

8.

DOCUMENTATION: THE SOCIAL SCENE *to 1945*

The true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science and to common lives.

—Walt Whitman, 1860¹

Documentary: That's a sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. . . . The term should be documentary style. . . . You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless.

—Walker Evans, 1971²

AS AN INEXPENSIVE AND REPLICATIBLE MEANS of presenting (supposedly) truthful verifications of visual fact, camera images were bound to become important adjuncts of the campaigns waged by reformers in industrialized nations during the 19th century to improve inequitable social conditions. Nevertheless, while photography's potential for this purpose was recognized soon after the medium's inception, a characteristic form for social documentation did not emerge until the end of the century. Then, shaped by both the emergence of organized social reform movements and the invention of an inexpensive means of mechanically reproducing the photograph's halftones, social photography began to flower in the aspect that we know today.

A tandem phrase, social documentary, is sometimes used to describe works in which social themes and social goals are paramount, because the word documentary could refer to any photograph whose primary purpose is the truthful depiction of reality. Indeed before 1880, nearly all unposed and unmanipulated images were considered documentation; since then, millions of such records of people, places, and events have been made. The word social also presents problems when used to describe the intent of a photograph because many camera images have as their subject some aspect of social behavior. For instance, commercial *cartes* (pl. no. 409), snapshots, postcards, artistic and photojournalistic images often depict social situations; that is, they deal with people, their relationships to one another and the way they live and work even though the motives of their makers have nothing to do with social commitment or programs. This said, however, it also must be emphasized that one cannot be too categorical about such distinctions, since all photographs defy attempts to define their essential nature too narrowly, and in the case of works that have social change as their prime goal the passage of time has been especially effectual in altering purpose, meaning, and resonance.

Documentary, as Evans observed, refers also to a particular style or approach. Although it began to emerge in the late 19th century, the documentary mode was not clearly defined as such until the 1930s, when American photography historian Beaumont Newhall noted that while the social documentary photographer is neither a mere recorder nor an "artist for arts sake, his reports are often brilliant technically and highly artistic"—that is, documentary

images involve imagination and art in that they imbue fact with feeling.³ With their focus mainly on people and social conditions, images in the documentary style combine lucid pictorial organization with an often passionate commitment to humanistic values—to ideals of dignity, the right to decent conditions of living and work, to truthfulness. Lewis Hine, one of the early partisans of social documentation (*see Profile*), explained its goals when he declared that light was required to illuminate the dark



409. CRUCES AND CO. *Fruit Vendors*, 1870s. Albumen print. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

areas of social existence, but where to shine the light and how to frame the subject in the camera are the creative decisions that have become the measure of the effectiveness of this style to both inform and move the viewer.⁴

A crucial aspect of social documentation involves the context in which the work is seen. Almost from the start, photographs meant as part of campaigns to improve social conditions were presented as groups of images rather than individually. Although they were included at times in displays at international expositions held in Europe and the United States in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, such works were not ordinarily shown in the salons and exhibitions devoted either to artistic images or snapshots. They were not sold individually in the manner of genre, landscape, and architectural scenes. Instead, socially purposive images reached viewers as lantern slides or as illustrations in pamphlets and periodicals, usually accompanied by explanatory lectures and texts. Indeed, the development of social documentary photography is so closely tied to advances in printing technology and the growth of the popular press that the flowering of the movement would be unthinkable without the capability of the halftone process printing plate to transmute silver image into inked print (see *A Short Technical History, Part II*). In this regard, social documentation has much in common with photo-reportage or photojournalism, but while this kind of camera documentation often involved social themes, the images usually were not aimed at social change.

Early Social Documentation

Few images of a socially provocative nature were made in the period directly following the 1839 announcements of the twin births of photography. The small size, reflective surfaces, and uniqueness of the daguerreotype did not suit it for this role despite attempts by some to document such events as the workers' rallies sponsored by the Chartist Movement in England in 1848 (*pl. no. 331*). The slow exposure time and broad definition of the calotype also made it an inefficient tool for social documentation. Of greater importance, however, is the fact that the need for accurate visual documentation in support of programs for social change was a matter of ideology rather than just technology; it was not until reformers grasped the connections between poverty, living conditions, and the social behavior of the work force (and its economic consequences) that the photograph was called upon to act as a "witness" and sway public opinion.

Nevertheless, although social betterment was not initially involved, images of working people were made soon after portraiture became possible. Usually commissioned by the sitters themselves, some images straddle the line

between individual portrait and genre scene, as in a daguerreotype by an unknown American depicting blacksmiths at work (*pl. no. 330*). Its particularity of detail—it includes surroundings, tools, work garments, and individual facial characteristics—coupled with the revelation of a sense of the upright dignity of the two men pictured, reflects attitudes toward rural and artisan labor similar to those embodied in the work of the American genre painters such as William Sidney Mount.

Calotypists who favored the picturesque genre tradition generally regarded working people as types rather than individuals, and portrayed them in tableauxlike scenes such as one of hunters by the French photographer Louis Adolphe Humbert de Molard (*pl. no. 257*). Others found more natural poses and more evocative lighting in order to place greater emphasis on individual expression and stance rather than on tools and emblems of a particular occupa-



410. T. G. DUGDALE. *Pit Brow Girl, Sherington, 1867*. Albumen *carte-de-visite*. A. J. Munby Collection, Trinity College Library, Cambridge, England.

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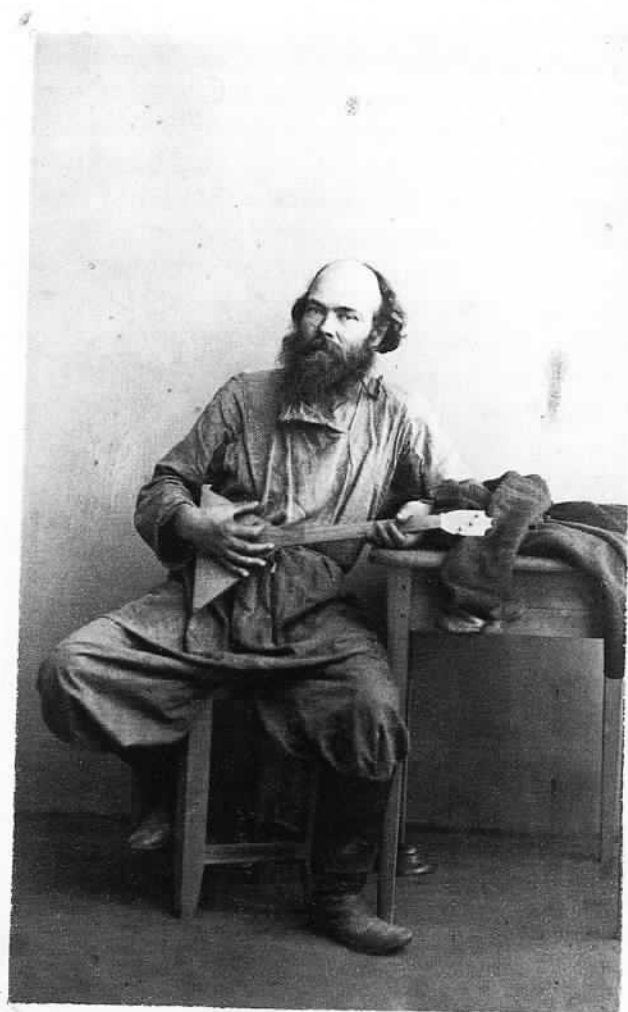


W. CARRICK, 19, petite Morskoi

411. WILLIAM CARRICK. *Russian Types (Milkgirl)*, c. 1859. Albumen *carte-de-visite*. Collection and © Felicity Ashbee, London.

tion or station in life. This approach, visible in images of farm laborers made by William Henry Fox Talbot on his estate at Lacock and of fisherfolk in Newhaven by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, may be seen as indications of the growing interest among artists and intellectuals not only in the theme of work but in working people as individuals.

A consciously conceived effort involving the depiction of working people was undertaken in 1845 by Hill and Adamson. Probably the first photographic project to embrace a socially beneficial purpose, it apparently was suggested that calotypes might serve as a means of raising funds to provide properly decked boats and better fishing tackle that would improve the safety of the fishermen of the village of Newhaven, Scotland. Intending to present



W. CARRICK, 19, petite Morskoi

412. WILLIAM CARRICK. *Russian Types (Balalaika Player)*, c. 1859. Albumen *carte-de-visite*. Collection and © Felicity Ashbee, London.

their subject in as favorable light as possible for cosmopolitan viewers, Hill and Adamson made beautifully composed and lighted calotypes of individuals (*pl. no. 51*) and groups that may be seen as especially picturesque forerunners of the documentary style.

After the invention of the collodion negative, which made possible the inexpensive Ambrotype, and the still cheaper and easily replicated albumen print on paper, working people began to be photographed more frequently, appearing on *cartes-de-visite* and other formats. With the subjects posed in studios in front of plain backdrops, often with the tools of their trade, these works, meant either as mementos for the sitter or souvenir images for travelers, ordinarily pay little attention to actual conditions of work or to the expressive use of light and form to reveal

character. The incongruity between studio decor and occupation, for example, is obvious in an 1867 English *carte* of a female mine worker (*pl. no. 410*) who, appropriately clothed for work in clogs, trousers, and headscarf, stands squarely before a classy paneled wall with a studio prop of a shovel by her side. One exception to the generally undistinguished character of such *cartes* is the work of Danish photographer Heinrich Tönnies, who maintained a studio in the provincial town of Aalborg between 1856 and 1903.⁵ In common with many such portraitists, Tönnies photographed all classes of people—carpenters, housemaids, chimney sweeps, waiters—as well as the town's more prosperous folk, but despite the anomaly of the decorated studio carpet and occasional painted backdrop, his images reveal a feeling for character that endows these working-class sitters with unusual individual presence (*pl. no. 69*).

Similar images of working people in cultures outside of western Europe and the United States served mainly as souvenirs. To cite but two examples, William Carrick, a Scottish photographer who opened a studio in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1859, and Eugenio Maunoury, a French national working in Peru at about the same time, each produced *cartes* of peddlers, street traders, and peasants. The distinctive quality of Carrick's *Russian Types* (*pl. nos. 411 and 412*), a series of over 40 images made in Simbirsk that fall partway between portraiture and picturesque genre, probably is owed to the photographer's expressed sympathy for humble clients to whom he devoted special attention.⁶ Maunoury, said to have been associated with Nadar's studio in Paris before appearing in Lima in 1861, may have been the first to introduce the genre *carte* to this part of South America, but his static studio scenes depict working-class types as glum and inert (*pl. no. 413*).

Commercial photographers working in the Near and Far East in the latter part of the 19th century produced

larger-format views in which working people, social life, native customs, and seemingly exotic dress were featured. Felix Bonfils, whose scenic views of the Near East were mentioned earlier, was a prolific producer of such socially informative views, many of which show the women of the Ottoman Empire in characteristic dress and activity but with uncharacteristic ease of pose and expression (*pl. no. 414*). This naturalness, and the fact that in a number of instances native women posed without veils, is attributable to the pictures being taken not by Bonfils himself but by his wife, Marie Lydie Cabannis Bonfils, who worked in the family studios in Beirut, Baalbeck, and Jerusalem between 1867 and 1916. In South America, a similar engagement with the life of the lower classes can be seen in the images of field peasants by Argentinian photographer Benito Panunzi (*pl. no. 415*).

Unquestionably, the most graceful studio portrayals of artisans, laborers, and geisha are the large-format albumen prints turned out in the Japanese commercial establishments of Félice Beato, Reteniz von Stillfried, and Kusakabe Kimbei. The subtle handling of light and the artful arrangements of props and figures create a rare tension between information—what work is done, what garments are worn—and idealization. Enhanced further at times by delicate hand-coloring or by vignetting (*pl. no. 333*), these highly decorative images may be seen as camera equivalents of the *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints that also often featured depictions of working people.

Social life and ways of work engrossed amateur as well as commercial photographers working or traveling in these parts of the world. During 1857, compositions by British amateur William Johnson appeared each month in the periodical *Indian Amateurs Photographic Album* under the title "Costumes and Characters of Western India" (*pl. no. 191*). Photographs of lower-caste Hindus taken by British



413. EUGENIO MAUNOURY.
Three Portraits, c. 1863.
Albumen *cartes-de-visite*.
Collection H. L.
Hoffenberg, New York.

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414. MARIE LYDIE CABANNIS
BONFILS. *Group of Syrian Bedouin
Women*, c. 1870. Albumen print.
Semitic Museum, Harvard University,
Cambridge, Mass.



415. BENITO PANUNZI. *Settlers in the
Countryside*, c. 1905. Albumen print.
Collection H. L. Hoffenberg,
New York.



416. WILLOUGHBY WALLACE HOOPER. *The Last of the Herd, Madras Famine, 1876-78*. Albumen print. Royal Geographic Society, London.

Army Captain Willoughby Wallace Hooper are further indications of the growing interest among Westerners in the social problems of the lower classes around the world (pl. no. 416). Perhaps the most completely realized result of a kind of curiosity about the way people live is a four-volume work entitled *Illustrations of China and Its People*, published by photographer John Thomson in England in 1873/74. With a lively text and 200 photographs taken during the photographer's four-year stay in China, the work attempted to make an arcane and exotic way of life understandable and acceptable to the British public by showing industrious and well-disposed natives (pl. no. 192) interspersed with unusual architectural and natural monuments (pl. no. 138). In so doing, Thomson helped create a style and format for documentation that carried over to projects concerned with social inequities.

A somewhat different view of the non-Westerner emerged in the photographs of Native American tribesmen by cameramen attached to the geographical and geological surveys of the American West. Early images by the Canadian Humphrey Lloyd Hime, and later works by the Americans Jack Hillers, William Henry Jackson, and Timo-

thy O'Sullivan, for example, depict "native races" with a sober directness unclouded by the least sense of the picturesque. Hillers's views of the Southern Paiute and Ute tribes, made on the Powell Expedition of 1872, were especially influential in establishing a style of ethnic and social documentation that had as its goal the presentation of information in a clear fashion without either idealization or undue artistry. This approach was taken over by the Bureau of American Ethnology after 1879, and it became a cornerstone of the social documentary style that began to emerge in the late 19th century. This style also informed such sociologically oriented documents as *Report on the Men of Marwar State*, mentioned in Chapter 2 (pl. no. 417).

Although the works discussed so far were sometimes published in books and albums, or were sold commercially, their impact on Western viewers is difficult to gauge. On the other hand, there is no question about the impact of the hundreds of thousands of stereograph views of similar social material published by commercial stereograph firms. From 1860 on, as capitalist nations opened up large areas of Africa, Asia, and South America for trade, exploitation, and colonization, companies such as Negretti and



Zambra, the London Stereoscopic Company, and Underwood and Underwood sent photographers—some known, some still anonymous—to record people at work and their housing, dress, and social customs. These three-dimensional views, accepted by the public as truth that “cannot deceive or extenuate,”³⁷ were in fact taken from the point of view of the industrialized Westerner; but while the scenes frequently were chosen to emphasize the cultural gap between the civilized European or American and the backward non-white, it is possible that glimpses of social life, such as two stereographic views of conditions in Cuba at the turn of the century (*pl. nos. 418 and 419*), inadvertently awakened viewers to inequities in colonized areas.

Toward the close of the 19th century, interest in social customs led some photographers to capture on glass plate and film indigenous peoples and folk customs that were in

417. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. *1 of 1565 Aahirs; He Sells Cow Dung* (from *Report on the Men of Marwar State [Jodhpur]*, 3rd volume), c. 1891. Albumen print. American Institute of Indian Studies, Chicago.



418. UNDERWOOD and UNDERWOOD (Publishers). *Wretched Poverty of a Cuban Peasant Home, Province of Santiago*, 1899. One-half of an albumen stereograph. Keystone-Mast Collection, California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside.



419. UNDERWOOD and UNDERWOOD (Publishers). *The Courtyard of a Typical Cuban Home, Remedios*, 1899. One-half of an albumen stereograph. Keystone-Mast Collection, California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside.



420. CHARLES L'HERMITTE. *On the Coast of Plomarc'h, Douarnenez*, 1912. Gelatin silver print. Explorer, Paris.

danger of extinction. In Europe, this role was assumed in the 1880s by Sir Benjamin Stone, a comfortably situated English manufacturer who hoped that a “record of ancient customs, which still linger in remote villages,” would provide future generations with an understanding of British cultural and social history.⁸ Somewhat later, José Ortíz Echagüe, a well-to-do Spanish industrialist, and Charles L’Hermitte, the son of a renowned French Salon painter, undertook similar projects, seeking out customs, costumes, and folkways in provincial byways that they believed would soon vanish with the spread of urbanization. Exemplified by L’Hermitte’s photograph of lace-makers in Brittany made in 1912 (*pl. no. 420*), such images tend toward nostalgia in that they romanticize handwork and folk mannerisms while seldom suggesting the difficulties and boredom of provincial life.

Similar attempts to use the camera both to arrest time and to make a comparative statement about past and pre-

sent can also be seen in the work of several photographers in the United States who turned their attention to native tribal life just before the turn of the century. In contrast to the earlier unnuanced records by Hillers and others of Indian dress and living arrangements, these projects—undertaken between 1895 and about 1910 by Edward S. Curtis, Karl E. Moon, Robert and Frances Flaherty, and Adam Clark Vroman—were designed to play up the positive aspects of tribal life, in particular the sense of community and the oneness of the individual Native American with nature. This attitude is especially visible in the 20-volume survey published by Curtis, which owing to its strongly Pictorialist interpretation was discussed in Chapter 7. The handsome portraits and artfully arranged group scenes made by Moon in the Southwest, and the close-ups of cheerful and determined Inuit tribespeople of the far north (*pl. no. 197*) photographed by Robert Flaherty, embody a similar desire to make their subjects palatable to



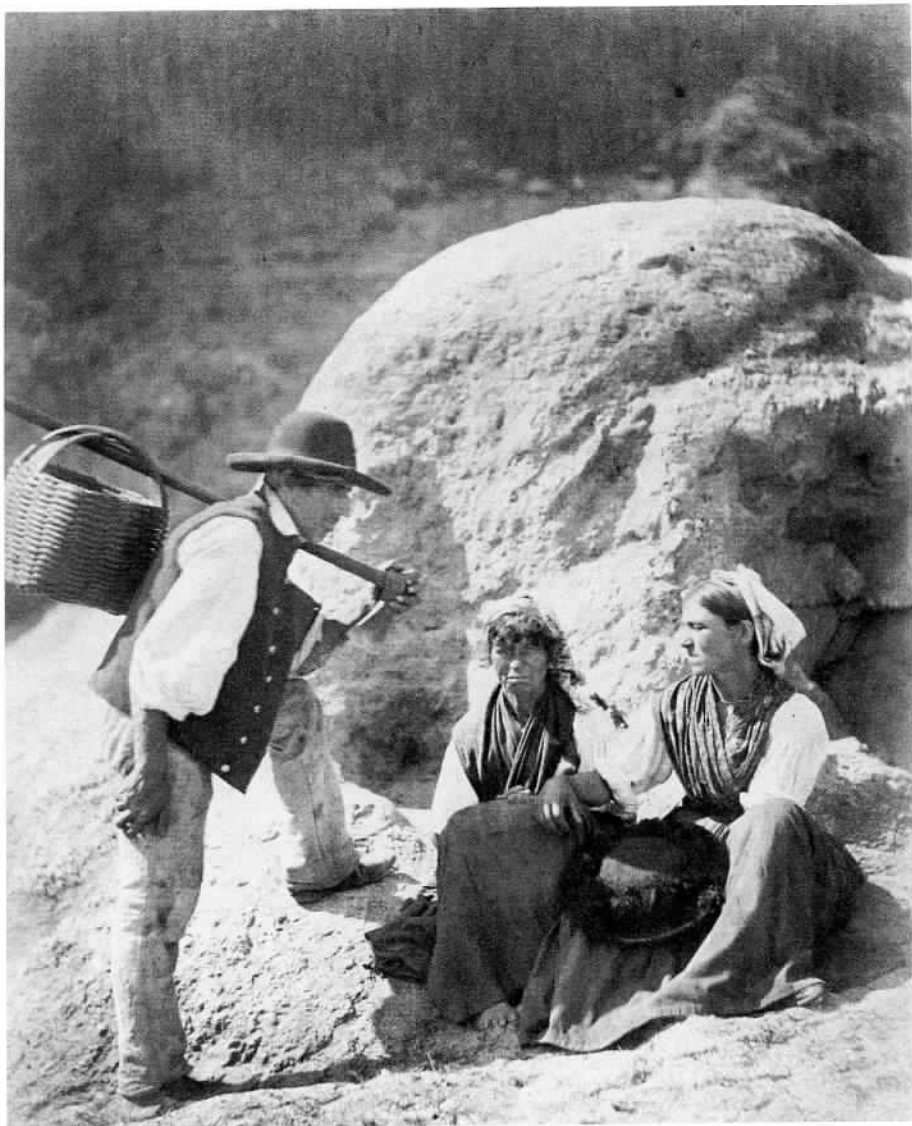
421. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. *Blind Russian Beggars*, 1870. Albumen print. Benjamin Stone Collection, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham, England.

white Americans with strong ethnocentric biases. As pioneers in documentary film in the United States in the early 1920s, the Flahertys became known for their ability to give dramatic form to mundane events, and among the 1,500 or so still photographs that Robert made of the Inuit are works that seem arranged and posed to accord with a concept of these subjects as heroic and energetic.

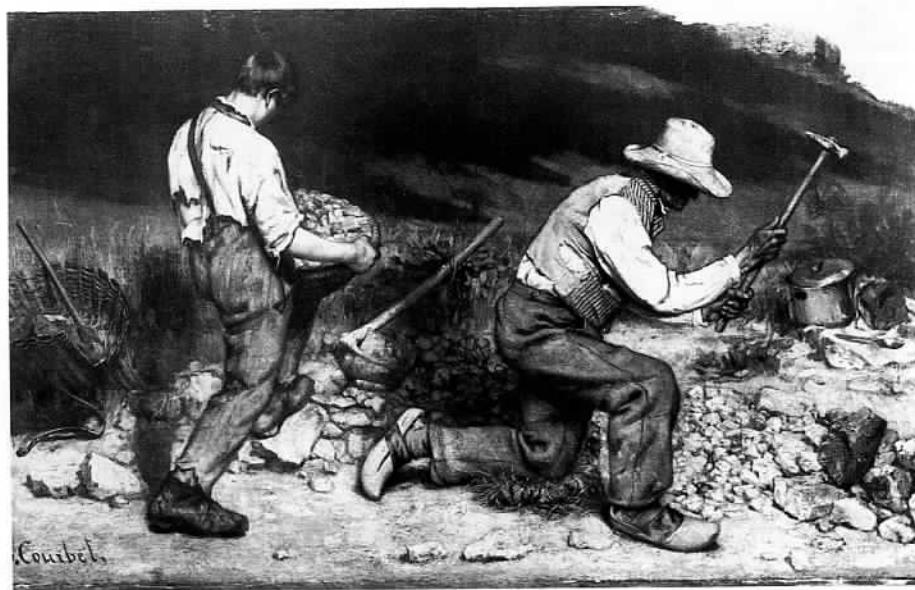
A project of more limited proportions than the one envisioned by Curtis occupied Adam Clark Vroman, a successful California book merchant who also saw in photography a means to emphasize the virtues of American tribal life. His images, of which *Hopi Maiden* is an example (pl. no. 195), were carefully framed to suggest the grace,

dignity, and industriousness of the natives of the American Southwest, but Vroman did not entirely romanticize his theme or obscure the hardships shaping Indian society in his time. In true documentary fashion, he used the photographs in slide lectures and publications in order to awaken white Americans to the plight of the Native American.

The interest in making images of a social nature relates to the collections of photographs of people at work, at home, and at play that were initiated toward the end of the century by individuals who believed such reservoirs of images would facilitate the study of history. Benjamin Stone, for example, not only photographed vanish-



422. JAMES JOSEPH FORRESTER. *Peasants of the Alto Douro*, 1856. From *The Photographic Album*, 1857. Albumen print. Gernsheim Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.



423. GUSTAVE COURBET. *The Stonebreakers*, 1851-52. Oil on canvas. Destroyed; formerly Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Dresden, Germany.



424. FORD MADDOX BROWN.
Work, 1852. Oil on canvas. City
Art Gallery, Manchester,
England.

ing customs but, an inveterate traveler, he collected camera images of social experiences around the world, typified by a photograph of blind beggars in St. Petersburg by an unknown photographer (pl. no. 421). He advocated the establishment of photographic surveys to be housed in local museums and libraries throughout Britain, a concept that actually was realized around the turn of the century with the establishment by Francis Greenwood Peabody, professor of social ethics at Harvard University, of a "Social Museum" that eventually comprised over 10,000 documents, including photographs, of social experience around the world.

It should be emphasized again that it is difficult to categorize many images that at first glance seem concerned with social themes such as work and living conditions, in that the goals of the makers were varied and complex. For example, should one regard views of workers on Talbot's estate at Lacock or of peasants in Portuguese vineyards owned by the family of photographer James Joseph Forrester (pl. no. 422) as more than a new type of picturesque genre imagery because they show us tools, dress, and relationships? *Children on a Fish Weir* (pl. no. 274) by the Venetian photographer-publisher Carlo Naya transforms the reality of working youngsters into an idyllic episode; should such commercial views be considered social documentation also? Can one really decide whether Curtis's views of tribal life in the United States are authentic documents or Pictorialist fictions?

Perhaps all of these images, no matter what their purpose, might be seen as aspects of the growing interest in

problems of work and social existence on the part of Western artists and intellectuals. From the 1850s on, alongside the serious but idealized treatment of the European peasantry by Barbizon painters, realistic portrayals of less bucolic kinds of work associated with advancing industrialization had begun to appear in graphic art and literature. Exemplified by *The Stonebreakers* (pl. no. 423) of 1851/52 by French realist Gustave Courbet and by *Work* (pl. no. 424), a grandiose composition begun in 1852 by the English Pre-Raphaelite Ford Maddox Brown, such themes signaled the mounting concern among elements of the middle class for the social and ethical consequences of rampant industrialization—a concern that helped prepare for the role of the documentary photograph in campaigns for social change.

Obviously, the complexity of ideas explored in the painting *Work*, which deals with the roles and kinds of labor necessary to the functioning of industrialized society, is difficult if not impossible to encompass in photography. Nevertheless, an effort was made by Oscar Gustav Rejlander. His composite picture *Two Ways of Life* (pl. no. 253—discussed in Chapter 5) can be seen as an attempt to deal with the moral and ethical implications of labor in a society in which the working class faces a choice between virtuous hard work or sinful ease. While Rejlander's image is derivative in style and moralistic in concept, other of his photographs embody less complex social themes and are more successful. For instance, the anxiety of unemployment is imaginatively handled in the composite image *Hard Times* (pl. no. 266) while portraits of chimney sweeps reveal an individualized grace that does not depend on social class.



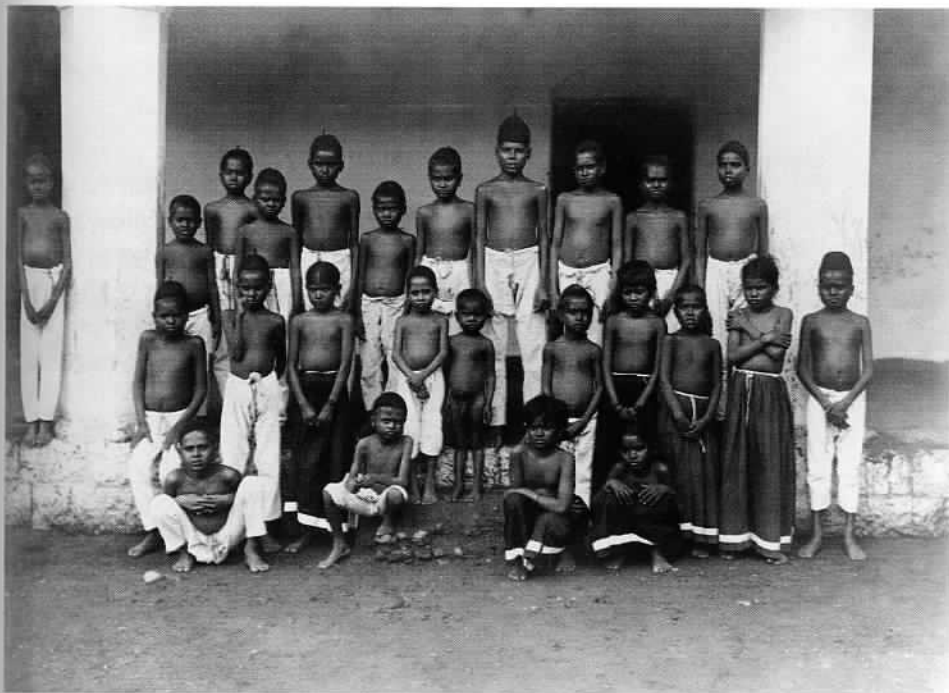
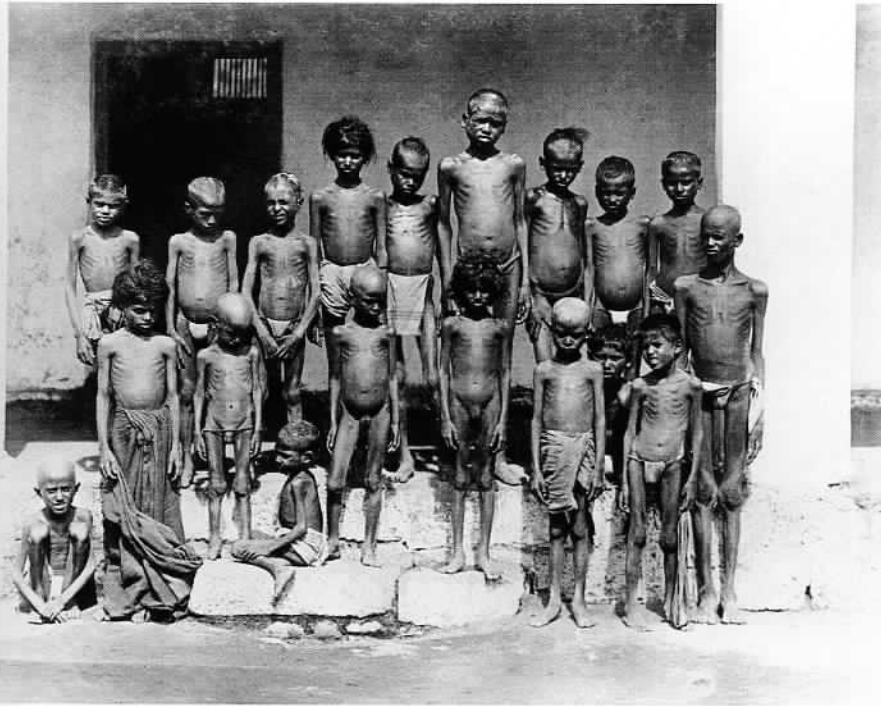
425-26. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. *Before and After Photographs of a Young Boy*, c. 1875. Albumen prints. Barnardo Photographic Archive, Ilford, England.

The Social Uses of Photographic Documentation

The concept of using camera documentation to improve social conditions could not evolve so long as poverty was regarded as a punishment for sinful behavior. Nevertheless, even before such Calvinistic attitudes were replaced by an understanding that improved housing and working conditions might produce better behavior and a more efficient labor force, the photograph began to find a place in campaigns for social betterment. *Carte* portraits were turned into a quasi-sociological tool by Dr. Thomas John Barnardo, a self-appointed evangelical missionary who opened his first home for destitute boys in London in 1871 and went on to organize a network of so-called charitable institutions. To illustrate the effectiveness of his programs, Barnardo installed a photographic department to document the "before" and "after" transformations of street waifs into obedient slaveys (*pl. nos. 425 and 426*); the

prints were kept as records and sold to raise funds.

Such works have little value as expression, but they raised issues that have continued to be perceived as significant problems in social documentation. Because the transformations seen in the photographs were at best little more than cosmetic, the result of a wash and a new wardrobe, and at worst entirely fictitious, Barnardo was accused of falsifying truth for the camera; he responded that he was seeking generic rather than individual truths about poverty. This attitude was considered flawed by subsequent social documentary photographers, who endeavored to make absolutely authentic records while also expressing what they saw as the larger truth of a situation. Nevertheless, the "before" and "after" image became a staple of social documentation, appearing in American tracts of the 1890s and on the other side of the world in the photographs made by the firm of Raja Lala Deen Dayal, for the nizamat of Hyderabad to show the efficacy of relief programs for the starving (*pl. nos. 427 and 428*).



427-28. RAJA LALA DEEN DAYAL.
Before and After (from
Types of Emaciation, Aurangabad),
1899-1900. Gelatin silver prints.
Private collection.

As photographs came to be accepted as evidence in campaigns to improve social conditions, it became apparent that in themselves images could not necessarily be counted on to convey specific meanings—that how they were perceived often depended on the outlook and social bias of the viewer. The *carte* images of women mineworkers

mentioned earlier are a case in point; introduced before a British industrial commission as evidence that women were deprived of their feminine charms because mine work forced them to wear trousers, the same images suggested to others that hard work induced independence and good health in women.⁹ Naturally, not all photographic



429. HORACE W. NICHOLLS. *Delivering Coal*, c. 1916. Gelatin silver print. Royal Photographic Society, Bath, England.

images can be as broadly construed as these bland *cartes* obviously were, but one of the basic tenets of the developing documentary style was that images should not only provide visual facts, they should be as unambiguous as possible in tone. For instance, in an interesting contrast to the *cartes* under discussion, an image of a young woman delivering coal (*pl. no. 429*), taken some 50 years later by Horace Nicholls as part of a project to investigate the role of women doing "men's work" during World War I, leaves little question as to the subject's feelings.

As a social theme, mining became a subject of special



430. TIMOTHY O'SULLIVAN. *Miner at Work, Comstock Lode*, 1867. Albumen print. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

appeal to artists, writers, and photographers in the late-19th and early-20th centuries owing to its difficulties and dangers and to the perception of the mineworker as one who mixed individualism and fearlessness. One of the earliest American mine images, an 1850 daguerreotype of California goldminers (*pl. no. 431*), presents this occupation as an open-air enterprise that seems not to entail hours of back-breaking "panning." The first underground mining pictures were made in England in 1864; some three years later, while on the Clarence King expedition, Timothy O'Sullivan documented silver miners at work in images that suggest the constriction of space and the physical difficulty of the work (*pl. no. 430*). In the final several decades of the 19th century, mining companies themselves commissioned photographs of their operations and often displayed them at international expositions. Between 1884 and 1895, George Bretz, who pioneered subterranean photography with electric light in the United States, focused almost exclusively on mining in Pennsylvania hard-coal collieries. *Breaker Boys, Eagle Hill Colliery* (*pl. no. 432*) was one of a number of works acclaimed for unusual subject, technical expertise, and directness of treatment.¹⁰ Not long afterward, Gustav Marrisiaux, a Belgian photographer commissioned by mining interests in Liège, depicted (among



431. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER.
Goldminers, California, 1850.
 Daguerreotype. International Museum of
 Photography at George Eastman House,
 Rochester, N.Y.



432. GEORGE BRETZ. *Breaker Boys, Eagle Hill Colliery, c. 1884.* Gelatin silver print.
 Edward L. Bafford Photography
 Collection, Albin O. Kuhn Library and
 Gallery, University of Maryland,
 Baltimore.



LEFT:

433. GUSTAV MARRISSIAUX. *Breaker Boys*, 1904. Gelatin silver print. Musée de la Vie Wallone, Liège, Belgium.

BELOW LEFT:

434. W. ROBERTS. *Street-Seller of Birds' Nests*, c. 1850. Wood engraving after a daguerreotype by Richard Beard or assistant; an illustration from *London Labour and London Poor* by Henry Mayhew. New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

BELOW RIGHT:

435. JOHN THOMSON. *The Crawlers* from *Street Life in London* (an album of 36 original photographs), 1877. Woodburytype. Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Edward Steichen.



other operations) young boys similarly occupied in separating coal from slag (pl. no. 433). Perhaps the most compelling images of this subject are those taken by Lewis Hine around 1910 as part of the campaign against the unconstrained use of children in heavy industry being waged by the National Child Labor Committee (pl. no. 474).

The directness of style associated with social documentation emerged around 1850, the consequence of expanded camera documentations on paper and glass of historic and modern structures—buildings, railroads, bridges, and, on occasion, social facilities (see Chapter 4). Commissioned mainly by government bodies, railroad lines, and publishers, the photographers involved with this work demonstrated an earnest respect for actuality and an attentive regard for the expressive properties of light. While they did not seek to obscure or mystify their subjects, they realized that the judicious management of light added an aesthetic dimension to the description of objects and events. One such documentation eloquently confirms that while actuality may be depicted without artifice, it can be made suggestive; *The Linen Room* (pl. no. 436) by Charles Nègre avoids the picturesqueness this photographer brought to his images of street types and draws one into the scene by an alternating cadence of dark and light notes that seem to imbue the scene with a mysterious silence. The series of which this is part was commissioned in 1859 by Napoleon III to demonstrate the government's benevolent concern for industrial workers injured on the job.

Social Photography in Publication

Despite the realization that photographs might be useful in campaigns for social improvement, it took a while for the medium of photography and the message of social activism to be effectively harnessed together. One early sociological venture involving camera images was Henry Mayhew's pioneering work, *London Labour and London Poor*, which first appeared toward the end of 1850. Combining illustrations based on daguerreotypes taken under the supervision of Richard Beard with "unvarnished" language in the text portions, the author sought to enliven his account of lower-class urban life, but in the translation from camera image to wood engraving the London "poor" became little more than stiffly positioned genre types (pl. no. 434). Furthermore, with the backgrounds only sketchily indicated, the figures of street vendors and workers seem extracted from their environment, a visual anomaly in view of Mayhew's desire to bring the reality of working-class existence home to his readers. Curiously, the same lack of veracity characterizes his later work on English prison conditions even though by this time the engraver had access to albumen prints from collodion negatives supplied by the



436. CHARLES NÈGRE. *Vincennes Imperial Asylum: The Linen Room*, 1859. Albumen print. Collection André Jammes, Paris; Courtesy National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

photographer Herbert Watkins. Even so, the format that was established—authentic language supposedly from firsthand interviews and accurate visual illustration from photographs—became the bedrock of sociological documentation—one that is still used today.

A later work, *Street Life in London*, a serial that began publication in 1877, repeated this scheme, but instead of line engravings it was illustrated with Woodburytypes made from photographs taken expressly for this project by Thomson, after his return from China. The 36 images that illustrate written vignettes supplied by author Adolphe Smith seemed to accord with the canons of the documentary style even though the text was a mixture of sensationalist reporting and moralistic opinions. The work was not a condemnation of the class system or of poverty as such, but an attempt to make the middle class more sympathetic to the plight of the poor and thus more eager to ameliorate conditions. In keeping with the tone of the writing, Thomson photographed vendors and other work-



437. THOMAS ANNAN. *Close No. 75 High Street* from *Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow*, 1868. Albumen print. Edward L. Bafford Photography Collection, Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore.

ing-class Londoners in an agreeable light, on the whole choosing pleasant-looking individuals and consciously arranging them in tableauxlike genre scenes. Nevertheless, at least one image—*The Crawlers* (pl. no. 435)—must have left readers with a disturbing feeling in that it depicts with considerable force and no self-consciousness an enfeebled woman seated in a scabrous doorway holding an infant. While *Street Life* may seem ambiguous in terms of purpose, one of its goals that met with eventual success was the building of an embankment to prevent the Thames River from periodically flooding the homes of the London poor.

A project that originated in the desire to make a record of slum buildings slated for demolition in central Glasgow also helped establish the documentary style even though its purpose was nostalgic rather than reformist. In 1868 and

again in 1877, during a period of unsettling urban growth, the Glasgow Improvement Trust commissioned Thomas Annan, a Scottish photographer of architecture, portraits, and works of art to “record many old and interesting landmarks.”¹¹ The results, originally printed in albumen in 1868, were reissued with later images added as carbon prints in 1878 and in two editions of gravure prints in 1900 with the title *Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow*. Because this project was not conceived in a reformist spirit, no statistical information about living conditions or comments by the inhabitants—who appear only incidentally in the images—were included. Nevertheless, Annan’s images might be seen as the earliest visual record of what has come to be called the inner city slum—in this case one that excelled in “filth . . . drunkenness . . . evil smell and all that

makes city poverty disgusting."¹² The vantage points selected by the photographer and the use of light to reveal the slimy and fetid dampness of the place transform scenes that might have been merely picturesque into a document that suggests the reality of life in such an environment (*pl. no. 437*).

Whatever the initial purpose of the commission and despite their equivocal status as social documentation, many of Annan's images are surprisingly close in viewpoint to those of Jacob Riis, one of the first in America to conceive of camera images as an instrument for social change. Sensitivity to the manner in which light gives form and dimension to inert objects also links Annan's work with that of the French photographers Charles Marville and Eugène Atget and supplies further evidence that the documentary style in itself is not specific to images commissioned for activist programs. This becomes even more apparent in the work of the photographer Waldemar Franz Herman Titzenthaler, one of the first in his native Germany to understand that the dry plate gave the urban photographer unprecedented access to the social scene. Whether documenting urban slums, industrial enterprises, workers (*pl. no. 438*), army cadets, or street life, Titzenthaler's images all display the same careful attention to pictorial structure and the disposition of light. Indeed, the stylistic similarities between such images and those made to realize specific social goals suggests that in addition to a particular approach on the part of the photographer, social documentation requires text and context to make its message understood.

Social Documentation in the United States

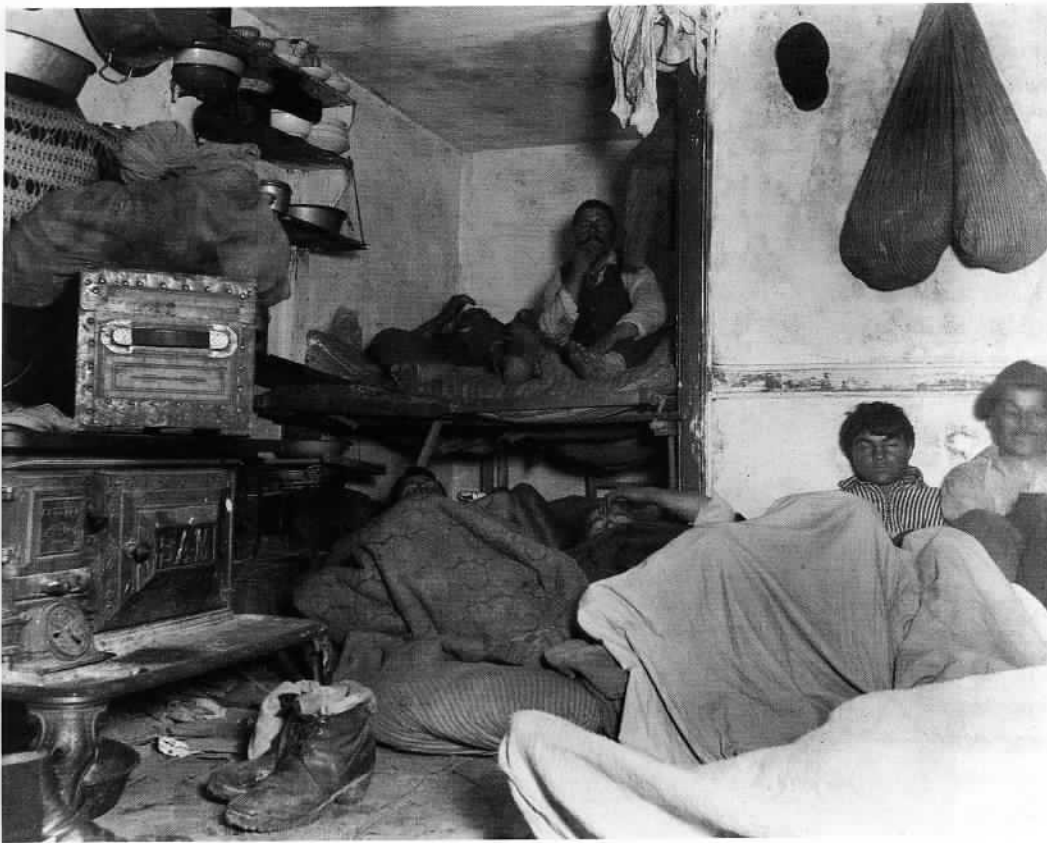
Riis was the link in the United States between older Victorian concepts and emerging Reform attitudes toward social problems. His subject was the tenement world, where the poverty-stricken half of New York's population lived. In the late 1880s, on the eve of the Reform era, millions of immigrants from Europe, largely from the eastern and southern sections, were induced by the promise of jobs to come to the United States. Needed as cheap labor for seemingly insatiable industrial appetites, those uprooted workers became the first victims of the economic collapse that lasted from 1882 until 1887 (one of the many in the post-Civil War era). Disgracefully ill-housed in tenements or actually living in the streets of major American cities, with New York by far the most overcrowded and disease-ridden, impoverished immigrants were thought by most middle-class people to be responsible for their own poverty. Before 1890, the problems of the urban poor were completely ignored by public officials, while private



438. WALDEMAR FRANZ HERMAN TITZENTHALER. *Boiler Maker (Types of German Workers)*, c. 1900. Gold-toned printing-out paper. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

charitable organizations contented themselves with providing soup kitchens and moral uplift.

As a police reporter for the *New York Herald*, Riis, who was thrust squarely into a densely populated and malignant slum called Mulberry Bend, started to use camera images, taken by himself or under his supervision, to prove the truth of his words and to make the relationship between poverty and social behavior clear to influential people. The photographs were seen as a way to produce incontrovertible evidence of the existence of vagrant children, squalid housing, and the disgraceful lodgings provided by the police for the homeless. As lantern slides for Riis's popular lectures and as illustrations for articles and books, these pictures were significant elements of the successful campaigns to eliminate the most pestilential shanties in Mulberry Bend and to close down the police lodging houses. The first and most influential publication by Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, which appeared in book form in 1890, consisted of reportage based on his personal investigation



439. JACOB A. RIIS. *Five Cents Lodging, Bayard Street*, c. 1889. Gelatin silver print. Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



440. KENYON COX. *Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement*, 1890. Wood engraving from *How the Other Half Lives*.

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and was illustrated by 40 plates, 17 of which were direct halftone reproductions of photographs.¹³ Despite the poor quality of these early halftones, images such as *Five Cents Lodging, Bayard Street* (pl. no. 439) clearly are more persuasive as photographs than as line drawings (pl. no. 440).

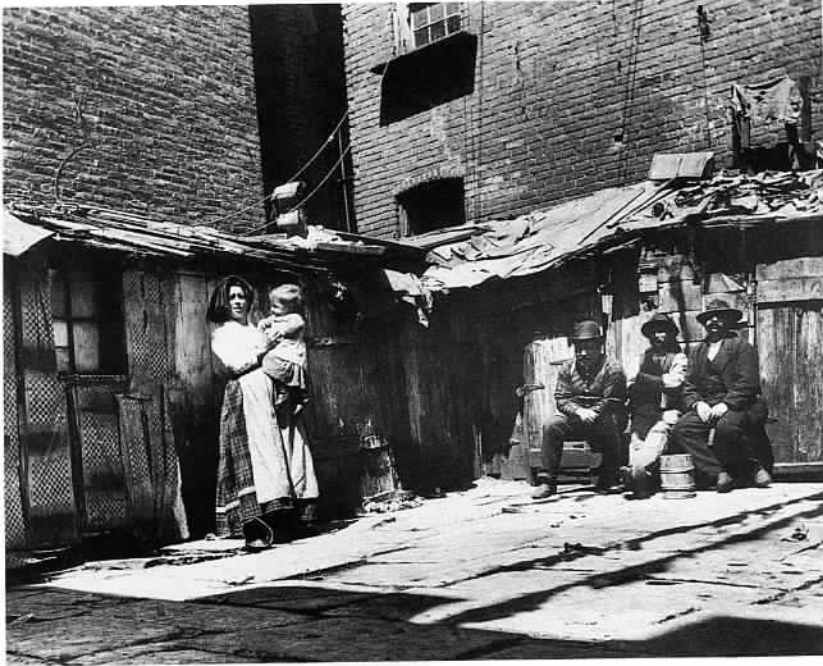
Neither their social intent nor the fact that Riis thought himself an inept photographer, uninterested in the techniques or aesthetics of printing, should blind one to the discernment with which these images were made. Fully aware of the purpose to be served, the photographer selected appropriate vantage points and ways to frame the subject, at times transcending the limitation implied in the title—that of an outsider looking at slum life from across the deep chasm separating middle- from lower-class life. While he may not have entered very deeply into the space occupied by the “other,” his was not a casual view. Compare for example, the Jersey Street sheds (pl. no. 441) in which the figures are placed in a rigidly circumscribed patch of sunlight, hemmed in by areas of brick and shadow and so disposed that the eye must focus on them while also taking in the surrounding details, with a contemporaneous image by an unknown photographer of a London slum courtyard (pl. no. 442). This scene, with its random arrangement of figures, may actually seem more authentically real to modern viewers than Riis’s image, but the slice-of-life naturalism it represents did not interest social documentarians. Because social images were meant to persuade, photographers felt it necessary to communicate a belief that slum dwellers were capable of human emotions and that they were being kept from fully realizing their human qualities by their surroundings. As a result, photographs used in campaigns for social reform not only provided truthful evidence but embodied a commitment to humanistic ideals. By selecting sympathetic types and contrasting the individual’s expression and gesture with the shabbiness of the physical surroundings, the photographer frequently was able to transform a mundane record of what exists into a fervent plea for what might be. This idealism became a basic tenet of the social documentary concept.

Before 1890, tracts on social problems in the United States had been largely religious in nature, stressing “redemption of the erring and sinful.”¹⁴ Such works usually were illustrated with engravings that at times acknowledged a photographic source and at others gave the artistic imagination free reign. After the appearance of *How The Other Half Lives*, however, photographic “evidence” became the rule for publications dealing with social problems even though the texts might still consider poverty to be the result of moral inadequacy rather than economic laws. In one example, *Darkness and Daylight*, an 1897 compendium of interviews, sensationalist reporting, and sermonizing, readers were assured that all the illustrations were “scenes

presented to the camera’s merciless and unfailing eye,” notwithstanding the fact that they actually were engraved by artists using photographs.¹⁵

As halftone printing techniques advanced and reformist ideas took the place of religiously motivated charity, social photography became the “embodiment of progressive values,”¹⁶ largely through the work of Hine. His career spanned 40 years, during which he enlarged on Riis’s objectives and formulated new concepts and techniques. Involvement in *The Pittsburgh Survey*, a pioneering study of working and living conditions in the nation’s foremost industrial city, aided Hine in developing a forceful and distinctive personal style, exemplified by the previously mentioned *Breaker Boys* (pl. no. 474). This complex organization of informative detail and affecting expression bathed in somber light creates a miniature netherworld of intersecting triangles, a visual counterpart to Hine’s characterization of child labor as “deadening in its monotony, exhausting physically, irregular,” and of child workers as “condemned.”¹⁷

The confident atmosphere engendered by the Progressive Era sustained other projects in which camera images were used to document social conditions, but few photographers were as committed to lobbying for social change as Riis and Hine. Many worked for the expanding periodical press that by 1886 had increased its use of photographs to the point where Frances Benjamin Johnston could describe herself as “making a business of photographic illustration and the writing of descriptive articles for magazines, illustrated weeklies and newspapers”¹⁸ (at the time an unusual career for women). Her early assignments are indicative of the growing popular interest in work and workers; they include a story on coal mines, a spread on the employees in the United States Mint, one on iron workers on the Mesabi Range and on women in the mills of New England, besides news stories on the illustrious doings of celebrities. Her most fully realized commissioned documentation (as contrasted with her magazine stories) was undertaken in 1899 to publicize the educational program offered by the Hampton Institute—a school in Virginia that incorporated the Reform ideal of industrial training in a program designed to eliminate poverty among rural blacks and Indians. Johnston’s highly styled arrangements, classical poses, and overall clarity of illumination—seen in *Students at Work on the Stairway* (pl. no. 443) and now so unexpected in documentary images—seem designed to suggest the temperate and disciplined approach that the school emphasized. Others who supplied imagery on social themes to the press were Arthur Hewitt, a member of the Camera Club of New York whose Pictorialist style colored his photographs of bridge-builders and longshoremen for *Everybody’s Magazine*, and Jesse Tarbox Beals, whose prosaic



441. JACOB RIIS. *Yard, Jersey Street Tenement*, c. 1888. Gelatin silver print. Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

442. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. *London Slum*, c. 1889. Gelatin silver print. BBC Hulton Picture Library/Bettman Archive.





443. FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON. *Hampton Institute: Students at Work on the Stairway*, 1899–1900. Gelatin silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

record shots of tenement life were commissioned by the charity organizations that eventually merged into the Community Services Society.

After 1915, Reformist ideals and programs withered as American energies were redirected to the crisis occasioned by the first World War. With social issues receding in importance, there was less demand for photographs that give dimension to these concerns, and at the same time fresh aesthetic winds, generated by the Armory Show of 1913, quickened interest in the European avant-garde movements in the arts. Abstraction, Expressionism, and Dadaism were some of the new styles and concepts that made Realism and the expression of human emotion and sentiment in visual art seem old-fashioned and contributed to a brief eclipse of the social documentary sensibility during the 1920s.

The Portrait as Social Document

In the United States, these changes were reflected not only in the direction taken by aesthetic photographers but in the images appearing in the periodical press, which joined with the new institution of advertising to project an image of the nation as an energetic titan ruled by rational industrial forces (see Chapter 10). Few photographers other than Hine regarded working people as the source of industrial wealth, and even his emphasis shifted from documenting “negative” factors such as exploitation and boredom to portraying the “positive” contributions made by individual men and women in industry. In his “Work Portraits,” which appeared sporadically in industrial trade journals during the 1920s, he attempted to bring out the human component in industry through facial close-ups and by relating the



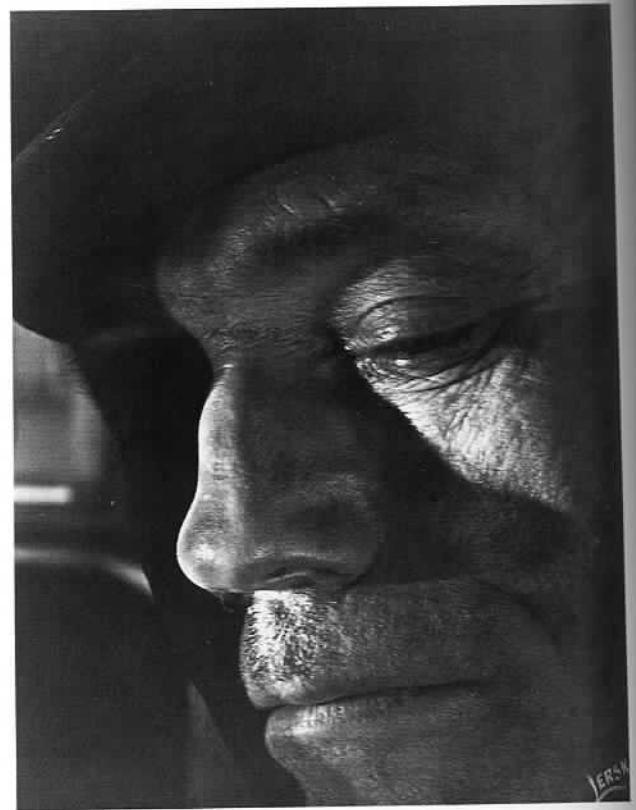
444. EMIL O. HOPPÉ. *Flower Seller*, 1921. Gelatin silver print. The E. O. Hoppé Curatorial Assistance Trust, Los Angeles.

forms of worker and machine (*pl. no. 446*), an endeavor that culminated in the documentation of the construction of the Empire State Building in 1930 and 1931.

Owing to the emphasis in Europe on political action rather than social reform, European photographers during the first decades of the 20th century were not given the opportunity to produce social documentation in the manner of Riis or Hine. Nevertheless, as individuals, Emil O. Hoppé, Helmar Lerski, and August Sander (*see Profile*) sought to create, in Sander's word, an "honest" document of an age¹⁹ through portraits that presumably would awaken the viewer to the character of different classes and occupations in society. Of the three, Hoppé, who opened a studio in London in 1907 after leaving Germany, actually was a commercial photographer of taste and discernment who undertook to photograph women workers (*pl. no. 444*) and became adept at reusing these images in a variety of contexts in publication and advertising work. Lerski, born in Strasbourg and trained as an actor, spent many years in the United States, where he became interested in photography about 1911. Theatrical lighting effects and large-scale facial close-ups that entirely fill the

picture space (*pl. no. 445*) characterize his attempt to create a sociopsychological portrait of people in a variety of occupations, which he published in Germany in 1931 as *Köpfe der Alltags* (*Ordinary Faces*).

The towering figure in this kind of documentation through portraiture is Sander. From 1910 until he was censured by the Nazi regime in 1934, he made beautifully lighted and composed images of individuals and groups from all professions and classes in Germany (*pl. no. 447*). The clarity and directness with which he approached social portraiture connect his work with both 19th-century Realist painting and the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) style that emerged in German visual art in the 1920s. Individually and as an aggregate his images are infused with an ironic dimension that suggests the entrenched role of stratified social hierarchies in the Germany of his time. Sander's project culminated in 1929 in the publication of *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of Our Time*), in which only a small number of the more than 500 images initially envisioned for this work were reproduced. The book was later banned in part because the images showed Germans to be greatly more varied in facial characteristics and temperament than the official mythology decreed.



445. HELMAR LERSKI. *German Metal Worker*, 1930. Gelatin silver print. Gernsheim Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

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446. LEWIS W. HINE. *Powerhouse Mechanic*, 1925. Gelatin silver print. Private collection.

No American photographer of the time attempted such a vast project dealing with portraiture of all sectors of society. Of the few who were attracted to “everyday” faces, Hine limited himself to portraits of skilled industrial workers, while Doris Ulmann, a sophisticated New York portraitist trained at the Clarence White School, sought to document the rural population of the Southern highlands and plains in a style that invokes Pictorialist ideas as much as social documentation (*pl. no. 393*). Inspired by the revived interest in rural customs and handicraft as a way of preserving America’s pre-industrial heritage, her portraits, made in natural light with a large-format view camera and soft-focus lens, embody the photographer’s conviction that simplicity and closeness to the soil were of greater moment than progress.

A similar idea about the independent character of rural folk can be seen in *The Boss* (*pl. no. 392*), an image by Prentice Hall Polk, photographer for Tuskegee Institute, that verges on being an idealized genre type rather than a document of social reality. Indeed, even commercial por-

trait photographers in the 20th century were sometimes in a position to provide a sociological document of the people among whom they lived. One thinks of James Van Der Zee, whose images of Harlem’s middle- and upper-class citizens (*pl. no. 322*) are poignant testimony to their aspirations. A similar view into the social structure of a provincial society can be seen in the work of the Peruvian portraitist Martín Chambi, a pioneer of the photo postcard in his own country. In the careful attention to details of dress and ambience, his individual and group portraits made in a studio in Cuzco or in remote highlands during the 1930s not only reveal the sitters’ physical features but also suggest social hierarchies (*pl. no. 448*).

Social Photography During the Depression

The documentary movement was born afresh in the United States in the 1930s. As William Stott has pointed out in his study of the period, the motive force was the “invisible nature” of the economic and social catastrophe known as the Great Depression.²⁰ Lasting about ten years,



447. AUGUST SANDER. *Pastry Cook, Cologne*, 1928. Gelatin silver print. Sander Gallery, New York; © Estate of August Sander.



448. MARTÍN CHAMBI.
Festival in Ayaviri, Puno,
 1940. Gelatin silver print.
 Courtesy Edward Ranney,
 New Mexico, and the
 Martín Chambi Family,
 Peru.

from 1931 until American entry into the second World War, the period was characterized by high unemployment, labor unrest, and agricultural disaster caused by persistent drought and misuse of the land. Pervasive rural poverty resulted in waves of internal migrations as families from the heartland made their way west in search of jobs and arable land. The upheaval, both urban and rural, moved the Federal government under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal to relieve the suffering of "one third of a nation" by providing resettlement loans to farmers and work programs for the urban unemployed.

The most completely realized photography project of the period—one of a number sponsored by government agencies—was undertaken by the Historic Section of the Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration or F.S.A. (*see Profile*).²¹ The project represented the New Deal's understanding that a visual documentation of conditions of work and life faced by farmers who suffered the calamities of drought and economic depression, and were in the process of being driven permanently from the land, was required to justify Federal expenditures for relief projects. Eventually in response to Congressional displeasure at the depiction of unrelieved poverty, photographers were directed to portray more positive aspects of the national experience. This project should be seen in relation to other Federally sponsored cultural endeavors in that all originated from the practical necessity of providing jobs and recording the effects of relief and reconstruction programs. Besides the immediate relief they

offered those on their payroll, they were influential in directing interest to the American scene and reviving a taste for realistic representation in the visual arts; as a result, in the United States the realist style enjoyed a brief period of coexistence with more formally conceived modes of expression derived from European modernist movements.

The patronage of the R.A./F.S.A. in particular exerted a bracing effect on social-documentary style because the Section Director, Roy E. Stryker, a brilliant if somewhat narrowly focused propagandist (*pl. no. 449*) and the photographers not only recognized the need for evoking compassion, but possessed a fresh eye and a high regard for their craft. Another factor in the exceptional caliber of this project, which produced some 270,000 images, was the variety of artistic approaches employed by the individual photographers.²² For example, Ben Shahn, who worked with a 35mm camera, directed Stryker's attention to the human element as a source of emotional appeal; Dorothea Lange, who worked with a Rollei, upheld the need for the photographer to exercise control over the negatives, while Walker Evans, using an 8 x 10 inch view camera, insisted on the right to realize his own particular concept of documentation.

In common with other government agencies that embraced photographic projects, the F.S.A. supplied prints for reproduction in the daily and periodical press. In that project photographers were given shooting scripts from which to work, did not own their negatives,²³ and had no control over how the pictures might be cropped, arranged, and captioned, their position was similar to that of photo-

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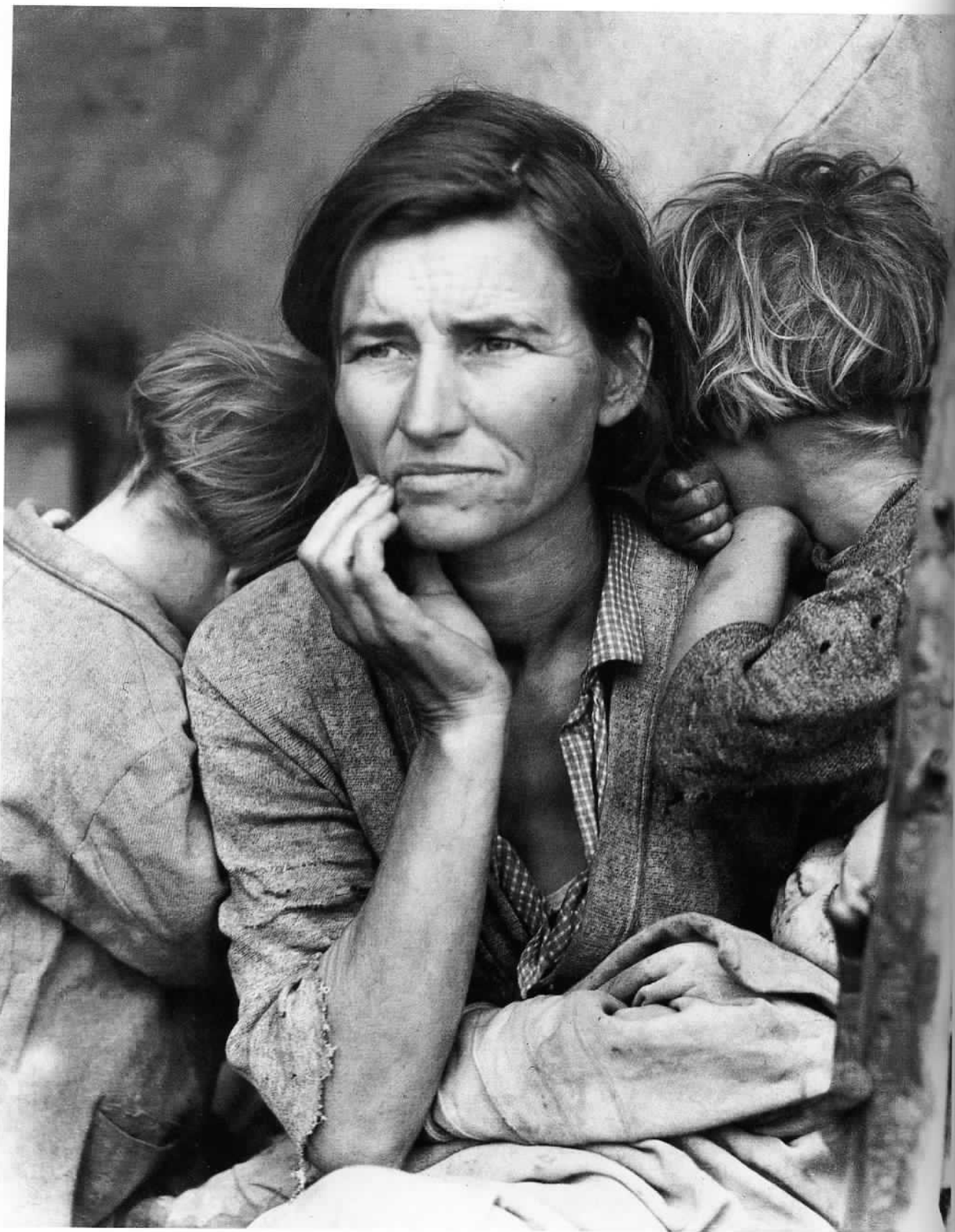


449. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER.
Arthur Rothstein and Roy Stryker,
1941. Gelatin silver print. Formerly
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450. ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN. *Dust
Storm, Cimarron County,* 1937.
Gelatin silver print. Library of
Congress, Washington, D.C.



451. DOROTHEA LANGE. *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936.
Gelatin silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

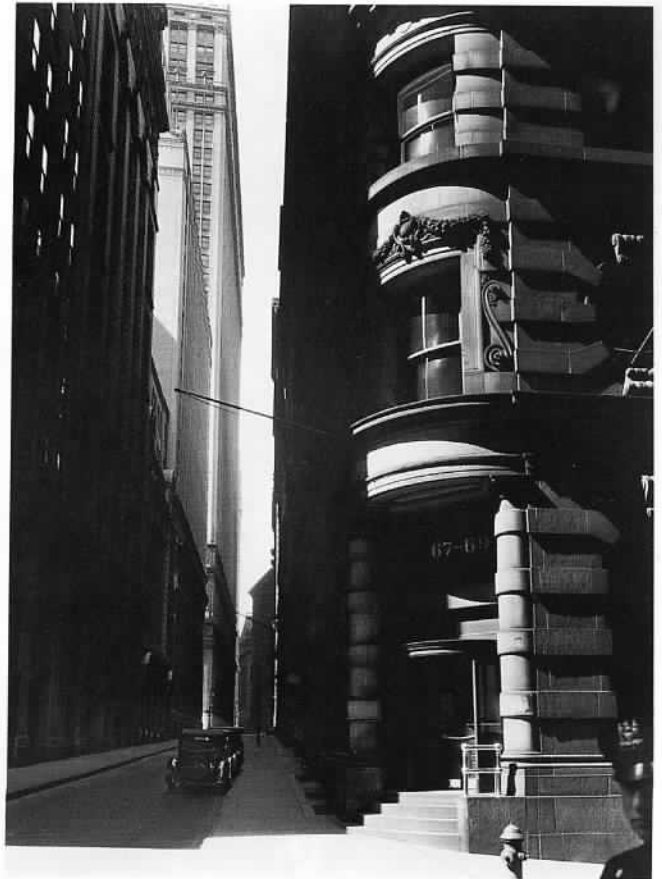


452. MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE. *Two Women, Lansdale, Arkansas*, 1936. Gelatin silver print. George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y.

journalists working for the commercial press—a situation that both Evans and Lange found particularly distasteful. The images were transformed into photographic works of art when they were exhibited under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art.²⁴ For the first time, photographs made to document social conditions were accorded the kind of recognition formerly reserved for aesthetically conceived camera images.

The F.S.A. images were considered truthful expression by some and socialistic propaganda by others who mistook the emphasis on social issues for socialism itself, but Americans were nonetheless affected by them. Furthermore, the impact of the Great Depression on rural communities has been perceived by later generations on the basis of certain key images. Arthur Rothstein's *Dust Storm, Cimarron County* (pl. no. 450) and Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (pl. no. 451) are the most famous icons of the time—the latter selected by Stryker as *the* picture to symbolize the concern of the government for displaced farmers—but it is the sum of the images that creates their force.²⁵

Few other officially sanctioned projects that dealt with



453. BERENICE ABBOTT. *Cedar Street from William Street, New York*, 1939. Gelatin silver print. Private collection. © Berenice Abbott/Commerce Graphics Limited, Inc.

rural themes used photography as successfully as the F.S.A., but both this and other New Deal efforts opened opportunities for African-American male photographers. The best known of this group, Gordon Parks (pl. no. 692), went on to fame in photojournalism and film; others, among them Robert McNeill and James Stephen Wright, found niches in picture agencies. Women, too, were included in the New Deal projects; besides Lange, Marion Post Wolcott toured the country for the F.S.A., and other agencies employed Esther Bubley, Marjory Collins, and Martha McMillan Roberts. An effort by the writer Erskine Caldwell and the industrial-photographer-turned-photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White resulted in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, an influential amalgam of text and image. It contained dramatic close-ups of Southern tenant-farm families (pl. no. 452) that were offset by a relatively reserved text based on interviews and documentation of the conditions of farm tenancy. This inexpensive paperback revived the form established by earlier social-reform tracts and helped prepare the way for the profusion of post-World War II photographic books on a wide spectrum of social issues.



454. BERENICE ABBOTT. *New York at Night*, 1933. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York; Stephen R. Currier Memorial Fund. © Berenice Abbott/Commerce Graphics Limited, Inc.



455. WALTER BALLHAUSE. *Untitled*, 1930-33. From the series *Kinder in der Grossstadt* (*City Children*). Gelatin silver print. Schirmer/Mosel, Munich. © Rolf Ballhause.

The urban experience during the Depression was photographed under the banners of the Federal Art Project and the Works Progress Administration, and by a group of socially committed photographers who formed the Film and Photo League, from which the Photo League (to be discussed shortly) emerged in 1936. The most fully realized project was a documentation of New York City initiated by Berenice Abbott. On the basis of her experiences as a photographer in Paris, and inspired by the work of Atget, she conceived of the city as a theme that might reflect "life at its greatest intensity."²⁶ In Abbott's vision, *Changing New York*, as the project came to be called, was meant to evoke "an intuition of past, present and future,"

and to include, besides single images, series of related pictures supported by texts. With its strong contrast between the heavy geometrical curves of the buildings and the narrow shaft of light representing the sky, *Cedar Street from William Street* (pl. no. 453), one of a number of views that suggest something of the stable commercial underpinnings of the city, is typical of the resonant clarity of the photographs she made for the project (see also pl. no. 454).

Documentation of the urban scene from the point of view of the political left became an issue toward the end of the 1920s when photographers in Europe especially felt moved to deal with unemployment and the rising strength of the working class. However, the aims of those involved



456. ROMAN VISHNIAC. *Entrance to the Ghetto, Cracow, 1937*. Gelatin silver print. International Center of Photography, New York; Purchase. Courtesy Mara Vishniac Kohn.



457. ROMAN VISHNIAC.
*Granddaughter and
Grandfather, Warsaw, 1938.*
Gelatin silver print.
International Center of
Photography, New York;
International Fund for
Concerned Photography,
Purchase. Courtesy
Mara Vishniac Kohn.

in what came to be known as the worker-photographer movement differed significantly from the reformist goals of social documentarians like Riis and Hine. Instead of images meant to provide middle-class viewers with evidence of the need to improve conditions, photographs by participants in the worker-photographer organizations were intended to make other working people conscious of their conditions and their political strengths. European photographers of the left took their cue from social and stylistic developments in the Soviet Union (see Chapter 9), exhibiting camera images in places where working people congregated and reproducing them in the leftist press. For example, *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf (The Worker-Photographer)*, a publication of the German worker-photographer movement, promoted the camera as a “weapon” in an ideological struggle, claiming that a “proletarian eye was essential for capturing a world invisible to the more privileged.”²⁷ That this outlook did not interfere with the expression of a poetic vision can be seen in images made by Walter Ballhause, a working-class activist who used a Leica camera in the early 1930s to portray the unemployed, the elderly, and the children of the poor in Hannover (pl. no. 455). In the singular gesture of the child, anchored within a symmetrical and barren urbanscape, one senses the pervading uncasiness of the time. With politically oriented photographers most active in Eastern Europe, the style of leftist imagery

was varied; indeed a Czech publication of 1934—*Socialni fotografie (Social Photography)*—specifically discussed the integration of avant-garde visual ideas and leftist political ideology. Images with strong political content were shown in two large international exhibitions held in Prague in 1933 and 1934, in which photographers from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Union, Belgium, Holland, and France participated.

Motivated less by political ideology than by a sense of impending catastrophe, Roman Vishniac, living in Berlin as a refugee from the Soviet Union where he had been trained in the biological sciences,²⁸ produced an extensive documentation of Eastern European Jews in Poland on the eve of the Holocaust. Photographed on the streets and indoors, his subjects generally were unaware of being filmed, a circumstance that lends a vitality to this document of some 5,000 images, of which *Entrance to the Ghetto, Cracow* (pl. no. 456) is one; they are made especially poignant by our knowledge today that everything—people, places, traditions—has vanished (see also pl. no. 457).

The worker-photographer movement had fleeting successes in England, where concern for the problems of the under-class was prompted more by personal sympathy than by class-conscious considerations. The well-known English photographer Humphrey Spender, employed as a photographer for the *London Daily Mail*, in 1937–38 par-

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458. HUMPHREY SPENDER. *Street Scene in a Milltown*, 1937-38. (From *Mass-Observation* published as *Worktown People*, 1982). Gelatin silver print. Falling Wall Press, Bristol, England. © Humphrey Spender.

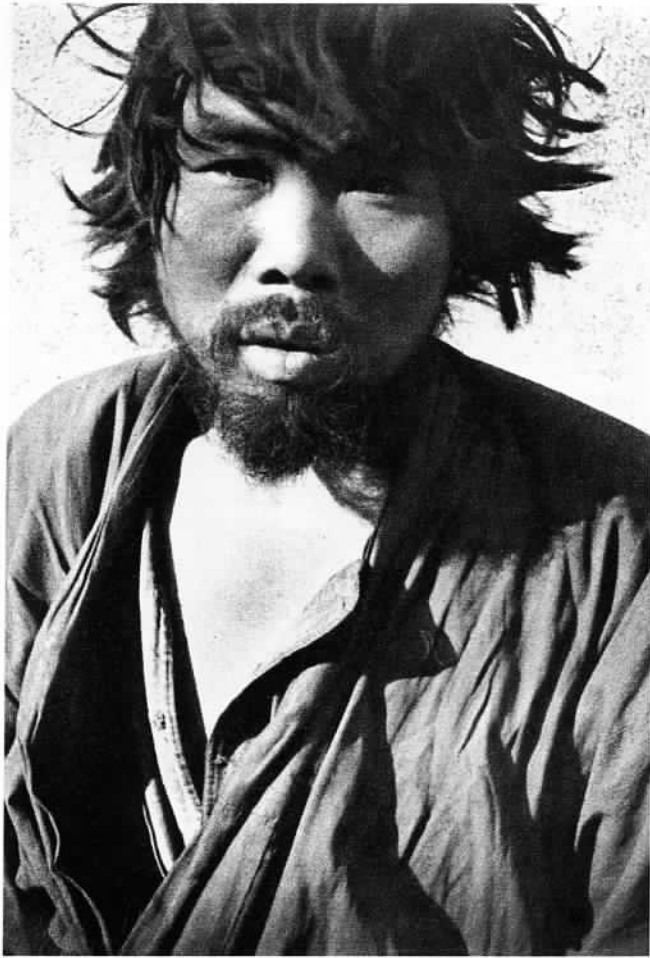
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459. BILL BRANDT. *Halifax*, 1936. Gelatin silver print. © Bill Brandt/Photo Researchers.



460. HORINO MASAO. *Beggar*, 1932. Gelatin silver print.
© 1971 Japan Professional Photographers Society.

ticipated in a project called "Mass-Observation," which was designed to be an absolutely "objective documentation," in the manner of an anthropological study, of life in the mill towns of the industrial north (*pl. no. 458*). Bill Brandt, initially attracted to Surrealism, returned to his British homeland in 1931 to depict the divisions between social classes in London as well as working-class life in mining villages. The long, bleak vista and inhospitable structures that all but engulf the tiny figures in *Halifax* (*pl. no. 459*) seem to symbolize the enduring human spirit that is all but crushed by poverty and industrialism.

During this same period, a number of Japanese photographers, with great interest in Western attitudes toward art and photography, found in the "new photography" (to be discussed in Chapter 9) the means for a humane portrayal of the hitherto despised and unrecorded lower classes. Horino Masao, a photographer of great versatility who also was interested in montage and industrial imagery, made large close-up portraits of working men, beggars (*pl. no. 460*), and street people. Similar subjects and approach can be seen in vibrant street images by Kuwabara Kineo (*pl. no. 461*) and in documentations of life in the occupied territories of Manchuria by several of Japan's most notable photographers. By the 1940s, however, photographers had put their cameras at the service of the government bureaucracy or they portrayed the pleasures of rural life, as in the images made by Hamaya Hiroshi between 1940 and 1944 for *Snow Country* (*pl. no. 462*). The conflict that had



461. KUWABARA KINEO. *Scene at a Fair*, 1936. Gelatin silver print.
© 1971 Japan Professional Photographers Society.

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462. HAMAYA HIROSHI.
Untitled, from *Snow
Country, a Record of Folk
Customs During the Lunar
New Year Celebrations in
Niigata Prefecture, 1940-44*.
Gelatin silver print. © 1971
Japan Professional
Photographers Society.

463. SID GROSSMAN.
Coney Island, 1947. Gelatin
silver print. National
Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
© Miriam Grossman Cohen;
Courtesy Howard Greenberg
Gallery, New York.

expanded from China to a confrontation with the United States on the Pacific islands effectively ended a brief but exhilarating period of expressive documentation.

In the United States, the Photo League, formed in the mid-1930s by a group of politically conscious photographers, was committed to the tradition of straight picture-making that its members traced back to Hill and Adamson, Stieglitz, and Hine. With this concept, the League eventually encompassed a broad range of styles and goals, but, as initially conceived by its photographer-founders Sid Grossman (*pl. no. 463*) and Sol Libsohn, its specific purpose was the promotion of documentary photography through a school and the establishment of "feature groups"—units organized to depict the less picturesque aspects of urban life, which they felt were being ignored by art photographers and Pictorialists. Projects included the Chelsea and Pitt Street documents, with the most fully realized being the Harlem Document.²⁹ This was a three-year effort headed by Aaron Siskind and including Harold Corsini, Morris Engel, and Jack Manning (all later respected professionals), which produced a searching but sympathetic look at life in New York's most significant black neighborhood. An image of a woman and children (*pl. no. 478*) by Engel (who became an independent filmmaker) encapsulates both the claustrophobia and the humanity of the ghetto, while Siskind's many images of street life in the same community reveal the way blacks "grasped a patch of happiness whenever and wherever they could find it."³⁰

Responding to the general movement in the arts



toward more personalized modes of expression, League members adopted the concept of creative photography in the late 1940s, but despite this subtle shift away from pure documentation many former members continued their commitment to humanist ideals even after the organization's politically inspired demise in 1952.³¹ Former League president Walter Rosenblum, for instance, undertook a series of self-motivated projects to document life in East Harlem, in Haiti, and in the South Bronx (*pl. no. 465*); W.



464. BERNARD COLE. *Shoemaker's Lunch*, Newark, N.J., 1944. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy Gwen Cole, Shelter Island, N.Y.

465. WALTER ROSENBLUM. *Mullaly Park*, Bronx, New York, 1980. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy and © Walter Rosenblum.



Eugene Smith (*pl. no. 475*), also a former president, continued his commitment to these ideals in Minamata; while others, among them Bernard Cole (*pl. no. 464*), Arthur Leipzig, and Dan Weiner, found a limited opportunity to treat humanistic themes in the flourishing field of postwar photojournalism (*see Chapter 10*).

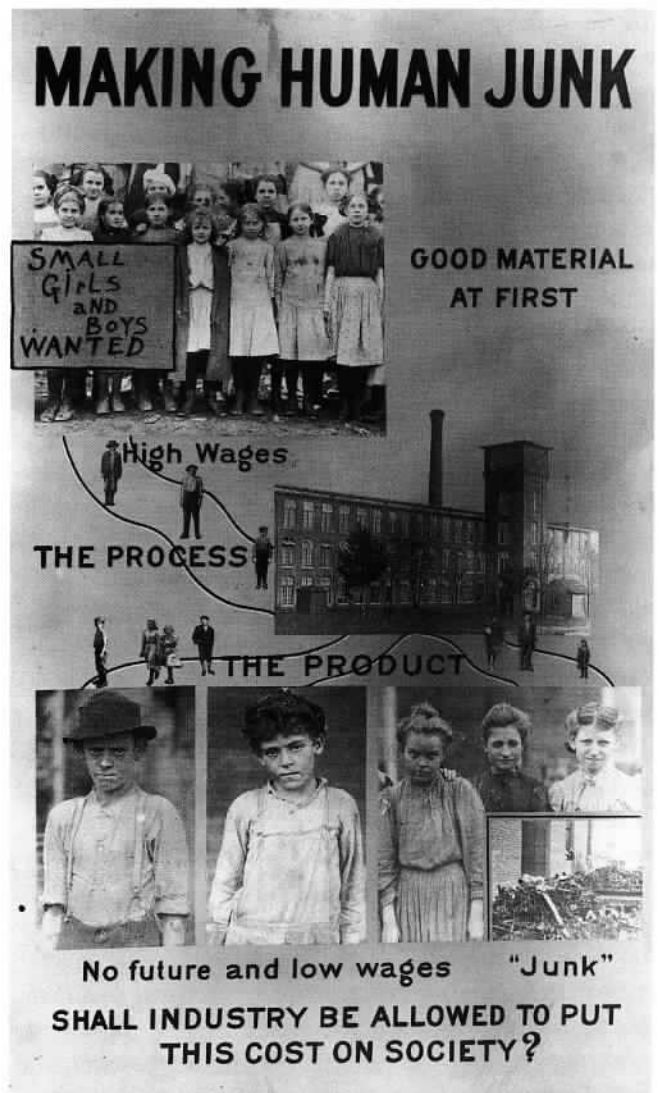
Before the 1930s, Pictorialists and their supporters subscribed to the idea that art ought not to be utilitarian. In consequence, they were blind to the fact that genuine feeling and innovative vision might imbue camera images made for a social purpose with imagination and meaning. At the same time, those who used documentary works frequently disregarded the individual photographer and reproduced the images without credit and at times without permission. Often social documentary photographers were unknown unless their work was used in a specific context. The outstanding quality of the work done under the aegis of the F.S.A. and by Abbott for *Changing New York* were factors that helped transform this situation, demonstrating to the photographic community and to viewers at large that divisions between art and document are difficult to maintain when dealing with images of actuality. These and other works made clear that, no matter what its purpose, any camera image may transcend the mundaneness of its immediate subject and transmute matter into thought and feeling—the essential goal of all visual art. Recognizing that purposeful photographs also may enlarge vision and inspire compassion even after the specific problems they addressed have disappeared, the generation of photographers that grew to maturity after the second World War rejected the compartmentalization of photographic expression that had been the legacy of the Pictorialist movement. Instead they sought to imbue their work, no matter what its ultimate purpose, with the passion and immediacy found in social documentation at its best. ✱

Profile: Lewis W. Hine

Lewis Hine, whose sociological horizons gave his images focus and form, was a photographer in touch with his time. When the twenty-seven-year-old Hine came east in 1900 from his birthplace in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to teach natural sciences, he already had experienced the exploitation of the workplace that he was to spend a good part of his life documenting. His first serious photographs were made in response to a desire on the part of his principal at the Ethical Culture School in New York to use the camera as an educational tool. As an arm of the Progressive Movement, the school sought in photography a means of counteracting the rampant prejudice among many Americans against the newly arrived peoples from eastern and

southern Europe, so, besides recording school activities and teaching photography, in 1904 Hine began photographing immigrants entering Ellis Island. Notwithstanding the chaos of the surroundings, his inability to communicate verbally, and his cumbersome 5 x 7 inch view camera and flash powder equipment, he succeeded in producing images that invest the individual immigrant with dignity and humanity in contrast to the more common distanced view.

In 1907, after convincing a group of social welfare agencies that photographs would provide incontrovertible evidence for their reform campaigns, Hine (along with graphic artist Joseph Stella) was invited to participate in *The Pittsburgh Survey*, a pioneer sociological investigation of working and living conditions in the nation's most



466. LEWIS HINE. *Making Human Junk*, c. 1915. Poster. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

industrialized city; after this experience he left teaching and set himself up as a professional "social photographer." From then until 1917, he was the staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee, traveling more than 50,000 miles from Maine to Texas to photograph youngsters in mines, mills, canneries, fields, and working on the streets, in order to provide "photographic proof" that "no anonymous or signed denials" could contradict.³² The images were used in pamphlets, magazines, books, slide lectures, and traveling exhibits (*pl. no. 466*), many of which Hine organized and designed.

Toward the end of the first World War, when the waning interest in social-welfare programs became apparent, Hine went overseas as a photographer on an American Red Cross relief mission to France and the Balkans. On his return, he embarked on a project of "positive documentation," hoping to portray the "human side of the system," which he felt should be recognized by a society convinced that machines run themselves. This period started with a series of individual portraits—"Work Portraits"—which were critically acclaimed although not greatly successful financially, and culminated for Hine in his 1930 commission to photograph the construction of the Empire State Building. The photographer followed its progress floor by dizzying floor, clambering over girders and even being swung out in a cement bucket to take pictures. At the conclusion of the project, he organized a number of the images along with others from the "Work Portrait" series into *Men at Work*, a pioneering photographic picture book that featured good reproduction, full-page bleeds, and simple modern typography.

The last decade of Hine's life coincided with the Great Depression, but while F.S.A. photographers were given the opportunity to produce a stirring document of social conditions, the photographic programs of the agencies for which Hine worked—the Rural Electrification Agency, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Works Progress Administration—had little creative vision concerning the use of photographs in this manner. The frustration of Hine's last years was offset to a degree by the efforts of Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth McCausland, and the Photo League to rescue his work from oblivion with a retrospective exhibition in New York in 1939.

Profile: August Sander

August Sander's dream was to create a visual document of "Man in 20th-Century Germany." He hoped that through a series of portraits, sequenced in a "sociological arc" that began with peasants, ascended through students, professional artists, and statesmen, and descended through urban labor to the unemployed, he would make viewers

aware of the social and cultural dimensions as well as the stratification of real life. After the publication of only one volume, which appeared in 1929 as *Antlitz der Zeit (Face of Our Time)*, this ambitious project was banned as presenting a version contrary to official Nazi teachings about class and race, and Sander was forced to abandon it.

Born in 1876 in a provincial village near Cologne to a family deeply rooted in traditional peasant culture, Sander was introduced fortuitously to photography while employed as a worker in the local mines. He soon began to make straightforward, unretouched portraits of local families; this approach, along with his later apprenticeship as a photographer of architectural structures and his training in fine art at the Dresden Academy of Art, helped establish the hallmarks of his mature vision. Though for a time the portraits he turned out in a commercial studio he opened in Linz displayed his mastery of Pictorialist techniques, he preferred, as he wrote in a publicity brochure for another of his studios a few years later, "simple, natural portraits that show the subject in an environment corresponding to their own individuality."³³ This attitude soon found its fruition in the grand project that began in earnest after the end of the first World War.

A thoughtful man, well-read in classical German literature, Sander drew his ideas from the twin concepts of physiognomic harmony and truth to nature. The former (discussed in Chapter 2) held that moral character was reflected in facial type and expression, a notion that the photographer enlarged upon by introducing the effect of environment on creating social types as well as typical individuals (*pl. no. 447*). Sander was convinced also that universal knowledge was to be gained from the careful probing and truthful representation of every aspect of the natural world—animals, plants, earth, and the heavens. To this rationalist belief he added an ironic view of German society as a permanent, almost medieval hierarchy of trades, occupations, and classes.

Sander's circle of friends in Cologne during the 1920s included intellectuals and artists, many of whom were partisans of the New Realism or New Objectivity. While the work of these artists may have influenced his ideas, it is at least as possible that the simple frontal poses, firm outlines, and undramatized illumination visible in paintings by the German artists Otto Dix and Edwin Merz, for example, owe something to Sander's portraiture; that all shared a belief in the probing nature of visual art to dissect truth beneath appearances also is evident.

The suppression of Sander's work by the Nazis was followed by the harassment of his family and the loss of many of his friends in the arts, who were either in exile or had been put to death. Sander, forced to turn his camera lens to landscape and industrial scenes, sought in land-



467. BEN SHAHN. *County Fair, Central Ohio, 1938.* Gelatin silver print. Private collection.

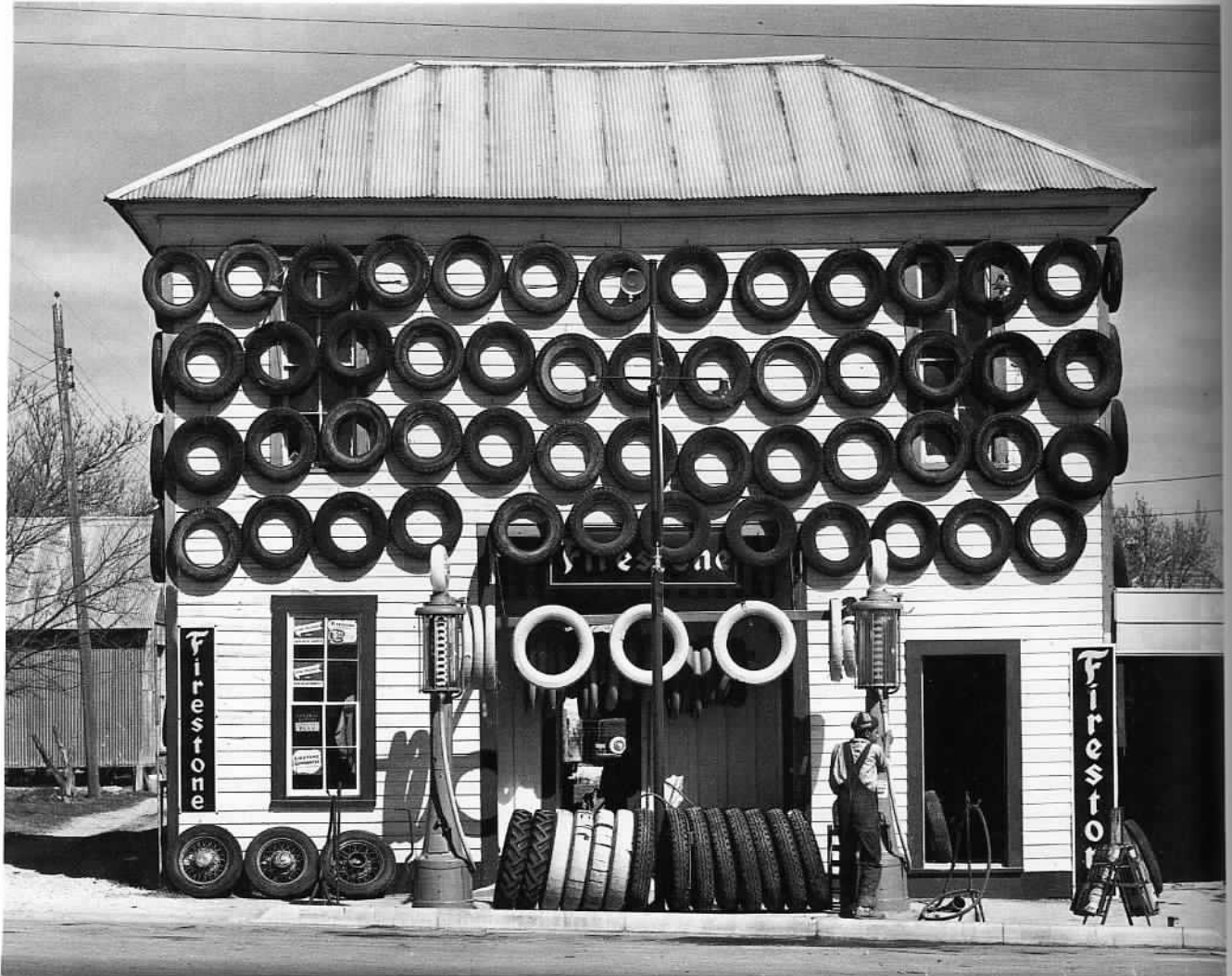
scapes of the farming communities of his native region to insinuate a suggestion of the historical role of the human intelligence in shaping the land, while the detailed close-ups of organic forms may have been meant as symbols of his abiding faith in the rational spirit. He survived the second World War, the deaths of several family members, and the loss of his negatives in a fire, to find his work republished and himself honored by photographers throughout the world.

Profile: The Historical Section Project, F.S.A.

The photographic documentation sponsored by the U.S. government under the auspices of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration, known popularly as the F.S.A. project, is a paradigm of what can be accomplished when sensitive photographers working with a stubborn yet visionary director are given opportunities and financial and psychological support in their efforts to make visual statements about compelling social conditions. When Roy E. Stryker, a former teacher in the Economics Department at Columbia University, was called to Washington in 1935 to head the Historical Section under the direction of the New Deal planner Rexford Guy Tugwell, he envisaged an effort that would use photographs to record the activities of the government in

helping destitute farmers. Ultimately, the project demonstrated that the New Deal recognized the powerful role that photographs played in creating a visual analogue of the humanistic social outlook voiced in the novels, dramas, and folk-music of the period. Now regarded as a "national treasure," this documentation was the work of eleven photographers: Arthur Rothstein, Theo Jung, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, John Vachon, and John Collier (listed in the order in which they were hired). All of them helped shape the overall result through their discussions and their images.

Rothstein, a former Columbia University student who was the first photographer hired, set up the files and dark-room and recorded the activities of the section before being sent to the South and West. While on assignment in drought-stricken regions in 1936, where he made the famous *Dust Storm, Cimarron County* (pl. no. 450), he also photographed a bleached steer skull in several positions; it was an experiment that precipitated a bizarre political controversy about the truthfulness of images made under government sponsorship and raised questions concerning the legitimacy of social documentation.³⁴ In its wake, some documentary photographers supported the photographer's right to find essential rather than literal truths in any situation, while others, notably Evans, insisted on absolute veracity, maintaining that for images to be true to both



468. RUSSELL LEE. *Second Hand Tires, San Marcos, Texas, 1940.* Gelatin silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



469. MARION POST WOLCOTT. *Family of Migrant Packinghouse Workers, Homestead, Florida, 1939.* Gelatin silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



470. JACK DELANO. *In the Convict Camp, Greene County, Georgia, 1941.* Gelatin silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

471. BEN SHAHN. *Cotton Pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935.* Gelatin silver print. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn.





472. WALKER EVANS.
Window Display, Bethlehem,
Pennsylvania, Nov., 1935.
 Gelatin silver print.
 Library of Congress,
 Washington, D.C.

medium and event, situations should be found, not re-enacted.

The painter Shahn, employed by the Special Skills Department of the Resettlement Administration, may have been the most persuasive voice in shaping attitudes and approaches on the project in that he convinced Stryker that record photographs were not sufficient to dramatize social issues, that what was needed were moving and vibrant images that captured the essence of social dislocation. Briefly instructed by Evans in the use of the Leica, Shahn had made candid exposures in New York streets for use in his graphic art. He displayed a vivid understanding of the

dimensions of documentation; his discussions with Stryker and the other photographers helped clarify the need for interesting and compassionate pictures instead of mere visual records whether they portrayed inanimate objects or people. In themselves, his images reveal a profound social awareness and a vivid sense of organization that captures the seamlessness of actuality (*pl. no. 471*).

Although quite different, the rigorous aesthetic and craft standards maintained by Evans, who was employed by the section for about two years, also broadened Stryker's understanding of the potential of photography to do more than record surface appearances. The only photographer

to consistently use the 8 x 10 inch view camera (as well as smaller formats), Evans photographed extensively in the South, engrossed by its "atmosphere . . . smell and signs." His subjects were exceptionally diverse, including portraits, interiors, domestic and factory architecture, folk craft, and popular artifacts (*pl. no. 472*). Of all the section photographers, he was least in sympathy with the social implications of the project and regarded with indifference Stryker's call for file photographs and the bureaucratic restrictions of the project. Therefore Evans was not unhappy to receive a leave in 1936 to work with the writer James Agee on an article about tenant farmers for *Fortune* magazine. Following this experience and the resulting publication, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Evans's work frequently seems to lack focus and intensity.

The compassionate vision of Lange, "the supreme humanist," also influenced Stryker and the direction taken by the section, even though they were at odds over the question of printing, which the photographer preferred to do herself rather than leave to the darkroom technicians at the F.S.A. A former portraitist trained in the Pictorialist aesthetic, Lange was employed first on a California rural relief project, where her innate capacity to penetrate beneath appearances was recognized. Concentrating on gesture and expression, and possessing the patience to wait for the telling moment (*pl. no. 451*), she seemed able to distill the meaning of the crisis to the individuals involved in terms that the nation at large could understand. On occasion, her pictures actually impelled authorities to take immediate steps to relieve suffering among migrant farm families. After leaving the project in 1940, Lange continued to work on her own in the same tradition, producing a memorable series of photographs of Japanese-Americans who had been unjustly interned by the federal government during the hysteria that accompanied the opening of hostilities between Japan and the United States.

Of the other photographers, both Mydans and Jung worked on the project for relatively short times. Lee, called "the great cataloguer" by Lange, took over Mydans's place when the latter was asked to join the staff of the newly established *Life*, and he remained with the section the longest. Though Lee was most committed to amassing as

complete a visual record as possible, his images celebrate individuality and spunk and display a wry humor (*pl. no. 468*). Post Wolcott, one of the relatively few female professional newspaper photographers of the time, was hired in 1938, when the direction of the project was being shifted toward a more positive view of the activities of the F.S.A. (*pl. no. 469*). Delano, whose W.P.A. photographs of a bootleg mining operation in Pennsylvania came to the attention of Stryker when he was looking for a replacement for Rothstein in 1940, was also expected to make positive images, but a long stay in Greene County, Georgia, where he was among the first to photograph prisons and labor camps, resulted in moving evocations of anguish and loneliness (*pl. no. 470*). Vachon, hired originally as a messenger, was responsible for the ever-growing picture file. Taught to handle a camera by both Shahn and Evans, Vachon saw his pictures begin to find their way into the file, and in 1940 he was promoted to photographer. Collier, the last hired for the project, barely had time to work in the field before the Historical Section was transferred to the Office of War Information in 1942.

The interrelationship between photographer, government agency, and public was crucial to the formation of this unique document, and it owes much to Stryker's capacity to direct the project toward ends in line with the New Deal's goal of offering minimal assistance to those being permanently displaced from the land by economic and social factors. Despite a certain resistance to the poetic resonance of camera images, and an autocratic attitude toward the use and cropping of the photographs; despite a willingness to bow to demands for superficial and positive images of the American experience, Stryker was an effective buffer between photographers, bureaucrats, and the press, and he created the conditions for an exceptional achievement. A small number of images in this extensive document have been consistently visible since the 1940s, when Stryker turned the collection over to the Library of Congress, whose archives are more accessible than those of other federal entities. Those few images have come to symbolize the documentary mode, but lesser-known works, along with images in other archives, also make vivid the degree of displacement suffered by the nation's rural population during the Great Depression.

A



WORLD



HISTORY



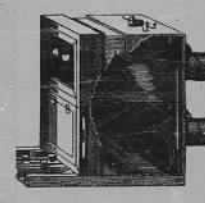
OF



PHOTO



GRAPHY



THIRD EDITION
Naomi Rosenblum

