

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ACQUIRES CORE COLLECTION OF MORE THAN 450 PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE FRIEDLANDER

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Gallery of Art has just acquired 459 photographs by Lee Friedlander (b.1934), who has been hailed as one of the masters of twentieth-century American photography and celebrated for his innovative photographs of modern American life. The purchase from the artist by the Gallery includes the only complete set of vintage prints of photographs Friedlander made for his 1970 book, Self Portrait, a complete set of prints for his 2000 book, Lee Friedlander, as well as a remarkable group of photographs that survey the artist's other accomplishments.

"This core collection, including work from throughout Friedlander's career, gives the National Gallery the most important holding of his early work, specifically his highly acclaimed Self Portrait series," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This outstanding group of photographs also complements the Gallery's holdings of works by other prominent American photographers, including Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank."

The series of vintage photographs taken by Friedlander in the 1960s and published in Self Portrait is widely considered to be his best work. The artist appears in the composition of all these photographs. In some he is seen reflected in mirrors and windows, while in others his shadow is projected, for example, onto the back of a woman in the street or truncated on a chair in a shop window where it joins the reflection of his feet. In others Friedlander angles the camera to include his feet or turns it back on himself from arm's length.

The Gallery has also acquired thirty prints from Friedlander's 1976 American Monuments, where the artist explored the camera's tendency to record everything with equal weight and importance; forty-five portraits of his wife Maria made from the beginning of their relationship in the late 1950s to the 1990s; thirty works from The Desert Seen, a series of photographs made in the Southwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and eight photographs from Letters to the People, a series of graffiti and signs made from the late 1970s through the late 1980s.

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"For more than forty years Lee Friedlander has recorded modern American urban life, with its jumble of people, signs, buildings, and cars," said Sarah Greenough, curator of photographs at the National Gallery of Art. "Out of this chaos, he has constructed densely layered photographs, often with odd or whimsical juxtapositions and fractured compressed spaces, that brilliantly coincide with our visual experience of contemporary life."

The Museum of Modern Art today announced a related acquisition of Friedlander's work.

THE ARTIST

Friedlander was born in Aberdeen, Washington, in 1934 and was introduced to photography at age fourteen. He studied with Edward Kaminski from 1953 to 1955. While living in Los Angeles his passion for music led him to photograph jazz musicians throughout the city and to meet Nesuhi Ertegun, a founder of Atlantic Records. Soon after moving to New York in 1956, Friedlander was hired by Atlantic to photograph recording artists such as John Coltrane and Ray Charles for album covers.

Friedlander's early work was inspired by Eugène Atget, André Kertész, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1960 and again in 1962 for photographic studies of the changing American scene. In 1972 he was awarded an individual fellowship in photography by the National Endowment for the Arts. During the 1970s Friedlander worked on a major project documenting American monuments. He received a Friends of Photography award in 1980 and was the first photographer to receive the MacDowell Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts in 1986. In 1990 he received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award. Numerous solo exhibitions of his work have been held throughout the United States and overseas, and he has published more than ten books of his photographs.

THE COLLECTION

Today the National Gallery's collection of approximately 3,500 photographs encompasses the history of the medium from its beginnings in 1839, concentrating on the finest examples by acclaimed masters. In 1949 artist Georgia O'Keeffe donated the key set of 1,270 photographs made by her husband Alfred Stieglitz, who had died in 1946. O'Keeffe gave the Gallery 330 more photographic masterpieces in 1980, making the Gallery's Alfred Stieglitz Collection of 1,600 photographs the most complete and finest holding of his work in existence.

Between 1990 and 1994 the Gallery began to expand its photography collection by acquiring the work of major photographers in depth, including outstanding photographs by Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Robert Frank. In 1995 the first nineteenth-century works were added to the collection as well as additional twentieth-century masterpieces. Over the past five years more than 1,000 photographs have been acquired, including works by more than seventy-five artists not previously represented in the collection.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between Third and Ninth Streets, N.W., are open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is free. For general information call (202) 737-4215, the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.