



A Fresh Look at Vintage Photos

Exhibit classes science images by visual characteristics

By JULIE ANN MILLER

Photos courtesy: Science Service Archive/National Museum of American History/Smithsonian Institution

Would a striking, perhaps puzzling image convince a newspaper editor to include a science story among the disasters and scandals of the day? Would it intrigue readers to delve into reports of scientists' discoveries and technological developments?

From the 1920s to the 1960s, Science Service's news syndicate sent out thousands of photographs showing the activities of scientists. Dressed in suits, uniforms, lab coats, or strange protective gear, they were looking at, pointing to, and holding up a wide range of objects, some commonplace, others mysterious. Many of these photos also appeared in Science Service's weekly publication, *SCIENCE NEWS LETTER* (later *SCIENCE NEWS*).

Emerging from 2 decades of storage at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., about 100 of these engaging images are going on display at the International Center for Photography in New York. Although some of the developments they depict have significantly influenced health and industry, the photos were chosen strictly for their visual impact. Called "Science Projects: A Taxonomy of Images," the exhibit will run from March 28 to June 22.

Charles Stainback, director of exhibitions at the center, says that he was looking for scientific images that could be considered art. He wanted something other than electron micrographs, with their millionfold magnifications. "I had no notion of what I would find, but I just knew there would be stuff," he recalls.

He was directed to the Science Service archive by Mary Foresta, a photo curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art. The archive includes photos taken for Science Service by its photographer, Fremont Davis, and public

relations shots sent by companies and government labs.

"What I did find was quite amazing," Stainback says.

"Then, it was a matter of formulating how to deal with the material in a way that is intelligent and appealing. It became logical to approach it as any scientific investigation does."

He began classifying the photos by their most obvious similarities—people who are doing the same thing, such as pointing (above) or holding something in one hand. Within each category, "I picked the most interesting and most peculiar," he reports.

Stainback didn't go in search of science photos simply because he thought they'd provide unrecognized artistic treasures. "I know something about science," he admits.

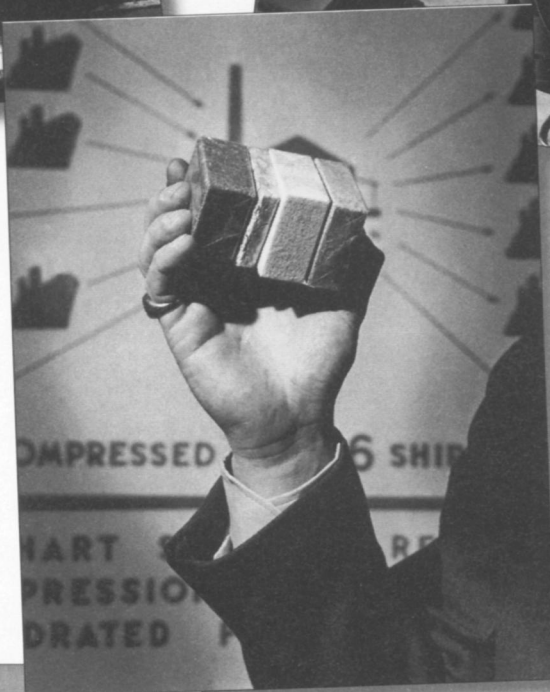
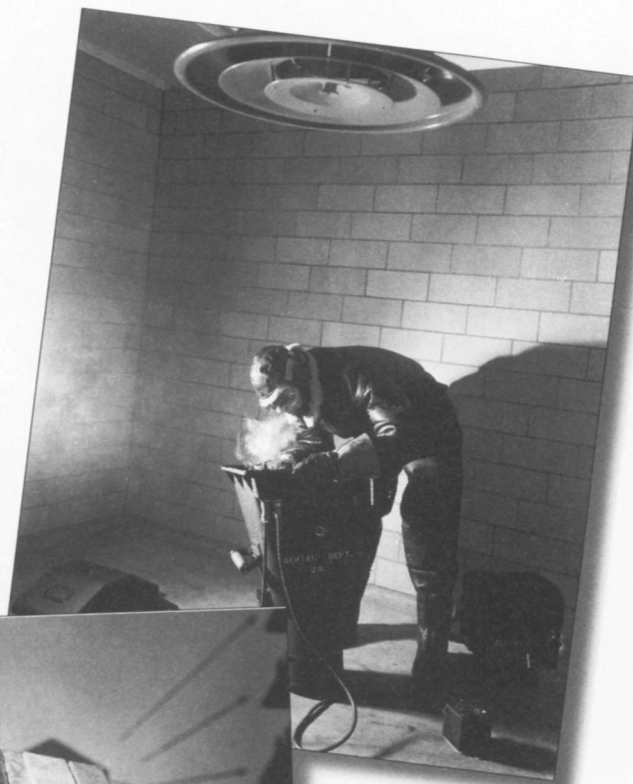
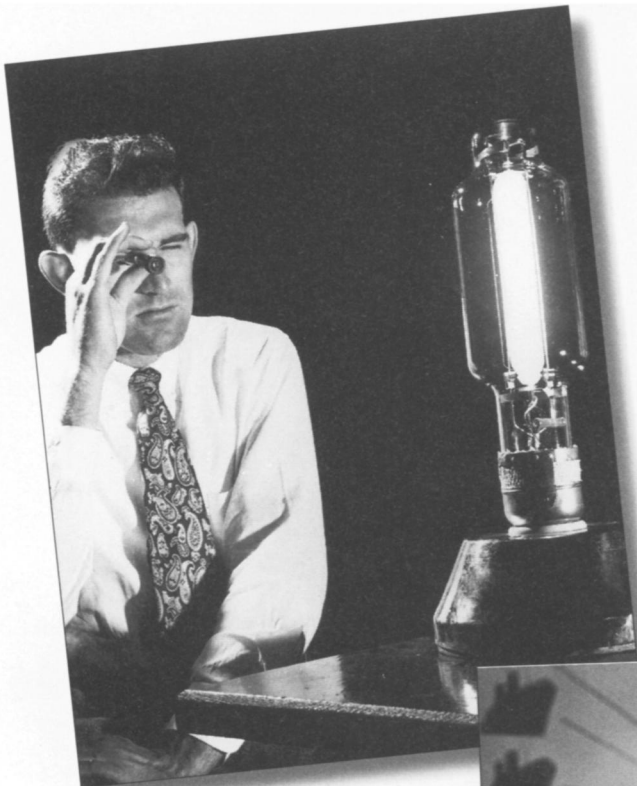
While in high school, Stainback won the Delaware State Science Fair for a project on viruses and plant growth. Ironically, the plant tumor photos he made for his project's display turned his career interest to photography.

Yet, his fascination with research remained, a feeling he believes many people share. "Science has intrigued us," he says.

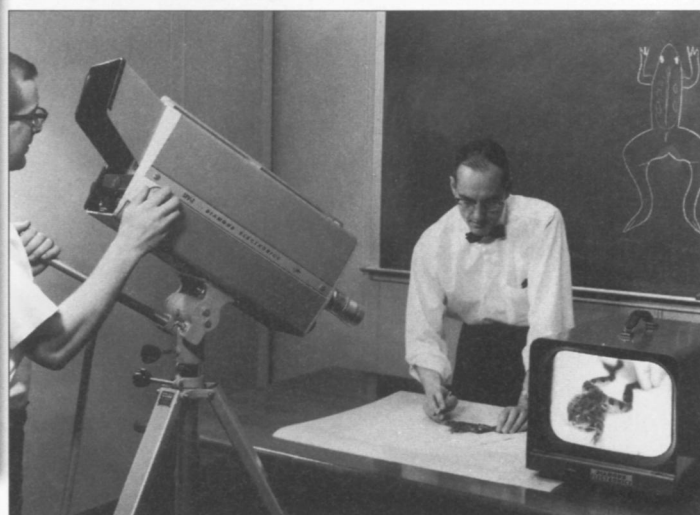
Stainback hopes to return to the Science Service archive to study the photos more closely. "My expedition was a quick, superficial one," he says. He would like eventually to prepare a book of science photos to share the images, whether momentous or quirky, with a wider audience.

The questions that the pictures generate—Who is that person? What is he pointing to? Whatever is she doing?—reflect their power and appeal. For some, the story depicted or fragments of it have survived along with the photo. For others, answers must be left to the imagination of the viewer. □

(Photos continue on next two pages.)



The photography show categorizes these Science Service images from the 1920s through the 1960s as "looking" (top row), "one hand holding something" (middle), and "two people" (bottom row).





Other classifications are "looking and touching" (top row), "two hands holding something" (middle right), "people and apparatus" (bottom left), and "test tubes" (bottom right).