

**#69 February 2022 Cameraderie  
The Family of Man Exhibition (1955):  
Impact and Successors**



View of The Family of Man Exhibition.

The Family of Man Exhibition (#22 Sept 2017) was displayed in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, curated by Edward Steichen (#9 Sept 2013), the Director of the Department of Photography at MoMA. It was the grandest and most significant Western photo exhibition of its time, and has had a lasting impact, stimulating criticism both positive and negative, as well as numerous follow-on exhibitions. This is the first time in this series that I am returning with a fuller article on a prior subject—because I did not previously discuss in detail the uniqueness of The Family of Man Exhibition and what happened following it.

Here is a summary of what I wrote in #22:

The Exhibition brought together 503 photos from 68 countries, the work of 273 photographers (there were 163 Americans and 70 Europeans). Steichen viewed The Family of Man Exhibition as the culmination of his life's work.

The Family of Man Exhibition, despite the gender-insensitivity of its mid-twentieth century framework, and a certain neglect of Eastern and of controversial points of view, was perhaps the greatest photo exhibition ever presented by a major museum until that time. Given that it was presented by an art museum, Steichen fulfilled Alfred Stieglitz's (#2, Jan 2013) hope that photography would stand equal to painting as an art form.

Dorothea Lange, (#4, March 2013) helped Steichen gather the photographs and Carl Sandburg wrote texts for the Exhibition. The Exhibition toured the world for many years, and was eventually permanently settled at a museum in Clervaux, Luxembourg, since Steichen was born in Luxembourg. A Clervaux press release stated that “the exhibition was meant as a manifesto for peace and the fundamental equality of mankind, expressed through the humanist photography of the post-war years.”

Steichen's theme was unity and commonality among all humans. In this, the Exhibition was a success, but it had an interesting legacy. If you read through the full Wikipedia article, you may be surprised to see much space is devoted to successor exhibitions. Many of these exhibitions proposed alternative viewpoints, focusing on differences, conflicts, and class. Basically, Steichen started a “grand conversation” that continued for many

decades. Please think about what Steichen's Exhibition does and does not say as you look through some of its images. If you own the book, you can browse through it again. Else, go to the following websites to read about the Exhibition and to view some of the images and their presentation:

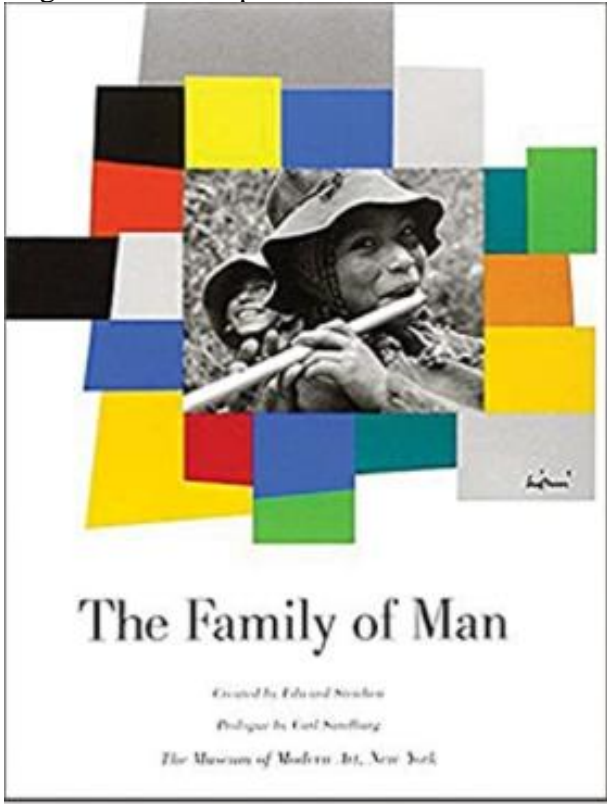
- Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Family\\_of\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Family_of_Man)
- Review of the Exhibition officially opening at Clervaux, together with several images from the Exhibition: <http://www.photography-now.com/exhibition/92024>.
- The museum at Clervaux, Luxembourg, showing the presentation of the entire Exhibition, permanently housed there: <http://www.destination-clervaux.lu/activities-art-culture/family-man/family-of-man/>.

In spite (or because) of the immense popularity of Exhibition, many photographers and critics were quite negative about the Exhibition; I have not discussed this in my previous article, and that is partly the reason for this article. Here is an interesting article by Professor Terry Towery, that gives a critical perspective on the Exhibition.

<http://towery.lehman.edu/photohistory/PhotoReadings/TheFamilyofMaAREappraisal.html>

One of Professor Towery's criticisms is that the Exhibition downplayed the significance and contributions of individual photographers (naturally, they did not like that) by presenting the photographs in subject area groups, rather than as the work of individual photographers. This raises an interesting question as to the purpose of any exhibition. In my opinion, either choice is valid, according to the goals of the exhibition curators. Obviously, most one-person shows are presenting the single photographer. In the case of The Family of Man Exhibition, I accept that the goal was to present groups of thematically related images. In my view, the 1968 successor exhibition, The 2d World Exhibition of Photography, took thematic groups to a further extreme, as I find many of the individual photographs uninteresting as individual photographs; I was hard pressed to select my favorite isolated images to show below.

Below is a summary of criticism of The Family of Man Exhibition and The 2nd World Exhibition of Photography. *The assessments are mine, based upon what I have read about the exhibitions, and upon my own taste.* I have not delved into the subsequent exhibitions, but you can read brief descriptions of them in the main Wikipedia article on The Family of Man Exhibition: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Family\\_of\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Family_of_Man)

Exhibition	Positive Assessments	Negative Assessments
<p>The Family of Man Exhibition, New York City, MOMA, 1955.</p>	<p>Cover of the book version of the Exhibition. Eugene Harris. Piper.</p>  <p>The Family of Man</p> <p><i>Curated by Edward Steichen</i>  <i>Prologue by Carl Sandburg</i>  <i>The Museum of Modern Art, New York</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Huge exhibition, placing photography on a high artistic platform.</li> <li>• Participating photographers from 68 countries.</li> <li>• 21% of the photographers were women.</li> <li>• Organized in image groups telling the entire story of human existence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prologue, Lovers, Marriage, Pregnancy, Childbirth, Nursing Mothers, Births, Mothers and Babies, Children 1, Family Activities, Children 2, Fathers and Sons, Family Groups, Land, Work 1, Work 2, Woman's Work, Adult Play, Classical Music, Jazz and Blues, Dance, Folk Music, Food, Ring Around the Rosy, Relationships, Learning, Death, Religious Expression, Aloneness and Compassion, Aspirations, Hard Times, Famine, Inhumanities, Revolt, Teens, Man's Judgment, Voting, Government, Faces, Bomb, Couples, Childhood Magic.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Contained some of the most iconic photographs of a number of famous photographers. My personal choices follow (all of which I have shown you in previous articles):</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Projected an idealized view of the human story, largely omitting the many forms of war, repression, calamity, cruelty, and pollution throughout the world—in short, a bit of a whitewash aimed at making this a successful popular exhibition.</li> <li>• 21% of the photographers were women (not a mistake that this assessment is in both columns).</li> <li>• Asian and other ethnic photographers largely omitted.</li> <li>• Thematic groups of images tended to deemphasize the achievements of individual photographers, although some iconic images did appear in this exhibition.</li> </ul>

- Wynn Bullock. Let There Be Light, 1954.



- Wynn Bullock. Child in Forest, 1951.



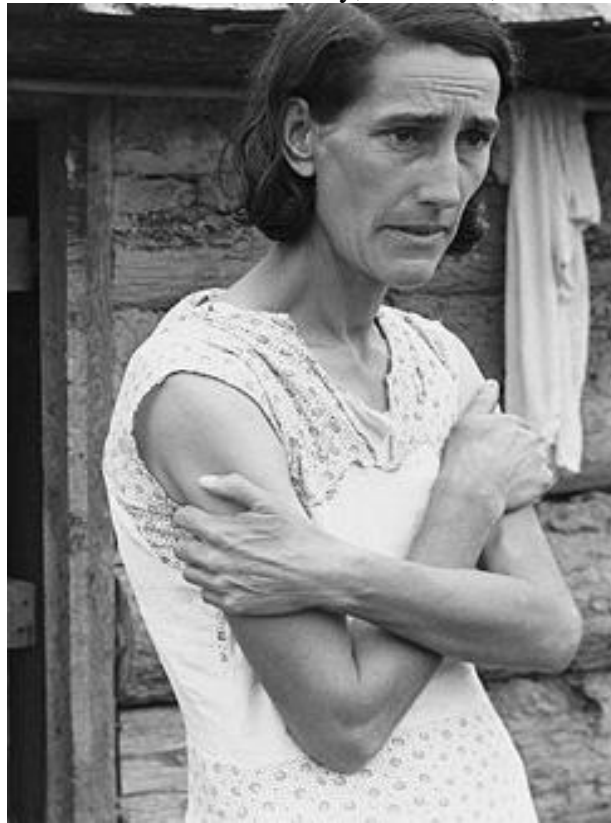
- Alfred Eisenstadt. Drum Major and Children, 1951.



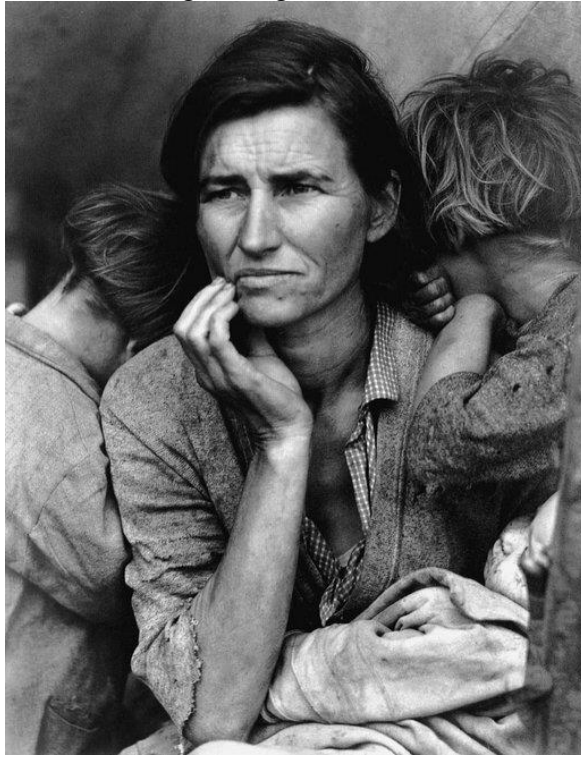
- Ansel Adams. Mt. Williamson, 1944.



- Ben Shahn. Boone County, Arkansas, 1935.



- Dorothea Lange: Migrant Mother, 1936.

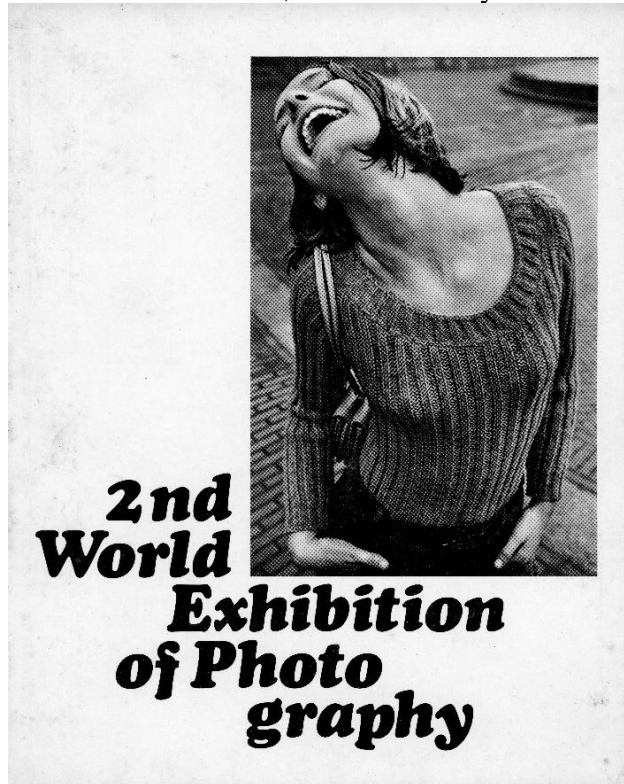


- W. Eugene Smith. The Walk to Paradise Garden, 1946.



2nd World Exhibition of Photography, 1968.

Cover of the book version of the Exhibition. Jerome Ducrot. In Central Park, New York City.



- Devoted to images of women with 522 photographs from 85 countries by 236 photographers.
- Considerable display of breasts, recognizing an essential womanly aspect.
- Organized in striking image groups as follows, from the table of contents of the book version:

<b>Woman</b>	
1 All Sisters Beneath the Skin	29 The Natural Ones
2 Little Girls	30 Woman in Total War
3 Adolescents	31 Nuns
4 Social Destiny	32 The Star
5 Physical Culture	33 Her Greatest Talent
6 Homage to Beauty	34 Her Dance
7 Figures of Fashion	35 Her Voice
8 Woman Adorned	36 In the World of Art
9 In the Technological Process	37 In the Intellectual Professions
10 Natural Bargainers	38 In the World of Culture
11 Creative Hands	39 Night Figures
12 Nursing Hands	40 In the Circus Ring
13 Props of the Apparatus	41 In Domestic Sanctuary
14 Close to Mother Earth	42 The Intimacy of Four Walls
15 Faith	43 Permitted in Black – Forbidden in White
16 Lovers	44 Militant Woman
17 The Bride	45 Political Personages
18 Expecting a Baby	46 Woman in Advertising ... and in Art
19 Motherhood	48 Still Life
20 A Child is born	49 Affection
21 The Burden of Children	50 Beyond the Normal
22 The Sportswoman	51 The Sick
23 Mermaids	52 The Dying
24 Women's Party	53 Woman and Death
25 The Worthy ... and the Wicked	54 She and He
26 Make-up	55 Revolt
27 Ecstasy, Freedom and Protest	56 Scenes
	57 The Old
	58 and the Young
	59 Yearnings of the Small and the Great
	60 Nude
	61 She

**Aspects  
of a  
grand  
theme**

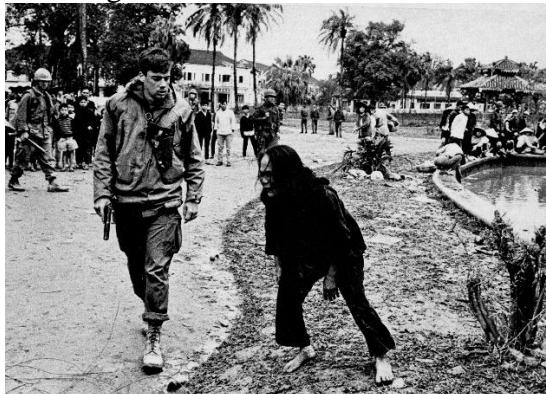
- Barely 10% of the photographers were women, compared to 21% for The Family of Man.
- Considerable display of breasts, showing male photographers' (or selection committee's) obsession with breasts.
- Extreme reliance on thematic grouping of images resulted in few memorable individual images.

- Below are a few of my personal choices for the most interesting images. I have included the photographer names, and image descriptions appearing in the book version.

- Jerome Ducrot. Boy with his grandmother during the fighting in Algeria, 1956.



- Hilmar Pabel. A Vietnamese woman asks an American soldier for mercy for her son, erroneously taken prisoner as a member of the Vietcong.





- Herbert Peterhofen. Gymnastic teacher on the beach at Borgio Verezzi (Italian Riviera).



- Rudi Herzog. In central India girls and young women carry home the heavy earthenware pots from the market.



- Victor Reznikov. Last image in the book version, no comments provided.



- Charlotte March. Back cover of the book version; the famous American photo model, Donyale Luna (“The Gazelle”).

