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A second go-around for photographer Vivian Maier

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Record crowds are packing a Seattle gallery's photography exhibit, thanks as much to the mystery woman behind the photos as for the prized photos themselves.

When Vivian Maier died in 2009, at the age of 83, she was virtually unknown. She had worked most of her adult life as a nanny for a series of families in Chicago. A very private person, she died penniless and alone, with no surviving family.

Two years earlier, a stash of her possessions had been unceremoniously auctioned off when she failed to pay a storage fee.

As it turned out, that local Chicago history buff, John Maloof, had uncovered a treasure trove. "The auction house is across the street from my home. I found this box loaded with negatives. I won it for, I think \$350," said Maloof.

That box contained 30,000 negatives, mostly undeveloped photos of Chicago and its inhabitants spanning the second half of the 20th century.

Maloof was so blown away by the quality of the work that he tracked down and bought out as many of the other buyers of Maier's possessions as he could. He now has amassed over 100,000 negatives. Another collector has 18,000 more Maier negatives, along with a thousand prints, a thousand color slides, and dozens of films.

It will take years just to scan all Maier's work. But enough of them have been processed that many already consider her one of the century's most important street photographers.

She's had exhibitions around the world and now Seattle gets its first first-hand glimpse of about 45 gorgeous prints at the Photo Center Northwest.

Inevitably, much of the buzz surrounding her work involves a fascination with her hidden, secret life, a life that's slowly coming in to focus.

Although born in New York in 1926, Vivian Maier spent most of her childhood in France. At the age of 25, she returned - on her own - to New York in 1951 and moved to Chicago in 1956.

For the next forty years, Maier supported herself as a nanny and quietly shot an average of a roll of film per day, cataloging the street life around her.

The filmmakers of a soon-to-be released documentary about Maier have tracked down some of the families who employed her. They said she was intensely private.

"She lived on the third floor, in our attic," described one mother. "One of the first things she asked me for was to please put in a lock."

"She said, don't ever open this door," described another mother.

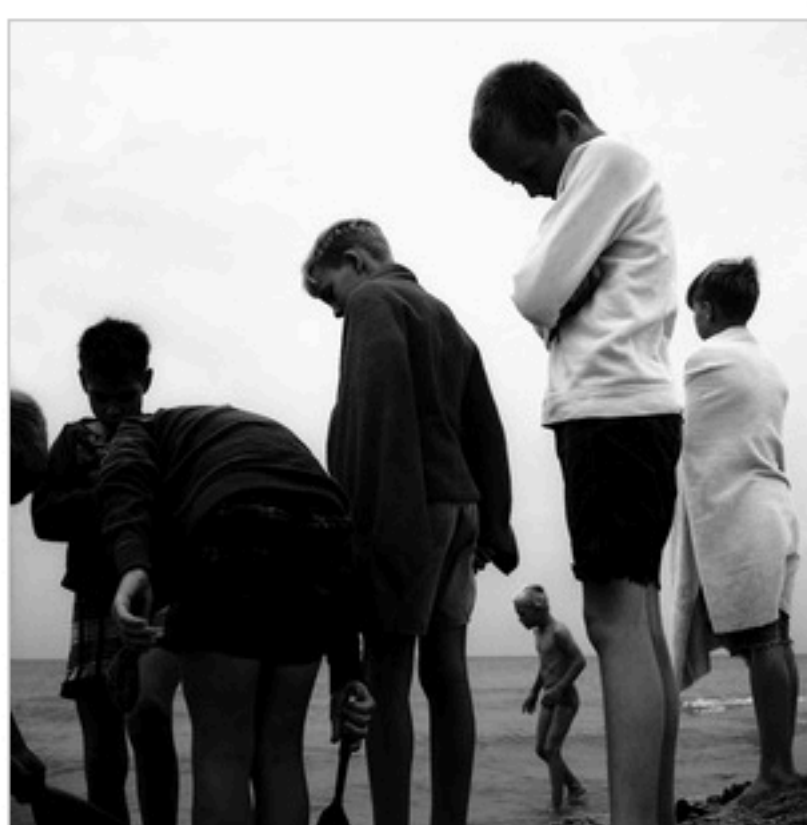
"We had no idea that she took photographs," said one father.

In addition to being an obsessive shutterbug, she was also something of a packrat, leaving behind 30 binders of newspaper clippings among many other things. These too ended up in the possession of John Maloof, who also has a snippet of audio of the mysterious Maier.

We're not sure of the context and it's a little hard to make it out, but she says, "I suppose nothing is meant to last forever - we have to make room for other people - it's a wheel."

If life is a wheel, Vivian Maier is getting a second go-around, thanks to her secret life as a photographer.

The Vivian Maier exhibition, courtesy of the Jeffrey Goldstein Collection, runs through March 23rd at the [Photo Center NW](#).



Photograph by Vivian Maier. On display now at Seattle's Photo Center Northwest.

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