

Harvard Art Museums

Fogg Museum
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Press Release

Harvard Art Museums Appoint Makeda Best as New Curator of Photography

Cambridge, MA
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The Harvard Art Museums are pleased to announce the appointment of Makeda Best as the new Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography, effective January 17, 2017.

Best is currently assistant professor in visual studies at the California College of the Arts, specializing in the history of photography. She has also played an ongoing role as a chief advisor and writer for *Essential Lens: Analyzing Photographs Across the Curriculum*, an online multimedia learning platform promoting the multidisciplinary use of photography in middle and high school classrooms, produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting and Annenberg Learner. Best has also worked at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as an assistant curator and graduate fellow; there she worked on numerous exhibitions, conducted gallery talks and symposia, and contributed new, insightful research on objects in the collections. Best's scholarly interests focus on the photobook as well as on documentary and war photography.

Her past teaching experience includes serving as assistant professor in the Department of Art and Architecture at the University of Vermont, where she developed museum-based learning courses in the history of photography and American art.

"Makeda Best is an accomplished scholar and curator, an innovative thinker, and a passionate advocate for teaching with original works of art; we are thrilled to welcome her back to Harvard as the Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography, a critical role for both the Art Museums and the University," said Martha Tedeschi, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art

Museums. “Makeda’s deep understanding of photography as an art form—and as a social, cultural, and political force—will advance new and challenging ideas to support our teaching and learning mission. She is a wonderful addition to our team of curators—extraordinary scholars who bring intellectual curiosity, fresh ideas, and a true commitment to unlocking the potential of Harvard’s great collections for all audiences.”

Best received her M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University in the Department of History of Art and Architecture. She earned a B.F.A. and M.F.A. in photography from the California Institute of the Arts, studying under American photographer, writer, filmmaker, theorist, and critic Allan Sekula. She also received a B.A. in history and art history from Barnard College.

She has received fellowships and grants from numerous institutions, including Duke University’s David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the Phillips Collection; and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Between 2013 and 2016, Best served on the College Art Association’s Museum Committee, and was recently appointed to serve on the association’s Education Committee.

Best has published in multiple journals and has contributed chapters to scholarly publications. She co-edited and contributed to *Conflict, Identity, and Protest in American Art* (2015), which explores the powerful relationship between artistic production and cultures of conflict in the United States. Her forthcoming book is on the Civil War–era photographer Alexander Gardner.

“Makeda Best is one of the freshest voices in the study of photography, and Harvard is very lucky to have her back,” said Robin Kelsey, Dean of Arts and Humanities and Shirley Carter Burden Professor of Photography at Harvard University. “Makeda brings an extraordinary combination of skills to the Harvard Art Museums. As an accomplished practitioner, she understands photographic techniques intimately, but she is also a historian of the first water. Few scholars or curators can match her capacity to bring out the historical significance of photographs in their subtle particulars.”

In her role at the Harvard Art Museums, Best will oversee the extensive photography collections, which trace the development of the medium from its earliest days and include exceptionally strong examples of contemporary photography.

Having worked in both educational and museum settings, Best will draw on this varied experience to develop exhibitions, public lectures, and other programming, and will play an integral role in the

planning of regular rotations of photographs within the permanent collections galleries. Photographs and other works on paper play an important role in many of the museums' collections galleries, as well as in the three University Galleries—spaces that support coursework in various academic departments and schools at Harvard.

Best will also build on the museums' recent acquisitions of notable photographs. The Harvard Art Museums have acquired artists Gary Schneider and John Erdman's Printer's Proof Collection, a rich resource on 20th-century photography that includes master prints by some of the most influential artists of the 1980s and '90s, including Richard Avedon, and a major suite of photographs by German-born documentary photographer August Sander. Best will be key in identifying future acquisitions for the Fogg Museum collection and will advise on acquisitions for the Busch-Reisinger and Arthur M. Sackler Museums.

"I am excited to return to Harvard and the museums' vast teaching collections, which offer so many ways to explore the formal and conceptual challenges that photographers have faced and to consider how they've negotiated new technologies, processes, social factors, and trends in visual culture over time," said Best. "As a student of these collections myself, I have a unique knowledge of these objects, and I'm interested in what they can teach us about photography as a cultural force as well as about issues like social justice and social reform. As an educator and practitioner, I have a passion for facilitating object-based learning and interactive, student-led projects. This is a natural next step for me and an exciting opportunity to collaborate with colleagues within the museums and across the university."

Photography Collections at the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums' photography holdings have a particular strength in 20th-century American documentary and contemporary photography, with an emphasis on diverse and alternative photographic processes. The holdings include photographs, negatives, and related materials in the collections of the Fogg and Busch-Reisinger Museums and select holdings in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum collections.

The collection of documentary photography, comprising nearly 35,000 images and 40,000 negatives, is unparalleled, strengthened considerably when Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts transferred their photographic collections to the Harvard Art Museums in 2002.

Other strengths include 19th-century photography, such as Southworth & Hawes daguerreotypes, Alexander Gardner's Sketch Book documenting the Civil War, and photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan and Mathew Brady; social documentary (the Ben Shahn Collection, the [Social Museum Collection](#), the Boston Elevated Railway Negative Collection, and the [Gordon Ward Gahan Collection](#)); and professional photography (the American Professional Photographers Collection). Other important holdings include documentary and experimental photomontage and cameraless photography in the museums' extensive [Bauhaus collection](#), including 18,000 negatives and slides by [Lyonel Feininger](#) that offer a comprehensive view of the artist's extended engagement with photography.

The museums' growing contemporary holdings began with Diane Arbus's [Box of Ten Photographs](#), acquired in 1972 by Davis Pratt, the Fogg Museum's first curator of photographs. The collections also include other strengths such as postwar subjective photography (Otto Steinert, Peter Keetman), and the Düsseldorf school (Andreas Gursky, Candida Hofer). The two phase acquisition of artist Gary Schneider and John Erdman's Printer's Proof Collection brings 459 photographs from the 1980s and 1990s, archival material, and artist's research materials to the museums' holdings, providing a rich repository for learning about the darkroom and activities of a photography lab, as well as about broader cultural issues attached to this era of photography. In addition, the South Asian Photography Initiative offers a growing repository of 100 works by 15 modern and contemporary Indian and South Asian photographers.

These collections enable scholars, students, and the public to closely investigate the medium's evolution. While developing holdings of photographs chronologically and geographically, the museums have maintained a strong and cohesive collection of contemporary work, including hybrid practices and time-based media. The museums are rooted in a history of collecting and teaching with photographs, and the collections have been shaped by diverse curatorial expertise.

The Harvard Art Museums are a key repository for the practice, scholarship, and teaching of photography. All objects in the collections not currently on display in the galleries may be viewed, by appointment, via the museums' [Art Study Center](#).

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums, among the world's leading art institutions, comprise three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes

Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on Asian, ancient, and Islamic and later Indian art. Together, the collections include approximately 250,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States.

The Harvard Art Museums' recent renovation and expansion builds on the legacies of the three museums and unites their remarkable collections under one roof for the first time. Renzo Piano Building Workshop's responsive design preserved the Fogg Museum's landmark 1927 facility, while transforming the space to accommodate 21st-century needs. Following a six-year building project, the museums now feature 40 percent more gallery space, an expanded Art Study Center, conservation labs, and classrooms, and a striking new glass roof that bridges the facility's historic and contemporary architecture. The new Harvard Art Museums' building is more functional, accessible, spacious, and above all, more transparent. The three constituent museums retain their distinct identities in this new facility, yet their close proximity provides exciting opportunities to experience works of art in a broader context. harvardartmuseums.org

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