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In Profile

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There are plenty of professional hats you can wear in any art-related field, but photography may trump them all when it comes to diversity of skills: images need to be shot, altered, printed, distributed; fine-art photographers need to be represented, and commercial agencies have to be fed images. Enter Mary Virginia Swanson, whose rather unique job description traverses them all: art consultant specializing in photography. To arrive at this juncture, Swanson has worn quite a number of hats over her variegated career, among them the heading up of Swanstock (her own fine-art image licensing company); placing art in important collections for Terry Etherton's gallery in Tucson; and a three-year tour with Magnum Photos. Private consultations, speaking engagements, and portfolio reviews take up the lion's share of her days now—which she spends shuttling between her home in Tucson and a pied-à-terre in New York. It's a pretty sweet niche, because whether she's connecting a stock photo house to the right photographer or a photographer to the right curator, or promoting *Publish Your Photography Book*, a new publication she co-authored with Darius Himes, Swanson, who interacts with virtually everyone, works for no one but herself. "If I had to summarize," she says, "I'd say that mostly I identify the strengths in an artist's work and find appreciative audiences; that's the core of my consulting."

Swanson was born and raised in Minneapolis, a city she describes as a fantastic place to grow up, thanks to its having an "urban-rural mix of dance, music, art, and cultural richness." A 1970 exhibition she took in at the Minneapolis Institute of Art curated by Ted Hartwell of Richard Avedon's portraiture was enough to tie the knot for her and a devotion to the medium of photography. "Seeing the space transformed," she says, "by these massive prints of the Chicago Seven and Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower was breathtaking." That said, it was another passion, ceramics, that she decided to focus on while earning a BFA at Arizona State. By her senior year, though, thanks in part to the tutelage of the late photo historian Bill Jay, she graduated with a photography degree. After graduation (and a productive year spent abroad in London), she returned to ASU and got her MFA in photography in 1979. But then, says Swanson, "You get out of graduate school with a 'what do you do now and how to you get a job?'" Luckily for Swanson, she landed an internship at Robert Freidus Gallery in New York, then run by Janet Borden. "I got an understanding of what it means to represent an artist so that they can be free to make their own work while you manage their careers," she recalls. "I always credit Janet with that."

After that came a spate of moves west and east: to the Friends of Photography in Carmel, California; to New York in 1984, to work for Callaway Editions; and finally, a three-year stint at Magnum, which provided a key puzzle piece in Swanson's picture. It gave her a sense of how photos can generate added revenue for their makers, and in what markets, and how. Etherton encouraged her to come back west a final time, gave her an office space in his gallery to pursue her licensing skills, and by 1991 Swanstock took shape. Today her clients, who range in age from their early 20s to their mid-80s, benefit from the fact that, if Swanson encourages them to think outside the box about their own careers, it's because she's done that herself. "In today's world 'exhibits' can mean many different things, 'publications' can mean many different things," she says. "More than ever you need to think about finding your voice, your craft, your brand. Being consistent is key." □