

National Gallery of Art News Release



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WALKER EVANS EXHIBIT AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

HIGHLIGHTS NEWLY ACQUIRED IMAGES, OPENING NOVEMBER 24

Washington, D.C. -- More than fifty photographs spanning the career of one of this country's most important photographers will be on view in Walker Evans: Subway Photographs and Other Recent Acquisitions at the National Gallery of Art. The exhibition opens November 24, 1991, and extends through March 1, 1992, in the East Building.

"Walker Evans developed a straightforward, objective style that became the touchstone for a new documentary movement in American photography," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful that recent contributions have significantly enhanced the Gallery's photography holdings to provide a strong representation of this celebrated photographer's work."

More than thirty images in the exhibition will be drawn from Evans' acclaimed series of photographs made on the New York subways. Many of these works are gifts from Kent and Marcia Minichiello. Also on display will be rare vintage prints of Evans' earliest portraits of Berenice Abbott, his precisionist-inspired architectural studies, and examples of his later work for Fortune magazine between 1945 and 1965. These have been selected from recent gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Harry H. Lunn, Jr., the Clive Gray family, Edward Lenkin and Katherine Meier, and Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Stern, as well as an anonymous donor.

-more-

evans . . . page two

Evans is best known for his classic, unflinching records of American life during the Depression, taken while he served as staff photographer at the Farm Security Administration, and for his collaboration in 1936 with James Agee on the book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Evans' fascination with the mundane details of modern life and his ability to present these everyday subjects as telling reflections of American culture have profoundly influenced such artists as Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Considered a wunderkind in the 1930s, Evans rejected the conscious artiness of much earlier twentieth-century photography, including the work of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. His direct, detached, unsentimental approach won early critical recognition. In 1938, at age thirty-five, he was the first photographer recognized with a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. "I think I was photographing against the style of the time, against salon photography, against beauty photography, against art photography," Evans said about his early work at the end of his career.

Evans' pivotal Subway series, created between 1938 and 1941, predicted the direction of American photography after the Second World War. These compelling portraits of subway riders represent remarkable technical and aesthetic achievements, exploring the possibilities of newly developed miniature cameras.

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evans . . . page three

With a 35mm camera hidden under his coat -- its lens protruding between two buttons -- Evans recorded "candid" images of people who happened to sit directly across from him on the transit. He could not control the lighting, composition, or exposure, nor did he look through the lens. His participation was limited to pressing the shutter release attached to a long wire concealed inside his sleeve. Despite these restrictions, Evans created enduring images that powerfully define the anonymous individual within the public environment.

Evans called the subway a "dream location" and "sociological gold mine...a parade of unselfconscious captive sitters." He wrote, "You don't see among them the face of a judge or a senator or a bank president. What you do see...are the ladies and gentlemen of the jury."

His later work further explores these themes. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, and later in Chicago and Detroit, while he was a staff photographer and associate editor for Fortune, Evans applied a random approach to documenting passersby on the city streets. Selections from the Bridgeport series will also be on view.

A fully illustrated catalogue, written by Sarah Greenough, curator of photographs at the National Gallery, accompanies the exhibition.

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