

"Young Artists are the Most Exciting"

An Interview with Fabio Castelli / By Giuliana Scimé

Collecting photography is a passion which has involved more and more people in the last decade. Fabio Castelli, who is assembling a remarkable collection of very high quality, consented to be interviewed for the first time. Very well known in graphic arts field — his collection on the subject is considered a leading one for unique and rare items — Fabio Castelli displays on the walls of his elegant apartment precious engravings (e. g. Dürer), modern lithographs (e. g. Picasso), as well as famous photographs (e. g. Ansel Adams's 'Moonrise').

You are one of the most famous collectors of graphic arts in the world. What inspired your interest in photography?

The photography collection is an extension of the graphic one. In fact, I believe that photography is an autonomous art form. It keeps up the graphic arts media in our time. So to say, photography is the process for reproducing images according to present society. It represents a natural evolution from engraving, etching, and lithography, and I consider it be a part of graphic arts.

Does your collection have a particular characteristic?

I developed the photographic section with a didactic point of view. I'm not interested only in modern and contemporary photography, but from the very beginnings of its history. Since my graphic collection has a didactic characteristic — from incunabula of 15th century onwards — even for photography I tried to find photogenic drawings, daguerreotypes, ambrotypes ..., the incunabula of photography. Therefore, photography belongs to my collection along a continuous and ideal line on the basis of the same philosophy.

Which was the true moment or fortuitous chance that induced you to explore the field of photography?

Studying graphic works of Duchamp and Man Ray, I became aware that they had used photography as an alternative and creative medium to brush and canvas. And several other artists, Max Ernst, Hans Bellmer, El Lissitzky ... very well known for art works made different media, employed camera and darkroom for their artistic researches and for autonomous expression. Going back in time, Corot made use of photographic techniques in creating the cliché verres. Consequently, I started looking for photographic images of those artists I was already collecting for graphics.

My initiation in photography originated from that very moment. My first purchase was a rayograph, better to say, the series of ten made by Man Ray for the French Electricity Company in 1931. Later, the knowledge of "Camera Work"

set was of topical importance for me. In "Camera Work" I saw exquisite techniques such as photogravure and magnificent pictures. Then, I understood the meanings and possibilities of photography as an art.

Afterwards, one impulse towards the pleasure of collecting photography is the price of contemporary pictures; vintage prints have reached astronomical values. It's still possible to buy beautiful images of excellent photographers at reasonable prices, the equivalent to four dinners at a restaurant. Therefore, buying is not as problematic as for high quality graphics nowadays.

When I began collecting graphic works, about 13 years ago painting was already impossible, as far as prices go. In graphics it was still possible to assemble a high quality collection, and it was easy to find in the art market excellent graphic works for \$ 200–300. With the same amount of

money you could buy only a small drawing by a famous painter. I had started with paintings, but I gave up. I'm not giving up with graphics, because for the past years, I have been exploring photography too. Collecting is an illness. (Fabio Castelli even has a very rare Japanese sword hilt collection. Ed.)

Do you have a personal attitude in collecting?

I'm very selective as to quality. For this reason my collection is not so extensive in quantity, only a few thousand each. I'm strongly convinced that collecting must be done with an eye towards economy. I'm a businessman and I cannot forget the economic aspect, even for the type of education I received. I was taught to respect money value. In my opinion, the only pictures which stand out in the future will be high quality ones. In photography, vintage. Vintage prints are works conceived and created by the artist. He attended personally to all parts of image execution.

Do you mean you don't buy modern prints?

No. I don't buy an image if I cannot have the vintage, which is of the most value in my opinion. If I can't find the vintage print, I'm not interested in the image. Of course, there is also a financial question to be considered.

Let me emphasize that you include in your collection young photographers, too.



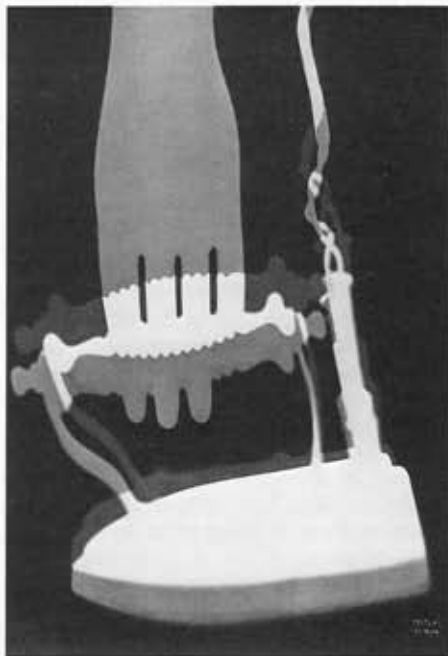
Young artists are the most exciting because I'm free to buy only what I really like. On the contrary, the acquisition of vintage prints must be based on historical research. Sometimes the task is not to gratify my personal taste, but to fill holes in the collection. I feel such a duty, my collection has a documentary and didactic character. For instance, if I need a picture I consider a milestone in the history of photography or one which is important to testify to the development of photography.

Do you collect color prints?

At the beginnings, I collected only black/white. Such an approach to photography has natural roots in collecting engravings. Little by little, I saw works in color with better techniques and I became aware that some feelings might be communicated by means of color. Images which express states of mind and sentiments.

What about the problem of color prints fading?

I don't care about this problem. I know that there is a debate about color fading, but I don't think of my collection in terms of centuries. In contemporary photography I buy only what I like. Nevertheless, I try to preserve the images in the best way possible. I keep them in drawers in acid-free mats and envelopes along archival system rules. The drawers are in a special little room without windows kept, at regular temperatures and



Man Ray. Collection Fabio Castelli

humidity. I fill out a card for every new acquisition, in which I take notes of the author's bibliography, date, place and price of the purchase, as well as a reference copy of the image. I want to know at any moment all the information on my collection. I even made a lot of effort and I spent a lot of time to make up a library.

I have daily relationships with museums, auction houses, publishers, and I read carefully the most important fine art photography magazines in order to have up to date information on the field I'm interested in.

Where do you get photographs usually?

When I travel for business, I try to dedicate few hours to visiting galleries and photographers. They are the moments in my daily life that I prefer. These moments are opportunities for interesting meetings.

Is the direct relationship with the author basic for you?

No. It's nice and if it's possible I request it. The image must live its own life. I would not like it otherwise.

Which are the most precious items you have in your collection?

The already mentioned Corot, Man Ray, Bellmer, and besides, the complete set of "Camera Work," Julia Margaret Cameron, Atget, calotypes by Talbot and many others. In particular, a series by Nadar on the first official Japanese delegation visiting Paris. Those images have a great historical meaning. The delegation brought Japanese prints to Europe for the first time. Japanese graphic art influenced modern art movements and artists. For me those photographs represent the conceptual link between graphic art and photography.