WALKER EVANS
AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
WALKER EVANS
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.

Generous support for this publication is provided by the Research and Scholarly Publications Program of The Museum of Modern Art, which was initiated with the support of a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Publication is made possible by an endowment established by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Edward John Noble Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Perry R. Bass, and the National Endowment for the Humanities' Challenge Grant Program.

Produced by the Department of Publications, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Edited by Rebecca Roberts
Designed by Amanda Washburn
Production by Matthew Plumb
Duotone separations by Thomas Palmer

Printed and bound by Trifolio s.r.l., Verona
Typeset in Caslon. Printed on Phoenixmotion Xantur 135 gsm

All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 2012940325
ISBN: 978-0-87070-835-0

Published by The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019-5497
www.moma.org

Distributed in the United States and Canada by ARTBOOK | D.A.P.
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10013
www.artbook.com

Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Tate Publishing,
a division of Tate Enterprises Ltd, Millbank, London SW1P 4RG

Printed in Italy

For permission to reproduce certain designated photographs, acknowledgment is due the Farm Security Administration, Washington, D.C., and Harper and Brothers, New York. Acknowledgment is also due the editors of The Hound and Horn for permission to reprint several photographs which originally appeared in that magazine.

The responsibility for the selection of the pictures used in this book has rested with the author, and the choice has been determined by his opinion: therefore they are presented without sponsorship or connection with the policies, aesthetic or political, of any of the institutions, publications or government agencies for which some of the work has been done.
PART ONE
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 precision and balance of the original reproductions but allowing for subtler and smoother tonal shifts).

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:

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.

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 fifth-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 retouched by hand before printing. Selected areas of a number of plates were lightened or darkened, and other painstaking alterations were made, in 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
be found that revealed the full frame as seen in the original edition (Part Two, Nos. 9 and 27). One reproduction was made from the 1938 edition (Part One, No. 18) because it was not possible to locate any print. Although it was not mentioned (perhaps deemed too small a point), Part Two, No. 2, was reproduced from a print made from a variant negative (the wisps of smoke and the surface of the water suggest at least a moment between exposures); the 1988 source print is in the Museum’s collection and has also been used in this edition. These challenges persist today, and yet, considering the extent to which Evans used his prints as mere points of departure for his reproductions, existing material is more than sufficient to produce an edition that conveys the character of the original book.

The advent of digital printing has once again transformed the methods of book production; the reproductions in this volume were made using the same duotone offset printing process as the fiftieth-anniversary edition, but now produced from digital files. Original source material continues to deteriorate or disappear, and the possibilities for digital mischief are extraordinary, making it ever more necessary to be scrupulous in characterizing the ways in which this edition takes advantage of current technology (however, any refinements with analog equivalents that were not previously deemed noteworthy are likewise here considered a routine part of the printing process). Specifically, as with the fiftieth-anniversary edition, Part One, No. 18, was made from a scan of that image in the 1938 book; the missing strip of sky along the top edge of Part Two, No. 9, has been restored here, digitally; and Part One, No. 1, and Part Two, No. 19, each draw information from two distinct prints to achieve a closer resemblance to the 1938 reproduction than any single source could provide. The source print for Part One, No. 48, has been cropped about a quarter inch on the right edge; the source print for Part Two, No. 27, has been cropped a bit on the left and right edges; and the source print for Part Two, No. 30, has been cropped a bit along the top and bottom edges, but the missing information in all three has been digitally restored to match the 1938 reproductions. A very slightly variant negative was used to make the reproduction for Part Two, No. 6. The purpose of these modifications is to emulate the general feel and the specific crops of the 1938 edition. Equally important is to balance this respect for the past with the potential for approximating ever-more-closely the cool beauty of prints made by Evans: careful observers might notice some reproductions capturing this better than ever before.

SARAH HERMANSON MEISTER
Thank you for downloading this preview of *American Photographs*. To continue reading, purchase the book by clicking [here](#).

MoMA publications are available to individual customers in several ways.

**MoMA Online**
www.MoMAStore.org

**MoMA Mail Order**
Tel. (toll-free): 800 447 6662
Fax: 212 333 1127

**MoMA Stores**

The MoMA Design and Book Store
11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019
Tel.: 212 708 9400

The MoMA Design Store, SoHo
81 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012
Tel.: 646 613 1367

**MoMA Books**
The Museum of Modern Art, 2nd Floor

Independent, chain, and online bookstores offer MoMA titles worldwide. Contact your favorite bookstore to inquire about new and recent MoMA titles. If the title you are seeking is unavailable, please inform your bookstore that MoMA titles can be ordered from our trade distributors.

**Trade Orders**

*Walker Evans: American Photographs* is distributed to the trade in the United States and Canada by ARTBOOK | D.A.P. and outside the United States and Canada by Tate Publishing.

Bookstores, book distributors, and libraries should direct all orders, invoice questions, and title, price, and availability inquiries to:

ARTBOOK | D.A.P.
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10013-1507
Tel.: 800 338 2665
www.artbook.com

Tate Publishing
Millbank
London SW1P 4RG
United Kingdom
Tel.: 44 (0) 20 7887 8869
www.tate.org.uk