

Resource for Educators: Robert Frank and the Street Photography Tradition



Robert Frank, *Political Rally Chicago*, 1956

This resource is aimed at integrating the study of photographs from the collection of the MoCP into secondary and post-secondary fine arts, language arts, and social science curriculum. This guide contains questions for looking and discussion, historical information, and classroom activities and is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards.

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That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and the music comes out from a jukebox or from a nearby funeral, that's what Robert Frank has captured in tremendous photographs taken as he traveled on the road around practically all forty-eight states in an old used car... Robert Frank, Swiss, unobtrusive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand he sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world. To Robert Frank I now give this message: You got eyes.

–Jack Kerouac, (from the introduction of Robert Frank's book The Americans)

Introduction

This education guide offers a look into photographer Robert Frank's most recognized body of work, *The Americans* that was created between 1955 and 1957. Using a small hand-held 35mm camera, Frank edited the over 20,000 frames made during his travels across the United States into a painstakingly edited sequence of 83 black-and-white images. Frank photographed American post-war culture in everyday locations such as pool halls, diners, and on the street. This guide examines the series, as well as Frank's perspective as an immigrant and the cultural climate in the United States at that time.

The Guggenheim Fellowship

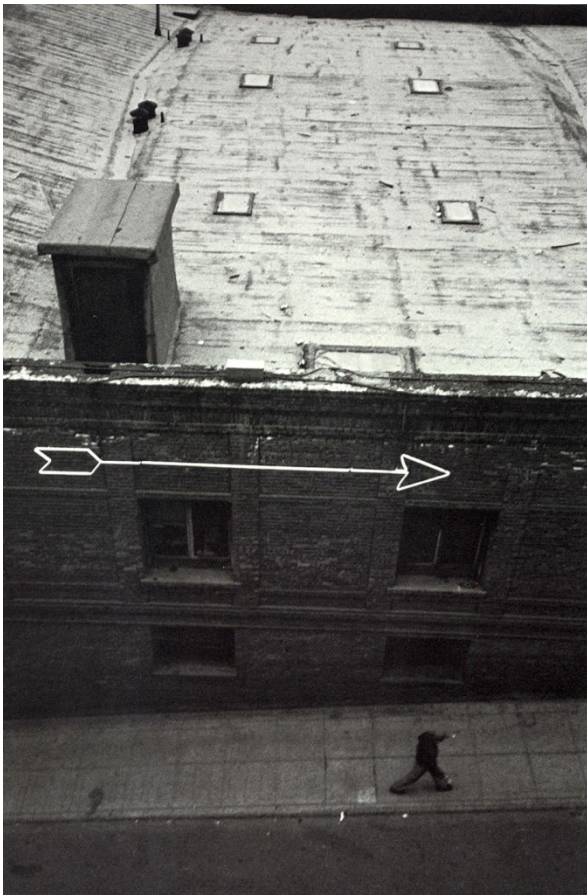


Robert Frank, *Woolworth, New York City, 1955*

In 1954 Robert Frank applied for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship. In his application he wrote:

The photographing of America is a large order — read at all literally, the phrase would be an absurdity. What I have in mind, then, is observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere. Incidentally, it is fair to assume that when an observant American travels abroad his eye will see freshly; and that the reverse may be true when a European eye looks at the United States. I speak of the things that are there, anywhere and everywhere — easily found, not easily selected and interpreted. A small catalog comes to the mind's eye: a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house, the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur, advertising, neon lights, the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and backyards.

In 1955, Frank received his Guggenheim fellowship and \$3,600 funding for the express purpose of traveling and photographing around the U.S. In 1958, his careful sequence of images became the book, *The Americans*, first published in France and in United States the following year. This became his most famous body of work.



Robert Frank, *Los Angeles*, 1956

Cultural and Personal Context for *The Americans*

Robert Frank was born to Swiss, German, and Jewish parents in 1924. His father lost his German citizenship during the war under Nazi oppression. To understand what individual and collective mindsets may have been in play in the United States, where Frank created *The Americans*, it is important to remember that people in the U.S. who were adults in the 1950s survived a series of extremely challenging—even horrific—events. Although it is impossible to cover the complicated global atmosphere of post-World War II in this guide, some key factors that shaped Robert Frank's *The Americans* are outlined below.

Americans who fought in World War II, and their spouses, were children of those who fought in World War I, which included the first use of chemical and mechanical weapons, gas, and tanks. These same families also lived through the lethal global flu pandemic of 1918 and the Great Depression. With the US deployment of the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and the

beginning of US involvement in Vietnam in 1955, people were desperate for relief from all the years of war, fear, and deprivation. Hungry for

security and stability, the national attention turned to the creation of financial success and domestic comforts.

The popular culture and media of the 1950s created new entertainments which placed an emphasis on domesticity, comfort, complacency, and economic prosperity. These longings were reflected in television shows such as the *Donna Reed Show* and *Leave it to Beaver*, both of which depicted idealized domestic spaces and relationships, reinforcing patriarchal cultural norms.



1950's era advertising image of American home life; not in MoCP collection.

Racial Tensions in the 1950s

During this same time, the U.S. was home to rising racial tensions. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs the Board of Education*, declared “separate but equal” schools for Black and white students unconstitutional, and efforts began to desegregate schools and communities. This process was glacially slow after decades of restrictive laws and housing policies kept Black and white families apart.

In 1955, the year Frank created his images, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery Alabama for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. This sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and successfully desegregating Montgomery’s transportation system. Many Americans marched and demonstrated in protest during these and other milestones of the 1950s civil rights movement. These activities often sparked violent backlash from segregationists.

While popular culture presented a cheery facade, others were initiating radical challenges in writing, music, and the visual arts. Robert Frank was one of the artists to document and reflect the sea changes.



Robert Frank, *Trolley, New Orleans, 1956*. From *The Americans*. (not held in MoCP collection)

A Radical Vision

Robert Frank discovered a more complete story beyond the media dream of America as he traveled and photographed to create the images that comprise *The Americans*. Frank's edgy and honest works challenged aesthetics of the time. In Frank's images, Americans often appear bored or alienated and divisions of race, class, and power are evident. The everyday settings Frank photographed in places such as bars and along the side of the road also struck many as not worthy of photographing. Most critics of the time considered *The Americans* an indictment of American culture made by an outsider and found Frank's street aesthetic sloppy or ugly. Frank embraced the gritty, grainy quality of 35mm photography and the fact that it allowed him to photograph quickly, often without being noticed.

His images also tapped into currents of dissent and rebellion in 1950s counter-culture. Other artists of the era working in a variety of media also created works that challenged cultural and aesthetic expectations. During this era jazz musicians including Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie developed BeBop, a style of jazz marked by experimentation and improvisation. In 1956, Elvis appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show drawing record audiences. His hip-shaking, rock-and-roll dance moves shocked viewers and challenged conservative attitudes toward sex.

Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac rejected the materialism of the 1950s and celebrated non-conformity and spontaneous creativity in their lives and work. The Beats felt an affinity with Frank's outsider and radical perspective. Frank's photographs echoed some of the themes that Kerouac wrote about in his 1957 book *On the Road* and the two men became friends. In his characteristic stream of consciousness style, Kerouac wrote the introduction to the 1959 American publication of *The Americans*

While often critically panned at the time, today Frank's *The Americans* is considered a milestone in the history of photography and a seminal and influential example of street photography.



Robert Frank *City Fathers, Hoboken New Jersey* from *The Americans*; not in MoCP collection

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Look at one frame from *The Americans* and describe what you see in the photograph.
- What is the relationship amongst the elements that we see? How do they work together or conflict?
- What can you tell about how this work was made? Consider factors such as framing and composition, time of day and use of light, and timing.
- What is the mood of the image? How is that conveyed?
- What might be happening beyond the edges of the frame?
- What is this picture about? Why do you think that?
- Describing style: When you look at multiple images from *The Americans*, how can you tell that the images were made by the same person? What look and techniques characterize Frank's style?
- What symbols or icons does he use and repeat?
- What types of people do you see?
- What does Frank communicate about America in the 1950's in this work? How does this contrast prevailing cultural narratives of that time?

Frank intended for this project to be realized as a book. Look carefully at the book and consider the following questions:

- What do you notice about how it is structured? Frank used only 83 of the over 20,000 frames he shot for this project in the book.
- Why do you think he selected the images that he did? Consider a few of the images and what they add to the overall narrative and view of 1950s America.
- What do you notice about how Frank sequenced the images?
- How might another mode of presentation (i.e. slideshow, exhibited on a wall, etc.) affect how you "read" the work?

The Street Photography Tradition

Photographers, like Frank, working in the street photography genre typically try to work without being seen or engaging directly with the people in their photographs. Instead, they spontaneously depict candid moments in public places, often using small hand-held cameras. Many street photographers develop a body of work over many years which expresses their subjective point of view of a subject

and a distinctive visual style. Technological improvements in photographic technologies support ongoing evolution in street photography, allowing photographers to work with existing light shooting multiple frames quickly without being noticed.

Other MoCP collection artists working in this tradition include: [Lee Friedlander](#) (1950's-present); [Roy DeCarava](#) (1950's-90s); [Gordan Parks](#) (1930's - 1970's) [Stephen Marc](#) (1980's -present); [Mary Ellen Mark](#) (1970's-2015); [Garry Winogrand](#) (1950s-80's); and [Antonio Perez](#) (1980s-present); [Dawoud Bey](#) (1970's to present), Helen Levitt (1930's-1970's), and [Charles H. Traub](#) (1970's to present).

Activity: Photographing in the Moment

Street photographers like Robert Frank are very observant of their surroundings and use their cameras to compose and quickly make photographs revealing interesting scenes and fleeting occurrences that others might not notice. Go for a walk with your camera and use all your senses to attune to what is happening around you.

What do you notice? What is interesting to you? How could you make a visually compelling picture of that thing or event? What vantage point might you use? What will you include or leave out of the frame? Make that picture. Practice using your camera so that you are ready to take good pictures quickly, before an interesting moment passes. Continue walking, observing and photographing.

Variation

While Robert Frank made the images that comprise the book *The Americans* spontaneously, he sought to photograph scenes and situations that reflected his interests and concerns, many of which were shared by others in the counter-culture of 1950s America. *The Americans* can be viewed as a document that captures the mood of a community and issues significant to a certain group within a specific generation and moment in history.

What social, cultural, or political issues and ideas are of interest to you at this moment in time? Follow the instructions for photographing in the moment (above), but like Frank seek out scenes and situations that might illustrate your concerns and interests and those of your peers.

Editing:

Frank shot many frames for this series but edited them down to the ones he felt were the strongest visually and that best illustrated his ideas. He conceived of this project in the form of a book, so he also sequenced his images in an order that created visual and conceptual relationships among the images and helped to move his loose narrative along.

Edit your images. Which ones did you select or leave out? Why? Would you like your images to be viewed in a book, exhibited on a wall or in a slideshow? Do you have any other ideas for how you might like to present your images? Organize your photographs into the type of presentation and order that you think suits them best. Share them with your peers and get feedback on the work.

Activity: Stream of Consciousness Writing

Jack Kerouac's writing style is fluid, loose, and informal and is known as "stream of consciousness," or what he referred to as "Spontaneous Prose." This narrative mode presents the thoughts of a person or character as they occur, as if we could see the flow of the writer's thoughts, feelings and impressions on a given scene or idea.

Select a photograph by Robert Frank or another professional photographer. Write about the scene or situation in the picture from the point of view of someone within the photograph. Consider who this person might be and what their voice might sound like. Instead of constructing a cohesive narrative, write about the character's impressions through free association in the style of Jack Kerouac. What might they see, smell, hear or feel in this scene? Do not stop to edit or rewrite text. Instead, trust your intuition.



Mabou Coal Mines, Landscape, from the Untitled portfolio, 1977-1976



Isn't It Wonderful Just To Be Alive, from the Untitled portfolio, 1971

Robert Frank: Later Years

After the successes and struggles that came with *The Americans*, Frank began to explore new ways of working that included using Super 8 film, mail order photo prints made in a cheap plastic camera, hand painted collages, and lithography. Particularly after the deaths of his daughter, Andrea, and his son, Pablo, Frank's work increasingly became more intimate, personal, and contemplative.

Married to Chicago-born artist, June Leaf, he also began to feel a desire to get away from New York City and the pressures of commercialism there and what he felt was the hollowness of the American Dream. Together they purchased a former fishing shack in Mabou, Nova Scotia in Cape Breton Island, in Canada where they spent their time until Frank's death in September 2019. In a 1977

interview with Canadian television, Frank said: “I came here not so much to change my professional [life] but to change my personal life. [To] get another outlook, to turn around a corner. I think it worked in some way at changing my head inside. You become calmer; I think you become a better person staying away from a city like New York for a while.”

Glossary of Terms

aesthetics

The branch of philosophy that deals with the study of concepts such as beauty and taste. A conception of what is artistically valid or beautiful.

conceptual

Of or relating to a concept or idea.

document

To provide evidence or information, or a work that provides evidence or information.

point of view (vantage point)

Where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer’s view or opinion of that subject.

style

The way something is said, made, done, or expressed. A combination of distinctive features.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.7

Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7

Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1.C

Pose and respond to specific questions by making comments that contribute to the discussion and elaborate on the remarks of others.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.2

Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.2

Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1.C

Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

VA:Re7.1.5 - a. Compare one's own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others.

VA:Re7.1.1 - a. Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

VA:Re7.2.1 - a. Analyze how one's understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.

VA:Re8.1.5 - a. Interpret art through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

VA:Re8.1.6 - a. Collaboratively interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

VA:Re8.1.7 - a. Interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information and identify key concepts.

VA:Re8.1.8 - a. Collaboratively develop meaningful interpretations, supported by evidence, of artworks through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, contextual information, and key concepts.

VA:Re8.1.1 - a. Construct meaningful interpretations, supported by evidence, of an artwork or collection of works through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, contextual information, and key concepts.

VA:Re9.2.6 - a. Develop and apply relevant criteria to evaluate a work of art.

VA:Cn11.1.5 - a. Identify how art is used to inform or change beliefs, values, or behaviors of an individual or society.

VA:Cn11.1.7 - a. Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

VA:Cn11.1.8 - a. Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.