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Pair cull LAPD photos

Artlike work gives glimpse into L.A.'s history

By Josh Kleinbaum, Staff Writer

In one long-forgotten photograph, a young boy peers through a car window at the body of a murdered woman inside. In another, a young and handsome President John F. Kennedy lands at LAX.

A shot dating back some 80 years shows two Los Angeles police detectives poking their heads through the entrance to a tunnel used to smuggle booze during the days of Prohibition.

The historical crime scene photographs, long hidden in LAPD archives, have been culled by Lt. John Thomas and Reserve Officer Merrick Morton, who embarked on a treasure hunt and came up with a museum-quality exhibit of photos that provide a stunning glimpse into the history of Los Angeles.

"What better way can you capture a city's history?" Thomas said. "If you go through them, you get a look at fashions, architecture, lifestyles.

"You look at some of those images, and you realize that they're very artistic in their approach to crime scene photos."

Some photos show a period when the bad guys had some class and style a note from a bank robbery tells the teller to smile, while a message scrawled by a burglar on the wall of an apartment simply says, "Thanks, The Falcon."

Then there's a scruffy Charles Manson being booked for the Tate-LaBianca murders and the defeated face of an assault victim, sitting on a bed, bruises showing on her neck and shoulder.

Thomas and Morton have been sorting through negatives of historical Los Angeles Police Department crime scene photos for more than four years. Despite only getting through 40,000 of the nearly 1 million negatives, they've found photos ranging from the grisly scene of the Black Dahlia murder to simple frames of evidence, including one shot of a purse pierced by a bullet.

About 100 of the prints are on display at the Kunsthau Zurich museum in Switzerland in an exhibit titled "The Art of the Archive."

"You would expect to see just nasty things when you see the crime scene photo," Kunsthau curator Tobia Bezzola said. "There's a lot of beauty in it, though.

"These photographers, they really went and looked and saw and showed things that other photographers at the time did not show. There's a tremendous quality to the work."



The LAPD's archive was the most extensive of any law enforcement agency that he could find, Bezzola said.

Envelopes stuffed with negatives had been stored in boxes in a city warehouse for decades, long forgotten. Morton and Thomas discovered them in 2001 when their individual projects converged.

Morton, a film industry photographer, predicted that old crime



LAPD file photo
from a 1929
bootleg raid.

scene photos would make interesting art, and he wanted to create an exhibit of LAPD archive art at his wife's Echo Park gallery, Fototeka. When he asked the city archivist for access to the department's archives, though, he ran into a brick wall.

"She said hell would freeze over before I got access to the archives," Morton said.

Thomas, at the time a sergeant working as an assistant to then-Chief Bernard Parks, wanted to research the history of African-Americans in the department. With Parks' blessing, he was able to get access to the archives to facilitate that research.

In February 2001, Morton and Thomas teamed up, with Morton providing the technical expertise and Thomas providing the access to the archives. Sorting through the negatives quickly became an obsession for both men Morton spent 40 to 50 hours a week on the project; Thomas about 20.

"It was overwhelming," Thomas said. "We basically decided we were going to start at the earliest period."

The project almost stalled before it began, though. The city Fire Department caught wind of the project and determined that the negatives were a fire hazard and had to be destroyed. Only a reprieve from the City Council saved the negatives from destruction.

After the City Council agreed to preserve the negatives, Thomas and Morton recruited two helpers Robin Blackman, Morton's wife, and Tim Wride, then associate curator of photography for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and dived into the archives.

Soon, Morton was named the department's official photo archivist a position created as a result of their work.

Once they were immersed in negatives, the team quickly found the beauty in the images, realizing that a collection of prints would appeal to art fans and history buffs. A small number of prints were featured in Blackman's gallery in September 2001, then in each of the LAPD's 18 stations. A collection of prints was made into a book.

The exhibit then traveled to San Francisco, North Carolina and North Dakota. Bezzola learned of it at a curator's conference in San Francisco. He traveled to Los Angeles to meet Merrick and Blackman, and decided he wanted to stage a show at his Switzerland museum.

Nearly 50,000 people have been through the Zurich exhibit, which opened July 15.

"There's already an institution in Germany that wants to take the show there so it can be seen there," Bezzola said. "There's a very lively interest."

A handful of LAPD photographers from the first half of the 20th century worked in the film industry, and they brought an artistic touch to their police work, Merrick said.

Now the art is becoming a revenue source for the city at Kunsthaus, the museum is selling the exhibit catalog, post cards and a poster. Some of the proceeds go into the city's Intellectual Property fund, and LAPD officials hope that money could come back to the department to better organize the archives and get through the next 960,000 negatives.

"Our goal is to get through them all," said Mary Grady, the LAPD's public information director. "To our knowledge, there's not another police department that has an archive this extensive, that dates back to the 1920s. It's amazing that we have them and that they're in such amazing quality."

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