

Fig. 1.

Roger Smith, "Office of War Information News Bureau. The News Bureau room of the OWI. It is arranged much the same way as the city room of a daily newspaper. Here, war news of the world is disseminated. In the foreground, are editors' desks handling such special services as trade press, women's activities, and campaigns. The news desk is in the background. Nov. 1942."

PICTURES AT WORK

Joshua Chuang

In this time of disruptive change—one marked by the rumored demise of magazines, newspapers, and books—there remains in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building of The New York Public Library a large room in which patrons can sift through thousands of folders containing loose, printed images (more than a million, sorted alphabetically by subject) and borrow what they wish for private use, as they would books. Each day, the room attracts artists, students, teachers, illustrators, designers for film, theater, and television, and scholars of all disciplines, each with their own inquiries and aims. This living, breathing, still-evolving body of images is called the Picture Collection.

Established in September 1915, just a few years after The New York Public Library's Central Building first opened its doors to the public, the Picture Collection may hold the distinction of being the earliest gathering of materials at the Library to have sprung up spontaneously from public demand. With advancements in the quality and efficiency of printing technology, the sheer quantity of illustrated books and periodicals produced for general consumption had reached a new zenith. The increasing audiences for these vehicles of popular content, fueled by an exploitable hunger for imagery in general, in turn contributed to a seemingly insatiable demand for compelling visuals by artists, illustrators, industrial and fashion designers, and producers of theater, film, and advertisements. In search of fresh visual references, these new cultural workers poured into the relatively new library. (An early internal report described Picture Collection staff as having been "besieged" with requests.¹)

The Library's existing visual resources were ill-equipped to satisfy the need for pictures of all kinds. Its Print Collection, which boasted fine etchings, engravings, and woodblock prints, was largely art historical in orientation and unable to withstand heavy use, and the juvenilia in the children's book section was only of limited appeal. At the same time, a handful of librarians in the Circulation Department, apparently loath to discard worn out or duplicate copies of illustrated books and periodicals, began in 1914 to recycle them, cutting out and setting aside the more interesting pictures within for future use. What started as a drawer full of images grew into a substantial pictorial clippings file that would become something greater than these librarians, or the Library itself, ever envisioned.

The result of years of visual exploration and research in the Picture Collection and its archives at The New York Public Library, the present volume by Taryn Simon, in addition to being a rigorous and layered work of art that speaks to the precarious, ever-changing hierarchies of images today, also unveils a story of remarkable prescience.

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When the Picture Collection began circulation, it was by no means the only or first collection of its kind. In 1891, at the newly organized Denver Public Library, the revolutionary librarian John Cotton Dana established the first circulating picture collection at a public library. Trained as a lawyer with a background in civil engineering and education, Dana pioneered the concept of the library as an accessible and indispensable center of community and learning, and was among the first to institute open, browsable stacks and a separate area for children's literature. He believed that libraries should be efficiently designed and easy to use, and that librarians, rather than being bookish gatekeepers to knowledge, should be responsive to their time and their particular locality. A brief stint in newspaper work also made Dana keenly aware of a growing output of printed materials of all kinds; whether these materials were meant to be ephemeral or to last, he felt that it was the role of the library to obtain them and make them available.

Dana developed these ideas in subsequent posts as the head librarian for the Springfield (Massachusetts) City Library Association from 1898 to 1901, and then at the Newark Public Library, which he directed from 1902 until his death in 1929. He established circulating picture collections at both institutions, with an emphasis on making illustrations such as pictures and maps available to supplement the lessons being taught in schools. When he arrived in Newark, however, Dana broadened its picture collection's scope upon seeing the need for pictures not just for classroom pedagogy, but also as a tool to promote visual literacy and overcome language barriers among the working-class immigrant communities. It was also important to Dana for citizens of Newark to have access to pictures that could be used to beautify one's home.²

Like the circulating picture files established around the same time at public libraries in Binghamton (New York), Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., The New York Public Library's Picture Collection initially

1. *Bulletin of The New York Public Library*, vol. 25, 1921, p. 237. Thanks to Anthony Troncale for pointing out this citation in his establishing research and texts on the history of the Picture Collection.

2. With a similar ethos of accessibility to knowledge and a leveling of hierarchies, Dana also founded the Newark Museum on the fourth floor of the Newark Public Library in 1909. He helped to establish the Special Libraries Association the same year, serving as its president from 1909 to 1911. Thanks to Diana Kamin for generously sharing her research and thoughts on Dana.

PICTURE COLLECTION *Picture Collection* *Earliest / description of*
Why necessary?
 Daily questions that cannot readily be supplied
 by books
Trial of Emmet
Georgian interior
Position of a hat in flying
Costume -
 Books in circulation, required pictures scattered
 through many books.
 Material not indexed.
 Sometimes no books on subject } *too much or*
 Many who do not use library would } *trivial - not read*
 come - Interior decorators, illustrators, } *to read - woman*
 lecturers, landscape architects, designers, } *no general interest*
 teachers of special subjects. } *is busy*

Miss E. Cragin
Head of
Cataloguing
Circ. Dept.

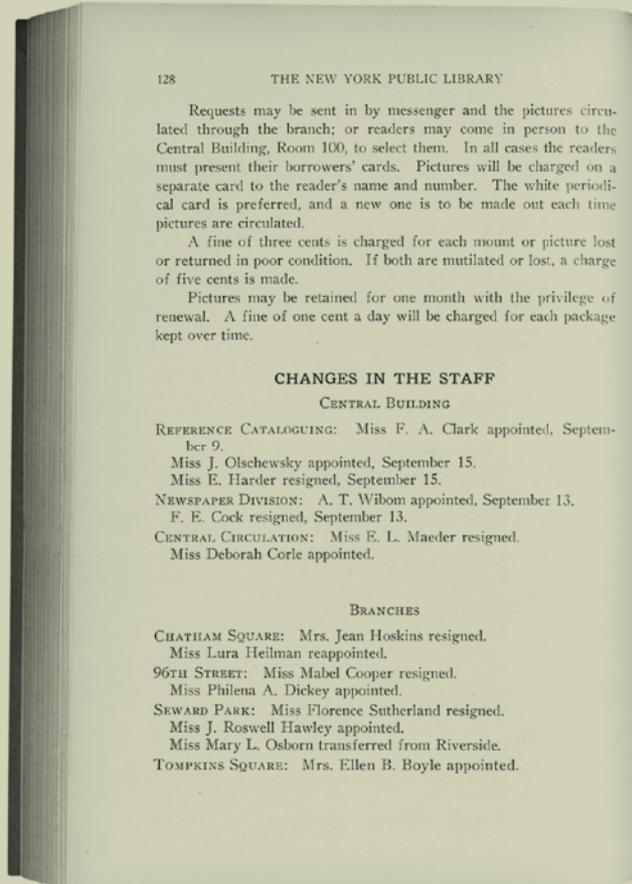
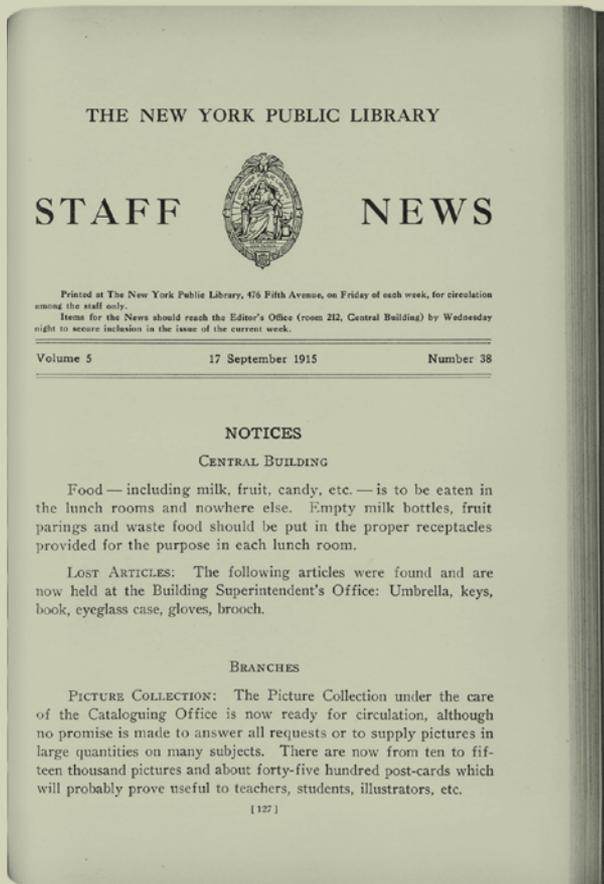


Fig. 2.
 Earliest description of the Picture Collection by Emma Cragin, superintendent of the Cataloguing Office in The New York Public Library's Circulation Department. ca. 1914.

Fig. 3.
 "The New York Public Library Staff News." 17 Sept. 1915.

adopted the Newark model of subject classification.³ Acknowledging school teachers' reliance on picture collections for instruction, Dana appropriated the main and subheadings for the collection from textbook terminology: Civics—Streets, for instance, or Minerals—Coal. Almost from the beginning, however, it was clear that teachers were not the only ones drawn to Room 100 of the Library's Central Building, where the Picture Collection was located. In the earliest surviving notes concerning the genesis of the Picture Collection, Emma Cragin, Superintendent of the Cataloging Office in the Library's Circulation Department, who helped conceive of the Picture Collection and took on the added responsibility of developing it, observed that patrons were asking "daily questions" that could not "readily be supplied by books," and that starting a picture collection would have the benefit of attracting "many who do not use [the] library now...interior decorators, illustrators, lecturers, landscape architects, designers, teachers of special subjects" (fig. 2).⁴ As the custodian of a new collection that lacked dedicated staff support, Cragin elected to proceed with caution: "Do not begin to circulate too quickly...Show collection to representative people + have them point out deficiencies...Do very little advertising at first." Within a year, however, having spent "all her spare time building [the collection] up," she admitted to finding the work "so interesting that it had become a serious labor."⁵

In 1916, the Collection's first full year of operation, its picture stock—at this point primarily derived from discarded books and periodicals—numbered approximately 27,000 items and circulated 15,092 pictures. In five years, the circulation figure would nearly quadruple to 59,833 items, with "a widening circle of borrowers, many of whom have never used the Library for any other purpose," so taken with the department's "generous spirit" that they offered their own collections to add to the stock.⁶ The number and variety of requests from all directions—walk-ins off the street, telephone calls and mail, and queries forwarded from patrons of other branches in the NYPL system—also witnessed a steady rise. Requests for particular subjects that could not be immediately filled due to paucity of stock were carefully logged; those that recurred were given priority as library staff processed a growing accumulation of raw source material drawn from branch library discards as well as gifts from patrons and businesses alike.

In two daybooks (pp. 158–165) kept by Ellen Perkins, who followed Cragin as head of the Picture Collection in 1917 and served until her retirement in 1929, it is tempting to read the subject requests that she dutifully logged as a barometer of changing public interest. The early evidence, however, is too arbitrary and idiosyncratic for that. In May 1917, for instance, more pictures of places (New York City, Europe, South America) were checked out than on any other single subject, but the next month, that distinction went to the subject "Costumes." In June 1918, the Library could not fill requests for Vauxhall Bridge, a man swinging an axe, the costume of a balloonist, or the bottom of a canal boat. Addressing gaps in the Collection revealed by the public's requests, no matter the subject or angle, the Collection continued to expand organically.

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Sometime in the mid-1920s, a young woman named Romana Javitz began working at the Picture Collection. Born in Minsk, Russia, to parents sympathetic to the arts, Javitz immigrated in 1906 with her family to New York City, where she attended public school before taking an assortment of drawing and painting classes at Cooper Union, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and Art Students League. In 1920 she began working part-time in the children's room at the Library, which exposed her to the Picture Collection. After a brief detour in 1924 to study dissection at Columbia University, and extended excursions in Europe (from which she mailed engravings to add to the Picture Collection's stock) in 1924 and 1925, she applied to work at the Picture Collection full-time. By the time Ellen Perkins retired in 1929, it was obvious who should succeed her.

At the age of twenty-six, Romana Javitz was appointed Superintendent of the Picture Collection, and during the nearly four decades she presided over it, the Collection developed into the one of the most widely used visual resources servicing arguably the most fertile site of creative, commercial, and industrial production anywhere in the world. Like John Cotton Dana, Javitz was a visionary informed by personal experience. She wanted to demystify the institution in which she worked and, without making assumptions, to connect an unprecedented gathering of materials with the people who most needed them. In 1929, Javitz's first year in charge, she implemented two major changes in the Collection's workflow. The first was to reorganize the furniture and equipment in Room 100 in order to allow the public open access to the Collection; prior to this, staff would field patron requests one at a time at the reference desk and fetch the material from closed stacks, sometimes resulting in wait times of up to forty-five minutes. The second was her decision to temporarily stop the practice of mounting each picture, which was necessary to make their processing more efficient, and to keep the picture stock up to date with images from current newspapers and magazines.

3. See John Cotton Dana, *Modern American Library Economy As Illustrated by the Newark N.J. Free Public Library*, Part V, The School Department, Section 3, The Picture Collection (Woodstock, VT: The Elm Tree Press, 1910), pp. 367–91.

6. *Bulletin of The New York Public Library*, vol. 25, 1921, p. 237.

4. "Earliest description of the P.C. by Miss E. Cragin," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

5. "Now Loan Pictures to Library Patrons," *New York Times*, June 4, 1916.

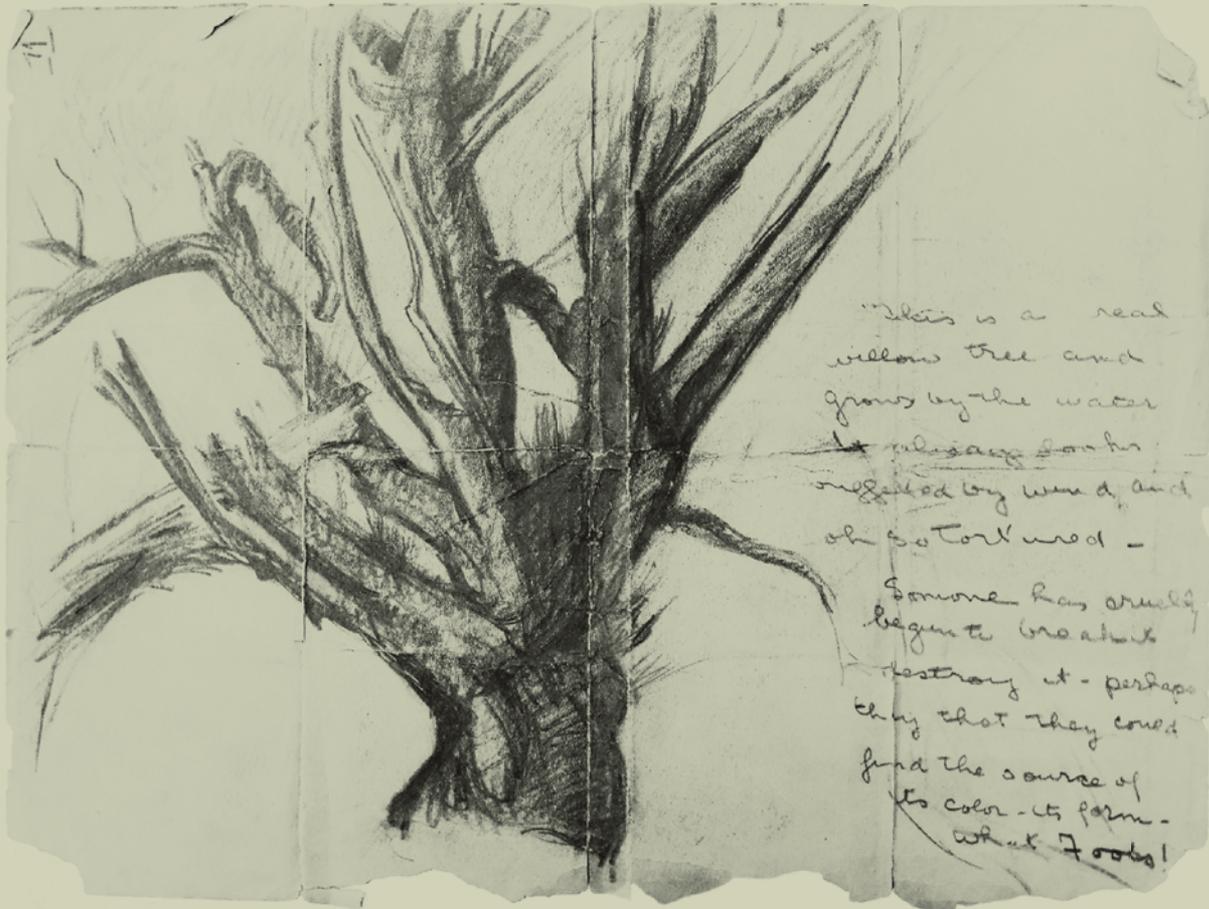


Fig. 4.

Drawing by Romana Javitz included in letter to unknown recipient. "This is a real willow tree and grows by the water. It always looks buffeted by wind and oh so tortured— Someone has cruelly begun to break + destroy it—perhaps [thinking] that they could find the source of its color—its form—what Fools!" Early 1920s.

This risked shortening the pictures' useful lives, but for Javitz it was their immediate availability for use that counted most. Prioritizing access over preservation, she advocated for the Collection's best interests without becoming too precious about the collection itself, accepting its cycles of attrition and addition as a fundamental aspect of its nature. These would only be the first of Javitz's many pragmatic adaptations to the practices she inherited.

Javitz's annual reports on the Collection during the early years of the Great Depression, pages of which Simon has incorporated into her project, provide an extraordinary account not only of the rapid evolution of the Collection and its use under her watch, but also of her ability to weave facts and evocative bits of narrative into her bureaucratic obligations (pp. 177–179 and 212–219). The following excerpts show how she deployed these documents to demonstrate the Collection's utility to Library administrators (for its utility to its users was clear) and in turn build, under duress, a compelling case for its continuation and growth.

1930

The circulation of 261,611 pictures in 1930 is an increase of 49.9 per cent over that of 1929 and 125 per cent over 1928.

Such statistics overlook the amount of reference work entailed in the circulation of pictures. . . . The Picture requests demand research, time, and ingenuity. A local museum needed the detail of a pack on a donkey in ancient times and in early America; a school required the history of the week in agriculture; a department store was interested in early advertisements of corsets; a magazine cover artist asked for the color of a flea's eye; a necktie manufacturer wanted internationally known waterfalls as a basis for designs to be used in a silk manufactured in Switzerland; for a stage set, a designer needed the lettering of an 1830 menu. . . .

About one-third of borrowers are teaching, some training classes in the department stores, others lecturing at universities. Another third includes theatres, publishers, advertising agencies, printers, barbers, and wig makers. The rest is made up of the individual artist, from mural decorator to trade-mark designer.

Visitors from other libraries, business organizations, and museums come for advice, interested in the methods of classification, storage, and circulation peculiar to this Collection because of its size and the varied interests it serves. Mail brings inquiries from all parts of the world.

The public is realizing that the Picture Collection is not an art file but a picture encyclopedia.

1931

For the first time since its beginning fifteen years ago, the Picture Collection is housed in a room devoted entirely to it. In August the entire Collection was transferred to Room 73 of the Central Building.

The Collection now numbers 316,877 classified pictures in its files.

In 1931, there were lent 316,633 pictures, an increase of 21 per cent over 1930. This seems remarkable when one realizes the unavailability of a good part of the stock. . . . and the general unemployment among artists. Lending of pictures for school use was somewhat curtailed because the requests far exceeded the supply.

The most fruitful innovation of the year was requiring the public to present picture requests in writing. This was started to overcome the repeated difficulty encountered in understanding the public's myriad accents, enunciations, and pronunciations. . . . From timesaver and interpreter, the written request has become a strong adjunct to the classification and purchase of new pictures. . . . The request is written according to the needs of the borrower and not as a catalogued subject-heading. The reader does not ask for a picture in zoology, but for the "profile view of a lamb."

The pictures go into the workshops of the city. In the theatre district the pictures are at work in a wigmaker's shop and at the make-up mirror. On Wall street, in a new office building, and in Radio City, walls are being painted from designs borrowed from the Library. To New Yorkers, art means something caught within frames in a museum. To the Picture Collection, art is a live profession, hungry for ideas, inspiration and experimentation.

1932

The existence of a picture collection as a source for idle time killing and diversion is the obvious assumption. But this lean year accentuated the practical attitude of the public. Essentially, these pictures are put to a bread earning usage.

406,967 pictures were lent during 1932, an increase of 28 ½ per cent over the 1931 circulation. . . .



Fig. 5.
Photograph by Wurts Bros. of patrons using the Picture Collection. 1947.

1933

There is stimulating satisfaction in the continuity of increased use of the Picture Collection, despite three years of depression.

In 1933, 467,897 pictures were borrowed. This was an increase of 14.7 per cent over the circulation of 1932. For three months no pictures were circulated through the branch libraries, a curtailment of service due to insufficient staff to cope with increased work.

The collection continues to grow in size. During the past year 76,318 new pictures were added to the Classified stock, bringing the total to 456,588...

1934

In 1934 a total of 667,967 pictures were lent. This represents a 42.7% increase over the 1933 circulation (467,897). The basic cause of this increase is apparent. The many artists hired under the Public Works Art Project to produce designs for the decoration of public buildings turned to the Library for the needed factual data.

Two incidents of the year epitomize the relation between the public and the Collection. A French designer felt it important to inform the staff that, although having worked in several capital cities here and abroad, he found this service unique... The second instance is that, at the opening of the first school of window display in the city, the director thought it essential to include as preliminary training for entry into the field, a thorough familiarity with the picture files of the Library, which she considers indispensable.

1935

Museums and art collections maintain collections of pictures selected as ends in themselves. It is only in a public library that pictures are organized as documents, not as good or bad art. Here the public come to make their own selection and find inspiration, stimulation, factual data, and opportunity for comparisons.

The years from mid-1930s through the beginning of World War II proved especially pivotal for the Picture Collection. By the end of 1933, the reinforcements that Javitz had long advocated for finally came in the form of workers from the just-created Civil Works Administration, an emergency job-creation program (recast in 1935 as the Works Progress Administration) that was part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. From then until the early 1940s, between twenty-five and forty temporary workers, many of them artists, executed a wholesale reorganization of the Collection, with tasks ranging from the routine (the refileing of returns and the processing of backlogged materials) to the specialized (subject research, the reclassification of images, the compilation of a new subject-heading index, and the construction of new wooden bins to house the Collection and make it easier for patrons to peruse [fig. 5]).

As Simon foregrounds in her selection of artifacts from the Picture Collection's archives, in early 1936, Javitz received the first major deposit of photographs to the Collection, courtesy of Roy Stryker from the Resettlement Administration (which became the Farm Security Administration) in Washington, D.C. The coded language of Stryker's initial letter to Javitz betrays the tightrope Stryker was walking by sending the prints to Javitz; later he admitted fearing that Congress might suppress the archive he was in the midst of building due to the inconvenient truths they told. "We are sending you, under separate cover, a bundle of prints which are not being used," wrote Stryker, downplaying the significance of his gesture. "[No] mark of identification has been put on them, and we prefer that no source be given. Instead of throwing away any old prints of any sort, I am going to keep them and send them to you whenever we get enough to make it worthwhile."⁷ Stamped as received in February 1936, a mere nine months after the creation of the RA and before Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans made their iconic photographs of the "Migrant Mother" and Hale County, respectively, the letter is reproduced for the first time in this book (p. 195).

Javitz recognized the import of Stryker's deposit at once, not only for the Picture Collection and its patrons, but also for how the photographs buttressed her conception of a picture's greatest worth—that is, its documentary

7. Letter from Roy Stryker to Romana Javitz, February 17, 1936, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. In a 1965 interview, Javitz recalled Stryker saying: "[We] had a meeting and decided if Congress was going to impound all these pictures as you know some senators were eager to have done, at least a duplicate file would be in New York." Romana Javitz and Richard K. Doud, "An Interview with Romana Javitz, 23 February 1965." *Archives of American Art Journal* 41, no. 1/4 (2001): pp. 2–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1557754>.

8. Speaking of the FSA photographs, Javitz recalled: "[It] was the first time that we had images that were clean-cut. They weren't made to sell records or soap or whatnot. Before that, our pictures were very tainted by commerce from the point of view of selling." Ibid.



Fig. 6.

André Malraux with images for the second volume of his book *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (*Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture*), published in 1954.

value.⁸ “When a picture is made for a single specific use, it is apt to be a distortion of fact conditioned by the demands of its users: in a propaganda use, in a commercial advertising campaign, in a political campaign,” she wrote in 1939. On the other hand, “a good document intends to record truthfully what is visible to the human and the camera eye.”⁹

Throughout her career, Javitz recognized the latent potential of a variety of visual documents, but in her view, photography, due to its reproducibility and capacity for precise and objective description, played an especially profound and transportive role, especially when seen in quantity and in relation to other photographs:

Through photography and printing, pictures of the accumulated cultural heritage of man were brought to the masses. More than any previous generation, the people of this century could gain a clearer visualization of the world of the past and present, and a broader view of the relation of man to nature throughout history. For the first time, all people could see, with their own eyes, the people of other times and far places. The printed picture has impressed the life of each of us, changed our tastes, affected our ideals and enriched our memories.¹⁰

Years later, when André Malraux introduced his concept of the “Imaginary Museum,” which aimed to generate new insights by comparing reproductions of works of art throughout the world and throughout history, Javitz must have smiled at the familiarity of his ideas (fig. 6).

Given that Romana Javitz is credited as the first person at The New York Public Library to truly grasp the potential and import of photography (evidenced in part by the fact that so many key figures gravitated to her, from Lewis Hine to Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Roy Stryker, Dorothea Lange, and Paul Strand, in the decades before the medium was broadly accepted as a museum-worthy art) it is instructive to compare her views and treatment of the medium with that of curator and art historian Beaumont Newhall in his watershed exhibition “Photography 1839–1937,” held contemporaneously at The Museum of Modern Art. Two years short of photography’s centennial, Newhall’s exhibition was the first major effort in America to comprehensively survey the history of the medium. For one month in the spring of 1937, more than 800 photographic objects—including cased objects, cameras, x-rays, film stills, and a camera obscura—filled four floors of the museum, its impressive attendance statistics (over 30,000 visitors in one month) a testament to the medium’s popularity.

“Ever since its inception, photography has been confused with all other graphic processes,” wrote Newhall, then the museum’s librarian, in the exhibition’s accompanying catalog. “From time immortal, pictures had been made only by human hands. Suddenly, a mechanical method of producing them was presented to an astonished world.”¹¹ Commissioned by MoMA director Alfred H. Barr as part of his ambitious program of large-scale, didactic exhibitions on modern art, and informed by László Moholy-Nagy’s Bauhaus ideals and its expansive embrace of photography, Newhall’s exhibition presented photography in its variety and plentitude, privileging the narrative of its technological developments over the recognition of its masters, and over its relation to broader aesthetic movements. That the question of whether photography was an art on par with the traditionally accepted mediums of painting, drawing, and sculpture was largely sidestepped did not go unnoticed by its critics. In his review for *The New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford was not alone in expressing his disappointment that the exhibition lacked “a weighing and an assessment of photography in terms of pure aesthetic merit” as one would expect in an art museum. “In shifting this function onto the spectator,” he observed, “the Museum seems to me to be adding unfairly to his burden.”¹²

For Newhall, however, in order to establish a basis for aesthetic judgment, it was necessary to first explicate a way of looking at photographs and of understanding “the optical and chemical laws which govern [their] production.”¹³ It could be that Newhall could not fully reconcile his role as a curator with his duty as a librarian, and wanted, to some degree, to have it both ways since, among the objects on view and illustrated in the accompanying publication, many were the finest examples of their type, and thus atypical. In any case, between the time of the exhibition and the founding of MoMA’s Department of Photography, the first museum department in the U.S. dedicated to photography, with Newhall as its first official curator, both he and the museum had already moved decisively in the direction of wielding its considerable influence to establish a modernist canon.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Javitz continued to cultivate the Picture Collection and refine her thoughts about the role of pictures in a public library, and the distinctions between a library and a museum:

9. Romana Javitz, “On Pictures in a Public Library, 1939,” Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. This statement comports with Walker Evans’s approach to his RA commission: “Never make photographic statements for the government.... This is pure record not propaganda. The value and if you like, even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself which in the long run will prove an intelligent and far-sighted thing to have done.” Quoted in Jeff L. Rosenheim, “The Cruel Radiance of What Is: Walker Evans and the South,” in *Walker Evans* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), p. 73.

10. Romana Javitz, “Influence and Function: Pictures in Print, Thesis for Grade 4 promotion, c. 1939.” Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

11. Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: 1839–1937* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1937), pp. 40–41.

12. Lewis Mumford, “The Art Galleries,” *New Yorker*, April 3, 1937, p. 40.

13. Newhall, *Photography: 1839–1937*, p. 41. Clement Greenberg later used this logic as a basis to define his notion of a modernist medium.

14. Both Christopher Phillips’s trenchant article “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” first published in *October*, vol. 22 (autumn, 1982): pp. 27–63, and Erin O’Toole’s insightful dissertation, “No Democracy in Quality: Ansel Adams, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, and the Founding of the Department of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art” (<http://hdl.handle.net/10150/204109>) provide



Fig. 7.

Page from *Vogue* with images from the Picture Collection selected by Walker Evans. 1 Aug. 1949.

Pictures in a museum function as art. They have been selected and displayed to inculcate aesthetic appreciation, to give pleasure and motivate culture. Pictures in a public library are made available to stimulate the individual to study the records, to evaluate for himself, to come to his own conclusions without a stipulation by the library concerning the ends to which the material is to be used. The museum, patently, directs and limits the function of its pictures to that of the development of taste and the awakening of aesthetic sensitivity. The library, unlimited, influences more aspects of our lives.¹⁵

Her love of art notwithstanding, in Javitz's view, delivering aesthetic pleasure was but one function of pictures made to be art. Since the historical goal of most artists was to create likenesses of what they observed, she contended, pictures that had "outrun their life as works of art" could still be useful as "records of the customs of their day."¹⁶ And then there were all of the pictures that were never meant to be art, whose purpose was simply to convey something visually; for Javitz, these included "most pictorial representation in the past and most photographs today."¹⁷ For the users of the Picture Collection, such images often had equal if not greater utility.

It was precisely this ethos of resourcefulness, open-ended contingency, lack of pretense, and aversion for taste-making that attracted so many artists to use the Collection. Walker Evans, whose FSA pictures were included by the hundreds in Roy Stryker's deposits, and whose 1933 suite of Cuba pictures Javitz acquired shortly after they were made, was himself no stranger to the Library, having been employed there as a page in the mid-1920s. In 1949, for a feature in *Vogue* celebrating the Library's centenary, Evans selected, arranged, and captioned a constellation of nineteen images from the "Rear Views" folder, including pictures of a medieval sculpture, a cartoon from *The New Yorker*, and a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson (fig. 7). Despite her seeming intolerance of aesthetes, Javitz admired the purity of Evans's eye, his self-assured tastes, appreciation of the vernacular, and subversive use of the documentary function of photography—what he later referred to as his "documentary style." Apparently the feeling of kinship was mutual, for when Evans came to photograph in the Library for that assignment, Javitz received a call from the Library's public relations department saying, "There's a completely mad photographer here. He said that he would not take photographs in this building if we accompanied him. He said he wouldn't mind if you came along because that wouldn't count."¹⁸

In the ensuing decades, as the holdings and the uses of the Picture Collection continued to multiply and become an even more essential resource, its staff—and the Library at large—struggled to support its function. In 1940, in response to constant overcrowding and a possible breakdown of service, Javitz was left with no choice but to ask her superiors for permission to close the Collection to the public for two days of the week and sequester whole sections of its file—by then, well over a million items—that simply could not be responsibly managed. Later that year, a group of prominent patrons formed the Friends of the Picture Collection to raise awareness and funds, and to lobby city officials to permanently sustain the service (fig. 9a). Whatever success the group may have had, by the end of the decade the situation had not substantially improved. "It is obvious that the usefulness of this collection would collapse the day that the picture stock fell behind the times," Javitz reported in 1949. "By winter, a peak backlog of 150,000 returned pictures had accumulated. No solution in sight. . . . The staff was literally overwhelmed by the public."¹⁹

Yet the Collection carried on its work despite the hardships, fielding requests from the publisher of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (pp. 270-272) as well as patrons from countries as distant as South Africa and New Zealand. It also became increasingly relied upon as a model for picture collections across the country and beyond. In a 1954 talk that Javitz delivered to encourage her beleaguered staff, she said, "We should always remember that in our collection every subject developed only because someone asked for it. We have grown only because the public has wanted us to grow and has needed us. . . . Every other part of the Library solicits publicity, whereas we discourage the use of our files and the collection keeps growing."²⁰

Not only did the Collection grow, it also continuously evolved. As its picture stock was reevaluated and updated to reflect shifts in patron demand, cultural production, and awareness of public sensibility, so too were the subject headings under which they were filed.²¹ Pictures initially classified, for instance, with the lead header "Negroes" (figs. 8a–c), a term still in common use through the 1960s, were eventually migrated to headings titled "Black History," "Black Life," or "Blacks—Art" once librarians recognized that the former term was outmoded

further insight into the formation of MoMA's influence of the course of photography. Newhall's book, revised continuously through 1982, became influential in its own right as a template for subsequent books delineating the history of photography.

15. Romana Javitz, "On Pictures in a Public Library, 1939."

16. Romana Javitz, *ibid.*

17. Romana Javitz, "Words on Pictures," *Massachusetts Library Club Bulletin*, 1943, pp. 19–23.

18. Romana Javitz and Richard K. Doud, "An Interview with Romana Javitz, 23 February 1965," p. 10.

19. Romana Javitz "Picture Collection Annual Report 1948/1949," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

20. Romana Javitz, "Talks to Staff, January 13, 1954," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

21. This periodic review and updating of terms, driven either by patron request or librarians' observations of subjects of interest to the public but not yet represented by a folder, continues today. Among the most recent additions to the subject-heading index are "Transgenderism," "Globalization," "Drones," and perhaps surprisingly, "Friendship."



NEGROES - 1898



Figs. 8a-c.

Photographs once filed under the subject heading "Negroes" in the Picture Collection (later transferred to the Photography Collection). Photographers, titles, and dates unknown.

and considered pejorative by many, not to mention the problematics of categorizing images according to race. By retaining evidence of these former taxonomies—traces of which can often be seen on the image margins or versos—the socio-historical implications of classification can become a subject of study in itself.

By the time Romana Javitz retired in 1968, the Picture Collection was rumored to have more than four million items. Advertisers and businesses, which had set up their own picture libraries, began using the Collection less and less as textbook publishers and media companies relied on it more and more. The circulation statistics, which peaked at 870,398 pictures in 1937 (p. 314), had settled down to approximately half that amount through the mid-1970s, when a funding crisis that hobbled the Library overall resulted in the elimination of nearly two-thirds of the Collection's staff. In 1976, another group of spirited patrons came together to form a nonprofit called The Committee for the Picture Collection to again raise funds and awareness to reestablish the Collection's operations (fig. 9b).

In the early 1980s, another set of profound changes to the Collection took place. In 1982, the Collection and its staff moved across Fifth Avenue to refurbished quarters at the Library's new Mid-Manhattan Branch, and due to space constraints, transitioned from open bin access to vertical subject folders placed on shelves. That same year, a substantial number of the Collection's photographic prints were transferred to the noncirculating collections of NYPL Research Libraries: approximately 4,000 to the Local History and Genealogy Division and 20,000 to the newly established Photography Collection within a division of Art, which possessed greater resources to preserve artifacts for which a robust collector's market had developed. Preservation issues aside, this new context also meant a difference in how these pictures would be accessed, cataloged, and perceived. The art historian Douglas Crimp critiqued this development in his 1981 essay "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," observing that "as urban poverty becomes Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine... Dior's New Look becomes Irving Penn, and World War II becomes Robert Capa," these photographs "will no longer serve the purposes of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage."²² Transfers of photographs, newly valued for their significance in the history of photography and as works by its exemplars, continued through the 2000s, including the collection of over 40,000 FSA prints that were sent in batches to Romana Javitz by Roy Stryker and his colleagues (pp. 384–388; 390–395; 402–403), and thousands of pictures received from the Library of Congress (pp. 366–367; 369; 372–374; 380), which sent the Picture Collection boxes of its duplicates starting in 1957 (pp. 282–283).²³

*

When Taryn Simon began the work in this volume, the Picture Collection was, for her, both a homecoming and a revelation. She was introduced at a young age by her father to the Collection, whose abundance of accessible offerings left an indelible mark. Returning to it many years later, she recognized the Collection as a whole to be what it also is: a homegrown, analog precursor to the online image retrieval tools of today (fig. 10). But her intentions and project far exceed that analogy. In *The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection*, Simon testifies not only to Javitz's liberating concept of the picture as document and her forward-looking conviction that "a true picture has many lives," but also to a collection that is profoundly unwieldy and resistant to synopsis, shaped by successive generations of Picture Collection staff and by broad and idiosyncratic public use.²⁴ After all, what appears in Simon's improvised compositions are only the pictures that happen to have survived librarians' and patrons' evolving notions of a given subject, as well as attrition over the years by intentional removal, theft, loss, or degradation.

A close reading of Simon's project on the Picture Collection reveals an even more provocative metaphor. What has been preserved through the decades, remarkably, are not only certain well-thumbed images—of the nineteen that Walker Evans selected from the "Rear Views" folder in 1949, for instance, at least five of them reappear in Simon's 2013 triptych featuring contents from the same folder (p. 114)—but also the humanizing contradiction at the core of Romana Javitz's progressive politics of image democracy. While Javitz aspired to a platonic ideal of neutrality by having user requests inform subject headings and by *not* judiciously preselecting only what she or her staff felt were the best specimens to fill their folders, the collection she presided over was, in fact, built upon a recursive system of individual subjectivities. There were not only those of staff who clipped and assigned classifications to pictures, and weeded out those that no longer fit; but also those of the public, who by using particular images—i.e., taking them out of circulation, temporarily or otherwise—inadvertently performed an act of natural selection that yields the inverse result currently achieved by the algorithms of online image search engines, which

22. Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject" in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 74–75.

23. Also among the transfers to the Photography Collection in the late 1980s and early 1990s were approximately 1,500 photographs that comprised the Franziska Gay Schacht Memorial Collection, named for an esteemed librarian of the Picture Collection who died in 1962. Distinct from the photographs in the circulating collection, these photographs were largely fine prints by noted photographers (see p. 337 for a summary list). Many were solicited as gifts from the photographers themselves; others were acquired with funds provided by the Schacht family. Sometime after 1980 the collection was renamed the Romana Javitz Collection.

24. Romana Javitz, "Words on Pictures," pp. 19–23.

25. See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 41–42.

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Friends of the Picture Collection
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Figs. 9a-b.
 Solicitations of public support for the Picture Collection. 1942 and 1976.

Fig. 10.
 Taryn Simon arranging the contents of the "Television programs" folder from the Picture Collection. 2013.

prioritize the most popular results. Thus Simon's pictures, which betray in their arrangements and selection of images the artist's own idiosyncrasies (witness the density of *Folder: Beards & Mustaches* [p. 60] or the whimsy of *Folder: Paper — Endpapers* [p. 108], both 2013), is as much about what is absent as what is present. They sustain our gaze because they upend our expectations more than they fulfill them.

This double valence at work in Simon's photographs of the Picture Collection—which un-nostalgically illuminates a history of the utility of physical images at a time when they have been drained of much of their original utility—is what art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss memorably describes in *A Voyage on the North Sea* (1973), her meditation on Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers's embrace of the outmoded. In it, she invokes Walter Benjamin's idea that the utopian dimension present at the genesis of a technology becomes visible again precisely at the moment of that technology's obsolescence.²⁵

While developing the photographic component of her multifaceted project, Simon also mined the Collection's institutional history, combing through scores of folders containing decades-old correspondence, annual reports, newspaper clippings, internal manuals of operation and the like, held in the Library's Manuscripts and Archives Division. The selection of documents she extracted and sequenced yield an almost geological view of the Collection's own layered narrative, as well as those of its protagonists.

In early 2013, Simon began to exhibit excerpts of her project at various venues around the world, generating considerable interest in the Collection itself, and later that year, believing that her work was nearly complete, she started to compile the materials for a publication intended for release in 2015. Multiple times in the seven years that followed, the finish line would loom promisingly near, only to recede once more into the far distance as yet another dimension of the Collection's story unfolded, prompting Simon to further expand her idiosyncratic social history of American visual production, photography (and images more generally), and the flattening (and later creation) of hierarchies that brought this history into being. Driving this was a feeling of kinship with Romana Javitz and a determination to honor the work of an under-recognized woman who played such a critical role in disseminating photography and visual culture in the twentieth century. Even in the project's final stage, during which Simon collaborated with the Library to investigate and foreground the Picture Collection provenance of many of the prized works now in the Library's Photography Collection, new information and materials continued to surface, leading to heated negotiation sessions with her publisher in which Simon championed the latest extraordinary find and argued that it warranted yet another adjustment to the book's page count, design, and production schedule. It became clear that the Collection itself, and the homegrown yet highly effective systems under which it operates, evince the same obsession with text and image, self-directed organizing principles, minute detail, and hidden narratives that so strongly characterize Simon and her larger endeavor. As it turns out, the present monograph is not only an epic paean to The New York Public Library; it is also an astonishing testament to the institution's openness to its own layered history, and to the ways in which the Picture Collection both mirrors and shapes the vast and inextricably intertwined cultures that it simultaneously culls from and feeds.

Recently the Picture Collection was moved again, back to its room of origin—only this time absorbed into the NYPL's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, where it has been reunited with the image-objects that were extracted to form a cornerstone of the Library's Photography Collection. Despite enduring many changes, it remains the largest free, circulating physical picture collection in the country, if not the world. With changing patterns of use, and the many demands on the Library's finite resources, however, the Collection is under pressure to evolve again. Alert to the genius of Javitz's work, Taryn Simon has suspended the Collection in its flux, providing a panoptic view of its hidden histories while pointing to the seemingly limitless range of possibilities ahead. Each of her pictures is itself an intricate document whose implications and multivalent character one suspects Romana Javitz would have innately appreciated. Although the Picture Collection—and the medium of photography itself—once again faces an indeterminate future, Simon's project testifies to its value as a living repository whose beauty resides in its unwieldiness, subjectivity, and fragmentation.

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25. See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 41–42.