

#14 October 2014 *Cameraderie* Walker Evans (1903-1975)

Evans was best known for his work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the years of the great depression. As a result, his work for the FSA is in the public domain, held by the Library of Congress (LOC). He was a man of letters and had many friends and acquaintances in the literary world. He was a staff writer for Time Magazine from 1945-65. Afterwards, he was a professor of photography at the Yale University School of Art. He worked with large-format cameras, small hidden cameras, and late in life he used the very new Polaroid SX-70 because as he became infirm it was easy to operate.

Urban Shooting

The following Library of Congress (LOC) website contains an extensive selection of images from Evans's *New York City Block* photo shoot in the summer of 1938. There is also a detailed analysis of the shoot, including its sequencing and the time of day. Here is the link to the LOC website, and following is a very cogent quote from that website about the *New York City Block* photo shoot.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/docchap4.html>

“Patterns of masonry, windows, fire escapes, and shadows transform the photographs of apartment house facades into geometric abstractions. In the 1930s, Evans often rendered buildings—for example, the rural churches he photographed in the South—as two-dimensional studies in form and texture, but he typically portrayed the entire facade. These photographs of tenement fronts recall his experiments of the 1920s, in which foreshortening, sharp-angled compositions, the use of strong shadows, and the exclusion of the roof and sidewalk heightened the degree of abstraction. The entire take also contains photographs that look up and down the block; in these, whole buildings are seen in their architectural context and the block itself is presented as the setting for human activity.”

Here is one of the images from that series, which can be linked directly to as follows:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8a19088\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8a19088))+@field(COLLID+fsa)))

This image is two things at once—a hard matter to carry off—it is a record photograph of a street scene, but also a beautiful composition of dappled lights and darks. There is a feeling of sunlight breaking through a forest cover—even though all the shadows are geometric and cast by fire escapes (some not in the scene).



Rural Shooting

The LOC FSA collection contains over 800 Evans images at the following link. There may be some overlap with the LOC website I mentioned earlier.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/related/?va=exact&co=fsa&sp=1&q=Evans%2C+Walker%2C+1903-1975&fi=author&sg=true&op=EQUAL>

This and similar publically owned image collections of photographs taken by great masters are a national treasure, free to the public to browse, research, and download.

Here is just one image from the collection: *Flood refugees at mealtime, Forrest City, Arkansas*, which can be directly linked to here: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8a28727/?co=fsa>. I guess the fourth child was not casting his eyes to the right, so it appears that Evans solved his compositional problem by cropping out the child's eyes. Do you dare do that? But he carried it off!



Style

See the following commentary from the Metropolitan Museum of Art website. I really can't improve on such a good discussion, only select it for presentation. It begins "Walker Evans is one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. His elegant, crystal-clear photographs and articulate publications have inspired several generations of artists..." Please read on:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/evan/hd_evan.htm