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The undiscovered street photography of Vivian Maier

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In 2007, Chicago Realtor John Maloof paid \$400 at an auction for a storage locker filled with rolls of undeveloped film. He was searching for photos for a book project about his Chicago neighborhood of Portage Park. In a moment straight out of an episode of "Auction Hunters," Maloof discovered a treasure-trove of thousands of negatives that turned out to be from a nanny who took up street photography in her spare time yet kept most of her work hidden. The photographer was Vivian Maier.

After scanning a few of the images Maloof quickly realized he stumbled onto something remarkable. He created a blog seeking expert opinion and feedback on her photos. Immediately hundreds of positive responses poured in with book and exhibition offers. Comparisons were made to Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Her black-and-white photos, taken primarily from the 1950s through the 1970s, depict ordinary people, street life and architecture of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

More than 100 of her photographs are on display at "Vivian Maier – A Life Discovered: Photographs From the Maloof Collection" at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in L.A.

"It's a history of America at a certain moment, previously unavailable, seen through new eyes," said actor and photographer Tim Roth, who selected the images along with gallery owner Karnowsky.

He initially read about Maier in the Guardian newspaper and checked out [Maloof's website](#). "Her photos were extraordinary," he said. "There's two very distressing photographs of men in abject poverty on the street. It reminded me a lot of Rodin sculptures," noted Roth.

Initially the only information Maloof had was that the trunk belonged to an elderly woman and was repossessed because of delinquent payments. It wasn't until 2009 that he found an envelope with her name in one of the boxes. He Googled her only to find her obituary from a few days earlier. He tracked down some of the families she worked for and bits of this mysterious, talented woman's life began to emerge.

Vivian Maier was born in 1926 in New York City to a French mother and Austrian father. She spent most of her youth in France (census records have her living with French portrait photographer Jeanne Bertrand at one point), returning to New York in 1951.



She made her way to Chicago's North Shore neighborhood in 1956 where she would spend the next 40 years as a nanny, counting talk show host Phil Donahue as an employer in the 1970s. She was described by the adult children she once cared for as a quasi Mary Poppins, eccentric, guarded but delightful. Audio recordings reveal her French accent. She was rarely without her Rolleiflex camera on her days off.

Her self-portraits show a serious woman with cropped hair, dressed in men's clothing and large hats. Her many photos of children and the destitute tell of her connection with those struggling to get by. "A lot of her subjects were in distressing situations. She had to gain their trust, have a certain level of comfort," said Roth who believes she brought her children with her on some of her adventures.

Her work has been exhibited in Norway, Germany, England, New York and Chicago. Last fall, The Stephen Cohen Gallery in Los Angeles showcased Maier's photos from collector, Jeffrey Goldstein. "[Vivian Maier: Street Photographer](#)," was published by Powerhouse in November.

Maloof and a friend, Anthony Rydzon, are raising money to develop the remainder of the nearly 150,000 negatives and are working on a documentary "Finding Vivian Maier," scheduled for release this year.

-- Liesl Bradner

The exhibit runs through Jan. 28. The Merry Karnowsky Gallery: 170 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles. Tues- Sat. 12-6 p.m. (323) 933-4408, www.mkgallery.com.

Photographs by Vivian Maier, from the Maloof Collection/ Merry Karnowsky Gallery.



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