

Doc Chat Episode Eleven Transcript

KATE CORDES: Hi, everyone! Welcome to Doc Chat. Just wait a minute for everyone to sign on, and then we'll get started. Alright! I think, I think we're good to go. Sorry for the late start, but we're all set now. Again, welcome! Another Thursday, another Doc Chat. I'm Kate Cordes, Associate Director of Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at the New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the Library's most interesting collections and highlights the ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In today's episode, Elizabeth Cronin, Assistant Curator of Photography at the library is joined by Andrea Nelson, Associate Curator in the Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.. Andrea recently published *The New Woman Behind the Camera* to accompany her upcoming exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, which opens in February of 2021. It will then travel to the Met in July. Elizabeth also contributed to this catalog, and congratulations to you both on that. Today, Elizabeth and Andrea will be discussing two different female photographers, Elizabeth Buehrmann and Therese Bonney, and their little known histories expanding the conversation about what defines modern photography and to participate in it. I guess we'll speak for about 10 to 15 minutes, and then we will open up the conversation. Please use the question and answer function rather than the chat function to share your questions and comments, and if you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. And we would also like to know a little bit more about you and what brought you here, so I'm going to just launch a quick poll that I'd like you to fill out. And with that, I will pass it over to our speakers.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: I am not going to fill out the poll. So I just want to introduce, let's see, let's see if I can get -- so here are our names in case you [inaudible] catch that. And then I was going to introduce first these two photographers that we're looking at: Elizabeth Buehrmann was a photographer, a young photographer at the beginning of the 20th century who sort of made her claim to fame with the Pictorialists, which was a group of art photographers in Chicago, but also New York, and all over sort of. But she was an early young member of their group and did a lot of portraits of very notable people. As you see here, the library has a lot of her work. We have over a hundred photographs by her, 52 of them are digitized on digital collection. And here's an early Pictorialist portrait she did of Mrs. Herman Atkins MacNeil, and the boy is holding the buffalo penny, which is what her husband sculpture designed. And then we also -- so Elizabeth Buehrmann was into portraiture, as I said, but then she sort of fell out of fashion, the Pictorialists sort of moved on, the first World War happened, and then she got into advertising. So you see the image for the cigar ad on your screen. And then Therese Bonney is someone else that we have in our collection. We have over 6,000 photographs by Therese Bonney. Unfortunately, not all of them are digitized on Digital Collections. But Bonney not only worked in advertising, that's the signature eventually we'll talk about, but she also became a war photographer and she started out by sort of -- not sort of. She founded her own sort of photo

journalistic agency with her mother and with her sister. And then in the war she was one of the first photographers to photograph the Russian invasion of Finland, and then was an advocate for children, the elderly, basically humanitarian rights. And she produced this book, *Europe's Children*, which you can find in the library's collection, also in other collections. Really interesting photographer by all accounts, both of them are. So I want to move to the two images that we're really going to focus on today. And I will say that Bonney right now on Digital Collections, only about 16 of her photographs are digitized, but we'll get more to how you can use what is on the website after we speak in depth about the photograph. So I really want to start off and ask Andrea a question about how to -- you know, I just briefly told their stories, and they're a lot more complicated than that, but how typical was it of women photographers in the beginning of the 20th century to be -- to, you know, set out on their own to work in advertising, to work in the press, to really make a name for themselves as photographers. And was this work actually typical of the women?

ANDREA NELSON: Well, in the research that I, you know, have done is that, you know, in many ways they are fairly typical. There are many more women than I knew about who were pursuing professional careers in photography, you know, in the 1910s into the 1920s. Of course, at this moment, more and more women are pursuing independent careers and are out into the public sphere. But really the entry point for a lot of women was through studio photography, commercial work. And, you know, you can find a lot of articles from, you know, the late 19th century into the early 20th century that talks about how photography is a career that's really suited for women. Women could teach themselves, anyone could set up their own, you know, dark room or studio in their house. A lot of these articles talk about that, you know, women were -- it was really good for women. You know, they could go out and they could go to their client's houses, they would interact with mothers, you know, you wanted their children's portrait taken, much more easily say than maybe their male colleagues. And they're, you know, you could create advertising work, fashion work, these types of commercial practices. So, you know, in looking at these two images that were either -- that were used for the printed press, that were used for advertisements, in many ways that was fairly typical.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: What do you think -- how do these photographs really go along with modernism? You know, these are these modern women, and how did the work signify modernism?

ANDREA NELSON: Yeah, so -- well, so when we think about, you know, modernism in photography, so, you know, in alignment with growing industrialization, rapid changes that were happening in manufacturing, transportation, and technology in the early 20th century, you know, modernism in photography really started to look at the camera as a direct tool of use for, you know, for artist practitioners. It was much more interested in the inherent properties of the medium, if that makes sense. So even mesh with pictorialism. So rather than say a pictorialist interest in creating a beautiful artistic picture kind of in line with traditional thinking of paintings, drawings, et cetera, you know, modernists wanted to really explore the camera's vision of the world, and they -- this was often, you know, must more abstract vision. It was interested --

photographers were interested then in manipulating camera angles. They often shot their subjects up close. They used radical or innovative propping techniques, and I think, you know, we see that here in these two works. But what I also find interesting is in a lot of past histories of art history of photography, per se, you know, modern photography, avant-garde photography, they would overlook that -- they would overlook advertising photography. They would overlook fashion photography because that wasn't seen as sort of purely artistic. So these works are I think using a lot of modern techniques, a lot of -- a modern approach, but past histories have overlooked them because they were being used for commercial ends. But, you know, I think we can argue that that has always happened with avant-garde practice. You know, that, you know, commercial ends are using these types of techniques to sort of sell products was happening immediately and throughout the 20th century. So they were modern, but they haven't been thought of as modern, if that makes sense.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yeah, I think that you can really see, especially in the way that these photographs are framed. Of course they, you know, I liked your point about the advertising is well taken because if these weren't just advertising photographs, I think people could be very quick to point out, well, you know, the focus on the hands and the focus only on the legs, something that you wouldn't have seen earlier in the 20th century is, you know, that's a really distinct sort of modern angle, only focusing on a certain body part, if you will. But because they're advertising, yeah, they can be really dismissed. But now I don't think that's really the case. I also, I wanted to talk a little bit about how, you know, these two photographers aren't really very well-known, and most, you know, most historians of photography might not even have heard of them. And then if they are well-known, this is not their signature image. So I wanted to take that as an example. I chose these images on purpose, one because they're great images and represent the collection that we have at the library, but also because it's a way to think about how can you take an image that's not canonical that's not super well-known, but to talk about a bigger issue. So what do, you know, what do you think are some of the bigger issues and how we can use these? I mean, we talked a little bit about modernism, but --

ANDREA NELSON: Right, right. Well, and, you know, just the fact that we're looking at two advertisements that are photographs rather than drawings, right? This was a big change in the whole, you know, printed media world, that drawings were falling out of favor for advertisements and fashion images, and photographs were coming in. And, you know, and the camera itself was a very modern technology. But I think when [inaudible] we look at these two works, you know, to think about both I think the depth of their careers, and I think what is very interesting is for these two women but for a lot of photographers working at this time, they were working in a lot of different disciplines, and in a sense that's very modern. And a lot of these disciplines were, the end result was the mass media, the print media, and there was just an unprecedented demand for photographs for illustrated newspapers and magazines. And so, you know, whether you were doing commercial, you know, advertisements, fashion, documentary photography, war photojournalism, you know, this was all, these were all in demand. And if you wanted to really pursue a career as a photographer you really needed to be that flexible. And, you know, I think for the Bonney image, you know, Elizabeth actually mentioned, is she started this illustrated

press agency, so she was supplying, you know, all these different magazines and newspapers with images that they wanted. And this was really a way for photographers to sell their work. There weren't a lot of staff photography, staff photographer positions at magazines and newspapers, and this was really a way to try to earn a living. And, you know, even say for Buehrmann, you're trying to earn a living so that you can continue, you know, a more artistic approach to photography. But I think, you know, these two women bring in new voices, you know, to the history of photography. I think just the idea that, you know, maybe what we would think is a marginal position can be very, very productive, and modernism has so many different guises. You know, I think it too it helps us push beyond, you know, what do we think is a modern photograph? What do we think is appropriate subject matter for art photography or -- these works can then kind of push us to rethink those questions.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yeah, I think you can even go so far, you know, you can say that they make us think about what is art in general, what should be in museum and libraries' collections, you know. And I think they illustrate, you know, how you can think outside the box and, you know, really think about what -- -- also the time period and what was really going on versus what, you know, sort of in standard textbook accounts of what photography was like at the time, what modernism was like at the time. And these are nice. They're not counter examples, but they're definitely different kinds of examples than you would normally see.

ANDREA NELSON: Yeah, yeah. Well, and I think, you know, we've talked a little bit about the Buehrmann image and, you know, you've written a bit about Buehrmann and her connection to the Pictorialists and the secession movement and, you know, she was an admirer of Stieglitz and had correspondents with Stieglitz, you know? And when you look at the Buehrmann photograph, it has resonance with a number of portraits that Stieglitz did of Georgia O'Keeffe, and these were around 1917, 1918, 1919. And I think what is interesting when we start to look at these women who are less known, it can help us rethink how we talk about influence. And I think for too many -- for too long, you know, histories have really focused on maybe leaders of movements, you know, great masters, you know, head figures of photography movements. And, you know, someone like Stieglitz is really, really important to the history of photography, but, you know, how do we think about these types of resonances and, you know, how does influence work, and how can we not sort of always make it an originator and an imitator type of relationship, if that makes sense.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yeah, absolutely. I think it might be time for us to open up to questions, right?

KATE CORDES: You have a few minutes left, we can keep going.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Oh, okay! But I actually also wanted to say, you know, point out why, you know, why are these two photographers not more well-known given the successful careers that they had.

ANDREA NELSON: Yeah.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: And I think we touched a little bit on that, but --

ANDREA NELSON: No, I mean, I think that's a good question and it, you know, I'm almost a little embarrassed to say how little I knew of Bonney's work, you know, and having, you know -- I'm a student of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, and she did so much and she, you know, she [inaudible]. You know, she -- and, you know, and how did I really not know about her. It's a good question.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yeah, I'll just tell the audience that, you know, she was publishing her war photographs in all the major news outlets and newspapers when the war first broke out and when it was happening, and she very quickly had an exhibition of her prints at the Library of Congress, and then another one at the Museum of Modern Art. And she was kind of all over the place for the time of the war and extremely well-known. So it's interesting that that, you know, just sort of fell away.

ANDREA NELSON: Right. Well, and, you know, we've talked about this because you have written about images of children for the catalog, and, you know, how does the subject matter come into play for these photographers to be forgotten? You know, if they're focusing on -- Bonney is focusing in her war photography on the effects of the war on people, on children, on the people who are forced to migrate. You know, that wasn't maybe the frontlines, it wasn't the exciting action, so to speak. Is that a reason, right?

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Right. I mean, it's often that, you know, the sense -- more sentimental images aren't taken as seriously even if they are quite effective and prominent --

ANDREA NELSON: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: -- in the history. Yeah, so it's an interesting issue, and I think it just sort of goes in trends of what people think is interesting and what people think to look at. Sort of, oh, is this more, let's see, is this more avant-garde, should we only look at these things. And then inevitably, whatever angle one takes, something gets left out and I think that's what happened to these women.

ANDREA NELSON: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Mm-hmm.

KATE CORDES: Okay, I think we can move it over to questions from the attendees. I have one about, you mentioned modernism -- and these are, you know, female photographers, but modernism, I usually associate it with male photographers. Is there something unique about female modernism that's obvious in these photos?

ELIZABETH CRONIN: That's a good question! You know, I think in these particular photos, I don't think it -- no, there's -- I don't think there is. I don't know what you would say, Andrea.

ANDREA NELSON: Well, I mean, I --

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Purely visual, I don't think you can say, oh, that's female or that's male.

ANDREA NELSON: Yeah, I mean definitely there's a dominance of form, right, in modernism. And all photographers, you know, who embrace modernism embrace these forms. You know, they -- you can think of someone like Germaine Krull who was really important in, you know, industrial. She did great industrial images, she did fashion, she did, you know, nude photographs, Margaret Bourke-White. So I don't -- in some ways it's a complicated question, like how does gender fit into this? And, you know, maybe sometimes it doesn't, per se, in the individual's approach to their practice. You find it in their reception. You know, you find that women photographers are always, almost always discussed through their gender. But I think, you know, today we, yeah, you know, biological sex, we don't really see the sort of direct connection. Is there something essentially female about these images? I don't really think so. But was there more accessibility to what we would maybe call a soft topic of the home front say during the war. You know, women maybe had barriers that they couldn't quite -- you know, there were only a few women who were granted access say to the warfront or things like that.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: I would also add, if I can jump in, that, you know, advertising was actually a hard field for women to be involved in, and that's -- Elizabeth Buehrmann tried her hand at advertising photograph and ultimately didn't really produce that much, and she then quit photography all together. She said -- we have a letter from her that says, you know, she basically just broke down and couldn't do it anymore. And I think that, you know, yes, in reception and also in there, you know, that it became very much a male dominated profession, and there aren't very many -- I mean, maybe I'll be corrected after this show, but, you know, I think it was much harder for them to get involved in some of the advertising, at least the high profile assignments. Not the children, not some of the other soft topics that were mentioned earlier.

KATE CORDES: Here's a question from Ian: "Is there a connection between these two photographers and Photo-Secession?"

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yes.

[Laughs]

Elizabeth Buehrmann was a member of the -- was an associate member of the Photo-Secession.

KATE CORDES: And for those of us unfamiliar with that?

ELIZABETH CRONIN: It was a group of -- it was earlier, it was around, you know, the 1900s, 19-teens, a group of photographers who sort of named themselves the Photo-Secession and they were concerned with photography as a high, you know, high art form so, you know, so that it would reach the status of painting and other sort of higher culture so that it -- that's a very simplified definition of it. But it was a group of photographers who were really striving and working together to redefine what photography was and how it was received. And the modernist then kind of went against that, stylistically at least.

KATE CORDES: Another question from Madeline: "How typical," this goes back to an earlier conversation, "how typical is it in the history of photography for women's photographic achievements to be marginalized? In light of what you've shown today, do you think the history of photography needs to be rewritten?"

ANDREA NELSON: Well, you know, I think there's been really, really great work being done on women photographers, you know, going on, you know, 10, 15 some years. But I will say when I started thinking about my larger project of modern women photographers, and, you know, this was, you know, at least six years ago or so, I just still felt like they weren't represented enough in general histories of photography. I think a lot of people had trouble calling up names of women photographers. So it just seemed like there's still a lot more work to be done, and I think that, you know, we do make an argument in the catalog that we do have to push the field, we have to rewrite some of the past histories and continue to, you know, really expand the canon. So there's a lot more work to be done, there's a -- there are lots of names, but not enough research, not enough, you know, information about a number of women photographers. So I look forward to more work by, you know, more scholars and more people interested.

KATE CORDES: One last question from John: "With commercial images being denied status as art for so many decades and color not being allowed in photography until the early 1970s, can you identify what techniques or qualities are now automatically dismissed as not art?"

ELIZABETH CRONIN: I think it's -- that's a really good and a tough question because, you know, a lot of art now is all -- it all depends on the maker, on the idea behind it. It's not just about appearances, so there's a lot going on with what's, you know, what's considered art and what's not considered art.

ANDREA NELSON: I mean, I think too far, you know, some of these works from the 20s, 30s, and 40s, there's still very much an interest in sort of print quality and -- and, you know, the approach of the photographer. You know, how are they using these modernist techniques? How are they cropping and creating, capturing lights, and, you know, I'm arguing and I think Elizabeth has too, you know, that when we look at this really beautiful print by Buehrmann that she pasted in a press book, like a scrapbook, and you know, the side, you know, the page next to it is a cutout of the advertisement. But, you know, she really came to the practice, you know, thinking

a lot about composition and, you know, she's made a really strong photograph. And I don't think it takes away from the photograph that, you know, it was the basis for an advertisement. But I, you know, this gets into sort of, you know, maybe more subjective analysis of looking at how the image is framed, how, you know, the quality of the print, et cetera.

KATE CORDES: Thank you. Elizabeth, would you be able, just to wrap this up, talk about how people can access the images of the collections?

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Yeah, sure! So I have here a little slide that shows you. You can go to Digital Collections, digitalcollections.nypl.org. And then you can just type in Therese Bonney and you'll get the results here, or Elizabeth Buehrmann. In the Elizabeth Buehrmann section, there is a short little description of the collection, and also you are more than welcome to email us at photography@nypl.org if you have any questions about any of these photographers or need help navigating the collection. We are here for you throughout this pandemic in all your photography needs. And, you know, we're -- please feel free to reach out to anyone at the library, or the National Gallery of Art.

KATE CORDES: Right. And just in closing, I'm going to relaunch the poll in a second, but I accidentally closed it, but these images and other resources, along with the video of this episode and a transcript will be published shortly in a blog post on the NYPL website, and we'll send out that link to everyone who registered. All previous episodes of Doc Chat can be found there as well. And, again, Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. The next one is on December 3rd where we will look again at photographs, this time at photographs of 20th century protests in New York City. Information in the chat. You can register here. And, as it says on the slide here, you can look out for future Doc Chats, sign up for our research newsletter, follow us on social media, and all those good things. I'm going to relaunch the poll, but before we also sign off, one question about the collections, Elizabeth, which I know you may not like, but do you know how they got them? Like how -- I know this is a hard question, like how did we get --

ELIZABETH CRONIN: No, no, I do actually! The Elizabeth Buehrmann photographs came from Elizabeth Buehrmann. She wrote -- she got in touch with the librarian who was at the picture collection, Romana Javitz, and they exchanged letters, and then she ended up selling her work to the library. And then the Bonney photograph I'm not sure exactly, but I think they also came through the picture collection.

KATE CORDES: They approached the library? Well --

ELIZABETH CRONIN: I believe so, yeah. Or, you know, maybe it also came through Romana Javitz. She was a big mover and shaker in the picture collection.

KATE CORDES: Alright. Well with that, thank you so much for everyone, and we hope to see you again, and thanks Elizabeth and Andrea! Oh I know, from Jessica Klein, it was a gift from J. Walter Thompson Company, [inaudible]. There we go.

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Thank you, Jessica!

KATE CORDES: Insider knowledge, Jessica, thank you!

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Jessica is the head of the picture collection, so she knows.

KATE CORDES: Alright everyone, thanks so much!

ELIZABETH CRONIN: Thank you!

ANDREA NELSON: Thank you!