



The Black Star historical collection at Ryerson University

HIGHLIGHTS

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Even an experienced marathon runner might take pause before setting out to view every image in the Black Star Collection: Placed end to end, the 291,049 prints cover a distance of just over 46 miles. Most of them, nearly a quarter million, are 8 x 10-inch black and white enlargements, carefully made on double-weight paper. In their totality they describe the personalities, events and conflicts of the twentieth century, from before World War I to Vietnam and beyond, forming a repository of collective global memory.

The collection originated with approximately 5000 prints from the Berlin-based Mauritius picture agency, which served the European picture magazines and the markets of the Weimar era. These prints were brought to New York in 1935 by the agency's owner, Ernest Mayer, when he fled Nazi Germany; with two fellow émigrés, Kurt Kornfeld and Kurt Safranski, he established Black Star that year. In 1936,

with the founding of Life magazine, one of Black Star's earliest and most significant clients, the collection began to grow rapidly, reaching its present size more than a half-century later. When picture magazines decreased in number, and as clients shifted first to colour and then to digital imagery, the black and white component of the agency's operations found itself in less commercial demand. At the same time, however, it was assuming increasing importance as a historical archive and visual record, and as a collection of unanticipated artistic significance.

The Black Star holdings include the work of more than 1200 different image-makers, many of them acknowledged as individuals who helped define picture journalism as it evolved throughout the twentieth century. Working collaboratively with the founders and editors of weekly magazines, including Life, Look and the Saturday Evening Post, these photographers established the norms of the





published photo-essay. Roman Vishniac, Philippe Halsman and Fritz Goro; Marion Post Wolcott, Andreas Feininger and W. Eugene Smith; Dennis Brack, Flip Schulke and Charles Moore are among the better known of these.

There is also work by photographers whose careers prefigure the emergence of photography as a contemporary art form, such as László Moholy-Nagy, Bill Brandt, Mario Giacomelli, Steve Schapiro and Bill Burke. A common characteristic of all this work is its immediacy, which reflects a kind of social engagement that is increasingly rare in the reportage of today, which often relies on the deliberate use of shock.

In 2005 the Black Star Collection was gifted to Ryerson University by an anonymous donor, and the university has been entrusted with preserving these photographs and making them accessible to the public. To this end, a gallery and research centre will be constructed at the university, and two exhibitions are to be held annually until the gallery is in place, providing a glimpse of the holdings through digital output and printing technologies.

This Highlights exhibition for CONTACT reveals the significance of the collection in documenting the tumultuous global, cultural and political events of the twentieth century. Representing the broad themes held by the collection, this exhibition offers viewers an opportunity to witness some of the century's defining historic moments and appreciate their continued relevance. For those who remember these events, the collection serves to confirm their memories and is, in addition, a resource of inestimable value. The appearance of Mao in China; the rise of Hitler; Mackenzie King, Roosevelt and Churchill; the exiled

Dalai Lama; Nixon and Krushchev; Lumumba in Africa, Nehru in India; early images of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, Ariel Sharon and Fidel Castro; Charles Manson and OJ Simpson; Pierre Trudeau and René Levesque; Teresa Stratas, Glenn Gould; Expo 67 and the Montreal Olympics; Margaret Mead; Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham; Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Miles Davis; Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe; the young Cassius Clay, now Muhammed Ali; the Inuit community in Baker Lake—all these characters and situations appear, as if assembled by Dickens or Joyce, as if imagined by Orwell, Beckett or Robert Penn Warren. An immense drama is presented in these pictures with all the clarity of the camera lens, the veracity of the optical enlargement and the immediacy of the hand-held camera.

For those who do not remember the events described by the Black Star pictures, and for those in future generations, the collection is an engaging portrait of social change and struggle and a moral lesson of no small significance. The Kennedy and Johnson presidencies in the United States are often seen as a time of great idealism and accomplishment, in stark contrast to racial violence, political assassination and a pointless war; and the photographs bear this out, particularly those of the Civil Rights Movement.

Without the complete media record of these years, of which the Black Star archive is a significant part, the full story of these personalities, movements and events could not be passed on. People need to remember the dramas of the twentieth century, and keeping photographs of them accessible and in public view is an essential part of this endeavour.

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