

**#85 Sept. 2023 Cameraderie
The Photo League (1936-51)**



Marion Palfi (#73, June 2022), Wife of the Lynch Victim, 1949.

This is the third of five articles in which I am taking up five organizations (or movements) throughout the 20th century that were major forces in the direction of American photography. There were similar organizations (or movements) in Europe and elsewhere. Some of the organizations (or movements) were international from the start.

In the last two months, I discussed the Photo-Secession movement and Group f/64. This month, I am going to discuss The Photo League. In the next two months, I will look at Magnum Photos and Getty Images.

The Photo League members were largely social activists, shooting the human condition as it really existed.

Here is the Wikipedia article link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo_League, and a few summary remarks for that article, with a considerable list of members and supporters—you might want to Google some of them:

The Photo League was a cooperative of photographers in New York who banded together around a range of common social and creative causes. Founded in 1936, the League included some of the most noted American photographers of the mid-20th century among its members. It ceased operations in 1951 following its placement in 1947 on the U.S. Department of Justice blacklist with accusations that it was a communist, anti-American organization.

...

More than anything else, though, the League was a gathering place for photographers to share and experience their common artistic and social interests.

...

Among the members of the League were co-founders Sol Libsohn and Sid Grossman (director of the Photo League School); [Paul Strand, #13, April, 2014,] Morris Engel (from 1936); Arthur Leipzig (from 1942); Ruth Orkin, Jerome Liebling, and Lester Talkington (all from 1947); Walter

Rosenblum (editor of the Photo League Photo Notes); Eliot Elisofon (a Life magazine photographer); Aaron Siskind [#70, March 2022]; Jack Manning (a member of the Harlem Document Group of the League and a New York Times photographer); Dan Weiner; Bill Witt; Martin Elkort; Lou Bernstein; Sy Kattelson; Louis Stettner; and Lisette Model. In the early 1940s, the list of notable photographers who were active in the League or supported their activities also included Margaret Bourke-White [#5, April 2013], W. Eugene Smith [#19, June 2017], Helen Levitt, FSA [Farm Security Administration] photographer Arthur Rothstein, Beaumont Newhall [#56, Dec. 2020], Nancy Newhall [#56, Dec. 2020], Richard Avedon [#3, Feb. 2013], Weegee [#38, March 2019], Robert Frank [#23, Oct. 2017], Harold Feinstein, Ansel Adams [#12, May 2014], Edward Weston [#1, Oct. 2012] and Minor White [#20, July 2017]. The League was the caretaker of the Lewis Hine [#10, Nov. 2013] Memorial Collection, which Hine's son had given the League in recognition of its role in fostering social activism through photography as his father had done.

The front image for this piece is by Marion Palfi (#73, June 2022), who was all about social change photography. As I noted in the article on her, she “eschewed a more lucrative career ... and chose instead to pursue imagery that challenged notions of the American Dream.”

Here is some more information on member and supporter activities, from this website:

[Photo League | American organization | Britannica](#)

Before World War II, Photo League members often formed Feature Groups to document life in poor neighbourhoods. One group, headed by Aaron Siskind and including Morris Engel and Jack Manning, produced a group of photographs entitled the “Harlem Document”; another, under the leadership of Consuelo Kanaga, documented the poorer reaches of Park Avenue. Lewis W. Hine headed a group who photographed men at work; Hine himself made memorable images of men working on the construction of the Empire State Building. Arthur Leipzig and Sol Lipsohn worked in Chelsea, and Walter Rosenblum, who was president of the league for a time, photographed near his birthplace on the Lower East Side.

Here is a smattering of images from the Photo League.

Aaron Siskind, Untitled, from *Harlem Document*.



The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg mounted a show of Aaron Siskind's *Harlem Document* in 2014, with the following commentary, *italics mine*:

The photographs by Aaron Siskind in this exhibition belong to one of the most important visual records of Harlem during the Great Depression. Siskind (1903–1991) graduated from City College in 1926 and taught in New York's public school system between 1926 and 1949. He turned to photography around 1930 and *joined the Photo League in 1932. The League's members were socially engaged photographers and filmmakers who drew attention to urban problems, especially in light of the Depression. In 1936 Siskind founded the League's Feature Group, which documented New York City, focusing especially on Harlem.*

By 1941 the project was dropped as the country entered WWII. Siskind also had left the League and began to turn to abstraction. It was only in 1981 that a collection of fifty-seven photographs from the series were published as a book, along with excerpts from the Federal Writers' Project's oral history of Harlem and a foreword by writer and filmmaker Gordon Parks [#21, Aug. 2017], who grew up in Harlem. Subjects range from intimate domestic interiors to lively street scenes. There are powerful depictions of churchgoers and arresting ones of performers and Harlem's nightlife, but the images of children are especially moving. While these photographs vary in tone, one senses not only Siskind's artistry, but his intense humanity and exquisite sensitivity in representing his subject. These are qualities not always found in documentary photography, and ones that demand universal celebration.

Jack Manning, *Elks Parade*, Harlem 1938.



This image is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

The slanted sunlight effect on New York tenement building facades is a classic subject, but look how it is combined with the social documentation of a festive event.

There is only a slight convergence of the vertical lines, so this means the photographer aimed his camera upwards only a little.

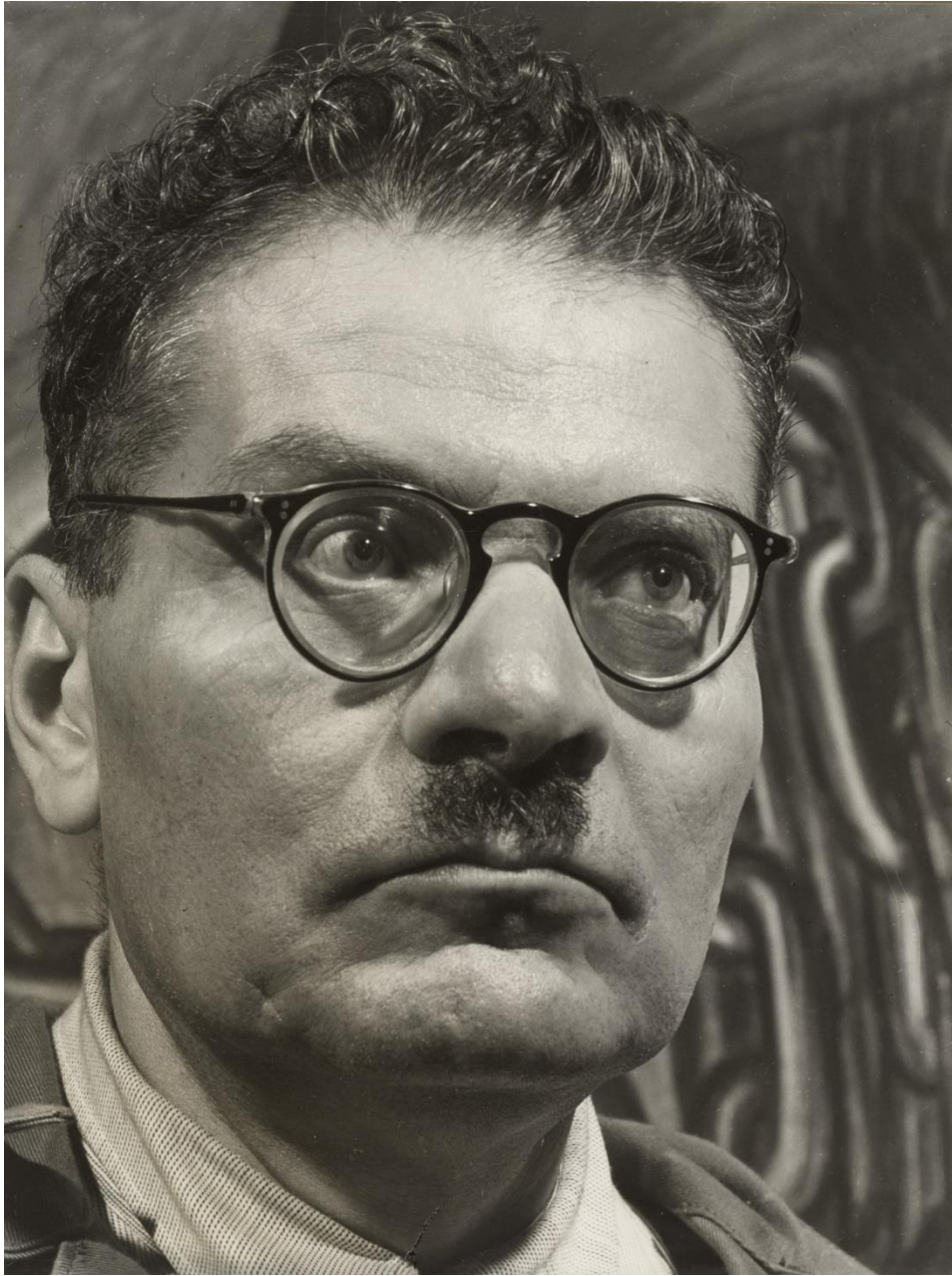
Notice also how well-dressed people are, typical of a past time.

Ruth Orkin, American Girl in Italy, Florence, 1951.



Although Ruth Orkin is listed as a founding member of The Photo League, I don't find her images to have the social punch that many of the other League photographers' images have. On the other hand, they are fine examples of interesting street life. Here is the link to her archive: <https://www.orkinphoto.com/photographs/new-york/>. In it, you will see that Orkin shot frequently from the windows of her NYC apartment—see the website for a sample. This image is from a series of shots Orkin took in Italy, with a friend of hers featured. This, and several of the other images in the series, are deliberate teases of the local men in the images. I find that insincere, but the images are fine captures. If you want to wander into deeper analysis, think about what this image says about the cooperation between the photographer and the friend-model in taking this image.

Eliot Elisofon, Portrait of Orozco, 1940.



Elisofon was a prominent Life Magazine photographer. José Clemente Orozco (shown here), Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were considered the pre-eminent Mexican muralists of the mid-twentieth century. Although not quite an image in the style of Photo League social truth-telling, this splendid portrait crosses over into Mexican Muralism—that great social art form, of which Orozco was one of the leaders. If you travel to Mexico, you cannot escape great quality murals everywhere, all with punch, all with subject, all with history, all with passion.