

*The Thrill  
of the Chase*

The Wagstaff Collection  
of Photographs

March 15–July 31, 2016

*Collecting is a curious vice, it changes your whole life—  
your whole way of looking at the world.*

—Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., 1978

From 1973 to early 1984, Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. (American, 1921–1987) assembled one of the most important private collections of photographs in the world. His interests spanned from the experimental beginnings of photography in the mid-nineteenth century to the works of contemporary artists. Wagstaff promoted photography as art by exhibiting, publishing, and lecturing on his holdings. A high point came when he organized the exhibition *Photographs from the Collection of Sam Wagstaff*, which opened in 1978 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, before touring to seventeen venues. Wagstaff was at the forefront of establishing a market for photographs, and his reputation as an arbiter of taste provided an impetus for museums to collect and for scholars to study this long-neglected medium. In 1984 Wagstaff sold his collection to the J. Paul Getty Museum, where it became part of a group of major acquisitions that formed the Department of Photographs.



Wagstaff (left) on *The Dick Cavett Show*, 1980. Photo by Gerald Murrell. The Getty Research Institute. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Inc. © Gerald Murrell

Quote: Gerald Marzorati, "Just a Bunch of Photographs," *SoHo Weekly News*, July 13, 1978



# *Who Was Sam Wagstaff?*

Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. was born in New York City on November 4, 1921, to a socially prominent family. He majored in English at Yale University and earned a master's degree in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. From 1961 to 1971, Wagstaff worked as a curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford and at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where he championed contemporary art with a series of innovative exhibitions that challenged and educated museum audiences.

In 1972 Wagstaff met the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (American, 1946–1989) and they became lovers. Mapplethorpe helped Wagstaff realize the value of photography as art, and Wagstaff helped support Mapplethorpe's career. Wagstaff became obsessed with acquiring photographs, and his reputation as a preeminent collector grew almost as quickly as his holdings. After selling his collection of photographs to the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1984, Wagstaff turned his attention to collecting nineteenth-century American silver. He died on January 14, 1987, at age sixty-five from AIDS-related complications. The bulk of his estate, which was estimated at \$7 million, passed to Mapplethorpe.

# *The Early Photography Market*

- 1969** Lee D. Witkin opens the first New York City gallery dedicated exclusively to photographs.
- 1973** Wagstaff acquires his first photographs—eleven platinum prints by Frederick H. Evans (English, 1853–1943)—from the New York–based dealer George Reinhart for \$3,800.
- 1974** Wagstaff makes international headlines when his successful bid of £52,000 (about \$120,000) at a British auction breaks the record for the highest amount offered for a photography lot—in this case, an album by Julia Margaret Cameron (English, born India, 1815–1879).
- 1975** Sotheby's creates a photographs department in New York City and establishes regular sales.
- Wagstaff buys four hundred photographs by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon; French, 1820–1910) from the French antiquarian book dealer André Jammes for \$69,000.
- 1977** Wagstaff purchases *Male Figures at the Site of "Swimming"* by Thomas Eakins (American, 1844–1916) at auction for \$9,000—the highest price he has paid for a single photograph up to this point.
- 1979** The Iranian Revolution sets off a dramatic increase in oil prices, precipitating an energy crisis that unfolds into a recession.
- 1982** Critic Andy Grundberg of the *New York Times* declares the photography boom officially over.
- 1984** Wagstaff sells his collection of photographs to the J. Paul Getty Museum for \$5 million.

## *Wagstaff's Collecting Style*

Wagstaff collected photographs by recognized British, French, and American masters as well as unknown makers. He traveled to London and Paris regularly to attend auctions and often trolled secondhand shops and flea markets, returning home with shopping bags full of prints. Wagstaff studied the collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and delighted in discovering artists who were deserving of attention but were not on their institutional radars. His broad and idiosyncratic taste gave other collectors and curators the courage to look beyond established names, thereby expanding the canon.

## *The Collection*

Wagstaff's collection of photographs serves, among other things, as a complex self-portrait of the man who assembled it. The collection is renowned for the quality and breadth of its works by William Henry Fox Talbot, Hill & Adamson, Gustave Le Gray, Nadar, and Julia Margaret Cameron. It contains a total of 26,754 objects: 9,138 individual prints; 315 cased objects; 2,115 photographic albums and illustrated books; 11,790 stereographs; and 3,396 card photographs. Even after thirty-two years of acquisitions, it remains the Getty Museum's largest holding of art from a single source.

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