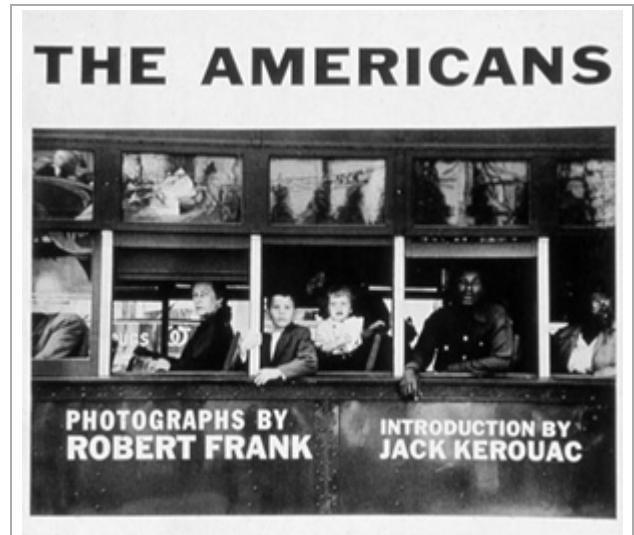


The Americans (photography)

The Americans, by [Robert Frank](#), was a highly influential book in post-war American photography. It was first published in France in 1958, and the following year in the United States. The photographs were notable for their distanced view of both high and low strata of American society. The book as a whole created a complicated portrait of the period that was viewed as skeptical of contemporary values and evocative of ubiquitous loneliness. "Frank set out with his Guggenheim Grant to do something new and unconstrained by commercial diktats" and made "a now classic photography book in the iconoclastic spirit of the Beats".^[1]

The Americans



The Americans, 1969 2nd printing

Author	Robert Frank
Country	France
Language	French, English
Subject	North American society
Genre	Photography
Publisher	Robert Delpire, Grove Press, Steidl
Publication date	1958
Media type	Hardback
ISBN	978-3-865215-84-0 (Steidl edition)

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Background

With the aid of his major artistic influence, the photographer [Walker Evans](#), Frank secured a [Guggenheim Fellowship](#) from the [John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation](#)^[2] in 1955 to travel across the United States and photograph its society at all strata. He took his family along with him for part of his series of road trips over the next two years, during which time he took 28,000 shots. Only 83 of those were finally selected by him for publication in *The Americans*.

[Sean O'Hagan](#), writing in *The Guardian*, about the inclusion of *The Americans* as the starting point in [David Company](#)'s critical journey into the photographic road trip, *The Open Road* (2014), said "Swiss-born Frank set out with his Guggenheim Grant to do something new and unconstrained by commercial diktats. His aim was to photograph America as it unfolded before his somewhat sombre outsider's eye. From the start, Frank defined himself against the traditional *Life* magazine school of romantic reportage."^[1]

Frank's journey was not without incident. While driving through Arkansas, Frank was arbitrarily thrown in jail for three days after being stopped by the police who accused him of being a communist (their reasons: he was shabbily dressed, he was Jewish, he had letters about his person from people with Russian sounding names, his children had foreign sounding names – Pablo & Andrea, and he had foreign whiskey with him). He was also told by a sheriff elsewhere in the South that he had "an hour to leave town."

Introduction

Shortly after returning to New York in 1957, Frank met Beat writer Jack Kerouac on the sidewalk outside a party and showed him the photographs from his travels. Kerouac immediately told Frank "Sure I can write something about these pictures," and he contributed the introduction to the U.S. edition of *The Americans*.^[1]

Style

Frank found a tension in the gloss of American culture and wealth over race and class differences, which gave his photographs a clear contrast to those of most contemporary American photojournalists, as did his use of unusual focus, low lighting and cropping that deviated from accepted photographic techniques.^[3]

Critical views

The book initially received harsh criticism in the USA, where the tone of the book was perceived as derogatory to national ideals. Much of the criticism Frank faced was as well related to his photojournalistic style, wherein the immediacy of the hand-held camera introduced technical imperfections into the resulting images. *Popular Photography*, for one, derided Frank's images as "meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness." This stands in contrast to Walker Evans' *American Photographs*, a direct inspiration to Frank, with its rigidly framed images shot via large-format viewcamera.^[4] Though sales were also poor at first, Kerouac's introduction helped it reach a larger audience because of the popularity of the Beat phenomenon. Over time and through its inspiration of later artists, *The Americans* became considered a seminal work in American photography and art history, and the work with which Frank is most clearly identified.

Sociologist Howard S. Becker has written about *The Americans* as social analysis:

Robert Frank's (...) enormously influential *The Americans* is in ways reminiscent both of Tocqueville's analysis of American institutions and of the analysis of cultural themes by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Frank presents photographs made in scattered places around the country, returning again and again to such themes as the flag, the automobile, race, restaurants—eventually turning those artifacts, by the weight of the associations in which he embeds them, into profound and meaningful symbols of American culture.^[5]

Publishing history

Frank's divergence from contemporary photographic standards gave him difficulty at first in securing an American publisher. *Les Américains* was first published on 15 May 1958 by Robert Delpire in Paris as part of its *Encyclopédie Essentielle* series. Writings by Simone de Beauvoir, Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Henry Miller and John Steinbeck were included, that Delpire positioned opposite Frank's photographs.^[6] Many thought that Frank's photos served more to illustrate the writing rather than the converse. The cover was decorated with a drawing by Saul Steinberg.

In 1959, *The Americans* was finally published in the United States by Grove Press, with the text removed from the French edition due to concerns that it was too un-American in tone. The added introduction by Kerouac, along with simple captions for the photos, were now the only text in the book, which was intended to mirror the layout of Walker Evans' *American Photographs*.^[4]

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the book's original publication (15 May 2008), a new edition was published by Steidl.^[7] Frank was involved in the design and production of this edition which used modern scanning of Frank's original prints, and tritone printing. A new format for the book was worked out, new typography selected, a new cover designed and Frank chose the book cloth,

foil embossing and endpaper. As he has done for every edition of *The Americans*, Frank changed the cropping of many of the photographs, usually including more information, and two slightly different photographs were used.

Exhibitions

- [Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 2008/2009](#)
- [National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 2009](#)
- [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, 2009](#)
- [Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, 2009](#)

References

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5. [Becker, Howard S. \(2009\). "Photography and Sociology" \(http://www.americanethnography.com/article.php?id=69\). *American Ethnography Quasimonthly*. Retrieved 17 January 2009.](#)
6. [Ladd, Jeffrey \(9 May 2012\). "Master of the Photobook: Robert Delpire's Long and Legendary Influence" \(http://time.com/3788403/robert-delpire/\). *Time*. Retrieved 14 September 2015.](#)
7. ["The Americans by Robert Frank" \(http://www.steidlville.com/books/695-The-Americans.html\). *Steidl*. Retrieved 2 March 2003.](#)

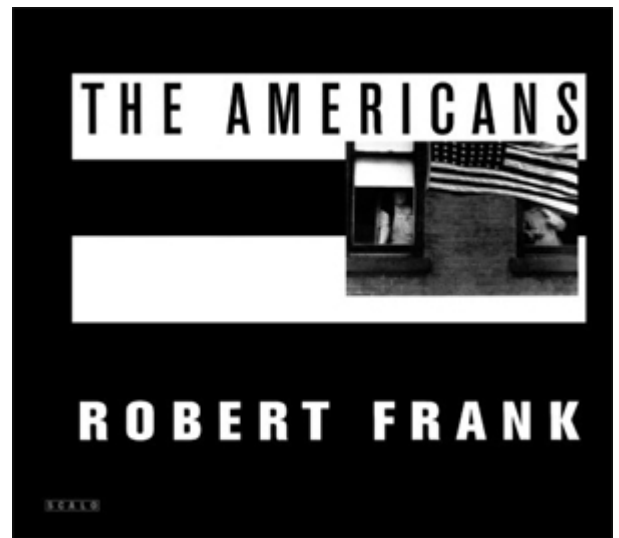
External links

- [Robert Frank's Elevator Girl sees herself years later \(https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112389032&ft=1&f=1008\) \(NPR\)](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112389032&ft=1&f=1008)

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The Americans, 1997 6th printing (3rd Scalo edition)