

**#24 December 2017 Cameraderie  
Vivian Maier (1926-2009)**



Vivian Maier. This is a photographer of entirely different stripes than any other great photographer I or anyone else has ever discussed. First of all, she was almost entirely unknown and unrecognized during her lifetime. She began to be discovered in the last two years of her life and became posthumously celebrated as one of the great twentieth-century photographers. She did child-care work most of her life in Chicago, and quietly carried out her personal photography project, often with her young charges in tow. You can read her story in the Wikipedia article, here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivian\\_Maier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivian_Maier)

You can (and really must) browse galleries of her work at this website:

<http://www.vivianmaier.com/>

Maier shot mostly with a twin-lens roll-film camera, a Rolleiflex, and her images are rich in detail because roll-film is 2.4 inches wide. I believe the necessity of looking down at a ground-glass viewing screen contributed to making her images carefully composed.

Maier has been critically analyzed as somewhat of a ghostly-photographer-creature (my term), floating around at the edges of the real world, half-injecting herself into some images with her trade-mark self-shadow, and taking off tangentially from the work of past photographers. I am going to compare her to Robert Frank, from last month, since Maier also has a somber view of the street life she photographed (although always in focus). This comparison is not original to me. Here is a quote from the Wikipedia article:

Photography critic Allan Sekula has suggested that the fact that Maier spent much of her early life in France sharpened her visual appreciation of American cities and society. Sekula compared her work with the photography of Swiss-born Robert Frank: "I find myself imagining her as a female Robert Frank, without a Guggenheim grant, unknown and working ... [at child-care] to get by. I also think she showed the world of women and children in a way that is pretty much unprecedented."

I might add that in contrast to Frank, Maier's eye is sometimes ironic and gently humorous. (Also, Mr. Sekula should have said "I find myself imagining her as *another* Robert Frank," because her gender has nothing to do with the photographic remark, except to diminish Maier as a photographer by pointing out she is "female.")

I have started this article off with four of Maier's self-portraits, but I greatly urge you to go to the website (<http://www.vivianmaier.com/>) and look at all the posted self-portraits, and then we can ask ourselves several questions. Who is this person? *What is she thinking?* Who is she taking these photographs for? What did all this photography work do for her self-development? Can we read any of that out of her self-portraits?

I put Maier's body of work forth as a contribution to the "grand conversation" of what photography can do and say. Recall that I discussed this about Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition two months ago, and Robert Frank's book, *The Americans*, last month.

Here are some of Maier's other images:

1956

New York, 1954



New York, 1954



Chicago, 1950s



New York, 1953



New York, 1953



These are just a few samples of Maier's penetrating eye. *ALL* of her images on her website are like this! It is a joy to browse through them. Please, please go there and look at the work of one of the twentieth century's greatest photographers. Here is the website address again: <http://www.vivianmaier.com/>