

The Museum of Modern Art

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"It is ourselves we see, ourselves lifted from a parochial setting. We see what we have not heretofore realized, ourselves made worthy in our anonymity." -- William Carlos Williams, writing about Walker Evans' photographs (1938).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WALKER EVANS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first definitive retrospective of photographs by Walker Evans, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, whose works "individually evoke an incontrovertible sense of specific places, and collectively a sense of America," will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 27 through April 11. Selected and installed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, the exhibition includes 200 pictures covering the years from 1928, when Evans was 24, to the present. After the New York showing, the exhibition will be seen at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., the San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, Calif., the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Fla., the City Art Museum of St. Louis, Mo., the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Mich., the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill., and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Mass. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum will publish Walker Evans with text by John Szarkowski.* Evans' preliminary research for the exhibition was supported by the New York State Council on the Arts.

"Evans' pictures have enlarged our sense of the usable visual tradition, and have affected the way that we now see not only other photographs, but billboards, junkyards, postcards, gas stations, colloquial architecture, Main Streets and the walls of rooms," Szarkowski says. He adds that Evans' work is rooted in the photography of the earlier past, and constitutes a reaffirmation of what had been photography's central sense of purpose and aesthetic: the precise and lucid description of significant fact.

"It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth or invented it. Beyond doubt the accepted myth of our recent past is in some measure

*WALKER EVANS, a volume of photographs representing a broad survey of the photographer's work from 1929 to 1970 and accompanied by a text by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, will be published by The Museum of Modern Art. The book will have 192 pages and 106 illustrations with a cloth edition priced at \$12.50 and paperbound at \$6.95.

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the creation of this photographer, whose work has persuaded us of the validity of a new set of clues and symbols, bearing on the questions of who we are. Whether that work and its judgment was fact or artifice, or half of each, it is now part of our history."

Evans began a documentation of indigenous American architecture in the late 20's. In 1931 Lincoln Kirstein asked him to photograph Victorian houses around Boston. Other friends at time were Hart Crane, James Agee and Ben Shahn. In the 30's Evans made a lasting contribution as one of that extraordinary group of photographers who were assembled during the Depression for the Farm Security Administration's photographic unit to record the life of the rural poor.

Many works in the exhibition are from the 18-month period beginning late in 1935 which Szarkowski characterizes as Evans' "astonishing creative hot streak," when he was part of the FSA group. These include photographs made then and later published in the widely acclaimed book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee and Walker Evans, and those published in American Photographs, issued by The Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of its first one-man photography show in 1938, which was devoted to Evans' work. Lincoln Kirstein's essay in American Photographs appraised the work in terms which perhaps seemed extravagant then, but which today seem both bold and measured: "Compare this vision of a continent as it is, not as it might be or as it was, with any other coherent vision that we have had since the war. What poet has said as much? What painter has shown as much? Only newspapers, the writers of popular music, the technicians of advertising and radio have in their blind energy accidentally, fortuitously, evoked for future historians such a powerful monument to our moment. And Evans' work has, in addition, intention, logic, continuity, climax, sense and perfection."

John Szarkowski says that to most photographers in the 30's, the work of Walker Evans probably seemed wilfully old-fashioned. "At a time when faster lenses and films and shutters allowed photographers to record ever-thinner slices of life, Evans' pictures were as still as sculpture. While the new miniature cameras were spawning an unending stream of bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, Evans worked insistently from a human's-eye level. While artificial lighting

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equipment grew continually more sophisticated and seductively ingenious, Evans preferred the light that the sun, or chance, provided. While the new picture magazines rewarded photographers who recorded the exotic, the charming, the topical, the glamorous and the shocking, Evans interpreted what was ubiquitous and typical."

Later work in the show includes Evans' subway pictures made in 1938 and 1941, and Chicago street portraits made in 1946. These constituted a direct challenge to the conventional notions of serious photography of the time by embracing, rather than disputing, the element of chance.

In his comment on the series of anonymous subway riders, John Szarkowski says, "This collection constitutes a kind of virtuoso piece in which the photographer knowingly sacrificed all of his basic controls except one.... He had to forego the freedom to choose his angle of view, the control of precise framing, the selection of light, the free choice or direction of his subjects. All that remained was the freedom to say yes or no -- to squeeze the cable release hidden in his sleeve, or not. The almost absolute lack of 'purely visual' interest in this series provides an appropriate setting for the astonishing individuality of Evans' subjects and fellow riders -- an individuality not so much of their roles and stations, as of their secrets....

"In his serious pictures of the past twenty years," he continues, "Evans has abandoned this duel with chance and returned to the poised and contemplative style of his youth.... If there is a hint of mockery in these later pictures it is perhaps the self-mockery of a middle-aging pilgrim who has discovered that his own principality is as rich in miracles and heresies as those of strangers. How surprising to find that documentary photographs (cool, precise as a police report, emotionally aloof) can be made in the apartments and weekend houses of one's friends, or in a child's bedroom in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The secrets of the lives of Alabama sharecroppers and dead Victorians were recorded -- so we supposed -- for our edification. For whose eyes then are own own secrets revealed?"

 Photographs, additional material and review copies of the catalogue are available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Mark Segal, Assistant, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Telephone: (212) 956-7501; 7296.