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Walker Evans: American Photographs: Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Edition

WALKER EVANS
AMERICAN
PHOTO-
GRAPHS

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



Synopsis

More than any other artist, Walker Evans invented the images of essential America that we have long since accepted as fact, and his work has influenced not only modern photography but also literature, film and visual arts in other mediums. The original edition of *American Photographs* was a carefully prepared letterpress production, published by The Museum of Modern Art in 1938 to accompany an exhibition of photographs by Evans that captured scenes of America in the early 1930s. As noted on the jacket of the first edition, Evans, “photographing in New England or Louisiana, watching a Cuban political funeral or a Mississippi flood, working cautiously so as to disturb nothing in the normal atmosphere of the average place, can be considered a kind of disembodied, burrowing eye, a conspirator against time and its hammers.” This seventy-fifth anniversary edition of *American Photographs*, made with new reproductions, recreates the original 1938 edition as closely as possible to make the landmark publication available for a new generation. *American Photographs* has fallen out of print for long periods of time since it was first published, and even subsequent editions--two of which altered the design and typography of the book in small but significant ways--are often available only at libraries and rare bookstores. This version, like the fiftieth-anniversary edition produced by the Museum in 1988, captures the look and feel of the very first edition with the aid of new digital technologies. Walker Evans (1903–1975) took up photography upon his return to New York in 1927, following a year in Paris when his aspiration to become a writer withered in the shadow of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Joyce. In 1935, Evans was commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to photograph the effects of the Great Depression in the Southeast. During this time he took many of the photographs that appeared in his collaboration with James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a book which has become a defining document of that era. Evans joined the staff of *Time* magazine in 1945 and shortly thereafter became an editor at *Fortune*, where he stayed for the next two decades. In 1964, he became a professor at the Yale University School of Art, where he taught until his death in 1975.

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Customer Reviews

[Walker Evans] made work that was once plainspoken and eloquent - images that still define something essential and true about America and Americans. (Vince Alletti *The New Yorker*) Published on the occasion of a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art, *American Photographs* fused Evans's avid learning from European books and journals about complex sequencing with his acute attention to bodies, faces, and places eclipsed by modern progress. No celebrities, no soaring skyscrapers -- in fact, nothing very new at all. This was a world persisting against the grain. The inscrutable photographs in suggestive, provocative order were the antithesis of the slick Life photo-stories Evans detested. (David Campany *Aperture Magazine*) For those who have been waiting for years to own this classic photobook -- one of the very best and most influential photobooks ever published, in fact -- this is your chance. To mark the 75th anniversary of the original 1938 publication, the Museum of Modern Art has reissued *American Photographs* for the first time since 1988 (the 50th anniversary). While there were previous reissues, in 1962 and 1971, the book has often been out of print and hard to find, which has caused secondhand copies to soar. Not only is it a pleasure to see it back in print at an affordable price, but, according to the jacket copy, the editors and printers have used digital technology to "aid in emulating the precise cropping and finely tuned balance of the 1938 reproductions, capturing as never before the look and feel of the first edition." Certainly this book, with its iconic play grey dust jacket, elegant typography and blind-stamped black cloth binding, looks and feels timeless. (John Dorfman *Art & Antiques*) "Walker Evans helped Americans discover themselves...a book populated by Depression-haunted souls." (*The New York Times*)

Although I came to understand and appreciate his work somewhat late in my own personal photographic journey, Walker Evans today stands at the top of my list of my photography heroes. Where early heroes such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston espoused the same philosophy of visual clarity, Evans refined this view and elevated the commonplace to the extraordinary. He did

not romanticize his subjects, something often seen in the photos of Adams and Weston. Instead, he worked in "documentary style" with honesty and simplicity. His influence has permeated photography and continues to evolve in the work of others, sometimes without them even being conscious of it. "American Photographs" is one of the icons of modern photography. This is the 75th Anniversary edition of the book. I have not seen the previous editions but I find it hard to believe they could have reproduced the photographs as well as they are presented here. This book is highly recommended.

I first came to know Walker Evans' American Photographs from a copy of the original edition owned by an uncle who bought it in the MoMA gift shop during that show. That was a beautiful book, with a wide sweep of subject and treatment, and this 75th anniversary edition is amazingly close to the original, except without the wear and fading. Reviewers gush about beautiful photo reproduction all the time, so let me just say that it is outstanding, without any fault. And the rest: this is a very nice book, and it will last through years of perusing by many hands. The images I think are also a fine introduction to Evans' work and career, though this is an early book, it represents most of his fetishes: signage, rural poverty, Americana and pop-culture, informal portraiture and candid (several from his secret-subway series appear here for the first time and not again for thirty years in "Many Are Called"). I grow fonder of Evans' work all the time, and find more and more in it to tangle with. I hadn't seen "American Photographs" in 20+ years, and other re-issues haven't always been so solid and carefully put together. Happily this is, and I recommend it very strongly (and the price charges actually makes me feel guilty!).

I have nothing but praise for this book. The photos are reproduced well, the paper is first-rate, and the book is a pleasure to hold. It is faithful to the original published in the 1930s. It is a treat to be able to spend time and examine Evan's pictures. They are laden with visual detail and historical meaning. Walker Evans certainly deserves to be considered among the best photographers of the last century as well as a gifted anthropologist. His photos render a piercing view of American life during the Great Depression. His technical mastery of black and white photography was impeccable. The manner in which he captured the people, settings, and iconography of the Great Depression continues to haunt and inspire. Kudos to MoMA! Thank you for reissuing this masterpiece with such care and attention to detail.

Lovely photo collection!!

as described

Evans' work seems as fresh and crisp as it must have in the Thirties when he and Henri Cartier-Bresson reinvented photography. This edition presents the original format and sequence as Lincoln Kirstein and Evans envisioned it. Although everyone has noticed that the first half of the book is stronger than the second, there are great images all through it. A must-have item for anyone with a serious interest in photography.

Nice grouping of photography for anyone who enjoys the art of photography and a time in American captured on film. I especially like the size of this book - not a dominating 'look at me' type coffee table book, but a very classy 'side' table addition to any collection of hardbacks.

I own the "books on books" version of this work, which does not reproduce most of the photos at full size and has only facsimiles of many pages. This edition, on the other hand, has a full page reproduction of each photograph (beautifully printed) facing a non-distracting blank page. The effect is breathtaking after having only seen the earlier inadequate edition. I think I can now begin to understand and appreciate the incredible importance of this work, whereas previously I could only imagine what I was missing. A masterpiece, finally, not to be missed.LJS

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