

# DICK SWANSON, PHOTOGRAPHER: BIOGRAPHY AND CAREER INFORMATION

## QUICK FACTS ABOUT RICHARD C. "DICK" SWANSON AND HIS PHOTOGRAPHY

- Born in 1933 in Caro, Michigan (grew up in nearby Vassar)
- As a teenager owned a commercial photography business
- Between 1948-1952 created hundreds of images with a Graflex large format 4x5 camera (photo journalism and social documentary styles)
- Moved to South Florida in 1961 to practice dentistry
- From the 1970s to 2000s lived part time in Western North Carolina
- Participated in photography workshops led by Ruth Bernhard, Eva Rubinstein and Garry Winogrand
- From the 1970s to 2000s created thousands of images with a 35mm SLR in a range of styles including abstract, experimental and "street photography"
- Referred to his portfolio as "Second Generation Photographs" because they reflected two eras in America separated by 30 years in the life of the photographer
- Exhibited his prints in over 70 national and international exhibitions, including dozens of national juried shows
- Was an amateur jazz piano player, an early member of the American Kitefliers Association, and an avid recreational kayaker
- Died in 2009 in Fernandina Beach, Florida, at the age of 76

## DISTRIBUTION OF DICK SWANSON'S PHOTOGRAPHY EQUIPMENT, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVE

- The Swanson family donated much of Dick Swanson's darkroom equipment, supplies and photography library to Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C., the University of North Carolina Asheville, and Phil Mechanic Studios in Asheville's River Arts District.
- The Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) eventually will house the Richard C. "Dick" Swanson Collection in its archives. The collection includes 300+ prints, original negatives, and personal papers.
- Several other institutions across the country have acquired extra original darkroom prints. These institutions include:
  - Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, North Carolina. 13 prints.
  - Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, Florida. 20 prints.
  - Davidson College Art Galleries (Van Every/Smith Galleries), Davidson, North Carolina. 6 prints.
  - Florida Museum of Photographic Arts, Tampa, Florida. 17 prints.
  - Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. 5 prints.
  - Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Michigan. 4 prints.
  - The Light Factory, Charlotte, North Carolina. 9 prints.
  - Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona State College (Daytona Beach, Florida). 30 prints.
  - University of Michigan Museum of Art, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). 23 prints.

## **BIOGRAPHY AND ARTISTIC ANALYSIS BY MARK SWANSON**

### ***The Young Commercial Photographer and Social Documentarian (Michigan, 1940s-50s)***

Richard Conrad "Dick" Swanson was born on May 2, 1933, in Caro, Michigan, and grew up in nearby Vassar. The middle child of Dr. Ewald C. Swanson and Mrs. Alma Swanson, *née* Weidemann, Dick Swanson took an interest in photography at an early age; one of his earliest photos is an image made with a pinhole camera in 1947.

While a student at Vassar High School Swanson bought a professional Graflex Speed Graphic 4x5 large format camera and started his own commercial photography business, the Vassar Photo Service. Between 1948 and 1952 he took hundreds of photographs for local newspapers and businesses, as well as the high school. These black and white images captured virtually every aspect of a typical small Midwestern U.S. town shortly after World War II. The subjects included school cooks and football players; power plants and old hotel rooms; car wrecks and weddings. Several images documented post-war events such as memorial ceremonies and the immigration of European refugees.

Some of the more interesting photographs of this period come from Swanson's coverage of the Vassar Centennial celebration in 1949. Over several days, as residents donned vintage nineteenth-century clothing and participated in activities of a bygone era, Swanson created dozens of striking (and often humorous) images in which time and place are ambiguous, and whose subjects appear at once familiar and strange. Like the Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s and early 1940s, Swanson understood that a documentary photograph could also have aesthetic value.

### ***Starting a Dental Career and a Family (Michigan and South Florida, mid 1950s-mid 1960s)***

After graduating from high school, Swanson attended Albion College where he took photos for his fraternity. He then went to the University of Michigan School of Dentistry in Ann Arbor, where he met his future wife, nursing student Josephine "Jo" Osmun. He and Jo moved to Lake Worth, Florida in 1961 with their first son Michael, and later had two more children, Mark and Matthew.

Having shifted his focus to studying for school, establishing a dental practice and raising a family, Swanson's photographic activities from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s generally revolved around documenting family events (usually with a medium format camera).

### ***Photographic Experimentation and Mastery (South Florida, late 1960s-early 70s)***

In the late 1960s Swanson decided to return to photography as a serious artistic endeavor, focusing on black and white image making. He purchased a 35mm SLR camera, built his own darkroom, began to assemble a large library of books on photography technique and history, and started taking pictures whenever he had free time.

In 1970 Swanson entered his first juried exhibition after resuming photography – and won "Best of Show." In 1973 he attended a workshop led by renowned photographer Ruth Bernhard, who inspired Swanson to refine his craft. His early 1970s photographs generally were abstract, conceptual or whimsical images often created with the assistance of family members or darkroom techniques. The photographs demonstrate a mastery of composition and use of light in addition to a well-developed sense of improvisation.

During this period Swanson continued to photograph family events and travel (now using 35mm cameras and Kodachrome slides). He also pursued two of his other interests: kite making/flying (he was an early member of the American Kitefliers Association) and music (he was a self-taught amateur jazz piano player).

### ***Putting Down Roots in Western North Carolina (1973-74)***

In 1973 Swanson and his wife decided to build a vacation home further north to get away from the hot Florida summers. They chose the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina and in 1974

oversaw the completion of their “cabin in the woods” in the small town of Newland. Swanson would soon divide his time between Florida and North Carolina, where he became enamored with the southern Appalachian culture, picturesque setting, and outdoor recreational opportunities (especially hiking and kayaking). He almost always had a camera with him when he ventured out.

### ***The Contemporary Artist (mid 1970s-1980s)***

By the mid-1970s Swanson had become familiar with the photography of his contemporaries, including Mark Cohen, Bruce Davidson, Elliott Erwitt, Lee Friedlander, Eva Rubinstein and Garry Winogrand, and he participated in workshops led by the latter two artists. Swanson quickly expanded his subject matter and approach. Exploring his South Florida environs, he found himself drawn to local fairs and flea markets and their variety of people and activities. The result was a collection of fascinating visual documents of human character, culture and place.

Swanson often referred to his portfolio of older and newer works as “Second Generation Photographs” because they reflected two eras in America separated by 30 years in the life of the photographer. Aesthetically speaking, much of the imagery Swanson created in the 1940s and 1950s was part of the social documentary tradition, so his pursuit of contemporary “street photography” in the 1970s and 1980s was a natural extension of an earlier approach to image making. No doubt his early experience, combined with the freedom of movement afforded by an SLR camera, gave him the confidence to capture his later subjects with greater intimacy and improvisation. These qualities characterized most of his 1980s photographs, whether taken at a Florida flea market, along a California street or on a North Carolina family’s porch.

During the 1980s Swanson’s photographs were accepted into dozens of national juried exhibitions and won several awards. In 1986 his work was featured in the exhibition *New Developments: Contemporary American Photo Work* at the Meisel Gallery in New York City. Many museums and other institutions acquired his photographs for their permanent collections.

### ***Returning Home (Michigan and North Carolina, 1990s-2000s)***

By the 1990s Swanson felt he had achieved as much as he could in the fine art photography world, and as he transitioned into retirement he adopted a more relaxed approach to image making. He and his wife sold their house in Lake Worth and moved to a smaller home in Fernandina Beach, Florida. But North Carolina was where they preferred to spend their time and by now they had expanded their “cabin in the woods” into a proper home; Swanson even recreated his original Florida darkroom in North Carolina. In his new darkroom Swanson printed several copies of his best photographs and donated a complete set of prints to the library in Vassar, Michigan, where he would travel frequently to visit his mother and go kayaking with a friend from his college days.

Swanson continued to take photographs in Western North Carolina, documenting the local people and culture in various communities in Avery, Mitchell and Watauga counties. He created some of his last photographs for a workshop at nearby Penland School of Craft. For the workshop he converted a vintage Graflex 4x5 camera into a pinhole-style camera, returning to a format he had used as a teenager, now with more intentional aesthetic goals. The resulting images are a series of ethereal landscapes and ghostly self-portraits that show a man near the end of his life but still exploring his creativity.

Swanson was in north Florida in the spring of 2009 when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had hoped to return to North Carolina one last time but the disease and the treatments took too great a toll. Swanson died on December 14, 2009 in Fernandina Beach, Florida, at the age of 76.

### ***The Richard C. “Dick” Swanson Collection***

After Dick Swanson’s death his son Mark started the search for an institution that would preserve his father’s photography for posterity. In 2016, the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) acquired Swanson’s core photography collection for its archives. The collection includes over 300 prints, original negatives, and personal papers. Several other institutions across the country have acquired extra original darkroom prints.

## EDUCATION

Photography workshops:

- Eric Renner & Nancy Spencer ("Pinhole & Zone Plate Photography"), Penland, NC, 2000
- Todd Walker, Lake Worth, FL, 1984
- Garry Winogrand, St. Paul, MN, 1981
- Eva Rubinstein, Minneapolis, MN, 1979
- Ruth Bernhard, Woodman, WI, 1973

Coursework in photography, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, 1979-81

Doctor of Dental Surgery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 1960

Bachelor of Arts, Albion College, Albion, MI, 1955

## EXHIBITIONS, SELECTED

- 2007 *Vassar – Through the Lens: A Photo Exhibit of the Work of Richard Swanson*, Bullard Sanford Memorial Library, Vassar, MI (solo)
- 1997 *A Retrospective of Dick Swanson Photographs*, Bullard Sanford Memorial Library, Vassar, MI (solo)
- 1986 *New Developments: Contemporary American Photo Work*, Meisel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1985 *Atkins on Huron Avenue*, Vassar, MI (solo)
- 1985 Governors State University, Park Forest, IL (three person)
- 1985 Eye Gallery, San Francisco, CA (three person)
- 1984 *Dick Swanson Retrospective: Second Generation Photographs*, Society for Photographic Education (SPE) National Conference, Riverside, CA (portfolio viewing)
- 1984 *Dick Swanson: Second Generation Photographs*, Bay Vista Gallery, Florida International University, North Miami, FL (solo)
- 1949 *Vassar Centennial*, Vassar, MI (solo)

## EXHIBITIONS, GROUP

- 1986 *Boundaries*, County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ, nat'l juried, **Honorable Mention**
- 1986 *Florida Focus III*, Northwood Institute, West Palm Beach, FL
- 1986 Virginia Intermont College, Bristol, VA
- 1986 Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY
- 1986 Stetson University, DeLand, FL
- 1986 Florida School of the Arts, Palatka, FL
- 1986 Edison Community College, Ft. Myers, FL
- 1986 Brevard Art Center, Brevard, FL
- 1986 Florida Junior College at Jacksonville, Jacksonville, FL
- 1986 Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, FL
- 1986 Spokane Falls Community College, Spokane, WA
- 1985 *The Finished Print*, Aetna Institute Gallery, Hartford, CT, nat'l juried, catalog
- 1985 *National Aperture 85*, Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC, nat'l juried, **Third Place Award**
- 1985 *Black to White*, Danadell Gallery, Houston, TX, nat'l juried, **Honorable Mention**
- 1985 *Contemporary Trends – Photo 85*, Race Street Gallery, Grand Rapids, MI, nat'l juried
- 1985 Shelby Art League, Shelby, NC, nat'l juried
- 1985 *Press, Publicity, Paparazzi*, North Miami Museum and Art Center, North Miami, FL, nat'l juried, **Best of Category** and **Honorable Mention**, catalog
- 1985 *North American International*, Florida Institute of Technology, Jensen Beach, FL
- 1985 *Woman's Work*, Edens Gallery, Columbia College, Columbia, SC, **First Purchase Award**
- 1985 *Magic Silver Show*, Murray State University, Murray, KY, nat'l juried
- 1985 California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA
- 1985 Governmental Building, West Palm Beach, FL
- 1985 *The Florida Document*, DBCC Gallery of Fine Arts, Daytona Beach, FL
- 1985 Florida Institute of Technology, Jensen Beach, FL
- 1985 Performing Arts Center and Theater, Clearwater, FL
- 1985 North Miami Museum and Art Center, North Miami, FL
- 1985 Manatee Junior College, Bradenton, FL

1985 University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

## EXHIBITIONS, GROUP (CONTINUED)

- 1984 Front Street Gallery, Wilmington, NC
- 1984 Visual Arts Gallery, Pensacola Junior College, Pensacola, FL
- 1984 Art Source Gallery, Flint, MI
- 1984 *Motordrive*, Alfred P. Sloan Museum, Flint, MI, nat'l juried
- 1984 *The Dog Show*, Eye Gallery, San Francisco, CA, nat'l juried
- 1984 *Natural World Photographic Competition*, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, PA, nat'l juried
- 1984 *Dwellings*, County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ, nat'l juried, catalog
- 1984 *The American Works on Paper Exhibition*, Zanner Gallery, Rochester, NY
- 1984 *East Texas International Photography Contest*, East Texas State University, Commerce, TX, **First and Third Place Awards**
- 1984 *Fourth International Sam Houston Photography Society Competition*, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, **Second and Third Place Awards**
- 1984 *Henley Southeastern Spectrum Third Annual Juried Exhibition*, Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC, **Honorable Mention**, catalog
- 1984 *Gender Construction: A Visual Inquiry into Gender and Photographic Representation*, Handwerker Gallery, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY, nat'l juried, catalog
- 1984 *U.S. Biennial II*, Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, nat'l juried, catalog
- 1984 North Carolina State University, Student Center, Raleigh, NC
- 1984 Spartanburg Art Center, Spartanburg, SC
- 1984 *The Road Show*, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
- 1984 The Light Factory, Charlotte, NC, nat'l juried
- 1984 *United States National Fine Arts Competition and International Exhibition*, State Capitol Building, Tallahassee, FL (one of 20 selected from 200 finalists for European Tour)
- 1984 American Center of Fine Arts, Paris, France
- 1984 Académie Internationale Burckhardt, Rome, Italy
- 1984 Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich, Germany
- 1984 Daytona Beach Community College, Daytona Beach, FL
- 1984 *Light Sensitive V*, Thomas Center Galleries, Gainesville, FL, catalog
- 1984 Senate Chambers, Tallahassee, FL
- 1984 *Jubilee*, Ritter Art Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL
- 1984 *Valeur International Photography Contest*, Kailua-Kona, HI, **Honorable Mention**
- 1984 *Photography 18*, Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts, Kern Gallery, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, nat'l juried (Duane Michals, juror)
- 1983 *Back Yards*, County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ, nat'l juried
- 1983 Brookdale Community College, Monmouth, NJ
- 1983 *Contemplate 2*, Eye Gallery, San Francisco, CA, nat'l juried
- 1983 *Light Sensitive IV*, Thomas Center Galleries, Gainesville, FL, catalog
- 1983 *Camera Movements*, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1982 The Light Factory, Charlotte, NC, nat'l juried, exhibition poster image
- 1980 Image Gallery, Sarasota, FL, **First Purchase Award**
- 1980 Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, student shows
- 1977 *Ann Arbor Art Festival*, Ann Arbor, MI
- 1973 *Focal Point*, House of Sight and Sound, West Palm Beach, FL
- 1970 Photographic Society of Palm Beaches, FL, **Best of Show**
- 1950 Saginaw Valley Camera Salon, Saginaw, MI, **Honorable Mention**

## AWARDS

- 1986 Honorable Mention, *Boundaries*, County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ, nat'l juried
- 1985 Third Place Award, *National Aperture 85*, Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC, nat'l juried
- 1985 Honorable Mention, *The Photo Review National Photographic Competition 1985*, Langhorne, PA, nat'l juried
- 1985 Honorable Mention, *Black to White*, Danadell Gallery, Houston, TX, nat'l juried
- 1985 Best of Category and Honorable Mention, *Press, Publicity, Paparazzi*, North Miami Museum and Art Center, North Miami, FL, nat'l juried
- 1985 First Purchase Award, *Woman's Work*, Edens Gallery, Columbia College, Columbia, SC
- 1984 Honorable Mention, *Photo Metro Second Annual Photographic Contest*, San Francisco, CA, nat'l juried
- 1984 First and Third Place Awards, *East Texas International Photography Contest*, East Texas State University, Commerce, TX
- 1984 Second and Third Place Awards, *Fourth International Sam Houston Photography Society Competition*, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX
- 1984 Honorable Mention, *Henley Southeastern Spectrum Third Annual Juried Exhibition*, Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC
- 1984 Fourth Place Award, *Little Sister Awards*, Southwest Area Arts Council, Chicago, IL, nat'l juried
- 1984 Honorable Mention, *Valeur International Photography Contest*, Kailua-Kona, HI
- 1980 First Purchase Award, Image Gallery, Sarasota, FL
- 1970 Best of Show, Photographic Society of Palm Beaches, FL
- 1950 Honorable Mention, Saginaw Valley Camera Salon, Saginaw, MI

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE (VASSAR PHOTO SERVICE, VASSAR, MICHIGAN, 1948-1952)

**Annual Report Photography.** Caterpillar Tractor, Eaton Manufacturing Company, Vassar Electroy Products, United Plastics Industries, Millington Truck and Body Company, and State Bank of Vassar, MI.

**Aerial Photographer.** Tuscola County Farm Bureau, MI.

**Freelance News Photographer.** Saginaw News, Flint Journal, Vassar Pioneer-Times, Tuscola County Advertiser and Millington newspapers, MI.

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Albion College Art Department, Albion, MI  
Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC  
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI (holds the Richard C. "Dick" Swanson Collection, the core collection of over 300 prints, personal papers, etc.)  
Bullard Sanford Memorial Library, Vassar, MI (over 200 prints)  
Caro-Watrousville Historical Museum, Watrousville, MI  
Columbia College, Permanent Fine Art Collection, Columbia, SC  
County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ  
Davidson College, Davidson, NC  
Eye Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
Florida Institute of Technology, Jensen Beach, FL  
Florida International University, North Miami, FL  
Frankenmuth Historical Museum, Frankenmuth, MI  
Image Gallery, Sarasota, FL  
Ithaca College, Handwerker Gallery, Ithaca, NY  
Museum of the Great Lakes, Bay City, MI  
Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
North Miami Museum Art Center, North Miami, FL  
Pinhole Resource, San Lorenzo, NM  
Southeast Museum of Contemporary Photography, Daytona Beach Community College, Daytona Beach, FL  
University of Louisville, Photographic Archives, Louisville, KY  
University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI  
University of Oklahoma, Museum of Art, Norman, OK  
Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC

## PRINT MEDIA, LECTURES, AND TELEVISION APPEARANCES

- The Avery Journal*, cover photo for Spring Supplement, Newland, NC, May 4, 2000.
- Tuscola County Advertiser*, "Vassar welcomes world to its community, history," Caro, MI, July 24, 1999.
- Mary Drier, "Past is viewed through lens," *Tuscola County Advertiser*, Caro, MI, March 26, 1997.
- Rhoda Miel, "The return of the native picture taker," *The Saginaw News*, February 16, 1997.
- The Vassar Pioneer Times*, "Dick Swanson's photography to be shown at Vassar Library Feb. 17-27," February 5, 1997. 16.
- Pinhole Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, San Lorenzo, NM, April 1988.
- Vicki Goldberg, "Contemporary work that sings the same old song" (review of the exhibition "New Developments, Contemporary Photography," Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York), *American Photographer*, October 1986. 28-30.
- The Finished Print*, exhibition catalog, Aetna Institute, Hartford, CT, 1985.
- The Photo Review*, vol. 8, no. 4, Langhorne, PA, Fall 1985.
- Maggie Evans Felser, "Self-Exposures," *Tropic* (*The Miami Herald* Sunday magazine), March 31, 1985. 10-13, 18.
- Photography: Press/Publicity/Paparazzi – A Competition and Exhibition of Florida Photographers*, exhibition catalog, North Miami Art Center, FL, 1985.
- Annette Thompson, "Photography: Press/Publicity/Paparazzi," *Photogroup* newsletter, vol. 2, no. 1, Miami, FL, March-April, 1985.
- John Eldridge, "Picture this," *The Miami News*, March 11, 1985.
- Something on Seventeen*, guest artist interview, WLRN-TV Channel 17 (Public Television), Miami, FL, 1984.
- Florida International University, guest artist lecture, North Miami, FL, September 25, 1984.
- Isabel Fernandez, "Photographer speaks," *The New International* (student newspaper), Florida International University, North Miami/Miami, FL, September 24, 1984.
- The Avery Journal*, Newland, NC, August, 1984.
- Midway Review* 6, "Little Sister Awards Issue," Chicago, IL, August, 1984, 17 and 37.
- Photo Metro*, "Second Annual Photographic Contest," San Francisco, CA, June/July 1984, 10-15.
- Dwellings*, exhibition catalog, County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ, 1984.
- Henley Southeastern Spectrum: Third Annual Juried Exhibition*, exhibition catalog, Winston Square Galleries, Winston-Salem, NC, 1984.
- U.S. Biennial II: A Juried Photography Exhibition*, exhibition catalog, Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, 1984.
- Palm Beach Post-Times*, "Datebook: What's of interest in and about Palm Beach County," February 10, 1973.
- The Miami Herald*, "Kite flyers to show soaring skills on Sunday," January 18, 1970. 15.
- Kite Tails* (American Kitefliers Association, Silver City, NM), cover photo, vol. 4, no. 4, Autumn 1969.
- The Rainbow* (national fraternity magazine), March/June/September, 1953.
- Various sheet music publications, front and back cover photos, 1952.
- Donald C. Durman, *He Belongs to the Ages: The Statues of Abraham Lincoln*, Ann Arbor: Edwards Bros., 1951.
- Photographs in various Michigan newspapers (*Saginaw News*, *Flint Journal*, *Vassar Pioneer-Times*, *Tuscola County Advertiser* and *Millington Herald*), corporate annual reports and other publications, 1947-1952.

## **DICK SWANSON PHOTOGRAPHY BOOKS**

*Dick Swanson: Photographs 1970s-1980s*, Swanson Media, 2010.

*Vassar, Michigan 1949-50: Photographs by Dick Swanson*, Swanson Media, 2009.

## **PURCHASE AND LICENSE INFORMATION**

To view Dick Swanson's portfolio of images or to purchase prints or books, visit Swanson Media:

<http://www.swanson-media.com/photos/>.

For information about licensing Dick Swanson's photographs, contact the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor): <http://bentley.umich.edu>.