

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



NO. 62
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

* * * * *
* PRESS PREVIEW: *
* January 7, 1981 *
* 3:00 - 5:00 p.m. *
* * * * *

MORE THAN A CENTURY OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF AMERICAN CHILDREN TO GO ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

AMERICAN CHILDREN, part of the continuing Springs Mills Series on the Art of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, will open in the third-floor Steichen Galleries on January 8, 1981. The exhibition of some 60 photographs drawn from the Museum's Collection will be directed by Susan Kismaric, Associate Curator of the Department of Photography.

AMERICAN CHILDREN will survey the changing concept of childhood in America as it has been reflected in photography from the mid-nineteenth century to 1978, from the Victorian view of children as miniature adults to today's celebrations of children as lusty, independent beings. The exhibition will remain on view through March 29, 1981.

"Children face the camera innocent of all but the present moment and often with a startling purity of motive," states Susan Kismaric. "They share a freedom of spirit because unlike adults they are relatively unpredictable and free from self-observance. No child has lived long enough to fully comprehend the dangers of recorded life, and no child's experience has provided him with the time and the space that gives one a sense of the past, of moments lost forever -- or, antithetically, a sense of the future, of the inevitable process of aging and death. As a result, children in photographs remain remarkably alike beneath whatever costumes and roles their disparate historical epochs assign them."

CONTINUED...

There are perceptible differences in the photographs of children from generation to generation, not all of them related to changes in the technological possibilities of the medium itself. The stamp of each age is evident; the child not only reflects his or her society as a whole but the photographer's individual view of that society in particular. "Mid-nineteenth century photographers, for example, sought in their subjects an absence of feeling, children mirroring innocence and purity, while today's photographers would at once discard the same posed, idealistic representations in favor of images of expressive, individualistic childhood," says Kismaric.

The daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes of the 1850s and 1860s showed children as the embodiment of the Victorian ideals of their parents; the portraiture of this time depicted them as young adults, appearing stiff and formal. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American photographers viewed their medium, as well as the changes in childhood, in disparate ways. The evils of technology and the effects of industrialization and urbanization on childhood in America were viewed by several photographers as a rallying point around which their craft could serve as a catalyst for change. Both Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, whose work is included in *AMERICAN CHILDREN*, used their photography to appeal to the viewer's social conscience, as with the stark reality of Riis' picture, Talmud School, Hester Street (early 1890s). At the same time, a second group of photographers concerned with pure aesthetics emerged -- the Photo-Secessionists. They believed that a photograph could be more than a pictorial document, and used people and objects from everyday life to create artistic works of timeless, symbolic meaning. John G. Bullock's portrait of a boy and girl fishing, titled Young Anglers (c. 1896-98), is a bucolic view of a gentle, peaceful time and setting,

CONTINUED...

where the children seem "inviolable, capable of a harmonious character," says Kismaric. The Photo-Secessionists portrayed a yearning for a less complicated time by uniting the innocence of children with the innocence of nature, thereby creating a romanticized vision of the world.

Photographs from the 1930s show children as the powerless victims of hard times and reflect America's inability to prevent the injustice of a bankrupt economy from destroying lives. The element of fantasy and the significance of play in a child's world can be seen in Helen Levitt's Cops and Robbers (1940), in which the ultimate separation of adult and child can be easily perceived. Post World War II photographs reveal increasingly individualistic and personalized views of children and the nature of childhood, as the child's response to being photographed often becomes the subject. The photography of the 1950s and 1960s is marked by new frankness about adolescent sexuality, while contemporary photographs seem to reflect the present societal reverence for youth.

As a body of work, the history of American photographs of children is a record of changes in the attitudes of the grown toward their young, as well as a reflection of the changes in the development of photography as a medium of artistic endeavor. Among the photographers to be represented in AMERICAN CHILDREN are Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Nicholas Nixon, Robert Frank, Walker Evans, Doris Ulmann, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine.

An accompanying catalog, entitled American Children and underwritten by Springs Mills, Inc., will feature an introduction by Susan Kismaric to the 60 photographs from the exhibition. The book is being published by The Museum of Modern Art and is being distributed in cloth and paper by The New

CONTINUED...

York Graphic Society, Boston, at \$14.95 clothbound and \$7.95 paperbound.

AMERICAN CHILDREN has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Upon its closing on March 20, 1981, the exhibition will travel to the following: The Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida (June 10 - August 23, 1981); Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas (September 30 - November 8, 1981); Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas (April 2 - May 9, 1982). Additional bookings are in the process of being confirmed and will be announced shortly.

November 1980

For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Sharon Zane, Associate Director, 956-7295, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.