

# The Collector

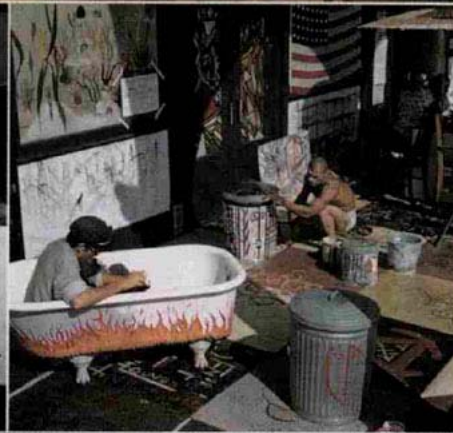
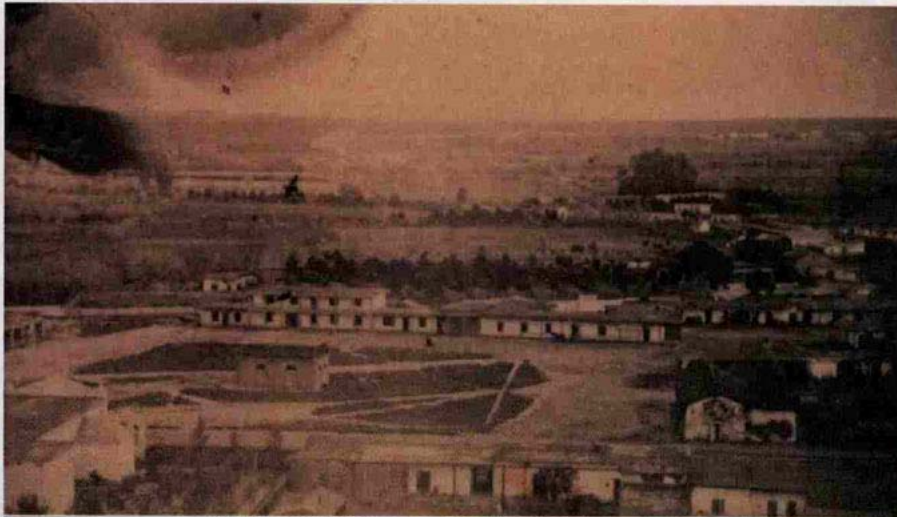
Urban anthropologist **Jim Heimann** reveals what it took to chronicle L.A.'s visual history, from the first known photo to the 99¢ Only Store **BY CHRIS NICHOLS**



**CLUTTER CLASH:**

Heimann, the executive editor at Taschen America, in his studio

**At swap meets and on the roadside,** in library stacks, private archives, basements, and attics, Jim Heimann has spent the past several decades sifting through the detritus to find the remains of a Los Angeles that would have been largely lost without him. The 60-year-old Inglewood native lives in Mid City and still sports the deep tan and casual demeanor of a '60s surfer dude. His collection of photographs, maps, menus, and ephemera—estimated at more than 250,000 pieces—has served as an endless resource for a series of art, architecture, and pop history books he has compiled, including *Shop America*, *Cars of the '50s*, and the eight-volume *All-American Ads*. Heimann became executive editor for the publishing house Taschen America in 2002, after a long career as a freelance de-



**HISTORY LESSON:** (clockwise from top) The first known photo of Los Angeles, 1862; beatnik poet Tex Klein, in the bathtub, and artist Fowad Magdalani, painting a trash can, at the Gas House Cafe in Venice Beach, 1959; the aftermath of a shoot-out, 1953

signer and illustrator. His new book, *Los Angeles, Portrait of a City*, is without a doubt the most comprehensive visual history of L.A. ever attempted.

**When did Los Angeles's past first take hold of you?** When I was growing up in the '50s and '60s, my parents would tell us tales around the dinner table about Casa Mañana and Lick Pier and the Rollerdrome—things that were gone from L.A. My dad was also really big on getting in the car and going for a Sunday drive to places like the Polka Palace, Cherry Valley, and the Fisherman's Fiesta in San Pedro. I think the wanderlust in getting to know L.A. was all part of his investigation.

**Where else did your folks take you?** We went to Disneyland right after it opened but to Knott's Berry Farm more often because it was free and my dad was really cheap. One vacation, it was like a staycation before there were staycations. We visited industrial plants around the area. We went to Helms Bakery, we went to the Palmolive soap factory, we went to Busch Gardens and saw them make beer. Every day he picked a new place for us

to go see where they manufactured stuff. It was pretty stupid.

**You're so deep into L.A. history now. What about when you were a teen? Were your passions more aligned then with those of your own generation?** In 1966 and '67, I was driving the Sunset Strip every Friday and Saturday night. L.A. was all about teenagers—we were the baby boomers, and everything was geared toward us. The Teenage Fairs, the articles in *Life* magazine, *Youthquake*—we were it. In high school, as an artist, I wanted to make psychedelic posters.

**How long did that last?** By the time I was at Long Beach State studying design, I was totally embedded in L.A. I was locked into all the authors. I was reading Chandler—people were turning me on to everything. The psychedelic stuff was kind of a blip. When I got out of school, I tried to get design jobs or get with a firm, but no one was hiring because it was the middle of a terrible recession, so I freelanced. I went to all the places I liked, like *Coast* magazine, to do illustrations. Then also the porno magazines were all coming out: *Oui* moved

here, Hustler had *Chic* magazine, *Playgirl* was here. They were great 'cause they paid.

**When did you get the idea for *California Crazy*, your book about wild L.A. architecture?** I started right after college with *Out with the Stars: Hollywood Nightlife in the Golden Era*. I would go through the photo files at the library in downtown L.A. Inevitably when I looked at the Hollywood photos, there was an odd-shaped building in there that I really liked because I had seen some of them when I was a kid—buildings that were in the shape of a pig or an owl, a giant brown derby or a puppy dog. They had resonance, so I began asking for pictures of Casa Mañana or the Rollerdrome and they'd say, "We don't have it, but try the Culver City Historical Society." Pretty soon, with the limited amount of funds that I had, I started buying. Finally I had so many pictures of these oddball buildings, I thought, "I've got a book here."

**What was the first thing you collected?** Rocks and coins. Then whenever our family went on trips, I would always buy a souvenir. So the collecting mentality was embedded early on. I don't know where that came from, but I collected everything. So much of the stuff I'm looking for is from the '30s and '40s, so the physical places are long gone and you're left with souvenirs. Some places made brochures and paper hats and place mats and toothpicks. Once I found a scrapbook where they had saved every straw and hamburger wrapper.

**Anything you haven't yet found but would love to?** A monkey lamp from the Coconut Grove.

**What do you collect from outside California?** Hawaiian, Tijuana, Vegas, other Mexican stuff...

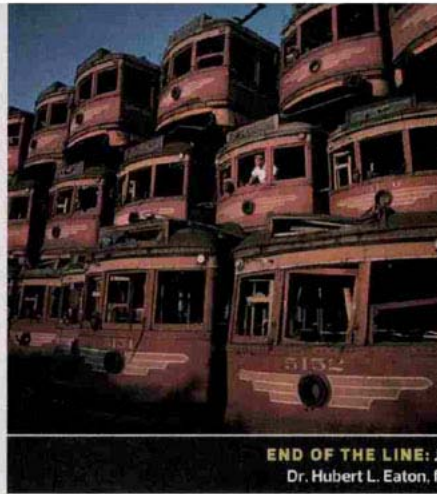
**How aggressive does a collector of L.A. artifacts have to be?** Very. I started going to the Rose Bowl swap meet around 1970, when it first opened. I go at the crack of dawn. Every Sunday for the last 30 years I've been at a flea market. The key is you gotta go every Sunday. Sometimes there's a feeding frenzy. Once some guy brought in four or five boxes of nothing but drive-in menus, and it was just like "Fuck!" That was kind of the basis of my book, *Car Hops and Curb Service: A History of American Drive-in Restaurants, 1920-1960*. I got there when there were three or four guys, and then there were, like, 15 people. I put my body around the menus, pulling stuff right and left so no one else could get them.

**Out of everything you've amassed, what would you rescue first in a fire?** Oh, God, don't ask me that question! That's like my nightmare. If I

could make it to my nightclub collection, that would be the first thing. There's no one in the world who has what I have as far as L.A. nightclubs. That—and Tijuana.

**How did you come to work for Taschen?** I think Benedikt [Taschen] first cold-called me in 2000. He had loved my *Sins of the City: The Real Los Angeles Noir*, and he loved *Out with the Stars*. I heard a voice with a heavy German accent: "This is Benedikt Taschen, and I was wondering if I could come to your studio." He walked in and it was uncomfortable, because he didn't talk. He was very German, and I was just blabbering and doing my dog and pony show. He walked around with his hands behind his back staring at the books and kind of ignoring me. He looks around and says, "So, no Taschen books here, huh?" and I had four walls of nothing but books. When he would come into town—Benedikt was going back and forth between Cologne and here—I would ask, "Have you ever been to Musso & Frank?" or "Have you ever been to the Bradbury Building?" I would always want to take him to really fancy places, and he just wanted to go to hamburger stands.

**Tell me about the new book. How many archives did you use?** Boy, I wanna say maybe 50 or so.



**END OF THE LINE:** Junked Pacific Electric Railway cars at Terminal Island, 1956; Dr. Hubert L. Eaton, founder of Forest Lawn, amid portraits of Jesus Christ, 1943

At one point I think we had 2,000 images. It's close to 600 pages. It begins with the first photograph of L.A. in 1862 and goes to 2009.

**Describe the 1862 photo. Where did it come from?**

It's kind of a bad, underexposed shot of the plaza, a rough quadrangle with dead grass with a path going through it and a few low-slung adobes. It's pretty rudimentary L.A. In 1862, not much was happening—it was still Sonoratown. I'm not sure who shot it, but it showed up in some early collection, maybe from the Natural History Museum. The Huntington has said that this is the first, and no

one has come up with anything earlier. The most revealing period to me was pre-1900. It's all fresh stuff—the L.A. River in Griffith Park when it looks like you're standing in rural California.

**Does the Los Angeles of your book seem more like a lost world, or does it seem more familiar through these images?** I think it's a combination. I tried to find pictures that people hadn't seen before. I wanted to tell a narrative of the history of Los Angeles through the photographs—to make this book a story and not just a collection of photographs. There's nev-

er been a book on Los Angeles that does the entire history of photography of L.A., from the first photograph to the most current one. We've also used quotations from book covers, album covers, and sheet music and excerpts from novels. I had to revisit all the L.A. novels I had read—*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and *The Loved One*. I reread everything.

**Which images are your favorites?** The Muscle Beach stuff is pretty good—all amateur photos. I like the ant-level shot of Little Tokyo with two Japanese women and big paper lanterns on 1st Street. There's a great shot of the founder of Forest Lawn sitting in an easy chair with all these portraits around him of Jesus with these huge eyes—it's really spooky.

**What's missing?** I'm always looking for anything from the Colony Club. I have nothing. It was run by gangsters, and it was on Alta Loma in an old mansion. Also anything from any of the gay underground clubs, like Jimmy's Back Yard, between 1920 and 1933. That's when the cops busted all of them, and they went underground until the 1950s with the Matachine Society and all that.

**Which eras were the hardest to edit down?** The richest period would be the '20s, '30s, and

'40s because of the growth that was going on. It was so well documented by the Whittingtons and the Watsons—newspaper photo guys. They would also go out and shoot odd-ball buildings. They were more well rounded—you don't find that kind of photographer nowadays. We had so much to choose from; the editing process was just killer. I could have done four volumes with the amount of stuff we found.

**How did you depict the L.A. of 2009?** You would think the new stuff would just fall into your lap, but the hardest chapter to put together was the last one. You don't really have generalist photographers today—everybody is a specialist or falls into the "clueless tourist shot" category. The new pictures are not necessarily defining. Homeless people lined up against a wall on Wall Street, an interior of the 99¢ Only Store by Andreas Gursky, an Angelyne billboard, porno in the Valley by Larry Sultan. I think Gary Leonard is among the only ones shooting architecture, news, celebrity, noncelebrities. The guy's everywhere.

**Is this going to be one of those Taschen books that are so big, they come with their own table?**

It does not come with a table. Enormous books are kind of on hold for now until the economy

ripens. It weighs five pounds and retails for \$70. I'm not a tiny-photo person—there's really nothing smaller than 5 by 7, and there are some that are 14 by 20, so that's pretty good.

**What are you doing next?** A book of photographs by John Margolies, who did road culture stuff in the '70s and '80s. It's primarily East Coast—movie theaters, restaurants, gas stations, minigolf stuff that has evaporated. I'm designing a menu right now for a place in Altadena. I'm going to try to do a little series of books on my own that'll be private label, in editions of 50, on specialized subjects: cult religions, nudist colonies, physical culture. Or it could be nothing but graphics of L.A. or L.A. matchbook covers.

**Where would you like your collections to end up?** I've thought of a foundation. My daughter is not interested in this stuff at all. She's a social worker and does psychological assessment of gang members. She always went with me to the swap meets until she was three years old, and then she just refused to go. She hated it. She totally appreciates everything that I have—she thinks it's absolutely wonderful, she understands the value of it. Does she want it? No. It's way beyond one person to deal with. This is insane. ■