

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

## PROLOGUE: PICTURE-WORKERS

---

---

I graduated college in 2006 and started working in the curatorial department of the Whitney Museum of American Art shortly thereafter. That first summer, I did a lot of collection research, walking downstairs to the department of rights and reproductions, pulling heavy binders of slides organized by exhibition date off the shelf, or sliding open creaky metal file cabinets to sift through folders labeled by artist and leaf through transparencies in crinkly glassine. Each time I went, I tried to appear practiced, quiet, and efficient so as not to disturb the longtime manager of rights and reproduction, Anita Duquette. Anita sat at a desk piled high with notes and transparencies and kept a watchful eye on all comers. She was tiny in stature, yet imperious and forbidding. Along with the cabinets filled with transparencies and discs, binders of slides, and stacks of photographers' logbooks that together formed the intellectual property of the museum, she was the de facto keeper of the institution's history, having worked at the museum since 1973 when she began as "a young woman with a long braid," in the words of Flora Miller Biddle, granddaughter of Whitney founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, in her memoir *The Whitney Women and the Museum They Made*.<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, the collection database was only partly illustrated, sometimes only with grainy black and white scans, and so I was instructed to make color scans of slides when I had time, in a slow process that required me

to perch by the curatorial scanner (surely a hard-won budgetary triumph) installed in an old closet space, painstakingly cropping and uploading to the museum's collection database. Soon those scans would be superfluous: by the time I left the museum in 2012, I had seen the museum go through most of a collection documentation project creating high-res digital photography for the entire collection and had helped launch the Whitney's first selection of collection images online. I had also formed a friendship with Anita, who worked as late as I did. When no one else was in the office, we would gossip about long-told Whitney rumors while trying to identify the exhibition in an old, unlabeled slide (she would sometimes half-close her eyes and then suddenly blurt out the exhibition title, "Image World!"). After leaving the Whitney, I continued to collaborate with her on projects as a freelance picture researcher for art publications before she retired in 2021. In many ways, her job had completely changed, as requests were filled digitally; metadata were created at the moment of photography, some of them automatically; and the images were stored on servers far from her own desk, which was still piled high with papers. She continued to keep vigilant care over the old slides and transparencies, which were regularly consulted by curators and conservators for evidence of installation preferences or condition changes, and I'm told she's still "on speed dial" by current curatorial staff.

I started this project because I was invested in the type of work Anita did, in the type of knowledge she embodied, and in the collection of reproductions that she managed, which doubled and shadowed the collection of artworks more commonly recognized as the museum's primary assets—I was interested in the centrality of her work to the museum and in the dramatic way it had changed in a matter of just a few years. When I presented a paper about the Whitney's collection of image reproductions at the Princeton-Weimar Summer School for Media Studies in 2015, one participant responded to my brief mention of Anita with a spark of recognition—she talked about the familiar figure of the gatekeeper of an archive or a collection, often a woman, usually a long-time staffer, who possesses that glowering affect that comes with the knowledge that she holds the keys to materials researchers desperately seek. Another participant spoke somewhat optimistically about the fading relevance of this type of figure, how digitization was loosening the access to the world's archival treasures. My

response was an impulse to pursue a project that sought out these collection workers, told their stories, and elucidated their philosophies of the image, which had undergirded the work of image circulation for so long. What I found was not gatekeepers standing in front of closed portals but workers enthusiastically spinning revolving doors, encouraging streams of images into and out of collections. These workers dealt with mountains of images and wide networks of people who wanted to see them. As a result, they saw images as constantly on the move, changeable, replaceable, reusable, only ever possessed temporarily. They saw that images in use were references to countless other images, networked through data like artist, subject, or distributor but also through the nature of representation itself. They understand that the history of photography is a history of accumulating and distributing collections of photography. The work they do to label, store, and circulate photographs is the subject of this book.



© 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>