THE DIGNITY OF MAN AS A WORKER

The Sievers Archive
Linda Groom describes the photographic archive of Wolfgang Sievers, which the National Library has recently acquired.

The photographic archive of Wolfgang Sievers, who is widely regarded as Australia’s greatest industrial photographer, is to become part of the National Library’s Pictures Collection. Under an agreement with the photographer, signed in March 2002, the Library will purchase Sievers’ entire collection of prints and negatives over a period of years. The first portion, comprising 2467 prints and over 10 000 negatives, arrived in July.

The acquisition of the Sievers Archive is a major achievement for the Library. Although Sievers’ work is represented in the collections of many important art museums and libraries, the fate of his precious archive had for many years been undecided. The strength of his reputation in Europe and the United States, exemplified by the success of a recent major exhibition of his work in Lisbon, meant that there was a very real risk that this archive might have eventually left Australia. The National Library is privileged to have been chosen by Sievers as the archive’s custodian.

Sievers, whose mother was of Jewish descent, came to Australia in 1938 aged 25 to escape Nazi persecution. He set up a commercial photographic studio in Melbourne, where his skills proved an unusual and attractive combination to business clients. Bringing with him the aesthetic of the famous Bauhaus school, he saw beauty in industrial forms and in the work of ordinary men and women. His father and mother had moved in the highest levels of the German public service and diplomatic circles, and the skills he had learned from them, along with quite different skills such as the ability to swear in Greek (which he had acquired in the Australian Army during World War II), recommended him to a range of Australians from chairmen of the board to factory hands. Added to these attributes were a rather Teutonic emphasis on systematic organisation and an unwillingness to compromise on technical standards. By the late 1940s, he had a thriving practice in his chosen fields of industrial and architectural photography. In a career that lasted until 1993, he worked for many of the major names in Australian industry, including Shell, Comalco, Ford, GMH, Alcoa, ICI, APPM, Broken Hill Associated Smelters and John Holland Constructions. He also worked for the Department of Overseas Trade.

It would be easy to write about the Sievers Archive in terms of its value as an acquisition. Certainly it fits perfectly within the Library’s collection development policy, documenting the postwar boom in manufacturing and the working conditions of many Australians. It contains images of industries now long gone, including the spinning mills of Wangaratta and the Bryant and May match factory. It shows some Australian icons, such as Orlando’s Barossa Pearl and MacRobertson’s chocolate frogs, on the assembly line. It is the notion of ‘acquisition’, however, that fits uncomfortably with the name Sievers. For those familiar with his work, and particularly for those familiar with his unique personality, the idea of buying Sievers is an anathema, an impossibility.

This may seem a rather precious statement to make about purchasing the work of someone who was, after all, a commercial photographer. For Sievers, however, his commercial work has always been a means to an end. It has allowed him to pursue his own ideology. In his own words, ‘the dignity of man as a worker ... is something that has followed me right through my life and in all the work I have done in industry it was the man and the machine’. He has often been part of a minority—from the minority of Germans who actively opposed Hitler’s rise to power to the very small minority of commercial photographers who for the most part declined to accept creative direction from corporate clients. He has frequently put his principles ahead of his commercial interests. At the time of the Vietnam War, for instance, he lost around two-thirds of his clients after placing an anti-Vietnam statement in his display window in the Australia Arcade in Collins Street.

Just as it is difficult to reduce the transfer of the Sievers Archive to a question of ownership, it is also difficult to claim Sievers as an Australian photographer, however much we may wish to do so. At a basic level, he is certainly Australian. He is an Australian citizen; he has made his home in Melbourne. Most of the photographs in his archive were taken in Australia—every state and territory is represented.

On the other hand, we cannot, in describing Sievers’ undoubted significance, drop out the usual phrases that normally accompany an evaluation of a great Australian photographer. He has not been fascinated by the quality of Australian light. With the exception of a handful of photographs, he has not engaged with the Australian landscape. He has not, because he has not sought to, influenced a generation of younger Australian photographers. Although many of his photographs show Australians in their workplaces, he depicts them as people rather than as Australians.

An examination of the photographs themselves shows that Sievers’ overriding concerns are the dignity of labour, the beauty and excitement of the forms of industry and architecture, and the properties of light and darkness. One Australian example of his concern with form is *Matches at Bryant and May 1939*—a close-up of hundreds of matches. The elegant assembly of shapes and contrasting light gives a semi-abstract impression. In his *Rayon Loom Tuner at Bruck Mills, Wangaratta, Victoria, 1950*, the same fascination with industrial forms is evident, but in this case the forms frame and celebrate the...
skilled loom worker. These concerns were already evident in his European work and further developed in his Australian œuvre.

Sievers has a strong international reputation. Jorge Calado in *Life Line* (2000) sees Sievers as having a unique role:

For Renger-Patzsch and his followers industry was beautiful; for Bourke-White, it was also good. The third way was born far from Europe and America, and was the work of a German photographer who had emigrated to Australia, Wolfgang Sievers ...

For Sievers, industry was beautiful, but goodness resided in the worker. Wolfgang Sievers represents an absolutely singular case in the whole history of photography.
name a few, the photographers have generally depicted either people-less scenes or have silhouetted the workers so that their shapes rather than their humanity are emphasised. The photographs in which Sievers celebrates the individuality of particular workers and the beauty and excitement of the industrial forms that surround them constitute a unique body of work.

One could argue that Australia has given Sievers very little in a creative sense, that he would have pursued his vision whether he had emigrated to France, the United States or Hong Kong. He recently commented, however, that he thought he had found a greater degree of creative freedom in Australia than he would have in Europe or the United States. In mid-career, he returned to Germany for one assignment, and was struck by the class distinctions in German industry, in which the workers looked up to photographers and photographers were meant to
look up to the factory managers. In his view, the Australian workplace was far more egalitarian and open, and thus allowed more scope for his determination to portray the dignity of labour.

Sievers now lives in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Sandringham. He no longer takes photographs but is busy administering his archive. From his upstairs office, he communicates with international curators, dealers, publishers and the many friends made during a long lifetime. At 89, he is putting his affairs in order with typical precision. The gradual transfer of his archive to the National Library is part of that process.

As with many long lives, his has in some ways come full circle. Denied entry to his chosen course of study in archaeology by the Nazi regime, he now reads books on archeology and has surrounded himself with the objects of his extraordinary personal history—from family manuscripts and paintings of his German ancestors to a tribal insignia which he wears around his neck. The insignia was a gift from the Museo del Oro in Columbia, where he worked on a photographic assignment in the 1970s. His photographs can be seen, at one level, as archaeological. His legacy to the world will be an elegant record of the artefacts of the machine age, to which he has added a dimension that archaeology can rarely re-create—images of individual workers whose skills bring the artefacts to life.

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