

MODULE ELEVEN

Photography and Creative Documentation

The selected images are black-and-white photographs by prominent American artists. They present a variety of urban and rural environments as well as social and political conditions. Throughout this module, consider the documentary potential of photography and take note of the various perspectives on the American landscape the artists present.

Jacob August Riis. *Bandits' Roost, 59 ½ Mulberry Street*. 1888

- What is the first thing you notice in this work? Is there a particular element that draws you in?
- What is the overall mood in this scene? What do you think the people are thinking or feeling?
- Why do you think Riis chose to photograph this particular alley?

Jacob August Riis (1849–1914) explored photography's potential for documenting and archiving the social fabric of New York City. Riis started his career as a journalist, working for the *South Brooklyn News* and later for *The Tribune*. As a police reporter at *The Tribune* he was assigned the Mulberry Bend area of Lower Manhattan, which includes the alley depicted in this work. Through the publication of his photographs along with his articles, audiences were exposed to the material conditions of the urban poor.



Walker Evans. *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*. 1935

- Where and when do you think this photograph was taken? Are there elements that give us a clue about its context?
- Evans took this photograph in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Why do you think he chose to include these features of the Bethlehem landscape in this work?
- There are no people in this photograph. How does the absence of people in the scene affect your interpretation of the work?



Walker Evans (1903–1975) is widely acknowledged as a pioneer in photography for his balanced approach to composition and content. He worked in the early-to-mid twentieth century, using a small-format camera to capture the landscape of the United States and

the habits of the American people. He presented his works in series or grouped in publications, creating long narratives exploring the diversity of American lives. A number of his photographs became emblematic of the suffering caused by the Great Depression, which Evans documented through his work with the United States government's Farm Security Administration in the 1930s.

Turn and Talk: How has the landscape changed in your town since you began living there? What events or developments led to these changes? What aspects of the town have remained unaffected?

Dorothea Lange. *Funeral Cortege, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California, 1938.* 1938

- How has Lange drawn attention to the woman in this photograph? Why do you think she has chosen to highlight her face?
- What does the body language of the seated woman suggest about her state of mind?
- The title of this work is *Funeral Cortege, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California, 1938*. How does knowing the title affect your understanding of the work?



Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) was a studio portrait photographer before she turned her attention to the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929. Working as a photographer for the United States government's Farm Security Administration, she witnessed the ramifications of the Great Depression firsthand. In 1939, in collaboration with Paul Schuster Taylor (who provided the text), she published *An American Exodus*, which explored the economic woes facing the American people. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Lange continued to photograph throughout the country, documenting the lives of migrant workers in California and various religious groups, such as Mormons and the Amish.

Helen Levitt. *New York.* 1940

- What are these children doing? Where do you think they are?
- How do the children in the foreground relate to the other people in the scene?
- When do you think this scene took place? What elements of the photograph provide clues?

Helen Levitt (1913–2009) lived and worked in New York City for more than seven decades. She was born in Brooklyn and began her career photographing chalk drawings in the streets; later she became celebrated for her street photographs of people, such as this one. Throughout her career, Levitt captured the poignancy in everyday events. Her photographs



constitute a rich archive of human experiences and document the transformations that took place in the city over her lifetime.

Turn and Talk: Create a story about this scene. Where will the children go next, and what will they do?

Garry Winogrand. *John F. Kennedy, Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles* from the portfolio *Big Shots*. 1955

- There are two views of John F. Kennedy in this photograph. What does each view communicate? What is the effect of seeing them simultaneously?
- This photograph was taken at the Democratic National Convention of 1955. What does it communicate about the mood of the event?
- Imagine that this is a color photograph. How would your interpretation of the image differ?



This photograph by Garry Winogrand (1928–1984) is a record of an important political event. The multiple angles on the subject in the single shot allow the viewer to appreciate Kennedy's posture from different perspectives. Through his photographic practice Winogrand exploited the documentary potential of the medium, inserting his perspective and framing the viewer's perception of the event depicted through his choice of content and composition. Winogrand developed his style while exploring the social and political events of his time. He used a handheld camera so he could quickly and easily take photographs of fleeting scenes.

Art-Making Activity

The photographers in this module were interested in documenting the world around them while keeping in mind the unique possibilities of photography to frame their subject matter, considering elements such as perspective, composition, and lighting, among others. Provide participants with digital cameras and ask them to document their environment with a staff member or caregiver. Ask participants to focus on a specific area of their surroundings and take several dozen pictures. Once everyone has finished, share pictures by either printing or projecting them. Facilitate conversations around the images taken, discussing the photographers' motivation for choosing particular content and the choices they made about how to represent the subject matter.