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Article: Building a Collection: The History of the Hallmark / Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Photography Collection (Abstract)

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## **Building a Collection: The History of the Hallmark / Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Photography Collection**

**Keith F. Davis**

*Presented at the 2017 PMG Winter Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri.*

The author presented a slide-illustrated talk on the history and guiding philosophy of the photography collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The foundation of this holding began in 1964 as the Hallmark Photographic Collection. The author oversaw that collection from 1979, when it numbered 650 works, until its transfer to the Nelson-Atkins Museum at the end of 2005, when it numbered 6500 works. At the end of 2017, the collection included about 14,000 objects. This collection supports a very active program of exhibitions, publications, and educational activities.

The author outlined the development of the collection. Through the early 1990s, it focused on 20<sup>th</sup> century American photography. Continuing its emphasis on American work, in 1995, the scope was extended back to 1839; as a result the collection now enjoys an exceptional strength in American daguerreotypes. Beginning in about 2005, 19<sup>th</sup> century European photography became an important (and continuing) focus. In more recent years, the collection's holding of 20<sup>th</sup> century European modernist works has increased.

The author emphasized two philosophical points. Every collection forms a proposition about the nature and meaning of the medium itself. It is a virtue that no two collections are really alike; each should strive to make its own statement, to assert its own uniqueness. The author also underscored the continued importance of the medium's "analogue" history. As we swim in an ocean of virtual images, why do we devote such attention to material ones? A physical photograph is a complete record of a vital process of decision-making—a union of eye and hand, concept and craft. Photographs are deliberately fashioned *image-objects*, a melding of the acts of perception and embodiment, a perfect union of the powers of nature, technology, and mind.

**For further reading:** Keith F. Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital, The Hallmark Photographic Collection* (Hallmark/Abrams, 1999); and Keith F. Davis and Jane L. Aspinwall, *The Origins of American Photography: From Daguerreotype to Dry-Plate* (NAMA/Yale, 2007).

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