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Propriété intellectuelle

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RÉFÉRENCE

New York and Göttingen, the International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2010, 2 vols, 592 p., 200 colour & b/w ill., 4500 b/w negatives, \$98.00

- 1 It's a story almost too unbelievable to be true, and one that fits so perfectly with 'the myth of Robert Capa' that it could easily be mistaken for a mystery novel: thousands of negatives from the Spanish Civil War found intact in Mexico City handed over to the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York almost seventy years after they went missing in Vichy, France. But this account is not one of fiction. It is the outcome of decades of research by the ICP's founder (and brother of Robert Capa), Cornell Capa, and Robert Capa scholar Richard Whelan. Edited by the ICP's assistant curator in charge of the Robert and Cornell Capa Archives, Cynthia Young, *The Mexican Suitcase: the Rediscovered Spanish Civil War Negatives of Capa, Chim, and Taro* (ICP/Steidl, 2010) includes contributions by 22 curators and scholars from various disciplines related to photographic history, visual culture and the Spanish Civil War. *The Mexican Suitcase* was published along with the 2010-2011 accompanying ICP exhibition of the same name.
- 2 It was a search for the negative of Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* that initially prompted the ICP's quest to find the Spanish Civil War films. In 2007, after a lengthy pursuit, three boxes containing more than 4,500 nitrate negatives taken in Spain during the years 1936 to 1939 by Robert Capa, David 'Chim' Seymour, and Gerda Taro were graciously gifted to the photographers' ICP-held estates by Benjamin Tarver, a Mexican filmmaker. Tarver had received the negatives from his aunt, who had inherited them from General Francisco Aguilar González, the Mexican Ambassador to the Vichy

government in 1941-1942. Aguilar came into possession of the negatives prior to sailing back to Mexico City in the early 1940s. The boxes were named the 'Mexican Suitcase' in homage to the 1979 discovery of the Swedish Suitcase, within which photographic prints by Capa, Chim and Taro were found instead of the sought-after film. While the *Falling Soldier* negative remains unaccounted for, the Mexican Suitcase's contents were hardly a disappointment.

- 3 *The Mexican Suitcase's* two volumes, *Volume: The History* and *Volume 2: The Films*, total nearly 600 pages. At 24.5 cm x 30 cm, the publication's hefty size and impressive production quality reaffirm the historic magnitude of this discovery. In *Volume 1*, we get a bird's eye view of the interiors and exteriors of the three 'suitcase' boxes, two of which housed 35mm roll film inserted into cardboard-formed grid-like cubby holes (corresponding numbered grids with handwritten descriptions on the box lid interiors show how the films were arranged), and the third containing cut up film strips enveloped in paper sleeves, hand labeled and/or stamped with the photographers' credits. In *Volume 2*, the 4,500 plus negatives are reproduced as digitally-formed positive contact sheets in stunning gray scale, printed with ink so rich that the tiny negatives (which appear just slightly larger than they would have been if made into contact sheets in the darkroom) are laced with impeccable detail. The negatives are reproduced to reflect their physical existence. As such we see sprocket holes, clipped leaders, chemical stains, watermarks, numbering, film type, under and over exposed frames, blurred captures, identifying chit marks, dents and scratches. The enlargements in *Volume 1* are also printed with their physical characteristics and imperfections left clearly visible.
- 4 *The Mexican Suitcase* negatives cover the Spanish Civil War from beginning to end: from Chim's April 1936 photographs of Madrid, shot three months before the civil war began, to Taro's captures of the Battle of Brunete in July of 1937 (taken just before her death), to Capa's March 1939 photographs of French internment camps for Republican exiles. Mixed in with the tense, gory battle scenes are numerous images of Spaniards leading quiet lives: farming, reading the newspaper and going to school. Nearly all of Taro's work is found within this archive; in certain cases, photographs once thought to be Capa's are now credited to Taro. Likewise, these negatives bring added attention to Chim's Civil War coverage, which has been largely overshadowed by Capa's famous photographs from the period. The negative boxes also contain film by lawyer/photographer Fred Stein (though his name is absent from the book's subtitle). Stein documented the lives of Capa, Taro and other fellow Jewish exiles living in Paris during the years 1933 to 1936. *The Mexican Suitcase's* reproductions, which show frame after frame, roll after roll, allow us to see how Capa, Chim, Taro and Stein worked: how much attention was paid to a given subject, and how the photographers moved around their subjects, photographing from far away, up close, from above or below. For example, we can see that Capa was a methodical, sequential shooter, influenced by his work with motion picture film. In both volumes, we find corresponding reproductions of the photographs in newspapers and magazines from the 1930s, such as *Life*, *Regards* and *Ce Soir*, allowing us to better understand how the photographs were treated editorially upon publication. The photographers' personal notebooks from that period, and maps showing where in Spain the images were taken, add additional written and optical contextualization.

- 5 The essays featured in *Volume 1* provide an introduction to *Volume 2*'s reproductions, and can be divided into two categories: essays about the Mexican Suitcase project, and essays examining the negatives' place within the history of press photography. Cynthia Young's 'The Process of Identifying 4,500 Negatives,' for example, recounts in mesmerizing detail the methodology used by the ICP to identify, attribute, scan and re-house the more than 4,500 mostly rolled up nitrate negatives found in the Mexican Suitcase boxes. Conversely, Simon Dell, a senior lecturer in Art History in the School of World Art Studies and Museology, University of East Anglia, England writes about the conditions under which Capa, Chim and Taro worked, and the political, technological and editorial circumstances under which these photographic negatives were produced, sold, selected and published by the 1930s press. *Volume 1* also includes a 20-page section titled 'Capa, Chim, Taro: List of Published Photographs, 1936-1941,' which lists magazines, newspapers, books, brochures and films that published photographs by Capa, Chim and Taro during the years 1936 to 1941 — an extremely valuable resource for researchers. In addition, interspersed within the negatives reproduced in *Volume 2* are numerous shorter texts that address (in addition to press photography) subjects related to visual culture, sociology and the history of the Spanish Civil War — some more successfully than others. For example, Carole Naggar's text explains how the rediscovery of Chim's 1936 photographs of the Regulares Indigenas sheds new light on Franco's use of African soldiers to fight his war in Spain; Sebastiaan Faber writes about the Spanish Civil War's successful use of visual propaganda in an essay entitled 'Documents of Displacement: Capa, Taro and Chim, and the Visual Birth of the Modern Refugee.' Together, both volumes provide various points of scholarly and visual entry into this body of work.
- 6 It is not often that one gains access to a collection of negatives, and although reproductions can never really compete with original objects, *The Mexican Suitcase: the Rediscovered Spanish Civil War Negatives of Capa, Chim, and Taro* does a remarkable job of replicating this material. With the publication of this book, the ICP has shared an immense amount of historical and conservation-related research and analysis. Our understanding of Capa, Chim, Taro and Stein's photographic pursuits in the years leading up to, and those consumed by, the Spanish Civil War is now more comprehensive. The ICP's publication of the 4,500 negatives found within the Mexican Suitcase, many of them previously unknown, provides new insight into these photographers' working methods and into the selection process that created that period's now iconic images. The addition of even just a few photographic frames reproduced in negative tones would make this archive-in-a-book truly complete.

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