Alfred Eisenstaedt (1898-1995). Eisenstaedt made the picture of the 26-year-old rising star in 1953 in Monroe's Hollywood residence on assignment from *Life* magazine. The 12½" x 9½" silver print was made in 1979. It has impressions from both his Time Inc. hand stamp and his copyright hand stamp, and it is signed, titled, and dated on the back.



Just ask any fan of *The Grapes of Wrath*. There is a whole novel's worth of narrative in *Drought Refugees from Oklahoma* by Dorothea Lange (1895-1965). This seems especially evident if you are aware of the complete title/caption: *Drought refugees from Oklahoma camping by roadside. They hope to work in the cotton fields. There are seven in the family. Blythe, California, August 1936.* "We feel their poverty viscerally. No detail is spared," said Kaplan, pointing out the disembodied foot at the lower right when she showed me this oversize (15½" x 17") silver print from the 1960s. "Lange used subtle tones of gray because it's a gray subject. It should be gray." Probably people other than myself have noted the husband's "stigmata" and the upward-looking Madonna-like eyes of the wife. As for Lange's story, she started out as a portrait photographer, then transitioned into the Farm Security Administration (FSA) work for which she is best known, becoming, in Kaplan's words, "one of [the FSA's] master storytellers." She made the change after seeing a Depression-era protest, leaving behind a young family of her own to document scenarios such as this one. The Library of Congress produced prints on demand from Lange's negatives. This print, with a Library of Congress hand stamp on reverse, sold for \$9375 (est. \$6000/9000).



Marilyn Monroe on a Pink Elephant by Weegee (1899-1968) went to an online bidder for \$4940 (est. \$2500/3500). "Two avid pachyderm collectors online—that's all it could be," quipped Swann's president and chief auctioneer Nicholas Lowry as the bid climbed. I found this to be an unlikely subject for Weegee, but, said Kaplan, he was a press photographer, and although he is more closely associated with "crime and the nitty-gritty life of the street," he also photographed celebrities and spent time in Hollywood. The circa 1955 silver print (image size 13¼" x 11"; mount size 16¼" x 15") has the signature of Weegee (a.k.a. Arthur Fellig) and his hand stamp on the mount.

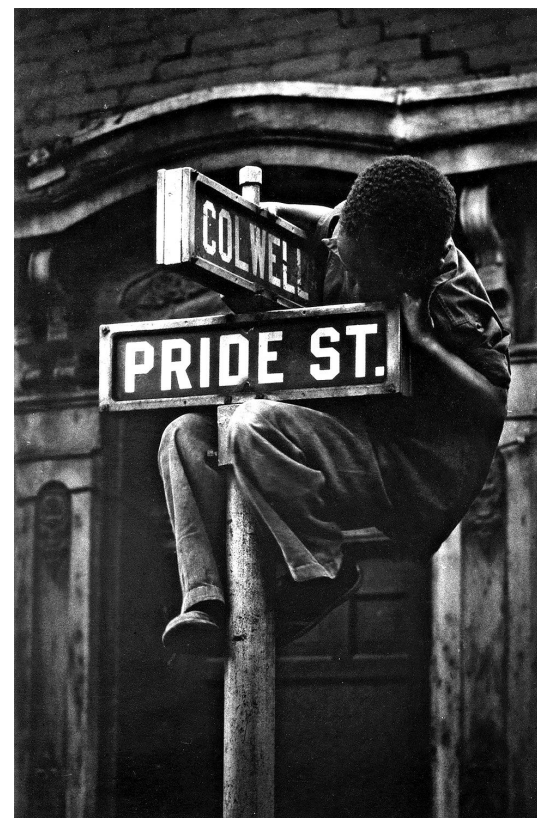
- AUCTION -



Horst P. Horst's *Model in Evening Gown and Hat* sold to an absentee bidder for \$10,000 (est. \$5000/7500). Horst (1906-1999) made the image circa 1955; the 1980s silver print (image size 15½" square; sheet size 20" x 16") has Horst's signature and his hand stamp.



Political Signs and Circus Poster, San Francisco by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) sold online for \$5200 (est. \$4000/6000). The 1970s silver print is 13½" x 10¼". The mount is 20" x 16" and has Adams's signature in pencil and his hand stamp with inked title and negative date (1931).



Pride Street by W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) sold for \$6760 (est. \$2000/3000). From the photographer's 1955-56 "Pittsburgh" series, the silver print (image size 8½" x 5¾"; sheet size, slightly larger) was printed after 1963.



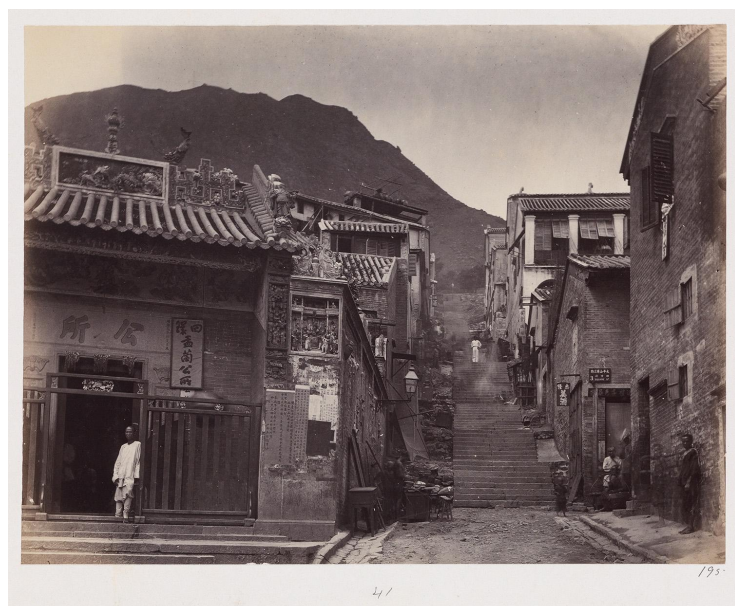
A collector paid \$26,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000), a record price, for a copy of *BAM* [Brooklyn Academy of Music] *Photography Portfolio I* (2000), featuring 11 photographs (loose as issued) by Richard Avedon, Nan Goldin, Annie Leibovitz, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, William Wegman, and others with names of contemporary blue-chip quality. Pictured is a photo from the series "My Ghost" by Andy Fuss.



The Potter, Hopi (1906) by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) sold to a phone bidder for \$20,000 (est. \$5000/7500). Consigned by New York City's Louis K. Meisel Gallery, the orotone is in its original 16½" x 13½" frame with Curtis's signature in the 13½" x 10½" plate.



Bidders took notice of the sale's cover lot, big time. One of them bought *Waiter, Paris* by Saul Leiter (1923-2013) for \$25,000 (est. \$6000/9000), a new artist's record. The chromogenic print was made from a 1959 negative in the 1990s. It measures 19½" x 13"; the sheet is slightly larger.



An album of 67 albumen prints credited to Scotsman John Thomson (1837-1921) sold to a dealer for \$45,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000). It consists of more than 30 depictions of China—streets, temples, rural landscapes, a shop interior, and Hong Kong's harbor—along with views of Singapore, Borneo, and other spots in South Asia during the period 1862-72.



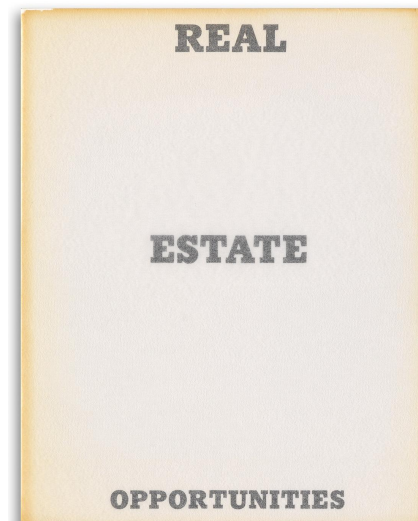
A circa 1915 salesman's album of 86 hand-colored silver prints showing pencils, pens, chalk, erasers, rubber bands, and display window products from the Eberhard Faber Pencil Company of New York sold to an institution for \$10,625 (est. \$1500/2500).



A rare first edition of *The Central Park*, with 50 photographs by William H. Guild Jr. and text by Frederick B. Perkins, sold for \$6000 (est. \$3000/4500). It was published by Carleton in New York in 1864. Just six years earlier, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux had won the design competition for their plan for America's first ever landscaped public park.



This signed 1990s silver print of Alfred Eisenstaedt's 1951 *Drum major for the University of Michigan marching band, practicing his high-kicking prance, leads line of seven admiring children, Ann Arbor, MI* sold for \$10,625 (est. \$5000/7500). The image size is 17" x 21 3/8"; sheet, 20" x 23 3/4".



A collection of 13 photo books by Edward Ruscha (b. 1937) sold to an institution for \$16,250 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The dry, wry wit of Ruscha is on display in these little conceptual volumes, seven of them self-published. They include *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1967), and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). Also part of this lot was a selection of five later publications by the artist.



This 1980s silver print of a 1946 image by Elliott Erwitt (b. 1928), *New York City (Chihuahua in a Sweater)*, image size 12" x 17 1/2", sheet size 16" x 20", "fetched" \$4250 (est. \$3000/4500).

Here's another image from the Eberhard Faber album, which had particular appeal for me. As a callow youth I devoured the life stories of writers as if I were reading *Lives of the Saints*, paying particular attention to details about what they employed as their writing implements. "I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write," Ernest Hemingway recalled in his posthumous memoir *A Moveable Feast* (1964). "A girl came in the cafe and sat by herself at a table near the window. She was very pretty with a face fresh as a newly minted coin.... I watched the girl whenever I looked up, or when I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink. I've seen you, beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again, I thought. You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and this pencil." As Hemingway fans know, he also used a typewriter, standing to do so. Schinto photo.



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