

Why Robert Frank's "The Americans" Matters Today

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Robert Frank, Indianapolis, 1956, Pace/MacGill Gallery

In his proposal to the Guggenheim Foundation in 1954 for the project that would become the seminal monograph *The Americans*, photographer Robert Frank wrote: “The photographing of America’ is a large order—read at all literally, the phrase would be an absurdity.” The “total production” of such a project, he added, would be “voluminous.” He wasn’t lying: Frank would end up shooting around 27,000 images on his journey across the country, which would be condensed into a classic set of 83 black-and-white photographs.

In 1955, with funding secured to support his goals, Frank, who had immigrated to the United States from Switzerland towards the end of the previous decade, set off with his 35mm Leica camera in a Ford Business Coupe. It would prove a very productive trip, during which he’d capture the images for a monograph that would have seismic effects on art and culture.

That volume—published in France in 1958, followed by the U.S. in 1959, the latter with an introduction by Jack Kerouac—is now roughly 60 years old (Frank himself is 93). While today it has become a lodestar for serious photographers, at its release, the haunting portrait of the United States was harshly received, and even treated with disdain by critics.



Robert Frank, Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1955, Etherton Gallery

Before embarking on the trip that would lead to *The Americans*, Frank worked as a commercial photographer, shooting for magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*. He befriended heavyweights like Walker Evans, and had his work included in the pivotal 1955 Museum of Modern Art photo survey, "The Family of Man." But he wanted something more. "He had some disenchantment with the commercial aspect," said Bernard Yenelouis, alumni and research coordinator at the International Center of Photography in New York. "Part of the work he did with *The Americans* was working against the craft he was very steeped in."

Frank was also driven to create a publication that would work as a self-contained book. "The desire to publish his photographs in a book was always something that was in the back of his head," said Sarah Greenough, senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., who organized a massive exhibition at the museum dedicated to *The Americans* in 2008. "Although he had an occasional photograph published in *LIFE*, he never had a photo story published. That was one of the things he wanted to do the most." The iconic magazine turned him down "time and time again,"

Greenough explained. Undeterred, Frank aimed to go his own way, to produce a story that rivaled those published in LIFE, “but not be like them. [To] be something different.” It’s hard to stress how different *The Americans* was. Over the course of those 83 pictures—shot from Detroit to San Francisco to Chattanooga, Tennessee—Frank captured the country in images that were intentionally unglamorous. On a technical level, he brazenly tossed out an adherence to traditional ideas of composition, framing, focus, and exposure.

“Some of the images are very underexposed, some are overexposed, which led to different graphic styles: an excess of grain, a lack of shadow detail,” said Yenelouis. A shot of a bar in New York City features a lit-up jukebox glowing almost demonically. A photograph that purports to capture a parade in Hoboken, New Jersey, focuses instead on two onlookers watching from their apartment windows, one of their faces obscured by a windblown American flag.



Robert Frank, Covered Car--Long Beach, California, 1956/1956c, Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

While publications like *LIFE* and *LOOK* were favorites of aspiring photographers, Greenough noted, they didn’t jive with what Frank would end up undertaking. Those popular magazines generally presented “a quite wholesome image of American life: mom,

apple pie, two cars in every garage,” she said. “And Frank’s vision was decidedly that of an outsider, of someone who was looking beneath the surface.”

What ultimately made *The Americans* a document with real staying power? “Frank revealed a people who were plagued by racism, ill-served by their politicians, and also rendered increasingly numb by the rising culture of consumerism,” Greenough noted. “But it’s also important to point out that he found new areas of beauty in those simple, overlooked corners of American life—in diners, or on the street. He pioneered a whole new subject matter that we [now] define as icons: cars, jukeboxes, even the road itself. All of these things, coupled with his style—which is seemingly intuitive, immediate, and off-kilter—were radically new at the time.”



Robert Frank, Elevator, Miami Beach, Florida, 1955, Etherton Gallery

While the 83 images that made the final cut indeed have a certain effortless ease, Frank’s process involved prolific photographing and editing. “Whenever Frank went into a new town,” Greenough said, “he tried to find one or two objects or scenes that for him symbolized that place.” That doesn’t mean he was cozying up to the diner counter and getting to know the locals. “You don’t get the sense that he’s really talking with people,”

Greenough added—but rather drifting in the background, shooting in hotel lobbies and bars, at funerals and political rallies and outside auto factories.

Occasionally, a pair of back-to-back photographs rhyme with each other explicitly—an image of a car in California, covered by a tarp, followed by the body of a car-accident victim in Arizona, covered by a blanket—but in general, the flow of *The Americans* is unpredictable. It skitters from wealthy, fur-wearing senior citizens in a Miami Beach hotel to cowboy wannabes in New Mexico, gamblers in Nevada, or motorcycle toughs in New York.

Greenough pinpoints the unique mixture of influences informing Frank's method, who had befriended Beat poet icons like Allen Ginsberg. "Frank is both sort of a quintessential Beat artist—responding immediately and intuitively to the world, seeming to live in a very disorganized, chaotic environment—he's also fundamentally Swiss, too," she said, alluding to the calm rationality of Frank's home country. "Beneath what looks like chaos, there's often a lot of order to his life." In order to give himself some boundaries, Greenough explained, Frank set out seeking specific types of pictures—of flags, politicians, or cars, for instance.



Robert Frank, *'New Orleans' (Trolley)*, Sotheby's

It's incredibly difficult to pick a single, indelible image in *The Americans*, especially since the series was conceived as a unit with its own rhythm and logic. But certain images do jump out. A shot taken in San Francisco is especially striking: In it, we see the city, hazy in the background, with an African-American couple lying on the lawn in the foreground. Both

members of the couple stare Frank down, seemingly displeased that he's snapping their picture without permission. Greenough said that this shot is actually one of Frank's favorites from the book, one that "distinctly expresses that reaction that a photographer can provoke in his subjects." (She added that Frank's contact sheets from the day demonstrate, amusingly, how he swiftly pretended to be snapping pictures of other things nearby, perhaps to allay the couple's suspicions.)

Everywhere, though, we find evidence of Frank's counterintuitive genius. A photograph taken at a Hollywood movie premiere places the ostensible starlet out-of-focus, so that our eye is instead trained on the ordinary men and women on the wrong side of the proverbial velvet rope. A shot of a department store in Lincoln, Nebraska, captures a sad array of ornamental crosses and flowers, with a quietly heartbreaking sign: "Hested's—Remember Your Loved Ones—69¢." Elsewhere, harsh economic realities (and disparities) come into focus, as in an almost abject image of a shoe-shine stand inside a men's restroom in Memphis, Tennessee.

Ultimately, *The Americans* changed the game for American photographers and other artists. "Frank influenced Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander," Greenough noted, as well as Joel Meyerowitz and the painter Ed Ruscha. "You could actually say he fostered a whole generation of what we've come to know as 'street photographers' in the 1960s and '70s. But younger photographers, younger people, still respond very positively to *The Americans*—because they see this ruthless, but also very passionate, vision that Frank applied to his work." As it turns 60, this pivotal photo series indeed still retains its fearless, idiosyncratic strangeness. No single photographer could ever capture the enormity of the United States, but Frank's efforts have certainly inspired many to try.