



International Center of Photography

Contact: Communications Department
212-857-0045 info@icp.org

media release



Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon

On view from
May 11 through
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Media Preview
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RSVP:
info@icp.org
212.857.0045

Amelia Earhart, ca. 1936
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Even before she disappeared over the Pacific Ocean on a round-the-world flight in 1937, aviator Amelia Earhart (1897–1937) was an international celebrity. She was the most famous female pilot of her day, featured on the front page of newspapers across the world and known for her charismatic public appearances and distinctive style, as well as for her extraordinary flying achievements. Earhart's unmistakable image remains an icon of daring, adventure, and unconventionality. *Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon*, on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) from May 11 through September 9, 2007, includes photographs and media representations of the legendary aviator, examining the essential role that photography plays in the creation of fame and its subsequent cultural impact.

Earhart managed to stay in the public eye for nearly a decade (from 1928 to 1937), through a combination of record-breaking flights, savvy publicity, and an appealing and photogenic style that was equal parts exceptional and accessible. Fashionable portraits by well-known society photographers such as Edward Steichen aided in the construction of Earhart's image. But even more influential were the contributions of thousands of anonymous or little-known press photographers. Their innumerable images shaped how the public perceived Earhart herself, and more importantly, the possibilities for women and the relatively new technology of flight.

At a time when aviation remained treacherous and pilots were regarded as heroes, Earhart stood out for her courage and also for her bold advocacy for the rights of women. Her rise to fame coincided with and helped solidify the idea of women's changing roles, and, in the 1920s and 1930s, she embodied the concept of the "new woman." Earhart was one of the most photographed women of her day, and her widely reproduced image contributed to the vision of what the modern woman could look like and accomplish.

Tracing the development and consolidation of Earhart's image through studio portraits, advertisements, newspaper coverage, women's magazines, and more provides a lens onto the practical applications and the distribution of photographs during a period of revolutionary change in the print media, and demonstrates how Earhart's image was promoted. Photographs will be drawn from a number of collections, including the George Eastman House; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the New York Times Photo Archives; the Time Picture Collection; The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University; and the Collection of the International Center of Photography.

Background

Amelia Earhart catapulted to instant notoriety as the first woman to cross the Atlantic by airplane on June 17, 1928. Though that flight was largely a publicity stunt, it was the exception in a career filled with groundbreaking accomplishments.

After a thrilling first plane ride at an airshow in Los Angeles in 1921, Earhart was eager to learn how to fly. She began flying lessons with pioneer female aviator Neta Snook, and was inspired to buy her first plane. Earhart, also determined to pursue "a life of the mind, a life of purpose and action," enrolled in pre-med classes at Columbia University in New York City and then became a social worker in Boston while honing her flying skills.

In April, 1928, Earhart received a phone call asking if she would like to fly across the Atlantic, an exploit spearheaded by wealthy British-American heiress Amy Guest and publisher-publicist George Putnam, and inspired by Charles Lindbergh's solo flight the previous year. Earning the nickname that would stick throughout her life, "Lady Lindy" completed the mission successfully and returned to the U.S. as a hero and media darling. She and the flight crew were greeted with a ticker-tape parade in New York and a reception at the White House.

Following the transatlantic flight, Earhart joined forces with Putnam, whom she married in 1931. Putnam sensed in her popularity a publicity gold mine, and Earhart hoped to promote her passions—aviation and feminism. The two arranged a lecture tour, and she became an accomplished speaker and writer as well as a columnist for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In addition to her newfound role as a celebrity, Earhart continued to break new ground in flight: flying in the first women's cross-country air derby in 1929, and setting speed and altitude records. She was a founding member of the Ninety-Nines, a women's flying association, and became vice-president of the National Aeronautics Association—the first woman to hold office in the organization.

Perhaps Earhart's greatest success was her 1932 solo transatlantic flight from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland, undertaken exactly five years after Charles Lindbergh made history with his Atlantic crossing. She also made pioneering solo flights from Hawaii to California and across North America. Earhart continued to encourage young women to explore aviation and other new fields, even joining the faculty of Purdue University as a women's career counselor in 1935.

When Earhart embarked on a flight around the world at the equator in 1937, she intended it to be her last record-breaking attempt. But she never reached Howland Island, the final leg of the journey over the Pacific Ocean, and despite a massive and costly search by the U.S. Navy, Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were never found. Their disappearance has inspired much speculation and many theories as to what happened on this final flight, contributing to Earhart's legend. More importantly, Amelia Earhart's image remains a powerful icon of unconventional, independent womanhood, its durability ensured in large part by the wealth of photographs documenting her life.

Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon is organized by ICP Associate Curator Kristen Lubben and ICP Assistant Curator Erin Barnett.

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Publication

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