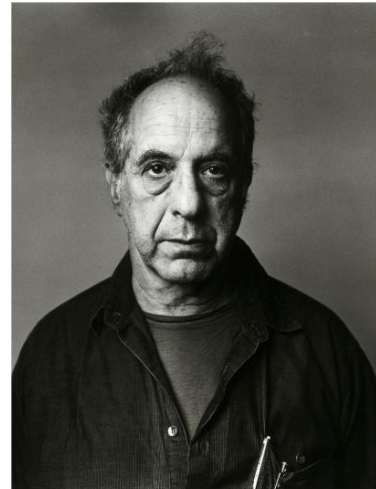
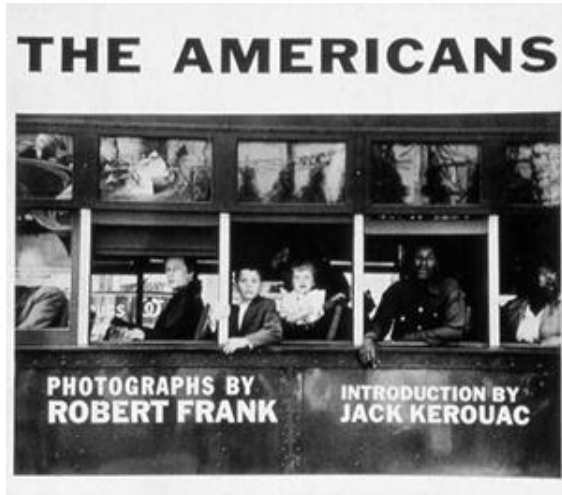


#23 October 2017 Cameraderie
Robert Frank (1924-) and *The Americans*



This is about one man, Robert Frank, and one book of photographs he produced, *The Americans*, in 1958, in a French edition. Jack Kerouac wrote the introduction to the American edition of 1959, ending with this sentence: "That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?" Here is the elevator girl photograph from *The Americans*:



Frank, A Swiss who settled in America, received a Guggenheim Foundation grant to photograph America in 1955-6. Note that this was the period immediately after *The Family of Man* exhibition that I discussed last month. Remember that I mentioned the "grand conversation" that Edward Steichen started with *The Family of Man*. Now let's continue that conversation with *The Americans*.

First of all, what is going on with Frank's approach to photography? *The Americans* is full of blurry, grainy, and strangely-composed images—nothing like the beautiful and dramatic images in *The Family of Man*. Frank is out-rightly rejecting that approach. He is trying to capture

feelings, not images, and express a different viewpoint. It is “an enduring contrast to Steichen’s exhibition.”

Here is the Wikipedia entry on *The Americans*:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Americans_\(photography\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Americans_(photography))

From the article:

The Americans, by Robert Frank, was a highly influential book in post-war American photography. It was first published in France in 1958, and the following year in the United States. The photographs were notable for their distanced view of both high and low strata of American society. The book as a whole created a complicated portrait of the period that was viewed as skeptical of contemporary values and evocative of ubiquitous loneliness.

Sean O'Hagan, writing in *The Guardian*, said "Swiss-born Frank set out to do something new and unconstrained by commercial diktats. His aim was to photograph America as it unfolded before his somewhat somber outsider's eye. From the start, Frank defined himself against the traditional *Life* magazine school of romantic reportage."

Sociologist Howard S. Becker has written about *The Americans* as social analysis: "Robert Frank's enormously influential *The Americans* is in ways reminiscent both of [Alexis de] Tocqueville's analysis of American institutions and of the analysis of cultural themes by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Frank presents photographs made in scattered places around the country, returning again and again to such themes as the flag, the automobile, race, restaurants—eventually turning those artifacts, by the weight of the associations in which he embeds them, into profound and meaningful symbols of American culture."

Here is the Wikipedia article on Frank himself, should you want to know more about him, other than *The Americans* project: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Frank

From the article:

The irony that Frank found in the gloss of American culture and wealth gave his photographs a clear contrast to those of most contemporary American photojournalists, as did his use of unusual focus, low lighting and cropping that deviated from accepted photographic techniques.

This divergence from contemporary photographic standards gave Frank difficulty at first in securing an American publisher. *Les Américains* was first published in 1958 by Robert Delpire in Paris with texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Henry Miller, and John Steinbeck that Delpire positioned opposite Frank's photographs. It was finally published in 1959 in the United States, without the texts, by Grove Press, where it initially received substantial criticism. *Popular Photography*, for one, derided Frank's images as "meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness." Though sales were also poor at first, the fact that the introduction was by the popular Kerouac helped it reach a larger audience. Over time and through its inspiration of later artists, *The Americans* became a seminal work in American photography and art history, and is the work with which Frank is most clearly identified. Critic Sean O'Hagan, writing in *The Guardian* in 2014, said "it is impossible to imagine photography's recent past and overwhelmingly confusing present without its lingeringly pervasive presence." and that "*The Americans* changed the nature of photography, what it could say and how it could say it. It remains perhaps the most influential photography book of the 20th century."

Here are several of the images from *The Americans*:

Parade — Hoboken, New Jersey



Think what it means that the American flag cuts off the identity of a viewer.

Drug Store — Detroit



Notice in 1955-6 that the patrons are all white males and the servers are all black females.

Public Park — Ann Arbor, Michigan



Does this derive socially and photographically from Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass*.

Bar — Las Vegas, Nevada



This is about loneliness.

Frank spent two years photographing for *The Americans*. He took 28,000 shots, and reduced them to just 83 images for the book. Many, if not most, were out of focus, un-level, shot from strange points of view, and composed with odd arrangements of subject matter. They were *nothing* like what went before. This was Frank's contribution to the "grand conversation" with Steichen.

Not a single photo in *The Americans* "celebrates" America. But every photo *reveals* America. As Kerouac also said in his introduction, in his second to last sentence, "To Robert Frank, I now give this message: You got eyes."