

Swann Auction Galleries, New York City

Photography Sale: “The Whole World in Our Heads”

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Swann Auction Galleries

A literal panoply of photographic objects was on offer in the New York City auction rooms of Swann Auction Galleries on February 21. They ranged from single works by masters such as Dorothea Lange to vernacular photography, i.e., from such classic images as Lange’s *White Angel Breadline* to a lot consisting of a bread box filled with approximately 980 examples of erotica dating from 1905 through the 1930s. Susan Sontag wrote in her classic text *On Photography* that “the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads.” It seemed almost possible at Swann on that day.

The formats traced photography’s full history.

The formats traced photography’s full history. Although most lots were silver prints, there were also albumen prints, salted paper prints, press photographs, tintypes, cartes de visite, cyanotypes, daguerreotypes, stereoviews, photogravures, Polaroids, chromogenic prints, and orotones, along with a newly emerging collector category, 35 mm color slides. Buyers looking for authenticity, for an icon, for something unique, something rare, or something simply visually striking paid \$1,356,697 (including buyers’ premiums) for 229 lots, representing 71% of what went up on the block. Sometimes a single lot ticked more than one of those boxes at this sale, whose subtitle was “Art & Visual Culture.”

The top lot was a photographic installation by Malick Sidibé (1935/36-2016) consisting of 38 images of his fellow West Africans that put their cultural heritage on display in vibrant clothing, elaborate hairstyles, head wraps, and other ornamental and graphic features of body and home. Sidibé chose silver prints in a variety of sizes for the work, some smaller than a postcard, others larger than this page. Studio portraits, group shots, head shots, and scenes of everyday life were commingled. A few of the subjects were posed as odalisques. Others were shown faceless, their backs turned to Sidibé’s camera, like stage performers in repose. The images dating from 1964 through 2001 were framed by the artist in 2003 using recycled materials, including colorful reverse-painted glass. The work, acquired by the consignor from the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York City, in the early 2000s, sold to a collector for \$87,500, a record price for the artist, according to Swann’s research.

Roy DeCarava’s *Dancers (Harlem)*, a 1951 scene of two men on the nearly deserted dance floor of a darkened dance hall, made a record price for the image (which was printed in 1982) when it sold to a dealer for \$52,500. DeCarava (1919-2009) was known as a master printmaker for himself and others. The 13" x 8¾" silver print had the artist’s signature, the date, and his notations in ink.

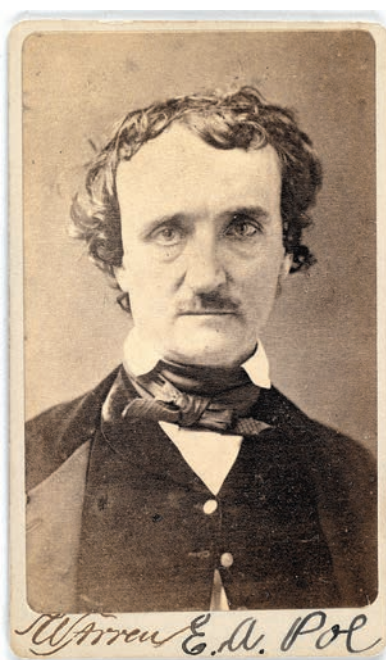
Some other bestsellers were groupings of photos: e.g., a first edition of Ansel Adams’s *Taos Pueblo*, his first book, which consists of 12 silver bromide prints, that sold for \$32,500; a suite of 18 cyanotypes of Native Americans by Edward S. Curtis, \$25,000; and another suite of 18, this time silver prints by living Mexican artist Flor Garduño (b. 1957), \$23,750—yet another artist record achieved at this sale. A suite of five silver prints by another living Mexican photographer, Graciela Iturbide (b. 1942), made \$10,000.

Iturbide’s black-and-white work is being exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through May 12. In a video on the MFA’s website, she says: “I take photos in black and white because when I started working with [Manuel] Álvarez Bravo, he always took his in black and white, and when I was a girl I had a small

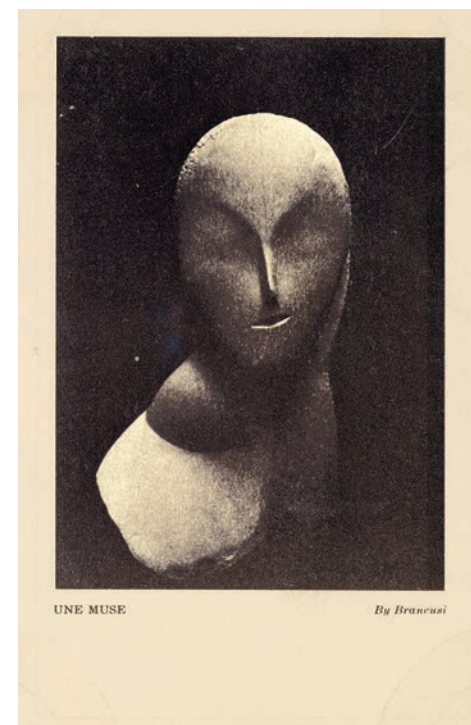
A selection of four plates (one shown) of men engaged in sports and other physical activities from *Animal Locomotion*, the 1887 book by Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), sold in one lot for \$5000 (est. \$3000/4500). The collotypes measure from 5" x 18" to 7" x 16". The two-toned sheets are 19" x 24".



The top lot of the sale was a photographic installation by Malick Sidibé (1935/36-2016) that sold to a collector for \$87,500 (est. \$30,000/45,000), a record price for the artist. Along with the artwork came a schematic for reinstallation on wall space approximately 3' x 5'.



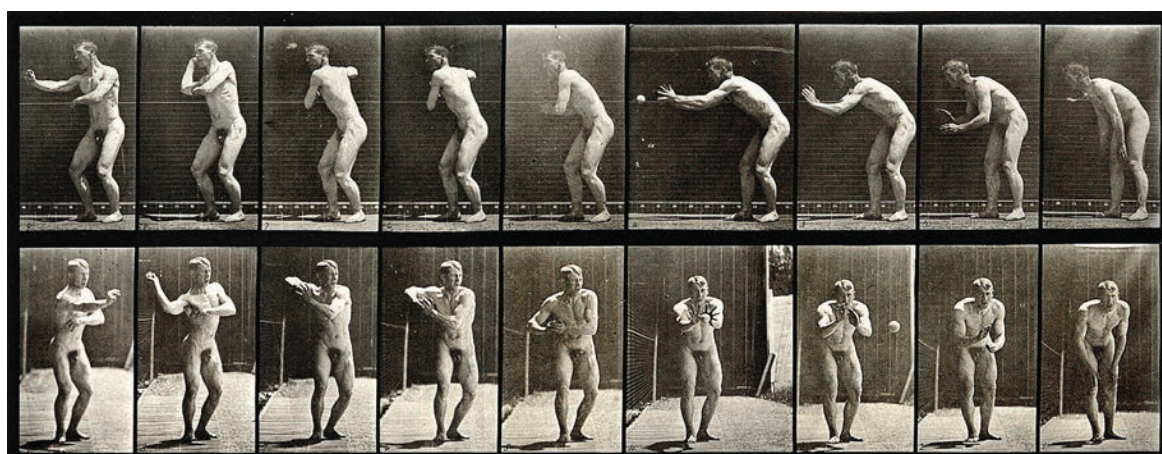
This 3¾" x 2¼" albumen carte de visite of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was printed in the 1870s “after” the so-called Annie Richmond daguerreotype. It sold for \$4250 (est. \$2000/3000). Poe courted Nancy L. Richmond, known as “Annie,” following the death of his wife, Virginia, in 1847. They met in 1848 at a poetry lecture Poe gave while visiting Lowell, Massachusetts; it was thought that she arranged and paid for Poe’s sitting with the unknown daguerreotypist who made the original image.



Thirty-three printed photomechanical postcards (one shown) depicting some of the iconic modern works exhibited at the Armory Show of 1913 by Marcel Duchamp, Paul Cézanne, Wassily Kandinsky, and others sold to a collector for \$12,500 (est. \$4000/6000). As it happens, the 69th Regiment Armory, where the pivotal show took place, is right across the street from Swann Auction Galleries.



Lewis W. Hine (1874-1940) took *Adolescent spinner*, Carolina cotton mill in 1908. This 7½" x 9½" silver print, printed in the 1920s, has Hine’s Interpretive Photography Hastings-on-Hudson hand stamp on its reverse. It sold for \$8125 (est. \$6000/9000).





This sixth-plate (3½" x 2½") tintype of surgeon Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919) achieved \$9375 (est. \$6000/9000). Besides bloomers, Dr. Walker is wearing her Congressional Medal of Honor. Each element is worthy of note. She was the first and remains the only woman to be awarded the medal, although it was subsequently revoked, because it is a military honor and she had never actually been enlisted in the Union Army. Walker refused to return the medal, however, and continued to wear it until she died. The medal was re-awarded to her in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. As for the bloomers, the women's rights advocate was well known for championing sensible dress reform for women.



A lot of 18 cyanotypes (one shown) of Native Americans by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) sold to a collector for \$25,000 (est. \$25,000/35,000). Written by Curtis on the reverse of each 8" x 6" image except one is a caption or name of the subject's tribe, including Kwakiutl, Cheyenne, Cowichan, and Flathead. The cyanotypes date from 1910 to 1914.

Another album of 19th-century Indian images, this one consisting of 80 albumen prints of large-scale civic engineering projects and turbaned workers by Shivshanker Narayan, sold to an unnamed institution for \$23,750 against a \$6000/9000 estimate. To be fair, Narayan's works are not merely documentary; they are known for their artistry, no matter what their subject matter. Some reside in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His images are also included in a relatively recent book by Mumbai-based curator Susan Hapgood, *Early Bombay Photography* (2015). One, in fact, from the collection of the British Library, is featured on the book's cover. The 1873 composition accentuates the beauty of a government normal school mistress and the students who encircle her.

Several more archives of documentary industrial photography excited bidders. Approximately 562 photographs of machinery featuring components made by Great Britain's Renold and Coventry Chain Company from the 1920s through the 1940s sold on the phone for \$5750. More than 400 photographs of people and items produced by Pittsburgh's Westinghouse Air Brake Company from the same period went to an Internet bidder for \$2470. Twenty-seven circa 1944 portraits of employees of the Timken Roller Bearing Company of Canton, Ohio, became the property of an absentee bidder for \$4375.

There was one major disappointment of the sale. It was the withdrawal of a lot of photos by Vivian Maier consigned by collector Ron Slattery and estimated at \$10,000/15,000. Maier's story has been told in the documentary film *Finding Vivian Maier* (2013), co-directed by John Maloof, who is responsible for her posthumous discovery. An alternative biography is available now, in the book *Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife* (2017) by Pamela Bannos, who decries Maier's portrayal as a nanny who took photos. In Bannos's view, it's the other way around: Maier was an artist first, nanny second, taking care of other people's children only to support herself. If the auction of a personal album of 22 photos shot by Maier during a 1959 trip to Europe and Asia had taken place, it would have been the first known auction appearance of vintage color work by Maier.

On February 14, 1952, Swann held its first photography sale. The Valentine's Day event was also the first auction anywhere in the United States dedicated solely to photography. This was only one year after Roy DeCarava shot *Dancers (Harlem)*. It was five years before Flor Garduño was even born. The sale's subtitle was "A Panoramic History of the Art of Photography as Applied to Book Illustration from Its Inception up to Date." The top lot was a collection of more than 1000 plates from Eadweard Muybridge's groundbreaking volume *Animal Locomotion*, published in 1887. The



This 14⅞" x 19¼" silver print by Fan Ho (d. 2016) sold to a collector for \$21,250 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The 1950 image, *Cleaning*, has two of the photographer's credit hand stamps, the title in ink, and five salon exhibition hand stamps on its reverse. Daile Kaplan believes this could be a unique print—i.e., the only one from 1950 that is today extant. "And given the way photographs were handled and disrespected for much of the twentieth century, the idea that this would be well taken care of and preserved becomes part of the story," said Kaplan.

price was \$250, superseding the \$200 that someone paid for a copy of William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*. Published in London in installments between 1844 and 1846, Talbot's work is known as the first photographically illustrated book to be commercially available.

We asked Kaplan to comment on how photography collecting has changed since that inaugural sale. "The notion that the market began with the focus on books and albums and, essentially, images that were not displayed on the wall is historically appropriate," she said, "given that in the nineteenth century this is how photographs were presented and not as fine art." Then in the 1960s and 1970s, with the occurrence of the countercultural revolution, came a generation that was television-bred and "very visually oriented." It was those folks who fostered "a growing recognition of the power of the image, which is a very modern approach to life that certainly would be set in counterpoint to, say, a Victorian sensibility, where the word, language, is privileged as a descriptor."

The dealers and collectors of that generation "were of an age when there was a lot of excitement around visual imagery and how it conveys historic events," she continued. But photography also came increasingly to be seen "as a way to render creative expression," despite its being considered "an upstart medium, an illegitimate art form, by the painting and sculpture and printmaking communities, because photographers relied on a mechanical device. That diminished it in the eyes of the canon makers."

The consignor of that 1952 sale was the estate of Albert E. Marshall of Providence, Rhode Island. According to his *New York Times* obituary, Marshall, who died in 1951 at age 67, had been a research chemist—i.e., someone who as a collector probably appreciated the medium's technological aspects as much as its visual ones. An important portion of the collecting community continues to do so, said Kaplan. "I think that the early interest in photography set the stage for the way a lot of folks approach photography today, which is that it is technologically driven. For some folks that's about understanding photographic technique or the different types of image making that has become available. For other people, it's about the camera as a kind of fascinating instrument and how that dictates how images can be shaped and made."

Sixty-seven years after that first-of-its-kind sale, Swann continues to be innovative. At the start of this auction, Nicholas D. "Nicho" Lowry, Swann's president and principal auctioneer, announced the launch of the new Swann Galleries app, available for iPad and iPhone. During the auction, he and, later, Kaplan took bids from the room, the phones, the Internet, and the app. As of this writing, a new live online bidding platform for desktop, "Swann Live," was in the works.

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or see the website (www.swannalleries.com).



Taliesin West, Phoenix Arizona (Frank Lloyd Wright's Studio) by Edward Weston (1886-1958) sold to a dealer for \$15,000 (est. \$7000/10,000). The 7⅞" x 9½" silver print has Weston's penciled initials and a date (1941) on its 9" x 11" mount and a penciled notation ("For Sibyl from Edward") on its reverse. The image came to the sale from a private European collector. It is unknown who Sibyl is, but Daile Kaplan speculated that it was a friend and that this was probably a gift print. What is certain is the print's quality. "The paper stock of the period had a lot of silver content," said Kaplan. "The print has an incredible dimensionality, and I'm happy to say that our catalog reproduction conveys that, and for discerning buyers that becomes an important issue because Edward Weston was such an accomplished printer."

camera that also shot in black and white. I have taken some photos in color, but not many. Because when I take color photos, I feel like it's Disneyland. I feel, in photography, that black and white is more real than color." A few nights after this sale, Hollywood's Oscars were awarded. Mexico's Alfonso Cuarón won for best director and best foreign film for his black-and-white *Roma*.

Exactly opposite from these artful eye-fuls were the multiple lots of industrial photographs in the vernacular photography section that inspired lively bidding and high prices. "This feels like an auction," said Daile Kaplan, a Swann vice president, auctioneer, and director of the house's photographs and photobooks department as she handled the several bidders vying for an album depicting India in the 1870s. The 105 albumen prints of tradespeople, studio portraits, and street scenes in Bombay, Delhi, and Agra sold to a dealer for \$30,000 (est. \$3000/4500).



A collector bought an archive of vintage photographs by Dorothy Norman (1905-1997) along with this portrait of Norman by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) plus other materials for \$18,200 (est. \$12,000/18,000). More than half of the unmounted silver contact prints by Norman bear either a Stieglitz comment (“Perfect,” “YES YES,” “Wonderful”) or a personal notation (“ILY,” i.e., “I Love You”). She and Stieglitz were mentee and mentor as well as lovers. Dating from 1931 to 1957, the images measure from 2¾" x 4" to 4¼" x 3¼". Also included in the lot were two books of photos by Norman, one by her and Stieglitz, and a file folder of notes exchanged between Norman and Miles Barth (d. 2017) of the International Center for Photography. Barth edited one of the Norman books, the retrospective *Intimate Visions: The Photographs of Dorothy Norman* (1993), in which Norman writes: “I tried to describe the world around me as directly as possible, to respond to its shifting truths.”



An album of 105 photographs of India in the 1870s (one shown) sold to a dealer for \$30,000 (est. \$3000/4500). The albumen prints of tradespeople, studio portraits, and street scenes in Bombay, Delhi, and Agra range in size from 5½" x 4" to 7" x 9".



An institution unnamed by Swann paid \$23,750 (est. \$6000/9000) for an album of 80 photographs (one shown) by Shivshanker Narayan depicting large-scale civic engineering projects and workers in India and Ceylon from the period 1883-84. The albumen prints, including six multi-part panoramas, are captioned and dated in pencil and bear Narayan’s hand stamp.



Street Demonstration, San Francisco by Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) sold for \$17,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 13¾" x 9¾" silver print of a 1934-38 image by Lange dates from circa 1970. A letter of provenance accompanying the lot indicated that it came from General Graphics, authorized printer of Lange’s negatives, then went to Thomas E. Curran III, a curator at the Oakland Museum (now the Oakland Museum of California), and then to a private collector. The new owner is, likewise, a private collector. Two other Lange images from the 1930s (not shown) sold: *White Angel Breadline*, a silver print from the 1960s, achieved \$12,500; *Migrant Mother*, silver print, 1960s-70s, brought \$8125.

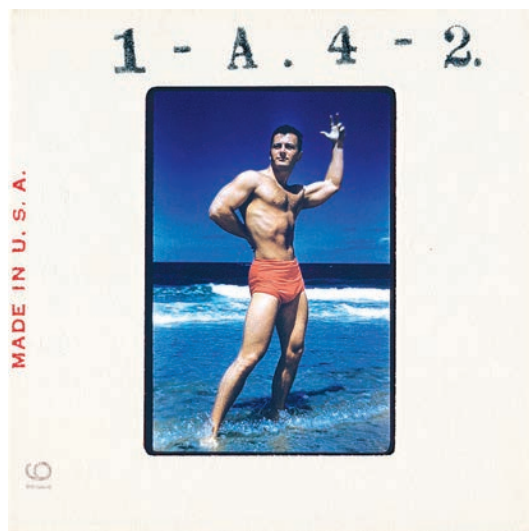


Leg—Paul H. by Peter Hujar (1934-1987) went to a dealer for \$22,500 (est. \$9000/12,000). The 1979 silver print measures 14⅞" x 14¾" and is signed by the photographer and notated “4/15”—a “meaningless” number, according to a communication with Swann by the Peter Hujar Archive. It signifies “nothing more than that he liked the picture and was satisfied with it,” the communication said. As for the subject, while it is sometimes identified as the leg of Paul Thek, the Hujar Archive said it is actually that of Paul Hudson. Hujar almost exclusively took photos of his inner circle of friends and lovers, so it is likely Hudson was part of it.

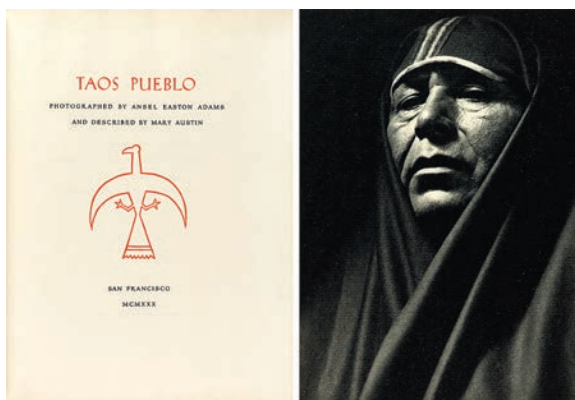
Seven “spirit photographs” (one shown) sold in one lot for \$9375 (est. \$3000/4500). The silver and albumen prints, each approximately 5½" x 4", date from 1890-1910. They include two by S.W. Fallis of Chicago, who produced images of this type to show that anyone could do what trickster photographers were doing to bilk grieving relatives. For more information, see “Can Ghosts Be Photographed?” by Professor Elliot Coues, *The Californian Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 4, September 1892.



A collector paid \$25,000 (est. \$15,000/20,000) for Ansel Adams’s 1944 image *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine, California*. The 15" x 19" silver print, which dates from the early 1960s, is on a 22" x 25" Hi-Art illustration board mount with Adams’s signature in ink and his Carmel, California, hand stamp with the title in ink on its reverse.



A newly emerging collector category, 35 mm color slides, is mentioned in the text, but that should not be considered a cue to haul out those European travel shots taken by your parents and bring them to market. The subject of 390 examples (one shown), including 40 in stereoview, that sold in one lot for \$4500 (est. \$1500/2000) was key. It was male models and body-builders from the late 1950s and early 1960s.



Number 87 of Ansel Adams's rare first book, *Taos Pueblo*, published in San Francisco by Grabhorn Press, sold to a dealer for \$32,500 (est. \$30,000/45,000). Signed by Adams (1902-1984) and by Mary Austin (1868-1934), who wrote the text, the volume includes 12 silver bromide prints. Each was hand printed by Adams for each of the book's 108 copies.



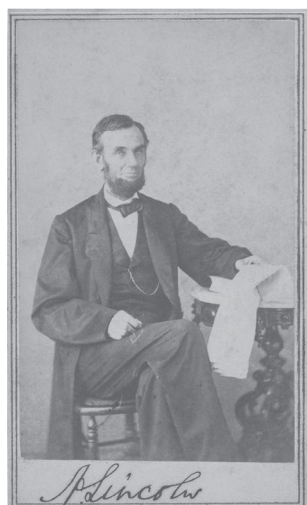
The catalog titled this lot "Erotica in a Bread Box." Indeed, it is a 9" x 13 1/4" x 9" metal bread box containing approximately 980 American and European "risqué" and erotic photographic images from 1905 through the 1930s thought to have been the clandestine inventory of a dealer. Having once belonged to Richard Merkin (1938-2009), an artist and illustrator for *The New Yorker*, the lot sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$3000/4500).



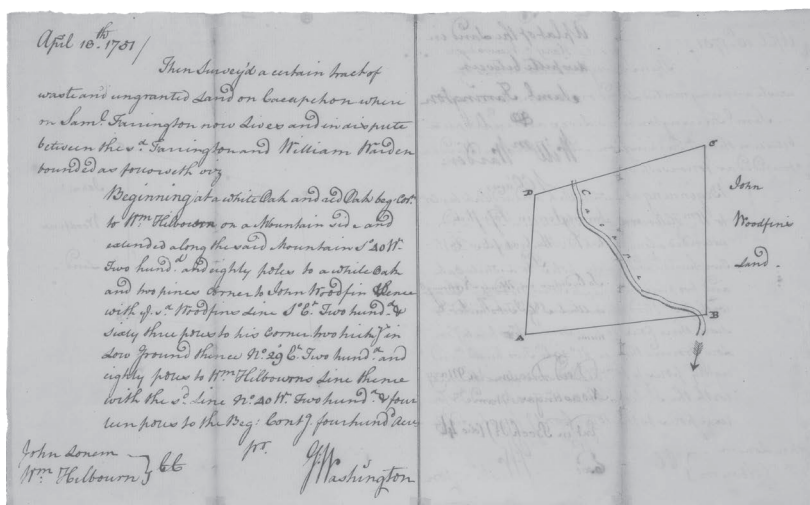
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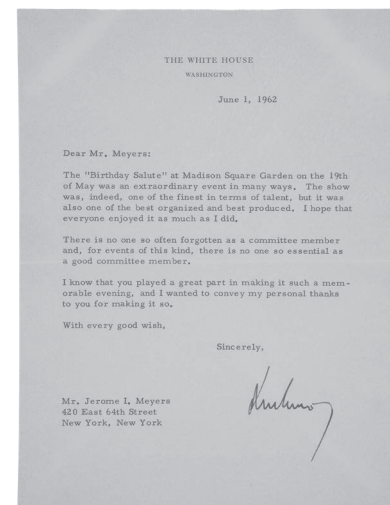
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