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‘Filling in these gaps’: Paul McCartney’s recently rediscovered photographs
A new exhibition at the Los Angeles Gagosian showcases previously unseen pictures taken by the musician during the rise of Beatlemania

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Paul McCartney at London Airport (with Brian Epstein, Mal Evans, and Neil Aspinall) for Pan Am flight 101 to New York City on 7 February 1964. Photograph: Paul McCartney and Gagosian

He is not drowning but waving. John Lennon’s arms stretch at angles like the sails of a windmill. His face wears a toothy, incandescent smile. Beads of water dance around him like an upside-down waterfall as he swims off Miami Beach.

“He’s so carefree,” says [Joshua Chuang](#), director of photography at the Gagosian art gallery. “It’s almost like you’ve never seen him like that; he’s always kind of joking around or brooding or being sarcastic. He’s so happy. It’s his best friend at the time capturing that and, when you know about what happened, it’s so moving.”

The best friend in this case is Sir Paul McCartney, whose recently rediscovered photographs go on display from Friday at Gagosian in Beverly Hills, California. The exhibition [Rearview Mirror](#) charts the rise of Beatlemania between December 1963 and February 1964 and marks the first time that 82-year-old McCartney has made signed editions of his photos available (a portion of proceeds from sales will go to Los Angeles-based fire relief organisations).

A thousand images taken by the musician were found by his archivist during the coronavirus pandemic after being largely forgotten for half a century. An initial museum exhibition, [Eyes of the Storm](#), organised by the National Portrait Gallery in London, contained 250 pictures and has toured various venues including the Brooklyn Museum and de Young Museum in San Francisco.

If that show was a sprawling anthology box set, Rearview Mirror is more of a sleek Revolver or Rubber Soul. It presents 36 works, some previously unseen, some overlapping with the museum show but often in different formats, for example intact contact sheets versus individual frames. It emphasises the formal qualities of the photographs as art objects.

Speaking via Zoom from Beverly Hills, Chuang says: “The museum show almost had a scrapbook quality to it. We wanted to do something that was much more focused, much more object-driven with works that were beautiful, printed to the highest standards with the latest technology and, if you were to acquire one, you feel like you’re owning a piece of history. I think we managed to do it.

“When Paul came into the studio to sign the first batch he was knocked out by them. What he kept saying as he was walking around was, ‘I feel like I’ve never seen this before.’ Visitors to our exhibition who have seen the touring museum exhibition at whatever venue will have that same reaction: ‘Oh, yeah, I saw that show. But is that the same picture?’”



Paul McCartney – Self-portrait in my room at the Asher family home, Wimpole Street, London, December 1963. Photograph: Paul McCartney and Gagosian

Chuang knew he had to make the show's title distinct from [Eyes of the Storm](#) and settled on something that reflects both a literal perspective from car windows and the metaphorical act of looking back at this pivotal period. He jokes: "Paul is the greatest lyricist of all time – can't you come up with it?! I started looking at the pictures that we chose and one of the motifs was of a mirror.

"There are self-portraits where Paul's trying to frame himself in a mirror. There's Paul caught in the reflection of a rearview mirror of the car; so many pictures were taken from inside cars because that was the only safe space in public. I suggested 'Rearview Mirror' both literally and metaphorically and he loved it."

The Fab Four remain an unstoppable cultural and commercial juggernaut. Late last year saw the release of [Beatles '64](#), a Disney+ documentary about that heady conquest of America; last month there was Ian Leslie's book, [John & Paul: A Love Story in Songs](#), study of Lennon and McCartney's marriage of true minds; last week it was the turn of [One to One: John & Yoko](#), a Kevin Macdonald film about Lennon and Yoko Ono's time living in Greenwich Village in the early 1970s.

So it is that McCartney's photographic oeuvre receives a second look. The pictures offer an intimate glimpse of the Beatles' adventures in London, Paris and the US through the lens of one of their own – a counterpoint to press images of the time. They preserve candid moments and intense fan reaction, from frenzied crowds in New York to the overwhelming greetings at airports.

Chuang worked with McCartney's archivist, Sarah Brown, to drill down to the specifics of each [day in the life](#). "Whereas in the museum show it's very general – John and Ringo, Paris, January 1964 – now it will say this is John playing the guitar in the hotel suite at the George V on 16 January, hours before they get the telegram that I Want to Hold Your Hand is number one in America and hours later they're doing the famous pillow fight. It's like filling in these gaps in the visual narrative and from the most unique perspective you could think of, which is Paul."

Another such example is a colour contact sheet of the Beatles and their entourage at Heathrow airport before flying to America, offering something akin to "stop motion sequence" of a band on the verge of global fame and cultural immortality. Chuang is impressed that McCartney had the presence of mind to run ahead on the tarmac, turn around and capture the moment.

"There's three pictures of John Lennon on there; it looks like three different people. It's like you're seeing these different facets of them basically hours before they're about to change the world. You can almost get a sense in those pictures they're excited, maybe they're tired – they had been touring non-stop leading up to that - and I'd like to think there's a good kind of nervousness, a sense that something is about to change."



Being chased by fans on West 58th Street, New York City, 12 February 1964 Photograph: Paul McCartney and Gagosian

Something did change. On 9 February 1964 the Beatles made their live TV debut on the The Ed Sullivan Show, watched by 73 million people. Less than 48 hours later they performed [their first US concert](#) at the Washington Coliseum (tickets ranged from \$2 to \$4) with more than 8,000 people in attendance, including future vice-president Al Gore. By April the Beatles had the top five spots on the US Billboard charts.

Perhaps it was no surprise that McCartney wanted to photograph people and things that went before. Cameras run in the family: his brother Mike, first wife Linda and daughter Mary all became professional photographers. McCartney grew up admiring sports photography [in the Observer newspaper](#) and won a school art prize.

Time surrounded by professional snappers during the Beatles' ascent further honed his eye. Chuang ventures: "I would like to think – and Paul doesn't quite remember – that buying a camera was both a way to create your own memento but also a way to play with the photographers who constantly had the lens pointed at you. If you've seen the [press conferences at JFK \[airport\]](#), there's this banter with the reporters. They're giving as good as they're getting and the camera seemed to serve a similar function."

McCartney was using a 35mm SLR Pentax camera, a technology that enabled spontaneity and the "snapshot aesthetic" of the 1960s. He told [CBS News](#) in 2023: "We were moving fast. So, you just learned to take pictures quickly."

Chuang comments: "He's a natural. The pictures have a sense of amateur zeal. The two self-portraits, if you will, which were both taken in a mirror, have this wonderful sense of amateurism but it doesn't detract from the power of the picture. You can see his skill level improve from

December to February, in part because the light's different in America, especially in Miami, where it was super bright. Those tend to be super sharp.”

One photo is taken in the attic of McCartney's then girlfriend [Jane Asher](#). “This is the room in which he woke up with a tune in his head. He starts jotting down the tune on the piano, didn't have words and came up with dummy words – scrambled eggs, oh, baby, how I love your legs. It took him about a year to come up with the actual lyrics, which became Yesterday. The fact he's in Jane Asher's house, he's got a camera – there's a kind of self-awareness of wanting to memorialise that moment. That doesn't exist anywhere else.”

Rearview Mirror: Photographs, December 1963–February 1964 by [Paul McCartney](#) is at Gagosian in Beverly Hills from 25 April to 21 June.