

PHOTOGRAPHY: COLLECTORS AS PATRONS

Stuart Franklin

Michael Wilson and Harriet Logan are two of a small group of British-based collectors who don't just collect, but actively support photographers to complete new work, as well as the industry at large. 110 prints from Harriet Logan's own collection of photojournalism will leave her home for the first time this month [February] for an exhibition: *History Through A Lens* at the Victoria Art Gallery (a public museum) in Bath from 25 February until 5 May 2017.

A spy thriller might begin here. An icy hill pavement in Hampstead; an unoccupied black Audi, its engine running; a fit but elderly gentleman advancing in a quilted waistcoat from a house whose doorbell I hadn't rung. Enter Michael G. Wilson OBE (74), James Bond producer and one of the most important collectors and cheerleaders for photography in Britain.

In the film world he's been the producer or executive producer on every Bond movie since *Moonraker* (1979). He's played behind-the-scenes cameo roles in eighteen of them. He's always in the background: pall bearer, doctor, man in a

corridor, police chief, army general, gambler in a casino, NASA technician, Greek priest, Soviet Security Council Member. An *éminence grise* both on set and in the world of photography.

Since the 1980s the enthusiasm for collecting photographs, alongside auction-house prices, has grown exponentially. An underpriced commodity has heralded a legion of speculators, dealers and collectors. Today, some photographic prints sell at auction for considerably more than an average priced Turner watercolour.

Among the private collectors are a few who have become patrons in their own right, and are actively enlarging both the history of photography and the photography of history. Simon Baker, the Tate's first Curator of Photography - in post since 2009 – affirms that Wilson's "been transformative for the Tate's photography collection."

The Wilson collection of 11,000 photographs is over three times the size of the Tate's and is constantly on loan to support British and overseas exhibitions. As an example, half the recent William Eggleston portraits exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery was sourced from Michael Wilson's own collection.

At the Victoria & Albert museum senior curator Susanna Brown is quick to acknowledge Wilson's "incredible scholarly expertise" and his generosity with his virtually unrivalled collection of nineteenth century photographic prints.

The Victoria & Albert museum has been at the forefront of amassing photographs since 1856. Sir Henry Cole, its first director, began the collection of the art of photography, replenished in 1868 by Chauncy Hare Towshend. He's responsible for the impressive set of Gustave Le Gray seascapes, a highlight of the National Art Collection that currently holds about half a million photographs.

That hungry collector's eye takes many forms. Some have singular obsessions, hunting down photographs of hands, merry-go-rounds, trees, people with their eyes shut; pictures with birds or eggs in them. Private patronage in the world of photography collecting is less common, in Britain at least. In New York, from 1972, the lawyer and curator Sam Wagstaff supported Robert Mapplethorpe (Michael Wilson met them both) years before the photo-boom took off around 1979.

Recently, Wilson has been acting as patron helping to promote living photographers, as well as funding the First Book Award, a publishing prize that Wilson began with Michael Mack in 2012. Self-promotion, for Wilson himself, is a foreign concept. Would he consider, as others have done, publishing a personal choice from his own collection? "It's a big wank. It really is," he scoffs.

Several photographers have benefited from Wilson's prior involvement with photography awards and museum bursaries. One of Wilson's protégés is Chino Otsuka (44) who got in touch after being awarded a National Media Museum bursary (which Wilson sponsored) in 2008. Otsuka's work is a form of visual storytelling, a subject that fascinates Wilson: "If you look at traditional art, it's a

problem of how to tell a story in one image – all at once ... [In Bond movies] we tell a narrative specifically through a narrow timeline with no deviation and just tell you the story from beginning to end. Bang. There it is.” Narrative was a challenge for historical painting, but also photography.

Wilson helped Otsuka, an only child who turned an alluring set of childhood photographs of herself into a series of double self-portraits, to complete her project and print the photobook: *Imagine finding me* (2012). For Otsuka a key advantage of the collaboration with Wilson is a level of credibility that Otsuka admits “sounds very good in the photography world”, drawing other collectors (recently in Los Angeles) to her work.

Wilson’s interest in starting a photography collection was inspired, during the 1970s, by his college friend the curator Weston Naef. In Naef’s New York Soho apartment he met and bought five prints (of American cinemas) from the then unknown Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. When Naef was hired by the Getty Museum in 1984 to build its photography collection Wilson followed him to Los Angeles (where he keeps the Sugimoto prints). At the time Wilson was preoccupied with building his nineteenth century collection.

Much later – in the 1990s – Wilson turned his attention more fully to twentieth century photography. After seeing the Sir Elton John collection currently on show at the Tate Modern (it’s normally kept in Atlanta) Wilson confessed: “I missed the boat – certainly on the modernists, I could have done better with Kertesz ... a lot

of it has to do with what's available, what's accessible and money being a scarce resource."

Every collector yearns for what they don't own. Newell Harbin, who buys photographs for Sir Elton John, laments that there's only one superior and unattainable Man Ray print of his famous picture of a woman's back with violin f-holes superimposed on it: it's in the Centre Pompidou collection in Paris.

"Unfortunately," Harbin writes, "we do not have *Violon d'Ingres*. And yes, the Pompidou has the most amazing example of that print!"

I joined one of Michael Wilson's four curators, Polly Fleury, to review prints of Newhaven fisher-folk by Hill & Adamson (1844/5); another "probably a masterpiece" by Roger Fenton, *Cooking House of the 8th Hussars* (1855) with his portable darkroom – a converted Canterbury wine merchant's cart – just visible to the far left of the picture.

Some of the first modern photographs Wilson collected were by Edward Weston – examples of the photographer's transition from pictorialism, using a soft-focus lens to capture his lover Tina Modotti, to the greater clarity and luminance of his later nudes on California's Oceano sand dunes.

Wilson's photographs are kept away from bright daylight, at a temperature of 17°C, with 50% relative humidity. "You have to take care of the work", stresses Fleury; but even excessive care can't stop some contemporary analogue colour

prints from discolouring over time or some face-mounted work from deteriorating.

Next door to the Wilson archive where the smaller prints and daguerreotypes (or “dags” as he calls them) are kept, is his London home. There we discuss his collecting addiction at a walnut dining table, set for twelve. A Camille Corot landscape hangs centrally on the wall, a bequest from his mother Dana Wilson and a childhood memory of growing up in Los Angeles.

On contemporary photography Wilson was keen to emphasize his collaborative relationship with those living artists he has collected. He keeps the large and difficult to store prints in a property nearby in north London, separated from some James Bond bric-a-brac in a climate controlled white cube. There rests Luc Delahaye’s exquisite corpse *Taliban Soldier* (1994): “It’s the enemy,” Wilson remarks, “but I feel sorry for this boy that’s killed. It’s a conflicting picture in many ways.”

Greater accolades Wilson reserves for Delahaye’s *Les Pillards* (2010) of “people stealing hair-nets and being shot at ... it’s probably the most amazing moment he ever captured.” Wilson helped Taryn Simon create an entire project from the early research stage: *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII* produced over a four year period and presented as a promised gift to the Tate, where it was shown in 2011.

Throughout the festive season and unbeknown to the artist, Wilson had hung several landscapes around his living room that he'd bought from Jem Southam from the series *The Painter's Pool*. Wilson peered at one, a winter scene of a wood from 2003, commenting that he finds something new in the photograph each time he looks at it, which counteracts his early ambivalence to bring Southam, who lives near Exeter, into the collection. Wilson's patronage of artists is a multifaceted affair. Not all enjoy the same cozy relationship. Some key figures, Sir Don McCullin for example, he doesn't collect at all. I went to find a more welcoming home for that work.

Somewhere south of Brysonesque Steeple Bumpstead, in the wilds of Essex, our taxi negotiates an electric gate and a half-mile driveway passing between landscaped meadow and artificial ponds. WELCOME in bold stainless steel serifs marks the entranceway to a spacious 1920s country house. Past muddy riding boots and kids' shoes in the hall, Harriet Logan (49), who I was meeting for the first time, greeted me with a warm hug and an Irish coffee. Wood stoves crackled in every room. She'd been out riding Tiger, her thoroughbred ex racehorse.

Logan, together with her curator Tristram Lund (36), have amassed what Andy Simpkin (43), chair of the Victoria & Albert museum's photographs acquisitions group described as "a world class collection of photojournalism" with that core ingredient for all the best collections – "an individual passion." There's no shortage of that here, and work only began in May 2012 when they were invoiced for their first print, an Eisenstaedt.



Harriet Logan (left), Tristram Lund (right) in front of *Medivac* (2010) by Damon Winter © Stuart Franklin/Magnum

A picture by the photographer Damon Winter (*Medivac*, 2010) of soldiers shielding a wounded comrade from a helicopter's downdraft in Afghanistan takes centre stage in the family living room. In the hall there's a giant photograph by Tom Stoddart (*Woman of Sarajevo*, 1993) of a woman walking past sandbags in Sarajevo: "it's kind of humanizing conflict," explains Logan, by recognizing that normal life still carries on in wartime: "she's put her make-up on and high heels and walks down Sniper's Alley."

Why would you live with war pictures? "I feel very strongly that these images shouldn't just be folded up inside magazines and left to die there. They have a life here," insists Logan, "History is so easily forgotten, but photography marks it, makes it real, puts it in our faces, makes it something we have to look at." Lund then adds poignantly: "You make the viewer slow down ... by putting them behind glass and separating them from text you are raising their status above

being purely an illustration.” Turning up the stairs there’s a picture from 9-11 *The Falling Man* by Richard Drew. “Can you imagine ... having no choice - I’m going to die because I’m going to get burnt or I’m going to jump.” Logan shuddered, recalling from an account “the way they could hear them hitting the ground.”

Along the hall is the official “Don Corridor” dedicated to Sir Don McCullin with some his finest vintage prints from various wars on walls decorated with hand-painted floral wallpaper: prints of a quality I’d never seen before. “I have so much love for that man,” gushes Logan. “I always cry when I leave him. I can’t bear the idea of him not living forever.” [alternative quote on McCullin: “Because he’s one of the greatest artists this country has ever produced. I would find it hard to live with passive pictures of flowers.”] Not all Logan’s collection is hard-hitting photojournalism. She collects Saul Leiter and Cartier-Bresson; landscapes by Bradford Washburn and Ed Burtynsky. The one Logan says she’d leave the burning building with is by Josef Koudelka, of a man with a horse, from the 1967 series *Gypsies*.

Logan’s an impulse buyer. One large print (*Horse, Wales*, 1965) I remembered from the hallway of Bruce Davidson’s flat in New York. Logan had been there, seen it, and ordered a print on the spot. Horses, again. Lund’s more circumspect and has also tried to broaden the collection to include conceptual work by Trevor Paglen and Richard Mosse.

On the stairs I pass a wonderful photograph by Logan herself from Afghanistan under Taliban rule. “It was one of the times when I really felt what it was like being a female photographer because there is no way that a male photographer would have been in the room with them at all.” Logan found that under the veil “these Afghan women were covered in make-up, plastered with it, which was illegal under the Taliban.”

In 1992, aged 24, Logan won the Ian Parry photojournalism award. “It completely and utterly changed my life,” building a bridge between her aspirations and people who helped her to fulfill them – a true family of award-givers and editors. Twenty years on Logan started her own campaign to prop up the ailing world of photojournalism.

Since 2012, with help from her husband Mark, she has underwritten the annual Ian Parry Award, which she finances entirely, together with the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography. In the past two years she’s funded Ed Burtynsky to work on his *Anthropocene* project, Moises Saman to print his personal account of the Arab Spring (*Discordia*, 2016), and Matt Black, who won the W. Eugene Smith Grant in 2015, to complete his project: *The Geography of Poverty*: “We wanted to support photographers as they are taking these pictures, because who the fuck else is going to do it?”

Logan’s attempting to fulfill the role that colour supplements and monthly magazines once regularly undertook: to publish in-depth photojournalism. She’s emphatic. “Collectors like me can influence the way our history is defined.”