Alice Austen's New York Street Types (February 17, 2022)

CARMEN NIGRO: Hello, everyone and welcome to Doc Chat. I'm Carmen Nigro. Doc Chat is a weekly program from the New York Public Library Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library’s most interesting collection and highlights ways the teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Elizabeth Cronin, Assistant Curator at the New York Public Library Photography Collection is joined by Bonnie Yochelson, an art historian whose book “Miss Alice Austen: Conservative Rebel of Staten Island,” will be published by Fordham University Press in 2023. Last year, Yochelson completed a writing fellowship at the Gotham Center at CUNY Grad Center, where she researched and prepared the following digital exhibition. I'm going to drop that into the chat as soon as I stop talking. Today, Elizabeth and Bonnie will explore the photographs of Alice Austen, a well-to-do Victorian amateur photographer from Staten Island who in 1895 and 1896 took her camera onto Manhattan Street to photograph working people, many of them newly arrived immigrants. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Make sure you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everyone is included. Once we begin the question and the answer segment, please use Zoom's question and answer function rather than the chat function to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. Now, let's go over to you, Elizabeth.

CRONIN: All right. I'm so happy to be here talking about Alice Austen who I feel like is very beloved by everyone who knows of her work. So we're just going to dive right in and here I forgot to put the slide up. So we're going to dive in and look at this wonderful photograph of Alice Austen. And I wonder Bonnie if you could speak about where she's headed and what she's posing for.

YOCHELSON: Okay. So this is a self-portrait that Alice Austen took in front of her family home, Clear Comfort, which is on Staten Island. And she is, I guess, bidding farewell to her family and to her dog, Punch, whose hand you can see she's -- the paw she's holding. She's on her way to Chicago, it's July 1, 1893, to see the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which everybody among her set were talking about and were hoping to see and she's ready to go. She was 28 years old at the time and had been photographing for about a decade already from when she was a teenager. And photography was at that time pretty expensive and complicated hobby for a lot of wealthy Americans, and she really distinguished herself as being an expert and much respected for that. I just want to mention that on her primary subject up until this time was her friends and family and sort of the -- she created this really fantastic portrait of sort of Gilded Age New York with, you know, very intimate and often irreverent. So that's what she's best known
for. So which stands in contrast to the street types that we're going to talk about today. I just want to mention before we go on is which is that this picture is not part of the library's collection, it belongs to the Historic Richmond Town which owns the Alice Austen photo collection, which is like 7,000 negatives and prints. And which -- and that the collection we're going to -- which the Historic Richmond Town, which was previously known as the Staten Island Historical Society, got from Austen under very dire circumstances in 1945 when she was 79 and evicted from Clear Comfort, her family home, which was in itself an amazing story. So anyway, but now the rest of the pictures we'll see are from the library and we'll talk about the street types.

CRONIN: Yeah. So maybe as a segue from this photo to the street types, we can talk about what inspired her street type series and what she saw in Chicago.

YOCHELSON: Right. Well, this is a theory, there's no like, internal evidence that this is what got her going on the subject. But when she was in Chicago, she saw both this book which is very popular, and there was also an exhibition with the same images at the fair by a man named Sigmund Krausz, a professional photographer who did the series called "Street Types of Chicago, Character Studies", which was as I say sort of a big hit in 1896. Three years later he published a sort of follow-up called "Street Types of Great American Cities." So it gives you some sense that it was really kind of something of a sensation. So it's, you know, it's a good chance that that's where it might have been her, you know, jumping-off point.

CRONIN: Yeah. I mean it's likely that she looked at, you know, whatever photographs were at the fair, right, I mean.

YOCHELSON: Yeah. She was -- well, this isn't -- I shouldn't take the time. But there was actually an exhibition of women's art from Staten Island, and she had pictures in that. So she definitely would have gone to see that, I'm sure she did, yeah.

CRONIN: So when she comes back to New York and then you know what, a few years later she starts working on her street type series. And I've just collected a bunch, you know, four from our collection and I wonder, you know, if we could talk broadly about what we know and what we don't know about the series.

YOCHELSON: Right. Well, the main thing is you can see right away the difference between what she was doing and what Krausz was doing is that she's working outside on the street, which is sort of everything, and I mean in terms of this as photography. And you know, when you start to think just to think about the sort of obvious issues that arise here, first of all, you have to think about what she was doing. She had to leave Staten Island, take the ferry, with a 4 by 5 camera and a tripod and glass plate negatives and then, you know, make her way through the streets of New York with this. And then commandeer her subjects, these are people who cooperated with her. She must have had an assistant with her who not only would help her carry all this stuff but also help create these portraits by keeping other people out of the scene because people were naturally curious as you can see, for example, in the bottom right example
of the peddler with people, you know, looking what, you know, what's going on. And you know, and so that is -- that just possesses in of itself a huge number of issues. And then when you think of it also in terms of, sort of the class and race, you know, she's an upper-class woman, very fashionably dressed usually. And a young woman, you know, making her way around the streets of New York with all this equipment and trying to get the attention and cooperation of people from a very different class, many of them immigrants probably with speaking kind of broken English. You know, it's quite sort of fascinating picture at least in my mind that this sort of presents as a project. And we can even ask, like, how did she gain their cooperation? I mean, one possible thought, I doubt it because I, you know, she had a very complicated and remote relationship with money, would be that if she, you know, that she actually paid people. I don't think she would do that but it's certainly a possibility to get their cooperation. I think it's more likely that people were just curious like who -- what's going on because this was quite a sight and quite a project that she was embarked on. And then the other thing to mention is more specifically the issue of gender, I mean it was quite recent that it was even appropriate for well-bred women to just be walking in public on the streets of the city. She from a very young age had done that, she loved to shop, she was a real Ladies' Mile aficionado. And you know, so she was used to being in the city and walking around, but there was a fairly new phenomenon. And you know, according to sort of norms, you know, kind of what was good etiquette and manners of the day was specifically that women were supposed to sort of be, what's the right -- not draw attention to themselves. So, you know, sort of by definition she is drawing attention to herself. So those are all -- it really shows the kind of adventurousness and even slightly subversive, you know, intent of this project, I think. And in terms of these particular subjects, they're very typical ones. The street types were both like traditional street types like peddlers but also very modern subjects, new subjects like bicycle messengers. I mean, bikes were new in the 1890s. So, you know, that -- I think that was very much her intention was to sort of cover, you know, the old and the new and sort of give a kind of portrait. And obviously because she's working on the street give a portrait of the city itself. So I think that's about it here.

CRONIN: Yeah. Maybe we can continue the discussion by talking about the "Rag Cart" and it's great because there's these two different, slightly different images of the same scene.

YOCHELSON: Yeah, which is unusual, it's not unique. But the fact that she took two pictures of this is interesting and they're both from -- to my eye beautiful and interesting as compositions. I mean this is one of my favorite pictures in the group. I mean in large part because of, as a modern composition, especially the far off one featuring all the billboards, you know, it looks like a cubus collage or something. I mean it's a really fantastic, you know, to the modern eye a really fantastic picture. And also the billboards themselves were a modern invention and very controversial in New York where there was a huge movement against them as being, you know, ugly, not surprisingly. You know sort of just destroying the city beautiful which was countervailing, you know, impulse at the same time. So that's interesting. And then, ragpickers, in general, were usually, it was a business of Italian immigrants, and they were looked down upon for a variety of reasons. First of all, what -- picking rags was filthy and the, you know, all the bits and pieces of fabric that were used which were unwashed from, you know, collected
and then resold, you know, resold. They were rarely washed which -- so I mean it was a pretty
gross industry. And it was also illegal to, for example, not wash them and resale them. And so it
was very looked down upon. So it's very interesting to me that she had this encounter and that
she took the subject, I mean it's also very picturesque in a traditional way. But you know, the fact
that there are two views, one at quite a distance and the other much closer, I mean you can sort
of weave an interesting narrative around that. You know, maybe she took the far-away picture
first, and then she got up her courage, or you know, and got closer and started a conversation.
But in any case, I've -- these are, you know, I love this pair and I think they're really interesting
on many levels.

CRONIN: Yeah. And it's clear she's also standing in the street for the closer picture.

YOCHELSON: Right. I mean you can see, I guess that's trolley tracks right there. Yeah, yeah.
Right. Which throughout, I mean there's also -- you can take a lot of these pictures and just try
to put yourself in her shoes and figure out what she was doing. And it's really quite astonishing
to consider for any photographer but especially for, you know, a 28-year-old, you know, woman.

CRONIN: So here is another great image with kids this time. So we can talk about perhaps with
this, you know, where this is in New York and then because Doc Chat is made for educators,
you know, to how they can use these images in their classes and talk about them. Maybe we
can move the conversation a little bit to how we can use Alice Austen to talk about New York
City at the turn of the century.

YOCHELSON: Sure. Well, this is, I think people can recognize this is right in front of City Hall
with newspaper row right behind the people in the scene. And Austen took a lot of pictures of
newsboys, newskids. I think it was probably one of the easier subjects, you know, because you
can talk to kids and ingratiate yourself with them in ways that are, you know, that -- well it might
be a little bit easier. These pictures are about 10 years before Lewis Hine's, you know, more
famous pictures of newsboys so that's just interesting as for context. And of course, this one is a
favorite mostly because it does feature a girl which is pretty unusual. And also, you know, she's
managed to capture -- you know, she's working with a view camera with her head under a cloth
and relatively slow technology although it's obviously a very sunny day which makes it a little
faster exposure. But she has captured these wonderful expressions of these kids. You know,
very momentary expressions which is, you know, almost probably pretty much stopping
movement in this particular case. So you know, it's just a really charming for I think a picture.
But of course, there was a tradition of depicting newsboys going back and bootblacks and these
are like essentially traditional subjects that go back at least a generation. But you know, it's
capturing them on the street in the city with a camera and all of the, you know, all of the city’s --
city imposing itself right into the scene is, you know, makes them pretty special.

CRONIN: What did Alice Austen do with these images? What happened to them?
YOCHELSON: Okay. Well, the whole -- what she did she took about 70 -- well, we have about 70 negatives or prints and prints -- or prints of Manhattan Street scenes taken at this time. And there are 69 in the library's collection, which I can explain maybe at the end or a little bit later, so most of them are represented there. And she was copyrighting pictures of the -- we don't -- I mean this is all -- it's sort of -- well, first of all, what she created was a portfolio of 12 images called "Street Types of New York." In this, the 12 images that she put in there, they were printed not on photosensitive paper but on it with an ink base process called the Albertype which is a little bit like photogravure, basically an ink-based photo image. Which were contact prints, 4 by 5 prints, that's the size of her negatives mounted onboard and put between covers, so decorative covers that have printed on the cover "Street Types of New York" with a table of contents that includes the name, you know, the street type, you know. And then also like "Rag Cart," or you know, "Bike Messenger" and the location in the city. So that's what -- that was her end product here. The larger question is was she thinking of becoming a professional? She copyrighted 18 of the street types, she copyrighted a bunch of photographs she took at the -- in Chicago at the World's Fair. She continued to copyright some other pictures in the next, you know, several years. So she's -- and took on several projects that can only be -- that I call quasi-professional. So but there's no indication that there was any marketing done and there's one -- very few extent portfolios and one of the -- that is, was a gift to her aunt and uncle. So there seems to be, you know, sort of ambivalence and in my view uncertainty as to what her, you know, flirtation with becoming a professional was all about. But certainly, this whole series falls within that category and was over by the end of the '90s. She no longer -- she was definitely not going to take on any of these types of subjects and all of her pictures after that are just personal returning to family and friends, trips, things like that.

CRONIN: Do we have any sense of how many portfolios she actually made?

YOCHELSON: No, not really. They show up in auctions once in a while. There's a lot of these prints not in portfolios but both in photographic prints and in those ink-based prints in the archive. So she produced lots of them perhaps with the intention of creating portfolios, but there are not a lot of, you know, finished portfolios that are mounted prints with covers.

CRONIN: It's so fascinating, I think we should open it up for questions, right?

NIGRO: Yes. Thank you. Wow. I love these photos so much, I'm so glad you're speaking about them today. First question, when a student analyzes these photos what might they take away about this time period just based on what they see in the images?

YOCHELSON: Well, the larger context -- there's two larger contexts I think, historical context. One is the massive -- the incredible changes to the infrastructure to the city and this is the time of skyscrapers going up and subways being built soon, you know, very soon and, you know, just mass transit. And you know, there's just -- it's a very -- it's a time of great modernization of the city and industrialization. And part of that story is a huge influx of immigrants many of whom are seen in these pictures. And also very young children, you know, this is before there was any
regulation as to how old a child could be to be working. And so, you know, all these kids were portrayed as, you know, is controversial in and of itself. So I would say those are the big broad historical themes that you would want to plug into.

NIGRO: Thank you. One person asked, "Could these be classified as early street photography?"

YOCHELSON: Yes. But if -- you know, when we think about like the great moment of street photography, I mean it's sort of it's with the handheld camera much later. You know, in the mid, you know, maybe the Leica Camera, you know, or a small 35 mm camera and really sort of came into its own as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s. You have to remember that she's working with a camera on a tripod, you know, where she has to set it up and put her head under a focusing cloth, you know, and ask her subjects to pose. So, you know, it's -- but yes, I think the spirit of this work is very much in that tradition it's sort of precursor to that what we would call modern street photography.

NIGRO: Oh, that leads nicely into the next question. How would you contrast her work to other street photography either from this era or after?

YOCHELSON: Well, this is right on at the time when Alfred Stieglitz is photographing on the street and writing about it. He actually wrote a sort of defense of the so-called "detective camera," which sounds like it would be a really tiny miniature camera but it's actually just one, a 4 by 5 negative. And he was working with that size camera on the street and wasn't -- by and large, was not interested in this kind of subject matter. I mean he was taking these small negatives and creating in large prints. He was very interested in weather effects as, you know, indications of his own inner state. You know, he was making works of fine art that are really having everything to do with sign of symbolist aesthetics. At the same time where she's really not interested in the whole pictorial movement or in photography as fine art as it was being debated in this time among other amateur photographers, she was not part of that world. She said she was self-taught, she had several amateurs, very fine amateurs in her family who no doubt helped her. But she wasn't part of the photo club scene at the time, she was really on her own, you know, on her own sidelight.

CRONIN: I think that's part of what makes these so interesting is that she doesn't fit neatly into the studio portraiture world or the art photography world that she's really just doing something against the grain that's her own project.

YOCHELSON: Yeah. I think that's right. I think that's what makes them very unique and, you know, worth thinking and confusing. Because you know, as a photo historian, or you know, you always want to kind of pigeonhole, you know, just a real impulse to try to put her into a pigeon hole, you know, a pre-existing category. And she really doesn't fit very well.
NIGRO: Well, that's really going to lead right into the next question posed by Kathy. "How aware was she of others working within the history of photography or even the history of art to know about precedence for her street pictures?"

YOCHELSON: I don't think she was interested; I mean there's no evidence. She definitely was not involved in the club scene which was everywhere. Part of that was a Staten Island issue that decided. She had a very, very busy social calendar. She was a very active athlete; she went to parties all the time. She had lots of friends and relatives who she visited; she always took her camera. I mean the idea -- she didn't need the social side of the camera clubs and also they would -- and going -- belonging actively to one of the New York area camera clubs would have required, you know, traveling. And she literally she didn't have the interest, but she also didn't have the time. So that is like not -- I really feel pretty certain that that's not her. And also, you can see from the pictures that she's not interested in the issues the -- issues of pictorialism per se. And if you look at the women pictorial photographers of her generation who were involved in art photography, this is work that is almost always looking at women painters and it's babies and moms and pastoral landscapes, you know. Or you know that type of thing and this is not her interest at all. It's not her temperament at all. So she is, you know, she is -- I think, you know, she herself said very proudly that she was self-taught and I sort of take her at her word.

NIGRO: So you mentioned Lewis Hine who photographed around the same time period and Hine had a very clear social agenda with his similar pictures. Did Alice have a social agenda or a reform agenda?

YOCHELSON: No. I think that could be clearly said. I mean this is a sort of I think very important point to make is first of all the whole concept of street types is in itself from our perspective or from the perspective of reform suspect. You know she is essentially othering these people saying that these are street types as opposed to individuals. They represent certain, you know, occupations, I mean and if you -- it's interesting to compare her work in this way to the Krausz book, right. The Krausz book has text which does not hold up at all today. And the fact that Alice Austen's pictures don't have text helps or sort of blunts her own value system. I mean like she was an upper-class woman who basically in her own life without being particularly, I mean there was no kind of animus I don't think in her about race or class. But I mean she did accept the values of her family, of her society which was that their wealth and position and education was a function of their natural superiority to the people of color and to foreigners. And that was just an assumption, you know. So there is a certain exoticism in her project but as I say because her style is very matter of fact and because there's no text and because just the very nature of her adventure -- adventurousness in taking these pictures and which itself was a little bit, you know, boundary推pushing in its own way, I think blunts the sense in which those are her values. You know, we don't -- that's not what pops out at us when you look at these pictures, you know, any sense of her own class consciousness or class -- sense of class superiority. But that it is nonetheless, you know, who she was. And you know, I think, you know, very strongly argues against there being any kind of -- there's nothing in her biography that would suggest any kind of reform agenda.
NIGRO: Right. One last question. Where do the NYPL photographs come from? Are they part of one of the portfolios that Austen made?

YOCHELSON: Oh, good question. In 1950, as I mentioned before the pictures there's -- came directly from the Staten Island Historical Society's main archive. And the way that happened is that as I say the collection came in 1945, nobody really paid any attention to it, it gathered dust in the basement of the society for a few years. But then, they did start paying attention to it and their initial mission was to save for the society the Staten Island subjects and find other public collections for the non-Staten Island subjects. And this acquisition in 1950 is a product of that sort of campaign in which the curator reached out to many, many organizations and succeeded in this acquisition by the library. Very shortly thereafter in fact the next year, they decided it made more sense to keep the archive intact. So they no longer try to, you know, separate other prints from other places but that's why these New York pictures are there. And at that time they had no idea there was a portfolio, you know, they were just -- the curator was just looking through and finding the Manhattan street scenes and saying, "Maybe you'll be interested in those," and the library was interested.

NIGRO: Oh, yeah.

YOCHELSON: So that happened in 1950.

NIGRO: Thank you.

CRONIN: We're so glad it happened.

YOCHELSON: Yeah. I know I think is -- and I am too. I think it's great. There are many, many of these prints in the Staten Island Historical Society sitting there so it's wonderful that this selection is here and, you know, seen by a different public. It's great.

NIGRO: Okay. Thank you so much to everyone who's attended today. Links to these collection items and other resources along with a video and transcript of this episode will be published shortly in a blog post on the NYPL blog, which we'll send out to everyone who's registered. All previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the Doc Chat channel of the NYPL blog and you will find the link in the chat. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode, A Guide to Black Travel Guides, Schomburg Center Librarian Rhonda Evans and NYPL Curator Julie Golia will analyze travel guides used by African Americans to help them navigate the experience of travel during the early mid-20th century when racially discriminatory laws were widespread. Register at the link in the chat and look for further Doc Chat event pages on NYPL's calendar, research newsletter, and social media. So thank you all for attending today and goodbye to our lovely guests.

YOCHELSON: Thank you.
CRONIN: Thank you.