

Swann Galleries, New York City

# \$1.2 Million Photography Sale Offers Americana from Ansel Adams to Anonymous

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

Ansel Adams, one of the 20th century's greatest and most revered American photographers, once famously said, "The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance." Swann's photography department, headed by its longtime specialist Daile Kaplan, drove home the idea of photography's two-pronged nature with the title that it chose for its spring sale on April 20 in the auction house's New York City gallery.

"We named our sale 'Images and Objects' to reinforce and target a better understanding of the notion of photography as picture-making but also as a creative art form, where the physical object is an important component of what people are buying," Kaplan explained. This distinction is especially crucial to stress in our digital age, she added, where so many images are "electronic and virtual and non-physical."

Adams and his work, represented at this sale by three photo books, a partial series from a portfolio, and eight individual images, including one of his most iconic, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, are excellent exemplars of photography's dual reality, she noted. "Here is a photographer who created the 'zone system,' who was known for his flawless photographic printing-making techniques, who was the charismatic teacher of hundreds and hundreds of his fellow photographers. So this idea of the object is something that Ansel Adams is very identified with."

Adams made *Moonrise* in 1941 after a frustrating day of driving around looking for a good subject and coming up with nothing, Kaplan said. It was nearing four o'clock in the afternoon when he saw what he called "an inevitable photograph" in *Examples: The Making of Forty Photographs*, published in 1983. He put the camera on top of the car and made the image from there. One of the most popular photographs that Swann sees at auction by anyone, it is available in different formats and sizes and printed during different periods over the eminent photographer's long career. In fact, said Kaplan, a census indicates that he made almost 2000 copies of it before he died in 1984 at age 82. Nonetheless, as she pointed out, whenever the image appears at auction, competitive bidding ensues, and this time was no different. A circa 1976 silver print measuring 15 1/8" x 19 1/4", signed by Adams on the front of its mount and estimated at \$30,000/45,000, sold to an unidentified dealer on the phone for \$42,500 (all prices include the buyer's premium).

Going for \$45,000 to another anonymous dealer on the phone was a lot of 60 plates from *Animal Locomotion* by Eadweard Muybridge. Part of Muybridge's multi-volume book, the serial images were published as a scientific study by the University of Pennsylvania in 1887. An Englishman who immigrated to the United States in 1850 at the age of 20, Muybridge started the project by managing to make the first-ever photo of a galloping horse with all four of its hooves off the ground. As the well-known story goes, he accomplished the feat in the spring of 1872 as the result of a challenge by industrialist and

one-time California Governor Leland Stanford. The group of images that sold at Swann show a horse jumping as well as other animals (a leopard, a lion, a buffalo) in motion and birds (a hawk, an eagle) in flight. They also depict a variety of men and women engaged in sports and other activities: pole-vaulting, swinging a baseball bat, throwing a javelin, using a hatchet, twirling a baton.

Interestingly, these images, universally credited as the prelude to the idea of motion pictures, aren't actually photographs. "They are collotypes," Kaplan said. "They are printed with ink, but the technique is such that they resemble photographic prints." Learning about and understanding these different techniques is what it means to be a photography collector, as anyone who has tried it will tell you. Or, as Kaplan put it, "The object is what people are collecting in addition to the image itself."

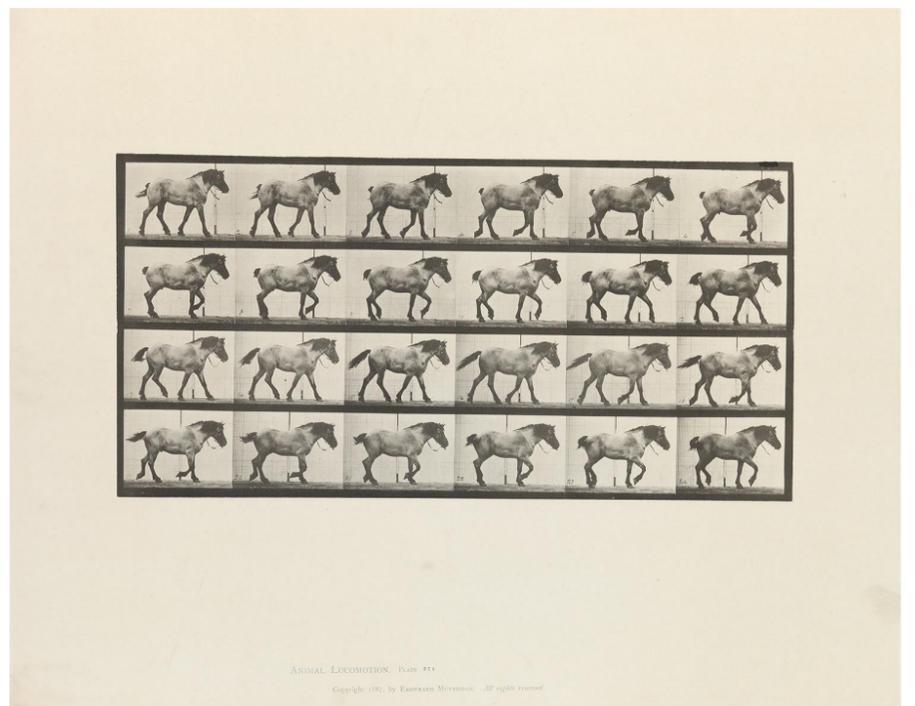
Nine of ten lots of Native American portraits that Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) made in 1905 and 1906 sold for a total of \$142,510, making Curtis material the highlight of the day, at least in terms of dollar values. One price was a record breaker for a particular Curtis image, *Red Cloud, Oglala*. Estimated at \$6000/9000, the platinum print of the leader of the Oglala Lakota from 1868 to 1909 and a formidable opponent of the U.S. Army went to yet another anonymous dealer on the phone for \$32,500.

Curtis, whom Kaplan calls "a techie genius in his time," perfected and refined a technique that results in what is called an orotone. As she described it, the process results in "a vivid gold-toned image on glass." Curtis displayed his orotones in Belle Époque-style frames of his own design. At this sale, three of the images by Curtis—*The Scout, Apache*; *Three Chiefs, Piegan*; and *An Oasis in the Badlands*—were orotones that retained those original frames.

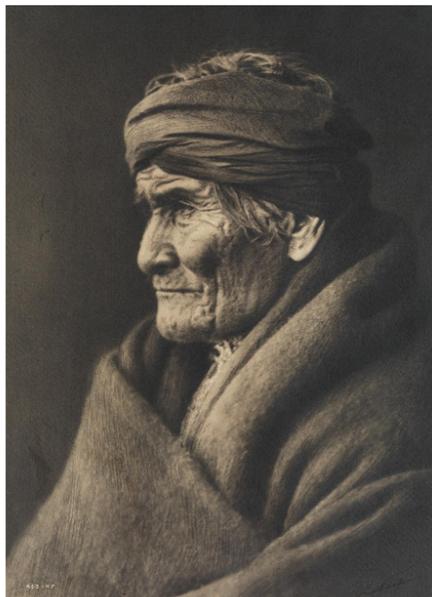
Swann has done extremely well with Curtis in the past. On October 15, 2007, Kaplan's department sold a partial set of Curtis's "The North American Indian" for \$1,048,000. It was Swann's first million-dollar sale. On October 4, 2012, the department sold a complete set for \$1,440,000. It remains the auction house's top lot of all time. At Swann's fall photo sale, scheduled for October 19, there will again be images by Curtis on the block. "We'll have additional orotones and platinum prints," said Kaplan. "We have been working with a private collection" (the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York City) "and are distributing this material over successive sales."

Lewis W. Hine is best known for his images of working people—children among them. Seven, including *Sadie Pfeifer, a Cotton Mill Spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina*; *Workers with Flag, Empire State Building*; and the masterful *Powerhouse Mechanic*, were available at this sale. But Hine is more than a social documentarian, said Kaplan, who has published two books about him. "The images certainly had a social documentary thrust and were meant to educate the public," she said, "but there is an aesthetic aspect to them."

The 1920-21 image *Powerhouse*



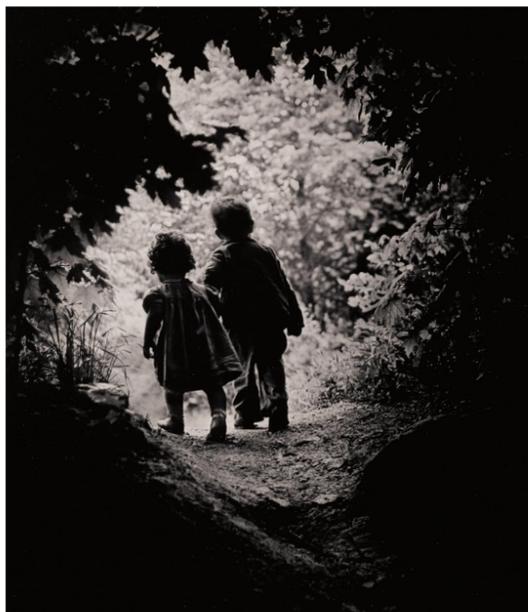
Sixty plates (one shown) from *Animal Locomotion* by Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) became the top lot, selling for \$45,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000). The images are collotypes in a variety of sizes, most measuring approximately 6 3/8" x 17 3/8".



Edward S. Curtis's *Geronimo, Apache, 1905*, went to a dealer for \$22,500 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The platinum print is 16 1/4" x 11 1/4" and bears Curtis's signature in ink and his debossed blind stamp on the front.



Edward S. Curtis's *Red Cloud, Oglala, 1905*, was the top Curtis lot, going at \$32,500, a new auction price record for this image. The platinum print is 16 3/8" x 12" and has Curtis's signature in ink and his debossed blind stamp on the front.



*The Walk to Paradise Garden, 1948*, by W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) sold to an absentee bidder for \$30,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The 15 1/2" x 13 1/2" silver print was printed between the late 1940s and early 1960s.



*Sadie Pfeifer, a Cotton Mill Spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina, 1908, by Lewis W. Hine (1874-1940) went to an absentee bidder for \$23,750 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 10 1/4" x 13 3/4" silver print was printed in the 1920s.*



*A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1957, by Toni Frissell (1907-1988) was the sale's cover lot. It sold for \$12,500 (est. \$4000/6000). The 14" square silver print is signed, titled, and inscribed by Frissell on the back "This is backwards." As Daile Kaplan explained it, the image, created by Frissell, who achieved a considerable reputation as a fine art photographer, was used for commercial purposes. It appears on the covers of no fewer than three albums, including that of *Undercurrent*, released by jazz musicians Bill Evans and Jim Hall in 1962. The negative was flipped for the making of the print sold at Swann, however. On each of the album covers, the model's head is facing in the opposite direction, which, given the inscription on this print, is how Frissell intended it.*

**"We are concerned about images and the quality of images, but at the end of the day they need to be presented in a way that gives them a narrative, where the condition is very good if not excellent."**

*Mechanic*, a 1940s-50s silver print, which sold at this sale for \$13,750, is a case in point. The portrait shows a young man bending at the waist tightening a nut with a giant wrench. He is beautifully framed inside a circular part of the machine, like a saint inside a halo. Happy accident it was not. Photographer's luck played no part in its creation. Hine made multiple images of various men similarly posed. He chose the model who was a bare-armed, perfectly muscled specimen of youth, strength, and intensity. The rest is photo history.

There is also a textual component to Hine's art. "Hine, who was a wonderful writer, captioned and supplied with a textual context some of the photos of his that we sold this time," said Kaplan. "This is a very important part of what he did, which is to say he created a picture-and-text marriage."

Some readers may be surprised to learn that snapshots, industrial photos, and advertising albums are eagerly sought by collectors. It's called "vernacular photography"—defined by Swann as "anything outside of the fine art realm"—and is a growing field in the photo-collecting world. Of great interest to a range of international collectors, it is also being examined and exhibited by many museum curators at art institutions. In 2007 no less august an institution than the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., showed *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978: From the collection of Robert E. Jackson*, after which, in 2008, it traveled to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

At the forefront of presenting this material to the market, Swann had its first all-vernacular photo auction on April 17, 2014, its second on December 18, 2014, and now includes a vernacular section in each of its thrice-yearly sales. Considering the amount of material of this kind that's out there, literally billions of images, I asked Kaplan how she and her department choose their consignments.

Returning once again to her sale's theme, Kaplan said, "What we're looking for is objects. We are concerned about images and the quality of images, but at the end of the day they need to be presented in

a way that gives them a narrative, where the condition is very good if not excellent, where the material is thoughtfully created and cared for. Some vernacular materials were actually made by commercial or professional photographers, so there was an aesthetic at work, but of course they weren't accepted as artists. Today those boundaries are much more fluid."

Considering the "antique" and "vintage" focus of *M.A.D.* and its readership, this report has not included most of the newer works offered at this sale. However, two lots of images by Peter Hujar, each of which more than doubled its high estimate, deserve special mention. That exception has been especially important to grant because the first in-depth retrospective of Hujar is currently on an international tour. Called *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*, the show has traveled from the Fundación MAPFRE in Barcelona to its current venue, the Fotomuseum Den Haag (The Hague) in the Netherlands, where it will be on view through October 17. From there, it goes to the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City from January 26 through May 20, 2018. The tour concludes at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive in downtown Berkeley, California. That represents considerable institutional attention, which not only reinforces Hujar's position in the canon but can't help but buttress his rising prices.

Asked to give a thumbnail sketch of Hujar, a prominent player in the downtown art circles of SoHo in the 1960s and 1970s, Kaplan said: "He was a portraitist; he traveled extensively; he was friends with and made pictures of some of the more renowned cultural figures of the period, including Susan Sontag; and his work had something of a cult following in his day. He contracted AIDS and had a very protracted illness in that regard." He died in 1987 at age 53. "And like the work of many photographers of that period, it took time to mature in terms of a market awareness. I don't think there's ever been a lack of interest or recognition of his importance among artists and curators," she continued, "but given the work—some of it is hard hitting, some of it is very dark, some of it is homoerotic—again, the

market dynamic can take a while."

Images & Objects offered 347 lots, 247 of which sold for a total of \$1,223,930. There was only one notable failure, the passing of William Bradford's *The Arctic Regions: Illustrated with Photographs Taken on an Art Expedition to Greenland* (est. \$100,000/150,000). The leather-bound elephant folio of 141 mounted albumen photographs by two Boston photographers was published in London in 1873 by Chiswick Press for Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle. The edition is said to have been 300 or fewer. Each image in each copy was printed individually from its original glass-plate negative. The accompanying text was written by Bradford and, by all accounts, he directed the photographers too. Together the photos and the narrative document a three-month journey that the artist and his team took along the western Greenland coast in 1869. Swann has successfully sold copies of *The Arctic Regions* in the past, one on February 7, 2008, for \$144,000, and another on February 28, 2012, for \$180,000. In addition, Christie's sold one on December 6, 2013, for \$125,000, and Sotheby's offered another on June 14, 2016, which, estimated at \$100,000/150,000, did not sell. As of this writing, that copy, from the library of collector Richard Manney, is on the website of the William Reese Company of New Haven, priced at \$175,000.

Reese, who bought the Manney copy post-sale via Sotheby's, said in an e-mail, "This is a book that benefited greatly from the rise in interest in photography. I sold a copy in the mid-1990s for \$35,000." He observed that "it's a hard book to compare as apples to apples unless you have examined the copies closely. I can't stress enough that this is a book which, as they say, 'must be seen.' I have probably looked at twenty copies or more in my life, and the range is great." That's because "it is subject to weird offsetting from the photos, which as you know are irregularly arranged and of differing sizes." Condition among copies

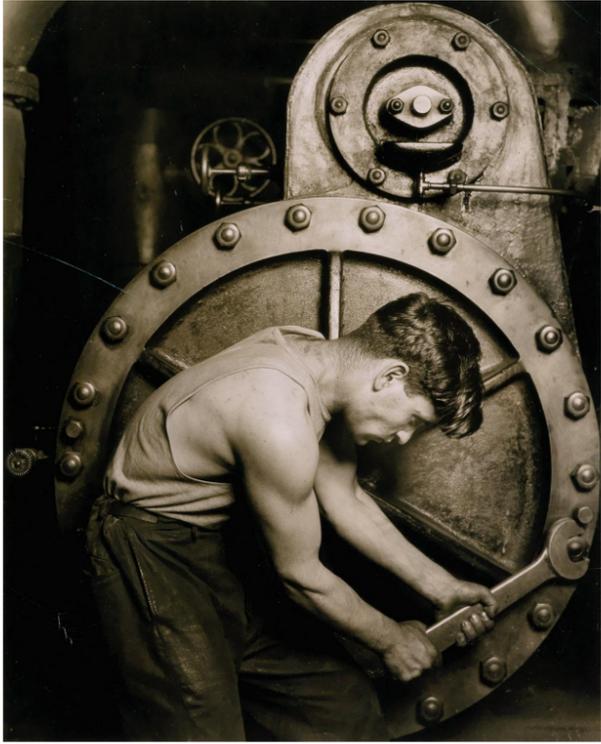
also varies greatly, he continued, as do the bindings, some of which are elaborate, with gilt polar bears and icebergs, while others are bound in plainer cloth. "It is of course a book celebrated in other ways, both because of its relationship to fine arts (Bradford as a painter) and as the farthest high latitude photographs taken up to that date."

To the suggestion that the limited market for such an item might be taking a breather, Kaplan said that was a good way to express it. "It's such a rare and important volume, and in today's political environment, it's one that testifies to this whole idea of climate change and therefore has such importance. But it's a volume that not many people can hope to acquire and live with, even institutionally."

Midrange items, by contrast, are enjoying the attentions of "both new and mature buyers," Kaplan said. "And we're seeing individuals from different disciplines, be it science, popular culture, Americana, or decorative arts, approaching photography as an area of interest." Asked how "midrange" was being defined, she elaborated: "That's the interesting thing about photography because, as you know, unlike in other fields, 'midrange' in photography casts a very wide net. Today it's still possible to acquire a really marvelous, important photo book for under a thousand dollars and a fine, vintage Lewis Hine photograph for under five thousand." In fact, at this sale a 4 1/2" x 6" silver print of Hine's 1909 *Doffer Boy in Georgia Cotton Mill* went for even less. With Hine's signature, title, and date on its reverse, it sold for \$3750.

"Looking at the field, it's important to recognize that there are just amazing opportunities," Kaplan said at the conclusion of our telephone interview. "When it comes to photography there's not just one point of access. There are many points of access to this very accessible form of art."

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or via its website ([www.swanngalleries.com](http://www.swanngalleries.com)).



*Powerhouse Mechanic* by Lewis W. Hine sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The image was made in 1920-21. The 10" x 8" silver print dates from the 1940s to 50s. The photo was affixed to a later archival board.

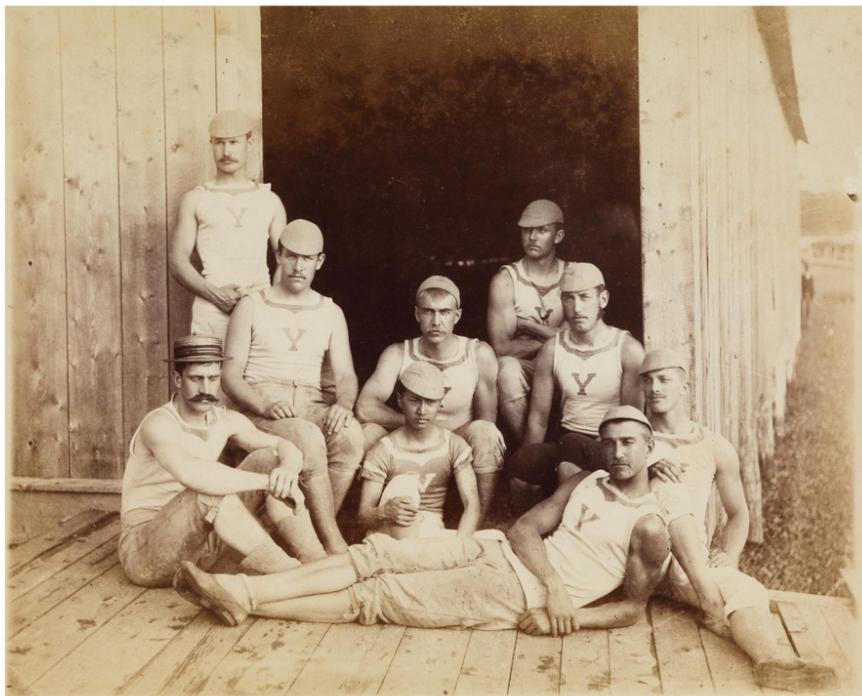
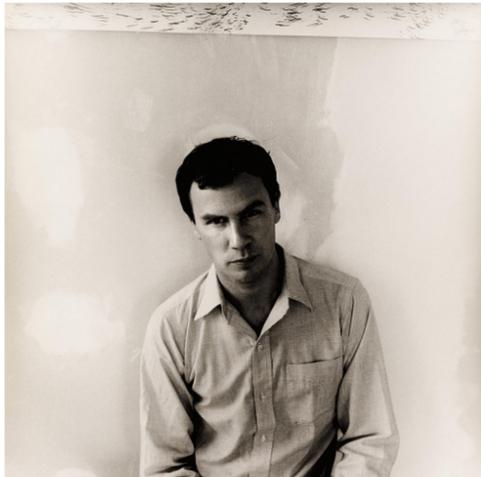


Daile Kaplan (on left) is a Swann auctioneer, vice president, and director of its photographs and photo books department. With her is Christine von der Linn, Swann's senior specialist for art, press, and illustrated books and its specialist for illustration art. This photo was taken at the auction house's 75th anniversary party, held on March 27.



This hand-tinted sixth-plate ambrotype of a man posing with several weapons fetched \$6750 (est. \$1000/1500) on the phone. The catalog identified him as "possibly Confederate" and dated the photo circa 1861.

This single lot of three 1975 portraits of the avant-garde Byrd Hoffman group performers by Peter Hujar (1934-1987) sold to a dealer for \$27,500 (est. \$9000/12,000). The buyer was the same one who bought the *Animal Locomotion* plates. The subjects are (left to right) theater director and designer Robert Wilson, visual artist and critic Ann Wilson (no relation to Robert), and actress Sheryl Sutton. Each silver print is approximately 14 1/4" square and signed at least once.



One of the vernacular photo lots, a group of 11 large-format photographs of Yale athletes, including its rowing team (shown here), sold for its high estimate of \$1500. The albumen prints, dating from 1874 to 1890, measure 9" x 13 1/2" to 11 1/4" x 16 1/4".



*Coney Island, 1940*, by Weegee, a.k.a. Arthur Fellig (1899-1968), sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$7000/10,000). The 10 3/8" x 13 3/8" silver print was printed in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

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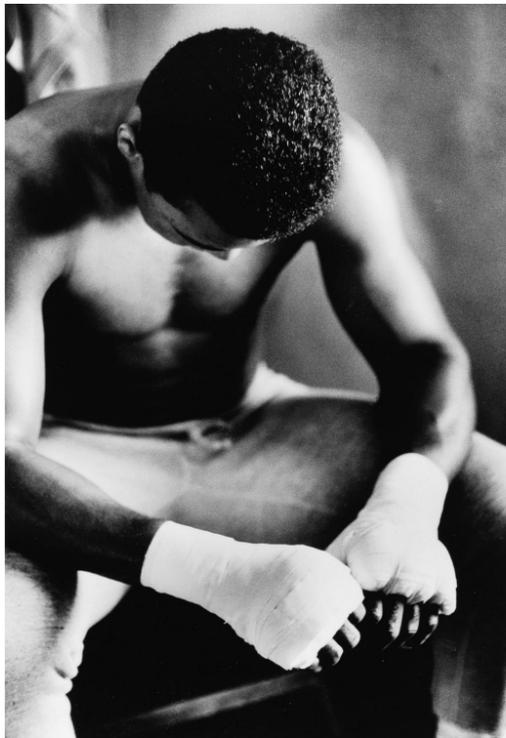
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Edward S. Curtis's *An Oasis in the Badlands*, 1905, sold to a collector for \$21,250 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" orotone has a Curtis copyright in the plate. It is in its original frame, which has a partial Curtis title label and a "Curtis Studios Los Angeles" label on its reverse.



Edward S. Curtis's *The Scout, Apache*, 1906, went to a dealer on the phone for \$27,500 (est. \$8000/12,000). The orotone, signed by Curtis in the plate, is 13<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 16<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" and in its original Curtis-designed frame with a Curtis title label on its reverse.



*Muhammad Ali*, taken in 1966 by Gordon Parks (1912-2006), brought \$10,625 (est. \$3000/4500). The 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" silver print, signed on its back, was printed in the 1980s. "We're seeing, because of Muhammad Ali's recent passing [in 2016], increased interest in him as a subject," Daile Kaplan said. But this image of him, getting ready for a bout, head bowed as if in prayer, also has "wonderful associational values" with Parks. Two years earlier, the athlete had converted to Islam, joined the Black Muslim cause, and stopped calling himself by his "slave name" (Cassius Clay), which was a prelude to his refusal as a conscientious objector to be drafted into the Vietnam War. During that tumultuous period, while on assignment with *Life* magazine, Parks, characterized by Kaplan as "one of the greatest African American photographers of the twentieth century," made many images of Ali, including this one, in Miami and London.



*Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) realized \$42,500 (est. \$30,000/45,000). The 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 19<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" silver print dates from circa 1976.



An archive of 245 vernacular images of saloons, bars, hotels, restaurants, liquor stores, and cafes achieved \$11,875 (est. \$5000/7500). Attributed to a newspaper photographer, E.H. Kemper, and identified as locations in coal mining towns throughout Pennsylvania, these 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" silver prints date from circa 1915. It would seem an item ideal for an institutional purchase and a great primary source for historical research. According to Daile Kaplan, however, "It was bought by a private collector who has his own private museum."



A collector paid \$13,750 (est. \$4000/6000) for Peter Hujar's *Shack, Queens*. The 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" silver print is signed, titled, and dated 1985 on its reverse.



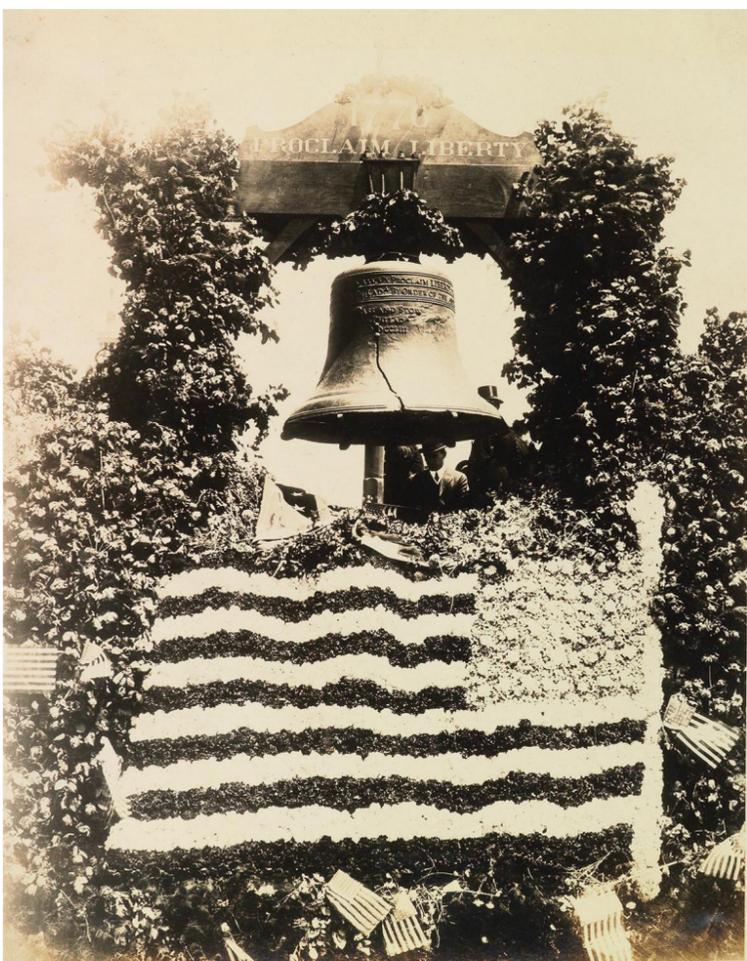
Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*, Number 36, sold to a collector for \$20,000 (est. \$18,000/22,000). It features 16 photogravures (lithographic-like prints on fine paper) made from Stieglitz's own photos. The magazine was published in New York in 1911. At the time, *Wilson's Photographic Magazine's* critic said of this particular issue of the publication that was then in its ninth year: "It must be seen and possessed to be appreciated." The magazine cost \$8 (approximately \$200 in today's dollars). The critic said: "To the man used to the dollar magazine, eight dollars may seem a high price. *Camera Work* cannot be measured by other standards." The images include Stieglitz's famous *Steerage* (shown), which he made in 1907, the peak year for immigration to this country. The scene is of people who were traveling in steerage from New York to Europe, not the other way around. Stieglitz and his wife were on board, traveling in first-class accommodations on their way to Bremen, Germany to visit friends and relatives.



Robert Frank (b. 1924) made this photo in 1978. Titled *Sick of Goodby's, Mabou*, the 13½" x 9" silver print is signed on the front. It sold to a collector for \$32,500 (est. \$30,000/45,000).



*Body Parts, Oyster Bay, NY, 1989*, by Horst P. Horst (1906-1999), was passed at the auction but later sold to a collector for its low estimate of \$15,000. The 19¾" x 17¾" platinum-palladium print is signed on the front and signed, titled, and dated on the reverse along with an edition notation, 9/25.



A presentation album containing 580 silver prints of the Liberty Bell on its round trip from Philadelphia to San Francisco for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition brought \$3120 (est. \$2000/3000). The cities where the train stopped en route to the West Coast and back again (via a different route) are identified in handwriting on the photos' fronts. Measuring 5" x 7" to 7¼" x 9½", the prints are attributed to Harry Kuenzel (active 1905-20). One of only four such albums commemorating the train's departure from Philadelphia, this one belonged to Pringle Borthwick (1862-1948) of that city.



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