

The Gernsheim Collection

In conjunction with the exhibition Discovering the Language of Photography: The Gernsheim Collection, the Ransom Center and University of Texas Press will publish The Gernsheim Collection, a catalog of the exhibition. The following excerpt is from an introduction by Roy Flukinger, the book's editor and Senior Research Curator at the Ransom Center.

When Helmut and Alison Gernsheim began assembling their collection in January 1945, they were part of a small minority that believed in the art of photography and the significance of its history. Two years later, their commitment would be such that they would both leave their other careers behind and set about the brave task of becoming independent full-time historians and collectors. And it would also be at this time that they would come to believe fully in the significance of the collection they were building and in the necessity of one day finding it a public home in which it could be perpetuated and grow.

The statistics they produced by the end of that campaign are impressive indeed. When The University of Texas at Austin purchased the Gernsheim collection in the summer of 1963, it consisted of approximately 35,000 original photographs; a research library of some 3,600 books, journals, and published articles; about 250 autographed letters and manuscripts; more than 200 pieces of early photographic apparatus; and miscellaneous materials and artifacts relating to the medium's early history. Equally impressive and prodigious was the work of the Gernsheims themselves, for in the same period of less than 20 years of collection-building, they had produced some 30 books and catalogs and well over 200 published articles—estimated by Helmut to comprise more than a million words—about photography.

While the Gernsheims were engaged in building their collection from the 1940s through the 1960s, this same era was witnessing a dominant change in photography's influence and acceptance. Over the course of that single generation, photography would make inroads into many more major art museum exhibitions, while photographic publications would begin the gradual transformation from technical manuals into reflections of the medium's artistry and history. And while the Gernsheims may have played only one part in that transformative era, their roles—as historians, authors, exhibitors, educators, curators, and promoters—were critical and ongoing.

By the twentieth century's end, the change that they and others effected was profound and continues to resonate among us today. The campaign for the acceptance of photography as an art form—with a vibrant history, a rich range of expression and ideas, and a preponderance of educational and professional opportunities—continues to enrich the worldwide impact of the camera image and the passionate eye.

Regardless of the changes of time, technology, style, criticism, and taste, what does continue to persist brilliantly into modern times is the Gernsheim collection itself. Helmut and Alison would often speak of the collection materials as the "children" that they elected never to have. For the

Gernsheims, nonetheless, what began as a labor of love became the foundation for their work and their lives. To both of them it remained a working collection, always capable of shaping, revising, and enriching knowledge and learning. Their firm belief was that "without any enthusiasm[,] depositories for huge photographic collections simply [existed] because there was no other place, [and] this has only led to dead departments. Photographs must be exhibited, researched on, written and lectured about, and made easily available to the public, other wise [sic] their whole purpose is lost." With the Gernsheim collection's final institutionalization at The University of Texas at Austin, it continues decisively to meet this endless challenge.