

Vivian Maier, a reluctant genius photographer

By Jennifer Wing

1 of 5



Credit Vivian Maier / Jeffrey Goldstein Collection

Vivian Maier self portrait

[Enlarge image](#)

Listen

6:17

Vivian Maier is an artist who is considered one of the greatest street photographers of our time. She was a nanny who lived in Chicago. She never talked about her work when she was alive and became famous for it after she died. That's when thousands of her negatives were discovered and developed. Some of her work is on display right now at [The Photo Center Northwest in Seattle](#).

[Jeffrey Goldstein](#) is a collector and owns the negatives of the photos that are on the walls. We are looking at a black and white picture taken by Vivian Maier. It shows girls, young women, laughing and playing in the shallow waves of Lake Michigan near Chicago in the late 1960's. You can almost feel their joy as they splash each other in the hot sun.

"And this is the north shore, with wealthy households and girls who have most things that they want and they are having fun, with bikinis and they are splashing water and here is Ingar, looking out towards the water and she's the only one with a white bathing cap on."

Ingar Raymond is a chubby girl. She's about six or seven years old and Vivian Maier was her nanny. In this picture, Ingar is the only person with her back turned to the camera.

"The lightest areas in the photograph are the clouds and Ingar's cap. And she's almost like one of these clouds. Just floating out there in the water by herself."

She had to look down into her camera to frame her shot. She rarely asked her subjects if it was "okay" to photograph them. Maier is usually compared to Diane Arbus, it just took decades for us to see it.

Maier thought nothing of standing just three feet away, or even closer, to take a picture of a stranger.

On Maier's days off as a nanny she roamed the streets of Chicago, usually in some pretty rough neighborhoods. She wore a hat, men's oxford shoes and a trench coat. Dressed a sort of a spy, she snapped shots of people waiting for the bus, flowers that looked like they were embracing, a dog gazing out a car window at the clouds. Maier took between one to three rolls of film a day, over a span 50 years.

[Richard Cahan](#) is the co-author of the new coffee table photo book, *Vivian Maier Out of the Shadows*. It covers some of her best work, taken in the 1960's and 70's.

"I don't think people understand how much courage it took to take a picture. You were spending a dollar every time you took a picture. You had 12 shots in your camera and then you'd have to reload your film so every time you are clicking the shutter you are making a commitment."

Cahan says the one word people use to describe Maier's work is "honest".

"Her work takes little moments in time it doesn't elevate or diminish the moments. They are small stores of people who walk by her. There is no distortion. It's as if these people smack of realism."

Maier was intensely private. She even put a padlock on her bedroom door. She didn't have much of a personal life. Richard Cahan says her Rolleiflex camera was her lover. She recorded her life with it. She even took pictures of the mundane; her taxes, letters, bills. She kept taking pictures up until the late 1990's.

Eventually Maier fell on hard times and one of the families she nannied for insisted on paying for her apartment. Her secret stash of negatives was discovered in 2007 when some of her belongings were auctioned off to pay debts. But by the time the photography world realized there was this unknown genius, Vivian Maier was already dead. The few people who did know her say she'd hate all of the attention she's getting today.