

‘WOMAN—YOU STRUCK OIL’:
THE ZELDA MACKAY COLLECTION AT THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM

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Abstract. The Zelda Mackay Collection at the George Eastman Museum consists of approximately five hundred nineteenth-century cased American photographs. While the collection was largely cataloged, it had never been analyzed alongside Zelda Mackay’s (1893–1985) collecting notebook and papers—sources that offer insight into her collection-building practices and the provenance of the objects. I have read Mackay’s notebook alongside the objects at the George Eastman Museum and made the information found in the primary source available in the museum’s collections database (TMS). My ambition was not only to gain intellectual control over the collection but also to rebuild Mackay’s important legacy as a collector. The notebook is evidence of Mackay’s careful curation and valuation of a collection that gained the attention of Alden Scott Boyer, Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, Robert Taft, Ansel Adams, and other well-known members of the established collecting circle in the twentieth century. My further analysis of the notebook indicates that Mackay acquired approximately one-fourth of her photograph collection through interactions with other women, thus exposing a pattern of women employing traditional conceptions of domesticity to build their collections. Using Mackay and her materials as a case study, this paper explores critical questions regarding the role of women as collectors of photography in the twentieth century. Within this, I consider the network of women who were financially, intellectually, and physically in control of their family photographs, and who seem to have domestic agency as keepers of records, photographs, and memories in non-domestic spaces.

Keywords: Photography, Women, Collecting

On February 4, 1966, Zelda Mackay (1893–1985), a retired California schoolteacher, expressed to the famous museum curator and historian of photography Beaumont Newhall (1908–1993) her desire to “dispose of [my collection] while I can still make arrangements, and dispose of it the least painfully [way] possible” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, February 4, 1966, Zelda Mackay Papers). Between the start of her collecting career in 1930 and her death in 1985, Mackay acquired over one thousand nineteenth-century photographs of early America, including images of pre-gold rush California, the America West, and the Civil War. Her collection provides rare examples of famous American subjects and photographers, outstanding anonymous and vernacular objects, and also boasts a handful of nineteenth-century European, Canadian, Mexican, and Asian photographs. In August 1969, after decades of corresponding with Mackay, Newhall acquired a large portion of Mackay’s collection, a collecting notebook, and four boxes of her papers on behalf of the George Eastman Museum.¹

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¹ The remainder of Mackay’s collection is in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, her alma matter. Mackay had previously communicated to Newhall her wish for the collection to stay together, “since it was practically a lifetime job to assemble it” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, February 4, 1966, Zelda Mackay Papers). However, in the early 1960s, “[a]fter much urgent persuasion by the Assistant Director of Bancroft Library, I finally sold most of my Californiana collection [to the Bancroft Library]... for which I received \$4,000” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, March 3, 1966, Zelda Mackay Files).

The importance of Mackay’s collection lies in the extensive documentation of the social history of early America, including depictions of early families, important people, and historical events. Beyond this, however, Mackay’s collection, collecting activities, and records have allowed me to make necessary interventions into the traditional, male-centric histories of collecting and photography. My critical reading of Mackay’s dynamic engagement with collecting reveals how she positioned herself between domestic spheres and male-driven institutional circles in order to acquire objects. Mackay’s liminal position not only allowed her to build a renowned collection, but also helped her to gain the trust of her female peers and the respect of her male contemporaries. For example, in 1945, Alden Scott Boyer (1887–1953), a prominent collector from Chicago credited with building a “foundation for the history of photography” (Templeton 2008, 197), wrote to Mackay to congratulate her on a recent addition to her collection:

Dear Collector,

To begin with; woman—you struck oil. The gal held you up; but your husband was a jewel to loosen up. I too would have paid the price had it been offered to me & I congrat[ulate] you on the haul. If you ever sell, sell to me. (Alden Scott Boyer to Zelda Mackay, January 14, 1945, Zelda Mackay Papers)

By 1945, the two collectors had already been “the steadiest of correspondents” for several years, their professional relationship beginning when Boyer wrote to introduce himself to Mackay (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, June 25, 1945, Library of Congress). By referring to her as a collector, and suggesting a hypothetical business transaction, Boyer admitted Mackay’s place as his equal in the seemingly male-dominated world of collecting (Bethel 1997; Paltz 1985, 11–24).

While the George Eastman Museum had largely cataloged Mackay’s collection, the objects had never been thoroughly analyzed alongside her notebook, inventories,² and papers that were acquired with the 1969 purchase. These materials offer insight into her collection-building practices, her personal cataloging system, and the way she imagined herself as a collector. In her collecting notebook, Mackay numbered and documented eight hundred and thirty-eight of her daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes “of sufficient importance or attractiveness” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, June 25, 1945, Library of Congress). Within each entry, she typically recorded the provenance, price and estimated worth of the object, and a brief description of the image, object, and transaction. At the Eastman Museum, I re-associated the entries in Mackay’s notebook with her objects and have made the information described in the primary source available in the museum’s collections database, The Museum System

² In the late 1960s, Mackay created two collection inventory notebooks for the Eastman Museum and Beaumont Newhall as she prepared to sell the remainder of her collection. The collection inventories, for the most part, are abridged versions of Mackay’s main collecting notebook; however, some entries in the inventory notebooks do not match those in the main collecting notebook. Whereas Mackay’s primary notebook reveals the organic growth of the collection over time, the inventories reflect the collection at the end of Mackay’s collecting career. In the three instances while cataloging, the number inscribed on an adhesive label on the spine of the case did not match the corresponding entry in Mackay’s collecting notebook. However, when I cross-referenced the notebook entries with those in the later inventory notebooks, the same number had a different description that now matched the object. In order to account for this in the TMS record, I transcribed the original notebook description in the inscription field—“Entry xx in Mackay’s notebook (located in library):”—and the description from the late-1960s “Daguerreotype Collection of Zelda P. Mackay” inventory notebook—“Entry xx in Mackay’s collection inventory notebook (located in library):” followed by the respective transcription. Though only the latter inscription matches the object, both sets are important to understanding Mackay’s collecting practice and the way she developed her collection.

(TMS).³ This work allowed me to rebuild Mackay’s legacy as a collector and to facilitate access to a collection that had gained the attention of her male contemporaries.

Mackay’s deep interest in photography was likely nurtured in her classroom, as she began her career as a high school teacher at the height of the Visual Instruction Movement. According to Anna Verona Dorris, an instructor at the University of California, in 1928, “Visual instruction simply means the presentation of knowledge to be gained through the ‘seeing experience,’” wherein teachers used visual aids pedagogically to motivate children’s natural learning (Dorris 1928, 6). As such, Mackay “found the study of the daguerreotype a very appropriate project for her art and French classes” (*Oakland Tribune* 1955). Though she retired from teaching after the birth of her son in 1924, Mackay certainly understood the didactic value of photography and built her collection with the Visual Instruction Movement in mind.⁴ Throughout her personal and professional correspondences, Mackay described using her “collection to entertain at clubs, talk before classes, etc.” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, February 4, 1966, *Zelda Mackay Papers*). She further exclaimed, “I am a collector of historical photographic material, daguerreotypes, etc., all of which I use for educational purposes. I am a high school teacher” (Zelda Mackay to unknown, undated correspondence, *Zelda Mackay Papers*).

In a 1945 letter to Mrs. Marian S. Carson, a collector of early photographic material from Philadelphia, Mackay described the beginnings of her hobby collecting photographs: “I just drifted into the hobby, having only 3 or 4 family dags. to start my collection” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, June 25, 1945, *Library of Congress*). As evidence of this, the first three objects listed in Mackay’s notebook, starting in 1930, depict members of her family.⁵ That Mackay began her collecting notebook in 1930 with three family photographs is significant, as Mackay’s father died in December of 1930. After her father’s death, Mackay and her family likely reminisced with photographic objects in hand, discussing memories and sharing stories (Edwards 1999, 228; Edwards 2012, 221). Mackay subsequently documented the images, objects, and stories in her notebook, thus preserving her family records in perpetuity and enacting the traditionally gendered role of family record-keeper (Siegel 2010, 113).

As Mackay continued to collect photographs as a hobby, she seems to have taken on the role of record-keeper for the people from whom she acquired photographs. A number of the entries in Mackay’s notebook list the 1939–1941 National Hobby Shows in Oakland, California, as venues where she displayed her objects and cultivated connections with female visitors, presenters, and vendors. For example, Mrs. E. Yeakle of San Francisco gave Mackay a “Group of 11 [family] daguerreotypes... as [a] result of meeting at Hobby Show” (Zelda Mackay *Collecting Notebook*, *Zelda Mackay Papers*). About half the Yeakle objects contained supplemental notes

³ Over the 2017–2018 academic year, I fully cataloged five hundred and thirty-five Mackay objects, predominantly including daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and photographic jewelry. Many of Mackay’s objects have an applied label on the verso or the spine of the case that, in Mackay’s handwriting, identifies the object’s corresponding number in the collecting notebook. After reviewing the respective notebook entry to confirm the description matched with the object, I recorded the number assigned by Mackay in the inscriptions field (ex. “Inscribed in pen on applied label on spine of case: xx”) and in the alternate number field in TMS (“Mackay #xx,” with the description “Mackay Number”). I also added to the inscription field in TMS: “Entry xx in Mackay’s notebook (located in library):” followed by my transcription of the notebook entry. Upon finishing cataloging, about one hundred and twenty objects did not match with a Mackay number listed in her notebook. Out of the eight hundred and thirty-eight entries in Mackay’s notebook, two hundred and thirty-two have not yet been matched with objects at either the Eastman Museum or the Bancroft Library. While there are certainly overlaps between the unmatched objects and the unmatched entries, the remaining Mackay records are too vague or general to definitively match with the objects at this time.

⁴ Mackay began her collecting notebook six years after the birth of her son.

⁵ Mackay indicated in her notebook that these and other family photographs remained with her family.

“written...by Mrs. Yeakle’s mother” that included information about the respective sitters and subjects (Zelda Mackay Collecting Notebook, Zelda Mackay Papers). Mackay transcribed Mrs. Yeakle’s mother’s records into her notebook, added annotations about the origins of the information, and documented how American families passed down, and eventually disconnected from, their personal photographs. At the Hobby Shows, Mackay encountered women who, by managing their family photographs, embodied the role of family record-keeper. By acquiring these women’s family photographs, and documenting their detailed family histories through the written analysis of the objects, Mackay became a surrogate record-keeper for these families—effectively transferring the meaning of the image and object “‘from one realm of significance to the other’” (Edwards 2012, 227).

My analysis of Mackay’s notebook—specifically, of the provenance information found within the majority of the entries—indicates that she acquired approximately one-fourth of her photographic collection through interactions with women, by means of coincidence and deliberate “detective work” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, October 4, 1944, Library of Congress). The active and enthusiastic women trading and selling family and non-family photographs at the National Hobby Shows, in particular, and with Mackay, in general, are evidence of a strong network of women involved in grassroots-level collecting. These women were not a part of the institutional collecting circles that furnished objects to libraries and museums; however, they did not engage with photographs in traditionally domestic spaces. Thus these women moved beyond traditional notions of private and semi-private domestic practice in order to financially, intellectually, and physically control their photographs in public spaces and on a greater scale. Mackay’s acquisitions from women are most notable, as they deconstruct purely male-centric and domestic-centric narratives of collecting.

Suggested by her career as a schoolteacher, her role as a family record-keeper, and her connections with other women, Mackay’s engagement with collecting can be understood through traditionally feminine domestic activities, in particular the act of compiling a photographic album. Elizabeth Siegel has argued, for example, that nineteenth-century American family albums reveal “a reciprocal relationship between the public, commercial sphere and the private, domestic one” (Siegel 2010, 2). Siegel lists several functions of photographic albums and positions them within the blurred space between public and private: “family record, parlor entertainment, social register, national portrait gallery...” (Siegel 2010, 2). Similarly, Mackay blurred boundaries between the public and private because she moved beyond an assumed traditional domestic sphere to enter into networks of trading, selling, and collecting photographs. Mackay’s photographs depicting nationally or locally famous subjects can be seen as collecting a “national portrait gallery” (Siegel 2010, 2). Further, the records Mackay meticulously kept about each photograph—including the memories shared by the original owners, whom the photograph depicts, and related American history—can be considered an extension of the activity of keeping a family record and a social register. Thus, as if she was compiling a nineteenth-century photographic album, Mackay collected, recorded, and memorialized her photographs and the subjects of her photographs through means of parlor entertainment and homosocial bonding.⁶

⁶ In an effort to define male homosocial relationships, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the “striking” differences between the continuum of homosociality among women and the “arrangement” among men (Sedgwick 1985, 2–3).

Like many other recent scholars on the topic of women in photography, Siegel does not view these activities as oppressive or domestic busywork, but rather empowering undertakings that define social networks and personal identity. Melody Davis argues that companies marketed stereographs to appeal to the “female-centric, hearth-and-home sentiment,” and explains how Victorian-era women engaged in the tradition of gifting stereographs among themselves (Davis 2015, x). Davis further explains that in Victorian America “the wife was the decision maker for products for the home,” and women’s decision to purchase stereoviews aided in the creation of “a white, middle-class space,” thus fostering the rise of an authorized cult of domesticity wherein women governed their environments (Davis 2015, x; 41). Likewise, Patrizia Di Bello writes about an empowered domestic space in which women’s identities and social relations are defined and redefined. Di Bello understands domestic album-making as part of modern women’s experience of a broader material culture of collecting. Albums, she states, are “crucial sites in the elaboration and codification of the meaning of photography,” and allow for a break from the “conflicting demands women have to accommodate” as either a devoted mother or a society hostess (Di Bello 2007, 2).

In her 2000 book *Tender Violence*, Laura Wexler takes the conversation of female agency further by understanding domesticity as a weapon. Specifically, Wexler considers white domesticity in regards to turn-of-the-century American racism and imperialism, claiming that female photographers’ images of domestic innocence, or sentimentality, expose an “averted gaze” away from admitted racial privilege (Wexler 2000, 209). As such, Wexler’s reading of the domestic “innocent eye” offers reconsideration of the aforementioned authors’ arguments, as she reframes empowered women in light of deliberate, weaponized domestic action (Wexler 2000, 6). This critical framework allows me to understand Mackay’s leveraging and utilization of traditionally domestic relationships for the purpose of building her collection.⁷ Thus, while Mackay acted within domestic relationships and male-run institutional circles, she also utilized her liminal position to push the assumed boundaries of domesticity, photography, and collecting.

In addition to meeting women at events like the National Hobby Shows, Mackay deliberately developed relationships with the female descendants of well-known photographers and families, as she understood women’s role as the keepers of family photographs.⁸ In a 1944 letter to Carson, Mackay described doing “a little detective work, [to] track down some of these descendants [of early photographers to] see what I could find out” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, October 4, 1944, Library of Congress). For example, in 1948 Mackay wrote to Beaumont Newhall about locating the daughter and granddaughter of a man she had previously purchased photographs from: “At least she was alive as of last May 15th. I rang up the Historical Dept. of the Wells-Fargo Bank, and they have a communication from her dated about that time. So, although elderly, I presume she is still alive, so it wont be necessary to ferret out the daughter, whoever and wherever she may be” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, September 5, 1948, Zelda Mackay Files). As another example, in 1943 Mackay wrote a letter to Miss Marion Hawes, the daughter of Josiah Johnson Hawes, to acquire any photographs from her father’s celebrated Boston photographic partnership, Southworth and Hawes (Holman’s Print Shop to Zelda Mackay, April 12, 1943,

⁷ However, Mackay’s activities and collection objects demand a conversation about race in middle class, white America.

⁸ In a 1966 letter to Newhall, Mackay emphasized the higher price she was willing to pay to collect photographs from descendants (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, March 3, 1966, Zelda Mackay Files).

Zelda Mackay Papers). Her efforts resulted in the acquisition of about a dozen Southworth and Hawes full-plate daguerreotypes from the Hawes estate.

Mackay’s relationship and correspondence with Amalia “Mollie” Britt (1865–1954), the daughter of the first photographer in Oregon, Peter Britt (1819–1905), is further evidence of this collection-building practice. Mackay and Mollie Britt’s relationship began when the Mackay family “[a]rrived [unannounced] at old Britt house & gallery in Jacksonville...on our way home from Yellowstone... Spent lovely afternoon in old gallery” (Note on Envelope of Mollie Britt to Zelda Mackay, August 24, 1941, Zelda Mackay Papers). According to the letters exchanged between the two women after this first visit, Mackay sent Britt a scarf and Britt promised to send her father’s photograph of San Francisco: “You really should have it and we are going to send it to you” (Mollie Britt to Zelda Mackay, August 24, 1941, Zelda Mackay Papers). Between 1941 and Britt’s death in 1954, Mackay traded scarves, aprons, baskets, pillows, holiday cards, and medical advice for Britt’s father’s photographs, thermoplastic cases, books, photographic journals, and stories.

Mackay demonstrated her success and prominence as a collector by defining the field of collecting in a 1944 letter to Carson: “I have come to the conclusion that there are about a dozen active and enthusiastic daguerreotype and early photographic material collectors, for that is about the number of persons who correspond regularly with me on the subject” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, October 14, 1944, Library of Congress). She proceeded to list Boyer, Mr. Fraprie of Boston, Mr. Kaynor of the Waterbury Button Company, Lieutenant Phillips, Mrs. Herman Baum of Los Angeles, and “4 or 5 others who are mildly interested in daguerreotype collecting” (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, October 14, 1944, Library of Congress). Mackay concluded her letter to Carson by saying, “Mr. Phillips tells me your collection is very nice, and that you are very much interested in the whole subject. I’m happy to add another collector to my list, and wish I lived near enough to you to drop in and enjoy your fine collection (Zelda Mackay to Marian S. Carson, October 14, 1944, Library of Congress). Mackay defined a group of men and women with whom she considered herself to be a collector in the same league.

Except for one occurrence involving Boyer, none of the collectors Mackay listed in her group are recorded in the notebook as sources or buyers of her photographs. Mackay and these collectors seem to have worked independently of each other and yet kept in regular contact to share information about and developments in their collections. For instance, on October 12, 1944, Mr. Kaynor wrote in a letter to Mackay, “You mentioned one of your friends who collects fans. Quite likely you would not care to submit her name to me... perhaps, like my other good collector friends, one does not let this type of information get out (W.F. Kaynor to Zelda Mackay, October 12, 1944, Zelda Mackay Papers). Supporting this, Mackay did not include in her 1944 letter to Carson the names of the women or female descendants of photographers from whom she acquired photographs. Mackay conceivably found these women to be an exploitable source and consequently did not share their information.

Newhall’s devoted interest in Mackay and her collection began around 1947, as he prepared his revised edition of *The History of Photography* with her objects in mind (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, December 2, 1947, Zelda Mackay Files).⁹ His inclusion of her photographs in *The History of Photography* and, later, in *The Daguerreotype in America* exposed his peers to Mackay, and thus marked Mackay’s entrance into, and operation

⁹ Boyer likely put Newhall in contact with Mackay.

within, an elite circle of male art collectors and museum professionals. For example, Newhall told Robert Taft about Mackay’s daguerreotype of Stephen A. Douglas, prompting Taft to seek permission from Mackay to use the photograph in a lecture and essay for *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Robert Taft to Zelda Mackay, July 19, 1954, Zelda Mackay Papers; Taft 1955, 211). In another instance, Edward Steichen wrote to Mackay “asking if I would loan a small group of daguerreotypes to be exhibited at their forthcoming ‘New Photography’ exhibition” (Zelda Mackay to Beaumont Newhall, January 25, 1949, Zelda Mackay Files).

Considering Mackay’s connections to influential men, such as Newhall and Boyer, and her more grassroots network of women, Mackay seems to have had her feet firmly planted in two worlds. On the one side, Mackay was part of the establishment, in which she collected along side, and as an equal to, men. On the other, Mackay employed traditional conceptions of domestic relationships and leveraged connections with women to acquire objects about which men had little idea or to which they had no access. I understand Zelda Mackay as a certain type of nuanced collector of the twentieth century, as she utilized American domestic sentiment within her collecting practice to fluidly move between the traditional domestic sphere and public space. Her activities stemmed from notions of homosocial and heterosocial relationships, traditional femininity, and engagements with domestic, vernacular photography. Such an admission of women’s agency as social actors in the world of collecting helps to complicate a traditional narrative of women’s relationship with photography, in which women were just educators, album-makers, and memory-keepers. My re-association of the notebook and correspondences with her objects, and the close analysis afforded by cataloging, exposes the way in which Mackay negotiated twentieth-century femininity for the purposes of pursuing and acquiring photographs. In turn, the case study of Mackay uncovers patterns of domesticity, social relationships, and the networks of men and women collecting nineteenth-century photographs in the twentieth century.

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