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IMAGE CONSCIOUS

An adventurous collector's photographs at MOMA.

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"Untitled" (1928-33), by Franz Rob, in "Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909-1949."

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One of the sharpest eyes involved in MOMA's terrific new exhibition, "Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909-1949," wasn't behind a camera. Walther himself is both sophisticated and shrewd. The German collector's adventurous sensibility is front and center in this show of nearly three hundred exceptional pictures. Sixty-five and based in Zurich, Walther has been buying photographs for the better part of his adult life. In the eighties, his prime focus was early-twentieth-century experimental European and American work, but he pushed past the confines of the modernist canon early on. In 2000, at the Metropolitan Museum, Walther's collection of flea-market finds became one of the first shows to put anonymous snapshots on museum walls. "Other Pictures" was groundbreaking, all the more so because, far from looking shabby or out of place, the images looked avant-garde. "Seeing is an act of creation," Walther wrote in the catalogue. "These photographs remind us that the camera can be an extension of genius in the hands of any one of us."

It is this idea that informs and invigorates the MOMA show. Organized by the museum's curators Quentin Bajac and Sarah Hermanson Meister, "Modern Photographs" highlights the collection's mix of the familiar and the little known, refreshing history with a sense of discovery. Iconic images by André Kertész, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Edward Weston, and Lisette Model provide reliable touchstones for viewers, but the show's spark comes from unfamiliar work. Willi Ruge, a German photojournalist with a daredevil streak, may not have a famous name, but a sequence of shots he made during a 1931 parachute jump opens the show on a buoyant note. Ruge's picture of his legs dangling just above an aerial landscape, "Seconds Before Landing," captures the exhibition's sense of innovation and adventure. A wall of pictures by Maurice Tabard, a French photographer ripe for rediscovery, picks up that spirit of experimentation. Like so much of the work here, Tabard's pictures slip between abstraction and representation, often with dreamlike double exposures that turn portraits—of models, a dancer, and Tabard himself—into psychological studies. Throughout the show, a sense of anxious instability is balanced by one of exhilaration. It's a restless mood shared by many young, process-minded photographers working today, and these neo-avant-gardists will find much here to inspire them, from Franz Roh's radical juxtapositions to Oskar Nerlinger's multilayered abstractions.

Even for connoisseurs, "Modern Photographs" is likely to be revelatory, given Walther's understanding of the medium's history. As the mid-century market continues to soar, it's exciting to learn that his collecting focus has shifted to the nineteenth century. "I'm very much a visual explorer," he told me, "and there are still areas that nobody has looked at yet, still bodies of work that are full of surprises." ♦