

SHUD

PHOTOGRAPHY GOES PUBLIC

DEERS!

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Introduction

Professor Anthony Lee and the members of Art History 342

In 1930s America, a newly defined mode of photographic expression, “documentary,” tried to address the extraordinary trauma visited upon common people, who were daily struggling with poverty and hunger, disenfranchisement and displacement. Documentary addressed Americans’ need to confront, explore, describe, and define so dramatic a time. Indeed, documentary photography, then and in subsequent generations, helped Americans understand the Great Depression and, at a time when the promises of industrial capitalism seemed in doubt, helped them interpret modernity itself.

Easily the most famous of these documentary projects belonged to the Farm Security Administration (FSA), whose photographers took their cameras out into the streets and fields and, year after year, shot an enormous body of pictures, more than a quarter of a million in all. Distributed widely and shown in a variety of venues, including museum exhibitions, newspapers, magazines, books, and government reports, the photographs gave thoughtful accounts about farmers in the Dust Bowl, migrants of the Far West, sharecroppers of the Deep South, and the displaced men, women and children living in fields and camps throughout the country. Occasionally augmented by charts and captions but just as often left on their own, they represented a common belief in the power of the camera to make the horrors of the Depression instantly visible and freeze the relentless flow of tragic events as iconic images. In FSA hands and in contrast to the modish habits of an earlier generation of street photographers, the camera’s power was to represent the human experience of dramatic historical conditions, that is, to document. Celebrated in their own day, the photographs continue to mark the era.

But photography in the 1930s, we now recognize, was made up of many more practices and practitioners than those associated with the FSA. The era was also characterized by the stylish mass market and fanzine photo magazines that hit the newsstands by the truckload, the newfangled photo wire services that started up and made freelance photojournalism a respectable or at least viable profession, private galleries displaying more and varied art photographs and the Museum of Modern Art in New York developing for the first time an omnibus “History of Photography” exhibition, and dailies and tabloids reaching unprecedented numbers and more than a few trading on trashy or otherwise sensational imagery to feed the appetites of a picture-hungry public.

Without denying the huge importance of documentary photography or the traumatic effects of the Depression that FSA photography attempted to address, *Shudders!: Photography Goes Public* is an exploration of these many other aspects of the era’s photography. Its title is a playful reference to the camera’s basic function, the snap of a “shutter.” With millions of cameras on the streets, the snap could be seemingly heard at every turn during the decade. But we also mean it to describe the phenomenon of photography in the 1930s as a “shudder,” a quivering or trembling in response to

something new, unexpected, or unprecedented, in this case a response to the sheer deluge of pictures, of all sorts, cropping everywhere in daily life.

Shudders! began as a seminar, Art History 342. As a class, we initially studied the function and fortunes of documentary photography. Using a classic text, William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, as our guide, we understood documentary photography against the backdrop of other documentary practices (in film, fiction, radio, theater) in order to grasp something of the era's most dominant forms of expression. We did not want to lose track of the difficulties experienced by Americans during the Great Depression or the attempts by documentarians, using a variety of media, to address it. But then quickly, on a weekly basis, we moved in other directions to explore different photographic practices: tabloid journalism, modernist photography, fashion work, the complicated work of the Photo League, architectural photography, and more. And then, just as quickly, we turned our attention to presenting our discoveries.

We are fortunate to have at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum a large collection of these "other" 1930s photographs, and we set out to study and present a selection of these photographs in an exhibition and, as you have it in your hands, a catalog. The selection is representative of the museum's holdings but also, as we try to explain in the essays, of the varied work of the era: in this case, examples of tabloid and photojournalism, caricature, dance photography, f/64 photography, landscape photography, and formal celebrity portraiture. An important body of work is that of Berenice Abbott, which comprises seven of the nineteen photographs. We were simply stunned by the quality and nuance of her pictures and wanted to give them their due.

During the initial stages of planning the exhibition, we decided to extend our time frame to the mid-1940s to suggest how the threads in the 1930s continued on—to show, that is, how some of the lesser known aspects of the era's photography initially enjoyed more extended lives in the post-war era than did the more well-known documentary photographs, and how the period after the Depression turned enthusiastically, maybe even defiantly, to non-documentary practices. No one, it seemed, wanted to be reminded of the traumas of the previous era. Some of our photographers are commonly known, like Abbott, Ansel Adams, and the loveable Weegee; but others may not be so, like Yousuf Karsh and Barbara Morgan. Celebrated or not, they all made up the era's multifaceted photography cultures. Just as it must have been for the photographers in their own day, who sought an audience for their work, it is our project to "go public" with them.

We extend our warm thanks to Ellen Alvord, Ryan Ferland, and Brian Kiernan for helping us with the exhibition and catalog.

Berenice Abbott and *Changing New York*

When she returned to New York in 1929 after a prolonged stay in Paris, Berenice Abbott discovered within herself a new and deep appreciation for a modern America. Aware that so much had changed since she had left years earlier, she declared upon her return that she “knew [America] was my country, something I had to set down in photographs.” The effort to “set it down” lasted for much of the next decade. Abbott’s efforts were given an added boost when she received funding from the Federal Art Project in 1935. Between 1935 and 1938, armed with assistants and backed by federal money, she pursued her love of the city in earnest. Using a large format view camera, Abbott took about a thousand photographs of New York City, mostly street scenes and architectural studies, images of the city’s towering verticality and transforming neighborhoods. The result was *Changing New York*, a collection of about three hundred choice photographs from Abbott’s many years prowling about the streets. From this collection, Abbott and her partner Elizabeth McCausland, at the time an art critic for the *Springfield Republican*, winnowed the photographs down to ninety-seven and published them as a book.

Changing New York is a unique body of work for the era in that it concentrates entirely on the urban built environment. New Yorkers sometimes appear in her photographs, but they are rarely her focus. This was partly the result of Abbott’s large view camera, which demanded a methodical way with her subjects. Buildings, not people, were so much easier to capture. But it was also the result of Abbott’s particular sensibility, in which “change” could be understood in the mix and match of architectural forms and the juxtaposition of buildings along the streets. Or as she put it in 1939 upon the publication of the book, the city must be understood as a synthesis of old and new, brownstone and skyscraper, and all of it fitting together in a balanced design.

Later in life, Abbott reprinted many of her photographs from the *Changing New York* series, compiled them with others from her career, and distributed them as boxed, retrospective, luxury portfolios. The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum holds two of these portfolios, from which our prints for *Changing New York* are taken.

Anthony Lee

Berenice Abbott, *West Street, 1936*

Rose Cantlin



Previously a portrait photographer in Paris, Abbott turned her lens towards America to create a portrait of a different kind. She set out to produce a comprehensive portfolio of New York City during an important time of change by photographing all aspects of the city from many different viewpoints. She would climb to the top of a skyscraper, waiting as the building swayed beneath her, for the perfect moment to take the photograph. Abbott used a large format camera with an 8 x 10 inch glass plate negative for most of her photographs of the city. The larger negative allowed

Abbott to capture the smallest of details, the most striking light and dark contrasts, as well as a full range of objects within the frame, such as in *West Street*. The large image also invites the viewer to discover a portrait-like or physiognomic quality within the picture.

West Street is representative of *Changing New York*, showing the contrast between old and new and displaying the fast development of the city and the changes that were taking place in its architecture. The photograph shows, in Abbott's words, "the past jostling the present" with the old and the new buildings crowding the frame and standing shoulder to shoulder. The newer, taller buildings seem to be growing out of the ground to tower over the older brick and wooden buildings, almost as if they are pushing the older buildings out of the way as they compete for space. Abbott has chosen a propitious angle from which to take the photograph so that the buildings, while clearly belonging to separate styles and moments in time, seem to blend together as one single mountain of metal, brick, and wood. By not showing any space between the buildings, she creates a sense that they are all connected, emphasizing the cramped, jostled feel of the street. Past and present occupy the same space, although it seems to be the newer, taller buildings that bear down on the older, shorter ones like a tidal wave. The cars move towards the edge of the frame, as if highlighting a moment in time that will soon pass and, as the cars move off frame, will be superseded by another moment, another development in the city's rapid change.

An important detail is the smoke that rises from among the skyscrapers. This smoke shows that these buildings are being used and are active and present in the changing skyline of New York. The ascending smoke mirrors the rise and growth of the buildings, which is especially evident in the upper left corner where the top of the skyscraper is cut off by the frame. This creates a sense that the structure is never ending and will continue to rise into the sky just like the smoke that floats up into the air next to it. Another telling detail is the small, older building at the lower left of the frame. The contrast between this building's façade and that of the newer buildings behind is pronounced, arched windows and decorative ornamentation in contrast to smooth, stark and modern exteriors of the skyscrapers.

Changing New York was intended to preserve the history of the city while also documenting the rapid growth and change that was taking place. *West Street* embodies this idea of preservation and change as an older New York is surrounded by a newer one in the skyscrapers and cars on either side.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: West Street
Gelatin silver print photograph

Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.42

Berenice Abbott, *City Arabesque*, 1938

Hannah Braun



During the machine age and technological boom in America, Abbott set out to document the changing landscape of New York City by examining the ways in which the transience of the city can be seen through its skyscrapers, streets, train stations, and storefronts. Inspired by Eugene Atget's photo-documentary of Paris, Abbott employed similar techniques of surrealism in her portrayal of city life. *City Arabesque* depicts a disorienting and dizzying view from a balcony of a New York skyscraper in lower Manhattan's financial district, the Wall Street area. Through this image, Abbott allows viewers to feel the frenzy and frenetic nature of New York

through a view from the top of a steel giant. In the new city, sidewalks and empty plots of land gave way to skyscrapers, which added a new dimension to the once untouched skyline, piercing the clouds over the East and Hudson Rivers with the needle noses of steel, metal, and concrete. *City Arabesque* is Abbott's way of disorienting viewers, asking them to confront this new relationship between modern architecture and the vast city below.

The term *arabesque* is both a posture in ballet as well as a style of art inspired by Arabic and Persian forms. Both meanings of the word refer to the graceful flowing lines: the dancer's body extends itself and elongates in this ballet posture; the flowery and ornately intertwined lines are characteristic of Arabic art. The Art Deco building at 60 Wall Tower in the financial district acts as the stage for this composition of line, geometry, and form. The building is decorated with ornately crafted steel ornaments that adorn the various balconies and external landings of this skyscraper. Our view from one of the balconies shows the graceful curves of this crafted steel ornament against a backdrop of the city, as if hovering over the rest of the buildings.

The point of view allows us to imagine the buildings and structures as a crowd of upright human figures, as if they were the inhabitants of New York itself. We can hypothesize that Abbott wanted to depict the city's uprightness, its erectness, its hyper-masculinity, its power and prowess, a way of alluding to its financial, economic, and social power. Additionally we view an expanse with no end in sight. Indeed, in contrast to many traditional compositions of the city skyline, Abbott refuses clearly defined planes and replaces them instead with an expanding depth of field. I believe Abbott chose this odd view for her work because she wanted to portray both the disorienting nature of New York as well as the uncertainty that people felt about the construction and appearance of the new buildings in the skyline. That is to say, although she did not emphasize people in her pictures, Abbott in *City Arabesque* found ways to suggest architectural stand-ins for financial figures and, moreover, the impact of rapid urbanization on common men and women.

What is going on in those buildings? Are people at work in offices? Are important meetings taking place? Are business deals being made? Through this enigmatic view of 60 Wall Tower we are left wondering what goes on behind the facades. We do not see New York from a bird's eye view, rather at an extreme angle, eliminating the typical grid-like order of the city and suggesting instead its anarchy and incomprehension. New York is changing into an unfamiliar place.

City Arabesque is thus a critical work as it expresses uncertainty and even insecurity through its point of view. The skyscraper on which we are perched is the city's new zenith, but from its high regard we see nothing nearly so clearly.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: City Arabesque
Gelatin silver print photograph

Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.48

Berenice Abbott, *Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place, 1938*

Abby Dykens



New York City, for those who visit, can be an overwhelming place, streets a blur with each racing taxi or city goers running to catch the next subway. For those who dwell in the Big Apple, it seems as if the chaos and constant hum never affects them. When I wander the streets of this man-made metropolis, I occasionally find myself walking into various objects, not because I'm unable to direct myself but because I am constantly looking up, skyward, at the repetition of metallic buildings, the distant peaks of tall skyscrapers. In *Canyon*, Abbott makes note of this experience by tilting

her camera and point of view seventy-five degrees from ground level. She discovered that these massive constructions have dual personalities. Beautiful but also rigid and inflexible, these colossal constructions overwhelm the cityscape.

The cultural historian John Raeburn states that Abbott was “deeply ambivalent about the modern megaliths.” She found the skyscrapers to be both beautiful and unsightly. At times, it’s obvious that her feeling toward these structures was quite negative, claiming that they have “no place in the planned city.” At other times, Abbott displayed the stunning and seamlessly beautiful qualities of skyscrapers. Both attitudes are present in *Canyon*.

Rather than view the city from above, as in *City Arabesque*, in *Canyon* she chooses to see it from below. We see two tall buildings, one older, the other newer, connected by a bridge. It seems as if two buildings are a study in contrasts. Reflected in the taller skyscraper’s windows are glimpses of the opposing and older structure. Along with the reflection, the lighting is also beautiful. The sliver of light that’s allowed through the city’s grid-like format is both dramatic and dazzling. This is seen through the fogged out outline of two modern buildings in the background.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: Canyon
Gelatin silver print photograph

Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.47

Berenice Abbott, *Untitled (Reindeer)*, 1935-38

Laura Moriarty



Unlike other pictures in *Changing New York*, *Untitled (Reindeer)* is not an explicit narrative of the evolving realities of metropolitan life, nor is it a study of some towering feat of architecture. An attentive viewing might lead one to wonder if this is a break from the straight photographic style which Abbott mastered while collecting images along the city streets.

We see the familiar storefront vignette, a favorite subject of Abbott's. Here, though, the typical mish mash of bric-a-brac window dressing is replaced by one lone cool image. The glowing white artificial reindeer seems to hover against the black background of the otherwise vacant store front. The image is arresting for both the striking composition it offers, as well as the questions it evokes but leaves unanswered.

Visually there is the opposition of tones with very little gradation between the darkest and the lightest. The hanging form of the reindeer casts no shadows; instead it seems to radiate an aura. From the softly lit spaces above and below the window the foreground fades into indistinguishable darkness. The elegant curvature of hindquarters, ear, and neck temper the sharp right angles of the visible architecture. The graceful posture of the reindeer along with the ambient light it casts offers an inviting contrast to straight lines and measured design. The curvature is repeated along the stone work on the building's side. This is one of the only details that is evident on the store's facade.

If *Changing New York* is an examination of the cultural, social, or economic changes of the city over time, then this piece can be seen as an extension of that study. What happens to nature within the boundaries of a metropolis? Abbott captures the curious contrast between the organic and synthetic. Here we see the canned representation of nature, set off and encapsulated as one would do with a gold fish in an empty bowl. It is canned and manipulated and captive to the greater designs of civilization. The reflections of the tenements on the plate glass play across the black background offering an almost perverse juxtaposition of nature on the defensive, fleeing. Abbott has captured the artifice that happens to a maple tree planted under grating to beautify an urban street; though it is a relic of nature it is not enough to retain what has been lost.

The Surrealist quality to this work is unmistakable. Though Abbott was a practitioner of straight photography, the choice of subject and composition echo themes present within the Surrealist movement. Abbott's appreciation of the arrestingly juxtaposed or unexpected elements of city life is here to behold. The chance appearance of this ornament, on display until its usage for the Christmas tree lighting ceremony at Rockefeller plaza, gives the artist the opportunity to play with the abstract. This subject defies the conventional. It is at once familiar and eerily out of place. One expects to see large store front windows adorned with cheerful colors and whimsical ornamentation. The sight of a single unadorned mannequin-like element is an image which is outside of the logical or easily classified. Though it may be a representation of a common symbol of the holiday season, that recognition is skewed in the minimalist presentation that is seen here.

Abbott's affiliation with the Surrealist and Dadaist movements began first in New York where she met Marcel Duchamp and then culminated in an apprenticeship to the photographer Man Ray. After leaving New York for Paris in 1921, Abbott signed on as a novice darkroom assistant to Man Ray. It was under his tutelage that she developed technical skills as a portrait photographer. Though her work departs heavily from the formal elements of both movements, this photograph displays the type of schism between tangible reality and illogical discord which is reminiscent of them.

The influence of the work of Eugene Atget is also visible in *Reindeer*. Atget's photographs of the store fronts on the streets of old Paris are shot so that, at once, the reflection of the street behind the photographer is superimposed on the subject being pictured. There is an air of old world nostalgia to Atget's pictures of old Paris which borders on romanticism but never crosses it. Abbott takes pains in Changing New York to avoid both cliché as well as romanticism. She succeeds in not falling prey to convention while simultaneously conveying a winsome, if solitary, vignette.

The elements which tie this piece to the others in the series are evident. Abbott is a master of the technical aspects of photography; her print is sharp and her ability to articulate the gradients in tone are on display in this work. She finds the elements representative of city life even in this minimalist palette. The neon sign is familiar marker to signal to the viewer that this is the city which is Abbott's constant muse. This artist's ability to highlight both the commonplace and bizarre creates photography which is resonant and poignant. It is this ability to interpret the familiar and place it within meaningful or unusual context which is characteristic of this piece as well as the rest of *Changing New York*.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: Untitled
Gelatin silver print photograph

Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.18

Berenice Abbott, *Under the El at Battery, New York, 1936*

Andrea Frye



Under the El at Battery Park, New York was taken the same year the Triborough Bridge opened, linking the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan. The bridge was emblematic of a country trying to pull itself out of the Depression by trying to rebuild. And in rebuilding, bigger was better. This sentiment is expressed in the photograph's having a wooden sign in the shape of a shoe with the word REBUILD painted on it, and its toe pointing towards the tracks. How does the El fit in the effort to rebuild? The tracks loom and seem to take over the scene. On the right are commercial buildings, on the left small privately-owned shops. The stark contrast between the ominous metal rails and the wooden signs gives the track a sense of power and domination over the small shops. The tracks might seem to represent progress; they appear to be pushing and crowding the old fashioned storefronts or the little man right out of the picture.

While Battery Park was normally a very busy and crowded area, Abbott chooses to capture it with few people in the photograph. The tracks overshadow the people. The lone expensive-looking vehicle under the El tracks suggests another mode of travel. Next to mass transit, the car is a mode of travel few could afford. This brings to mind the different economic classes of people that live side by side in the city of New York.

With the El, the photograph suggests a movement from the past, the moment of the present, and gives thought to the possibilities of the rapidly coming future. The repeated patterns of light, shadow, and steel create a depth in this photograph that is endless. The further you look into the picture for a definitive stopping point the more the pattern appears to continue. It is as if the “process” of progress, of looking further down the road, continues on and on into an unknown future. Yet there is also a slight curvature to the El structure. This is visible when comparing the top left side of the street with the structure but also more dramatically displayed by the pattern of light that cascades down from the tracks into the middle of the road. The process of progress does not always follow a straight or predictable line. Indeed, in the name of progress, the El at Battery Park was torn down two years after Abbott’s picture was taken and replaced with an underground subway.

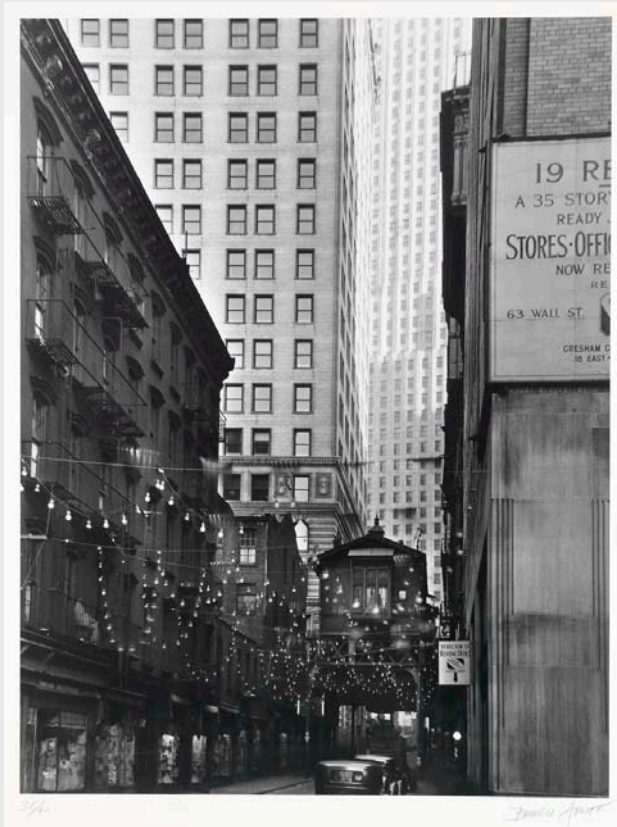
We can still look at this photograph today and discover beauty in the ordinary and history in everyday structures. As in the rest of *Changing New York*, Abbott in this photograph preserved the story of a structure and with it the stories and history of the people of New York.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: El at Battery
Gelatin silver print photograph

Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.19

Berenice Abbott, *Rector Street, Italian Festival*, c. 1938

Annamarie Amato



The subject of an Italian festival evokes a scene we might imagine as cluttered with bodies in celebration. However in *Rector Street, Italian Festival* Abbott absents any physical human form. Abbott frames the photograph, emphasizing humanity's absence, by separating the depth of field into an interior and exterior space. The interior of the photograph represents the space in which the city's changes take place. The hanging lights symbolize a ghost of human presence. The exterior space depicts two enormous skyscrapers that fill up the photograph's entire background and extend to the edge of the photograph. Abbott's framing gives the audience no sight of the natural world. Her framing wants to keep the audience contained within New York. The skyscrapers enclose the beauty of the photograph, keeping the human presence internal. It is in this stark contrast of internal and external space that one sees how the city leaves its imprint on the memory.

The photograph depicts a unique visual rhythm seen through the repetition in the hanging lights and storefront windows. The photograph has a horizontal composition that creates perspective. The photograph uses perspective by the lines of storefronts one side of the street and cars on the other. The storefront and cars mirror each other, and get smaller as they disappear into the background. Following the line of perspective, one sees a glimpse of the exterior space, very far in the distance. However, our eyes' movement toward the exterior backfires, and draws the audience gaze back into the swooping web of hanging lights. Everything in the photograph deflects our gaze, and brings our attention to the human presence. Abbott's historical consciousness is emphasizing the human interaction within all aspects of city life, even when all we see is the cold exterior of buildings and a dirty street. There is a warmth portrayed in *Rector Street, Italian Festival* by using the lights to represent humanity.

Changing New York is consistent in emphasizing photography as a medium of time. Abbott's work records her vision by capturing a specific moment in time, within the dynamics of a changing environment. In *Rector Street, Italian Festival*, Abbott places our gaze on a deserted city street. Our connection with humanity is through its material presence, the streams of hanging light. Abbott works with isolation, a theme that, at first glance, is uncharacteristic of New York City. However, it is in this representation of the city's isolation that Abbott captures as even larger theme in her work, temporality. Abbott plays with temporality by making the festival's decorations the subject of the photograph. As spectators, we are aware of the event. However, by uniting our gaze with Abbott's, objective place in time and space, our perception of the festival combines with Abbott's memory.

The photography of Berenice Abbott captures moments of unique human presence based in New York City's changing environment. In *Rector Street, Italian Festival*, Abbott locates the ephemeral, by dividing space into the interior and exterior. The juxtaposition of these spaces in the photograph defines interior and exterior as layers of Abbott's memory—the photograph represents a stasis she felt upon viewing this scene. The aim of Abbott's work is to capture human interaction with their environment. In *Rector Street, Italian Festival*, Abbott pays close attention to the tools cultures uses in presenting itself. In doing so, she captures aspects of culture, with relevance to the future because of their authentic beauty. In *Rector Street, Italian Festival*, too, she wants the audience to interact with light the same way a photographer does, to see it as a tool that speaks to the complexities of passing beauty.

According to Abbott, the photographer's vision "pleads not only for realism, shot through with human aspirations and faith, life as it is, real characters in a real world. . . . The photographer explores and discovers and reacts to the world he lives in." In this, she admits she is a kind of documentarian, suffused by historical consciousness but concerned not with poverty and loss, as was typical among photographers in the 1930s, but as *Rector Street, Italian Festival* suggests, with memory and change.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: Rector Street - Italian Festival
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.20

Berenice Abbott, *Fifth Avenue Coach Company, New York, 1932*
Kimberly Gonzales



In *Fifth Avenue Coach Company* Abbott pictured an essential part of everyday life in New York, a bus ride. Public transportation was crucial to mobility through the crowded and sprawling city. It is for this reason that Abbott decided to include transportation and not just architecture in *Changing New York*. It is important to note that in the photograph there are a considerable number of people riding in both of the buses and that perhaps it was their only means of transportation.

Movement is emphasized in this photograph by the man stepping off the bus and into the street. It is this same movement that creates some of the spontaneity that Abbott was so fond of. Spontaneity and movement imply that people in the city have busy lives. In fact people on the move are seen in many photographs in *Changing New York*, with images of streets full of people heading in all directions. Even though people are not a dominant aspect of Abbott's photography, as can be seen in her other photographs in this exhibit, one must remember that ultimately they were the ones who built and inhabited the metropolis, as Abbott well knew. A changing city does not mean only a changing architecture; its residents change and move as well. This is a key to understanding the emphasis on movement in the picture. Going to work, out for shopping, heading to the cafe—the reasons people move about the city are plentiful. The times are tough, the economy is in a tailspin, but people keep moving, changing. Life must go on.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Berenice Abbott Retrospective: Fifth Avenue Coach Company
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Joseph R. and Ruth Lasser (Ruth H. Pollak, Class of 1947), 1985.5.34

Berenice Abbott, *The Courtyard of the First Model Tenement*, c. 1936
Shayna Wong



The Courtyard of the First Model Tenement offers us all of the essential qualities and values aspired to by the documentary photographers of this period. A clear photograph with fine architectural detail, it speaks to us about the realities of city life and provides us with certainty in the truth and the photograph's ability to help us realize this. Amidst the Great Depression, a period filled with chaos and hopelessness, this photograph transplants us deep into the heart of the city asking us to consider this time and the struggle of these conditions. At the same time we are forced to confront these images. The majestic, yet meek portrayal of

these tenement structures asks us to consider instead a way of life, and the optimism of living day by day. A few years out of what critics have called the most dramatic point of the Depression, the lack of children in the courtyard marks perhaps one of the most poignant conditions of this photograph. In Depression culture, many children were committed to working in factories in order to help support familial economies. The fact that they are withdrawn from their homes and visibly absent in this photograph strikes a sense of compassion in the viewer as to what the condition of life in the city could be like.

Abbott made two exposures of these courts with the laundry lines in the foreground of both photographs. In her desire to document these buildings, it is clear that she felt as though the lines expressed something for or about the people that they belonged to. We can interpret this as a communication of the state of living, the tenement's population, or as an attempt to shed light on both in conjunction with each other. Either way we choose to look at it, we find that the photograph raises more questions than answers, and in that deliberateness is Abbott's objective. She asks us to consider the photograph, to look at it, and to pick it apart in order to also be able to look back on that frozen picture in time with the same deliberateness, with an enlightened and educated perspective that allows it to be translated effectively. That introspectiveness allows us to soak up the documentary characteristics of the photograph as every brick tells a story, the empty sidewalks spell out names and faces, and the crammed laundry lines give us the "real world, real person" aspect of the tenement's inhabitants. These elements contribute valuable things to the integrity of the photograph, giving it life and value, as well as the humanity documentary photographers of this period strived to represent.

The technical aspects of this photograph are a feat, for this photograph presents itself with such a sense of clarity that it is possible to see how time has touched every surface of this scene. Also, the precision allows us to feel the details; the drapery in the laundry, the rough facades of the tenement buildings, and the multi-dimensional realities the layers create. This photograph is a tangle of abstract lines and complex lighting. It appears as though in one photograph, Abbott has managed to encapsulate the entire spectrum of grays in spectacular clarity and in ways where your eyes fall across the photograph searching for every shadow, being coaxed into the photograph's depth. The lines are tangled and aimless to reflect the interwoven patterns and lives of these Depression tenement communities: disorganized, complex, and unsure. The laundry lines are a metaphor for the courtyard and the tenements that create its boundaries. The looming nature of the buildings seems to communicate a community in themselves, huddled in a circle casting shadows on the grounds below. It is a conundrum to figure out whether or not this image is comforting or foreboding, as the shadows offer nowhere to hide, but also simultaneously, someplace safe to stand.

According to some sources Abbott took the photograph in near freezing conditions and the laundry, literally frozen in time, hung motionless as if already posing itself to be documented as a solitary moment in time. Fine architectural detail highlights the

quality of life and general communal lifestyle of these tenement houses and stresses the documentary nature of this photograph. Certainly there is a lot to consider in dissecting this photograph: there is more focus put on the buildings in this case than the laundry or immediate foreground. Abbott's photography is notably very intentional, and this subtle communication allows us to interpret her photographs with more accuracy and intentionality. There are noticeably no signs of people or life in general, and Abbott's depiction of life communicates the tenements as an awe-inspiring rather than as places of meager living. The buildings hardly allow for the glimpses of skyline and are literally larger than life as they tower over you. Or perhaps Abbott wished to communicate the state of the economy and the state of the working class. The economy of the Depression left many families with little to no options. The tenements created large environments for people of the same crises and addressed the needs of a more demanding middle class. Laundry is the only sign of life, as far as the eye can see. These personal items represent the life in these buildings as well as help to create an understanding for the time period. This photograph is orchestrated in such a way as to create a symphony of different elements that come together to commit themselves to this greater, cohesive vision.

Berenice Abbott (American, 1898-1991)
Court of the First Model Tenement, NY, NY
Gelatin silver print photograph, ca. 1936

Purchase with the Teri J. Edelstein Art Acquisition Fund, 2008.18.1

Arthur Fellig (Weegee), *Wife of the Victim*, c. 1940

Caity Bryant



Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee, was a freelance news photographer who worked in New York City during the 1930s and 1940s. For Weegee, a Ukrainian immigrant, New York City was the only America he needed. He found the places, people, and problems most would choose to forget and photographed them with flourish. He gave character to a city full of anonymous faces. His focus shifted from great tragedy to extreme elation, scenes of a bloodstained dead man to a crowd of jubilant teenagers at Coney Island. Weegee perfected what we know now as the tabloid, but he was by no means the paparazzi. He worked with skill, the camera moving as fast as his eyes. He even acquired the sobriquet Weegee, phonetic for Ouija, due to his eerie ability to sense when an event would occur. He was always in the right place at the right time. However, the intrusive nature we attribute to news photographers now is missing from Weegee's photographs. The notion of celebrity was still novelty—the camera itself still new in the eyes of the subjects, the lens still something to engage with rather than shy away from.

In his book of photographs, *Naked City*, Weegee's subjects display a vast array of emotions. Weegee chose to show all emotions, not just grief and distress. His photographs of tenement housing are testaments to the life of an immigrant in New York. They are cluttered not only visually but also emotionally. Weegee draws out the raw emotion in his subjects and forces the viewer to look, to feel the emotion exploding from the photograph. In many instances, what the viewer experiences is humor and laughs at the absurdity Weegee was able to capture. However, many of the photographs depart from this notion of comedy. Weegee's photographs of fires and murders cater to the shared human interest of death and destruction. The clichéd idea of being incapable of looking away from a car wreck has never been more accurate than in Weegee's most exploitative photographs. The photographs of murdered victims play on our need to understand what humanity is capable of. The initial shock is replaced by a undeniable need to comprehend. *Wife of the Victim* doesn't just shock or confuse the viewer. Weegee captured a moment of intensive emotion, and like a car wreck, it is nearly impossible to not stare.

"The dead man's wife arrived . . . and then she collapsed." This caption is Weegee's own description of *Wife of the Victim*. Weegee includes many of these offbeat captions in his collection of photographs in *Naked City*. In this case it evokes a felt tension. The nonchalant caption does not describe the intense grief exhibited within the photograph. The photograph depicts a woman collapsing backwards while being pulled by two policemen next to a dark car. The woman's face is twisted with sadness. Her body, clad in a white dress and black overcoat, folds in on itself. Her right arm, though held by the policeman, is pushing against him instead of relying on his support. The policeman's face is visible, displaying not grief but confusion. He appears bewildered by the weakness of the woman. Weegee captures this moment of anguish in a snapshot. Despite the fact that the policemen are attempting to help the woman, the photograph reveals a certain air of restraint.

The woman could also be seen as someone being taken away by the police, rather than helped by them. Weegee, at times, would manipulate the scene of his photograph to be more shocking, more ridiculous. In this particular photograph, however, Weegee doesn't need to add more (more blood splatter with applied ink, for example). The shocking nature of the photograph comes from the composition. The woman is swallowed up by the darkness. The darkness of the night, the policemen's uniforms, the dark car, her overcoat. Her body, in the light dress, is the brightest in the frame. This brightness only causes the grief to be more evident. Weegee manages to control the light within the scene even though it is nighttime. It is this mastery that made Weegee's stark New York night scenes so intriguing.

Weegee's interest in the macabre is clearly demonstrated in this photograph, as it was typical for his interests. As a news photographer, it was Weegee's job to capture the scenes of crimes. Weegee's investment in human experience, reaction, and emotion is demonstrated in each photograph. *Wife of the Victim* is full of the kind of overwhelming despair that causes the viewer to gasp in agony.

Arthur Fellig; known as "Weegee" (American, b. Poland 1899-1968)
Wife of the Victim
Gelatin silver print photograph, ca. 1940
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsol Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund, 2008.9.3

Aaron Siskind, *Savoy Dancers*, c. 1937

Ferron Dooley Fairchild



Savoy Dancers features a young, African-American couple dancing together at the Savoy Ballroom in New York City. The photo, taken in 1937, is one of the more famous pieces from a collection of photos entitled *The Harlem Document*, a project headed by Aaron Siskind that stretched from 1932 until 1940. *The Harlem Document* was attempting to reveal the economic and racial injustice in Harlem in the 1930s. The Photo League, the photography group behind the project, was a group of socially-motivated, at times radical and Communist artists who believed that documentary photography had a responsibility to reflect the reality of the social conditions they were living in. As a group they also considered aesthetics very important and were interested in taking photos that were communicative and represented social issues and at the same time were also good photos—of careful composition and practiced technique.

Savoy Dancers is an excellent example of Siskind's practice of these ideals. While remaining straightforward and including the entire figure, the composition is not boring or staid. The couple is caught in a moment of extreme movement, yet the photo is not blurry. The contrast of the tones of rich grays and stark white in the clothing and bodies of the figures against the dark background that is barely distinguishable highlights the couple. They are the most important two people in this photograph, and this "stolen moment" has the qualities of care and attention to composition that are characteristic of Siskind's work as a photographer.

The Harlem Document was an extremely large body of work, with many photographers working together on the project. Therefore there is a variation in the style and nature of the photos. But all of Siskind's photos from this period handled the subject matter in the same careful and methodical way. Siskind planned and executed his work with tremendous consideration of all the variables of subject, technique, and approach that he was dealing with. It's in this way that one can draw parallels between The Photo League and Farm Security Administration photography in the 1930s. In different ways the Photo League and the FSA both were trying to document and communicate to the country what was happening to the poor and oppressed people of America and how the Great Depression was affecting the citizens of the United States.

Although the subjects do not seem to object to their picture being taken, there is a feeling of intrusion. The flash used to illuminate and capture this couple in a moment of levity and fun is a shock of light that freezes these two dancers in dramatic contrast to the dark nightclub environment surrounding them. Like other aspects of *The Harlem Document*, *Savoy Dancers* leaves the viewer with a feeling of trespassing into a culture, an intrusion or perhaps even an exploitation of its subjects.

Indeed, the issue of race was one that Siskind could not escape dealing with in this project. Joseph Estin argues that "Siskind's images subtly but provocatively call attention to the uneasiness of the cross-class and interracial looking that his photographs of Harlem entails." He compares *Savoy Dancers* with other photographs in *The Harlem Document* that feature, in a very different way, entertainment and nightlife in Harlem in the 1930s, and argues that they all "play upon longstanding white stereotypes of black bodies [and] evoke the formal vocabulary of blackface minstrelsy." This is a conundrum of Photo League photography: was Siskind participating in racial prejudice and the exploitation of his subjects? Or was he rather using his methodical practice of observing and carefully documenting truthfully what was happening in Harlem at that time? Many observers of *The Harlem Document* derided the project for not showing a more "real" or depressed state of affairs in Harlem, yet there were also responses from residents of Harlem who praised it for accurately depicting the neighborhood's culture and citizens. Was *Savoy Dancers* simply a slice of life, a swinging 1930s image of a young couple doing the Lindy Hop at a nightclub? They're dressed well, they're young and full of life and on their faces they wear expressions of carefree joy.

Aaron Siskind (American, 1903-1991)
Savoy Dancers from Harlem Document
Gelatin silver print photograph, ca. 1937
Gift of Estelle Jussim, 1997.8.15

Lisette Model, *Two Women Having Cocktails*, 1930

Emma D'Amato



The two women in this photograph seem distracted by the camera's presence. The one on the left seems to be turning to meet the viewer's eye, while the other seems not to notice. Both women sip white wine, but the long-faced lady on the left also has a glass of milk, perhaps for an ulcer. Immediately one thinks of the woman's stomach and the consequences of this drink. The two might be drunk already; their lipstick is smeared, their hats are tilted slightly to the side. Although Lisette Model has crafted a humorous portrait, she in no way seems malicious. The women have become clowns, but they are lovable in their clumsiness.

Model was born Elise Stern in Vienna in 1910. She spent most of her life training to be a professional singer and came to photography fairly late after trying many other artistic endeavors. The most successful part of her career was spent in New York, where she helped shape what has become known as the New York School of Photography. She was

known for portraits of anonymous pedestrians, blind people, the obese, figures of the art world, and comical portraits of the wealthy. Model's keen eye for composition and her background in both documentary photography and photojournalism result in a strong narrative in all of her photographs. She was known for the angles in her photographs. She approached her subjects in ways that no one else did, often positioning herself below or above what she was photographing. *Two Women Having Cocktails* seems to have been snapped in just such an eccentric angle, as if Model slid into the booth with this pair, shocking them out of their conversation.

Model was an influential member of New York's Photo League, a group of photographers dedicated to politically-charged documentary photography of New York subjects. The Photo League not only pushed her to have politically focused work but to engage with the experimental side of photography. She focused her craft learning new techniques from the group's many classes and used them to tell new kinds of stories. While a part of the Photo League Model began an interesting relationship with photographer Weegee. Although the two rarely agreed on personal issues, they exhibited together and often photographed the same events. Both found the ridiculous in their subjects. Yet there were key differences. Model never staged her pictures and, unlike the celebrity-hound Weegee, never made herself the subject of her pictures.

Model's distinct style landed her a job photographing for Harper's *Bazaar*, which at the time was interested in and fostered experimental photography. She had opportunities to work for other big publications until she started to chafe under the magazine's ideas of fashion photography.

Although she was artistically talented and in good favor with the art world, she seemed perpetually financially stressed. She began teaching at the New School and was an outstanding teacher. One of her most famous pupils was Diane Arbus. With influential figures like Model, photography became the first art form to critically and commercially include women. Fellow female photographer and contemporary of Model, Bernice Abbott, wrote the preface to Model's first solo book of photographs. These connections hint at the sisterhood between women in New York photography.

Two Women Having Cocktails exemplifies Model's best work, especially the humor that she masters in her portraits. Model had no sympathies for the grotesqueness of the wealthy. She often did these kinds of satirical shots of women out to lunch, or on a stroll. While other photographers of her time were focused on beauty by means of perfection, or heavy-handed nobility in their subjects, Model looked for marks of life that told a story, or more importantly a punch line.

As an immigrant, Model's view on American culture was different than most of her peers. The American Dream seemed ridiculous to her, and she sought to exemplify that in her pictures. Model did not stage her photographs. She captured the two women in this photo at a private moment and shared it with us. Model did not think of her camera as a way to show a deeper truth, but to hyperbolize the surface.

Lisette Model (American, b. Vienna 1901-1983)
Two Women Having Cocktails
Gelatin silver print photograph, negative ca. 1935; print ca. 1975
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias, 2000.5.19

Barbara Morgan, *Hearst Over the People*, 1938

Hillary Marder



The contentious newspaper tycoon of the era, William Randolph Hearst is the subject of this thought-provoking piece. Hearst inherited his father's newspaper, The San Francisco Examiner, in 1887 and quickly expanded his publishing empire to include thirty other newspapers, creating the world's largest print media business. Credited as the creator and propagator of yellow journalism, Hearst peppered his newspapers with sensational stories. By instigating controversy, pushing myths, and dominating the print media market, the magnate manipulated public opinion. Hearst's strangle-hold on public opinion is symbolized in the photograph through the masses of people that seem to be gravitating towards his face, as if Hearst's psyche was capable of swallowing the masses.

The photograph is arguably the most anomalous in Morgan's oeuvre. She was most renowned for her emotive and fluid portraits of dancers in New York. This particular piece exemplifies Morgan's interest in photomontage, a collage-like photography characterized by one photograph superimposed over another. Photomontage was a popular and novel technique during the 1920s and 1930s, often used for political propaganda. The use of photomontage in *Hearst Over the People* should likewise be understood as socio-political commentary. Morgan intentionally confuses the superimposed images, awkwardly truncating each, and generating a sense of abruptness. More than a portrait of Hearst, the work should be considered an expression of Morgan's opinion of the scandalous nature of the subject's character, as well as a representation of his arch public persona.

As the title indicates, Hearst is depicted quite literally "over the people." The photograph displays a shadowed and distorted photograph of Hearst's visage at the center of darkened outward-reaching tendril-like forms, which are superimposed over the image of a mass of people. Morgan's uncomplimentary portrayal of Hearst would be shared by many others. His portrayal in the 1957 film *Citizen Kane* was perhaps the most influential and widely known, cementing the newspaper tycoon's public status as a person who inspired fascination, perplexity and often disdain. Morgan's piece is a visual representation of these attitudes. Because of the incongruous visual components of the piece, Morgan seems to be calling upon viewers to orient, re-orient, and submit themselves to her image of the man. The black smoke-like tendrils pin-wheeling from Hearst's distorted face are subject to myriad interpretations: as Medusa-like tentacles, as a life-sucking black hole. Was he trying to mislead the public or inform the public? Was his business a strangle-hold over people's lives or just a part of them?

Interestingly, Hearst's newspaper conglomerate emerged at a time when the industry was received with strong public skepticism. People were weary of the print media, and regarded newspapers as a misleading medium for relaying information. At the time, photography was regarded as one of the only media that reported truthful, empirical, and objective information. The irony is that Morgan flips this "uncensored" medium on its head by creating a manipulated photographic portrait, cultivating an image of a man whose livelihood depended on manufactured stories.

Barbara Morgan (American, 1900-1992)
Hearst over the People
Gelatin silver print photograph, 1939
Gift of Donald Holden, 1984.16.5

Barbara Morgan, *Merce Cunningham-Totem Ancestor*, 1942

Cheylene Contiguglia



Born in Kansas, Morgan moved to California, where she met Edward Weston and fell in love with his work. He inspired her to realize photography's potential as an art form. She then moved to New York in order to pursue a career as a photographer. She quickly developed a following and exhibited frequently in art galleries and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the ACA Gallery. She was on the Photo League advisory board, which included Bernice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, Elizabeth McCausland, and Paul Strand.

She became acquainted with several dancers and choreographers and developed a passion as a performance-based photographer. She is best known for her dance photographs, and the main theme in many of her work is movement and living energy.

After making several pictures of Martha Graham, a successful dancer and dance company owner, she met with Merce Cunningham, a dance choreographer. She photographed his performance called "Totem Ancestor." *Merce Cunningham-Totem Ancestor* derives from that performance. The male dancer portrayed here seems to be in ecstasy. He is in mid-air with his palms up and head thrown back. Morgan's picture captures the entire body in a kneeling position while in mid-air. She captured the movement of the dancer, and one is almost able to feel his energy coming straight from the photograph itself.

Morgan's style of portraying people while dancing is closely related to the era's fashion photography. This is because both types of photography were elegant and pleasing to the eye. Like fashion photographers, Edward Steichen in particular, Morgan took photos at a medium distance from her subjects in order to capture most or all of the sitter's body in the frame. Both Steichen's and Morgan's photos were legible but not razor sharp in focus. Morgan's photographs typically did not have any props in the background in order to not distract the viewer.

Morgan used dramatic light in order to enhance her photographs. In *Merce Cunningham-Totem Ancestor* she pointed the studio lights at right angles to hit the dancer. She used overhead lights to fall directly on the dancer and ambient lights to highlight the dancer's face and create deep shadows throughout his costume. The overhead lights seem to filter out the background in order to almost create the appearance of a silhouette on his body. She does this because the outfit the dancer is wearing is not really important; it is his expression and position that tells the story. The viewer is almost able to hear a piano in the distance as the dancer simply floats in mid-air. The performance is absorbing, as if it were happening right now and not almost 70 years ago.

Barbara Morgan (American, 1900-1992)
Merce Cunningham - Totem Ancestor
Gelatin silver print photograph, 1942
Gift of Donald Holden, 1984.16.3

Imogen Cunningham, *Nude*, 1932

Nora Mariano



Cunningham was one of the most significant photographers working on the American West Coast in the twentieth century. Although photographers like Edward Weston are often described as having been the “fathers” of West Coast straight photography, Cunningham’s work demonstrated the principles of straight photography very early on in the movement. Straight photography fundamentally dictated that the medium of photography be its own, pure art form, not relying on the principles of other mediums like painting. As such, artists practicing straight photography condemned styles like pictorialism (even if they had once worked in this genre), which often featured blurred

lines, staged subjects derivative of classical art forms, and a generally sentimental outlook. Instead, straight photography usually featured clear, crisp lines and a focus on the object being photographed. Landscapes, single objects, and bodies could be celebrated purely for the beauty of their forms.

As a member of the 1930s California group f/64, Cunningham worked amongst some of the most talented straight photographers of the age, including Ansel Adams, Sonya Noskowiak, John Paul Edwards, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke, and Edward Weston. Her affiliation with the group helped Cunningham gain recognition for her work and her role in the movement, but the egos and fame of other members (Weston in particular) often overshadowed her work and that of her other woman colleague, Sonya Noskowiak. Outside of the group, Cunningham was a distinguished photographer in her own right. She studied chemistry at the University of Washington, writing a thesis titled “The Scientific Development of Photography”. She continued publishing academic works throughout the first two decades of the century, writing mostly on the science of photography, but also on women working in the field. During the course of her career, Cunningham was featured in many exhibits, including one-person shows, and the 1930s was a particularly rich decade for this; her work was shown in at least one exhibit almost every year.

Nude is one of many nudes Cunningham produced, and is an example of how she captured the human body in a way that purely celebrated its form. Her subject’s identity is erased and is entirely irrelevant to this photograph. The narrative of the photograph comes from the crispness of the lines of the body and from the light and shadows that play across it. The image is at once clear and its lines well-defined, but it is also soft. Most of the form is starkly bright against the black fabric background, but the folds of her body, in her stomach, underarm, and leg, and the shadows on her breast and feet create contrast and definition in her form. Although the light is incredibly soft, the detail that makes up the photo is seen in the tiny creases of her feet and the individual hairs visible on her head. Cunningham demonstrates here how she was able not only to elevate the photograph to a purer art form, but also the body itself as a subject worth photographing, without making it highly sexualized.

Cunningham photographed many nudes, especially female ones. As a pictorialist in her early career, her nudes from the 1910s and early 1920s tended to be highly stylized and sometimes historical or biblical in subject. It is clear, however, that her interest lay in the form of the body even then, and her work moved quite naturally into the new “straight” style she began using in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of her nudes from the latter period reflect a definite love for the shape of the female body. Her photos tend to be close-ups, focused on particular parts of the body, more like studies than true narratives. Perhaps because she was a woman photographer, Cunningham approached female nudes in a way that showed great respect and love for the body, no matter which style she was working in.

Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883-1976)

Nude

Gelatin silver print photograph, negative 1932; print 1960s or 1970s

Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias, 2000.5.8

Ansel Adams, *Sunset Crater National Monument, Arizona*, 1947

Silvia Chiesa



No photographer equaled the lifetime contributions of Adams in bringing public recognition to the art of photography or taught so widely the techniques of black and white. His strength as an artist is largely attributed to his tireless investigation of methods, developing a careful darkroom technique of exposure and development he called the Zone System.

In early 1930s, Adams founded Group f/64 along with fellow photographers Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. Group f/64 proposed methods that would produce images with the most distinctive photographic characteristics, advocating the use of a view camera, the use of small apertures and long exposures giving extreme optical sharpness, and prints with a full tonal range made in direct contact with the negative on a glossy paper. In 1941 the National Park Service commissioned Adams to create a photo mural for the Department of the Interior Building in Washington, D.C. The theme was to be "Nature" as exemplified and protected in the U.S. National Parks. When Adams' commission was not renewed after 1942, he sought funding on his own to continue the project. He received Guggenheim fellowships in 1946 and 1948 that allowed him to travel to more distant national parks, including the Glacier Bay and Mount McKinley Parks in Alaska, Hawaii National Park, and the Great Smokey Mountains in Tennessee. Nature defined Adams' artistic love and devotion. The famous landscape photographs resulting from his traveling, were not just photographs of the wilderness, but were representative images of America. They became powerful tools in preserving the country's beautiful habitats.

Sunset Crater National Monument was made during Adams' tours of national parks. As in all Zone System pictures, Adams' technique in this photograph was to carefully study the scene, "visualize" the final print, then determine the correspondence between portions of the scene and tones in the print. He would then meter, expose and develop the negative accordingly. His basic rule was "expose for the shadows, develop for the highlights." By metering for the burned tree stumps in the foreground, for example, we see the intensity of value that comes from the tree trunk in the background and the soft tones of the entire composition. The shifting values of light and dark create an effect that enhances the soft wooden texture.

All the visual elements come together to create a feeling of unity. Shapes are proportionate to their relative space. Balance is achieved through thoughtful composition and range of tones in the visual elements. In the photograph's simplicity balance and we find its beauty.

The Sunset Crater volcano in Arizona was born in a series of eruptions sometime between 1040 and 1100 and its powerful explosions profoundly affected the lives of local people and forever changed the landscape and ecology of the area. Yet, a curious aspect of the photograph, as it is the case for nearly all of Adams' landscape photographs, is that people do not appear in it, hinting that the place does not affect and is not affected by human presence. The landscape is to be portrayed beyond the limits of human experience, articulating a reality greater than us.

Ansel Adams (American, 1902-1984)
Sunset Crater National Monument, Arizona
Gelatin silver print photograph, 1947
Purchase with Student Friends of Art Fund, 1988.17

Margaret Bourke-White, *Russian Woman*, c. 1930-32
Kunzang Wangdi



After studying photography under Clarence White at Columbia University, Bourke-White opened a studio in Cleveland where she specialized in architectural photography and in 1929 the New York native assumed the position of associate editor at *Fortune*. Her talent and aggressive nature got her an assignment to capture the rapid industrial growth in the Soviet Union. She would be the first Western photographer to be allowed in the USSR. It was the first of several trips, the outcome the publication of "Eyes on Russia" in 1939 and a switch from *Fortune* to *Life* magazine. The work made

her a role model for women and set precedence for women photojournalists trying to professionalize during a time when men dominated the bolder and more adventurous parts of photography.

As a photojournalist, Bourke-White was focused on picturing social conditions. She was able capture her fascination with the effects of industrialization on the Russian people during the time of rapid industrialization. The government placed restrictions on the subjects she could photograph. In *Russian Woman*, she observed factories that celebrated gender equality and the principle of work in the Soviet Union where men and women labored side by side. Women worked to increase their skills, to increase production levels, by attending night school to work on their factory techniques. This photograph was one of many images she captured of women in working conditions.

Another way to view *Russian Woman* is to see her as part of an emerging national identity, an emblem of a poor nation rushing to catch up with its industrialized European counterparts.

Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904-1971)
Russian Woman
Silver print photograph, 1930-1932
Purchase with funds from T. Marc Futter, 1986.13.2

Lewis Wickes Hine, *Untitled (Man with plastic doll heads)*, 1936-37

Betsy Johnson



*“The great social peril is darkness and ignorance. Light is required.
Light! Light in floods!”* —Lewis Wickes Hine

This unique photograph, like many of Lewis Hine’s works, is untitled. It is part of a series called “Men at Work,” one of several from that series held by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. It may have been taken at a factory in nearby Holyoke. When I first saw this print I was struck by the way the man held his body and his facial expression. He appears as if caught up in a moment of private reflection. There is also sensitivity in his expression as he cranes his head from his working-erect body and pauses, cradling the plastic baby head in his work-abused hands. As he gazes down at the plastic head, he is absorbed and seemingly unaware of Hine’s presence. A rack of plastic baby doll heads appears somewhat out of focus behind. They are like a wall of macabre skulls of children.

We might begin to ask ourselves questions about what this man was thinking and doing. It would be easiest to deduce that he is hanging his head in exhaustion while simply inspecting his work. But maybe the man is reflecting on the loss or dismemberment of his own childhood; perhaps, like so many others, he has worked in factories since he was a boy. Or maybe he lost a brother or sister to a factory accident. Or maybe he is acting as if holding his newborn child and considering his absence at home because of the long hours he must work. Hines images speak to what factory workers gave up, risked losing, and endured for very little in return. In this sense, the wall of skulls behind is like a commentary on the working children of Holyoke whose childhood years were lost as machine hands of the factory.

Hine's photographs highlighted the contemptible working conditions faced by immigrant factory workers and were used as part of reform legislation in the early 20th century. He would somehow sneak into factories, lugging his large view camera and flash equipment, introduce himself to individual children, women and men, get to know them briefly. It was through these means that he was able to capture the distinct character of real people who made the factory's machines hum. His "human documents" acted as a declaration of the dignity of the worker, whether child or adult, whose blood sweat and tears, greased the gears of the many unregulated factories born of the industrial revolution and machine-age. Hines images helped communicate the idea that the immigrant factory worker was an American factory worker, portraying the worker through the pride they took in the work they did.

Hine documented the social conditions of the immigrant worker for the National Child Labor Committee between 1906-1918 and the Work Projects Administration between 1936-37. His photos of children laboring in factories formed a substantial part of numerous child labor committee exhibitions throughout the U.S. from 1908-1929. Although he went mostly unrecognized as a master American photographer for which he is honored for today, Hine continued to pursue social reform and justice through documentary photography until his death in 1940. It wasn't until 1937 and through his own initiative that he would be embraced by the Photo League of New York and elevated by its members to the standing of "father" of the social documentary movement. Hine felt to make a difference in the world was most important and did not consider his form of social documentary work as an artistic endeavor; he was just simply trying to do the right thing.

Lewis Wickes Hine (American, 1874-1940)
Men at work: Holyoke series
Gelatin silver print photograph, negative 1936-37; print ca. 1980
Gift of William Ravanesi, 1984.3.9

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

Emily Chow



During her career, Lange authored two photographic books, *An American Exodus*, *A Record of Human Erosion* and *The American Country Woman*, that revealed her interest in the subjects of women and human erosion during the Great Depression. *Funeral Cortege, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California* is a photograph that combines these interests.

Lange viewed migrant women as mothers and wives who worked hard and selflessly alongside their husbands for the sake of their families. While on assignment for the FSA, she admired the women that she came across, referring to them as “modern” women, precisely the sort of woman we find in *Funeral Cortège*. Centered in the photograph, the woman wears a weathered look, creases and wrinkles under her eyes, and a slight frown upon her forehead. Yet she is strong. Lange always sympathized with women who have sacrificed for their families, including those who have witnessed the death of a loved one, as this picture suggests.

Often, Lange’s titles complement and explain a photograph, but often they are enigmatic. Does the “End of the Era” in the picture’s title refer to the end of the deceased person’s life? Or does it represent the wider context of loss during the Great Depression? Or does it try to link the two? If the last, her idea may have derived a President’s Special Committee on Farm Tenancy report which equated the “erosion of soil” to the “erosion of society.” Lange may have used the concept of erosion as a metaphor for the deterioration of the social and economic conditions in the country that greatly affected these migrant families. In this sense, the idea of “erosion” is central to the photograph, especially in terms of how the female subject is enveloped by layers of frames, like layers of soil. Lange doesn’t even photograph the woman directly: it is a reflection in the hearse’s mirror that is captured. The reflection is enclosed by the edges of the mirror, which is framed by the vehicle’s structure.

Funeral Cortège is not typical of Lange’s documentary style, though it does combine elements of her early portrait photography. As a studio portraitist, Lange would exclude her subject’s body, concentrating instead on their faces and the emotions conveyed through the eyes. Her style changed when she switched to street photography. She began to capture her subject’s pose and body language while they were captured unaware of her presence.

While Lange preferred “invisibility” on assignments, she refused to let her subjects remain so. She dedicated her efforts to the migrant families who were the embodiments of human erosion, especially the solid and hardworking women, and reinforced their central place in society.

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895-1965)
Funeral Cortège, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California
Gelatin silver print photograph, negative 1938; print ca. 1950
Purchase with the Teri J. Edelstein Art Acquisition Fund, 2008.18.2

Yousuf Karsh, *Helen Keller with Polly Thompson*, 1948
Aggie Traye



“On first looking into her blind but seeing eyes, I said to myself . . . ‘Her light comes from within.’” —Yousuf Karsh

Keller was a world famous speaker and author who was an advocate for women’s suffrage and worker’s rights, among numerous other progressive causes. Left blind and deaf by illness before the age of two, Keller, with the aid of her visually impaired instructor/governess/companion Anne Sullivan, managed to find success despite her disability. After graduating from Radcliffe College as the first deaf blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree, Keller went on to be a passionate advocate for people with disabilities, women’s rights, and socialism. By the time this photo was taken, Keller had helped found the Helen Keller International Organization (dedicated to researching vision, health, and nutrition) and the American Civil Liberties Union. She had written a

number of books, and traveled the world, raising money for the blind. Her mentor, Anne Sullivan had since passed away and the 68-year-old Keller's companion was now Polly Thompson, photographed here with Keller by Karsh. Karsh prided himself on the "homework" he did before photographing his subjects, learning everything he could about them so he could better appreciate the "remarkable personalities" he was to capture. As a result, Karsh's photographs successfully capture the essence of his sitters' personalities in a way that weds the stark realism of his predecessors in portrait photography, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, with the glamour and controlled studio settings of Edward Steichen's celebrity portraits.

Born in 1908 and raised in the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian Genocide, Karsh fled first to Syria and then to Canada to live with a photographer uncle. Karsh found an apprenticeship with his uncle's friend, photographer John H. Garo, who Karsh would later describe as highly influential in developing his skill as a photographer. Following the success of his iconic portrait of Winston Churchill in 1941, Karsh's list of celebrity sitters began to increase and by 1948, the date of his portrait of Keller and Thompson, Karsh had become a much sought after photographer, who was known for his practiced use of dramatic lighting.

Here, Keller and Thompson are presented in front of a plain background, a common element in Karsh's portraits. Keller's and Thompson's dark shirts almost blend into the dark background, creating a sense of isolation (which perhaps evokes the isolation Keller might have felt). Karsh's frequent practice of lighting the sitter's hands and face separately draws an equal amount of attention to each, stressing their equal importance—an especially poignant decision as Keller relied on her hands for communication for the majority of her life. Keller's face in profile recalls early portraits, in which she is shown in profile from the right to hide her protruding left eye. In this portrait, however, Karsh's portrayal of her from the left side is almost suggestive of the journey and transformation Keller has undergone through her many years of experience. Karsh's 8x10 bellows Calumet camera captures the minutest detail, from the wear of the pages in the book to the wrinkles in Keller's face and hands, and celebrates them in way that bestows significance and knowledge to his sitters.

Also helping to characterize Keller within this portrait is the inclusion of Polly Thompson. Within the dark background that surrounds the pair, the inclusion of Thompson signifies her loyalty and the companionship she provided when Keller's deaf blindness might have forced her to remain in a world of isolation. Thompson sits close to Keller; her head is slightly bowed and contrasts Keller's head, which sits a little higher, and her single hand rests near (but not quite touching) Keller's hands. The fact that it is Keller's hands that rest on top of the large book, however, indicates that while Keller is dependent on Thompson's support and guidance, it is still Keller whose own strength and wisdom have enabled her to become the public icon that she is.

Yousuf Karsh (Canadian, b. Armenia 1908-2002)
Helen Keller
Gelatin silver print photograph, negative 1948; print 1983
Gift of Lynn Mowbray Wegner (Class of 1973) in memory of Buren B. Day, 1991.32.8



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