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Grifters and Goons, Framed (and Matted)



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IT'S hard to imagine worse conditions for taking good pictures: the photographer has little training and less interest, and the subject is unwilling for a variety of reasons, among them being dirty, disheveled, drunk, high, sleep-deprived and/or recently beaten about the head and face. Not to mention wrongfully arrested.

Yet in the century and a half since police departments began using the novel tool of photography to help them catalog and catch criminals, mug shots have often transcended their forensic roots. At the very least they have become cultural artifacts — the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., wearing a tie and a defiant glare; Steve McQueen, flashing a peace sign; Ethel Rosenberg, in a crisp white dress — and sometimes they emerge as powerful portraits in their own right. Collectively, as a kind of photo booth for the American underbelly, mug shots make up a unique pictorial history of the country, one that is constantly being erased as police departments destroy or dispose of old case files.

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A decade ago Mark Michaelson did not care much about criminals or the preservation of their likenesses. He was working as an art director at New York magazine. He thought of himself “more as a pack rat than a collector,” he said, occasionally buying art photos or the originals of illustrations. But then one year for his birthday a friend gave him a vintage Patty Hearst wanted poster that jump-started an interest in crime ephemera. Aided and abetted by eBay, he began to collect stray mug shots, a fascination that grew into an obsession, one that eventually turned his apartment into an archive and his life into a strange kind of scavenger hunt.

This week, his private mania will be given a public life. Steidl and the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea are publishing “Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots,” a plaintive, rollicking selection of pictures from Mr. Michaelson’s extensive rogues’ gallery, many of which he has put up for sale at an exhibition that opened yesterday and runs through Oct. 28 at the Kasher Gallery.

The book’s pages are in chronological order, from an 1883 shot of one Tim O’Brien, young burglar, scowling and trying to retract his head into his stiff overcoat, to an elderly unnamed 1973 arrestee in New Castle, Pa., who bears a passing resemblance to Don King, especially in the hairdo department. On the pages in between, as Mr. Michaelson puts it in his foreword to the book, are dozens of characters right out of “central casting for the late-late show of an unvarnished reality.”

Mr. Michaelson, a thin and angular 50-year-old with black horn-rimmed glasses perpetually perched on his forehead, still recalls one of the first mug shots he bought in the way an addict might recall a first score. He won it in an online auction, with a bid he remembers as \$5 or \$10. The prize was a crisp frontal and profile shot of a young black man who had been arrested in 1938 in Minneapolis. The police suspected he had stolen some stockings from a department store, but the charge, as it often was for black men in those days, was vagrancy.

The arrest card, neatly typed out, described the arrestee as “a close mouthed Negro who is probably committing burglaries.”

The crassness of the assessment amused Mr. Michaelson, but it also helped him form a philosophy that guided him as he built what eventually became an archive of some 10,000 mug

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shots, some more than a century old. They are pictures that have somehow made their way out of police department files, to be rescued by retired detectives, photo buffs and Dumpster divers.

“I started to figure out that I wasn’t interested in famous criminals or people who’d committed big crimes or very violent crimes,” Mr. Michaelson said. “I wanted the small-time people, petty crooks who just fell through the cracks. Instead of being most wanted, these were the least wanted.”

There are gap-toothed teenagers and grandmothers, lawyers and longshoremen, career criminals and terrified first-timers. The pictures often read like a catalog of the human face and the things that can happen to it: crossed eyes and painted-on eyebrows, jug ears and broken noses, Clark Gable mustaches and porkpie hats.

Most of the criminals or those accused of crimes seem to fall into the category of people for whom arrest and incarceration were just inevitable stops along the road of sorry luck. Like a man named Elery Augustus Stroup, who in the spring of 1959, according to the arrest record accompanying his sullen mug shot, “found one Morris Westman in bed with his wife.”

“Went to son’s bedroom, took a knife and cut both parties,” the account added.

Or the housewife in Santa Monica, Calif., with disheveled black hair and an angry glare, arrested in 1927. “This woman picked up on susp. of being dissolute person,” the police wrote, adding that the woman was not even successful at being a criminal: “Not enough evidence to convict.”

The book also offers a vast compendium of the kind of low-level offenses that have supplied America’s jails with short-time residents over the decades: vagrancy, drunkenness, unlawful cohabitation, flashing, check kiting, car clouting, panhandling, pimping, beer theft and being a Communist. (Pictures of suspected Communists were usually filed on pink or red index cards.)

Some experts say that the first photographs used for law enforcement were probably taken of prisoners in Belgium in 1843 and 1844, possibly so that the prisoners could be identified if they committed other crimes after being released. By 1857 the New York police had adopted the practice, opening a gallery so that the public could come in to see the daguerreotypes of what Mr. Michaelson calls “hookers, stooges, grifters and goons.”

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The New York Times reported later that year, “Already, some arrests have been made by means of these portraits, and three or four of the thieves so unenviably distinguished have quitted New York for parts unknown, convinced that Daguerre had put an end to their chances of success in this locality.”

Mr. Michaelson said that in collecting the mug shots and in winnowing them for the book he was motivated less by historical concerns than by his eye, which sometimes led him to the odder Diane Arbus-esque portraits, to those that had a certain revenant quality and even to those that were age-speckled or torn. “I was looking for the ones that moved me,” he said. “It was all my little visual fetishes rolled into one.”

He said that as his obsession with the collection deepened over the years, along with his spending on it, he started to categorize the pictures in different ways. He began by arranging them chronologically. Then he sorted them under headings like gender and type of crime. Later he moved into ever more specialized subcategories, like black eyes and head bandages. He also developed unlikely relationships with other mug shot collectors, many of whom guarded their finds jealously, like a retired detective in New Castle, Pa., who became a frequent correspondent.

Mr. Kasher said he was fascinated by mug shots because they were the only category of vernacular photography — family snapshots, photo-booth shots, crime-scene photos, all now sought after by photo collectors — in which the subjects were compelled to have their pictures taken.

“They somehow get below the surface,” he said, “because people are not posing in a normal way, not wanting to be photographed. Even with passport photos you’re not forced to have your picture taken.”

The other day in Mr. Kasher’s gallery on West 23rd Street the two men were browsing through piles of ring-binder notebooks filled with pages of mug shots as Mr. Kasher began the arduous process of sorting the images for the exhibition. Mr. Michaelson, who found himself between jobs last winter when Radar magazine folded, said he had been reluctant to begin selling his collection.

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“I’ve gotten pretty attached to them personally, but I had to bite the bullet,” he said. “But I really wanted to see if I could make a living from them.” (The mug shots are all originals; most are priced between \$500 and \$750.) Right about then he came across a 50-year-old mug shot of a sleepy-faced man with a police notation saying he had been arrested for “loitering around beer parlors and not working.”

Mr. Michaelson grinned. “I’ve been guilty of that,” he said.

He added that even though he is starting to sell his mug shots, he has yet fully to shake his habit of buying them.

“When I’ve got a few extra dollars, I see what I can afford,” he said. “I just got a call the other day from one of my connections in Maryland, who said she’s got a whole new batch of stuff for me.”