

Continuity of Purpose: A Photographic Legacy from Ruth Orkin to Her Daughter

By Jill Waterman | 4 months ago

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A photographer's gift is to record his or her encounters with the world in pictures. If that photographer meets with success, pictures from their archive are published in magazines and books, exhibited in museums and galleries, licensed for commercial use, and sold as prints. With careful planning, these images have a life that endures well beyond that of the artist, through the continuing efforts of a legacy keeper.

Such is the relationship between the trailblazing work of 20th-Century photographer Ruth Orkin and the ongoing endeavors of her daughter, Mary Engel, who inherited Orkin's archive in 1985.

"It's a wonderful legacy, but a huge responsibility, and 35 years later that still rings true," says Engel of her efforts. "My job, generally, is to keep the work out there, and that's why I do what I do."

Photographs © [Ruth Orkin Photo Archive](#)

Enduring Mother-Daughter Bond

Engel was only 23 when her mother died after a long battle with cancer. Although she was closely involved in various aspects of Orkin's photo career throughout her formative years, Engel says, "Obviously I was in school most of the time, but I was always helping her to an extent with the photos, or with slides, or with invoices. We lived in a two-bedroom apartment, and she had a lot of her work in her room. So, it was right there. It was hard not to be part of it."





One of Orkin's signature photographs from 1948, showing a young boy jumping into the Hudson River from New York's West Side waterfront.

In actuality, this was a two-photographer household, since Orkin was married to fellow photographer and filmmaker Morris Engel. Yet, when it came time to plan her estate, Orkin selected her daughter as executrix instead of her husband or son. "My father was definitely involved with her work," Engel says, "but because he had his own photographs and films to represent, my mother felt that it would be a lot easier for me to handle her work. Somehow she felt I understood what she wanted, and would be able to properly represent her in the future."

To clarify further, Engel points out that each photographer has his or her own philosophy about how they want their work to be viewed and received, and understanding this philosophy is a key component of legacy planning. "My mother wanted her work to be out there, and she had no issue going after this, knocking on people's doors, or trying to get the work seen," she says. "Whereas I think my father really wanted people to come to him."

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Orkin and her daughter Mary at 1980 ceremony for First Annual Manhattan Cultural Award in Photography.
Photograph © Andrew French, courtesy of the Municipal Art Society

Engel describes her mother as possessing a tremendous amount of confidence in her life and her work, a trait she passed on to her daughter along with her photographs. “That confidence that she gave me, and she still gives me every day as I manage her archive, is incredible,” she attests. “I get to be with her every day. And she left an incredible legacy.”

A Child Steeped in Hollywood

As the only child of Samuel Orkin, a manufacturer of toy boats, and silent-film-era actress Mary Ruby, Ruth Orkin had four loves growing up in Hollywood during its heyday in the 1920s and '30s: Film, photography, music, and travel.

“Film was a very important part of her life from the very beginning,” Engel explains. She tells of Ruth accompanying her mother to film premieres and grand Hollywood funerals from a very young age, adding, “The glamour of Hollywood was a big deal for them.”

Orkin's mother kept scrapbooks full of photos and clippings from her days in vaudeville and silent films, which inspired Ruth to start a diary about the films she saw. This childhood ritual would grow into a lifelong passion for record keeping, from scrapbooks and autograph collecting, to stories she wrote about her life, and adventure diaries that she illustrated with her photographs.

After receiving her first camera, at age 10, a 39-cent Univex that shot six exposures per roll, Orkin quickly put it to use by photographing her friends and teachers at school. At 12, she received a darkroom set, which allowed her to develop her own film and make prints.

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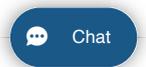


Orkin posed with her bicycle, after riding it from Los Angeles, to attend the 1939 New York World's Fair.

As a teen, she became entranced by the exotic tales in travel writer Richard Halliburton's book, *The Royal Road to Romance*, which inspired her to plan an expedition of her own. A two-week bicycle trip around San Francisco that she took, at 16, became the precursor to a four-month cross-country solo adventure the next summer, with the goal of visiting the 1939 World's Fair in New York. "She was very industrious," Engel says. "She pretty much laid out a route based on certain relatives, and cities she wanted to see."

Another aspect of her trip became fodder for newspaper copy. A story in the *Philadelphia Daily Ledger* dubbed Orkin "a self-appointed apostle of the American Youth Hostel movement." This form of short-term lodging for young cyclists and recreational enthusiasts was just catching on in America, and she was a big fan. According to Engel, her mother was "fairly pioneering as a woman doing that alone at the time."

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After receiving an enlarger at age 12, Orkin regularly worked in the darkroom. Above, she makes prints at home in the late 1940s.

To document her bicycle trip, Orkin brought along a new camera—the medium-format Pilot 6—capable of recording 12 exposures on 120 roll film. Upon her return to California, she contact-printed 300 negatives, which she organized into a scrapbook with detailed captions. “When you look at this album, the level of her work and the strength of the pictures are pretty incredible for a 17-year-old,” remarks Engel. “It’s not like there’s only one strong image on a page with 16, there would be like five or six.”

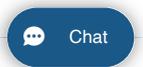
Engel says that, later in life, “she would always talk about how she would wait, and let her finger freeze before clicking the shutter to achieve such a high ratio of successful photographs.”

Filmmaking Aspirations

Despite her love for photography, Orkin’s first desire was to be in the film business. “This was partly due to the influence of her mother’s having been in the movies,” says Engel, “and living in Hollywood and loving not only the glamour, but the actual films she saw.”

At 21, Orkin secured a job as the first messenger girl hired by MGM Studios, hoping to jump-start her film career. “Unfortunately, they wouldn’t let her into the union because she was a woman,” Engel points out. “So she never really got a chance to shoot film. But when you evaluate all her photos, many of them are shot in series or in sequences, which is like she was shooting a movie.”

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After her time as the first messenger girl at MGM Studios, Orkin returned five years later to shoot a picture story with messenger Vee Carson.

Still hoping to find her way into filmmaking, Orkin joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, under the false impression that she would be sent to New York and trained in cinematography; only she ended up in Monticello, Arkansas, instead. Yet, within a year she had made it to New York City, where she initially found work as a nightclub photographer, making baby pictures by day to purchase her first professional camera, a 35mm Contax.

"My mother was a pioneer in a lot of different ways," Engel says of her drive. "She definitely had a lot of chutzpah, or she couldn't have gotten into a lot of circumstances she found herself in, whether it was the bike trip, or working as a photographer. She was incredibly productive once she got to New York in 1943," Engel adds. "I don't think she would have survived otherwise."

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Trailblazing Freelance Career

By 1945, she had scored an assignment for The New York Times to photograph Leonard Bernstein with the City Symphony. Her freelance career grew to include assignments for LIFE, Look, Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, and many other major publications in the 1940s and early '50s.





Leonard Bernstein in the Greenroom with his sister Shirley, Carnegie Hall, NYC, 1950

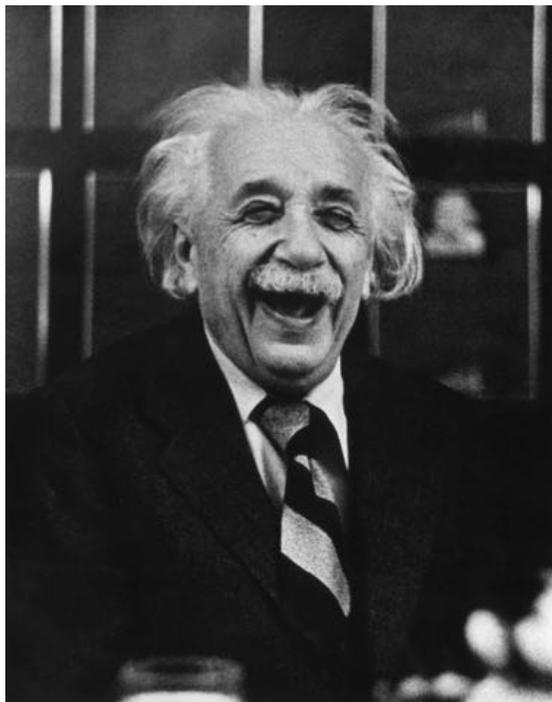
In addition to regular assignment work, she was also prolific in capitalizing on her own ideas. “She was not only a pioneer and adventurous with plans like the bike trip, but she also took many chances as a photographer,” Engel says.

In the late 1940s, one of her many bold schemes was to write the Boston Symphony Orchestra, asking to photograph over the summer at the musical haven Tanglewood, in Western Massachusetts. After receiving a curt reply saying they didn’t need anyone, and that “freelancing would be very limited,” Orkin decided to make the trip anyway.

“[I took] all my darkroom equipment and my cello,” she notes in a diary excerpt. “I set up all my darkroom equipment in the basement of the Lenox Hotel, the cello was insurance in the event that I needed to masquerade as a student. As it turned out, I had no trouble getting on the grounds, and before long the Boston Symphony publicity man was sending over many of the newspaper and magazine reporters who needed one-of-a-kind photographs to go along with their articles. Tanglewood was a dream come true,” she enthuses. “It was like the Hollywood Bowl, a summer camp, a holiday resort, and a working and money-making experience all rolled into one. I couldn’t have been more stimulated, prolific or happy.”

Orkin returned to Tanglewood over the course of several summers, even publishing her own guidebook in 1947 and ’48, illustrated with her photos, featuring many the world’s most significant musicians and composers of the time.





Albert Einstein at Princeton luncheon, laughing, Princeton, New Jersey, 1953

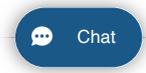
As Engel tells us, in some cases being a female photographer in a male-dominated field worked in her favor. “Yet, basically, my mother said it worked in her favor and it worked against her at the same time,” she points out. “It worked in her favor because sometimes a subject would be nicer to a female photographer, let’s say, or they wanted to flirt with her, such as Brando, or whatever. But it also worked against her because she couldn’t get into the union when she wanted to be a cinematographer.”

To clarify further, Engel says, “Let’s just say she had a big personality that she used to her advantage. She used it when she needed to, and sometimes it got in her way because of the era.”

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American Girl in Italy

In 1951, Orkin was assigned by LIFE magazine to travel to Israel with the Israeli Philharmonic. During this trip, she spent several months living on a kibbutz, where she photographed extensively and recorded her experiences. Before returning to New York, she stopped in Italy to visit Rome, Venice, and Florence. It was during this brief junket that Orkin made some of the most memorable photographs of her career.



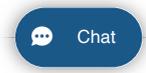


Tirza on Sinks, Israel, 1951, from Orkin's picture story about a little girl in the kibbutz where she stayed.

After meeting fellow American artist Jinx Allen in Florence, the two spent time, “talking about their shared experiences traveling alone as young single women,” Engel writes in a 1995 catalog essay. “My mother had an idea. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘let’s go out and shoot pictures of what it’s really like.’ In the morning, while the Italian women were inside preparing lunch, Jinx gawked at statues, asked military officials for directions, fumbled with lire, and flirted in cafes while my mother photographed her.”

In just three rolls of film, this impromptu photo session would yield Orkin’s best-known photograph, “American Girl in Italy,” along with a host of other remarkable frames. “I’m still finding interesting images on those contact sheets that I haven’t even printed,” Engel says. “There’s an image, ‘Jinx in Goggles,’ in a little book we did that my mother had never printed. I discovered it, and it’s become part of the series. It’s very popular with people, and Ralph Lauren buys it every so often for their stores.”

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The image *Jinx in Goggles*, 1951, from Orkin's classic series "American Girl in Italy"

In recent years, "American Girl in Italy" has taken on a whole new meaning through its interpretation by the Me Too movement. "It's up to everybody to look at the photo however they want, and that's fine," says Engel, "but they do need to understand the original intent. It was shot in 1951, and in Italy, and Italian culture was different, especially during that era. I still try not to let it be editorialized too much," she adds. "That's my job as the legacy keeper, to make decisions about what I think is important, or not important to the body of work. Also, to honor the original integrity of the photographer."

From Photography to Filmmaking to Family Life

By this point in her career, Orkin had become deeply involved in New York's lively photo scene, and she attended many of the parties, lectures, and events organized by professional associations such as the New York Photo League and the American Society of Magazine Photographers (ASMP). It was at an ASMP party where she first met photographer and filmmaker Morris Engel, in 1945, eventually marrying him in 1952.

At the time of their first meeting, Engel was just back from serving as a Navy combat photographer in World War II. A staff photographer for PM magazine before and after the war, he also freelanced for many of the major picture magazines. Yet, by the early 1950s, he was developing an independent feature film, and Orkin soon became involved as the editor, co-writer, and co-director.

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Morris Engel and Ruth Orkin with child actor Richie Andrusco during the filming of *Little Fugitive*

The resulting 80-minute, black-and-white feature, *Little Fugitive*, would go on to win the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and be nominated for an Academy Award for best motion picture story. This bittersweet tale of a little boy's adventures as a runaway to Coney Island remains a classic to this day, and even prompted Francois Truffaut to credit it with helping to start the French New Wave.

After working together on a second film, *Lovers and Lollipops*, Engel continued making more independent features and directing commercials, while Orkin refocused her energies on family life, giving birth to son Andy, in 1959, and daughter Mary, in 1961.

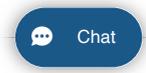
By the early 1960s, the golden era of magazine photography was winding down. "She always talked about how the magazines had died, and there wasn't any work," Engel says. "It was much more about raising us."

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Engel recalls Orkin being very hands-on as a mother. "Talk about record keeping," she muses. "There were records and photos of everything. I mean, every single birthday party. It wasn't like the typical stories told by other photographers' children, who didn't even know the parent because they were always on assignment. It was rare that she was away for any period of time."

Woman in the Window

Armed with a Nikon and a variety of lenses, Orkin spent many hours photographing Mary and her brother, even installing powerful 500-watt floodlights in each room of their apartment to ensure good light. Yet, throughout the 1960s and '70s, a new personal project would become even more significant to Orkin's artistic career—a series of color photos made from the 15th-floor window of the family's apartment overlooking Central Park.





Street scene from the bay window in Orkin's apartment on West 88th Street

Window views were a familiar subject to Orkin, who had photographed extensively from a second-floor bay window in her previous Upper West Side apartment. Yet, the shift to a wider, higher vantage point initially made her question her motivations. "... I thought in dismay, how am I going to shoot anything so high up? The people are too far away!" she wrote in a journal entry excerpted as part of a 1995 catalog essay. "After living there just a couple of weeks, I quickly changed my mind," she continues. "I could hardly drag myself away from the window at the beginning. What I hadn't anticipated was that finally here was the perfect spot from which I could shoot panoramic views, just what I couldn't do with my little 39-cent camera so long ago."

Engel sees Orkin's window pictures as helping to bring her earlier work into focus. "My mother liked the window work, and she was proud of it, but it was really the early black-and-white photos that she wanted people to know about. She always felt like the window work was much more popular and easy to appreciate," Engel says. "And, that helped her other work to get more notice."

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A Lasting Legacy

While her magazine work had disappeared, opportunities for exhibition, lectures, teaching, and books slowly brought new life to Orkin's photographs. She had her first retrospective exhibit at Nikon House in 1974, and then lectured at the International Center of Photography (ICP). In the late 1970s she began teaching at the School of Visual Arts and exhibiting her photographs at Witkin Gallery, "That's when she started selling prints," says Engel. "But she had a very small period of time to really sell, and get the recognition for the work in terms of the gallery world."





The image *Muted Autumn, NYC*, from Orkin's beloved photo series out the window of her apartment on Central Park West

The popularity of Orkin's window scenes led to the publication of her first book, *A World from My Window*, in 1978, and a second book on this subject followed, in 1983. Orkin also published an illustrated autobiography, *A Photo Journal*, in 1981, featuring black-and-white images and extensive writings. In many ways, these books allowed her career to come full circle before her death, at only 63 years old, in 1985.

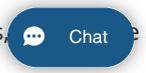
In the years since Orkin's passing, her daughter has made great strides in keeping her work visible and expanding its scope. One example of her efforts is the 1995 short film *Ruth Orkin: Frames of Life*, which Engel made to accompany an exhibit of Orkin's work at the ICP. After a premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, it was selected as an Outstanding Documentary of 1996 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

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Ruth Orkin leaning out her window with camera in hand, © 1977 Jerry La Plante

Additionally, as an outgrowth of the wisdom Engel has gained through managing both of her parents' archives,



founded the American Photography Archives Group (APAG) as a resource organization for individuals who own or manage privately held photography archives. For further details, read our story [Concerned About Your Photographic Legacy? Look to APAG for Help.](#)

With the centennial of Orkin's birth on the horizon in 2021, Engel is particularly reflective about both her past efforts and future possibilities. "I am proud of what I've accomplished," she concludes. "I think she would have been, hopefully, and I work hard to keep the work out there. But basically, I can never do enough. That comes from her and her work, and wanting to do the best thing I can with her legacy. And, for me, it's created a tremendous opportunity."

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