



KINGSBOROUGH ART MUSEUM

WHAT IS VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY?

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In conjunction with *The American Eye: Vernacular Photography in the United States from the Brownie Camera to Instagram*

VERNACULAR

Vernacular Photography is an umbrella term for photographs made non-professional photographers; although generally the term refers to snapshots, it can include utilitarian photographs such as identification photos or mugshots. The word *vernacular* is often used to denote the common language of a particular area, or to describe a regional architectural style used by non-professional architects for functional use. When used to discuss photography, it connotes images made without the pretense of fine art. Many vernacular images, however, reflect a keen sense of composition, lighting, and artistic sensibility. Some scholars of photography have to come to dislike the term, as it does not seem to accurately describe the wide range of amateur photographs, and have suggested alternatives such as *folk photography*. Over the years numerous professional photographers, such as Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Nan Goldin, have appropriated the vernacular aesthetic, blurring the lines between fine art and popular culture.





WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY?

Generally speaking, vernacular photography refers to snapshots. But other types of photographs considered vernacular are mugshots, company ID photos and buttons, home movies, school photos, and other images created by non-art photographers for common or practical use. .

WHAT MAKES VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS SPECIAL?



Beyond their aesthetic interest, vernacular photographs are windows into social customs, dress, relationships, and culture of the past. They offer a glimpse into the lives of others long lost to time and history.

ARE VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS *ART*?

This is a difficult question to answer, as the definition of *art* varies with every person. Can something not intended to be art actually *be* art? Can we be sure that the photograph wasn't considered art by the person who took it? Can something be considered art if it is made by someone other than a trained artist? Or does the photograph speak for itself? In many vernacular photographs, it seems clear the amateur photographer was trying to express something--if only to amuse themselves or capture something they've experienced in their lives.



WHY ARE VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS NOT GIVEN THE SAME CONSIDERATION AS OTHER ART PHOTOGRAPHS?

The sheer number of snapshots in the world makes it virtually impossible to assess them in the same manner as photographs by fine arts photographers. Most are also anonymous, which makes collecting and interpreting the full body of work by each photographer impossible. Their small scale adds to the difficulty of examining and exhibiting them. As they were usually developed by others, and not by the photographer in the darkroom, snapshots are seen as less artistic, in a sense--although they certainly may exhibit artistic qualities. Moreover, snapshots were generally not meant to be exhibited but rather were taken for personal use. In the end, the viewer must decide which is more important, the historical and cultural context of the image, or the merits of the photograph itself.



WHERE CAN I FIND VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS?

Flea markets, yard sales, estate sales, used bookshops and online auctions are excellent sources of original vernacular photographs. Collectors seek out images that possess formal qualities akin to work by professional fine art photographers.

