



Travel Deals
EZine Signup
Fall Savings

HOME / A&E / THEATER/ARTS
ALEX BEAM

ADVERTISEMENT

Through the lens of time

The Boston Globe

By Alex Beam

Globe Staff / September 22, 2009

E-mail | Print | Reprints | Yahoo! Buzz | ShareThis | Text size - +

In the late 1960s, the Polaroid Corp. had an interesting idea. The company recruited the world's best-known photographers, such as Ansel Adams, William Wegman, and Andy Warhol, provided them with free film and studio space, and said: Have a ball. When you are finished, please give us a few prints, which we will include in our corporate collection.

Four decades later, the Polaroid Collection has 16,000 prints by 120 recognized masters: 443 Ansel Adamses, 198 Phillippe Halsmans, 35 Mary Ellen Marks, and so on through Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Rauschenberg, Inge Morath, and Margaret Bourke-White. It's not just Polaroids. Some of the pictures, by Bourke-White, Edward Weston, and Dorothea Lange, hung in Polaroid founder Edwin Land's library. Sotheby's has chosen 1,300 prints from the collection, valued between \$7 million and \$11 million, and plans to auction them off next spring.

"Hey, wait a minute!" is the widespread reaction of some photographers and former Polaroid employees blindsided by the proposed sale. "I was responsible for accumulating some of this collection," recalls former Polaroid staffer Sam Yanes. "I thought we didn't buy these photographs, we just bought the right to use them. I talked to Manfred Heiting and Ted Voss, who also worked on the collection, and they agreed with me, that was the case."

"We loaned them our photographs; they don't legally own them," says Museum School artist and photographer Erica Adams, who wrote a letter to the St. Paul bankruptcy judge who OK'd the Sotheby's sale. "I have the paperwork."

How did we get here? The original Polaroid company went bankrupt in 2002. A group of Minnesota-based investors bought its assets, including the photo collection. Then they declared bankruptcy. This summer their creditors asked a judge if they could sell the photos, and the judge approved. He ruled, and Sotheby's asserts, that the creditors have "free and clear" ownership of the collection.

If the photographers wanted to claim their work, he said, they should have acted in 2002, during the first bankruptcy proceedings. "That is when the contractual rights may have been voided," says photography critic Allan Coleman, who has been bird-dogging the fate of the collection on his blog [PhotoCritic International](#).

Rough justice, to be sure. The facts behind the case are devilishly complex. Polaroid signed many different agreements with many different photographers. For instance, Ansel Adams and Land experimented with film starting in the

Discuss
COMMENTS (7)

LATEST ENTERTAINMENT TWITTERS

Get breaking entertainment news, gossip, and the latest from Boston Globe critics and Boston.com A&E staff.

- GlobeNames** Boy or girl, baby will be a bundle of joy for Bumpchen - <http://is.gd/3Frfc> about 3 hours ago
- GlobeNames** Ted and Tommy? - <http://is.gd/3FoHN> about 4 hours ago
- GlobeFood** Dishing blog: Like a baby Clio - <http://is.gd/3Fm54> about 4 hours ago
- GlobeNames** Cam Neely gives B's uni a Classic makeover - <http://is.gd/3Fjve> about 5 hours ago

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER
[Follow Boston.com Tweets](#) | [What is Twitter?](#)

INSIDE BOSTON.COM

BILL BRETT PHOTOS



Photos from the BostonGives 2009 Big Give Event

INK TANK



Roundup of editorial cartoons

1940s, and Adams gave his work outright to the company. On the other hand, many photographers signed an agreement which stipulated that "Collection images are exclusively used for exhibition and editorial (non-commercial) purposes with Polaroid retaining all rights."

At various times during Polaroid's roiled recent history, staffers approached Harvard's Fogg Museum and the Whitney Museum in New York, seeking a home for the photos. One roadblock was money. It costs an estimated \$200,000 a year just to warehouse the photos in Somerville. And stiffed creditors couldn't be expected to overlook the multimillion-dollar value of the collection.

Many photographers are unaware of the pending sale, and among those in the know, reaction is mixed. "I would assume they could sell the entire collection without having to ask my permission," says Joel Meyerowitz, five of whose works are with Polaroid. "I never heard anything from Polaroid at any time about my work," says [John Divola](#), a photographer who teaches at the University of California at Riverside. "My understanding was that they were taking prints for their collection. It was never represented to me that these prints would be put on the market to compete with my other work."

Photographer John Reuter, who lives in Longmeadow, has about a hundred prints in the portion of the collection that Sotheby's chose not to sell. "There are some really nice pieces in there," he says. "I am going to try and get them back."

"I am disappointed that it has come to this," says William Turnage, who manages the Ansel Adams Trust. "I suspect that Dr. Land is rolling over in his grave."

Alex Beam is a Globe columnist. His e-dress is beam@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company.

Start your week off right with in-depth coverage. [Subscribe now to the Globe.](#)



READER COMMENTS »

[View reader comments \(7\)](#) » [Comment on this story](#) »

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

Polaroid Film In Stock

Unique Photo Inc. Has The Newest Polaroid Instant Films in the World
www.uniquephoto.com/polaroid

Quality Stock Photos

Nature, Underwater, Lifestyle, Travel & Fine Art Stock Photos
www.JohnAresPhotographic.com

Photography School

Searching for the Best Photography School? Find it Today!
AllArtSchools.com/Photography

CRUISE, DIAZ MIX IT UP ON SET



[Tom, Cameron, and other Hollywood celebs hit the Hub](#)

PLANNING FOR THE PLAYOFFS



[5 things the Red Sox and Yankees need to address](#)

PLUS...

[Blogs](#) | [Crossword](#) | [Comics](#)
| [Horoscopes](#) | [Games](#) | [Lottery](#)
| [Caption contest](#) | [Today in history](#)

MOST E-MAILED

- [1. Black bear roams through yard in Harvard](#)
- [2. Kerry asks \\$20m for Kennedy institute](#)
- [3. National parks photo contest winners](#)
- [4. Brandeis president to step down](#)
- [5. An entire aisle just for noodles](#)
- [6. The September Seen -- Bill Brett's photos around town](#)
- [7. Plymouth Rock Studios announces \\$550m loan to start construction](#)

RECOMMENDED SEARCHES

- [Movies](#)
- [The Green Blog](#)
- [RECIPES Fall food](#)
- [Steven Syre](#)
- [Horoscope](#)
- [Obituaries](#)

[ABOUT THIS LIST](#)


TOURISME
Mont-Tremblant
Tourisme Mont-Tremblant, your resort destination !


KING'S FAIR
One day.
One thousand memories.


Let your new home find you with email alerts

[Home](#) | [Today's Globe](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [A&E](#) | [Things to Do](#) | [Travel](#) | [Cars](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Local Search](#)

[CONTACT BOSTON.COM](#) | [Help](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Work here](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS feeds](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Make Boston.com your homepage](#)

[CONTACT THE BOSTON GLOBE](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Manage your subscription](#) | [Advertise](#) | [The Boston Globe Extras](#) | [The Boston Globe Store](#) | © 2009 NY Times Co.
