

Hundreds of millions of studio portraits and everyday snapshots were made in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although commonplace, these vernacular pictures demonstrate photography's important role in shaping personal and collective identity. Over two hundred pictures of African Americans on view here document the rich and varied personal histories of their subjects and makers. When displayed in personal albums, on living room walls, and on refrigerator doors, they signified family and community bonds. While these photographs continue to carry cultural meaning, they also raise complex questions: How and why were they separated from their original owners, and what does it mean to display them in a public space like a museum, far removed from their intended audiences?

In the late nineteenth century, just as photography grew into a widely accessible and affordable form of self-representation, African Americans struggled to establish selfhood in a country largely founded on their forced labor. By the early twentieth century, when picture postcards depicting lynchings, cotton pickers, chain gangs, and "alligator bait" were produced and distributed throughout the world, personal cameras provided African Americans a means to create a counternarrative to these racist depictions.

Most of the photographs assembled here are now considered anonymous, with few clues about their origins, but the makers and their subjects were not nameless when the pictures were taken. Migration and displacement, among other factors, contributed to these photos ending up in yard sales and vintage shops, on eBay, and in landfills. Although the images may symbolize loss for many who view them, they simultaneously convey resistance in the face of systemic inequality and the power of shaping self-identity through the camera's lens.

*Organized by the Portland Art Museum and curated by Julia Dolan, PhD, The Minor White Curator of Photography*

## THE COLLECTIONS

The photographs in this exhibition are drawn from three collections: the North Portland estate of Carl and Judge Mercedes Deiz, Manhattan-based snapshot collector Peter J. Cohen, and Toronto-based artist and educator Zun Lee.

In 2015, the album on view nearby was sold at an estate sale at the Deiz home in Portland's Albina neighborhood. Mercedes, originally from New York City, was the first black woman to serve as a district court judge in Oregon. Carl, a lifelong Portland resident, was a Tuskegee Airman during World War II. Mercedes' parents and Carl's father were immigrants, while Carl's mother, Elnora "Nonie" Foster Deiz, and grandmother, Mollie Sanders Foster, were born and raised in the Midwest. Mollie brought the album, containing pictures made in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Colorado, and Tennessee, with her when she moved to Oregon with her husband and daughter in 1918. Mollie's photo album was the inspiration for this exhibition.

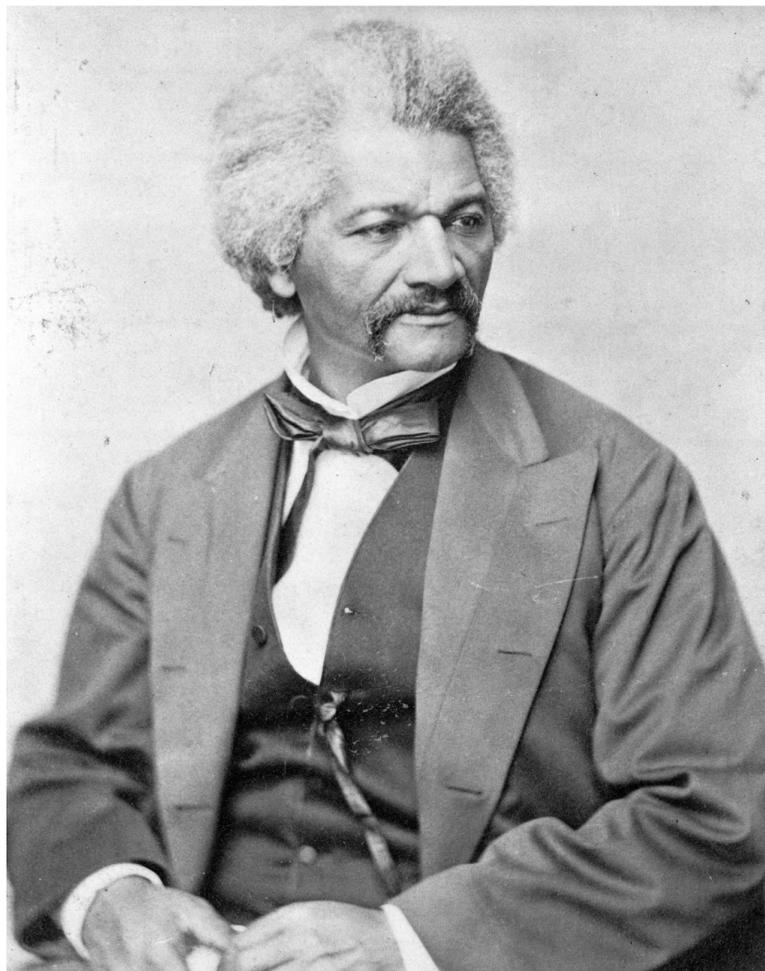
Cohen has been collecting snapshots for more than twenty-five years, mining thrift stores and flea markets for exceptional examples of everyday photography. His collection now numbers more than 50,000 pictures, and he regularly gifts selections to museums and historical archives around the world. Earlier this year, Cohen donated many of the early and mid-twentieth century photographs on view here to the Museum.

Like Cohen, Lee assembled his collection of 3,500 Polaroids from multiple sources, including yard sales and eBay, highlighting the transient nature of snapshots and raising questions about displacement and loss within the African-American community. Lee's own photographic work explores black masculinity and fatherhood. Most of the Polaroids on view here are drawn from Lee's unique collection.

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH

*It is evident that the great cheapness, and universality of pictures must exert a powerful though silent influence, upon the ideas and sentiment of present and future generations. The family is the fountainhead of all mental and moral influence. And the presence there of the miniature forms and faces of our loved ones whether separated from us by time and space, or by the Silent countenance of Eternity—must act powerfully upon the minds of all. They bring to mind all that is amiable and good, in the departed, and strengthen the same qualities.*

—Frederick Douglass,  
Pictures and Progress,  
an address delivered in Boston,  
December 3, 1861



George Francis Schreiber (German, active United States, 1804-1892), Frederick Douglass, 1870, albumen silver print, image courtesy the Library of Congress

Prominent abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass believed that the new medium of photography was the ideal instrument to establish and strengthen African-American identity. In essays and public speeches, he argued that “the humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago,” asserting that such portraits “highlighted the essential humanity of [their] subjects.” Douglass’ conviction that photography could be a tool for civil rights was so strong that he posed for at least 160 portraits between the early 1840s and his

death in 1895. The most photographed American of the nineteenth century, he sat for more portraits than Abraham Lincoln.

# VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS

A vernacular photograph is a picture that captures an everyday subject. School portraits, selfies, vacation snapshots and postcards, photobooth pictures, government identification photos, and formal wedding portraits are all considered vernacular.

During the late nineteenth century, when mass-produced, easy-to-use cameras first became available, professional photographers and photographic artists distanced themselves from the popular new processes. This stark division of purpose and approach was maintained for decades, until fine artists working the 1950s and 1960s began to incorporate the haphazard compositions of snapshots and bright, Kodak- and Polaroid-influenced colors into their practice.

For many years, art museums exhibited only those photographs that were created with artistic intention. Today, vernacular pictures are exhibited alongside fine art photographs, paintings, and drawings with increasing frequency. These everyday images, often visually compelling in their own right, are a critical aspect of photographic practice that is now studied in relation to other art forms and visual culture.