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The Naylor Collection, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

Buyer with Spare $20 Million Sought for the Complete History of Photography

by Jeanne Schinto

The Complete History of Photography, a collection that is the lifetime achievement of 87-year-old Thurman F. "Jack" Naylor of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, is up for sale. In 1988 Naylor sold a group of 9000 items, mostly cameras, to the Japanese government for approximately $9 million. That became the core of a photography museum established in Yokohama. Now Naylor wants to sell the rest, even as he continues to collect additional bits and pieces and sells off other items that, for one reason or another, did not become part of the museum. (See the related story on p. 26-C in this issue.)

Five hundred copies of an oversized (16" x 11-5/8") elegant brochure, 34 glossy pages long, were mailed to potential buyers in wooden slipcases in late January 2005. They went to museums, collectors, dealers, foundations, and other carefully selected individuals—George Lucas, Elton John, Donald Trump, and Steve Wynn among them. Since the initial edition of the prospectus went out, some 1200 other copies (not in slipcases) have been disseminated to a second list, said Jonathan Barkan of Arlington, Massachusetts, who helped Naylor develop his marketing strategy and is representing him in the sale. No one yet is on the hook for the $20 million asking price.

"We received a very nice response back from George Lucas and also from Elton John's agent," said Barkan, who is founding director of a communications firm and a friend and associate of Naylor since the 1970's, when they worked together on the formation of the Charles River Museum of Industry in Waltham, Massachusetts. (Naylor was the museum's founding president and one of its earliest benefactors.) Neither the filmmaker nor the singer-songwriter, however, made an offer.

"Elton John collects only postmodern," said Barkan, and the collecting interests of George Lucas don't make him the right buyer, either. As for Donald Trump and Steve Wynn, Barkan said, "Even though here are guys who are both building major entertainment attractions, and it's not much of a stretch to me that they could build a wing that would be just terrific for this, there was no response from either of them."

The prospectus is accompanied by a five-minute DVD, narrated by Naylor, in which he describes what motivated him to collect, in addition to the 9000 items already gone, 31,000 more cameras, pieces of photographic equipment, images of all kinds, related ephemera, and books-the largest privately held photographic collection in the world.

"I was interested in acquiring items not seen elsewhere, not likely to be seen elsewhere, and in telling the stories behind them," Naylor said in the sonorous voice of a man who long ago worked as a radio announcer.

The radio work was undertaken way before the Baltimore native became a man of means. His money was derived from an invention, an automobile thermostat, that he developed in the 1960's after earning a degree in mechanical engineering at Johns Hopkins University and while president of the former Thomson Manufacturing Company, Waltham, Massachusetts, now part of Tomkins PLC, a conglomerate based in London, England. Here and abroad, while traveling to manufacturing plants in 13 countries, where the thermostat was made, he began to collect cameras, then photos, then other items related to photographica.

The collecting field was still young in those years. Important items were readily available even from places that should have known better than to sell or give them away. As one documented story goes, the library of Harvard University's geology department put a sign on its door more than 40 years ago, "Students: Free Photographs," offering to any comers a cache of important albumen prints by geological survey photographers Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson. We all know of other tales that make us mourn the losses and wish for a time machine.

Naylor also bought at shows, from dealers, and at auctions, estimating that he has spent $6 million to $7 million at the various houses over the years. And he acquired from friends such as Harold Edgerton, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who developed the electronic flash, and Leopold Godowsky Jr., the concert violinist who co-invented the first color film.

Naylor's collection, open by invitation only, is housed in 5500 square feet of his suburban Boston residence. (A 1500-square-foot storage facility in Natick, Massachusetts, is also filled with his purchases.) Naylor and Barkan together gave this reporter a tour in late September 2006. It was our second visit-the first had been a half-dozen years ago-and once again we were amazed by the collection's vast historical sweep, spanning as it does Louis Daguerre and Richard Avedon, W. Fox Talbot and William Wegman, John Adams Whipple and Edwin Land.

As we moved through the highly secure, temperature-controlled exhibition areas, the collector frequently pointed out many items that were the first or largest or smallest or last of a kind. There was, for example, Jacques Cousteau's first underwater camera. There was the largest photograph ever made by Mathew Brady. A hand-colored image in the so-called imperial size (17" x 21"), it shows a New York City socialite of the period, Mrs. Robert Lawson. (Just two other Brady images of the same size are known, said Naylor.)

There was the world's longest photograph (35'), an image of a circus train, made with a special 70 mm color camera. It was pinned along the top of one wall of glass exhibition cases.

We also saw the first single-use disposable camera, made in France in 1900; the world's largest commercial camera, designed by Falz and Werner in Leipzig, Germany in 1898, to produce photographs measuring 20" x 24"; and the world's smallest commercial camera, just 1-5/8" x 5/8". Produced by the KGB in 1983, the Little Creator was meant to be used for espionage work. It is part of an important subcollection of the museum, the world's largest gathering of spy cameras and equipment—cameras hidden in cigarette packages, a walking cane, a pocket watch, a woman's garter, a lapel button.

Not every item in the collection is special or rare. Some objects became part of it precisely because of their populist nature, such as the No. 1 Kodak Brownie camera, in its original box, from 1900; the Polaroid SX-70, introduced 76 years later; and novelty cameras in the form of Big Bird, Charlie the Tuna, and Snoopy. While it's true that one minute you may be looking at a Southworth & Hawes whole-plate daguerreotype and the next you're being directed to a hand-cranked penny machine, circa 1894, that shows 800 photos in 30 seconds, flip-book style-each has a rightful place in this collection as part of the story that the collector aimed to tell. Each contributes to the collection's value, and those who would wish for more precision or connoisseurship are missing the point. If it were a work of literature, it would be a sprawling, multi-tiered novel by Theodore Dreiser or Joyce Carol Oates, not a precious short story by one of our minimalist writers who love to choose le mot juste.

In short, like any serious collector, Naylor has created something that reflects his personality-big, assertive, inclusive, curious, inquisitive, acquisitive, and charming. These qualities of the collection are also, ironically, the ones that may be making it difficult to sell as a single entity. This is the age of specialization, and even a museum of photographic history may not specialize enough.

The thought naturally occurred to us, as it has to others, that the collection would probably be worth more if sent to auction and sold piece by piece. Naylor's own informal auction estimate is $30 million to $50 million. But he wants to keep it together, he said. Donation to a museum or other institution is one way of accomplishing that goal, but it is not an idea that Naylor is considering. He and his wife, Enid Starr, a Boston attorney, have seven children and stepchildren, and the sale proceeds are expected to become part of their inheritance.

We see parallels between this collection and the Time Museum collection of Seth Atwood, which was sold by Sotheby's in three separate sales held between December 1999 and October 2004. Atwood had previously tried to sell his collection as a single entity. The asking price was not too much different from Naylor's. In the end, the Atwood

Fmaterials fetched over $57.9 million at auction. (See "Time Is Money at Sotheby's: Masterpieces from the Time Museum," M.A.D., January 2005, p. 12-C.)

There are additional equivalents. Besides the fact that Atwood is about the same age as Naylor and also made his money in parts for automobiles, each man assembled a comprehensive history of a technology the likes of which could never be assembled in today's collecting world. There are no more photos by O'Sullivan and Jackson being given away to students. Collections like these will never pass this way again.

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