

Yasuhiro Ishimoto, *Untitled*, from "Chicago, Chicago," 1958–1961

Fundamentals of Photography Print Viewing

This print viewing is meant to serve as a basic introduction to the medium of photography and includes images that demonstrate a range of fundamentals and techniques including camera optics, use of vantage point, framing, focus, light, and time of day. This selection also introduces viewers to a variety of traditions, such as portraiture and street photography.

Harry Callahan

(American, 1912–1999)



Eleanor, 1948
1984:10

Harry Callahan taught photography at the Institute of Design in Chicago (ID) in the 1940s, which was renowned for its innovative methods of education and focused heavily on design. In the tradition started by László Moholy-Nagy, the ID photography program began with a strong emphasis on observing, using, and modulating light. Callahan often transformed his everyday subjects—nature, architecture, city streets, his wife Eleanor and daughter Barbara—into (barely recognizable) simple forms. Callahan's goal, however, was to describe, not to conceal or distort. For each new subject, he refreshed his photographic vocabulary and used his 8 x10 view camera and strong sense of design and composition to create meticulously crafted and elegant images.



Eleanor and Barbara, Chicago, 1954
1984:1



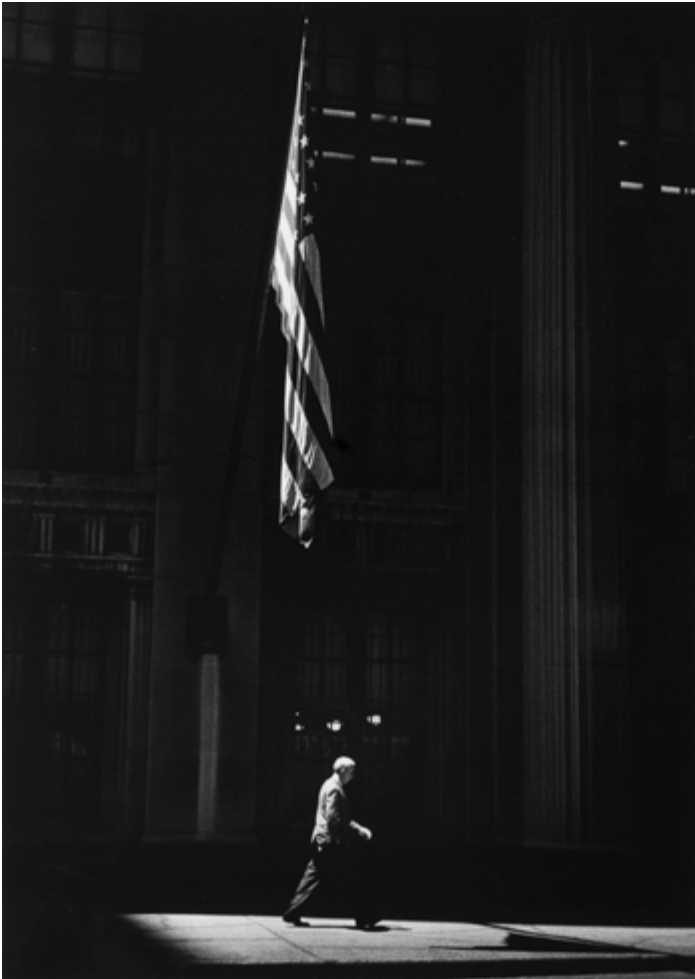
Eleanor, 1947
1984:9

→ Questions for Looking

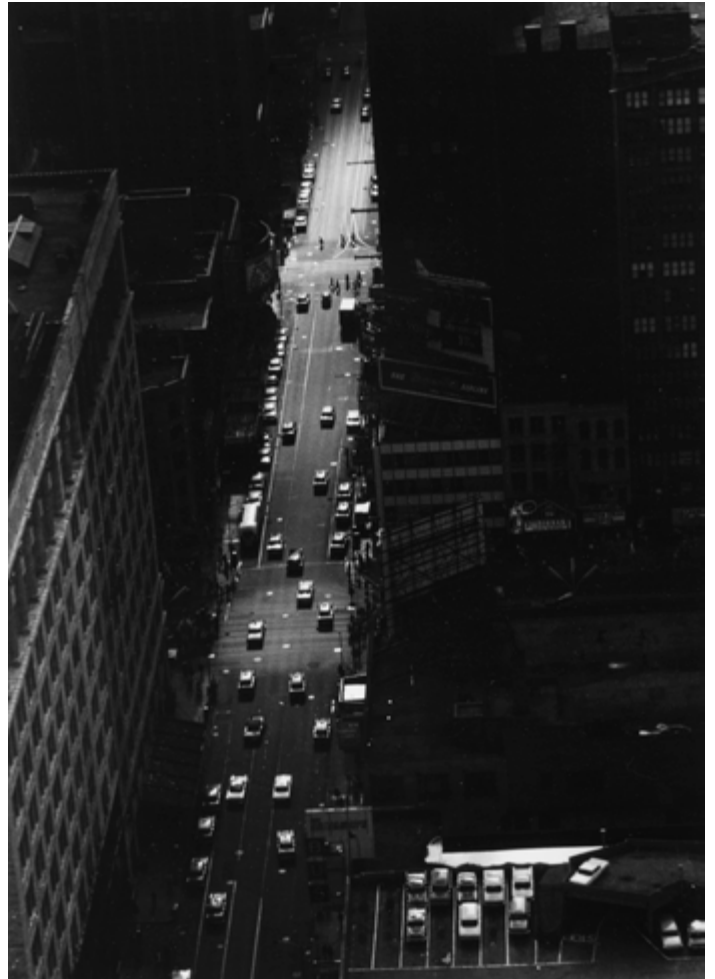
- What is the subject's relationship to the photographer? What formal elements in the image suggest his relationship to the subject?
- Describe Callahan's compositions. What is the artist doing with light and contrast? Why would he choose to leave sections of the images very light or very dark?
- Think about the vantage point in each image. Why did the artist choose these points of view?
- Eleanor was his muse and he photographed her for over 15 years. Do you think she had any agency in how she was portrayed? Why or why not?

Yasuhiro Ishimoto

(Japanese-American, 1921–2012)



All images Untitled, from *Chicago, Chicago*, 1958–1961
1981:104



1981:113

Yasuhiro Ishimoto was born in San Francisco in 1921. When he was three years old, his family moved back to Japan where he lived until he was 18 years old. He returned to the US in 1939 to study architecture at Northwestern University. From 1942–1944 he was held at the Amachi Japanese Internment Camp in Colorado, where he took up photography. He then returned to Chicago and studied photography at the Institute of Design with Harry Callahan. While at the ID, Ishimoto photographed extensively on the streets of Chicago, often documenting scenes that showed the inequality and tension between African Americans and whites in this very segregated city. Being both Japanese and American and experiencing intense racism during WWII after the bombing of Pearl Harbor greatly informs his work and his viewpoint of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. His portrait of a city *Chicago, Chicago* (published as a book in 1969) is a rich study of time and place in which the artist uses environmental details and perspective to question or comment on individuals and their relationships to society at large.



All images Untitled, from *Chicago, Chicago*, 1958–1961
1981:109



1981:120

→ Questions for Looking

- How might Ishimoto's studies in architecture and design inform his photographs?
- Where and when were these photographs taken? What makes you think this?
- Compare the tonality in Ishimoto's prints to Callahan's. How are they different or similar?
- How did he achieve such extreme lights and darks in his images without the use of digital technology?
- How does your eye travel through the images? How do his choices in point of view add to the story?
- Consider the architectural imagery. Where is the source of light for each picture? Where is Ishimoto setting up his camera?

Deeper Reading: The New Bauhaus

Harry Callahan taught for many years at the New Bauhaus, later called the Institute of Design (ID) at what is now the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). This was one of the most important schools of design and photography in America during the twentieth century. Founded in Chicago in 1937 by László Moholy-Nagy, the New Bauhaus aimed to train “the perfect designer” through a modernist and multi-disciplinary curriculum that encouraged experimentation and broke down the hierarchy between fine and applied arts and industry. A K-16 curriculum guide on the New Bauhaus can be accessed [here](#).

Roy DeCarava

(American, 1919–2009)



Man in Window, 1978



Dancers, 1956

Roy DeCarava photographed African American daily life on the streets of Harlem in the mid-to-late 20th century. His intentional use of dark shadows serves many conceptual and formal purposes. Formally, the darkness forces the viewer to slow down and wait for details of the image to emerge. The eyes adjust to the darkness as if entering a lightless room. Conceptually, the lack of information comments on the politics of living as a person of color in mid-century America. Film emulsion and light meters at this time were calibrated for cameras to photograph people with fair skin, making it difficult to create portraits of people with dark skin unless several adjustments were made while photographing or in the darkroom. DeCarava instead decided to exaggerate and celebrate blackness in a time of segregation and violence.

In 1952 he became the first African American recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. At first rejected by publishers, photographs from this project were eventually published with the help of Langston Hughes in 1955 as *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.



Ketchup Bottles, Table and Coat, 1952

Questions for Looking

- In what time-period were these photographs taken? What was happening in America at that time? Compare the pictures with Ishimoto's view of the Civil Rights Movement. How are they alike or different?
- Compare Decarava's images to Callahan's nearly all white image, *Eleanor*, 1947. What effect does lighting have on the overall mood?
- What details do you notice in the image upon closer look that you did not notice upon initially seeing it? What do these details offer to the narrative?

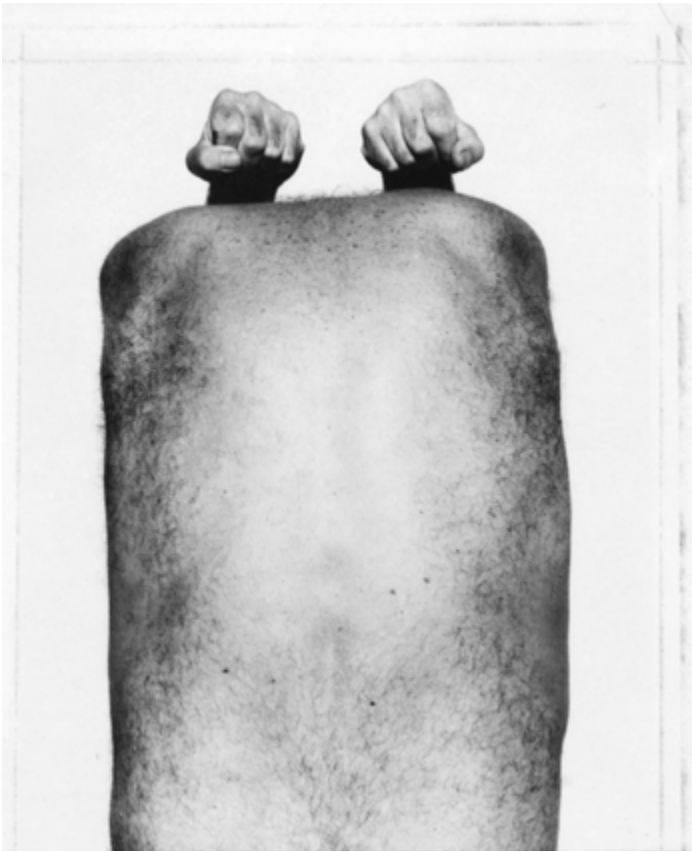


Deeper Reading: The Shirley Card

The Shirley Card (pictured right from 1978) was created by Kodak and used between the 1940s and 1990s to calibrate skin tone and light levels in film labs during processing. In 1987, in response to complaints from wood and chocolate manufacturers who could not accurately picture their products, Kodak released its Gold Max 100 film, which had more ability to recognize darker tones. The film was later marketed to African Americans in the 1990s and new, multi-racial "Shirley Cards" were released. Yet, the problem of some technologies only recognizing white skin persists. As recent as 2009, one brand of web cameras was not built to "see" people of color.

John Coplans

(British, 1920–2003)



Self-portrait, Back and Hands, 1984



Self-portrait, Hands Touching, 1985

When John Coplans began photographing his aging body after he turned 60, he embarked on a documentation of age that is alternately humorous, reflective, and disquieting in the closeness of its observation. Seeing himself as an actor, Coplans examines various body parts closely, often quoting art historical postures with his sagging figure. The images exemplify his own scrutiny of an idealized body and the self. Coplans studied painting and was a curator, museum director, and founding editor of *Artforum*. His work experience provided him with a rich understanding of art history, and the references to painting and sculpture are evident in his compositions.

→ Questions for Looking

- What is the subject's relationship to the photographer? Are there any clues that these are self-portraits? Describe.
- How do Coplans images portray aging? How might the artist feel about aging?
- Look closely at the compositions. What other art forms may have influenced his work?
- Are these successful portraits even though they do not portray faces? Why or why not?



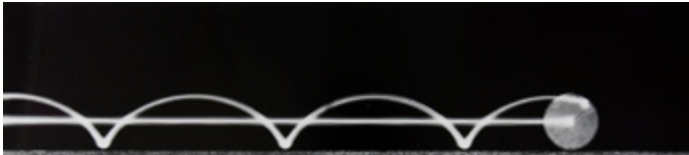
Self-Portrait (Hands holding feet), 1985

Deeper Reading: Aging and the Abject

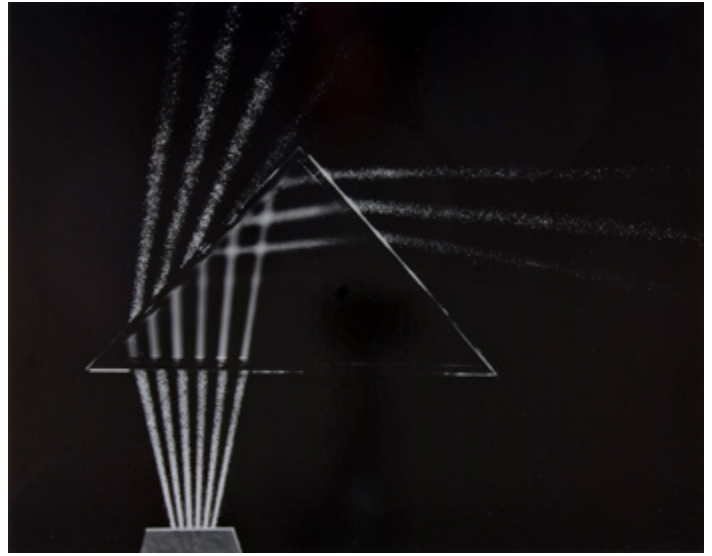
“The abject” as a term was coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection" (1982). Her text ponders the detachment of self from the “other,” particularly in relation to the body’s natural process of death and decay. The work of John Coplans illustrates this concept; his own body is documented as aging, yet he also poses his body as if a material object and considered purely as form. Some artists that employ the abject by picturing bodily functions and the body in its non-idealized state in the MoCP’s collection are [Joel-Peter Witkin](#), [Anne Noggle](#), and [Aleksandra Vajd](#).

Berenice Abbott

(American, 1908–1993)



Cycloid, 1997:1.1
From "The Science Pictures" portfolio, 1958–1961; printed 1982



Beams of Light through Glass, from "The Science Pictures" portfolio, 1958–1961; printed 1982
1997:1.10

Primarily known for her systematic and richly detailed photographs of New York architecture, Berenice Abbott also photographed scientific subjects for *Life* and *Science Illustrated* magazines as well as school physics textbooks, using the camera to demonstrate complicated scientific principles. Whether photographing buildings or her clusters of soap bubbles, Abbott believed that the photographer's responsibility is to represent truth and the realities of life. For her image, *Beams of Light Through Glass*, Abbott illustrates how glass splits light into separate wavelengths by placing two glass triangles atop one another with water in-between and completely sealed from air. She then placed six laser beams below the objects to demonstrate light transforming, bending, and refracting depending on its intersection with air, water, and glass. For *Cycloid*, she attaches two lights to a rolling ball: one on the edge and one in the center. While rolling the ball across a tabletop, Abbott holds the exposure on her camera, logging the movement of the ball and light to depict basic principles of physics. The pictures ponder the role of light in photography and in life from a purely scientific perspective and provoke questions on the camera's primary function as a tool that uses light to document the world.

→ Questions for Looking

- Do you think Abbott is adapting these images in the darkroom? Why or why not?
- What is photography's relationship to truth? Can the camera lie?
- Abbott once said "Abstraction in photography is ridiculous and is only an imitation of painting. We stopped imitating painters a hundred years ago, so to imitate them in this day and age is laughable."¹ Do you think the camera is capable of creating abstract photography? Why or why not?

¹Rotkin, Charles E. *Professional Photographers Survival Guide*. New York, NY: AMPHOTO, 1982, page: 242

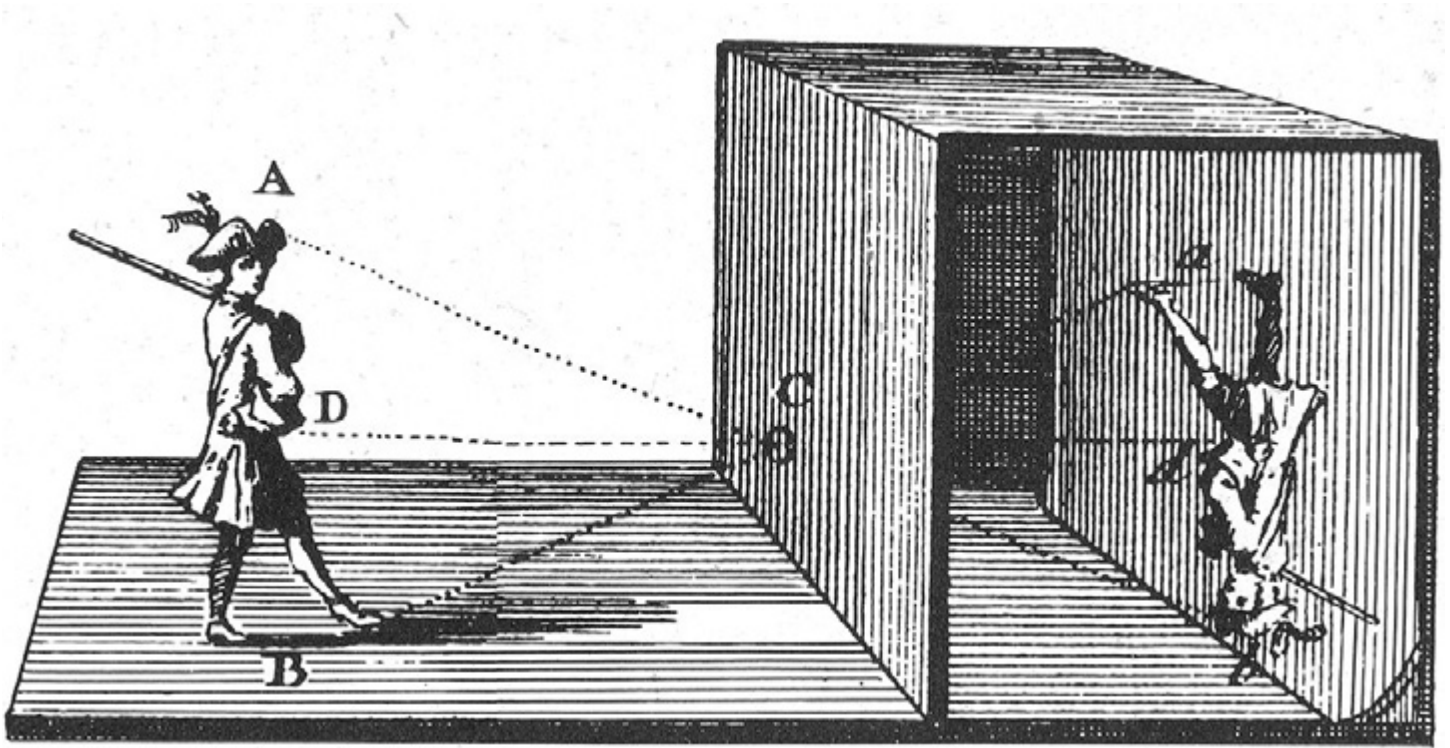


Camera Obscura: The Pantheon in Hotel Albergo del Sole, Room #111, Rome, Italy, 2008
2009:333

In this image, Abelardo Morell employs camera obscura to set up an inverted image of the Pantheon in a hotel room in Rome. For this image, the artist placed a mirror inside the room to flip the image right side up. The entire room functions as a camera and Morell takes a picture of the phenomenon using an 8x10 inch view camera. These images conjure up the effect that mechanical reproducibility of images has had on the history of art and image making.

→ Questions for Looking

- What is this a photograph of? How was it created?
- Have you ever created a pinhole camera? How did it work?
- Why would Morell choose to depict the Pantheon in this way? What could he be saying about his subject? About photography? What might it mean to juxtapose these two layers?
- Notice the details in the picture indicating the passage of time. How long might the exposure need to be to capture this image in a darkened room?"



17th century illustration of the camera obscura

Deeper Reading: Camera Obscura

The camera obscura is a device that enables an artist or draftsman to see an inverted image of the living world on a plane surface. The guiding principle of the camera obscura, which literally means, "dark chamber" is that light entering a room or camera from a single point creates an image of the exterior world. Used since the Renaissance, the camera obscura was one tool with which artists were able to accurately or realistically manage perspectively difficult scenes or subjects.

Barbara Probst

(German, b. 1964)



Exposure #42: N.Y.C. Broome & Crosby Streets, 06.09.06, 7:12 p.m., 2006
1007:9

Barbara Probst's *Exposures* are sets of photographs that depict the same subject from various angles at precisely the same instant. Probst makes the photographs using radio controls, synchronized cable releases, and sometimes multiple photographers. Despite the proximity of the cameras and the simultaneity of their exposures, the resulting images are extremely diverse in style, atmosphere, and content, concretely demonstrating that photographs are highly selective interpretations of reality. Her use of photography to emphasize the schism between reality and artifice exhibits recognition of the fact that, although photography does possess evidentiary value, it is incapable of delivering unambiguous meaning.

→ Questions for Looking

- Do you think that Probst happened upon this scene or did she stage or direct it? Why or why not?
- What clues is she placing in the images to help the viewer solve the puzzle?
- Why might the artist choose to photograph both in black and white and in color?
- What does Probst's work suggest about how we experience the world? Describe.
- What does her work say about the strengths and limitations of photography in representing an event or a moment in time? In what ways can photographs be "truthful?" In what ways can they be misleading?
- Is it possible to create a definitive account of an event or moment in time? If so, what would it look like? If not, why?

Barbara Probst Inspired Activity

Using instant cameras, have students photograph one setting from multiple perspectives. Consider choices in color, vantage point, and composition. Ask students to rotate between being the subject and being the photographer. Arrange series of photographs and discuss how their experiences or point of view might influence their decisions in making the pictures and portraying the same scene in different iterations.

Vantage Point

This refers to where the photographer stands in relation to his or her subject. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

Depth of field

This refers to the distance the camera has from the subject. Depending on one's aperture setting, or f-stop setting, objects in the foreground or background appear as either sharp or out of focus. Lower f-stop numbers result in a short—or shallow—depth of field, and larger number results in a longer—or deeper—depth of field.

Contrast and tonality

How dark or light the details of the image appear.

Framing or composition

How one composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.

Illinois Arts Learning Standards Addressed in This Guide

Visual Arts Standards

VA:Re7.2.K-12

Responding: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12

Responding: Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12

Responding: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria

VA:Cn11.K-12

Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring Understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.