

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## **ROY DeCARAVA: A RETROSPECTIVE**

January 25 - May 7, 1996

The largest and most comprehensive survey ever devoted to the work of Roy DeCarava (b. 1919), one of the central figures in postwar American photography, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on January 25, 1996. Organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, **ROY DeCARAVA: A RETROSPECTIVE** spans DeCarava's oeuvre, from his groundbreaking pictures of everyday life in Harlem, through the civil rights protests of the early 1960s, to recent lyrical studies of nature. On view through May 7, the exhibition includes a generous selection of DeCarava's remarkable jazz photographs -- of Billie Holiday, Milt Jackson, John Coltrane, and many others.

The exhibition and its accompanying publication are supported by a grant from Metropolitan Life Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

**ROY DeCARAVA** is the first retrospective of the artist's work in New York in more than twenty-five years. It surveys nearly half a century of work through some 200 black-and-white photographs made from the late 1940s through the mid-1990s. Presented in generally chronological order, the exhibition also explores continuities of style and theme by juxtaposing works that span decades.

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On the occasion of the exhibition, Roy DeCarava states, "Images and the making of images have been and are still central to me as a person and to my growth as an artist. Photography is the best way I know of to express my concerns and my values. Exhibiting and publishing the work are ways of sharing and confirm my belief in the power of art to illuminate and transform our lives."

"DeCarava's photography, an indispensable contribution to the rich American tradition of the past fifty years, simply has not been seen in adequate depth," states Mr. Galassi. "It has been an honor and a pleasure to work closely with Roy DeCarava and Sherry Turner DeCarava to bring this great body of work to the Museum's large audience."

Among the earliest works in the exhibition are photographs that first appeared in the book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), with a fictional text by Langston Hughes. DeCarava made many of the pictures after winning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952 -- the first awarded to an African-American photographer -- which allowed him to spend a full year photographing daily life in Harlem. The pictures brought a new gentleness and intimacy to photography, creating an image of everyday experience that is at once tender and unsentimental.

Born in New York City in 1919, DeCarava studied painting and printmaking at the Cooper Union School of Art, the Harlem Community Art Center, and the George Washington Art School. He turned to photography in the late 1940s and quickly mastered the vocabulary of the small, hand-held camera, which was rapidly becoming the hallmark of advanced American work. "Within the aesthetic that he helped to define, DeCarava created a style whose emotional

force arises from its pictorial simplicity and grace," states Mr. Galassi. "His impulse always has been to reach an elemental image, to transform the particulars of ordinary life into emblems and metaphors without losing their physical immediacy."

In *Man coming up subway stairs* (1952), one of several subway pictures in the exhibition, one exhausted worker stands for all working men at the end of the day. Also exemplary of DeCarava's metaphoric bent is *Hallway* (1953), in which an inhumanly narrow passage is described both as a haunting instance of "the economics of building for poor people" and as a thing of beauty.

In 1955 DeCarava opened A Photographer's Gallery in New York, a pioneering effort to win recognition for photography as a fine art; the gallery remained open for more than two years. In 1956 he embarked on an extensive series of photographs of jazz musicians. Many of the jazz pictures, such as *Coltrane on soprano* (1963), show individuals absorbed in the act of creation. Others, such as *Billie Holiday* (1952), are warm and affecting portraits. Together with photographs of Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Norman Lewis, and others, these portraits form an important body within DeCarava's work.

In 1958 DeCarava quit his job as a commercial illustrator and for most of the next two decades earned his living as a freelance photographer. In 1963 he helped to found the Kamoinge Workshop, an association of African-American photographers based in Harlem. In 1975 he ended his freelance career to teach photography at Hunter College, where he is Distinguished Professor of Art of the City University of New York.

In the early 1960s, DeCarava's work grew more tough-minded in its response to racial discrimination, notably in pictures of laborers in New York's garment district and of civil rights protests. *Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington, D.C.* (1963), made at the historic March on Washington, exemplifies the photographer's instinct for isolating the essential detail. Instead of attempting to encompass the vast event, DeCarava's picture enters into the spirit of the March, distilling a collective determination and hope in the expression of a single face.

A life-long New Yorker, DeCarava almost always has photographed close to home, making from his immediate world the expansive world of his art. Within these parameters, his art has continued to evolve, as a group of pictures from the mid-1980s attests. DeCarava's hand-camera style rejects artificial light as an intrusion upon experience and thus accepts deep shadow and blur as marks of authenticity. Beginning in 1985, DeCarava elaborated this principle in pictures whose long exposures make the blur of motion an active stylistic device. In these photographs the sensuousness that DeCarava earlier had accorded to individual figures is transposed to the overall field of the image.

**ROY DeCARAVA: A RETROSPECTIVE** extends a long association between the artist and The Museum of Modern Art. In 1950 the Museum purchased three photographs from the then thirty-year-old artist who had recently turned to photography. His pictures have been shown regularly in the Museum's exhibitions since 1953 and in its photography collection galleries since their creation in 1964.

In association with the exhibition, Roy DeCarava and bassist Ron Carter present "Jazz at MoMA," featuring internationally renowned musicians on Fridays from 5:30 to 7:45 p.m. This series is supported by a generous grant from The Robert and Joyce Menschel Foundation. The Museum offers pay-what-you-wish admission on Thursdays and Fridays from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Roy DeCarava discusses his work in a lecture sponsored by The Friends of Education on Thursday, February 15 at 7:00 p.m. in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. Tickets, available at the Lobby Information Desk, are \$10 (members, \$9; students and seniors, \$8). For lecture information, the public may call the Department of Education (212-708-9795).

Following its MoMA showing, **ROY DeCARAVA: A RETROSPECTIVE** travels to The Art Institute of Chicago (June 8 - September 15, 1996); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November 14, 1996 - January 26, 1997); the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA (February 22 - May 4, 1997); The St. Louis Art Museum (June 15 - August 9, 1997); The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (September 7 - November 16, 1997); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (January 22 - April 5, 1998); the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (June 27 - September 19, 1998); and The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (October 17, 1998 - January 4, 1999).

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**PUBLICATION**

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