

Robert Frank
Trolley—
New Orleans

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



Robert Frank (American, born Switzerland. 1924–2019). *Trolley—New Orleans*. 1955. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/16 x 13 3/8" (23.1 x 34 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. THE FELLOWS OF PHOTOGRAPHY FUND, THE FAMILY OF MAN FUND, AND HORACE W. GOLDSMITH FUND THROUGH ROBERT B. MENSCHER

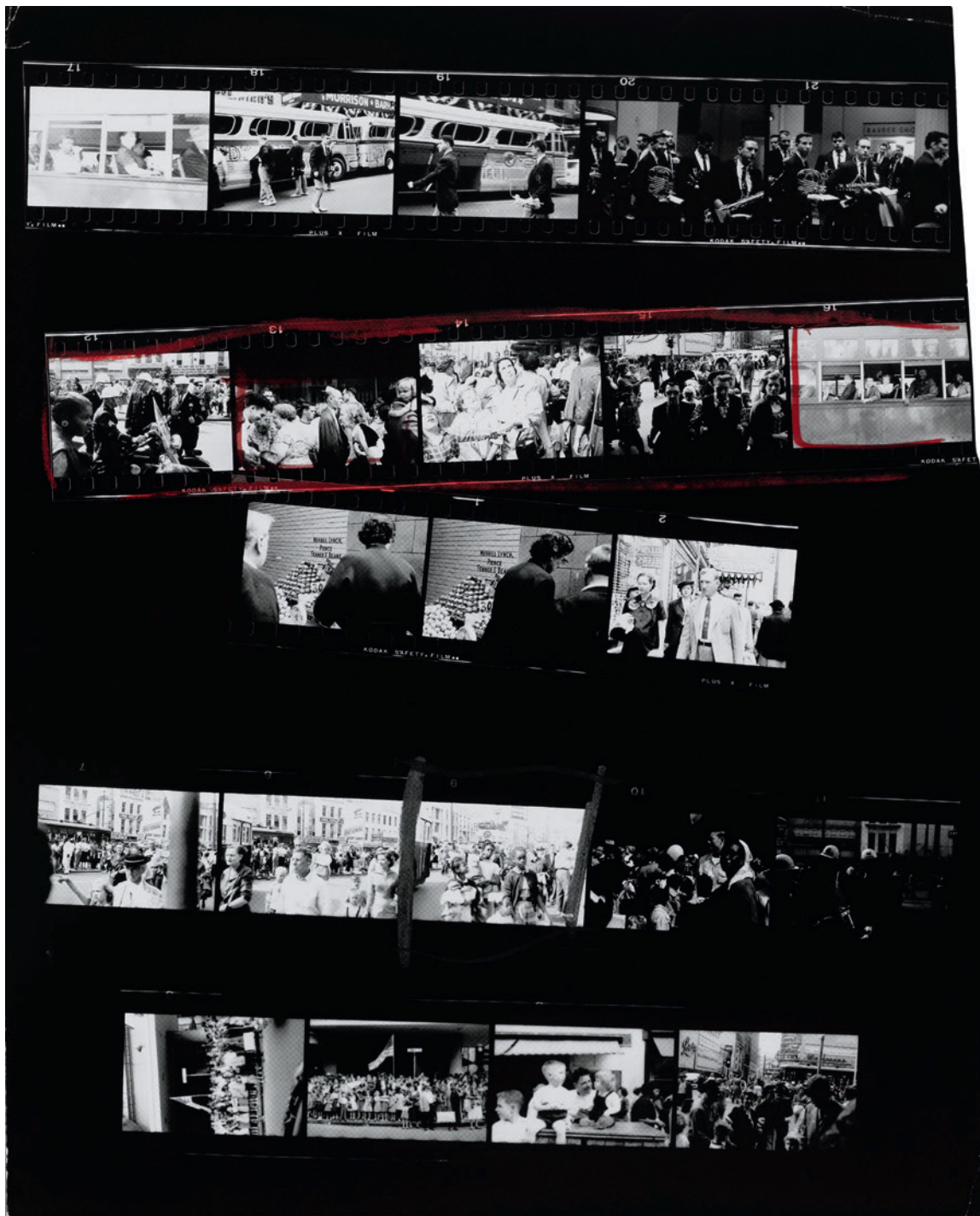


FIG. 1. Robert Frank (American, born Switzerland. 1924–2019). Contact sheet from the portfolio *Robert Frank: The Americans*, 81 Contact Sheets. November 11, 1955. Inkjet print, printed 2009, 20 ¼ × 16 ⅞" (51.5 × 42 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF SUSAN AND PETER MACGILL



FIG. 2. Robert Frank (American, born Switzerland. 1924–2019). *Canal Street—New Orleans*. 1955. Gelatin silver print, 8 ¼ × 12 ⅝" (20.9 × 31.3 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ROBERT AND GAYLE GREENHILL

"AMERICA IS AN INTERESTING COUNTRY, BUT THERE IS A LOT HERE THAT I DO not like and that I would never accept," the Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank wrote in a letter to his parents in late 1955. "I am also trying to show this in my photos."¹ On November 11 of that year, Frank was passing through New Orleans on the multi-leg road trip that would produce his landmark book *The Americans*. Turning away from the throngs of people crowding Canal Street, he pointed his camera at a streetcar and clicked the shutter, creating the image he would later title *Trolley—New Orleans*. Frank's contact sheet from this roll of film shows that the sidewalks around him were teeming with people of all ages: young musicians in matching blazers; grinning police officers gathered around their motorcycles; elderly women with arms linked [FIG. 1]. Three frames before the streetcar, he captured a section of Canal Street jam-packed with pedestrians crossing within inches of one another, intent on their own business [FIG. 2].² In *Trolley*, on the other hand, Frank isolated the faces of just a few individuals, as they sat, immobile, framed by the vehicle's windows.

The order of the passengers in the streetcar mirrors the unjust social order of the world around them: The figure at left, seated nearest to the front of the vehicle, appears to be a white man, partially obscured by reflections in the glass between him and the camera. In the row behind him is a white woman, her lips



FIG. 3. Interior of a streetcar with race screens, New Orleans, August 29, 1951. CHARLES L. FRANCK STUDIO COLLECTION AT THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

clenched, almost scowling as she looks directly out at the photographer through the open window. At far right, in the rearmost row visible within the frame of the photograph, a Black woman gazes away from the camera. In front of her a Black man in a work shirt leans on the window frame, his hand hanging heavy over the edge; he, too, seems to meet the photographer's eye. In the middle, two white children share a bench—a boy, sharply dressed in a bowtie, staring straight at the camera, and a younger girl behind him. One of her hands grips a white paper bag; the other rests on the little wooden sign, known as a race screen, that divides the front of the streetcar, reserved for white passengers, from the rear, and which could be picked up and moved back by the white passengers to assure themselves of a seat as the vehicle filled [FIG. 3].

"I had always tried to come up with a picture that really said it all, that was a masterpiece," Frank once reflected, but by "the time I applied for the Guggenheim Fellowship by the middle '50s, I decided that wasn't it either. . . . I decided that there had to be a more sustained form of visual expression. There had to be more pictures that would sustain an idea or vision or something. I couldn't just depend on that one singular photograph anymore."³ Indeed, the monumental

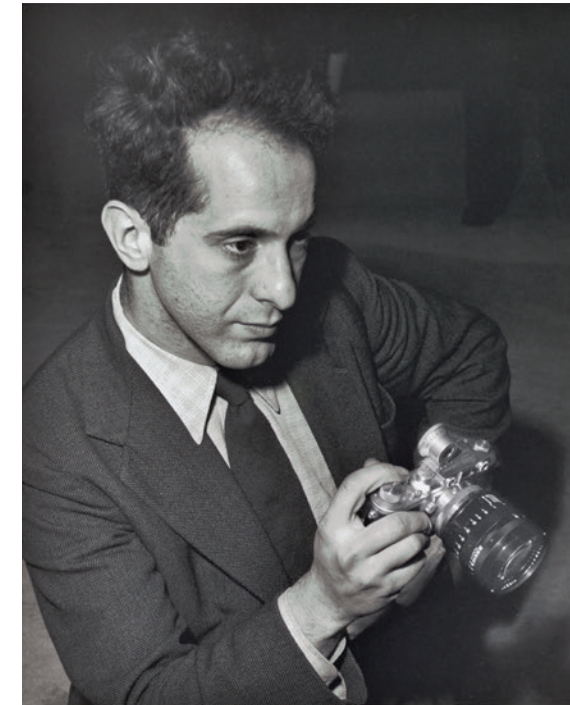


FIG. 4. Fred Stein (American, 1909–1967). Robert Frank. 1954. Gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 x 7 15/16" (25.1 x 20.1 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ARCHIVES, NEW YORK

work that came out of Frank's 1955 Guggenheim Fellowship—*The Americans*—is just that: a sustained idea woven from eighty-three photographs shot over two years in urban and rural environments in multiple states, a carefully sequenced rhythm of images creating a layered and complex portrait of the United States and the people who lived there. Nonetheless, *Trolley*, the photograph that appeared on the cover of the U.S. edition of the book, is a singular work of art, a picture that has transcended its original context through its reverberating influences, even as it distills many of the characteristics of *The Americans*. Its impacts are at once political, social, and artistic. It is, in the words of Frank's fellow photographer and one-time collaborator Danny Lyon, "a perfect picture."⁴

In his Guggenheim Fellowship application, Frank anticipated that his work would be read through the lens of social documentary—as a cultural portrait of the United States—but he emphasized his own aesthetic aims as well: "It is only partly documentary in nature: one of its aims is more artistic than the word documentary implies."⁵ One hallmark of Frank's artistry was the spontaneity made possible by his handheld 35mm Leica camera, which allowed him to shoot from the hip [FIG. 4]. Many photographs in *The Americans* are characterized by

visible grain, blurriness, or an off-center composition, qualities that in the 1950s were more often associated with amateur snapshots than with professional photography, but which Frank embraced for their connotations of improvisation or indifference. Yet in *Trolley* he captured his subject with impressive clarity. He may have exposed the film while the vehicle was stopped: the contact sheet reveals a second streetcar image, the main characteristics of which are a blur of illegible faces and the washed-out glare of sunlight on metal siding. By the subsequent frame, Frank had turned away.

The Americans did not include any editorializing captions, nor was it buttressed by deep sociological research, and many of Frank's contemporaries would not have considered him a political photographer. But, looking back, Frank said of *The Americans*, "It was very political. It really talked about that period in America—it showed that period in an unmistakable way, how I felt about it, where I stood."⁶ Others—including the Beat writer Jack Kerouac in his introduction to the book—used the word "poetry" to describe Frank's work, validating it as art over and above its use as a social document: "Robert Frank . . . sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world."⁷

Prior to the release of his book, Frank published a selection of photographs from his extended road trip—*Trolley* among them—in the 1958 *U.S. Camera Annual*. In a statement accompanying the images (many of which did not appear in *The Americans*), Frank explained his straightforward goals: "With these photographs, I have attempted to show a cross-section of the American population. My effort was to express it simply and without confusion."⁸ In *Trolley* this clarity is at least partly achieved through the relative evenness of tone across all the faces in the composition. Sid Kaplan, a printer who frequently worked with Frank, remembered him saying, "It doesn't matter if it's not a good print, as long as it's even."⁹ Above the passengers, a rhythmic tapestry of swirling shapes is reflected in the glass, the web of illegible forms contrasting with the row of figures below. That row evokes a film strip, with one frame following another, prompting us to read them in sequence. It is also a collection of pictures within a bigger picture, each component a remarkable image in itself. Marked by a row of vertical white bars, the formal arrangement can also be compared to a prison: the window frames delineate the cells that isolate *Trolley's* riders from each other and from the bustling world of the street below.

On November 7, 1955, two days before his thirty-first birthday, Frank was pulled over while driving on U.S. Route 65 in the town of McGehee, Arkansas.¹⁰ A letter sent the next month from one of the arresting lieutenants to the police captain in Little Rock reported that Frank had been "shabbily dressed, needed a shave

and haircut, also a bath. Subject talked with a foreign accent."¹¹ The lieutenant also took note of Frank's belongings—cameras, numerous papers in various languages—and arrested him on suspicion of spying. He was fingerprinted and questioned for hours by the authorities, including a local counterintelligence specialist. When he was finally released, around midnight, Frank drove south. Two days later, writing from Port Gibson, Mississippi, to the photographer Walker Evans—his friend and mentor—he called the ordeal "the most humiliating experience I had so far."¹²

The trauma was lasting: the officers' prejudice and their suspicion of his Jewishness made a deep impression on Frank. And, as he recounted in a 1975 lecture, the experience influenced his work:

I was driving early in the morning on a little country road, and the cops came, stopped my car, and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm on a Guggenheim Fellowship, and I'm traveling around photographing the country." The guy said, "Guggenheim? Who is that?" So they pulled me in. They said, "We got to arrest you," and I said, "What for?" and they said, "Never mind." . . . I didn't know anybody; they could have killed me. It's pretty scary, and I think that somehow came through in the photographs—that violence I was confronted with.¹³

Many years later, in his autobiographical artist's book *The Lines of My Hand*, first published in 1972, Frank reproduced a grid of photographs shot in Port Gibson on the day he wrote to Evans [FIG. 5]. The pictures depict a group of white boys gathered by the local high school; it is clear from their dialogue with the photographer, transcribed on the page, that they viewed him with both suspicion and derision.

Frank had acknowledged his position as an outsider—"a European eye [looking] at the United States"—even before he set forth on his trip. In his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, he wrote, "What I have in mind, then, is observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere."¹⁴ Yet the episode in Arkansas was a turning point; what Frank endured on that day was, for many, what life in the United States is really like. After his experience in McGehee, his pictures took on a different cast, and, as he later recalled, when he photographed the streetcar in New Orleans four days later, he "knew what to look for."¹⁵



Port Gibson, Mississippi; in front of the Highschool September 1955

Kids: What are you doing here? Are you from New York?

Me: I'm just taking pictures.

Kids: Why?

Me: For myself—just to see.

Kids: He must be a communist. He looks like one. Why don't you go to the other side of town and watch the niggers play?

FIG. 5. Port Gibson, Mississippi in Robert Frank's *The Lines of My Hand* (New York: Lustrum, 1972), n.p. Though dated in the book to September, the photographs were taken in November 1955. THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART LIBRARY, NEW YORK

Frank was born to a bourgeois Jewish family in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1924. He was drawn to photography early, apprenticing with several professional photographers before emigrating to New York at age twenty-two. He arrived in the city in March 1947 and was hired the next month by Alexey Brodovitch, art director of the influential fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, where he worked full-time for several months before continuing as a freelance photographer.¹⁶ It was Brodovitch who introduced Frank to the 35mm Leica that he began carrying that year, switching from the slower Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera he had used in Europe.¹⁷

Frank also received early recognition from Edward Steichen, the director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art. Steichen presented one of Frank's photographs for the first time in an exhibition in 1950 (*Photographs by 51 Photographers*), and in 1955 he included seven photographs by Frank in his influential traveling exhibition *The Family of Man*.¹⁸ Steichen's exhibition was an attempt to trace universal characteristics of humanity across geography, class, and social circumstance, while Frank's subsequent project, *The Americans*, argued against a homogeneous reading of American culture.¹⁹ As Evans put it, Frank's work "is a far cry from all the wooly, successful 'photo-sentiments' about human familyhood."²⁰

In New York, Frank was also close with Beat writers and poets and Abstract Expressionist painters. He identified with their solitary pursuit of art, their outlaw status, and their rejection of popular views and behavior. "I didn't know any people in Europe that lived like that," he recollected later. "They were free, and that impressed me. They paid no attention to how you dressed or where you lived. They made their own rules."²¹ At the same time, Frank benefitted from the esteem of establishment figures. His application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, submitted in October 1954, included recommendations from Brodovitch and Steichen; Evans, who besides his accomplishment as a photographer was also an editor at *Fortune* magazine; Alexander Liberman, *Vogue's* art director; and Meyer Schapiro, an art history professor at Columbia University. In April 1955 Frank became the first European photographer to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

That June, just before setting off for the Midwest on the first leg of his road trip, Frank used part of the grant money to purchase a 1950 Ford Business Coupe. This car, his constant companion on the road, is pictured in the last photograph in *The Americans*, *U.S. 90, En Route to Del Rio, Texas* [FIG. 6]. The image, in which Frank's wife Mary can be seen huddled in the Ford's front seat together with their young son, Pablo (their daughter, Andrea, was also in the car), is a poignant bookend to *Trolley*. In *Trolley* Frank looked at a streetcar from outside, capturing a cross-section of Americans but also the divisions between them. In *U.S. 90* Frank was also looking in, but this time he was looking at his own family; this is his personal view. In his initial statement accompanying the photographs that make

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