



PICTURE COLLECTION



Visits to the  
Picture Collection  
and a Meeting  
with Librarian  
Margarete Gross

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The first time I used the Picture Collection at The Chicago Public Library's Harold Washington Library Center was about seven years ago. I was researching an idea for an exhibition but once I started pulling open the massive file drawers, my research plans quickly took a backseat to my curiosity about the Picture Collection itself. In addition to obvious reference subjects like flowers, costumes of various periods, art and architecture and images relating to Chicago, there are more surprising files like "Cuckoo Clocks", "Snow Removal", "Iron Lungs" and "Cigar Store Indians." I wondered about the projects a person might realize using those photos. I dreamed that maybe the librarian that managed the collection was using it as a means of gently imposing his or her own interests on the public. I knew this was an unlikely fantasy but I enjoyed thinking about it.

The Picture Collection at Harold Washington Library (HWL) does not occupy a lot of physical space – just a small fraction of the Visual and Performing Arts Department on the 8th floor. The collection consists of four double-sided rows of anonymous looking black file cabinets; each row contains 48 drawers of files. In those drawers, however, is an archive that truly feels like it encompasses the entire visual world. There are an estimated 10,000 subject headings; each contains varying numbers of pictures mounted on cardstock or sorted into folios. Some subjects, like "Tug of War," are represented by just five photos; other files contain hundreds of examples. The total collection is estimated at over 1,250,000 pictures.

Whatever their future may be, picture collections don't hold the importance in public libraries that they once did. Harold Washington is one of the few libraries that still maintain a circulating collection of this kind. According to their website, the library's Picture Collection was established in 1940 and was patterned after the collection of the New York Public Library. At HWL, the card catalog for the picture collection is still an actual card catalog – the file headings are not computerized. This might make the Picture Collection seem old-fashioned to some, but in fact it is refreshing to experience all of this material so directly. No permission is required to start looking; the files are accessible at all times during library hours; there is no waiting. Additionally, photos can be checked out and taken home. Nearly all of the pictures at HWL are sourced – usually just with handwritten notes - allowing patrons to secure their own copyright clearance from the publishers if they wish.

A surprising aspect of HWL's Picture Collection is that it is also an unintentional ephemera collection. For example, the "Taxidermy" file also contains an old issue of Taxidermy News. Likewise, numerous files contain

postcards, advertising inserts, mail order catalogs and other bits of printed matter. If you look in “Greeting Cards”, you will – not surprisingly - find a lot of greeting cards, many of which have been used and recycled into the Picture Collection. In places, the Picture Collection resembles a catchall destination for any paper materials that are neither a book nor a periodical.

I began my own picture collection in 1991. The pictures I save in my photo files are used in art projects, exhibitions, self-published booklets, and other applications that have yet to be determined. Most importantly, my photo files are an experimental creative project in and of themselves. The files provide a space where I can attempt to make sense of the depicted visual world – where I can make playful or poetic associations between images that don’t normally get presented alongside each other. The clipping and sorting of pictures is a means of imposing a personal order on images in a cheap, manageable, and direct way. I can create new categories as needed, weed my collection of pictures I no longer find interesting, and change file headings to make them more helpful. There are about a hundred categories and maybe 4,000 photos in my files. My intention is not to create an impossibly large and unwieldy collection, but to maintain a certain usefulness and vitality.

About two years ago, I made a general inquiry about the Picture Collection at Harold Washington Library and learned that one full time staff member manages it. I knew I wanted to meet this person and I thought about that sometimes while I was working on my photo files. My own sense of order and that found in the Picture Collection at HWL are largely incompatible; what interests me is how a librarian goes about slicing and dicing the visual world in order to make a public collection of pictures. Our collections serve different purposes, but it seemed that our process might be similar; I thought we should know each other. When I committed to show my picture collection at the Hyde Park Art Center for the exhibition “Operation: Human Intelligence”, I also committed to finally meet the picture librarian.

Margarete Gross is the Head of the Picture Collection. Her title is a bit misleading as she is in fact the only full time employee devoted to the Picture Collection. After a friendly preliminary meeting, Margarete and I met again soon after for a longer discussion at the library. From there we went to the staff-only reference section where she gave me a behind-the-scenes look at the work she does. I brought along some of my own photo files, a few self-published booklets, and several books by other artists that work directly with photos from their archives. Margarete preferred that we talk without a tape recorder so I brought a list of questions that I tried to cover as we spoke. Our

conversation flowed effortlessly for over two hours.

Margarete has been working at the Chicago Public Library for twenty years and she has worked in the Picture Collection right from the beginning of her employment. There were once more library staff that helped with the collection but now it is solely the domain of Margarete and a single invaluable volunteer. Margarete has a Masters degree in Library Sciences but she also brought her love of pictures and art to her job. As an artist, she had her own photo files before coming to the library. She collected images relating to subjects like “Body Movement” that she used as sources for her drawings. She also saved pictures of art movements and styles that interested her such as Russian icons. Today Margarete draws “only for her own amusement” but she remains a passionate observer of art and actively visits exhibits in galleries and museums. She has also helped organize several exhibits in the library. In addition to heading the Picture Collection, Margarete manages the reference collection of materials pertaining to Chicago artists. This includes a massive slide collection, files filled with papers, images, brochures, and exhibition histories, as well as a card catalog that collects indexes of books that the library owns on each artist.

Clipping, labeling, and filing pictures are the primary tasks of Margarete’s job. She tracks how heavily the collection is used and has noted that between eight and nine hundred pictures are pulled weekly – all of which she must re-file. The library subscribes to about twelve magazines solely for the pictures that she cuts from them. These include titles like Time, Newsweek, National Geographic, Vogue, Ebony, People, and American Heritage. She also receives discarded books and materials that people donate to her from other departments. Her cutting and sorting work is done in a typical office cubicle. Loose pictures are sorted alphabetically once they are labeled. Photos that Margarete hasn’t yet decided on a category for are stored in a couple lids from the boxes that photocopy paper comes in (I use these lids for the same purpose). Like any picture obsessed person, she clips photos outside of work as she spots them and will find herself cutting pictures out of airline flight magazines and other sources that she comes across in her travels.

The thousands of picture categories in HWL’s collection originated from a list provided by the Library of Congress. Margarete also tries to “get a feel for what patrons are looking for” and adds to or develops the files in response to their needs. When asked if categories are ever phased out, perhaps because they seem outdated, she quickly replied “Never.” Likewise, I asked if new categories are added and she confirmed, “as the world changes,

of course I do.” Among the more recent additions are files for subjects like AIDS, Abortion, Homosexuality, Computer Art, and various new technologies. While some of these subjects are not new, it is only recently that images for them are prevalent in mainstream sources. I asked if there were any images she would deem inappropriate for the files or if there was anything she would reject. Her answer was “No” except that “I wouldn’t put pornography in – not out of prudishness – but only because it would be stolen.”

In a somewhat related story, an elderly-sounding woman once phoned to inquire about photos of “Harems.” Margarete recalled how she went to collect all of the photos from this file and had them ready for the woman when she came to the library. When she arrived, the patron saw the many suggestive pictures of Harem girls and was taken aback. Apparently her weak speech had been misunderstood. She was looking for bird photos of “Herons.” I’m sure the library had plenty of those too.

Margarete has noticed that a lot of artists use the Picture Collection when they are seeking source material to draw or paint from. People involved with theater use the Picture Collection heavily as a source for costume designs and other visual references. Other requests are more specific. One artist looking for photos of decomposing bodies came up short. While photos like this might fall under a category such as “Death”, there is no file specifically for this subject; the images are not terribly common. Another request once came in for an image of Chicago Alderman Bobby Rush. Long before he entered electoral city politics, Rush was a member of the Black Panthers. What this patron sought was a photo of Rush dressed in his Black Panther regalia with his fist raised. Because of unpredictable requests like this, Margarete is reluctant to weed the collection; nothing is removed unless the pictures are completely shredded and falling apart.

Some library administrators at large feel that the Internet is an adequate replacement as a source of images and that the Picture Collection is no longer needed. Margarete challenges this: “It’s fine if you are searching for pictures of Britney Spears”, but for older subjects or for people seeking a more direct and tactile approach, one cannot compete with being able to spread a hundred pictures across a large table. Looking at a series of pictures on a computer can be like reading a magazine on microfilm; the images are confined to a screen that can only hold several of them at once. It is slow and difficult to see comparative relationships between images when you can only look at a couple at a time. The benefit of digital preservation has many drawbacks as a viewing experience.



In the Picture Collection, the articles that accompany certain pictures are frequently retained and filed intact. Not surprisingly the surrounding texts can be distracting and Margarete admitted that she now knows an awful lot about some subjects that she might never have researched otherwise. Gradually after cut and labeled pictures pile up, Margarete returns to the task of sorting them. She remarks “When I cut out a picture, I try to ask: ‘What would be the most logical place to put this if someone was looking for it?’” She talks of having to try to get inside the head of the patron as a way of attempting to determine how to make the collection accessible and easy to use.

Finally, I asked Margarete if she ever gets tired of looking at pictures all the time and she quickly responded that she doesn’t (and then asked “Do you?”). She does express distaste for the look of the computer-manipulated photos that are common in contemporary advertising. It strikes her as false and just too easy for people to create these distortions with the click of a mouse button. She appreciates clearly conceived and well-crafted images and collecting and filing pictures remains a vital activity for her. It is hard to imagine a more passionate and devoted advocate for picture collecting and patrons are lucky to be the beneficiaries of someone who does her job so thoughtfully. Near the close of our meeting Margarete provided a succinct justification for her longstanding interest in her work when she stated: “I just value the power of the two-dimensional form.”

PICTURE COLLECTION SUBJECT HEADINGS

PICTURES ... S - FL	16 PICTURES ... - MONTG, NY	21 PICTURES
	17 PICTURES ... 77 ... 192	22 PICTURES
3 PICTURES ... S - PROVERB, E	18 PICTURES ... 18 ... 196	23 PICTURES
14 PICTURES ... ... 1 - 191	19 PICTURES ... 16 ... P	
15 PICTURES ... ... - 191	20 PICTURES ... ... 19	

A Personal Subjective  
Selection of Subject  
Headings in the Picture  
Collection at Harold  
Washington Library

Accidents	Claus	Giants
Air Raid Shelters	Cigar Store Indians	Grain Elevators
Aircraft – Hijacking	Clambakes	Halloween
Alchemists	Clean-Up Week	Handicapped
Ambulance	Clouds	Happenings
Anchors	Cock Fighting	Harems
Animals –	College Life	Hog Raising
Chipmunks	Cosmic Rays	Horns-of-Plenty
Apothecary Jars	Crop Spraying	Hydrogen Bombs
Aqueducts	Crystal Gazing	Ice Cream
Architecture –	Cyclotrons	Illumination
Pompeii	Death	Infantile Paralysis
Auctions	Dervishes	Iron Lungs
Aurora Borealis	Disk Jockeys	Jesters
Avalanches	Dog Pounds	Junk
Baby Carriages	Doormen	Ku Klux Klan
Barbeques	Dragons	Liberty Bell
Beauty Contests	Drunkenness	Little League
Bible – Christ –	Easter Island	Locks and Keys
Miracles	Emotions	Magicians
Binoculars	Escalators	Mazes
Biography – Sammy	Extremist Groups	Meat Industry
Davis Jr.	Fads	Minstrels
Birds – Eagles –	Fakers	Molecules
Symbolic	Fakirs	Mosses
Boomerangs	Falling	Mummies
Boy Scouts	Father Time	New York (City)
Bubbles	Finger Prints	Hospitals
Butlers	Fire Alarms	Nursemaids
Cambodia	Flower Painting	Nuts
Camouflage	Flying Saucers	Octopuses
Caricature	Forest Fires	Organ Grinders
Cemeteries	Fortune Telling	Outhouses
Census	4-H Clubs	Outlaws
Checkers	Freemasonry	Passion Plays
Chicago – Slums	Gambling	Pasta
Chopsticks	Gay ‘90’s	Paul Bunyon
Christmas – Santa -	Geishas	Peep Shows

Pencils	Cross	Weathervanes
Picnics	Stone Henge	Weddings in Other
Pirates	Street Cleaning	Lands
Police in Other	Street Cries	Weighing Machines
Lands	String Figures	Wheel Chairs
Pony Express	Stunts	Witch Doctors
Portraits – Mao	Suntan	Wood – Petrified
Praying	Swimming Pools	Worms
Prisons	Swiss Guard	X-Rays
Psychedelic Art	Table Decorations	Y.W.C.A.
Punishments	Taxidermy	Zipper Fastenings
Pygmies	Teenagers	
Radar	Telephone Linemen	
Railroads –	Textures	
Employees	Tobogganing	
Reading	Toilet Articles	
Rear Views	Tombstones	
Refugees	Town Cries	
Respirators	Trappings	
Restrooms	Treaties	
Riots	Trojan Horse	
Roaring 20's	Tug of War	
Rodeos	Unemployed	
Ruins	Unicorns	
Saints	United States Mint	
Sand Painting	Unknown Soldier	
Sayings	Vampires	
Scare Crows	Vending Machines	
Scissors	Ventriloquism	
Shrines	Vikings	
Silhouettes	Vitamins	
Sleeping	Voodoo	
Slums	Voting	
Snow Removal	Walking	
Space Flight –	Washington D.C. –	
Challenger	Birds Eye View	
Spoons	Wax Figures	
Stations of the -	Weapons	

Please take pictures to the Periodicals Desk -  
8<sup>th</sup> floor north side -  
for counting and packaging  
then proceed to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor for checkout.

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NEW YORK STATE TO DAIS

OHIO

OFFICES-DESIGNS AND PLANS

OFFICE EQUIPMENT

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