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How We Saved James Van Der Zee's Photo Archive From The Garbage Collectors on Lenox Avenue!

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, March 10th, 2021

Featured photo: Florence Mills, Photograph by James Van Der Zee, Harlem, 1930

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As curator of the *Harlem On My Mind* exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, I was responsible for providing photographer James Van Der Zee with the prominence that he deserved for his masterful chronicle of life in Harlem during the first half of the 20th century. To say that he had been a neglected genius would be an understatement. In retrospect, it can be said that his photographs are one of the most significant records of the transformation of Harlem as a consequence of the Post World I Great Migration of African Africans from The South to The North.

In the 1920s and 1930s, most American cities hosted a neighborhood photography studio where people came to be memorialized in their best attire. Photographers used 8 x 10 inch glass plate negative cameras which provided superb details. In most cases, their cameras never left their studios. However, James Van Der Zee took his camera everywhere in Harlem: people's homes, churches, night clubs and political demonstrations. Prescient, he used an 8 x 10 camera to capture his contemporary world as though it were a 35mm Leica which did not become available until the 1950s. Therefore, his photographs offer intimate views of life in Harlem over six decades.

His exposure at The Metropolitan Museum of Art did not translate into financial security. When unable to pay rent in 1969, his landlord, a Harlem judge, decided to remove all of his possessions — including thousands of glass plate negatives — to the Lenox Avenue sidewalk awaiting garbage collection.

Van Der Zee was desperate. He would call me every morning before 9:00AM pleading for help. When I proposed a story on this impending crisis to John Morris, then picture editor of *The New York Times*, he said, "Everything associated with *Harlem On My Mind* is so toxic here that no editor would touch it." After being evicted, *The New York Times* ran a story confirming the removal of his photos and personal belongings.

With funds that I administered at the New York State Council on the Arts, Reggie McGhee, a photographer who had been on the *Harlem On My Mind* staff, rented a truck and storage space. He was custodian of Van Der Zee's archive until Van Der Zee married Donna, a woman fifty years his

junior, around 1980. They lived in a project apartment in the 80s on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She arranged sales and publications which enhanced his reputation. The majority of photographs are in the collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Others are in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Photography dealer Howard Greenberg represents the estate.

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