



IN CELEBRATION OF
LIGHT

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Photographs from the Collection
of
Cheryle R. and James F. Pierce

Honolulu Academy of Arts

A Few Photographs from the Pierce Collection

Robert Becker

A Pair

Thirty years and several hundred pictures compose the Pierce collection; 106 of the photographs are in the current exhibition. I asked Cherye and Jim Pierce to pick their individual favorites. (Judging by the way they talk about their collection, they love almost everything they own to a lesser or greater degree. How could they not? Cherye also named one picture she doesn't own but wants—Edward Steichen's portrait of Gloria Swanson from 1924. So the fire still burns.) Neither hesitated in answering the question.

Cherye chose Irving Penn's slightly haunting *Cuzco Children*. It's also titled, variously, *Mountain Children* or *Brother and Sister*. Penn took the picture at a pivotal moment in his career, as he moved from photographing artists to becoming one himself. Established already with *Condé Nast*, shooting portraits and fashion, the thirty-one-year-old photographer, while on location in Lima, Peru, for *Vogue Magazine*, left the city and headed to Cuzco for Christmas. Cuzco was "a town I had . . . a hunch about," he wrote. "I hungered to begin photographing its people the moment I set eyes on them. . . . And then, by incredible providence, there in the center of the town was a daylight studio! A Victorian leftover, one broad wall of light to the north, a stone floor, a painted cloth backdrop." The backdrop eliminated any context; it's only you and two ragged children looking across the distance right at each other. The picture's subjects probably seemed exotic to an audience in 1948. Penn brought back to New York his fascinating bag, much as a *National Geographic* photographer might. Fifty years later we are more worldly. Shorn by time of its foreignness, the art of the picture has instead moved to the foreground, pulled by the plaza's flagstones and Penn's broad vision.

Jim Pierce said his favorite is *At the Animal Market, Quai St. Michel, Paris (Boy with Puppy)* by André Kertész, another picture of a child. No picture in the collection carries with it as much pathos or tension. We expect boys and puppies to be cute, a charming subject. But Kertész offers something else: menace, vulnerability, pride, love, and a dozen questions. *Boy with Puppy* is a found image, a "street photograph," as opposed to a studio picture. Kertész no doubt guided the little boy a little, but it took a practiced eye to see the possibility and then frame it just so. The French critic and author Roland Barthes once remarked that this was an important image to him as well.

Roland Barthes

I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from the world to me, without my asking; they are only "images," their mode of appearance is heterogeneous. Yet, among those which had been selected, evaluated, approved, collected in albums or magazines and which had thereby passed through the filter of culture, I realized that some provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself. . . . and that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me that by dint of seeing them multiply, like some weed, I felt a kind of aversion toward them, even of irritation: there are moments when I detest Photographs. . . .

Roland Barthes from *Camera Lucida*

History

By pulling just nine of the photographers in the Pierce collection out of line, a snapshot history of twentieth-century American photography takes shape—a bite-sized primer. It begins with Alfred Stieglitz in 1900 and ends with Robert Mapplethorpe in 1986. Though photography's march is relatively short compared with thousands of years of painting, sculpture, architecture, or theater—its most rudimentary forms were only invented in 1826 and 1839—distinct demarcations nonetheless exist in its technical and philosophical evolution, as well as in the general acceptance of the medium as a legitimate art form. There are dozens of photographers whose names might be writ large in any history of the medium, a number of whom are represented in the Pierce collection. These nine, however, best suit the purpose.

Chronologically Stieglitz comes first, but he also comes first in