

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14086.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14086.001.0001)

Picture-Work

How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies Launched a New Image Economy

By: Diana Kamin

Citation:

*Picture-Work: How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies
Launched a New Image Economy*

By: Diana Kamin

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14086.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377041

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023

The open access edition of this book was made possible by
generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

INTRODUCTION: PICTURE-PROBLEMS

To collect photographs is to collect the world.

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1973), 1

If you work with pictures wouldn't you like to know: What your colleagues all over the country are doing? *What picture-problems—mechanical or philosophical—are being worked out elsewhere?*

—Committee for an Association of Picture Librarians, *Picturescope* 1, no. 1 (1952), n.p. (emphasis added)

“What picture-problems—mechanical or philosophical—are being worked out elsewhere?” This question introduced the first issue of *Picturescope*, a quarterly published by the Picture Division of the Special Libraries Association from 1952 to 1987. While founded within a library association, the division intended to serve a community that stretched beyond the library, to workers in government archives, newspaper morgues, corporate collections, museums, and historical societies. This community is what I call picture-workers—the librarians, curators, cataloguers, picture editors, picture researchers, and eventually programmers and database administrators who encounter pictures on a professional basis, as stewards of picture collections.

The variety of the Picture Division's activities capture the breadth of this work. As part of its community-building efforts, the group visited

photography collections housed in institutions as varied as Standard Oil, *Look* magazine, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Bell Labs. They heard invited lectures from photographers, executives, journalists, television producers, and activists about the vital work of sifting through millions of pictures in search of the right illustration. They heard curator and photographer Edward Steichen announce his impending exhibition *Family of Man*, culled from three million photographs, which he promised would to showcase photography “giving an account of itself.”¹ They heard from a textbook publisher about the important use of “pictorial ‘bait’ to hold teenagers’ attention.”² They approvingly reprinted a trade article arguing that “every organization, large or small, should maintain a photo library, and profit from the publicity and public relations benefits it can yield.”³ They declared themselves “anti-automationist” but welcomed presentations from technologists promising miniaturization.⁴ They saw themselves as experts at the precipice of a new age, their labor essential to its bringing about, if only they pooled resources. While the Picture Division members’ work with pictures encompassed a broad range of endeavors, the coverage in *Picturescope* repeatedly affirmed their common purpose and common predicament, the “picture-problems” they faced together.⁵

“Picture-problems” for this community meant challenges related to the acquisition, classification, storage, and circulation of pictures—activities that these specialists struggled with on a daily basis as they managed special collections of visual material within systems often designed for the circulation of text. The phrasing of this question reflexively situates these techniques as both theoretical and practical, asserting that philosophy is never far from mechanics. Moreover, the philosophical and mechanical problems that these workers encountered continue to have far-reaching consequences for a public whose daily exposure to pictures is the result of the comprehensive and pervasive work of cataloguing, classifying, retrieving, and releasing images. The new age *Picturescope* contributors expected did indeed arrive, as more than four billion social media users interact with billions of indexed images every day, though perhaps not led by the librarian labor force they imagined. But their essential insight holds true: circulating image collections create conditions of possibility for what pictures can do, and their architects and managers enact a philosophy of images with every organizational decision.

The particular philosophy that picture-workers explore and materialize through their work is parallel to yet distinct from theories of the image in art history, cultural criticism, and media studies. It is a philosophy that holds the image as inherently mobile, as defined by its diverse uses among networks of past and future users, and thus as existing in an economy in which availability and accessibility are determinant of value. In other words, a philosophy of the image that captures the fleeting, fugitive, simultaneously democratized and commoditized spaces of image exchange in visual culture today. This book takes seriously the following questions, inspired by the midcentury community of practitioners: What mechanical and philosophical problems does the circulation of images pose, and how were they addressed over the twentieth century? How did these problems migrate and transform as collections were digitized in the twenty-first century? How have picture-workers themselves framed and attempted to answer this question over the past hundred years: *What picture-problems are being worked out elsewhere?* Attention to these questions will offer a greater understanding not just of theoretical implications of the circulating image but also of the prehistory that conditions our current information environment. And it posits a history and theory of photography told through the lens of the picture-worker.

To accomplish this, this study will address the interconnected histories of three exemplary picture collections: the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and stock photography agency H. Armstrong Roberts. All three collections were founded in New York City and Philadelphia between 1915 and 1929 and continue circulating pictures today. By looking to the material workings of these collections, this study demonstrates that throughout the twentieth century, institutions like the museum, the library, and the stock photography agency defined the public's cultural understanding of what the photographic image is and how it is to be used. They did this by assembling large-scale *circulating* collections, from which patrons or clients could search, select, and borrow. Through the circulation of pictures, the public interfaced with systems of classification and protocols of search and retrieval, as well as the technological and legal constraints of the photographic image, in ways that communicated ontological and epistemological arguments about the nature of photography. These interactions have in turn shaped contemporary image

culture, including concepts of authorship, art, property, and value, as well as logics of indexing, cross-referencing, tagging, and hyperlinking.

Taken together, collections like these contributed to an image economy predicated on the availability of circulating images. This reflects a broader conception of the image as *alienable content*, or nonmedium specific, characterized by indeterminate meaning, packaged for networked travel, and adaptable to various and multiple uses.⁶ Though each institution did ascribe some monetary value to the pictures (in reproduction licenses, replacement fees, outright purchase of prints), the concept of availability need not be understood as entirely commercial. The library offered a collection of pictures as historical documentation for pictorial fact-finding, promising an availability of visual document. The museum stipulated that art appreciation and inspiration were not limited to direct experience and that the pictures available through the global art museum necessarily escaped bounds of geographical place and time. The stock photography agency promised “The Right Picture Right When You Want It,” a pictorial universe of gestures, experiences, and relationships available for whatever story a customer might be eager to tell.⁷

In libraries, circulating collections are distinguished from reference collections, special collections, or archives by a simple criterion: circulating material can be checked out of the institution. A circulating image collection is a collection from which one can take an image “home” (i.e., can remove it from the space of collection and bring it into another space). While circulation is conceived differently across a library, a museum, and a commercial photography agency (and differently associated with the circulation of newspapers and magazines), this essential distinction from library practice is key: the circulating image is an image that is physically checked out for individual use. A history of the circulating image collection holds particular significance today, as the digitization of cultural archives (libraries, museums, private collections) and the increasing reach of image search platforms like Google Images have produced a sea change: the act of “checking out” an image is now as routine and effortless as clicking on the desired image onscreen. Although bringing an image home is phenomenologically and ontologically transformed, and this shift has profound implications for the way we conceptualize what images are and what they do, often these changes are framed as a trend toward dematerialization

or as a new seamlessness between user and collection. Somewhere in the transition from the collection site to the collection website, the rhetoric of dematerialization obscures a material and institutional reality: in order for images to circulate, they have to be coded to do so. This process of coding is productive and reflective of broad epistemological and ontological understandings of the image. Further, coding does not begin with the digital database. The cataloguing of images with the goal to determine their subsequent performance is a historical project. Techniques of classification that schematize description into various units of data, as well as copyright structures that create layers of distinct property concentrated in a single image, developed in the context of analog picture collections. Significantly, the processes of coding, organizing, and describing images in order to facilitate their circulation not only reifies perceived genres but also *produces* genres. Categories of commercial photography, documentary photography, or documentation photography were established by the collections surveyed here and communicated to the public via circulation. These genres persist even as the digital environment has loosened some of the previous barriers between so-called art images and commercial images. Analog processes of coding images, as well as the search for solutions to storing and circulating visual material, are an essential aspect of the development of so-called digital culture as we know it.⁸

By looking at the history of the professional practice of circulating images across fields, I seek to contribute a material, technical, and practical dimension to the study of images and photography, one that will refract the concepts that digitization has troubled—such as distinctions between original and copy or public and private—through a historical lens. Further, I hope to explore how the professionals who posed and solved problems of image circulation laid the groundwork for technological and legal developments that resulted in a digital culture defined by the collection and dissemination of multimedia objects. Finally, I hope to surface lessons for the architects of twenty-first-century picture collections. At a time when our image economy is driven by the innovations of a tech industry animated by the mantra to move fast and break things, how can we reintroduce the voices of librarians, collection managers, and photographers who built their image-sharing social networks through paper and touch?

PICTURES ACROSS FIELDS AND HISTORY

The images under review in this study are organized in environments designed for their circulation, environments whose conceptualization begins at a particular place and time. The concentration of fashion, advertising, studio art, publishing, and theater in the New York City area from the late nineteenth century on is a key factor that drives the development of the three historical case studies. These industries relied on the varied activities of picture research, from the artist or designer seeking reference images to the publisher or advertiser seeking readymade illustrations. The New York Public Library (NYPL), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and H. Armstrong Roberts all responded to specific needs of communities who were energized by new forms of circulating media. Illustrated magazines, cinema, clothing manufacture, and a thriving theater scene drove designers and artists to the NYPL for reference images, prompting the opening of the Picture Collection in 1915.⁹ Art books and art reproductions imported from Europe inspired MoMA's founding director, Alfred Barr, throughout his education in the 1920s and influenced his mission for the museum when it opened in 1929; MoMA's library of available artwork for reproduction was used in exhibitions on art and design that traveled to university galleries and department stores across the country and was mined by designers, publishers, and advertisers in New York. And young entrepreneur H. Armstrong Roberts first started in commercial photography by selling his own photographs to accompany his syndicated articles licensed to various national magazines in the 1910s, and after he founded an agency in 1920 his photographs were licensed by the largest advertising firms in the country over the next decade, including J. Walter Thompson and Newell Emmett Co. in New York, Williams and Cunnyngham in Chicago, and Young & Rubicam in Philadelphia. All of the collections thus interacted to different degrees with the advertising and publishing industries centered in New York and Philadelphia.

Along with the professional users, each of these collections was also oriented in some way toward the American general public. At the NYPL, Picture Collection director Romana Javitz passionately advocated for her collection's accessibility, often extolling the taste and vision of the general public against members of the elite art institutions or industries: "I

believe that the public taste is far higher than the mythical target of public preference at which the art director aims and for which the artist is forced to slick, polish and devitalize his output."¹⁰ A frequent target of her ire, MoMA, was also founded with the American general public in mind and sought to make remote European modern art accessible to people across the country. An early circulating exhibition, *A Brief Survey of Modern Painting in Color Reproductions* (which circulated to eighty-six venues in the 1930s), was accompanied by a cheery brochure, "For Your Own Collection of Modern Paintings," which encouraged the public to purchase color facsimiles for their homes.¹¹ In many ways, MoMA defined modern art against what it was not. When it came to photography, this meant promoting straight photography against the aesthetic of the type of staged commercial photography that H. Armstrong Roberts produced. While Roberts sold his photography to advertisers and publishers, his ultimate audience was the public, who viewed stock photography like his on a daily basis far more than they might visit a library or museum. Roberts positioned himself as a populist photographer, which translated to mostly domestic scenes that communicated a clear story quickly to the viewer.

Taken together, these collections trained the public in what an image was for: what images belong in a magazine and what images belong on a wall, what images are meant to serve as transient inspiration and what images are meant to be preserved as valuable property. But they also trained viewers in the essential ability for photography to jump contexts. At MoMA, photographic reproductions are alternately documentation, artistic reference, or artworks themselves. At the library, advertising images and art reproduction alike are cut up and filed for future historical reference. At the stock agency, the same photograph might be licensed as a greeting card, an advertisement, a fine art poster, a textbook illustration, and a public health brochure.

The range of collections under study here represents three different conceptions of the circulating image, as each one posits the photograph as proxy for something else. The library proposes the picture as document, a phrase that its longtime director Romana Javitz uses continuously to position the picture collection within the library ecosystem. The museum prefers the photograph as artwork—either through using the reproduction as a stand-in for absent artwork in exhibitions, as Alfred Barr does with a famous Picasso painting in his landmark exhibition *Cubism and Abstract*

Art, or as an auratic artwork in itself. Though it could be used as historical document or artwork depending on the client, H. Armstrong Roberts primarily posited the photograph as story—he preferred the term “library of stories” to “stock photography,” seeing the camera as a means to construct a series of generic visual stories at scale.¹² Yet, despite the difference in ends, the three case studies here share an understanding of the means: photography as a tool that allows for the rapid accumulation of images, requiring the development of systems to manage that accumulation. All three collections wrestle with the relationship between meaning-making and scale in the circulating visual archive.

The institutions under study here were hardly the only exemplary picture collections of the twentieth century, their architects not the only picture-workers captivated by the vision. To begin with, they are all based in the United States. Picture collections in public institutions (museums, libraries) also emerged in Europe during the period of investigation, including collections housed in research institutions like Ernest de Potter and Paul Otlet’s International Institute of Photography in Paris, or the Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institute in Florence, and picture collections like the Hulton Picture Post Library in London.¹³ In the United States, the Times Inc. Picture Morgue, the Bettmann Archive, and the Frick Art Library, as just a few examples, all grew collections that sought to organize the avalanche of twentieth-century visual culture into something useable for their communities, many of whom were also users of the collections under study here, and each continues to shape picture-work today.¹⁴ By focusing on just three collections, representing three ostensibly different industries and missions, I seek a deep engagement with the words of a variety of picture-workers and a thick description of how picture-work changed over the decades.

My approach, drawing on the perspectives and methodologies of art history, media studies, and history of information technology, will argue for the importance of looking at the relationship between the routine labor practices of picture-workers and their epistemological consequences. As Greg Mitman and Kelley Wilder assert, “[m]eaning’ and ‘fact’ lie not simply inside the photographic material but in a set of relationships formed between the maker, the user, the object, and the archive;” picture-workers actively make these relationships legible.¹⁵ I am guided in this

project by the recent work being done across media studies that has traced the development of modern forms of information management, systematically exploring the histories of industries from publishing houses to newspaper clippings bureaus, genres from files to documents, and “intellectual furnishings” from card catalogues to filing cabinets.¹⁶ These studies take labor, bureaucracy, and paperwork seriously, exploring the exchange between equipment, technique, and broader social and discursive fields, and their continued impact in the present. As Craig Robertson argues, “Concepts people use in the twenty-first century to comprehend data and information originated in a particular moment in the history of capitalism, a moment that led to a gendered, raced, and classed understanding of efficiency becoming pervasive.”¹⁷ Circulating image collections are also rooted in various models of gendered, raced, and classed understandings of efficiency set in place in this period, not solely in relationship to information or text but rather to the manner in which the world is documented, reproduced, and accessed visually.

This work is thus rooted in a broader approach to history of photography that counters prevailing narratives around inventors and artists in favor of broader social and economic contexts. Like Michelle Henning, I seek to explore the photographic image as “migratory, journeying, wandering and vagabond, against the grain of a theoretical and historical discussion which tends to represent photographs as static, fixed, and relatively unchanging, at least until the advent of the digital image.”¹⁸ Doing so requires a focus on the labor of working with pictures, on the work that pictures do. Thy Phu and Matthew Brower identify this approach as continuing in John Tagg’s tradition of locating photographic history in “the institutional and discursive spaces of photographic production, and especially, their circulation.”¹⁹ Thierry Gervais’s edited collection *The ‘Public’ Life of Photographs* foregrounds methods of circulation as various interfaces with publics that are actively produced, centering “those responsible for the dissemination of images” and emphasizing “the collective practices of image sharing.”²⁰ Artist Walead Beshty’s *Picture Industry: A Provisional History of the Technical Image* (2018) eschews the term “photography” in favor of the technical image, which shifts attention away from the photographer to the production and circulation by particular assemblages of people and technical apparatus.²¹ Elizabeth Edwards and Sigfrid Lien

explore photography as the “crucial museum ecosystem” that supplements work across the institution as both tools and objects.²² Art historian Nadya Bair coins the term the “decisive network” (a riff of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s famous invocation of the photographer who captures the “decisive moment”) to emphasize the labor, material, and technical networks that bring iconic photographs into being.²³ Zeynep Devrim Gursel offers a thick ethnography of “image brokers,” or workers in newsrooms, wire services, and agencies that shape the selection and distribution of news images, arguing that they “collectively frame our ways of seeing.”²⁴ Vanessa Schwartz and Jason E. Hill similarly reveal the historical networks of aesthetic, market, and social relations in which the news picture is “formed and selected rather than merely transcribed.”²⁵ Paul Frosh calls attention to the stock photography industry, “an elaborate system of manufacture, distribution and consumption that is itself largely concealed from view,” as a key site for understanding the historical sweep of visual culture as market-driven image production.²⁶ Estelle Blaschke has published essential work on the history of the Bettmann Archive and Corbis to trace the transformation from picture agency to “image bank.”²⁷ Forthcoming work by Nina Lager Vestberg looks at the transformation of the labor of picture research from the nineteenth century to the present.²⁸ Artists, archivists, and image collection stewards have engaged in active analysis of their material practices as well. *The Lives of Images: An Aperture Reader Series*, edited by artist and critic Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, and accompanying symposium series at the International Center of Photography similarly center the circulation of reproducible images within broader circuits and economies.²⁹ As head of Photothek at the Kunsthistorisches Institute, Costanza Caraffa has positioned the photographic archive as “laboratory,” overseeing research, symposia, and publications that bring together the perspective of academics across fields and center the expertise of the archivist.³⁰ This book is indebted to these scholars, who demonstrate that the history of photography is a history of producing, building, and maintaining collections. Like these works, I seek to center my focus on use, embracing Carolyn Marvin’s definition of media:

Media are not fixed objects: they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication. The history of media is never more or less than the

history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate.³¹

To attempt a media history of the circulating image collection, I thus provide an account of the social practices around circulating images and the conflicts illuminated therein. Rather than looking at this from the perspective of the public who interact with these collections as users or the artists who populate the collections, I take the view of the collection workers themselves.

As with many history projects, this story does not cohere into a rupture narrative, though there are elements of rupture. Nor is it a neat story of remediation, though there are echoes of remediation throughout. Rather, it is narrative of what came before, an account of spaces and practices, and a description of people and the plans, ideas, and dreams that played out as they shuffled through material. It is an eye on dusty archives, a story of discarded materials. In this way, it is a call for similar attention to be paid to the new groups of laborers under the digital paradigm of circulating collections.

CIRCULATING, IMAGE, COLLECTION, AND OTHER USEFUL TERMS: A SHORT GLOSSARY

When I first proposed a project on the circulating image collection among a group of other graduate students and our faculty advisor in the department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, I was met with a room of confused stares. Eventually, a friend gently ventured, “What do you mean by circulating collection?” allowing me, with relief, to explain the library definition (items that can be checked out) and how I meant to extend it theoretically, probing the different ways a collection might be built to allow a user to take an image home. Drawn from fields that deal both practically and theoretically with the study and organization of images, many of the terms throughout this book perform double duty as straightforward descriptions and as conceptual frames. Part of the aim of this project is to highlight the complex epistemologies embedded within the bureaucratic terms and techniques of image circulation, to define the circulating image collection in a way that communicates the philosophies

and practical considerations of the picture-worker to a broader audience. I offer a short glossary here in order to ground the main concepts of this book in the working language of picture-work.

CIRCULATING

Reference to the increasing circulation of images often serves as shorthand for new, globalized conditions of cultural exchange and shifting structures of knowledge production, in a theoretical tradition that spans from Walter Benjamin to Jean Baudrillard to the present. In short, this argument suggests that as images circulate more easily, their value (auratic and otherwise) and connection to real-world referents decrease, while access and use are democratized to various ends. This broader use of the term “circulation” emphasizes that image circulation happens outside of the bounds of the traditional institutional channels, an insight that has sustained essential work across fields. My own concern with circulation is necessarily narrower. One question animating this study is, what theories of photography and visual communication are elaborated by the class of workers whose daily practices enable the scholarly, artistic, and commercial usages of images? For this reason, in my study, circulation is taken literally, as the concern of library and collection workers tasked with ensuring its continued functioning. From a library and information science perspective, a circulation department is charged with maintaining “the flow of materials in and out of the library. . . . Its concern is dispensing or receiving library materials.”³² For this study, the term “circulating images” refers to the movement of pictures from collection site to other public and private spaces. This delimiting gesture allows me to shift the locus of attention from the theorist of the image to the practitioner of its actual and potential circulation.

At the same time, circulation is also inextricably linked with capitalist distribution, in which profits accrue to those actors that act as distributors by facilitating circulation. By using the term “distributor,” I invoke the vocabulary of the stock photography industry (the most explicitly capitalist venture surveyed here) in which distribution partnerships or agencies extend the reach of smaller collections. But I also intend to reframe the librarian, curator, exhibitions manager, and rights and reproduction

administrator as distributors in a larger landscape. Through this frame, we can see how the role of distribution is occupied by different professions and facilitated by different technologies over time.

IMAGE

Attentive readers will have noticed my slippage between “picture” and “image.” W. J. T. Mitchell, whose seminal question “What do pictures want?” is of primary importance to my study, has distinguished between picture and image thusly: “The picture is the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium.”³³ Alternatively, art historian Douglas Crimp, when reflecting on his generation-defining 1977 exhibition *Pictures*, asserted that the term “picture” corresponded to a deliberate *lack* of media specificity that was important for a new group of artists not confined by earlier media hierarchies.³⁴ Framed in straightforward material terms by Mitchell and in antihierarchical terms by Crimp, the difference between picture and image is less oppositional in communities of practice, reflecting instead a linguistic shift over time as “image” is used today where “picture” might have been used in the past.³⁵ In the context of Mitchell and Crimp’s definitions, the movement from the colloquial use of picture to the emphasis on image would seem to be linked to a discursive dematerialization of the material support as defined by Mitchell, suggesting that the language of dematerialization in art criticism and media theory has seeped into the broader vernacular.³⁶ Yet focusing on the language in practice reveals that the term “picture” was used by picture-workers as a capacious catchall in a similar manner to “image” today and that those working with the circulating image today consider the image in its materiality (as digital file or otherwise) as a matter of course. While I move between the two terms in order to embrace the language of my archival and informant sources, any use of the term “image” is invested in this trajectory. By this, I mean that my use of the term “image” is always related to the term “picture,” always incorporating an association with a material support of some kind. Specifically, the images under consideration in this project are reproductions, mostly photography—images that are conceived as copies in advance.

COLLECTION

For art history, library science, and museum studies, “collection” is a practical term designating a group of objects with defined provenance, location, and classification system. Work on the collection as a theoretical construct has tended to focus on the collection either as a central historical phenomenon of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in fields of material culture, art history, or history of science or as an expression of the psyche of the collector in the fields of literary or cultural studies.³⁷ In the former, the collection is treated as a technique of ordering and a lens on historical epistemology, while in the latter, it is often individualized or pathologized. Cultural theorist Couze Venn brings these strains together in his definition of the collection:

As a category then, the collection stands at the threshold of a number of domains: it is part of technologies of the social, participating in the formation of identities and of publics, yet at the same time it functions as the visible trace intimating the invisible and haphazard history of knowledge whilst remaining as testimony to yearnings and pleasures that weave biographies into the history of communities and their deeds.³⁸

It is this tension, between the historically specific and the appeal to more universalized human drives, between the order and pathos, between the systematic and the personal, that makes the “collection” ripe for a reinsertion into conversation around shifting techniques of knowledge production, following Venn. In practical terms, I take the collection as any ordered and stored set of items, in which the order is interpreted flexibly (from the standardized to the idiosyncratic). Drawing from the nomenclature of library and information science, I take these items as being in any one of four categories: (1) tangible materials (i.e., physical objects), (2) intangible materials (i.e., electronic resources), (3) tangible materials not owned by collection (i.e., objects tracked but owned by other libraries or collections), and (4) intangible materials not owned by collection (i.e., materials available on the web).³⁹ Further, collections can be managed by lists, index cards, bound books, or databases but are not reducible to any one particular method of cataloguing. I find that this concept of the collection, while drawing on historical framing, is particularly useful in connection with web culture. It allows for certain kinds of inquiries: How is Google Images organized as a picture collection? How do we interact

with collections as part of our daily navigation through the web? How are the politics of collection differently charged as the legal and material conditions of collecting shift with digitization? Daily interactions with the internet involve a wide range of collections as social media feeds are organized into groupings by keywords or geotags, and our computer caches collect impressions of our itinerant paths and activities online. The broad definition also highlights the importance of considering the collection—any collection—as a network unto itself. Catalogued, arranged, and grouped, a collection's network of tangible and intangible objects is built out of meshes of links between things and ideas. These links follow structures determined by various strategies: the creation of metadata, indexes, documentation, and classification schemes.

INDEX, RECORD, DOCUMENT

Looking at the collection leads me to a consideration of classification, indexing, documentation, and metadata as technical terms as well as orienting concepts that bridge past and present. Metadata, in its simplest formation, is data about data. This recursive description, like a dog chasing its tail, captures the challenges of unpacking the collapse of process and object in media studies. According to some dictionaries, to index is to record in an index, to document is to create documents. Media techniques are literally defined by their objects and vice versa. Further blurring the terms, across the case studies in this project, words recur with different meanings. An index is a collection of cross-references, a typewritten list of sources, a standard format card, and a semiotic term designating a physical relationship between representation and referent. A catalogue is a piece of furniture holding an organized collection of index cards, a promotional brochure listing items for sale, a scholarly publication documenting an exhibition, and a verb designating the work of a picture-worker tasked with describing an object. The document is a designation that artists and picture-workers use throughout this book to alternately confer aesthetic, professional, or informational value, changing the meaning of what it is to document and what a document consists of each time. All of these terms are subsumed under the process of classification, which includes the organization, placement, arrangement, description, marketing, or historicization

of the pictures at hand. These all equally represent or require “intellectual furnishings”—those shelves, cabinets, drawers, desks, stands, files, and other myriad equipment that create the scaffolding for knowledge production, to use Shannon Mattern’s term.⁴⁰ I do not seek to rigidly delimit these terms but let them play out their meanings in the words and technical processes of the actors surveyed.

The *index*’s linguistic identity as noun and verb, as well as its meaning as description of a metaphysical relationship between lived reality and representation, demonstrates the epistemological arguments about the world threaded throughout information management. Practically, an index is a list, which, as Liam Cole Young points out, can function “variously as a communicative device, a cultural form, an operational mode of writing, a storage or archival device, a poetic form, and a mediator.”⁴¹ An index can be a list of topics in the back of a book or a list of subject headings in a card catalog. It is also, more broadly, “that which serves to direct or point to a particular fact or conclusion; a guiding principle,” and “a sign, token, or indication of something.”⁴² In semiotics, the index is a privileged type of sign—an index indicates that link between representation and reality that is based on a physical connection, “a deposit of the real.”⁴³ For all its practical applications and challenges for information scientists, this connection to reality permeates its practical use as an information management tool. Google is, of course, first and foremost, an index to the webpages accessible online. Its ubiquitous use among web users promotes the fiction that it *is* the internet. In fact, like all other collections, Google’s indexing priorities reflect editorial decisions, as results filtering out spam, illegal activity, and other results shaped by a shifting set of company priorities.⁴⁴

Indexes appear in the library and stock agency cases as the lists of subject headings used to organize the collection (at the museum, pictures are generally ordered by medium, then by artist, obviating the need for extensive subject indexing). Subject indexing is a fraught process. As Nina Lager Vestberg has put it, indexing a picture invites “the constant problem of adequately attending to the different levels of content in any picture . . . accounting for what a picture shows is never the same as describing what it depicts.”⁴⁵ Further, from the perspective of library science, visual indexing is doomed by the fact that it requires interpretation (interpretation being a dirty word among a profession that seeks neutrality): “not only is the

initial interpretation inescapable, the entire indexing process is made up of multiple inescapable interpretations."⁴⁶ One professional distinction that seeks to guard against unannounced interpretation is the contrast between "ofness"—an account of the objects or subject on view in a picture—and "aboutness"—an approximation of the concepts conveyed. These correspond to Erwin Panofsky's pre-iconographic and iconographic strata of meaning, in which aboutness requires some level of decoding and cultural knowledge and, thus, interpretation.⁴⁷ Even describing an image according to the standards of "ofness" comes with particular challenges in analog conditions in which a subject heading determines a single picture's location and thus its accessibility.

One created, *records* stand as ontological substitutions for the image in question. As Cornelia Vismann has explored the strange urgency with which researchers seek "presence" from files, users of the catalogue and indexes treat their lists and databases as a shadow collection of objects, trawling the virtual shelves in search of their picture of interest.⁴⁸ Further, files have the tendency to "take on ontological categories."⁴⁹ Through these ontological categories, they direct their custodians, users, patrons, and clients. The insurance forms in the museum, the invoice for the stock agency—these ontologizing records accompany images, constrain their use, and announce their value.

Before a piece of recorded information is called upon to perform work as a record, it is simply a *document*, which Lisa Gitelman describes as "epistemic objects" defined by their "know-show" function.⁵⁰ In my case studies, the document relates to a range of practices: the museum's use of photographic documentation, the Picture Collection's use of the term to convey their approach to collecting images as reference rather than art, and the straightforward documentary photography celebrated as an art historical genre by MoMA. This reflects the different currencies of the "document" at play in the 1920s and 1930s, from the library documentation movement to the "documentary style" promoted by MoMA's librarian, curator, and photographer Beaumont Newhall as "often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily . . . pictorial reports."⁵¹ More than any other term surveyed here, the competing definitions of the document are at the heart of the theories of photography that are communicated by these collections and will be surveyed in greater detail throughout the chapters.

Bringing these valences of the document together, I expand on a general theory of the document to incorporate creative work, a flexible concept of information, and a greater agency on the part of the user.

PICTURE-WORK

Picture-work is, simply put, work with pictures. More specifically, it is the work that pictures *require* in order to circulate. By looking to labor practices, I turn to a group that, as I have noted, I call picture-workers. Picture-workers, including librarians, archivists, cataloguers, and curators, are a professionalized group who actively reflect upon their practice and often serve communities of users and producers with whom they might overlap. Users appear in this study either as they are constructed by picture-workers or as picture-workers themselves: the professionals whose own use of pictures influences the functioning of the collections. In making this delimiting gesture, I do not want to dismiss the essential insight of visual culture studies that viewers (or users) are active producers of meaning rather than passive consumers.⁵² Indeed, the active participation of users or viewers in the construction of collections is attested to by the picture-workers themselves. The exchange between the users and practitioners of these collections is essential to the way they have evolved, and I will pay particular attention to the ways in which users influence standards and practices.

The professionalization of picture-work and the grouping of certain kinds of labor practices are traced throughout the book as I chart how professional communities are legitimated through professional organizations and publications. This kind of networked professionalization is linked to the networked images themselves, which invite collaboration and the sharing of resources across communities, one of the results being the trend toward the large, aggregated collections contemporary libraries, museums, and stock agencies are pursuing in the digital environment.

Despite its range in genre, my selection of case studies thus reflects specific interests that differ from the broader phenomenon of circulating images in the twentieth century that has drawn attention across fields. The images that I'm looking at are for the most part banal. They circulate not so much to do the work of representing scientific phenomena, bodies, state subjects, or as expressions of personal identity and expression but rather to function as citations for other images, to proliferate into other images.

They represent artworks to be copied down by art history students, or visual sources for a graphic designer, or stock images sufficiently generic to serve as a backdrop for a variety of advertising messages. They circulate as material objects, but their visual content is part of a larger circulation and mutation of forms in postmodern visual culture. Across these case studies, pictures are adjacent to the objects of higher value within the ecologies of the institutions, yet comparatively ephemeral, modest, and mundane; they are “uncertain images,” to use Elizabeth Edwards and Sigrid Lien’s term.⁵³ In the same manner that I mean to bring attention to the role that information workers’ labor and everyday practices play in the cultural politics of the image, I similarly explore the overlooked part that a particular kind of image plays in larger value systems—the reference image, the commercial photograph, the art reproduction. In this way, I wish to historicize the value of the circulating image by tracing it back through the twentieth century.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In chapter 1, I examine the NYPL’s Picture Collection, a collection of millions of clipped pictures that has been in operation for over a century. The collection was founded in 1915 as new class of modern workers was seeking reference images to support their production, which increasingly required eye-catching imagery or period-specific visual accuracy, and the Print Collection was overwhelmed with requests for valuable holdings that could only be consulted onsite. As an alternative, the Circulation Department started collecting clippings from old books, discarded photographs, and postcards, and in the fall of 1915, the Picture Collection, where visual researchers could go to search for an image by subject and check it out, opened to the public. These visual researchers included (and continue to include) artists, designers, publishers, historians, educators, government researchers, and general users who check pictures out for purposes from reference to inspiration to recreation and appreciation. As such, it is organized in such a way to be intuitive to users who are looking for images of particular topics, rather than artwork. Specifically, clipped pictures are gathered in folders by subject and organized alphabetically, demonstrating that the general subject searching contemporary users are familiar with on Google Image search has long been a feature of our information culture.

To elucidate the significance of the Picture Collection, I look specifically at the work of the head of the Picture Collection from 1929–1968, Romana Javitz. Javitz wrote extensively about the administration of picture collections in bureaucratic reports and professional journals alike, expounding on a philosophy of the image she described as “pictures as documents.” I argue that the structural logic of the collection she produced, which she frequently described as “live,” “living,” and “contemporary,” anticipates features of the digital image collection and Google Image search, but rooted in the context of a public library. For Javitz, the “picture as document” means that the picture exists to be used: its status as document resides in the potential for a user to find information within it. The value of a collection of “pictures as document” is thus measured by both scale and findability, qualities increasingly relevant to the contemporary collection that can be at odds with each other. Javitz achieved these through a flexible, straightforward organization system that empowered the user. This is crucially not an evidentiary model in which the authoritative photograph communicates a truth prescribed in advance. Rather, Javitz’s “picture as document” is enacted for use for information, inspiration, or pleasure by its user; its applications cannot be foreseen in advance. She articulated this conception of the picture widely among her network of artists, curators, and other picture-workers, and her ideas were influential to prominent documentary photographers like Walker Evans and architects of government archive projects like Roy Stryker, demonstrating that a discourse of the documentary that is interactive and generative rather than authoritative has a long genealogy.

In chapter 2, I look at the history of MoMA to trace how the virtual circulation of art and the dematerialization of the museum’s walls were central preoccupations of the museum long before the web, highlighting MoMA’s early activities circulating exhibitions of artwork reproductions and maintaining a slide rental library, as well their continuous production of photographic material in photography studios onsite and through their rights and reproductions department. I further argue that the circulation and production of photographic prints were key methods through which MoMA established a context for photography as art to be exhibited in the 1930s and, by the 1970s, as an art to be collected while maintaining documentation photography as a strictly nonart genre.

Exploring MoMA's history through this lens decenters figures like first director Alfred Barr and highlights the contributions of the head of the circulating exhibitions department, Elodie Courter, and first director of the rights and reproductions department, Pearl Moeller. These women performed crucial roles within the museum, facilitating the flow of visual information within the museum but also between the museum and the outside world. One of the central interventions of this chapter is the argument that theories of the museum that are based around an essential cleavage between the space of everyday life and the space of history are insufficient. Rather, I reframe the museum's walls as membranes that permit a constant diffusion and assimilation of objects and pictures. The result of this circulation of pictures, supported by various forms of paperwork and the labor of Courter and Moeller, was the creation of a canon of modern art. This canon affirmed photography as modern art, insisting on its auratic value as objects to be collected and displayed. Allan Sekula has gestured toward the connections between "the archival mode of photography and the emergence of photographic modernism," but in reference to crime scene photography and government archives.⁵⁴ This chapter explores how the museum itself engaged in both the production of an organized photographic archive and the production of photographic modernism, wherein the former consolidated the value of the latter. Further, photography plays a key role in naturalizing the aesthetic ideology of modernism, including its appropriation of the non-Western culture, for a US audience.

Next, in chapter 3, I excavate the history of H. Armstrong Roberts Company, an early stock photography agency that anticipates the visual culture industry that flourishes in the postwar period. Here, I analyze the conditions that shaped the development of an industry and the unusual semiotic status of the stock image as free-floating signifier—stock photographs are designed to function as generic and specific at the same time, in order to fulfill, in advance, the distinct and varied needs of advertisers or publishers in search of a readymade illustration. In particular, I investigate the influence of syndicated publishing, the early advertising industry, and amateur photography culture on H. Armstrong Roberts from the teens through the 1930s and review the structural conditions of his early networked offices (though the company was based in Philadelphia, there were branch offices across the United States and Europe by 1930). I look at their central card

index as a proto-image database that generates stories and narratives using a recombination of props, settings, and themes.

The case captures the professionalization of a type of photography practice, in which the photographer is transformed into a distributor, and in which the genre of stock photography comes to dominate print visual culture. Roberts was first an amateur traveling photographer, then a studio manager and producer, and finally an agent for multiple photographers selling under his name. The stock photography agency he created was a factory-like setting for the large-scale production of a product. This product was shaped by media infrastructures from industries like publishing and advertising, to the communication technologies like the telephone and telegram, to office techniques like the marketing catalogue and the filing cabinet. And the commodity that emerged from this constellation of media infrastructures was a photographic genre that posits the image-as-story, an easily deconstructed, simple message with a wide variety of possible applications. The widespread market for these images trained generations of viewers in what to expect from the majority of commercial images we are exposed to: real but constructed scenes, meant to be visually decoded, and generated in part by a market system.

Finally, chapter 4 explores how the circulating image collection has been reconceived with digitization. Based on interviews with long-time staff members in each case study, I create a new glossary of terms to book-end the ones rehearsed here in order to trace the digitization projects of each of the three cases. Common themes abound: a trend toward interoperability, outsourcing of labor to digital asset management systems and outside firms, and a new importance placed on metadata. I further identify the mess of things, the starts and stops, and the uneven reach of digitization projects. While digitization has undoubtedly transformed the work of each of the institutions surveyed here in dramatic and everyday ways, there are no clean breaks in their digitization narratives; each collection still circulates and manages analog material, their classification systems (now referred to as “legacy” systems) are jerry-rigged into digital schemes if they cannot be easily translated, and the same staff members are trained in new technology or processes. Each case thus demonstrates the gaps, code-switching, and patchwork that go into smooth digital space of an online collection. At the same time, each case reveals the importance of

new actors: companies that design internal databases and programmers that link these with public-facing webpages.

The picture-workers who observed these changes shepherded their collections through heady days of digitization, witnessing the total transformation of their jobs and learning new equipment just to observe it quickly become outdated. As they consider the changes to come, workers predict greater interoperability between library and museum collections, the creation of three-dimensional museum catalogues, the increasing release of metadata as both an artistic and a commercial resource, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to assist with indexing and copyright management in ways that will automate much of licensing and legal enforcement of image usages. It remains to be seen whether or how quickly these changes will bear out, but they reveal the continued prominence of values of the documentary, open-ended, constructed, and decodable nature of the photographic image that the collections in this book developed throughout the twentieth century.

Each case of this project thus demonstrates ways in which early twentieth-century institutions shape today's image flows. The user-centered library establishes a model for the user-generated content of the internet (without the commitment to the public interest), the museum's unacknowledged yet central role as a producer and distributor of images is central to its consolidation of cultural authority, and the stock agency's transformation of the photographer into a manufacturer and an agent anticipates the aggregator logic of the contemporary visual content industry that is steadily driving down the value of the individual image itself.⁵⁵ Across these three case studies, picture-work produces new genres—such as the generic commercial image or the fine art photograph—and new types of workers—such as the picture researcher or the database administrator. Yet as new applications of circulating image collections develop, the fundamentals of picture-work—classification, storage, and circulation at scale—remain.

"AN EXHILARATING CONTINUITY"

Libraries, museums, and stock agencies now find themselves at a critical juncture: the world of universal image collections that they labored to construct has been realized in such a way that their influence is

underacknowledged, and the expertise that was once foregrounded is now obscured by online interfaces. Paradoxically, the circulating image collections surveyed here, with missions ranging from preservation of cultural heritage to pursuit of commercial profit, produced an ethos of the available image, an ahistorical, non-medium-specific phenomenon that is both informational and aesthetic, free for public use and an object of potential exchange value. This understanding of the image is dominant in a culture in which images shared to a free platform like Instagram or Flickr are often appropriated, monetized, or repurposed in ways intended by the original authors or not. At the same time, the historical collections surveyed here are increasingly structured and constrained by technological solutions built by outside companies. Looking back at earlier environments for image circulation enables us to see that the image economy was built not just through the accumulation and indexing of images but through the cultivation of communities and the social interactions between people, image, and material. This insight deemphasizes the authority and agency of the technological system in favor of the interpersonal interactions that a circulating picture collection promotes. To collect and organize pictures is already to presume the possibility of collecting and organizing the world, to paraphrase the Susan Sontag quote that opened this introduction. Bringing lessons of the analog circulating picture collection into the present centers the insight of the public librarian that this world-building is collective, public, creative, and ongoing. In a 1936 Annual Report, Romana Javitz captures this vision:

There is so exhilarating a continuity in the usefulness of this type of library service that both the organization of the material and its development is never static. It keeps both staff and public alert and arouses a lively stream of cooperative reports from the public from whom we receive an amazing percentage of constructive and understanding suggestion, always in the spirit of keeping the collection one of live preservation and availability.⁵⁶

Our current project of collectively maintaining the digital circulating image collections would do well to hold this early description close, centering cooperation, preservation, and availability in our contemporary world-building efforts.

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.
Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



Chapter 3 is adapted and extended from article “Cards, Cabinets, and Compression in Early Stock Photography” which originally appeared in *Information and Culture: A Journal of History* Volume 56, Number 3, pp. 229–250. Copyright 2021 by the University of Texas Press. All rights reserved.

The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kamin, Diana, author.

Title: Picture-work : how libraries, museums, and stock agencies launched a new image economy / Diana Kamin.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] |

Series: History and foundations of information science | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022059845 (print) | LCCN 2022059846 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547000 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377034 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262377041 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Visual sociology. | Visual communication. | Signs and symbols.

Classification: LCC HM500 .K36 2023 (print) | LCC HM500 (ebook) |

DDC 302.23—dc23/eng/20230109

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022059845>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022059846>