

# VIEWPOINTS

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE HOWARD GREENBERG COLLECTION



KRISTEN GRESH AND ANNE E. HAVINGA

FRONTISPIECE  
HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON  
*Valencia, Spain, 1933*

MFA PUBLICATIONS  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ *Chez Mondrian, Paris, 1926*

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EDWARD STEICHEN *Gloria Swanson*, 1924

## PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORIES

KRISTEN GRESH

The photographs selected here from the rich collection of 446 photographs assembled by Howard Greenberg and now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, form an integral part of collective visual memories of the twentieth century. Among the instantly recognizable images are a pensive woman—“a migratory mother”—from the Depression era gazing off into the distance, as her children cling to her sides (by Dorothea Lange); the Dust Bowl image of the father and sons in front of a shack (Arthur Rothstein); the close-up portrait of Gloria Swanson veiled in lace (Edward Steichen); an artist’s studio with a flower in a vase and a stairwell in the background (André Kertész); a blurry soldier under gunfire at Omaha Beach approaching the shore on D-day (Robert Capa); a Vietnam prisoner being shot point-blank (Eddie Adams). These photographs have been reproduced countless times, recording some of the most important events and challenges of the twentieth century. Conjuring a wide range of emotional responses, they are rooted in specific times, places, and social and political contexts. Many of the photographs have significant symbolic meaning and have become secular icons.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in the twenty-first century, the digital era has resulted in an oversaturation of photographs. Today, when millions of photographs per minute are uploaded and shared via the internet, the potential meaning of a single photograph has changed. Absorbing and responding to today’s infinite supply of images requires a new level of filtering and a radically different kind of visual literacy.

The shift in photographic practices from analog to digital and the advent of the smartphone have also changed the nature of photography. Not only have visual analysis and questioning become more essential than ever, but the physical photographic print has become an increasingly rare object.

The ubiquity of cameras has made it easier for more people to be photographers themselves, and in some cases develop a shared visual lexicon based on acquired knowledge and information through images. In the process of this expansion and democratization of photography, the materiality of photography is slowly being eclipsed for the general public. Today, photographs are reproduced digitally and viewed on screens of all sizes; they are seldom printed. Their capacity to be remembered has been diminished by the fact that they rarely exist as lasting, physical objects. Seen, shared, and posted online predominantly via social media outlets, photographs have lost their impact, changing their effect on our collective memories.

The black-and-white photographs in this book are bound together by the distinguishing physical qualities of the prints themselves, and their ability to create a transformative experience. The emotional content and materiality of the photographs spark conversations among themselves around a variety of themes, yet one of the most notable aspects of these works is not only what the images represent but the rare nature of so many of the prints—whether they are the first print ever made of the image, the only print ever made, or the best existing example.

The print of André Kertész’s *Chez Mondrian, Paris* on special *carte postale* paper gets its power from the paper, the toners, and the developing chemicals, as well as the provenance of the print and how it was used (pl. 1). The technical mastery of a print adds to the experience of viewing a photograph. Each photograph is a special combination of vision and craft. Each print’s story is the result of the photographer’s ability to capture the image coupled with the execution of the physical print.

Similarly, the trajectory of each print—the lives of the physical images—also contributes to its transformative power. The way a photograph is used and distributed contributes to its layers of meaning. For example, the back of the photograph *Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the national police chief of South Vietnam, executed a Vietcong fighter, Nguyen Van Lem, in Saigon on Feb. 1, 1968* by Eddie Adams is a reminder and indicator of the image’s trajectory (pl. 33). The original typed caption is taped onto the back surrounded by stamps and other markings indicating its social status as a “Famous Picture” and a Pulitzer Prize photograph (fig. 1). The many red stamps reveal all of the times the photograph was reproduced in multiple publications. A single print’s history of use, whether in a magazine or a newspaper, in books, exhibitions, or elsewhere, tells an important part of its story.

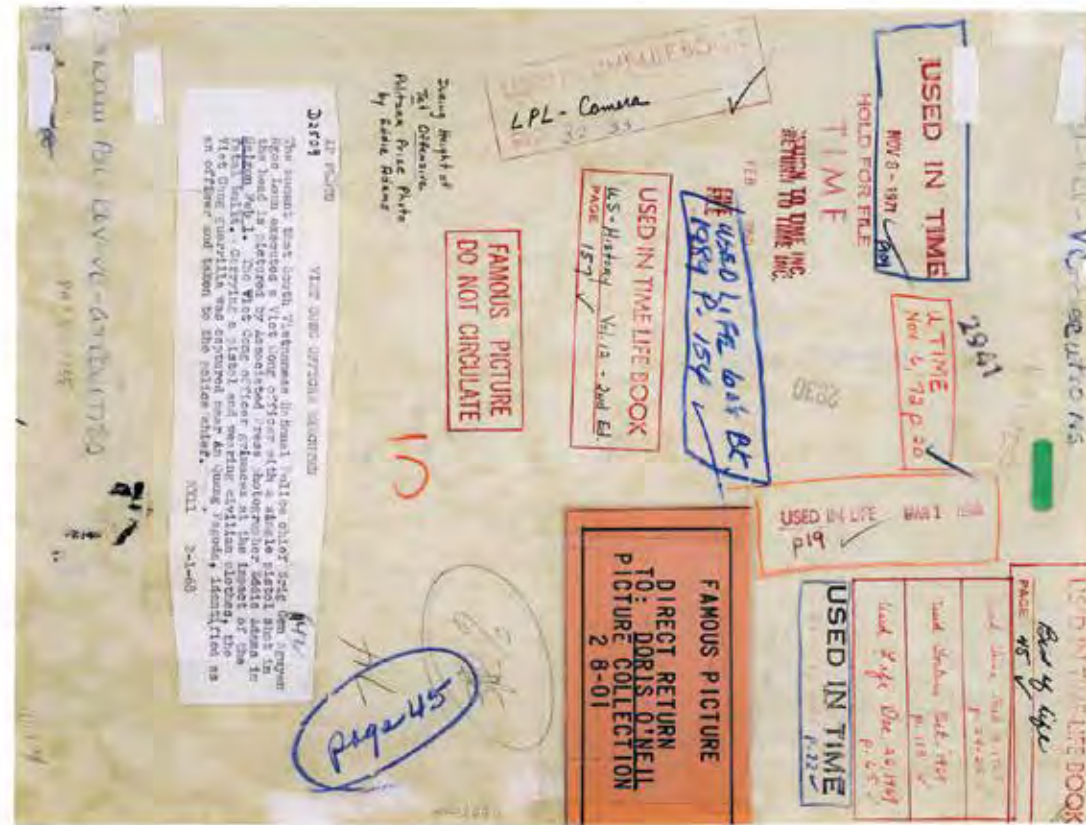


FIG. 1  
Verso of Adams, *Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the national police chief of South Vietnam, executed a Vietcong fighter, Nguyen Van Lem, in Saigon on Feb. 1, 1968*



FIG. 2  
MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE  
*At the Time of the Louisville Flood, 1937*

The twentieth century saw an explosion of photography in books, the picture press, photography and art galleries, and museum exhibitions. Photography’s spheres of influence are never ending, and a photograph’s meaning is constructed and reconstructed over time.

Many of the photographers hired by the United States government’s Farm Security Administration (FSA) as part of its New Deal initiatives in rural America also shot images that extended well beyond the initial scope of their assignment. These images were included in books reflecting the photographers’ social consciousness and sometimes their personal political views.

For example, Dorothea Lange’s photographs documenting poverty and the economic troubles that caused a mass westward migration were included in many books, as well as in newspapers and exhibitions. In 1939, for example, Lange and her partner, economist Paul Taylor, published *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*. Similarly, Walker Evans used work he had made for a Fortune magazine story about three tenant farmers to create his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a seminal book about American rural life, published with James Agee in 1941. Other FSA photographers had similar experiences.

In the picture press, Margaret Bourke-White shared similar views about rural America but had a larger platform through which to share her photographs. *At the Time of the Louisville Flood*, her landmark photograph published in *Life* magazine, captures the anxiety of an epoch (fig. 2). A large group of predominantly African Americans waits in a breadline under a billboard-size image of a carefree white family and their dog in their car. The advertising slogans on the poster read: “World’s Highest Standard of Living” and “There’s no way like the American Way.” This photograph was originally used in *Life*

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ARNOLD NEWMAN *Violins*, 1941







COTTON PICKERS — PULASKI, ARKANSAS

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W. EUGENE SMITH *Thelonius Monk*, 1959





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EDWARD WESTON *Nahui Olín*, 1923



Edward Weston 1923





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DOROTHEA LANGE *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona, 1940*

## PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE MFA

ANNE E. HAVINGA

The photography collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has grown and been repeatedly transformed by a series of visionary collectors. Their collections reflect the uniqueness of their individual approaches, their specific tastes, their connoisseurship, and their moment in the history of the medium. One can easily describe the photography holdings at the MFA as a collection of collections.

The founding of the photography collection at the Museum dates to 1924 and is thanks to the esteemed and influential photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Having long campaigned for the acceptance of photography as a fine art, Stieglitz must have been overjoyed when his friend Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the MFA's curator of Indian art and an amateur photographer himself, agreed to encourage the Museum's trustees to accept a gift of a dozen Stieglitz photographs. When the trustees agreed, Stieglitz spent almost a year making the highest quality prints, and ultimately determined to increase his donation to twenty-seven works. The acquisition was the first significant group of works by a single photographer to enter a major American art museum, a triumph not only for the photographer but also for the institution.

In 1950, four years after Stieglitz's death, his wife Georgia O'Keeffe made an additional substantial donation of thirty-five photographs. O'Keeffe's choices were intended to be a counterpoint to Stieglitz's initial group, so that the two installments provided a balanced overview of the photographer's career. As the scholar Doris Bry wrote in her 1965 book on the MFA's Stieglitz collection: "Each print selected by O'Keeffe was intended to match the caliber of those Stieglitz himself had chosen, so that the group as it now stands may be considered the finest, most highly distilled small collection that can ever be assembled to show the full extent of his work in concentrated form."

The Stieglitz acquisitions supplied a foundation on which the Museum could build. They stimulated the gift of small groups of photographs by Stieglitz's friends Clarence H. White and Frederick H. Evans, as well as by Paul Outerbridge. In the 1940s, the son of Josiah Johnson Hawes donated an archive of more than one hundred daguerreotypes by the Boston firm Southworth and Hawes, a major donation for the Museum.

If an artist made the first great contribution to the photography collection at the MFA, an important curator made the next one. Clifford S. Ackley guided the Museum's first photographic purchases in the 1960s, when most museums were just beginning to wake up to the idea of collecting