

The PSA Journal's History Series

Celebrating 75 Years of PSA

Dedicated to the memory of longtime
PSA Historian, Tony Patti, Hon PSA, FPSA

The Evolution of Exhibitions

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Most of us tend to think of international exhibitions as pretty similar from one year to the next. We enter our four images, fill out an entry form, and send the images, form and entry fee to the exhibition. Right? Not exactly.

The fact is that exhibitions have changed radically over the years, and most of us who cheerfully submitted entries to the 2008 International Exhibition of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) would have been unable to submit one to the PSA International of 70 years earlier.

The reason is obvious. Photography has changed. The PSA International of 1938 was actually PSA's *Second Annual 100-Print Travel Salon*. The images were monochrome prints. The rules required that prints be at least 8 by 10 inches in dimension and mounted on a 16- by 20-inch mounting board.



Hand-colored prints were not accepted. Prints had to be shipped in a flat, dark, heavy-duty box with lid and straps—sturdy enough to withstand post office battering.

In addition to the print title and maker's name on the back of each print, makers had to list the medium used. Print processes listed in the 1939 PSA Salon catalogue were B (Bromide), Ch (Chloride), Ch-B (Chloro-Bromide), BO (Bromoil), BO-T (Bromoil Transfer), Ca (Carbon), CC (Charcoal) and PN (Paper Negative).

These and other laborious, creative darkroom techniques helped the photographers of PSA's early days achieve the ideal stated in a salon catalogue: "The aim of the annual International Salon of the Photographic Society of America is to exhibit only distinctive and outstanding examples of PICTORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY wherein artistic perception and technical excel."

"Pictorial" was the key word. It involved composition, lighting and a mastery of printing techniques to achieve a wide range of subtle tones that resulted in a "painterly" print. Serious photographers thought of their work as art, which is why they called their exhibitions "salons," borrowing the word from the fine art world of 19th century Europe, where the name of the venue had become the name of the event.

Well before the Photographic Society of America was established in early 1934, camera clubs held salons. PSA's predecessor organization, the *Associated Camera Clubs of America*, sponsored a *Traveling Salon of Photographic Art*. PSA's first *Bulletin* (April 1934) featured an article entitled *Shall the Photographic Society of America Conduct a Salon?* It discussed whether the salon should travel, how prints should be selected and judged, what cities and clubs should get the salon, and more.

Ultimately, the problems were resolved, and in 1937 PSA sponsored its *First Annual 100-Print Travel Salon*. It allowed only one print acceptance per entrant, and it toured for a year,



with exhibitions at city art museums in Columbus, Rochester, Dayton, St. Louis, Akron, Oklahoma City, Seattle, Vancouver BC, and Chicago.

The 1938 Salon went to major galleries and museums in eleven other cities: the third annual Travel Salon in 1939 chose its 100 prints from 650 entries submitted by 200 makers. The prestigious exhibitions were open to “any photographer resident in the USA and possessions and Canada...and to PSA members anywhere.” By 1939, entries came from Canada, Mexico, Hungary, Italy, Czechoslovakia, England, India, Belgium and China. The entry fee in the 1939 Salon was \$1, and makers could list a sale price for each accepted print. PSA took a 15 percent commission, and print prices for duplicates ranged from \$3 to \$25.

Monochrome ruled the exhibition scene, including exhibitions sponsored by individual camera clubs, into the 1940s. With the establishment of the Nature Division, the First PSA Nature Salon—also in monochrome prints—was held in 1941. It had a complex set of categories and sub-categories covering zoological, botanical, technical (geological, astronomical, and more), and series pictures showing growth or change in natural sciences or animals. It also had eleven judges, national experts in botany, zoology, natural sciences and photography, several of whom were museum curators and university deans. At the time, PSA also considered zoo animals, pets and

farm animals as appropriate nature subjects, but this view was discarded within a few years.

A giant change in exhibition practices was on the horizon. Color film had been introduced just as World War II neared; and in December 1943, the Chicago Color Camera Club and PSA’s Color Division put on the first Color Slide Salon. It drew more than 3,000 entries—a “huge success”—and exhibitions were never the same again.

Two other developments influenced the growth of exhibitions: the addition of new special interest divisions and the growth in PSA membership. The Press (now Photojournalism) Division was organized in 1944; Stereo followed in 1951; and Travel, which had been a popular subject with color, print and PJ exhibitors, finally got its own division in 1972.

Exhibitions thrived in that decade. The July 1973 *PSA Journal*, in PSA’s 40th year, listed 118 PSA-recognized exhibitions, including 45 in pictorial prints, nearly all accepting both monochrome and color print entries; 40 color slide exhibitions; 20 in nature, 8 in stereo and 5 in photojournalism. This writer recalls working on a Mississippi Valley Salon in that era which had 728 entrants in color slides (or more than 2900 slides submitted).

Exhibitions were listed across the USA and in Canada, South America, Europe, Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand. An alert exhibitor could arrange to have his entry forwarded from one exhibition to another for several months.

It was a heady time, but a certain amount of burnout was inevitable. Rising costs, in fees and postage, especially for print makers, drove out some exhibitors and exhibitions. Smaller clubs found it hard to keep workers.

One innovation appeared in the 1980s that gave a boost to both exhibitors and exhibitions. This was the circuit, the brainchild of the late **Charles Keaton, FPSA**, of Vienna, Virginia, who introduced the idea of an exhibition circuit in an area running from Washington DC, to Norfolk, Virginia. An exhibitor could enter a circuit of three to six exhibitions with one entry, one fee and one mailing, and the opportunity for multiple acceptances.

Though some greeted the idea with doubt, Keaton worked tirelessly to prove the value of circuits to exhibitors, and he succeeded. The idea has been adopted by many exhibitions worldwide and has helped keep exhibitions alive and healthy by bringing many new participants to the exhibition scene.

Photographs contributed by Jean Timmermeister, FPSA.

The 21st century has seen important changes in exhibitions. The advent of the digital camera and electronic imaging has revolutionized photography, as dramatically as negative and color slide film did in their day. Today's photographer uses a computer to send his images to an exhibition, or to transfer them to a disc. Today's photographer captures brilliant colors and uses almost unlimited creativity to change his images with the click of a mouse. Print makers need only finish their image in the computer: once done, they can print multiple copies with relative ease and complete accuracy.

Projected digital images can travel electronically to an exhibition—no more packaging, no more mailing, no more postal charges. With today's technology, the photographic world has no borders.

Another major change is in exhibition sponsorship. Many of the oldest and best known US exhibitions have folded. Their places have been taken by thriving exhibitions in almost every part of the globe. A recent *PSA Journal* listed 82 exhibitions—21 in Color Projected Image, 9 in Electronic Imaging, 20 in Nature, 6 in Photo Travel, 2 in Photojournalism, 16 in Pictorial Prints, 5 in Small Prints and 3 in Stereo—a healthy total. Of that number, in all sections, only 22 exhibitions are in the USA. The rest are literally all over the world. Further, of the 82 exhibitions, 10 are circuits with 46 judgments—proving the appeal of this kind of exhibition

Historical Vignette:

Why was that so?...

Have you ever wondered why, when the Royal Photographic Society was established in 1853, it took eighty one more years to form the Photographic Society of America (PSA)? The answers are really very simple: Geography and Communications. The very vastness of this great country made the forming of such an organization seem like a daunting task. However, in the 1920's and early 1930's, speedy communications and transportation brought the East and West Coast, Canada and Mexico, closer to each other and the idea of a North American organization became a reality.

Can you imagine what those early PSA founders would think of today's modes of communication and transportation? Now, it is quite feasible to believe that anyone, anywhere in the world can join and participate in PSA. PSA membership extends over the borders to include over 1060 international members in 65 different countries.

Elena McTighe
Publications Vice President

Minneapolis - St.Paul Print Circuit 2009

Catalog of Acceptances



Aged and Beautiful

Cynthia Fleury

Finally, PSA has been a leader in developing exhibition standards that serve as dependable guidelines for exhibitions and exhibitors alike.

As PSA celebrates its 75th year, the outlook for exhibitions is excellent. PSA's membership is on the rise once more. The 2008 PSA International Exhibition was the largest in PSA's history, with entries from some 55 countries. The exhibition community and the exhibitor community are global. These facts, plus the success of circuits and the amazing spread of exhibitions worldwide have helped make PSA a vital force in international photography. ■

Minneapolis - St.Paul Print Circuit 2009

Images of Distinction



Fur Ball Shetland Cat

Dennis Poeschel