The New York Public Library
New York Public Library Archives

Guide to the
Picture Collection records
1896-1999
MssArc 5850

Compiled by Jim Moske and Anthony T. Troncale; machine readable finding aid created by FAKER.

Summary

Creator: New York Public Library. Picture Collection

Title: Picture Collection records

Date: 1896-1999

Size: 6 linear feet (10 boxes)

Source: Transferred from Picture Collection.

Abstract: Reports, correspondence, news clippings and administrative files documenting operation of the Picture Collection of The New York Public Library.

Physical Location: RG 8

Conditions Governing Access:

Box 6 is closed to research.

Preferred citation: Picture Collection Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Compiled by Jim Moske and Anthony T. Troncale; machine readable finding aid created by FAKER.

Creator History

The New York Public Library Picture Collection, comprised of clipped illustrations from books, newspapers and magazines as well as loose photographs, prints and postcards, was established in 1914. Encyclopedic in scope and arranged by subject, this circulating collection has provided inspiration and visual information for a broad range of endeavors - commercial art, mass market publishing,

advertising, fashion design, film, theater and popular entertainment.

The NYPL Circulation Department, forerunner of today's Branch Libraries, began saving plates, posters, postcards, photographs in 1914. Within a few years, over 17,000 images had been prepared for circulation. Many of these pictures came from old magazines and books that might otherwise have been sold for scrap paper. The Library assigned Ellen Perkins, a chief cataloger in the Circulation Department, to oversee the program's development. By 1926 the growing collection was housed in Room 67 of the NYPL central building.

In 1929, Romana Javitz succeeded Perkins as Head of the Picture Collection. During Javitz's long tenure, the collection grew tremendously, access was improved, and use expanded. In 1931, Javitz overcame a language barrier faced by non-English speaking users of the collection by instituting a policy requiring the public to record their requests for pictures by describing, or drawing, them on a call slip. During the 1930s, Javitz addressed the need to devise a better system of subject access for the ever-growing collection, which then numbered 667,967 items. The collection also needed to be weeded, sorted, updated, cross-indexed - tasks that required artist-trained workers. Javitz found such artists through the Works Progress Administration, which initially provided thirty-one workers (later increased to forty). This team systematically eliminated outdated materials from the collections, added newer, more modern images, and streamlined the process of getting material to the public and then back on the shelves. Numbers written or stamped on each picture led the user to a catalog card index of original sources. Javitz and her staff adopted a flexible arrangement scheme based on Regions, Styles, Types, and Year. Subheading arrangements depended on the subjects' geographical, stylistic, or chronological identities.

During the 1930s-1940s, several major acquisitions helped to build the Picture Collection into a world-class resource. Movie studios used the Picture Collection often and recognized its importance by establishing depository arrangements with the Library. Several newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*, donated current news photographs from their files. Ten thousand photographs of paintings were purchased in 1936 from the Frick Collection.

Exhibitions were staged to highlight aspects of the collection; typical was an exhibit entitled "Romance of the Railroad" for which several railroad companies donated photographs illustrating all aspects of the industry. Eager to represent current lifestyles and trends, the Picture Collection, through the cooperation of local businesses, obtained photographs of outstanding window displays, architecture, vehicles, fashions, vaudeville acts, and the dance. In 1934, the Public Works Art Project donated ninety-one fine prints and twenty paintings that would form the beginning of a circulating collection of framed pictures for use in the branch libraries. In addition, Javitz began to purchase books, pamphlets, and periodicals specifically for the purpose of cutting out the plates and illustrations, to selectively enhance the collection in subject areas that had been inadequately documented. While this deconstruction of material often horrified other librarians, Javitz reveled in the practice. To her thinking, dismembering a book not only allowed for redistribution of its pieces toward other, perhaps better, purposes, but also demystified the book as an object.

Among the thousands of items donated to the Picture Collection during 1936-1937 were photographs from the United States government's Resettlement Administration (RA). This was a New Deal program to assist farmers and their tenants who had been displaced by drought and economic ruin. The Photographic Section of the RA, later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), was created to document the plight of those in need. Roy E. Stryker, the head of the Photographic Section, hired several talented photographers to cover the rural and urban communities affected by the Depression. At the suggestion of the painter Ben Shahn (1898-1969), one of the photographers he hired, Stryker began regularly to send duplicate photographs from the Resettlement Administration to the Picture

Collection. In 1957-1958, the Library of Congress provided thousands of duplicate copyright deposits of prints and photographs to the Picture Collection in exchange for copy prints and microfilm reels from the New York Public Library's holdings. Among the materials from the Library of Congress were nineteenth-century Civil War and Spanish-American War scenes, cartes-de-visite and cabinet card portraits, travel views, and early American landscapes. Twentieth-century views included works by the photographers Alvin Langdon Coburn, Francis Bruguiere, Carl Moon, Laura Gilpin, and Margaret Bourke-White. Hundreds of images by amateur or aspiring photographers were also included. (Most of these FSA and LC photographs were transferred to the NYPL Research Libraries during the 1980s.)

Romana Javitz retired in 1968 and was succeeded by Lenore Cowan. The Picture Collection was eventually moved from the Central Building to the Mid-Manhattan Library at 5th Avenue and 40th Street. The collection remains an essential resource for New York City's creative communities, and has expanded into the digital realm. The Picture Collection Online is a select group of images available to researchers through the NYPL web site.

[This Historical Note is based substantially on: Troncale, Anthony T. "Worth Beyond Words: Romana Javitz and The New York Public Library's Picture Collection," *Biblion: The Bulletin of The New York Public Library*, Volume 4, Number 1, Fall 1995.]

Scope and Content Note

Records document the creation, operation and administration of the NYPL Picture Collection. Included are correspondence, memos, reports, news clippings and promotional materials. Romana Javitz correspondence includes letters exchanged with Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange and Roy Stryker.

Arrangement: The collection has been arranged in three series: 1.Curator, 1896-1982; 2.Administrative Files, 1915-1999; 3.Support Groups, 1940-1976.

Key Terms

Subjects
Cataloging of pictures
Classification -- Pictures
Libraries -- New York (State) -- New York
Libraries and pictures
Photograph collections
Public libraries -- New York (State) -- New York

Names
New York Public Library. Picture Collection
Evans, Walker, 1903-1975
Hine, Lewis Wickes, 1874-1940
Javitz, Romana
Lange, Dorothea
Stryker, Roy Emerson, 1893-1975

Container List

1. Curator 1896-1982

A. Romana Javitz 1896-1977

b. 1 f. 1	Accent on Pictures 1949
b. 1 f. 2	American Institute of Graphic Arts Medal 1967-1968
b. 1 f. 3	American Society of Magazine Photographers 1969
b. 1 f. 4	Appraisals 1961
b. 1 f. 5	Architecture Collection n.d.
b. 1 f. 6	Arrangement of Pictures n.d.
b. 1 f. 7	Austin, E.A. 1896
b. 1 f. 8	Blackwell, Jean 1949-1950
b. 1 f. 9	Brady, Matthew n.d.
b. 1 f. 10	Carnegie Grant 1940-1943
b. 1 f. 11	Complaint 1965
b. 1 f. 12	Compliments 1942-1966
b. 1 f. 13	Correspondence - Barnhill, William A. 1963-1965
b. 1 f. 14	Correspondence - Benet, William Rose n.d.
b. 1 f. 15	Correspondence - Bettman, Otto 1960
b. 1 f. 16	Correspondence - Boas, Ernst 1955-1977
b. 1 f. 17	Correspondence - Cowan, Lenore 1968, n.d.
b. 1 f. 18	Correspondence - Evans, Walker 1947-1949
b. 1 f. 19	Correspondence - Golternman, Guy 1944-1960
b. 1 f. 20	Correspondence - Graphic History Society 1944-1960
b. 1 f. 21	Correspondence - Hine, Lewis 1931-1940
b. 1 f. 22	Correspondence - Hine, Lewis - collection 1947-1976
b. 1 f. 23	Correspondence - Javitz, Romana - outgoing n.d.
b. 1 f. 24	Correspondence - Kent, Rockwell 1935
b. 1 f. 25	Correspondence - Lange, Dorothea 1956-1965
b. 1 f. 26	Correspondence - Leighton, George 1952-1966
b. 1 f. 27	Correspondence - Library of Congress 1943-1963
b. 1 f. 28	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, A-B 1935-1967
b. 1 f. 29	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, C-D 1938-1971
b. 1 f. 30	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, E-G 1932-1961
b. 1 f. 31	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, H-K 1938-1962
b. 2 f. 1	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, L-M 1931-1960
b. 2 f. 2	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, N-O 1934-1960
b. 2 f. 3	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, P-S 1940-1970
b. 2 f. 4	Correspondence - Miscellaneous, T-Z 1939-1960
b. 2 f. 5	Correspondence - Morgan, Barbara 1941, 1964
b. 2 f. 6	Correspondence - Ogden, Beecher 1946-1954

1. Curator (cont.)
  A. Romana Javitz (cont.)

1. Curator (cont.)
  A. Romana Javitz (cont.)

b. 3 f. 25	Staffing and hours 1967
b. 3 f. 26	Statistics n.d.
b. 3 f. 27	Talks to Staff 1954
b. 3 f. 28	Teaching (Pratt) 1940-1967
b. 3 f. 29	Webb, Todd - Captions n.d.
b. 3 f. 30	WNDT Channel 13 television n.d.
b. 3 f. 31	Words At War - Readers' Advisor 1943
b. 3 f. 32	Works Progress Administration (WPA) 1935
b. 3 f. 33	World War II n.d.
b. 3 f. 34	Writings 1943-1955, n.d.
b. 4	Audio tape transcriptions - Javitz class at Pratt[?] n.d.

B. Lenore Cowan 1968-1982

b. 5 f. 1	Brochure 1970s
b. 5 f. 2	Clustering grievance 1972-1973
b. 5 f. 3	History of Picture Collection 1975
b. 5 f. 4	Inaccessibilia Contract 1971
b. 5 f. 5	Javitz letter n.d.
b. 5 f. 6	Javitz Memorial 1980
b. 5 f. 7	Letters and memos 1968-1979
b. 5 f. 8	Letters of support 1975
b. 5 f. 9	Letters of support 1976
b. 5 f. 10	Preservation 1972
b. 5 f. 11	Referral Letters 1971
b. 5 f. 12	Schacht Collection 1980
b. 5 f. 13	Schacht/Javitz Collection 1980
b. 5 f. 14	Spivak, Max 1968
b. 5 f. 15	Statistics - Hourly Circulation 1969
b. 5 f. 16	Transfer of Photos to Research Libraries 1982
b. 5 f. 17	Wiethorn, Marion (Retirement) 1975
b. 6	Personnel files n.d.
	Closed to research.

2. Administrative Files 1915-1999

b. 7 f. 1	Abstracts from Pictures as Documents 1944
b. 7 f. 2	Adult Training Seminar 1971-1975
b. 7 f. 3	Amana n.d.
b. 7 f. 4-11	Annual Reports 1928-1999
b. 7 f. 12	Automated Cataloging 1985
b. 7 f. 13-15	Brochures 1970s-1980s
b. 7 f. 16	Buehrmann n.d.
b. 7 f. 17	Classification 1975, n.d.
b. 7 f. 18	Exhibit Loans n.d.