

[CONSULTANTS CORNER]

BY MARY ENGEL

WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS?

THE AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVES GROUP OFFERS SOME INSIGHTS

The responsibility of handling a photographer's archive is huge. It is a big decision for someone to become responsible for an artist's life work, and it is extremely important to understand how much is really involved in the business end of this type of endeavor. Many issues aren't necessarily evident in the beginning but become apparent over time.

INHERITING MY MOTHER'S PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE

I inherited my mother, photographer Ruth Orkin's, archive when I was just out of college. There has been a great satisfaction for me in keeping her name in the public eye, and having people continue to see and appreciate her work; however, managing all the details involved comes with a lot of work.

Even with someone like my mother—who achieved recognition during her lifetime with numerous awards, exhibitions, books and an internationally known image, *American Girl in Italy*, to her credit—a lot of constant promotion still needs to be done to make the archive viable.

In 2005, I also inherited the archive of my father, Morris Engel, which included not only photographs, but also all of his films—such as *Little Fugitive* the 1953 classic he made with my mother. This added an additional responsibility of learning all the technical and historical issues dealing with the film industry and all of his film prints. My father's archive was a lot less organized than my mother's, and it had to be moved quickly from the apartment where I had



Ruth Orkin's classic *American Girl in Italy*, 1951, is internationally known, but it still takes a great deal of work to keep her archive viable. Orkin's daughter, Mary Engel, founded the American Photography Archives Group (APAG) as a resource organization to help others who own or manage a privately-held photography archive.

grown up, which he had lived in for 50 years. I had to come up with a new system to organize his photographs for easy retrieval. Also, his filing system was to keep files by year, but with all materials mixed in together. I had to go through everything and prioritize what was important for immediate reference.

MY CHILDHOOD AS THE DAUGHTER OF TWO PHOTOGRAPHERS AND FILMMAKERS

A few falsehoods to start off: people always assumed I knew how to shoot. I was once hired to photograph a benefit because of this. Also, people always assumed that being the daughter of two well-known artists

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was glamorous. Aspects of it were—when my mother was healthy, when she was having an opening and other times as well—but more often than not, it was very difficult, as it took a long time for both of them to achieve financial success and recognition as fine art photographers.

While I was growing up, my mother was never without a camera; in the park, at a party, traveling, wherever we went. The biggest lesson she taught me was to always document where I was, so I have gone through life with that in mind wherever I was and wherever I went. Her words of advice to aspiring photographers were always, “Don’t say you’re a photographer, just do it.” She would be amazed now how everyone is really taking photos all the time, with digital cameras and their phones.

Even though I occasionally helped to organize her files or make press kits, my experience actually handling the work was limited. When my mother passed away in 1985 and I became the executor of her photography estate, I tried my best to pick up where she left off in terms of promoting her work, handling image requests, working with the various galleries across the country where she had work on consignment, and handling all the legal and financial matters. Even though I consulted with a number of my parents’ photographer friends, I had to learn about the industry on my own. There was a big learning curve and a lot of trial and error, but eventually things fell into place. Yet, despite all I have learned over time, I have always felt that I should always be doing more.

My mother did leave her archive pretty organized, and because she had been ill for many years, she tried to show me where everything was during her last few months. At the time of her death, I was just starting my first full-time job at an art magazine. It was hard for me to want to leave that and learn everything about her work, which is what she wanted. This made sense, but it was too hard for me to handle emotionally. In hindsight, for anyone else in this situation, getting firsthand insights about an artist’s work is extremely valuable, especially if this process happens over time.

For many years I worked fulltime while also handling the archive, but in 1996, after a position in the agent-training program at the William Morris Agency (WMA), I left to handle the archive full time. I had made the short film *Ruth Orkin: Frames of Life*, and marketing both the film and the archive began to take up all of my time. This film was accepted into the Sundance Festival, which opened a few doors in the film industry. In addition, the WMA training program gave me invaluable experience, and the knowledge I gained in learning to be an agent is essentially a large part of what I do as an archivist promoting and selling my parent’s work.

PHOTOGRAPHER TO DO LIST

A photographer who is trying to organize his or her archive can do a lot to make things easier for future heirs or whomever is indicated as executor of the estate. Many issues need to be addressed, but the most essential is to identify and organize the physical works as best as possible. My mother did a lot of this instinctively; she had a fairly good way of locating many of her negatives and prints. However, she kept lots and lots of files—probably too many.

It is important to distinguish the prints existing in the archive during the photographer’s lifetime, regardless of whether the prints are signed, stamped or have any markings at all. My mother had signed a lot of her prints, but not all of them, and even without a signature there is still an intrinsic value to a lifetime print. Her vintage prints are the most valuable, but these don’t exist for all of her images. In all cases, you have to work with what you are left with, and then try to create an additional market, which is what I have done with posthumous prints.

In addition to signing existing prints, it is important to organize everything as much as possible, including papers, books, negatives, photos and everything else in the collection. It is also highly beneficial to discard as much unnecessary paperwork yourself as you can.

Leave notes and lists of people in the industry that you trust, so your heirs have available resources. Also, leave notes and directions



Mary Engel also manages the archive of her father, photojournalist and filmmaker Morris Engel. The film he made with Orkin, *Little Fugitive* was praised by Francois Truffaut as an influence behind the French New Wave. Pictured here: *Mary and Morris Shaving, NYC, 1966*, an intimate moment between father and daughter.

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about your photographs. Make sure copyright information is in one place, and that it is included in your will, so that it is not abstract as to who actually owns the copyright to your images.

Another essential question to consider is whether there is enough money to even sustain the expenses of the archive. Expenses for setting up an office with computer equipment, paying rent or storage fees and also dealing with the tax ramifications for inheritance and yearly returns add up quickly. Some people feel it is essential to keep an archive intact, but this may not be possible. There are various reasons why it may be advisable to split up a collection, for example, as there may be a particular segment of the body of work that would be much better appreciated at an institution. Because of the tremendous costs and time involved in maintaining an archive, one solution might also be to donate the physical archive to an institution with close ties to the photographer, while allowing for the photographer's family to retain copyright and all methods of use.

WHY I STARTED APAG

As I gained experience in handling my mother's, and then later my father's archive, people started coming to me for advice, and I began doing some informal consulting. As this work became increasingly time consuming, I formed the American Photography Archives Group (APAG), a resource organization for individuals who own or manage a privately held photography archive. We had a first dinner meeting about six years ago with six people, and the organization has taken off from there.

In October 2008, APAG held a very successful panel: *What Are We Going to Do with All These Photographs?*

Panel members included: Denise Bethel, senior VP and head of photography at Sotheby's; Jeff Rosenheim, associate curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Marc Jacobson, Of Counsel, Greenberg Traurig; Ed Yee, appraiser from Penelope Dixon and Associates; Richard Halperin, coauthor of *The Art Law Handbook* and estate planner at McLaughlin & Stern; Howard Greenberg, owner of the Howard Greenberg Gallery; and myself as the moderator. Video clips from this panel discussion can be viewed on the APAG Web site. We plan on holding another panel this fall, which is still in planning stages, so check the APAG Web site for the latest details.

APAG members now include almost 30 archives, two foundations and six established photographers. While most are from the tri-state area, about a third of our members are spread across the United States. Our meetings consist of anything that deals with managing a family photography archive. We meet as a group three times a year at ICP, and generally start with an agenda and then open the floor to the issues that members want to address.

Some of our earliest members include Grayson Dantzig, son of Jerry Dantzig, and Jean Bublely, niece of Esther Bublely. Photographer Daniel Kramer and his wife, Arline, are also frequent meeting attendees, and photographer Leonard Speier and his son Jonathan recently attended as



APAG's executive vice president, Grayson Dantzig, manages his father Jerry Dantzig's archives, including this signature image *Mambo Jambo, Palladium Ballroom, 1952*. Also employed as the archivist for Atlantic Records, Grayson shares his expertise to help other group members.

well. The subjects brought up often make it easier for individuals to discuss difficult issues later on with other family members. I think it is helpful to hear other people's viewpoints so they can discuss what is really going to happen to their archive, and how to have as much input as possible to try to do what they want. There are so many issues to address that it is easier to discuss things in an open forum and to hear various viewpoints on sensitive subjects

Looking to the future, I think APAG's contribution is two-fold: to help existing family archives learn how to handle a photographer's work as best as possible, and to assist living photographers' families to discuss issues that might be difficult to broach without the combined knowledge and support of a group of like-minded colleagues. ☺

In addition to being the founder of APAG and full-time archivist of the Orkin/Engel Film and Photo Archive, **Mary Engel** is an award-winning filmmaker. Her film *Ruth Orkin: Frames of Life* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and her latest film *Morris Engel: The Independent* recently premiered on Turner Classic Movies. To learn more about APAG please visit <www.apag.us>. For further details about the archives she manages visit <www.orkinphoto.com>, <www.engelphoto.com>, or e-mail Mary at <orkinphoto@aol.com>.