



Two of Vivian Maier's
Chicago street
scenes from the
1950s and 1960s



To those who knew her, Vivian Maier was a loving if eccentric nanny to three adoring boys. But what no one suspected was what she got up to on her days off... KATE SALTER reveals how this mysterious Mary Poppins figure came to be exposed as a photographic great

Supercalifragilistic snaps

When John Maloof bought a box of old photographic negatives at an auction four years ago, he had no idea that he had unwittingly discovered a rare talent in mid-century street photography. Maloof, then a 26-year-old estate agent and eBay entrepreneur, had hoped the box would provide some images for a book he was putting together on his Chicago neighbourhood. He bid \$400 for the box, won it and took it home to inspect the contents. None of it looked of much use, however, so he put it away and forgot about it. Months later he had another look. What he saw, to his untrained eye, looked really rather good – black and white images of Chicago street scenes from

the 1950s and 1960s, its scruffy children, sleeping tramps and upper-class fur-clad women. As he later found out, this was the work of Vivian Maier, a nanny whose amateur photographs have caused a sensation and received worldwide acclaim.

Maloof had acquired about 30,000 negatives but he says, 'I didn't know what street photography was.' He decided to see what other people thought of the photographs, so posted some of them on the photo-sharing website Flickr. From the responses he received Maloof realised he may have stumbled upon something special. The reviews were not only positive, some even thought they were so good they had to be a hoax. Soon the local

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newspapers and television stations were reporting the remarkable discovery and from there followed press coverage in *Time* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal* and on CBS news. The *New York Times* wrote, 'Vivian Maier, evidently one of America's more insightful street photographers, has at last been discovered.'

Not only are the photographs captivating, but so is the story of Maloof's search for the identity of whoever took them. The auction house told him that the box had been retrieved from a storage locker that had been repossessed for non-payment. Maloof searched through the negatives for clues. Finally, in April 2009, he found the name Vivian Maier written on a photo-processing envelope. When Maloof typed her name into Google he found an obituary from the *Chicago Tribune* – Maier had died three days earlier. 'Vivian Maier, proud native of France and Chicago resident for the last 50 years died peacefully on Monday. Second mother to John, Lane and Matthew. A free and kindred spirit who magically touched the lives of all who knew her.'

Filing away negatives one day, Maloof found an address for someone called Avron Gensburg. Searching the Chicago directory, he found a Lane Gensburg, who turned out to be the same 'Lane' mentioned in Maier's obituary. From 1956 until 1972 Vivian Maier had been the live-in nanny to the three Gensburg boys. Today it is the Gensburgs who have been able to shed most light on the life of this eccentric photographer.

'She was like Mary Poppins,' Lane told a newspaper. 'She had an amazing ability to relate to children.' In fact, Maier seems to have been a little more complicated than Poppins, and other people who knew her have described her abrasive manner and odd dress sense (wearing a heavy overcoat and stout shoes even in the height of summer). The Gensburgs, however, insist she was nothing but kind to them. They remember her taking them to Chinese New Year parades or foraging for wild strawberries. On her days off Maier would go out with her camera around her neck and wander the streets taking photographs. Her makeshift darkroom was a bathroom in the Gensburgs' house.

Maloof's attic is now full of boxes of Maier's possessions, given to him by the Gensburgs (who continued to look after her, finding her the nursing home where she eventually died aged 83). Among the boxes he found a birth certificate: Maier was born in New York in 1926 to a French mother and Austrian father. After her father left, Maier and her mother returned to France, where they lived until 1951 when the 25-year-old Maier left on her own for New York. In 1956 she answered the Gensburgs'

advert for a nanny, although Nancy Gensburg, the boys' mother, said, 'She really wasn't interested in being a nanny at all, but she didn't know how to do anything else.' Maier never spoke about her life, or her past, to Nancy. If anyone referred to her as Mrs Maier she would correct them, 'Miss Maier, and I'm proud of it.' She never spoke about why she took so many photographs, but Maloof's collection contains four decades' worth of images, from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Maloof now owns about 100,000 of Maier's negatives, which he is gradually archiving and showing on his blog vivianmaier.com. He is co-directing a documentary about Maier's life and is overseeing a book that will be published later this year. Her work will also be shown in the London Street Photography Festival in July. Archiving Maier's work is a daunting task, but Maloof says he feels duty-bound to tell her story. 'Now our goal is to get her name out there. To get Vivian Maier into the history books.' ●

Photographs by Vivian Maier, including a self-portrait below

The London Street Photography Festival is at various locations in London from 7 to 17 July (londonstreetphotographyfestival.org)



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