

ADVOCATING WITH INSPIRATION

The Empowering Wisdom of Mary Virginia Swanson

[By Amy Touchette]



Photo © Steven St. John

Picture: Swanson discusses an attendee's portfolio during a September 2013 session at the Santa Fe Workshops. (Inset) Lisa M. Robinson and her work grace the cover of Swanson's new book, *Finding Your Audience: An Introduction to Marketing your Photographs*.



Headshot © Jessica Tampas

Few in the photo industry have as strong a reputation for artist advocacy as Mary Virginia Swanson.

Her extensive knowledge of the field and its

history, coupled with her vast contact network and best practices for exhibiting and publishing photography, sets her apart as an unrivaled industry expert. Yet perhaps what most distinguishes Swanson is the sentiment so many of her clients and colleagues speak of: her genuine, heartfelt desire to foster flourishing careers.

Swanson's unique ability to inspire photographers grew out of a love for the art form itself. At 17, she encountered a Richard Avedon exhibition, featuring black and silver walls, eight-foot prints, sound elements and fabric mural

prints of the Chicago Seven stapled to the walls "like an unfinished tapestry," says Swanson. She was hooked. "Going forward, photography and its presentation in public spaces completely engaged me," she adds.

During graduate studies at Arizona State University, Swanson availed herself of multiple internships, developing indispensable mentors who worked in varied aspects of the field. What followed is an impressive array of opportunities and achievements. She worked with Ansel Adams at the Friends of Photography in California, led special projects at Magnum Photos in New York and founded the fine art licensing company Swanstock in Tucson. In 2011, she co-authored *Publish Your Photography Book* with Darius Himes, and in spring 2015, she'll release *Finding Your Audience: An Introduction to Marketing Your Photographs*.

Swanson's experience with multiple markets—from fine art to commercial to

photojournalism—gives her a unique, comprehensive perspective that's proved extremely beneficial to photographers. "Artists must learn as much as they can about all opportunities for print sales, licensing and commissions rather than assuming they'll have a publisher and galleries and just make art with a fleet of people managing their professional life," she says. "Beyond talent and meticulous craft, an artist must have excellent research skills, business savvy and a driving, entrepreneurial spirit to be successful."

According to Swanson, understanding the varied parameters and syntax used in each market is key. For example, photo editors and researchers are interested in narrative, specific facts and keywords that define content; gallery owners focus more on the works' physical properties; and curators and collectors are concerned with consistency of methodology and provenance. As a result, it's crucial that photographers learn how to "speak the language of their audience in order to have the optimum professional relationship."

The foundation of Swanson's wisdom comes from her deep desire to empower photographers: to teach them how to fish instead of giving them fish, as the saying goes. "Many artists I meet just want to make their artwork and skip the heavy lifting, which is career building," Swanson notes. "You learn a tremendous amount about your work, yourself and our industry through broadening awareness and being your own best agent." **EDU**

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In March 2015, Swanson will receive the Society for Photographic Education's (SPE) Honored Educator award at the 52nd National Conference in New Orleans, complementing the Lifetime Achievement Award she received from the Griffin Museum of Photography in 2013. To watch the biographical profile created for her Griffin Museum award, visit PDNedu's digital edition at <digitalmag.pdnedu.com> or see it on YouTube at <http://bit.ly/1Kel4XP>.