

The Museum of Modern Art

WALKER EVANS

Born in St. Louis in 1903, Walker Evans grew up in suburban Chicago, and later in New York. After attending Williams College for one year, Evans traveled to Paris in 1926, where he audited lectures at the Sorbonne.

Upon returning to the U.S. in 1927, Evans abandoned his early ambition to write and soon began to photograph seriously. Within a few years he had worked his way through the advanced photographic idioms of the twenties and began to form his own, radical outlook. Setting himself in opposition to the romantic aesthetic of Alfred Stieglitz and the commercial success of Edward Steichen, Evans developed a style of sober, unembellished description.

Evans learned from the photography of Eugène Atget and the precocious Ralph Steiner, but his strongest formative influences came from writers, intellectuals, and painters. Ben Shahn, with whom Evans shared a Greenwich Village apartment, Hart Crane, Lincoln Kirstein, and a bit later James Agee, were especially close friends. Kirstein, although younger than Evans, was already by 1930 a visible force in advanced American culture, and he played an important role in Evans's early career.

In 1931 Kirstein secured a commission for Evans to photograph Victorian houses in and near Boston. Two years later the pictures were presented in the first one-person photography exhibition at the recently founded Museum of Modern Art. The second such show at the Museum, in 1938, was Walker Evans: American Photographs. Kirstein again was instrumental in arranging the exhibition, and he wrote a brilliant essay for the book that accompanied it.

Evans was fiercely independent as an artist, but he did some of his best work of the thirties while nominally under hire. Notable are his pictures for Carlton Beals's The Crime of Cuba (1932), his photographs of the objects in the

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African Negro Art exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art (1935), and especially his work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

In 1935, Evans was hired by the Resettlement Administration (later the FSA) as an information specialist to document the life of the poor in the rural South. The eighteen-month period beginning late in 1935 was the most prolific and creative in his career. The work of that period alone would sustain his reputation. In those eighteen months Evans made almost half of the pictures in American Photographs and all of those in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men--his celebrated collaboration with Agee, published in 1941.

In the late thirties and early forties Evans made a series of photographs of New York subway passengers, eventually published under the title Many Are Called (1966). Riding the subway for hundreds of hours with his camera hidden under his coat, lens alone showing, Evans photographed the people sitting opposite him. In the mid-forties he continued his study of private persons in public anonymity with a series of portraits made in the streets of Chicago. A selection of the pictures was exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1948.

In 1943 Evans joined the staff of Time magazine as a writer, and two years later he transferred to Fortune as writer and sole staff photographer. Over the next twenty years, until he retired from the magazine in 1965, Evans published in it some forty portfolios of photographs with text examining aspects of life in America.

From 1965 until his death in 1975 Evans served as professor at Yale University. In 1971 John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography, organized a large retrospective exhibition of Evans's work at The Museum of Modern Art. In the catalogue Szarkowski wrote,

It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth, or invented it. Beyond doubt, the accepted myth of our recent past is in some measure the creation of this photographer, whose work has persuaded us of the validity of a new set of clues and symbols bearing on the question of who we are. Whether that work and its judgment was fact or artifice, or half of each, is now part of our history.