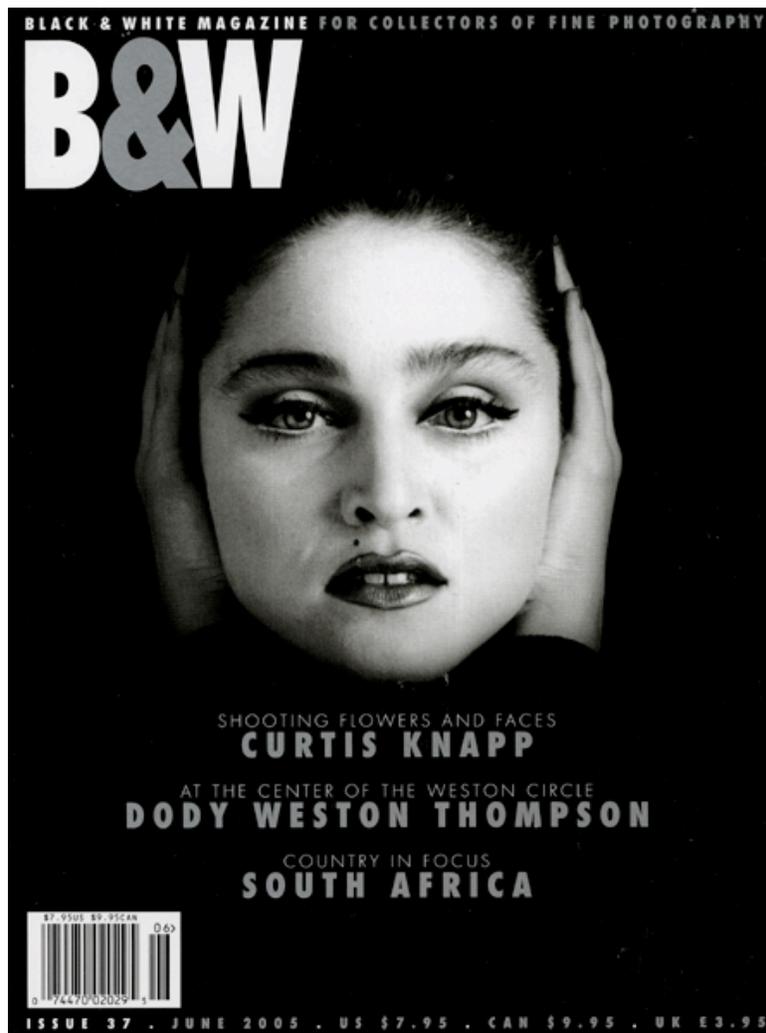


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COLLECTOR CLOSEUP: RICHARD AND ELLEN SANDOR

INTERVIEW BY SHAWN O'SULLIVAN

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DIRECTOR

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Richard and Ellen Sandor,
Gene Siskel Film Center, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, February 2005

If one were looking for a crash course in the history of photography one need not go further than the Sandor Family Collection. Founded on the shared passion of Richard and Ellen Sandor, this collection of photographs and related art is a microcosm of the history of photography spanning its beginnings in the 1840s to the present day – from the daguerreotype to digital. Richard Sandor is an economist and founder of the Chicago Climate Exchange and involved with research at Northwestern University. Ellen is an artist and director of (art)ⁿ – the home of virtual photography – and a collaborator/associate professor at Iowa State University. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she and her husband serve on the board. Richard also serves on the board of the International Center of Photography in New York, where Ellen's work has been shown. Richard is the historian, and Ellen's strength lies in the world of digital and virtual photography. Together, they make a marriage of photography's past and future.

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B&W: *What prompted you to begin collecting photography?*

Richard: We both have a passion for art in general. We had collected lithographs as graduate students and young academics. Ellen's advisor at the Art Institute, Jim Zanzi, got us interested in photography. The first photograph we bought was a Walker Evans. Compulsive behavior overtook us and we managed to accumulate a couple of thousand images over the past 25 to 30 years. We have about a thousand photographs hanging in our apartment.

Ellen: Our children tell people they grew up in a "houseum." Richard was really about the history of photography. The genius of our collection stems from Richard's passion and academic understanding. I have a love for outsider art and the future of art.

B&W: *How did you select what to purchase?*

Richard: It ended up as a collection of themes, but wasn't designed to be that way. It springs from some of the passions and loves we have: portraits of intellectuals and artists; the era between the wars; the history of the American West; the early history of photography; post-modernism and beyond.

Ellen: I was showing my work in New York in the 1980s, and got Richard involved with the post-modernists. As far as the market is concerned, the value of the post-modernists is greater, but I still think it's the historical images that are most important.

Richard: I think photography can be looked at in a couple of segments. It's manageable. You know where it began in 1839 with Daguerre and Fox Talbot; you kind of know where it ended after 150 years in 1989. You saw the beginning of the end with the post-modernists, where photography became a tool of artists and not an artistic end of itself.

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B&W: *What is your policy on showing the collection?*

Richard: We were very private until recently. We've gone a bit more public now, because Ellen and I both have teaching in our souls and we've opened the collection to students. One of the things that keeps one's collecting eye very open is to be exposed to the 18- and 19-year-olds and their vision of the world. All of us who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s recognize that film and photography is our medium. Contemporary life incorporates film, photography, Virtual Reality – many things that are generationally different. In photography, art and technology are inseparable. We went from salt albumen prints, silver, platinum, then to a variety of color processes that began in the 1930s, and now to digital. Photography is the mixture of technology and artistic vision. We find that very exciting.

B&W: *Do you feel it's become too expensive to collect?*

Richard: I don't think so. I think the beauty of photography is that you can still assemble a brilliant collection—you can still find great pieces for hundreds of dollars or a few thousands. As a student of markets, I think if a great vintage print sells for \$300,000, and a modern print of the same images sells for \$3,000, that's a good value. It's the image that is critical—as long as the provenance is sound. In 1982, we bought a Southworth & Hawes daguerreotype of Daniel Webster for \$2,000. It was reported in *The New York Times* at the time that it was a crazy thing to do. Frankly, we have found that the best pieces we have are often ones we overpaid for. It's the combination of taking a risk and buying what you like.

B&W: *Do you collect other art besides photography?*

Richard: We collect art other than photography when it fits the photography collection. We purchased Rodin's sculpture of Balzac to place near the Steichen image of the sculpture. The

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painter Roger Brown hangs alongside Alvarez-Bravo and other great Latin American photographers.

B&W: *Do you ever sell photographs from the collection?*

Richard: Very rarely, but we are having fun now donating a lot of the work to universities and museums. We recently sponsored a new gallery at the University of Oklahoma. We believe the future is to educate young people as to the history of the medium.

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