

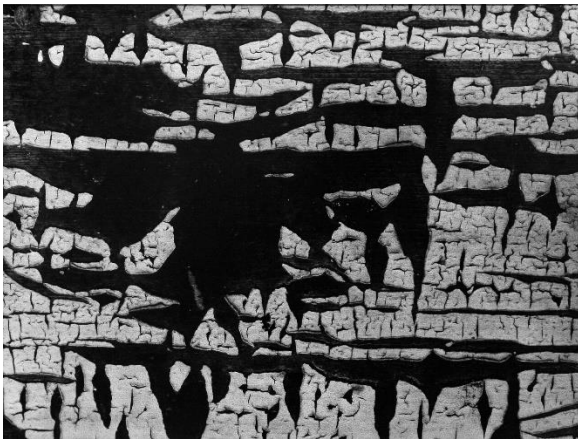
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 14, 2020

VMFA receives more than 8,000 photographs from the Aaron Siskind Foundation
Gift represents the largest single donation of photographs in VMFA's history; VMFA will take over the administration of the Aaron Siskind Fellowship Prize.



Aaron Siskind (American, 1903-1991), *Gloucester*, 1944, Gelatin silver print, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Aaron Siskind Foundation, 2019 © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.



L: Aaron Siskind, (American, 1903-1991), *New York*, 1947, Gelatin silver print, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Aaron Siskind Foundation, 2019 © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.



R: Aaron Siskind, (American, 1903-1991), *Chicago*, 1953, Gelatin silver print, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Aaron Siskind Foundation, 2019 © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.

Richmond, Virginia — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has been given an extraordinary gift of more than 8,000 photographs by Aaron Siskind (1903–1991) from the Aaron Siskind Foundation in New York. Established by the artist in 1984, the foundation's mission has been to preserve and protect Siskind's artistic legacy, as well as to foster knowledge and appreciation for photography through research, publications, exhibitions and an annual fellowship prize for individual artists. The foundation recently decided to dissolve its operations and transfer the collection to an

American art museum that would be willing to administer the annual fellowship prize and care for, interpret, and display the foundation's core collection of Siskind's photographs. VMFA was awarded this major gift thanks to the museum's demonstrated commitment to photography and its outstanding fellowship program. The transfer of the collection to VMFA took place on January 1, 2020.

"After a thorough search of the major art institutions across the country, the Aaron Siskind Foundation was delighted to find that the visionary leadership, ambitious plans for the future, and commitment to carrying on Aaron Siskind's legacy made VMFA the ideal choice as the new and permanent home for the collection and administration of the Siskind Prize," says Victor Schrager, President of the Aaron Siskind Foundation.

"With this remarkable donation from the Aaron Siskind Foundation, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts owns what Siskind and his colleagues considered to be the finest prints of every important work he ever made," says VMFA Director and CEO Alex Nyerges. "Comparable to the key sets of Paul Strand's photographs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Alfred Stieglitz's photographs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., this gift also allows VMFA to become an important center for the study and appreciation of Siskind's life and work, as well as photography in general."

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Siskind was born and raised in New York City and graduated from the College of the City of New York in 1926. Three years later, Siskind received a large-format view camera as a wedding gift when he married Sidonie Glatter. He took his first photographs with this camera on their honeymoon in Bermuda in 1930. Siskind later joined the Film and Photo League in New York. Inspired by the social documentary photography that he saw at the Film and Photo League, Siskind spent the next decade working as a street photographer, most notably producing his acclaimed *Harlem Document* series. In the early 1940s, he shifted to more abstract and symbolic work, often based on found objects.

Siskind supported himself by teaching in the New York public school system until 1949, when he resigned and briefly tried to earn his living as a freelance photographer. Unable to do so, Siskind moved to Chicago at the invitation of fellow photographer Harry Callahan, whom he met in the summer of 1950 at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, where they both taught photography. Siskind went on to teach photography at the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago from 1951 to 1970. By the 1950s, his work had become widely associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement thanks to his acclaimed photographs of the walls of buildings, whose flat, variegated surfaces enlivened by peeling paint or the remnants of torn posters provided a visual counterpart to the work of Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and other painters of the New York School. Siskind's photographs were shown alongside the paintings of these artists in a series of exhibitions at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York between 1947 and 1951. At a time when photography rarely achieved equality with painting as a fine art, Siskind's success in the broader New York art scene signaled an important advancement for the medium.

In 1971, Siskind was appointed as a professor of photography at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), a position he held until his retirement in 1976. He spent the next two decades traveling extensively, including extended trips to Italy, Morocco, Mexico and Peru. In 1975, he made an acclaimed series of abstract compositions in Peru based on the tightly packed stone wall at Sacsayhuamán which, with its geometric patterning, continued the artist's interest in finding visual equivalents for contemporary abstract painting in his stark black and white compositions. When Siskind died in 1991, he held a pre-eminent place in the history of the medium thanks to his career-long dedication to the idea that photography can be an abstract form of expression and an aesthetic end in itself.

The gift includes the core collection of 4,062 photographs that represent the artist's finest works from every series and period of his career. VMFA will also receive approximately 3,900 duplicate prints which it will donate to other museums, including those in cities and places where Siskind lived and worked, as well as countries he visited at the end of his career. The museum has also agreed to take on the responsibility of administering the Aaron Siskind Individual Photographer's Fellowship, which provides cash grants to artists working in photography and lens-based media. Siskind established this grant to assist independent photographers to pursue personal projects without bias to

any particular form of the medium. VMFA is in an excellent position to administer this annual prize due to its Visual Arts Fellowship Program that has supported Virginia artists for the past 80 years.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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