

WALKER EVANS  
AMERICAN  
PHOTO-  
GRAPHS

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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AMERICAN  
PHOTOGRAPHS

WITH AN ESSAY BY LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

SEVENTY-FIFTH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Beginning on the facing page, through the end of Lincoln Kirstein's essay on page 200, this edition of *American Photographs* follows the original, 1938 edition as closely as possible, page for page. A Note on the Seventy-Fifth-Anniversary Edition, beginning on page 201, provides a historical context for the 1938 book and subsequent editions and clarifies aspects that are unique to the publication of this new edition. Credits for the sources of the reproductions in this edition are included in the Acknowledgments, on page 205.

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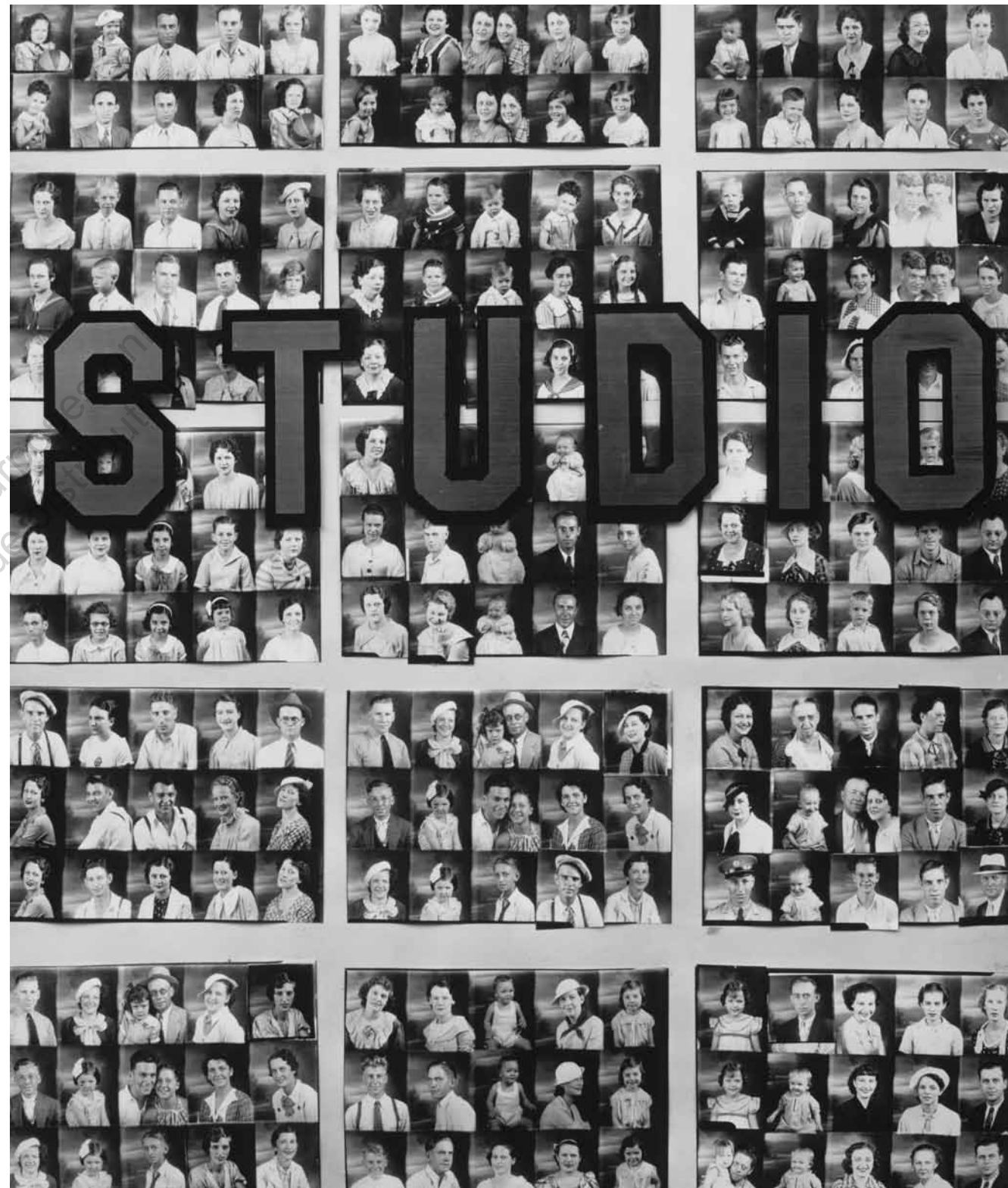
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## A NOTE ON THE SEVENTY-FIFTH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION

The interest in and influence of Walker Evans's *American Photographs* has grown, essentially unabated, since The Museum of Modern Art first published it in 1938. This elegant and modestly scaled catalogue accompanied an exhibition of the same name, held at the Museum from September 28 to November 18, 1938. The exhibition, and especially the book, have been the subjects of an impressive array of musings by artists, critics, cultural historians, curators, and photography enthusiasts, from William Carlos Williams to Alan Trachtenberg, and the book has been a key touchstone for photographers and those who seek to understand the lyric potential of the medium. Bringing *American Photographs* back into print allows members of a new generation to hold this sequence of eighty-seven photographs in their hands and form their own opinions of its worth.

In 1938 there was no formal Department of Photography at the Museum, yet interest in the medium was keen and growing, owing much to the vision of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA's founding director. On the heels of the success of *Photography 1839–1937* (the medium's first major historical survey), the Museum decided to mount a one-person photography exhibition featuring the work

of Walker Evans, with an accompanying catalogue—a remarkable commitment only partially explained by the steadfast support of Evans's patron and friend Lincoln Kirstein as well as Thomas Mabry, the Museum's Executive Director. *American Photographs* is a clear signal of Kirstein's contributions to the visual arts, through both his financial support and his critical writing. Although the press release for *American Photographs* declared it to be “the first one-man photography exhibition ever given by the Museum of Modern Art,” it was, technically, the second. In 1933 the Museum had displayed thirty-nine photographs by Evans in what was considered an architecture exhibition; that work was commissioned by the precocious Kirstein to document nineteenth-century American vernacular architecture. Kirstein gave the Museum one hundred of these photographs, and Evans included several images or close variants in *American Photographs* (see Part Two, Nos. 26–28, 32, 33, and 35).

Despite their sharing a title, the exhibition and book are hardly synonymous. The exhibition featured one hundred prints, of which only about half are reproduced in the book, although both selections represent the scope of Evans's work since 1929. Evans clearly

understood that the publication of *American Photographs* would come to define his legacy in ways that a seven-week exhibition never could, and this fifth edition is as good an indication as any of his foresight. Legend has it that the exhibition was installed in a single evening; the process by which the first edition of *American Photographs* came into being was evidently more considered.

Working closely with Kirstein and Frances Collins, the Museum's Manager of Publications, Evans deliberated extensively on the selection and sequencing of the photographs. Placing pictures only on the right-hand side of each spread and relegating the prosaic titles to a list at the end of each of the two sections, Evans allowed nothing to interrupt the experience of looking through the progression of plates. Kirstein's contribution—the first major critical consideration of Evans's work—followed the plates, as it appears here. A note at the back of the book stated, "Five thousand copies of this book have been printed for the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art by The Spiral Press, New York, from plates made by Beck Engraving Company. Of the edition, 1315 copies have been reserved for members of the Museum." Bound in black cloth, it is an exquisite example of letterpress printing (the dominant technology at the time) that renders Evans's work with clarity and balance, guiding the character of the reproductions in this fifth edition.

In 1962, recognizing the importance of bringing *American Photographs* back into print, the Museum issued a twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of the original publication. The new edition used all but one of the letterpress plates from the first edition, but there were some significant changes to the design, including the addition of an image to the cover, a new typeface throughout, and the placement of titles across from each plate. Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Publications, wrote the foreword:

*Walker Evans's pictorial record of America in the early thirties was first published at the time of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition of his work in 1938. It revealed a new master of the camera who expressed the tragic sense and troubled conscience of that period of economic depression and political change, although in mood and style it was reflective rather than tendentious. Evans, then as now, contemplates the present as it might be seen at some future date. This explains why these photographs seem even more important now, when the period out of which they arose can be seen in historical perspective.*

*Many young people, who have found the first edition in libraries, regard it not only as an extraordinary example of photographic art but as an indispensable visual chronicle, and they have wanted to procure it. We dedicate this new edition to them.*

By 1971 *American Photographs* was again out of print. The Museum had planned to

reissue it along with *Walker Evans*, a catalogue for the retrospective organized that year by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography. When this didn't happen, and the book's copyright expired upon Evans's death in 1975, East River Press, Inc., New York, simply made a paperbound copy of the 1938 book, reverting to the original typeface but again placing the titles across from each plate. The most significant change was the use of offset lithography, which had superseded letterpress printing as the standard in photomechanical reproduction.

The fiftieth-anniversary edition, issued in 1988, restored many aspects of the original publication, from the bold simplicity of the cover design, with its hyphenated title, to the color and gloss of the paper on which the plates were printed. The titles of the photographs were once again placed at the end of each plate section, and the dedication was restored. Taking advantage of changes in the technology for reproducing photographs, the book was printed in duotone offset lithography, with many of the plates made from Evans's own prints, preserving the precision and balance of the original reproductions but allowing for subtler and smoother tonal shifts.

Peter Galassi, Curator in the Museum's Department of Photography, observed in his note on the fiftieth-anniversary edition:

*The prints reproduced here are the best that our extensive search yielded. Inevitably, however, they differ from one another in printing style, color, and condition. But even if all of the prints used here were the same ones that were used in 1938, the two books still would look very different from each other. The reason for this goes beyond the difference between letterpress and offset printing.*

*The plates of the 1938 edition were carefully, often extensively reworked by hand before printing. Selected areas of a number of plates were lightened or darkened, and other painstaking alterations were made, so that in many cases the tonal structure of the reproduction is substantially different from the tonal structure of the print—or indeed of any print from the same negative. No attempt has been made here to imitate the subtle or sometimes quite radical effects of this pictorial alchemy. Instead we have attempted to follow the spirit of the original reproductions, taken as a whole; to emulate their clarity and legibility.*

The challenge of locating satisfactory prints to use as the matrices of the reproductions twenty-five years ago was considerable. There were five different sources of prints, not including the Museum or the Library of Congress, which holds the negatives for much of Evans's work for the Farm Security Administration from the mid-1930s. Only a fraction of the gelatin silver prints used to make the original plates existed. Certain images were cropped because no print could

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