

The Museum of Modern Art

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VARIANTS

December 12, 1985 - March 11, 1986

An exhibition illustrating the varieties of choice that define the art of photography opens at The Museum of Modern Art on December 12, 1985. Entitled VARIANTS, the exhibition includes both famous and lesser-known examples of works by leading American and European photographers. Shown alongside one another are variant prints made from the same negative, different views of the same subject, and pictures taken from the same vantage point at different times, often to startling effect. Organized by John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography, the exhibition consists of approximately fifty black-and-white photographs, most of which have been drawn from the Museum's collection.

The earliest variants in the exhibition are two 1865 pictures by Matthew Brady depicting the ruins of the mills of Richmond, Virginia. Both are made from the same camera position; but the photographer has panned his camera to produce two different versions of a symbol of total war.

The work of Alfred Stieglitz provides an exceptionally rich example of the way a photographer may reconsider and revise the meaning of a picture years after the making of the negative. The exhibition contains two photogravure prints from his 1893 negative Winter Fifth Avenue. The earlier print (1897) presents a harsher, more naturalistic vision of the rigors of a winter snow storm; the 1905 print, by means of a softer tonal scale and the removal by retouching of unwanted details, produces a more lyric and decorative blizzard.

Two Walker Evans photographs made within minutes of each other in 1930, both of the facade of a simple summer camp cottage, demonstrate the

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contradictory goals that competed for primacy in his work during that pivotal period. One negative, a detail of the facade, is concerned with the abstract pattern of light and shadow cast on a flat, textured plane. The alternate view shows the whole facade, symmetrically and factually, and prefigures Evans's mature, classical style, in which the poetic integrity of the simple fact takes precedence over the claims of pure design.

The most interesting and instructive variations are often very simple ones. When Dorothea Lange made Five Tenant Farmers Without Farms in 1937 the social imperatives of the times encouraged her to emphasize the strength and obvious competence of her subjects, and she eliminated from the picture's right edge a smaller, less exemplary sixth tenant farmer. When she reprinted the negative in the early sixties its meaning seemed to her richer without cropping, and the sixth farmer was restored to the picture.

Among the more recent of the pictures in the exhibition are two from the series that Frank Gohlke made in his home town, Wichita Falls, Texas. The first half of the series was made immediately after the city was destroyed by a tornado in April 1979; the second half was made from the same vantage points one year later.

Other photographers represented in the exhibition include Ansel Adams, Eugène Atget, Richard Benson, Harry Callahan, Julia Margaret Cameron, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Cumming, Robert Doisneau, Jim Goldberg, Lisette Model, Wright Morris, Nicholas Nixon, Aaron Siskind, Edward Steichen, Ralph Steiner, and Edward Weston.

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