

Title: ‘Woman—you struck oil’: The Zelda Mackay Collection at the George Eastman Museum

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The Zelda Mackay Collection at the George Eastman Museum consists of approximately five hundred nineteenth-century cased American photographs. While the collection was largely cataloged, it had never been analyzed alongside Zelda Mackay’s (1893–1985) collecting notebook and papers—sources that offer insight into her collection-building practices and the provenance of the objects. I have read Mackay’s notebook alongside the objects at the George Eastman Museum and made the information found in the primary sources available in the museum’s collections database (TMS). My ambition was not only to gain intellectual control over the collection but also to rebuild Mackay’s important legacy as a collector. The notebook is evidence of Mackay’s careful curation and valuation of a collection that gained the attention of Alden Scott Boyer, Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, Robert Taft, Ansel Adams, and other well-known members of the established collecting circle in the twentieth century. My further analysis of the notebook indicates that Mackay acquired approximately one-fourth of her photograph collection through interactions with other women, thus exposing a pattern of women employing traditional conceptions of domesticity to build their collections. Using Mackay as a case study, this paper explores critical questions regarding the role of women as collectors of photography in the twentieth century. Within this, I consider the network of women who were financially, intellectually, and physically in control of their family photographs, and who seem to have domestic agency as keepers of records, photographs, and memories in non-domestic spaces.