

Contemporary Collectibles: Four fine photo books

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Photography books continue to be a major force in the art book market and are increasingly collectible for their own sake. Here's a quartet of new releases that are particularly worthy of note, both for collectors and civilians.

- "Art of the American Snapshot: 1888-1978." It's only in the past couple of decades that you would hear the words "art" and "snapshot" uttered in the same sentence, but these vernacular photos have slowly but surely edged into that realm. This book, by Sarah Greenough and Dianne Waggoner (National Gallery of Art in association with Princeton University Press), focuses on a single collection, that of Robert E. Jackson, which is now on view in Washington.

Demonstrating how the introduction and widespread use of the Kodak Brownie and other cheap cameras democratized photography and documented everyday American life, the book contains some 250 representative snapshots, organized chronologically, from carefully posed and composed turn-of-the-century silver print portraits to some humorous 1970s Polaroids. A substantive, definitive work.

- "The Origins of American Photography 1839-1885: The Hallmark Photographic Collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art" by Keith F. Davis (distributed by Yale University Press) is an important photo-historical volume documenting the early years of the form and features 600 impeccable tritone and four-color reproductions, facilitating the faithful reproduction of the black-and-white and sepia of the originals. Beginning with the 1839 introduction of the daguerreotype and its proliferation during the Civil War, it follows with a demonstration of its chronicling of the American West, a thorough treatment of its contribution to portraiture depicting Americans of the period in a variety of ages, professions and ethnicities, and finally moves on to the rise of paper photography - ambrotypes, calotypes, etc.

Fascinating subcategories include in-depth treatments of such subjects as the establishment of photography as a profession in various locales, postmortem images, outdoor views and landscapes, and humorous and allegorical pictures, providing a cultural and social history of the country as well as being an essential document on the roots of this art form.

- "Yesterday: The Beatles Once Upon A Time" by Astrid Kirchherr and photojournalist Max Scheler (The Vendome Press). Anyone who knows their Beatles history will be familiar with the name Astrid Kirchherr: She was the young German photographer who was very much in on Hamburg's Cavern club scene when the lads were starting out, eventually becoming engaged to the original bass player, Stu Sutcliffe. These photographs, taken in Liverpool in 1964 and later in London during the filming of "A Hard Day's Night", offer a rare, intimate view of the group as they moved toward superstardom.

In the most candid of shots, they're seen rehearsing, playing, performing, clowning, cooking, collaborating

and visiting their parents - all effectively capturing the spirit of that particular yesterday. The glimpses afforded of grim city streets and claustrophobic, kitsch-filled sitting rooms show exactly what the Fab Four and their British fans were escaping from.

- "Mapplethorpe: Polaroids" by Sylvia Wolf (Prestel). Like his contemporary Andy Warhol, Mapplethorpe was a practitioner of the art of instant photography. But whereas Warhol's shots tended to be candid and casual, taken at his "factory" and Studio 54, Mapplethorpe's are for the most part more formal studies, employing his characteristic subject matter - male (and sometimes female) nudes (some of them fetishistic), singly and in pairs, portraits of some of the leading characters in his life, such as singers Patti Smith and Marianne Faithful, curator Henry Geldzahler and collector Sam Wagstaff, as well as a number of provocative self-portraits. There are also floral and other still lifes.

This handsomely produced slip-cased book, the first comprehensive collection of the artist's black-and-white Polaroids of the 1970s, features many previously unpublished works and a perceptive text by Wolf, an adjunct curator at the Whitney Museum. Definitely R-rated.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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