

**Permanent Collection work:**

**Weegee**

***Untitled, 1940***

**gelatin silver print**

**Gift of David B. Devine**

**6.356.1986**

**Essay written by student, Michael Christopher, Spring 2001**

Michael Christopher

*Untitled by Weegee (1940)*

“Weegee the Famous” was an immigrant who truly loved his home in New York City. Asher Fellig emigrated from Poland at ten and was named “Weegee” after the ouija board. The peculiar spelling of his name came from Weegee himself, and its eccentricity serves to describe his personality perfectly. With little education and almost no money, Weegee began his career in photography working in photo labs and studios. His first job at Acme Newspictures allowed him to rush out from the dark room to cover breaking news around the city. He left Acme to become a freelance photographer and lived next door to the police headquarters, where he owned an authorized police radio to monitor calls. As a freelance photographer, Weegee worked 20 hours a day and resented even the four short hours that he sacrificed for sleep. Even when he did sleep, the police radio remained near his bed so he would awaken if there were an opportunity for a photo.

Weegee was tireless in his efforts to capture New York City of the late ‘30s and early ‘40s through the lens of his Polaroid. The majority of his subjects were murders, fires, tabloid celebrities, drunks asleep on the street, and the everyday riff-raff of urban life. He made his living from the sale of these photos to reporters for their stories. His photos became so renowned,

that he became known as the "“Murder, Inc.”” photographer. In 1945, he compiled his first book, *Naked City*, which later became a movie, and etched himself a place in history as more than just a freelance photographer, he was a chronicler of urban culture. Weegee’s *Naked City* contains photos and a brief commentary on everything from drunks at 6 a.m. “sleeping it off” to “old blue eyes,” Frank Sinatra, at Radio City. This immensely popular book gives a colorful view of New York from the almost silent break of morning to the mirth and mayhem of the night.

This photograph, *Untitled*, taken by Weegee in 1940 and held within the permanent collection of the de Saisset, was taken at the same time as those photos included in *Naked City*. In most of his photography, as is represented in *Naked City*, Weegee seems personally detached from the subject, and through his photography, he allowed readers to view Saturday night blood baths and similar subjects in New York in relative safety. *Untitled* is different in that the focus of the people’s attention in the audience is not pictured. The majority of the crowd is quite attentive to the spectacle off to the left, and yet the central female figure soundly sleeps. The incongruities of the sleeping woman give the photo a humorous tone and invite the viewer to ponder the setting for the crowd. Clearly, given Weegee’s profession as a photographer who sold the photos he took to reporters for their stories, this photo is unusual. There is no obvious story for anyone to write about, unless he or she was present at the event. The peculiarity of the photo gives the viewer a rare look into one of the many sides of Weegee. It offers a counterbalance to the often grisly and matter-of-fact photos of lifeless bodies most commonly associated with Weegee’s early career.

## Bibliography

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