PHOTOGRAPHY IN 1955:

THE FAMILY OF MAN AND THE AMERICANS

A Thesis

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by

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I. The Fifties and The Family of Man

The fifties were a great period for home and family, for getting and spending, for cultivating one's garden...But its spokesman also called it an Age of Anxiety; behind its material growth hovers a quiet despair, whose symbols are the Bomb and the still-vivid death camps and a fear of Armageddon that rings true even in the monstrous phrases of a Judge Kaufman. (Morris Dickstein)

1955 was the year of Hurricane Diane. The President of Panama was assassinated and James Dean died in a car crash. It was also the year of the United Nations Atoms for Peace Conference and Salk's discovery of the polio vaccine. And the Air Force came out with a statement that flying saucers do not exist. Adult Americans of 1955 had lived through the Depression, World War II was impressed in their memories and they had suffered through the McCarthy Era. Finally they were enjoying a period of prosperity, characterized by John Kenneth Galbraith as "the affluent society." However as Dickstein described, the country was conspicuously consuming as fast as possible before the Cold War could get "hot" and the Bomb would end it all.

In the 1950's there were two photographic landmarks, one illustrated the hope and the other captured the Americans' latent despair. "The Family of Man" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art exemplified the optimism, faith and romanticism of the era. In his book, The Americans, photographer Robert Frank made visible the undercurrent alienation and pessimism that most Americans did not recognize until it exploded in
their cities and campuses a decade later.

1. The Family of Man

PICTURES
WANTED

Museum Calls for 'Family of Man'
Contributions

By Jacob Deschin

A world-wide invitation to amateur and professional photographers to submit pictures for Edward Steichen's "The Family of Man" project is announced by Rene d'Harnoncourt, director of the Museum of Modern Art, where an exhibition of the project will open in January, 1955. One of the most extensive photography shows ever held and international in character, the exhibition will be a major feature of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration. Other shows developed by the project will open simultaneously in Europe, Asia and Latin America and will circulate throughout the world for at least two years. Mr. Steichen is director of the museum's Department of Photography.

Although work on the show has been in progress for more than a year, and a large number of pictures already have been assembled, the new appeal is an attempt to comb every possible source throughout the world and thus assure the most comprehensive coverage. Anyone, anywhere, who has anything to say photographically to illustrate the project's theme---to portray "the universal elements and emotions and the oneness of human beings throughout the world"---is asked to respond to the search for appropriate pictures.

Steichen's Aim

"If the assembled photographs bring the elements of this theme to-
gether," Mr. Steichen says, "they will demonstrate that the art of photography can give force and life to ideas. This exhibition will then be created in a passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man. Nothing short of that will do."

To simplify handling at the museum, contributors are asked to send for preliminary selection only contact prints (except 35-mm) or proof enlargements, unmounted and not larger than 8 x 10 inches. Do not send negatives. Published or unpublished photographs are acceptable. Prints cannot be returned. The photographer's name and address should appear on the back of each photograph. Since this is an exhibition, no payments can be made or prizes awarded. No photographs will be reproduced without the maker's permission. The museum will acknowledge receipt of all photographs, which must reach the museum not later than April 10, 1954. When the final selections are made, the photographers will be asked for exhibition prints or the loan of their negatives. Send pictures to The Family of Man Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, P.O. Box 368, Radio City Post Office, New York, 19.2 (New York Times, Sunday January 31, 1954)

2. **The Family of Man**: Rites of Passage

Millions of people around the world saw "The Family of Man" or bought the book version. The world is presented as a huge extended family, a romantic vision of human brotherhood that fit the cultural and political climate of the fifties, so Steichen's message reached people because they believed this vision.
The photographs are arranged into sections. Each section consists of several photographs that repeat one concept, such as love, war or death. Because of the sequencing the viewer notices the category rather than individual photographs. Ambiguity in an image is eradicated by the presentation; the images become secondary to the theme.

The Family of Man begins with a quote from Genesis, "let there be light" and a photograph of moonlit land and waters. Next are pictures of lovers from New Guinea to lovers in the United States; after six pages of romance one couple is pictured in bed. Subsequently, couples of each race are photographed at their wedding ceremonies. The women soon appear pregnant and then an infant is presented at birth and breast.

The world embarks upon its childhood securely nestled in mother's arms—arms clothed in rags and evening gowns—in the jungle and in the Arctic. Soon these children take their first steps and begin to play. The games end as violence erupts between friend and friend, mother and son, sister and brother. On the next pages violence becomes internalized, manifest in childhood's loneliness and anxiety.

Suddenly father emerges from the darkness with a swaddled infant, and the sons of Bechuanaland, Jamaica, U.S.S.R., U.S.A. and Austria rehearse their adult roles as they study and mimic father. Now the family unit is complete, so the whole clan poses for a picture.
Mother and father go to work in the fields, mines, factories and at home. Amidst images of physical labor appears the work of nature, "Mt. Williamson Clearing." Then back to work in offices and laboratories.

Meanwhile exotic women carry goods home from market and everyone sits down to supper. After the meal the world makes music or goes dancing.

Discord and death come, along with poverty and hunger. For a few images everyone looks skyward and then everything is alright. Cartier-Bresson's viewfinder finds the Pope and everyone else gets religion. Political strife is counterpointed with images of justice: the United Nations and the ballot-box.

It all ends on an optimistic note. A photograph of a Peruvian child playing a wooden flute recurs throughout the book, accompanying humanity during joyous times. He appears finally with rejoicing children from around the world as they complete the circle and bring the book to a close.

3. The Family of Man and Life Magazine

Photography meant Life magazine to the American public of the fifties. In 1936, Henry R. Luce published this prospectus for his new magazine:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things---machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see
men's work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.

The readers of Life were at home with The Family of Man. They recognized the photo-essay form, they were familiar with the work of some of the photographers and some of the photographs from The Family of Man had been published first in the magazine. True to Luce's outline, The Family of Man begins with life and shows life and death around the world: great, small and universal events, the rich and the poor, the proud and the wretched, the strange and the commonplace, and above all the multitudes.

Presenting the world in a spirit of faith in humanity was a common philosophical base shared by Life and The Family of Man, and this philosophy was shared by most of the photographers at the time.

It was Life and the news services that provided the paychecks; teaching jobs were scarce and no-one was making a living from print sales. Thus the prominent photographic esthetic of this time to both the public and the photographers was Life.

Aperture magazine had been an alternative outlet for photographers since 1952. Rather than dwelling constantly upon the reportorial image, Aperture published non-traditional
imagery. Instead of description, the camera could be a means for self-expression through internal, metaphorical and mystical visions and for formal experimentation. However, *Aperture*’s subscribers were only five-hundred in number, hardly competitive with *Life*’s following from the public and the photographers. *Life* magazine satisfied their visual and political positions that were epitomized in *The Family of Man*.

4. *The Family of Man* and Conventional Style

Almost every photograph from *The Family of Man* adheres to the documentary, straight and conventional style. Steichen insured the accessibility of the subject matter by keeping abstraction to a minimum. In 1959 he told a group of Russian photographers that although he could accept that photographers worked in abstraction, *The Family of Man* had no room for abstraction.⁴ Steichen did include a landscape by Brassai in which the land is transformed into a patchwork quilt, and an aerial photograph of birds flying over water. The photographs are abstract, but quite representational. Neither allows the viewer to lose sight of the actual subject.

In *The Family of Man* light is usually used to reveal the subject matter clearly and without confusion. It is interpretive in the customary ways: Hugh Bell’s photograph of musicians is dark and grainy, recreating the atmosphere of a smoky, dim nightclub and Bill Brandt’s cathedral in
England appears to be irradiated with light emanating from heaven. On occasion, light is used for its ability to modify, alter and transform. Carmel Vitullo photographed a row of people in the United States with spots of light forming their specters on a wall behind them. Harry Callahan's picture of a young girl in a white dress and mask is transformed by the light into an image of slashing diagonal neon. Finally, Ernst Haas' costumed figures backlit by flames appear to be dancing in hell.

The typical Family of Man photographer tended to hold the camera still or keep the subject still. Some of them utilized the blurred image, yet only when it was expected: Ralph Crane's teenagers out for a joy-ride in the convertible, people dancing and children running. The depiction of motion was otherwise academic, like Gjon Mili's strobe experiments.

Occasionally unusual perspective occurred; usually a high camera angle. Kurt Huhle took a low-angle shot, enabling the viewer to see the bloomers of some German folk dancers. The subject was usually centered and photographed frontally, but Nell Dorr dared to use truncation, whether for propriety or composition: a nude female emerges from the water, chopped off at the waist and carrying some strategically placed flowers.

In the book there are a few instances in which a slight shift away from the straight photograph occurs in
the form of superimposition of small pictures onto a larger photograph. For example, six photographs of distressed children are superimposed upon a black page with bare white twigs and branches weaving about the images, trapping the children in an oppressive net. This technique is again used as a formal device in the high-contrast photograph of a logger at work, pasted upon a photograph of a forest. Pictures of scientists and businessmen at work are suspended on a background of nuclear tracings. Finally, Steichen places a photograph of his mother onto a picture of a wheat field.

The form and content of the photographs is conventional but Steichen's gallery presentation was non-traditional. This construction received positive and negative criticism, and critic Rollie McKenna immortalized the experience as a trip through a funhouse:

Good photographs speak for themselves. Steichen would be the first to agree, but somehow he and Paul Rudolf (sic), a gifted Florida architect, designed a display so elaborate that the photographs become less important than the methods of displaying them. Birth, certainly a universal experience, is vividly climaxed by an extraordinarily sharp and realistic picture by Wayne Miller. Yet his photograph and others in the series are displayed on a raised dais surrounded by virginal white gauze. Pictures of children throughout the world playing ring-around-a-rosy are contorted into trapezoids and mounted on a circular metal construction. In another instance a man is chopping wood high
in a tree top. This undistinguished photograph has been mounted horizontally over the spectator's head. To see it properly he has to get in the same position as the photographer who took the picture, on his back! Further on, four unfortunate Australians have been severed from their land and made into free standing black silhouettes. Photographs grow from pink and lavendar poles, dangle from the ceiling, lie on the floor, protrude from the wall. Some happily, just hang.

In case the point has not yet been made, toward the end of the exhibit there is a group of nine portraits arranged around---yes, a mirror. Along side is a quote from Bertrand Russell: "...for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration."

This installation was not traditional, but the innovation was more window-dressing than interpretation. In the book, the layout is similar to Life magazine photo-essays. The images were accessible to the general public in content, and the straight use of camera controls added to the accessibility.

5. The Family of Man as a Political Statement

The Family of Man was a culmination of the fifties visual and political tradition. Steichen successfully presented an optimistic view, however naive and romantic, that was politically and culturally congruent with the times. He introduced the public to photography in a way that had meaning for most people. The era was epitomized in the book: Alfred Eisenstadt's photograph of a drum major
followed and gleefully imitated by a line of young boys, "keeping in step," repeated in Austria by David Seymour, only this time the leader is a woman playing the violin and the children are holding on to one another, looking tentatively at the camera.

The notion of following the leader is echoed in the image of the elfish child playing the flute. He made background music for the lovers in the grass, played Lohengrin at all of those weddings and accompanied the drum major and violinist. Finally he played harmony for the singers and joined the rejoicing children.

The Family of Man philosophy received official political sanction. On January 24, 1955, then Special Assistant to the President of the United States, Nelson D. Rockefeller gave a preview speech for the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. In his address he heralded the simplistic virtues of Steichen's concept, saying that the exhibition instilled in him a "sense of kinship with mankind" by its portrayal of man's relationship to man and his environment. Yet he continued, mankind consists of individuals "as varied as the shape of snowflakes" which form one big snowball of "human experience." In closing, he invoked Eisenhower's words that it was "time for all of us to renew our faith in ourselves and in our fellow man." 6

The Family of Man is a political statement that was relatively daring for the time; the Senate did not condemn
McCarthy until 1954 and the climate of fear had not cleared. Steichen, the humanist, chose to show that people need not mistrust one another. In the words of his text, "people are really good at heart" (Anne Frank). To make this assertion with photographs of enemies and allies alike was an attempt at an antidote to distrust.

In an essay about television in the seventies, Anne Roiphe talks about this naive yet hopeful political ideal:

> And the American family dream is as naive and ambitious as some of our political credos—"all men are created equal," etc. There has always been a dichotomy in our society between what we believe—the image we would choose of ourselves—and the social realities. We think we are humane and good and then we discover a MyLai massacre. We preach brotherhood as racial tensions mount. Nevertheless, with a more realistic view of ourselves we would probably behave even worse. And despite the laughability of the American romance, it's not such a bad thing to keep on dreaming."

The Americans needed that dream as a reprieve from World War II and Korea. As critic Russell Lynes said, The Family of Man was appropriate to the fifties because it was "a moment when the world was briefly tired of warring... and some of it was superficially and hopefully, if not actually, 'a family.'"³

6. The Family of Man and Mass Culture

For about a century, Western culture has really been two cultures:
the traditional kind—let us call it "High Culture"—that is chronicled in the textbooks, and a "Mass Culture" manufactured wholesale for the market. In the old art forms, the artisans of Mass Culture have long been at work: In the novel, the line stretches from Eugene Sue to Lloyd C. Douglas; in music, from Offenbach to Tin-Pan Alley; in art from the chromo to Maxfield Parrish and Norman Rockwell; in architecture, from Victorian Gothic to suburban Tudor. (Dwight Macdonald)9

Cultural scholars generally divide Western culture into two not very distinct categories: high culture and mass culture. High culture is "high-brow art" that has received academic acceptance and not always much public understanding. Cezanne is high culture. Mass culture (popular culture, kitsch, popular arts) is comprised of cultural phenomena that have not received academic kudos yet have popular support. Andrew Wyeth and The Saturday Evening Post are mass culture.

Mass culture functions as mass communication: it is accessible, universal and homogenized. The creator of mass culture consciously produces work for mass consumption with total subjugation to the potential spectator. The Family of Man was an incredible popular success and Steichen's words confirmed that however naive, idealistic and unrealistic, he was sincere about his message. Macdonald's theory of mass culture establishes that the creator must believe in his creation.10
Steichen honestly wanted to "make an affirmative contribution to life" through photography. In fact, he attributed his belief in brotherhood to a lesson learned as a child, when his mother told him that "all people were alike regardless of race, creed or color." Steichen credited this discussion with sowing the seed for The Family of Man. He saw himself grandly explaining "man to himself...and to the world we live in." Steichen saw himself as a popular educator.

Even before the exhibition was hung, Jacob Deschin forecast that it "may prove to be the most important photographic venture." This prediction was joined with the best sort of Madison Avenue hype. Such publicity was ordinarily not a feature of fine art advertisement, yet it was in keeping with Steichen's flamboyant nature and added to his celebrity. Like Cecil B. DeMille, Steichen was a showman who attracted large audiences by large, flashy productions. If DeMille's genre was the epic film, then Steichen's genre was the epic exhibit. His crowning achievement was The Family of Man.

The celebrity of the individual photographers is diminished as they are a means to an end. Most of the photographers who participated in the exhibition were accustomed to editorial power as they worked for magazines such as Life, picture agencies such as Magnum and government, business, industry and newspapers.
Steichen used the photographs as a tool for his concept rather than a representation of the work of the photographer. After Steichen selected the photographs, he sent the negatives to a professional printer, altering the image size and cropping as he saw fit. Not only did he exercise his editorial control over the photographers, but he further obliterated the individuality of the image-maker by the uniformity of the reproduction process; he defied the concept of the precious print by replacing it with a poster-like lab-produced picture. This homogenization made the pictures resemble magazine illustrations. The public understood the presentation as well as the content, and the sheer size of the images made them difficult to ignore.

7. The Pictures and the Text: Steichen's Universal Language

In order to reach the general public through photography, Steichen hoped to find a photographic language, a visual Esperanto that would enable communication and understanding among diverse groups of people. The Family of Man could be embraced by any politic. In fact it made the public feel good and noble. The images are humane and inoffensive and the human relationships depicted are conventional and undisturbing. In order for mass culture to attract and satisfy a large audience, it must not alienate potential patrons.

Like nineteenth-century capitalism, Mass Culture is a dynamic, revolutionary
force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture...It thus destroys all values, since value judgments imply discrimination. Mass Culture is very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and it all comes out very finely ground indeed. (Macdonald)

The syntax as well as the vocabulary of his photographic language contributed to the accessibility of Steichen's message through the use of anecdote, stereotype, redundant captions, cliche and aphorism. Like most mass culture, the reaction is built into the images: the audience knows how to react to cute babies, children playing, starving humans and mourning mothers. The human condition is reduced to a series of literal, sententious and rhetorical vignettes accompanied by superfluous captions.

Critic Phoebe Lou Adams attacked *The Family of Man* in general and specifically for the use of a literal and reportial style in both the photographs and the text:

All this text is rather surprising, since pictures are generally expected to speak for themselves, but the designers of "The Family of Man" leave no loopholes for random error. Each section of the show has its appropriate quotation, like incantations accompanying a ritual.

Wayne Miller's photograph shows birth and Scriabin's parable reiterates that the child will be spanked and con-
sequently cry as do all newborns. Mother and child are portrayed more than twenty times accompanied by the tautology "Bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

This literal presentation is comparable to many of the photographic essays that appeared in *Life* magazine during this time. Steichen's text could have been replaced by the titles of many of *Life*’s essays, such as "Let There Be Music," "The Base of Abundance," "The U.S. Goes Out to Lunch" or "The World's Greatest Religions." This format satisfied the American magazine mentality by not challenging the viewer. One could merely glance at the image, read the caption and turn the page.

Like Dr. Esperanto, Steichen strove for simplicity. *The Family of Man* represents the photograph as a record, not an object for contemplation, capable of metaphor, symbolism or transformation. There can be no misinterpretation of the message behind nearly all of the photographs in the book. The emaciated Dutch woman shoving food into her mouth has been hungry. If somehow the signification eludes the viewer, the next image or the next half-dozen are certain to reiterate: the Indian child with the distended abdomen has been hungry also.

This unfigurative imaging is used throughout the book. When God said "let there be light," the moon shines on page one. Everything is illustrated in its most apparent form: Love is public affection, when people are thirsty they drink
water, when people are sad they cry, and when people die, other people cry.

The most metaphoric photograph in the book is Wynn Bullock's "Child in Forest." Spectators at the exhibition may have felt that they were witnessing primal birth in a primeval forest. Yet a nagging thought at the back of the mind said that perhaps the child is not peacefully resting, but has been molested, murdered and abandoned. Steichen said it is an image of Lilith, but is it Lilith in the form of the original woman or is this the work of the evil Lilith who menaces small children? This ambiguity makes the image one of the most provocative in the book, yet rather than enjoy the controversy in interpretation, much of the public felt that the photograph was too controversial.

A search among the remaining images for this sort of vision usually turned up potential metaphors, diluted to euphemism or cliche. Aperture magazine credited the show with turning the milk of human kindness to "schmaltz." Both sexual intercourse and the birth process are transformed into grimaces; salvation is reduced to the spirit in the sky; and a loss of freedom becomes an analogy between Korean barbed wire and a child trapped behind a Danish Modern couch leg.

Steichen's photographic rhetoric exploited the synecdoche. Like the dictionary, Steichen used "bread for food" and "the army for soldier." The section about eating is labelled with the Russian proverb "Eat Bread and Salt
and Speak the Truth." Steichen translated this adage into a picture of his mother holding a plate of food superimposed on a larger photograph of an (amber) field of grain. After being reminded that bread is the staff of life in both Yugoslavia and Sicily, we see the international public dining, devouring, feasting and masticating their breakfasts, lunches, dinners and between-meal snacks. Consumption is presented as hyperbole. Hunger is shown as starvation.

The viewer is forewarned of man's inhumanity to man in the images of childhood. The United States seems to have had an especially violent childhood. All on one page there is a young girl tied to a tree, two boys about to square off and fight, and a woman about to be clubbed over the head by a child wielding a wooden plank. This page is faced with Gene Smith's image of his children's over-zealous sibling rivalry. The little boys grew up to be soldiers.

The soldier is a recurrent figure. First we see him, weapon in hand, crying as he says good-bye to his sobbing son. Later he appears with a woman, instead of a rifle, at each side; and then a flashback to the rebel sharpshooter. The soldier is shown consoling a fellow soldier in Korea and leading prisoners in the Warsaw ghetto. David Douglas Duncan gives us a final look just before he falls face down in Pacific mud. Ah, war is hell. (William Tecumseh Sherman)

If this is a photographic language, then the photographs are aphorisms. Complex and ambiguous situations are
too simply reduced to stereotype. The section on love could be replaced with the adage "love makes the world go 'round," and religion could translate: "the family that prays together stays together."

It is not surprising that a culture that turned to Dear Abby and Norman Vincent Peale for consolation would find massive therapy in platitudes and easy answers. Thus it is logical that one of the images that the public particularly appreciated was the cliche to end all cliches and the picture that ends the book: "The Walk to Paradise Garden" by W. Eugene Smith.

In the context of Smith's personal life this image is quintessential. It is a photograph he made of his children made after two and a half years of convalescence from wounds he received in the war. Smith said that he was determined that the first picture he made upon his recovery would be life-confirming in contrast to his war images.

In the context of the life of the family of man, that photograph shares most of the problems of Steichen's photographic language. It is obviously two children, new life; walking out of the darkness, the womb or despair of the previous generations; into the light, the morning, a new beginning. This optimistic image summarizes the entire book and the one-world outlook of the fifties: brother and sister---nation and nation---joining hands.

Dwight Macdonald characterized The Family of Man
as a mass culture spectacle that avoids difficult truths by dealing in generalities:

The midcult mind aspires toward universality above all. A good example was that "Family of Man" show of photographs Edward Steichen put on several years ago at the Museum of Modern to great applause. (The following summer it was the hit of the American exhibition in Moscow, showing that a touch of Midcult makes the whole world kin.) The title was typical---actually, it should have been called Photorama. There were many excellent photographs, but they were arranged under the most pretentious and idiotic titles---each section had a caption from Whitman, Emerson, Carl Sandburg or some other sage---and the whole effect was of a specially pompous issue of Life ("Life on Life"). The editorializing was insistent---the Midcult audience always wants to be Told---and the photographs were marshaled to demonstrate that although there are real Problems (death, for instance), it's a pretty good old world after all.

8. The Family of Man and the American Family

The Family of Man came out of a vital and viable tradition within its own time perspective. However, today we see it with the benefit of history and hindsight. The sight is one of a spectacular piece of mass culture that gave a view of the idealistic, middle-class American cultural norms.

Love in the United States is shown by flirting and cuddling couples. Surprisingly for the fifties, all of this
affection led to sex before marriage; but in keeping with
the morality of the time, sex is treated with kid gloves:
a tiny, dark image hidden on a large black page.

Love, marriage and of course the baby carriage is
next. In The Family of Man, pregnancy in America is a
fecund, smiling woman, standing in a room full of potted
geraniums, gazing out of the window. Or playing hide-and-
seek with a kitten behind her swollen abdomen. Birth is
accomplished with pain and without blood, through the rubber-
gloved hands of the doctor.

Dr. Benjamin Spock's Book of Baby and Child Care was
published in 1946, and it became the authority that guided
the infancy, childhood and parenthood of much of the American
post-war generation. As the doctor recommended, mother
stayed at home and tended the kids: "I would myself say it
is much more creative to rear and shape the personality of a
fine, live child than it is to work in an office or even to
carve a statue." 20

Finally, father appears on page fifty, uneasily
holding an infant. A Kwakiutl Indian poem proclaims that
when the infant grows up he will follow in dad's footsteps.

There is little misery and no surprise. Everyone
fulfills their expected roles: mother is a nurturer, father
is a provider, and the daughter grows up to nurture and the
son to provide.

In this manner, Steichen universalized the world:
presenting it as America's extended family. He homogenized each culture so distant places are merely exotic, not unfamiliar.

In 1958, *The Ugly American* by Lederer and Burdick hit the public like a bombshell. It dramatically illustrated how Americans entered a foreign social structure and expected to understand the mores and customs of a new culture without even bothering to learn the language. Margaret Mead wrote about this phenomenon:

> In the past when a great religious story was taken from one people to another, those who heard it soon remodeled the saints from a faraway land, changing the settings in which they acted, their appearance, and even the color of their skin, to fit them into a local, more familiar picture of life. As long as travelers had only words to describe all they had seen, listeners to traveler's tales could cast other peoples in their own image or picture them as monsters, different in kind from themselves.\(^{21}\)

Thus it is not surprising that when Steichen talked about the brotherhood of man, the kinship structure he imposed upon the globe was middle-class American.

The cultural myth pervading America was the notion that the world was one big family, that as Carl Sandburg wrote in the introduction to *The Family of Man*:

> There is only one man in the world and his name is All Men.  
> There is only one woman in the world and her name is All Women.  
> There is only one child in the world and the child's name is All Children.
The problem with this philosophy is that all men, women and children are cast in American molds. When Steichen attempted to show that we are all alike, he did so by using images of families from Sicily, Japan, Italy, Bechuanaland and the United States posed as if the photographer from Sears had been there and lined everybody up according to height. The reader is to assume that because everyone can fit into the family snapshot pose, therefore there are no differences. Steichen was confusing humanity with homogeneity.

Cultural critic Roland Barthes criticized Steichen for the confusion after he saw the exhibition in France. Barthes faults the exhibition for first stressing morphological dissimilarities by showing various races, cultures and physiognomies and then asserting that all people are alike. Barthes wrote that Steichen holds the viewer back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating this ulterior zone of human behavior where historical alienation introduces some "differences" which we shall here quite simply call injustices...22

As Barthes contends, the only universals are the universals of nature and to dwell on those universals only repeats biological facts. The essential truth of The Family of Man is not brotherhood or shared aspirations, but rather Birth, copulation and death That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks. (T.S. Eliot)

Social scientists have since warned that homogenization is
a myopic way of looking at the globe:

Certain kinds of social relationships are institutionalized in all human societies. Thus in every culture there are accepted patterns of behaviour between parents and children, husbands and wives, persons in authority and those subject to it, the people who produce goods and the people who consume them, and so on. But the form and the content of the relationships thus broadly characterized may differ vastly from one culture to another. Grave misunderstandings have arisen and continue to arise because people have attempted to understand the institutions of other, unfamiliar societies in terms of the familiar and unquestioned categories of their own cultures...An important contribution of social anthropology has been to demonstrate that the societies remote from our own must be understood, if they are to be understood at all, through the ideas and values current in those societies, and not simply in our own terms. And this kind of comprehension is only possible when the investigator moves, usually literally as well as metaphorically, out of his own culture into the unfamiliar one which he wishes to understand, and "learns" the new culture as he would learn a new language. (John Beattie) 23

Nevertheless, a generation of Americans believed The Family of Man message. They wanted to see hope and unity and Steichen's message showed them what they wanted to see.
II. The Fifties and The Americans

Of what value is the new competence of family life if, while we have achieved it, we have surrendered control of the material development of the country? It is time to ask ourselves if a fruitful and humane life will be possible at all in an America full of the flashy and insolent wealth of a permanent war economy, brutalized slums, rampant and dehumanizing Levittowns, race hatred, cynical exploitation and waste of natural resources, government by pressure group, by executive abdication and by Congressional expediency, vulgarization and perhaps the destruction of the schools, not to mention the sporadic flash and fall-out of "nuclear devices." Here are enemies enough. Here is the seedbed of new ideologies. (Richard Chase) 1

The subscriber to U.S. Camera opened the 1958 annual to a frontispiece of scientific photography for Standard Oil, turned the page to "wall art" by Brassai, natural and man-made graffiti on Paris walls, an essay on the New York Port Authority and a series of images by Dan Weiner of Naples street-scenes of families and children. The following portfolio was devoted to an aircraft carrier, followed by Andreas Feininger's insect close-ups and tree studies. The next feature was an essay on rural Spanish life, succeeded by advertising photographs made by the New York Art Director's Club. After club member Irving Penn's blurred-focus photograph of a white-woman-in-white breastfeeding a baby, the reader saw a sullen cowboy rolling a cigarette, slouched against a trash can on a littered New York City street. The
next pages presented a country obsessed with the automobile, hiding behind its flag and overwhelmed by an emerging urban landscape. These photographs are the work of Robert Frank from his book, *The Americans*.

In photography, the "seedbed of new ideologies" mentioned by Chase, was sown by Frank. He instituted a wider approach to both form and content; capturing the negative view and the darker, pessimistic and banal sides of human relationships and human existence while initiating a looser interpretation of the plastic controls of the medium. As *The Family of Man* was the epitome of the overt public esthetic and social climate, *The Americans* reflected the undercurrent of anomie and dehumanization that the public was slow to acknowledge. As John Szarkowski said over a decade later:

> It is difficult now to remember how shocking Robert Frank's book was ten years ago. The pictures took us by ambush then. We knew the America that they described, of course, but we knew it as one knows the background hum in a record player, not as a fact to recognize and confront. Nor had we understood that this stratum of our experience was a proper concern of artists.

1. Robert Frank: From the Outside

> When I did *The Americans* I was very ambitious. I knew I wanted to do a book, and I was deadly serious about it, and somehow things just happened right. It was the first time I had seen this country, and it was the right mood. I had the right
influences—I knew Walker's photographs, I knew what I didn't want, and then that whole enormous country sort of coming against my eyes. It was a tremendous experience, and I worked, but it came naturally to show what I felt, seeing those faces, those people, the kind of hidden violence. The country at that time—the McCarthy period—I felt it very strongly.

Frank was from Switzerland. He first came to the United States in 1947, but for the next eight years he traveled back and forth between New York City, Europe and South America. In 1955 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph the American scene.

Frank planned to apply his own photographic vision to this country and his was the outsider's observation. The sense of being a stranger and an outsider came from living in a foreign country. Although he had been in the United States for eight years before he set out on his travels, there was much of this huge country Frank had not seen, and he still felt that most of it was new to him.

Also, Frank was an outsider because he lived on the fringes of the mainstream in America. He was not the classical Family of Man inhabitant, but rather he shared the Beat lifestyle, living in a loft in New York among artists and musicians.

Frank's photography in The Americans also kept him on the outside. He was an observer, standing on the sidelines snatching pictures without intruding upon the situation, often without the subject's recognition. He maintained his distance
and avoided interaction, as he said:

...that feeling of being a stranger---
it has to do with years of photography
where you walk around, you observe and
you walk away, and you begin to be a
pretty good detective.4

Frank started his trip in a second-hand Ford with his
wife and two young children. As he traveled 10,000 miles
around the country he attempted to understand an alien way
of life and interpret unfamiliar sights. Exposure to a strange
environment results in culture shock. In his book, Culture
Shock, Philip K. Bock described the sense of isolation and
loneliness culture brings about:

Culture, in its broadest sense,
is what makes you a stranger when you
are away from home...direct exposure
to an alien society usually produces
a disturbing feeling of disorientation
and helplessness that is called "cul-
ture shock"...
...the person subject to extreme
culture shock is often unsure whether
he has gone mad or whether all the
people around him are crazy---perhaps
both.5

When Frank looked closely at this country for the
first time, he saw things that were invisible to most Ameri-
cans. Over and over again he photographed the pervasive
alienation of the American people: they are detached in love,
isolated in crowds, lonely when they are young and old, and
as alone in life as in death.

2. Robert Frank and the Photographic Establishment

Frank had been a member of the photographic establish-
ment. Not only was The Americans a new picture of the country, but also a rejection of the established ways to photograph.

As an eighteen-year old in Zurich, Frank became a commercial photographer; as an apprentice he worked as an industrial photographer, a fashion photographer and a still photographer for a Zurich film company. When Frank came to the United States he was hired by Harper's Bazaar. The next year he left for Bolivia and Peru, a trip that culminated in a book called Incas to Indians. Afterward he returned to the states for a while, free-lancing for the big magazines. In 1949 he resumed his travels in Wales, France and Spain; then back to the magazines.

The Museum of Modern Art purchased four of Frank's prints for the collection in 1950. A few years later, he met Steichen, and Steichen selected him to go to Europe to help prepare for the "Post-War European Photographers" exhibition. Frank exhibited in that show and continued his participation in the photographic elite as a participant in The Family of Man.

Seven photographs by Frank appear in The Family of Man. Amidst global diners, Frank's New York women sit at a hamburger shop, eating as they watched pedestrians walk by. In the section on pregnancy, Frank's image of his wife appears amidst all of those glowing mothers: she is lying in bed in a darkened room, seemingly in pain. On the next page, she reappears, bathed and diffused by an unknown light source, in
a room full of irradiant forms. This image is a relief from the obvious images in the book. The atmosphere is charged with a spirituality that can not be traced to its literal source. This luminescence recurs in his picture of a Spanish mother, enveloped in light as she huddles over her child. Frank exploits the contrast of darkness and light in his photograph of a Peruvian; face obscured with a dark hat, body covered with dark clothes, blending into the dark surroundings, walking away from the brightness of the day. Darkness permeates the atmosphere in his image of an Englishman, lit by a small ball of light over some distant smokestacks. Amidst a sequence of impoverished people, the misfortune of the man is not concrete, but seems to stem from the grimness of his desolate surroundings. Finally a photograph of a miner is on the page along with several heaven-seekers. Not only is Frank's work in the book, but he is a "family"-member, captured with his wife as one of the happy couples by photographer Lou Faurer.

Yet, Frank's images do not share the mood and style of the majority of Steichen's selections. It is Frank's use of emotions in a subjective way, and his metaphoric light and darkness that set him apart and hints at the vision he expresses in The Americans.

At about the same time that he met Steichen, Frank met Walker Evans. Evans helped him prepare his statement to the Guggenheim selection committee, another bastion of the photo-
graphic establishment. Frank's desire for affiliation with these institutions was contradictory. In some ways he wanted to be accepted by them, while at the same time he seemed to thrive upon antagonism with them. He expressed appreciation of the support he received from the Guggenheim committee, saying that it was not the money, but rather "It's the support you get—that somebody believes in you. That was very important." 6

He was hostile toward Life magazine, but he wanted to sell his pictures to them. He explains that he was influenced by "Life magazine. I wanted to sell my pictures to them, and they never did buy them. So I developed tremendous contempt for them, which helped me." 7

Concurrent with Frank's American travels in 1955 and 1956, Life published photographic essays by such celebrated photographers as Margaret Bourke-White, Alfred Eisenstadt, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks and Bruce Davidson. The most typical essay was the travelog, with titles such as "Isles of Romance in the South Seas." Art, entertainment (Elvis) and animals comprised a considerable proportion, and there were several that dealt with with organized religion. Politics and the military combined were given the same amount of coverage as athletics ("Basketball Fever in Dixie") and the rest of the essays were concerned with various aspects of American affluence, including fraternity rushing, "Women Spend Billions of Dollars to Stay Pretty," "Teenagers
and The Telephone" and "The Base of Abundance." Rural life was barely touched upon and there was a smattering of articles about the cities, such as "Spokane's New Coliseum." Out of approximately one-hundred and fifty photographic essays published in Life during those two years, only a few handled openly the problems of the cities, slums and the surfacing manifestations of segregation.

It was that hypocrisy that disenchanted him with Life. As he put it, "Those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end." The big picture periodicals cultivated and perpetuated that anecdotal way of seeing, and The Americans contradicted that vision.

Frank rejected the photographic document in favor of the photographer's internal interpretation. In this way he dealt with the questions raised by the photographic medium. He discarded The Family of Man esthetic; his work was a statement that was as much about photography as it was about America.

3. The Americans and the Critics

The Americans aroused the critical response of a culture that was shocked by Frank's interpretation. Once he edited his pictures to eighty-three prints, he was unable to find a publisher in the United States, so his friend from Paris, Robert Delpire, published the book. U.S. Camera printed an excerpt in the 1958 annual, but it was not
printed in its entirety in the United States until 1959, when
the avant-garde Grove Press produced an American edition with
an introduction by the Beat writer, Jack Kerouac.

While The Americans sold poorly, it created an uproar
among critics. They were shocked because Frank's internal
viewpoint was so distant from the current boundaries of social
realities and photographic taste. They condemned Frank's
choice of form and content and attacked him for distortion
and defeatism. The critical consensus was that it was unfair
to call the book The Americans since it did not deal with all
Americans and it showed a negative view of those he did photo-
graph. The critics seemed to prefer the romantic vision of
Life and The Family of Man, although they gave a false picture
of the world. Critics felt that Frank's scope was too limited
and it gave a false picture of their country.

In the May, 1960 issue of Popular Photography, several
of the editors attacked Frank from this perspective. Some
of the negative reactions were sheer histrionics, such as
Bruce Downes' statement that Frank was a "liar, perversely
basking in the kind of world and the kind of misery he is
perpetually seeking and persistently creating."9 Other critics
from the magazine psychoanalyzed Frank. Arthur Goldsmith
diagnosed him as suffering from "intense personal vision
marred by spite, bitterness, and narrow prejudices..."10 and
James Zanutto went to the extreme of questioning whether a
statement that was so personal merited publication or contri-
buted "to our knowledge of anything other than the personality of Robert Frank." 11

In a book review in The San Francisco Chronicle, critic William Hogan detected the same tendencies as the other critics, accusing Frank of neurosis:

While Frank's pictures are dazzling, moody, even moving, they lack sociological comment and have no real reportorial function. They remain merely neurotic, and to some degree dishonest. 12

Minor White cryptically agreed that The Americans was a vindictive lie:

No matter how true the fraction, when the jukebox eye on American life is presented as a symbol of the whole, a lie is the flower of truth. A gross lie is ground in with a vengeance. 13

On a formal level, some of the critics were offended that Frank disobeyed traditional composition and craftsmanship, by tilting the horizon, allowing prominent grain, photographing blurs and glaring light sources, and above all creating sloppy, apparently unplanned images. In this way, Frank not only challenged what to photograph but also how to photograph.

Most of the negative criticism originated with an objection to Frank's renunciation of accepted conceptual, visual and political traditions. But underlying the writings was a fear that this outsider was launching an attack on the United States. Les Barry felt that it was "only logical to conclude that his book is an attack on the United States" 14 and Downes said that Frank "hates the country of his adop-
tion."\textsuperscript{15} Frank answered to these implications of anti-Americanism by explaining that he intended to show a variety of scenes in a personal way. He was aware of the political climate of the time, but he defended his work, elaborating that he "had never traveled through the country. I saw something that was hidden and threatening. It is important to see what was invisible to others. You felt no tenderness."\textsuperscript{16}

Some critics realized that it was a moot point that Frank should have included other aspects of America in his essay. In \textit{Popular Photography}, H.N. Kinzer said, "The fact is simply that he feels strongly about some of the things he sees in his adopted country, and wants to call them to our attention."\textsuperscript{17} An article in \textit{The New Yorker} also credited Frank for his sensitivity toward "the special quality of American life."\textsuperscript{18} Although they disagreed with Frank's viewpoint, Arthur Goldsmith and Charles Reynolds found beauty in some of the images and in Frank's ability to express his internal ideas. \textsuperscript{19}

\textit{The Americans}' most staunch supporter was Walker Evans. He lauded the book in the 1958 \textit{U.S. Camera} annual and continued to praise Frank for the rest of his life. In a clear comparison between \textit{The Family of Man} and \textit{The Americans}, Evans upheld Frank's rejection of Steichen's political stance when he said:

\ldots it is a far cry from all the wooly, successful "photo-sentiments" about
human familyhood; from the mindless pictorial saletalk around fashionable, guilty and therefore bogus heart feeling. 20

4. The Americans and The Family of Man

[there is a] contrast between the sullen faces of real people and the vision of happiness television offers: men and women ecstatically engaged in stereotyped symbols of fun—running through fields, strolling on beaches, dancing and singing. Smiling faces with chronically open mouths express their gratification with the manifold bounties offered by the culture. One begins to feel there is a severe gap between the fantasies Americans live by and the realities they live in. (Philip Slater) 21

Steichen’s goal in The Family of Man was to show the universality of the world and the bond of world-wide brotherhood. He did this in an optimistic fashion, showing the world engaged in what Slater called stereotyped symbols of fun, reinforcing the American fantasy.

In his application to the Guggenheim committee, Frank’s goal was to "produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation." 22 However his document was not contemporary but avant-garde. Frank’s work was understood much later, as Ian Jeffrey wrote, "Its influence was gradual rather than immediate, as though Americans themselves only slowly came to recognise this as the picture of the flawed actuality of the American dream." 23 Although scenes from The Americans surrounded them, the pub-
lic did not recognize Frank's statement. Instead they saw Steichen's pleasant myth.

Steichen's people live on and off of the land; it is a place to work, to play and to fight for. It is the Earth Mother. Most of The Americans are estranged from their land; it is a hostile earth mother, nurturing cars and buildings. In The Family of Man, the earth is a home and a playground for people and animals. It is a grassy bed for a small child or for lovers. In Frank's world it becomes a hard pallet for a solitary tattooed man in a public park in Cleveland. In The Americans an anonymous bit of ground is a prayerground or a retreat, while in The Family of Man holy land is the dramatic, spectacular vista of "Mt. Williamson Clearing."

The land yields sustinence in The Family of Man. People belong there; they make homes and settle. Frank's people are homeless. For them the land is a place to traverse, not to know and love. The land is seen through car windows by Frank's subjects, as Kerouac describes:

Drain your basins in old Ohio and the Indian and the Illini plains, bring your Big Muddy rivers thru Kansas and the mudlands, Yellowstone in the frozen North, punch lake holes in Florida and L.A., raise your cities in the white plain, cast your mountains up, bedawze the west, bedight the west with brave hedgerow cliffs rising to Pomeathean heights and fame---plant your prisons in the basin of the Utah moon---nudge Canadian groping lands that end in Arctic bays, purl your Mexican ringneck, America---we're going home, going home. 24
Steichen's people live in togetherness, fellowship and intimacy among family and friends. Frank's Americans are as detached from one another as from their environment. Frank photographed passengers on a New Orleans trolley, caged in their individual compartments. They look out at the world as the world passes them by in reflections above their heads. People appear in the book as pseudo-humans: a smiling cardboard Santa Claus, faces on campaign posters and on television and movie screens. Flesh and blood humans emerge as apparitions and enigmatic shadows.

The Americans are not inimical yet they are not overtly violent. Violence is not sibling rivalry or men at war. It is the chaos of the man-made environment, a mean wind in a Chinese cemetery, a symbolic decapitation in a picture window or death on the highway. There is little amiability. There is little affection. Love is a kiss on the cheek at a charity ball or an embrace between parked cars at a city park. Marriage is a visit to the Reno City Hall, not a bridal bouquet and white gown.

Frank's Americans have a jaded youth. Children are not nursed by madonna-mothers, or taken under her wing or taught to follow father's footsteps. Rather than playfully imitating mom and dad, the little girl from Butte looks as old and troubled as the old woman in the car with her. In the introduction, Kerouac wrote about all of those kids in all of those cars:
"I told you to wait in the car" say people in America so Robert sneaks around and photographs little kids waiting in the car, whether three little boys in a motorama limousine, pompous & opifil, or poor little kids can't keep their eyes open on Route 90 Texas at 4 A.M. as dad goes to the bushes and stretches.  

The Americans eat on the road. While The Family of Man eats mom's home cooking or shares meals with relatives and friends, Frank's people eat lonely luncheonette meals: jumbo hot dogs at the Ranch Market or a dinner special at a cluttered table-for-one at a San Francisco cafeteria. Instead of pleasant comradery, The Americans find meal-time company in a blaring television set in an empty South Carolina restaurant or metal trash cans at a California picnic grounds. Even when diners share a table, they don't face one another. They line up at a drugstore lunch counter, having silent conversations with their thoughts, watching tired waitresses and short-order cooks while a firmament of cardboard advertisements for 10¢ orange whip dangles above their heads. Rather than illustrating consumption, for The Americans eating was another sad, alienating activity.

The children of Frank's Americans grow up to be weary Ranch Market waitresses and elevator operators. They serve up food rather than till the land. They don't tend herds in the mountains, but shine shoes among the urinals or a railway station. Factory workers are automaton-like, indistinguishable from their machines. In The Family of Man, workers
move in unison, pulling nets and laying rail. Steichen's teachers and scientists work with people while Frank's Houston banker was left alone among a pile of papers and a room full of humanoid chairs.

After work, The Americans seek their entertainment at bars and in their cars. Their lethargy extends to recreation: music is a passive experience. The Americans do not go to hear an orchestra or dance to a band. While The Family of Man is dancing and singing, The Americans feed their nickels to jukeboxes in dingy bars.

Steichen's rites of passage include death followed by joyous regeneration. Children die; people die of old age and war, mourned by black-veiled women and despondent families. Then a new crop comes up and continues the cycle. To Frank, death is a corpse covered by a tarp on the roadside, not sheltered by graveyard grass and crosses.

He photographed mourners at a funeral in St. Helena: pensive in the light-filled funeral home as they file by the dead man in his shiny, satin-lined coffin. He photographed them again, leaning on their cars before they left for the graveyard. Monuments for the dead were roadside markers. Or a windblown cemetery with torn-apart wreaths and paper flowers turned to litter. The dead received perpetual remembrance when Hested's Department Store in Lincoln, Nebraska has their annual sale on plastic flowers and styrofoam crosses.

In The Family of Man, religion is traditional and
conservative. It sanctifies love through the wedding ceremony, it imparts wisdom through its ministers and provides comfort to mourners and the down-trodden. The Family of Man finds God in the refuge of cathedrals and tradition in the decorum of candles, vestments, artifacts and ritual. The high priest of The Americans is the wretched little man in Los Angeles: standing alone on the street with his twisted face, holding his Jehovah's Witness messages. Frank's subjects find no shelter in churches. They celebrate their holidays along the East River or kneeling along the Mississippi amidst grass and debris. Their shrines are at the scenes of automobile accidents or in the middle of a Los Angeles city street; St. Francis giving his blessing to a gasoline station and a city hall. The Family of Man discovers solace in its churches. The Americans find their salvation in bumper-sticker religions.

The Family of Man was a cycle. Throughout the course of the cycle the world followed leaders; first mother, then father, then teachers and rulers. There was security in toeing the mark. Frank's Americans just follow one neon arrow to the next.

5. Robert Frank's Photographic Language

Frank used the camera to record new experiences in a new way. The origins of his photographic language can be traced to Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and the Beat
writers.

Like Cartier-Bresson, Frank used a small camera and photographed the street and its inhabitants. The significance of the comparison between these two photographers is Frank's departure from Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment."

Frank and Cartier-Bresson both unobtrusively observe a scene and steal moments from the flow of time. Beaumont Newhall likened Cartier-Bresson to a hunter: "When a flock of partridges flies within range, a good hunter will select one bird and bring it down intact." Cartier-Bresson waited for the scenario before him to fall into place, while Frank works in an unpremeditated manner. His approach is the opposite of the decisive moment. If Cartier-Bresson is a hunter, then Frank's method is like snapshooting, "taking a hurried aim."

Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment is a point in time when all of the elements in a scene come together. Geometry becomes the syntax of the event. As he explains:

...composition is the result of a simultaneous coalition, the organic co-ordination of elements seen by the eye. One does not add composition as though it were an afterthought superimposed on the basic subject material, since it is impossible to separate content from form.

It is in this manner that he emphasizes the essence of the instance and insures that a scene is presented as a whole, with a wholesome overtone. All of the space, both formal and temporal, is resolved and in an optimistic spirit.

In contrast, Frank courted unstructure by shooting
before all of the shapes fall into place. He photographs a world of imbalance and disparity, because for him the "world moves very rapidly, and not necessarily in perfect images." Frank saw like that consistently: blurred people with their backs to the camera in "Yom Kippur---East River, New York City," the bored elevator operator in Miami Beach and the waitress in the Indianapolis railway station, caught standing still in a haze of glaring reflections.

Frank rejected the decisive moment, Life and The Family of Man esthetics. His photograph, "Candy Store---New York City" is the antithesis of the decisive moment. It is not a conventionally pleasing image. It is not about a significant event or a peak point in time, but about a non-event and about restlessness. The subjects' bodies are truncated, their heads hit the top of the frame, in fact, they all seem to be sliding out of the chaotic background.

Frank cultivates the opposite of the decisive moment. His moments were not the peak of activity, but the monotony of inactivity, or the moment before the decisive moment occurs. Frank abandoned Cartier-Bresson's lyrical subjects and composition. Most significantly, the difference is between an eloquent record and an emotional opinion. Cartier-Bresson showed things of the world without comment, as Robert Frank said of his work:

...I've always thought it was terribly important to have a point of view, and I was always sort of disappointed in him that that was never in his pictures.
He traveled all over the goddamned world, and you never felt that he was moved by something that was happening other than the beauty of it, or just the composition. That's certainly why Life gave him big assignments. They knew he wouldn't come up with something that wasn't acceptable.

The Americans bears resemblance to Evans' work in content, though not in form or interpretation. Robert Frank and Walker Evans were both strangers to the scenes they photographed: Frank to The Americans and Evans to the rural working-class and migrant laborer. In an essay about The Americans and Evans' American Photographs, William Stott wrote about the difference:

Frank's America was the opposite of Evans'---a land of dissociation and meanness, not community and compassion---and Frank created it by reversing Evans' technique.

Frank remained on the outside of the scenes, working surreptitiously, and Evans, the outsider, entered his scenes. The subjects were aware of the photographer and responded to his presence:

There was nothing candid in his shots of people; he let them compose themselves for the camera and keep it at bay with a level stare. Because his negatives were large---usually 8" x 10" ---they had great detail and tonal range; the things he photographed, however "poor," have a clarity and texture that is beautiful.

Frank's style was dictated by the subject in another way. Dingy rooms were translated into muddy prints; brutal
atmospheres were printed harshly; fleeting, unclear moments were translated into off-kilter glances and chaotic situations were transformed with tilted horizons, fragmented frames and truncated, blurry figures. Frank's frame-line was a sharp cutting edge.

Evans and Frank photographed the same things: small towns and small town people, cars, telephone poles, storefronts, posters, advertisements, gas stations, coffee shops, graves and monuments. However in an Evans photograph a Rexall poster and a Coca-Cola Santa Claus ... give some color and warmth to the cardboard walls of his carefully swept living-room. In Frank's America a plastic Santa above a diner counter becomes just one more piece of crud on the wall.33

When the Beats write about gas stations, cars and cafes, they become identical icons with Frank's gas stations, cars and cafes.

...the Beats had perceived and managed to touch something essential that was only then beginning to take shape in the America of the 1950's. It was a very important and widespread something, compounded of a deep hunger for individual recognition, a desire to speak frankly and honestly about the things that mattered, and finally a need for passionate personal involvement in major undertakings. (Bruce Cook)34

Robert Frank and the Beats perceived that there were Americans who did not live like The Family of Man, with home and family; the rootless, aimless, lonely Americans that populated the streets that Frank photographed. While
Evans' poor looked dignified in their shabby settings, the Beats and Frank portray their people in a hostile environment. The photographs reveal the asynchrony of The Americans and their environment. They slide out of their surroundings, like the children in the New York candy store or the cowboys in the Gallup bar. The old man is swallowed up by his rooming house in Bunker Hill. The surroundings dwarf the Houston banker at his desk and engulf the pedestrians on Canal Street.

The automobile is one phenomenon that brought about this alienation. The most striking metaphor shared by Frank and the Beats is the image of the road.

The 1950's were the beginning of the National Defense Highway System, a modernization program that lured many Americans to the road. Along with the higher incomes of the fifties, there were new car models, advertisements about the pride of ownership and the prospect of upward mobility in a move from the city to the suburbs.

The automobile that Frank photographed is one that, as Philip Slater wrote:

...did more than anything else to destroy community life in America. It segmented the various parts of the community and scattered them about so that they became unfamiliar with one another. It isolated travelers and de-coordinated the movement of people from one place to another. It isolated and shrunk living units to the point where the skills involved in informal cooperation among large groups of people atrophied and were lost. As the community became a less and less
satisfying and pleasurable place to be, people more and more took to their automobiles as an escape from it. The Americans were rootless, but the car gave them privacy, security, freedom, shelter and escape. The road was the route to better times and new adventures. The car was something to lean on for support before seeing a friend buried or a place to lock up the kids while parents attended to adult business. Ginsberg wrote about being secure yet trapped in the automobile; passengers safe inside and anxious to reach their next destination:

Black signs Los Angeles 140 miles
stifling car-heat-------
music over tacky radio.

Frank captured that feeling of isolation and restlessness, and the hot and grimy feeling in "U.S. 91, leaving Blackfoot, Idaho." The sun is shining, bleaching the outside to a dull white. The two cowboys are looking straight ahead and radio jingles take away the need for conversation.

The automobile was Frank's Americans' most prized possession; Kerouac wrote about Frank's covered-car photograph: "shrouded in fancy expensive designed tarpolian." Frank also photographed an abandoned old car left to rust and become a part of the overgrown environment. While factory workers in Detroit cranked out more.

Humbert Humbert's travels across the United States with Lolita were published in 1955. A few years earlier, Henry Miller wrote about his journey through his homeland in The
Air-Conditioned Nightmare. Frank traveled in a second-hand Ford. Miller and his companion also took to the highways:

Little by little we evolved the idea of getting a car. The only way to see America is by automobile— that's what everybody says. It's not true, of course, but it sounds wonderful. 38

Jack Kerouac published the account of his rampageous odyssey back and forth across the United States, On the Road, in 1955. Kerouac and his cohorts went any way they could; on a Greyhound bus or hitching a ride on a '49 Hudson, a '38 Chevy or the back of a flatbed truck.

There is a parallel vision between On the Road and The Americans. Frank's style resembles that of his friend Kerouac in its looseness and quickness; Kerouac put down facts without revision and Frank photographed uncalculatedly. The content is also parallel in selection and interpretation. Frank and Kerouac traveled many of the same routes. Kerouac stopped at a soda fountain on the plains of North Platte and Frank photographed the same stretch of U.S. 30. Later Ginsberg made the same trek:

Straight thru Nebraska at midnight
Toward North Platte & Ogalalla. 39

Kerouac wrote about an old rickety Los Angeles rooming house that might have been Frank's Bunker Hill rooming house with its weathered wooden stairway.

"Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" 40 wrote Kerouac. In Kerouac's works, cars roared,
zoomed and crawled as drivers hunched over their steering wheels. Frank's passengers in Butte had a long look through the car window as it rolled along, and the black kids in the convertible had a fleeting glance at Belle Isle as they sped past. On the Road and The Americans took their creators onto the same highways and the same city streets. On U.S. 285, Frank photographed the endless highway with the sun just over the horizon, chasing a solitary car. Kerouac had spent "one inky night" on the same highway in New Mexico.

Frank and the Beat writers went beyond description of these icons. The new iconography elicited from Frank was not only a concrete language, but a spiritual one. The artifacts of American culture—the cars, cowboys, jukeboxes and flags—became symbols.

The car and the road became symbolic of restlessness and rootlessness. Objects were anthropomorphized, more alive than the humans. At each coffee-shop and saloon there is a jukebox. Frank's jukeboxes come to life. In the Beaufort cafe the old jukebox with its chrome curlicues becomes a jewel in its drab surroundings. Tilting the frame, Frank makes it appear as if the hulking creature is moving toward the little baby on the floor who could only crawl to escape. In the New York bar, the jukebox glows with life in contrast with the dark, shadowy humans in the room.

Frank said that his fascination with the music machines was their novelty and the idea of communicating sound through
a picture:

I guess it was something new that I had never seen, really, and I was impressed with that. I think I like pictures that would convey a sound. Maybe it has something to do with that. You would look at the photographs, and maybe you would hear the sound come out.41

Kerouac described the sounds that emanated from the jukeboxes: jazz records and groaning cowboy ballads and the "new 1950 jukeboxes with immense snouts and ten-cent slots and awful songs."42

The already mythologized American cowboy appears repeatedly in the Beat writings and The Americans. The cowboy epitomized the American ideal: adventuresome, living under the stars. He appeared in advertising, literature, art (Remington), television and the movies.

One of the most vital fantasies of America, the dream of the cowboy, free and footloose, become a drifter with the crowding and commercialization of modern life...On the Road caught a sense of the American folk hero rebelliousness, the spirit of the wide Western plains...colossal restlessness. (Ann Charters)43

In The Americans, the cowboy is more pathetic than heroic, the American dream tarnished: free to wander, but going nowhere; a man of the open Plains in dingy bars. Frank's cowboys are as displaced as the rest of his Americans.

Robert Frank and the Beats confronted the political spirit of America in the fifties. While Steichen avoided political feelings by including political moments, Frank's
photographs dissected man the political animal. The Family of Man shows history with a photograph of the Warsaw ghetto. Frank gives us "City Fathers---Hoboken, New Jersey" who could be city fathers anywhere, and "Political Rally---Chicago" with its stereotypical open-mouthed politician. Even less directly, he utilized the ultimate symbol of American patriotism, the flag, hanging limply or draped across the collective American face. In this way he changes the symbolism of the flag.

It had been traditionally photographed a la Iwo Jima as a symbol of the war and of patriotism, one nation under God and indivisible. Frank came along and showed it at rallies as decoration and as a sunshade in someone's backyard. In a Detroit bar it hangs between pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, tied down but ruffled as it attempted to fly freely. At an Independence Day picnic in Jay, New York, the light shines through the flag showing the tears and patches in the American system as tears and patches in the flag.

Rather than a vision of one unified world, the Beats, particularly Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, showed the poorly concealed flaws of the American society. Henry Miller describes it just as it appears in The Americans:

...It has become so to-day that when you see the flag boldly displayed you smell a rat somewhere. The flag has become a cloak to hide iniquity. We have two American flags always: one for the rich and one for the poor...
This is the bitter caricature which
the descendants of our liberty-
loving forefathers have made of
the national emblem.44

Photographers eventually adopted Frank's photographic handwriting and vocabulary. Danny Lyon elaborated upon Frank's Newburgh motorcyclists in his study called "Bike-
Riders." Donald Blumberg portrays people in Frank-like, gravity-defying environments. Charles Harbutt's Travelog
is about urban alienation and transportation. Burk Uzzle
borrowed Frank's flags, motorcycles and cars repeatedly in Landscapes. Uzzle has photographed a cleaner-cut version of
Frank's Newburgh cyclists in his ornament-bedecked man on
a cycle. He even incorporated two Frank trademarks in his
image of a fat man wearing an American flag shirt standing
next to an American flag motorcycle. Echoes of Frank's
covered car resonate from Uzzle's car-planter. The unwashed
teenagers in Landscapes appear to be transplanted from The
Americans' candy store. Frank's tuba from the Adlai rally
is multiplied and facelessly marching across a stage in some
patriotic ceremony. And the waitresses at The Dew Parlor
are reincarnates of the 1955 Ranch Market girl selling 18¢
hotdogs in Hollywood.

Steichen had his universal language, Cartier-Bresson
his decisive moment, Evans his "ordering of facts"45 Frank's
iconography and choices of form, content and interpretation
eliminated convention and outstepped the boundaries of the
photographic tradition.
It was principally his sombre vision of the world which disturbed and then ousted the humane and optimistic picture-making of the immediate post-war years. (Ian Jeffrey) 46

Eventually interest was revived in *The Americans*, so *Aperture* reissued it in 1969. A second critical appraisal of Frank declared him to be so significant that *The Americans* was marked as a turning point in photographic history.

III. Conclusion

Frank joined those in the fifties who took exception to the mainstream belief in materialism, blind patriotism and blind faith. *The Family of Man* and *The Americans* illustrate the polarity between the accepted cultural norms and the small voices that rejected them.

While Steichen chose to make his message acceptable and accessible to the masses, Frank believed that "something must be left for the onlooker. He must have something to see. It is not all said for him." ¹

While Steichen chose to be literal and obvious, Frank chose understatement and inference. While Steichen followed tradition, Frank abandoned it.

With eighty-three images, Frank was first the devil and then the darling of the photographic world. In challenging what was being photographed and how it was being photographed, Frank shook the foundations of the documentary and creative photographic traditions and in so doing created a new icono-
graphy for the contemporary image-maker and for the American people.

How much I wanted then to have a show, have these photographs reproduced, hoped that the magazines would publish them. In due time all this has happened. But that wasn't it either. Young people and students picked up THE AMERICANS. They recognized and understood my language. They listened to voices that had no part in the "System." Aware of hypocrisy around them, dissatisfied with slogans from preachers and patriots, they began to question everything. THE AMERICANS became for many an affirmation of what they felt about their country...that's what I cherish most. (Robert Frank)

This study has concentrated on the photographs themselves and the interrelationships of the photographs of Steichen's editorial choice for The Family of Man and the photographs Robert Frank made for The Americans. I have essentially left untouched the personal histories of these two men and the social and political interactions of the groups of photographers that surrounded them. The particularities of the photographic communicay at mid-century---cliques, publications, relationships between photographer and editor, the world of earning a living with the camera---would repay further study. As we have moved further away in time from these two photographic events, their importance becomes more obvious. The work of the photographer is related to his social and political environment. The Family
of Man and The Americans not only accurately mirror the feelings in this country at that time. Steichen's work sums up what came before and Frank's work defines the course of the future.
Footnotes

I. The Fifties and *The Family of Man*


12 ibid.

13 ibid.


II. The Fifties and *The Americans*


4 ibid., p. 64.


7 Frank, *Photography within the Humanities*, p. 56.

8 ibid.


15 Downes, p. 104.


22 Robert Frank reprinted in *Photographers on Photography*, Nathan Lyons, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:


24 Jack Kerouac, introduction to The Americans, pp. iv -v.

25 ibid., pp. v-vi


28 Henri Cartier-Bresson, reprinted in Photographers on Photography, p. 46.


30 ________, Photography within the Humanities, p. 56.


32 ibid., p. 84.
33 ibid.


39 Ginsberg, *The Fall of America*, p. 68.


41 Robert Frank, *Photography within the Humanities*, p. 58.

42 Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 221.


III. Conclusion


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