Cleveland Photographs of the 1920s and 1930s: Jobs and Assignments

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During the 1920s Cleveland like so many other cities saw a tremendous boom in manufacturing, commerce, retail and other areas of business. During this time the managers were worried about the future of the economy. Businessmen witnessed devastating downturns and shifts of individuals using new products and new ways of doing business. As well, this became an era of advocating sound business practices and innovations in order to continue a high level of efficiency and activity in many professions.

This business climate resulted in the advancement of the role of the professional photographer. The professional photographer had been around since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. The role usually centered around portrait work. Eventually other assignments materialized. Industry early on looked to photographs to explain and promote products and ultimately improve business. By the early 1920s commercial photography became an important adjunct to advertising agencies who realized it was true that “a picture was worth . . .” Technical changes in printing made it increasingly easier to include images in all types of printed documents.

The selling of products such as the use of automobiles and other consumer items was the first area to see the new emphasis on photographs to increase the demand for items. Industry and commerce were late to the game in using photographs as ways to increase sales volume of their goods and services. However, once they saw the importance of photographs to increase the appeal of their products, they began to make use of commercial photographic services.

The Union Trust Bank, founded in 1915, grew very rapidly in the boom years of the 1920s in Cleveland. Its clients included major steel and manufacturing firms as well as those involved in real estate and construction. The famous names such as Elroy Kulas represented the steel interests (Kulas was president of Otis Steel). The Van Sweringen brothers who developed the Terminal Tower and Shaker Heights and purchased mainline railroads, were clients who represented the emerging group of those involved in land and transportation acquisitions through vertical holding companies.

The leader of the Union Trust Bank during this pivotal period of the 1920s was John Sherwin. Besides his involvement with Union Trust, Mr. Sherwin served on boards of major
firms that were also the bank's clients. Mr. Sherwin also exhibited an interest in the arts as did his wife, Frances. During the 1920s the Union Trust Company was engaged in the construction of its new headquarters at the corner of East Ninth and Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland. In the 1920s this intersection was the crossroads of Cleveland's commerce and because of the city's prominence, the important point for commerce in the entire Midwest. The bank hired the Chicago firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White to design this new structure which was to be the largest office building between New York and Chicago. This firm would remain in Cleveland working during the period 1925-27 on the Terminal Tower complex. The bank building, in a neoclassic design, featured an incredible series of murals and other details in its interior. At the same time the bank launched its new monthly publication, *Trade Winds*. *Trade Winds* featured articles written either by bank personnel or by invited well-known names in business and finance. Articles discussed developments in business, commerce and industry that would appeal to local businessmen. The publication was illustrated at first with paintings and drawings and later with photographs, some from agencies such as Ewig Galloway, and more often than not, local artists. *Trade Winds* remained a showpiece publication for Union Trust until the bank failed and closed in 1933.4

Photography was a newer art form in this period and its employment in this publication suggests that *Trade Winds* proved to be innovative employing the latest in art. Trends were being set by photographers throughout the nation. One of the local artists whose worked appeared in the publication was Margaret Bourke-White famous for her architectural and industrial views of Cleveland. Margaret Bourke-White obtained the connection for her photographs of Otis Steel through an introduction from John Sherwin to Elroy Kulas.5 Other photographers such as Carl Semon also received commissions from *Trade Winds*.

The use of these images became in part the interest of John Sherwin as a reflection of his sense of taste and interest in the artistic nature of business. This interest probably had two sources. His own personal interest in art was apparent. At home he expressed this interest as did his wife, Frances. Mrs. Sherwin was a member of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Advisory Committee until her death and was instrumental in bringing about the Fine Arts Garden in front of the Cleveland Museum of Art. She was a founder of the Garden Center of Greater Cleveland, now the Cleveland Botanical Garden. In fact, one of the top awards given by the Cleveland Botanical Garden is the Frances McIntosh Sherwin medal. John Sherwin knew that good art was good business. His clients were impressed by the size and beauty of his bank building and were equally enthralled with his bank's glossy magazine with its careful layout and high quality illustrations. In many ways *Trade Winds* and its photographs reflected the several reasons why photographs and their incorporation into commercial
publications satisfied the needs and demands of American business during the boom years of the 1920s.

The rise of photography such as was seen in the images in *Trade Winds* came from another source as well. Mr. Whiting, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, took a personal interest in advancing the exhibition of photographs at the museum, especially images depicting Cleveland industry.* The Cleveland Museum of Art had already taken a pioneering role in creating an interest in photography through its inclusion in the annual May Show. This additional role for photography meant that the field was certainly to gain increased attention. Mr. Whiting went as far as inviting local photographers, including Mr. Semon, to exhibit and sell their photographs in an area near the sales desk at the museum’s entrance. This pioneering effort fit well into the museum’s mission in its early years to promote many art forms and widen the audience attracted to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Cleveland was able to bridge the gap between the role of photography as a commercial one and that of the field of a fine art. The work of such individuals as Carl Semon and also Margaret Bourke-White indicated that photographers could bridge this gap as their work was certainly art; at the same time it also served very well the needs to visually express the new products of business and industry.

The work of the precisionists such as Charles Sheeler reflected this trend towards using photographs. Photographs with their pared-down treatment of industrial subjects became a way of depicting functional machinery and structures, and at the same time the great reliance on technology in their production made them perfect works for the industrial age. Margaret Bourke-White and Carl Semon in their own way carried the message of the precisionists.*

The role of the Cleveland Museum of Art in championing the role of photography applied as well to the work of Ihna Thayer Frary. I. T. Frary was director of publicity and membership at the Cleveland Museum of Art from 1920 to 1946. He was also known for his work documenting the architecture of Ohio in photographs and writing. His most important books included *Early Homes of Ohio*, *Early American Doorways* and *Thomas Jefferson: Architect and Builder*. I. T. Frary was a pioneer architectural historian who helped lead the movement to rediscover and appreciate the architecture of the early American Republic. Mr. Frary’s work in the field of early American architecture coincided with the national movement to restore and reconstruct examples of the nation’s early architecture. His work reflected the construction and restoration of such sites as Colonial Williamsburg, historic Deerfield and Old Sturbridge Village.*

I. T. Frary took the photographs which illustrated his books. They were used in many other publications and became part of the lectures he presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art and other venues. He was able to produce many photographs of structures in the greater
Cleveland area. These photographs of very high quality were not romantic views of the past like those of Wallace Nutting. Instead, I. T. Frary’s work reflected the precisionist ideas of individuals such as Charles Sheeler. Very careful composition and the use of small F-stops resulting in a greater depth of field were hallmarks of I. T. Frary’s work.

As a result of this work, especially since Mr. Frary had a prominent role at the Cleveland Museum of Art, architecture of the early days of the Western Reserve began to be taken seriously. Much like the appearance of Mr. Semon’s photographs, the presence of photographs of early homes of the Western Reserve had more impact than the volumes of text that would have been needed to present the same information.

What is significant about the work of these photographers is that their work was of high quality. But the even more important issue was that photographs had entered the professional arena and that photography was being considered as an important artistic means of expression as well as part of a reputable career as seen in the growing field of commercial photography. Cleveland as the center of the inland empire was following developments seen in other American cities. Certainly New York, Chicago and Los Angeles (especially Hollywood) witnessed the impact of commercial photography. But so did other American cities. Cleveland as a growing and dynamic industrial center of the 1920s adapted the techniques and fashions of the rest of the nation.

Finally, we would like to find out why Cleveland emerged as a center for professional photography. Probably the union of commercial interests such as seen in the world of John Sherwin with his involvement in so many aspects of the business world coupled with his participation in the cultural world was a phenomena which only a city like Cleveland could produce, and only in the 1920s. Certainly Cleveland was known for its contributions during these years to both industry and culture. Industry through its provisions of funding, and cultural institutions as resources, combined to promote the production of and opportunities to view art. Both areas were needed. Industry and cultural institutions combined to mold and promote a sense of taste. Certainly this sense of taste—sometimes a little too magnificent—was seen in Cleveland during the 1920s. These developments did contribute towards a legacy which we still see around us.
Endnotes


2. An examination of the popular magazines of the 1920s reveals an extensive use of photographs to promote products. Speciality magazines such as *House Beautiful, Motor Age* and industrial journals also reveal the growing use of photography.


4. *Trade Winds*, is available at Cleveland Public Library, et.al.


6. See the Whiting Papers, archives Cleveland Museum of Art for an account of the concern Mr. Whiting had for promoting the work of Cleveland photographers of their city.

7. Charles Sheeler's photographs of the Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Plant, and of Ford automobiles present images similar to those produced by Margaret Bourke-White.


9. Wallace Nutting wrote extensively about American and British architecture, furniture and domestic interiors. He published a volume in the 1920s devoted to his views of a precise, formal approach to how photographs of these subjects should be taken. His photographs present accurate yet at the same time picturesque views of these subjects.