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Photographic Portraits are Explored in Exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington



James Van Der Zee, *Couple*, 1924
gelatin silver print
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert B. Menschel Fund

Washington, DC—***Posing for the Camera: Gifts from Robert B. Menschel*** explores posing in photography and examines how photographers have both drawn on artistic conventions and exploited the collaborative nature of the medium to create probing portraits of their subjects. A selection of some 70 photographs, either acquired with funds from Robert B. Menschel or pledged as gifts from his personal collection, examines the many forms portraits have taken throughout the history of the medium: as means to define one's understanding of another person or one's own identity, a device to elucidate cultural issues, documents of historical moments, and resources for educational and scientific purposes. It also illustrates the ways in which photographers have used a figure's unconscious pose to create striking depictions of contemporary life.

On view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from September 17, 2017, through January 28, 2018, ***Posing for the Camera*** features pictures from the early 1840s through the 1990s by photographers such as William Henry Fox Talbot, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, James Van Der Zee, Brassai, Roy DeCarava, Robert Frank, and Cindy Sherman, as well as scientists, commercial practitioners, and amateurs. Many of the works are on view for the first time, including examples by Lewis Carroll, Edward Weston, and Man Ray. Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* (1990)—a recent acquisition made possible by Menschel and the Vital Projects Fund, and the Collectors Committee—is also on view in the East Building throughout the run of the exhibition.

A passionate advocate for photography, Menschel has been a generous supporter of the Gallery since his 1989 donation of funds helped spur the Gallery to start collecting photographs in 1990. Since then, his annual donations have supported the acquisition of more than 450 photographs by some 150 European and American photographers. Most recently, Menschel generously pledged 54 photographs from his personal collection to the Gallery, several of which are on view in the exhibition.

"The Gallery has been fortunate to have a handful of donors whose generosity has helped to change the course of the museum," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art, Washington. "Robert B. Menschel is one of those donors, and our photography collection would not be what it is without him. We are incredibly grateful to Mr. Menschel for his unwavering support, which has greatly enhanced the breadth and depth of our collection and allowed us to tell the history of photography in a rich, multifaceted manner."

Exhibition Organization and Curator

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and curated by Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head of the department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition begins by illustrating how the invention of photography in the late 1830s and its affordability relative to painting allowed for more people of middle-class means to have portraits made of themselves, their families, and their friends. Included are several early examples by commercial photographers who responded to the growing demand for portraits in a range of styles. While James Tyler's group of 24 daguerreotypes, *Our Pastor's Circle* (c. 1855), exemplifies the work of many studio portraits, *Portrait of a Child* (1850s) by Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes demonstrates the creative adjustments that these two Boston-based photographers made in their subjects' poses, dress, and lighting to create naturalistic portraits. *Posing for the Camera* also features work by earlier fine-art photographers, such as William Henry Fox Talbot, who used models—particularly friends and family—who were willing to hold the long poses required for experimentations with his negative-positive process in the 1840s.

Additional works explore the ways in which photographers have both drawn on and strayed from artistic conventions. Some replicated the approach of painters—Heinrich Kühn worked from preparatory sketches and Thomas Eakins applied the same insightfulness evident in his painted portraits to his photographs, such as the 1884 portrait of his father-in-law, William H. Macdowell. Others represented individuals with the attributes of their professions, as seen in Gertrude Käsebier's depiction of painter Willard Dryden Paddock with his palette. In the 20th century, photographers such as Franz Roh rejected any imitation of painting or graphic arts and posed figures in the urban environment in order to define photography's distinctive characteristics and relevance to modern life. With similar ambitions, Ray Metzker took full advantage of the medium's unique capabilities by pushing the boundaries of black-and-white photography in images like *Atlantic City* (1966).

Another focus of the exhibition is the relationship between photographer and subject and the medium's ability to draw on a fruitful collaboration between the two, which can lead to insightful representations of a subject's persona, as seen in Brassai's portraits of the painter Lucian Freud and writers Jean Genêt and Henry Miller. Works by anonymous makers in the exhibition demonstrate how photography also gave subjects the ability to use the medium as a means of self-presentation or as a form of social performance. In more documentary approaches, surreptitious portraits can reveal a subject's psyche and, in turn, the nature of modern life, as seen in Walker Evans's *Labor Anonymous* (c. 1946), W. Eugene Smith's *Waiting for Survivors: The Andrea Doria Sinking* (1956), and Roy DeCarava's *Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington, D.C.* (1963).

Robert B. Menschel

Menschel's history with the Gallery began in 1989 when he was inspired by the exhibition [On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: 150 Years of Photography](#) to donate funds from the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation to encourage the museum to begin collecting photographs. Since then, Menschel has made annual donations, helping the Gallery's photography collection grow to more than 17,000 European and American photographs made from 1839 to the present.

Menschel was a member of the Gallery's Trustees' Council from 2007 to 2011 and again from 2013 to 2017, and he has been a member of the Photography Initiative group since its inception in 2012. Menschel's support for photography and his philanthropy also extends to other museums. He joined the Committee on Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1977, eventually becoming chairman of that group. Menschel was a member of MoMA's Investment Committee beginning in 1987 before becoming a trustee in 1989, then vice chairman of the board, president in 2002, and later chairman. In 2007 Menschel became chairman emeritus and a life trustee of MoMA. In addition to the National Gallery of Art and MoMA, Menschel has provided key support in partnership with his former wife, Joyce Menschel, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Public Library, the Chrysler Museum of Art, and Light Work at Syracuse University.

Menschel's interest in photography began in his youth, when he began to explore the medium as an amateur. Growing up in New York City, he was a pupil of photographer Aaron Siskind at P.S. 87 and a frequent visitor to MoMA. Menschel began acquiring photographs in the late 1960s, building his collection with works from across the entire history of the medium, including large groups of pictures by Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, and Berenice Abbott.

Related Program

Kitchen Table Series

October 17, 2017, at noon

East Building Atrium

Carrie Mae Weems, artist

Held in conjunction with *Posing for the Camera: Gifts from Robert B. Menschel* and the performance *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on Friday, October 20, 2017. Weems's seminal suite *Kitchen Tables Series* (1990) was acquired in part with funding from Menschel and will be on view in the East Building to coincide with the exhibition. A signing of the book *Kitchen Table Series* follows.

This program is made possible by the James D. and Kathryn K. Steele Fund for Photography.

Press Contact:

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt, Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc, and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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Curator Biography:

[Sarah Greenough](#)

[Senior Curator and Head of the Department of Photographs](#)

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[Exhibition Page](#)

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