Andy Warhol (1928–1987) was a keen observer. Known for being quiet and reserved, he was frequently seen off to one side of a social scene—whether at his famous silver-lined studio or at a charity event—watching (often through the lens of a camera). Warhol was also an obsessive collector of objects, of people, and even of artistic styles.

Warhol not only saved bits of ephemera from his daily activities, which he famously stuffed into boxes known as “time capsules,” but he also preserved much of his life experience on film as well. Although Warhol grew up around photography—his older brother, John Warhola, operated a photo shop in his hometown of Pittsburgh—it wasn’t until the 1970s that he fully embraced the medium as a means of personal expression. He began taking color Polaroids as an expedient way to capture imagery for his portrait commissions. Like the preparatory drawings of traditional portrait painters, these studies served as referential tools rather than as artworks in their own right. When he picked up an easy-to-use Minox 35EL camera in 1976, Warhol began a love affair with black-and-white photography that would last until his untimely death at age 58. His camera became a constant companion—as familiar a part of his ensemble as his trademark silver wig. He strove to document every moment of his life, creating a remarkable “visual diary.” Warhol produced an astonishing body of still images—over 150,000 black-and-white negatives and 66,000 prints, including thousands of Polaroids. The exhibition, Shot by Warhol, currently on view...
at the Indiana University Art Museum, features seventy-nine prints from a recent gift of more than 150 photographs from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Warhol worked in a wide range of media. Nonetheless, a consistent thread throughout much of his work is an abiding interest in the photographic image. Although reared in a poor, immigrant family, he had a Kodak Brownie camera from a cousin and even set up a makeshift darkroom in the family’s basement as a teenager. However, Warhol didn’t pursue photography professionally, instead opting to study pictorial design at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Although he acquired a 35mm still camera in the 1960s, Warhol found it too complicated to use and quickly abandoned it. He occasionally took shots with a Kodak instamatic camera and a black-and-white Polaroid camera during this period, but primarily he relied on photographs from the mass media for his artistic inspiration. Warhol used these appropriated images to create silkscreen matrices that he printed on a variety of supports. While many other Pop artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, also used imagery derived from popular culture, a combination of factors—Warhol’s desire to create his own look, his discovery of easier-to-use photographic equipment, and a copyright infringement case against him—led the artist to begin shooting his own source material.

Warhol liked his photography quick and easy, without the fuss of darkroom manipulation or technical expertise. He was introduced to the concept of cheap, automatic photography through the photo booth (or Photomaton) in his brother’s photo shop, where a 2½-inch camera would take four-for-a-quarter photographs. When Warhol decided to make ‘original’ images for his portrait commissions, he began by sending his fashionable clients down to the photo booths in New York City’s Times Square with a $100 worth of change.

After he discovered the Polaroid “Big Shot” camera, Warhol took rapid-fire standardized shots, like frames of photo-booth strips, passport pictures, or police mug shots. His studio shoots became little rituals with a meal for the client (also known as the “sacrifice”) and a friend before the session, with Warhol arriving near the end of the meal. The portrait-making process was, however, the part of the commission that most interested Warhol. The sitter would have light-colored makeup applied to his/her face—an old daguerreotypist’s trick—to reflect the light and smooth out any imperfections. The Polaroid process also flattened out tonal gradations, making it easier to produce high-contrast silkscreen halftones. Warhol’s ultimate desire was to make everyone look great. He would often take over one hundred Polaroid studies, select an “ideal” image with the sitter’s input, and then mark off the cropping for the printer. Finally, the image would be printed (usually in a black ink) on colorful hand-painted canvases. Warhol kept the un-used Polaroids, often asking the sitter to autograph one for his personal collection.

Warhol was obsessed with celebrity. As an adolescent he began collecting pictures of movie stars, a passion that he continued into his adulthood. Professional head shots—eight-by-ten-inch glossies—were a staple of the Hollywood studio system, which carefully orchestrated each actor’s visage and public persona. Publicity shots (or film stills) served as the basis for some of his early portraits of iconic stars such as Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe. Despite his choice of an “instant” medium, Warhol carefully orchestrated the studio set ups for his commercial portraiture following in this earlier tradition. His subjects were professionally styled, theatrically lit, and usually posed against a stark white background devoid of environmental context. They are generally presented in a traditional bust-length format, often with their hands artificially posed against their chins. Some of Warhol’s sitters were bona fide celebrities, while others simply wanted to be depicted by him as if they were famous. In the 1970s and 80s Warhol was seen as a “celebrity among celebrities.” As the chronicler of the period’s aristocracy, he created portraits using commercial materials that were modern, but poses that were timeless and serene. It became a marker of success to be “shot” by Warhol, making him one of the last great social portraitists—the “court painter” of the twentieth century. Warhol codified his stargazing in 1969 with the publication of his celebrity magazine Interview, which later helped him to meet and secure additional portrait clients.

Warhol’s portrait photography closely resembles the format of his Screen Tests. Between 1964 and 1966, he asked 472 visitors to the Factory—the moniker for his infamous studio/hangout—to be filmed for “living portraits.” They were simply placed against a blank wall in front of a stationary 16mm Bolex camera and given no instructions other than to look into the camera for a blank visage and public persona. Publicity shots or technical expertise. Warhol liked his photography quick and easy, without the fuss of darkroom manipulation or technical expertise.
Warhol’s interest in documenting his life through black-and-white photography (he claimed that color film was too expensive) led him to snap pictures in New York City and on his travels around the U.S. and abroad. Although generally undated, most of these images were taken between 1976 and 1982. His “on the road” imagery recalls the influence of Robert Frank’s book, The Americans (1958/59), Walker Evans’ Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941/ re-issued 1960), and Robert Rauschenberg’s series In + Out City Limits (1980-81). Warhol published his own “street” photography in a book titled America (1985).

His informal, “snapshot” aesthetic aligned Warhol with a group of documentary photographers, including Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Lee Friedlander, tagged as “social landscape” photographers, as well as with the New Topographics photographers, known for their unsentimental views of the American scene. Although Warhol’s images lack some of the satirical edge or social critique found in the work of his peers, they share a cool, impassive outlook on contemporary society. The photographer Stephen Shore remarked that Warhol had a “detached enjoyment of American culture.” Like Winogrand, Warhol shot tens of thousands of negatives, but only marked about 17% of his contact sheets for printing. Nonetheless, he democratically claimed that there was no such thing as a bad picture.

Many of Warhol’s black-and-white photographs record famous (or at least wealthy) people at social events, such as clubs, benefit’s, award ceremonies, weddings, funerals, art openings, and fashion shows. They often depicted celebrities engaged in normal activities, such as eating, drinking, and talking, thus making them seem more like one of us. Since Warhol went out almost every night (because of what he called his “social disease”) and had odd eating habits, he had plenty of time to snap his friends and acquaintances at such gatherings. Unlike covert paparazzi (or “pap”) photography, Warhol’s subjects seem aware of his presence, if not always of his actual shot. The pictures have a relaxed, nonchalant, and occasionally humorous air—often accentuated by the works’ off-kilt compositions—that came from Warhol’s privileged position as a social insider. Since Warhol knew everyone, it is not surprising that he was often negligent in recording the name of the event, the people depicted, or even the date. Although they were more like personal mementos, he used some of his event pictures in Interview magazine, in his gossip book Exposures (1979), and in the “how to” Party Book (1988), published shortly after his death by his diarist Pat Hackett.

Warhol’s obsessive documentation of his surroundings led to frequent comparisons with other photographers who successfully captured the character of their life and times, such as Nadar, Eugène Atget, Weegee, Paul Strand, and Walker Evans. However, when Warhol’s black-and-white photographs were compared to André Kertész’s in a catalogue for a rare solo exhibition of his photographs during his lifetime, he balked at the simile. He wanted to be seen as having a new, fresh perspective. Local photographer Dave Derkacy recently observed that Warhol’s constant stream of informal pictures seem analogous to contemporary posts on Facebook and it is interesting to imagine how the Pop artist might have adapted to this new technology.

Despite Warhol’s promotion of himself as an enigmatic genius, he was well aware of the work of his contemporaries and predecessors. Among his favorite photographers—and one whose work he collected—was Man Ray. Despite Warhol’s general mantra to “make it less arty,” he occasionally experimented with the formal properties of photography. To create aesthetic effects (whether intentionally or by accident), he played with high contrast, blurred focus, close-ups, and movement. In November 1975 Warhol devoted an entire issue of his Interview magazine to photography, in honor of Man Ray’s eighty-fifth birthday. In addition to works by the great surrealist, the issue included examples by Warhol’s friends Chris von Wangenheim, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Christopher Makos. While Warhol’s interest in the isolated depiction of “things,” fragmentary views of the human figure, and homo-eroticism had precedence in the work of these artists, he seemed far less concerned with image clarity, print quality, and tonal range than some of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, Warhol clearly saw the artistic potential of strong abstract design. Even his simple Polaroids—particularly of everyday objects—use shape and composition to re-focus our attention on the world around us.

Warhol’s photography not only affords us an opportunity to see a lesser-known aspect of his creative output, but also provides a unique insight into his professional practice and a window into his inner world from his own perspective. The Indiana University Art Museum’s small slice from his private photographic hoard reveals both his life as an artist and his life as art.