

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago

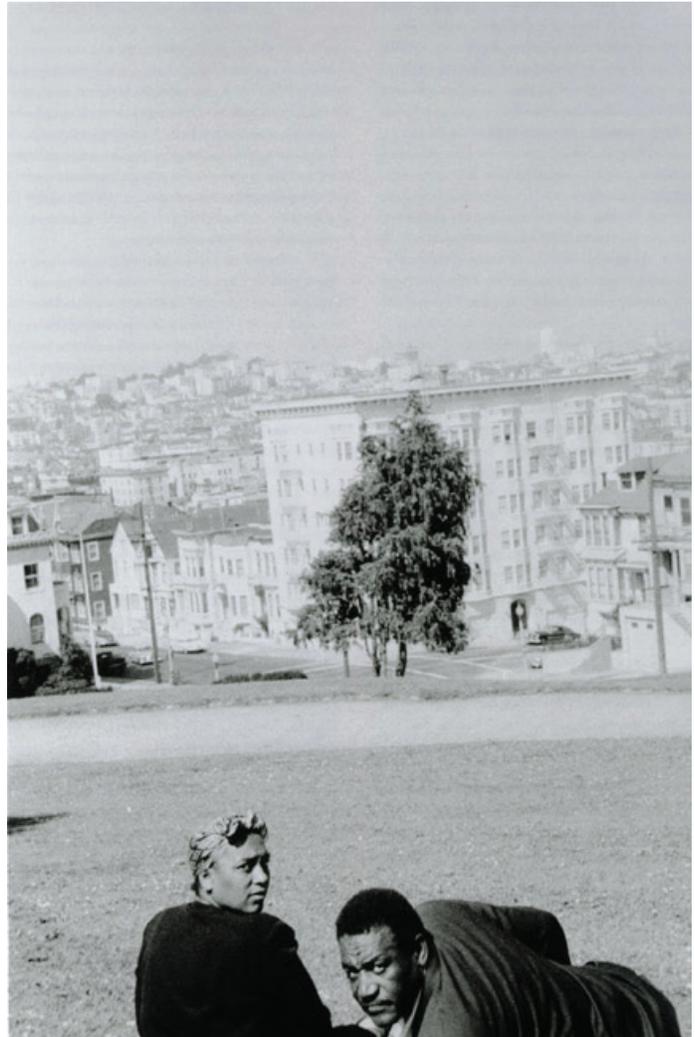
FRAMING IDEAS

Robert Frank's *The Americans*: Image Culture, Personal Vision, and the "Street" Tradition.

CURRICULUM GUIDE

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 Incorporating the Common Core. A corresponding set of images for classroom use can be found at www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. The MoCP is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.

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Robert Frank

San Francisco, 1956

From the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

Framing Ideas

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Robert Frank: *The Americans*

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)



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

Robert Frank: *The Americans*

With funding from a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship, in 1955-56 Swiss émigré and photographer Robert Frank took multiple road trips around the US and using a small hand-held 35mm camera, photographed American post-war culture in everyday locations such as pool halls, diners, and on the street. In his 1954 Guggenheim application, Frank 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.

Frank received \$3600.00 from the Guggenheim Foundation to travel and photograph around the US. Between 1955-57 he edited the over 20,000 frames he took on the road down to the 83 painstakingly-sequenced black-and-white images that were published as the book *The Americans* in France in 1958 and then in America the following year. In this work, Frank examined issues such as divisions of class and race, and power in America. His work followed in the tradition of photographers including Walker Evans who documented American life and culture during the Great Depression for the Farm Security Administration,

but Frank's was a highly personal and critical vision that has influenced photographers of subsequent generations to also look critically at the events of their time. *The Americans* is also influential in the genre of American road trip narratives that includes works such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Hunter S. Thompson's book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), and Ridley Scott's film *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Photographs from Will Mebane and Martin Hyers series *Empire* (2004-2007), which are held in the MoCP's collection, could also be included in this genre.



1950's era advertising image of American home life (not held in MoCP collection).



Cultural Context: 1950s America

After the hardships and sacrifices that many Americans endured during World War II, many young people were eager for comfort and stability and to establish their own families. Suburban developments such as Levittown sprung up to meet demands for new housing, manufacturers produced and advertisers promoted

commercial goods to feed the needs of an expanding population and increasingly consumer culture. Popular culture of the era such as the *Donna Reed Show* and *Leave it to Beaver* depicted a culture ideal and pervasive image of 1950s: an emphasis on domesticity, comfort, complacency and economic prosperity.

Robert Frank discovered a very different America as traveled and photographed to create the images that comprise *The Americans*. 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. In 1955 Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery Alabama for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott that ultimately successfully desegregated Montgomery’s transportation system. Many African-Americans marched and demonstrated in protest

during these and other milestones of the 1950s civil rights movement. These activities often sparked violent backlash from white segregationists, including at times police and government officials. The Cold War quickly intensified in the 1950s and the House Un-American Activities committee led by Senator Joe McCarthy, accused thousands of Americans of being Communists or Communist sympathizers creating widespread paranoia and censorship and for those accused, violations of civil rights and hardship including loss of employment and even imprisonment.



A Civil Rights era protest (image not held in MoCP collection).



A Radical Vision

Frank’s edgy and honest works challenged aesthetics of the time. Most photographs of America or Americans made in this era celebrated their subject matter and American ideals and were made in grand or idealized locations. 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. Many critics of the time considered *The Americans* an indictment of American culture made by an outsider and found Frank’s “street” or snapshot 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.

Frank's images were criticized by many, but 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* (see excerpt at the beginning of this guide). 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
Trolley, New Orleans, 1956. From *The Americans*. (not held in MoCP collection)



The Street Photography Tradition

Photographers working in this genre spontaneously capture candid moments in public places with small hand-held cameras. Many street photographers develop a body of work over time that expresses their subjective point of view of a subject and a distinctive visual style. Technological improvements in film and 35 millimeter camera technology in the early 20th century aided in the development of street photography, allowing photographers to hand hold their cameras and work with

existing light shooting multiple frames quickly, without being noticed.

MoCP collection artists working in this tradition include: Robert Frank (1950's), Lee Friedlander (1950's-present); Roy De Carava (1950's-90s); Stephen Marc (1980's -present); Mary Ellen Mark (1970's-present); Garry Winogrand (1950s-80's); and Antonio Perez (1980s-present).

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSION: ROBERT FRANK'S *THE AMERICANS*

- 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?
- What do you notice about Frank's title, *The Americans*?

Frank intended for this project to be realized as a book. Look carefully at the book *The Americans*.

- 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?

Activities

1. Photographing in the Moment

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

What do you notice? What is interesting 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.

- Edit your images.
- Share and discuss them with others.
- Which images do you think are the strongest? Why?
- What might you do differently if you were to shoot again?

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.

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.

2. Art in Context

Research America in the 1950s. What characterized American life and culture at that time? What significant historic events happened? What changes took place?

Compare and contrast the work of artists from 1950s counter-culture. Read works by Beat Poets such as Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* and Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*. Listen to Be Bop Jazz from the 1950s by artists such as Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie. Consider Robert Frank's book *The Americans*.

- What do you notice as you experience each work?
- What can you tell about how it was made?
- What moods or feelings are expressed in the work? How?
- What do you think this work is about? Why?
- How would you describe the style of this work? How is the artist's style or point of view expressed in this work?
- What do the works by these artists working in various media have in common? How do they differ?
- In what ways do you think each work reflects the era in which it was made?

3. Stream of Consciousness Writing

Jack Kerouac's, fluid, loose, and informal style is known as stream of consciousness writing 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? Don't stop to edit or rewrite text.

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY: 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.

tone

The quality, character and voice of a written work that indicates the attitude and feeling of the author about their subject. The overall blend of color, light and shade in a painting or photograph.

Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:

CC.K-12.L.R.3 Knowledge of Language: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CC.K-12.R.R.1 Key Ideas and Details: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.10 CC.K-12.R.R.10 Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced. A. Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

Early High School-26.A.3e Visual Arts: Describe how the choices of tools/technologies and processes are used to create specific effects in the arts.

Late High School-26.A.4e Visual Arts: Analyze and evaluate how tools/technologies and processes combine to convey meaning.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

A. Analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STATE GOAL 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations A. Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation.

Elementary-16.A.2b: Compare different stories about a historical figure or event and analyze differences in the portrayals and perspectives they present.

Late High School-16.A.5b: Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.