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At the Addison Gallery, a revelation about Robert Frank's
revelation

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Robert Frank's "Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey," from "The Americans." ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

ANDOVER — Reopening to visitors a week ago, the Addison Gallery of American Art, at Phillips Academy, returns with a photographic bang. Each of the three shows now up is excellent, and one of them offers a very rare exhibition pleasure: It's a revelation about a revelation.

That show, "Robert Frank: The Americans," runs through April 11. The others, "An Incomplete History of Photography: 1860s to 1960s," and "Roy DeCarava," run through Feb. 21 and Jan. 3, respectively. Visitors should note that in response to the pandemic, advance tickets to the Addison are required, though no admission is charged.

What more is there to say about "The Americans"? Sixty-plus years after its initial publication, so much surrounding the book and the response to it verges on photographic legend. How Frank, who [died last](#)

[year, at 94](#), spent most of two years traveling more than 10,000 miles, made more than 27,000 exposures — and then chose just 83 for publication. How “The Americans” drew withering criticism for its offhand style and detached, if not alienated, view of an I-like-Ike nation. How soon it then fired the imaginations of photographers and remains enormously influential.



Robert Frank's "Charleston, South Carolina," from "The Americans." ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

The question isn't what more is there to say about “The Americans.” It's what more is there to see, and the answer is a lot. This culture tends to use “classic” as a euphemism for “old” or, even more damning, “not new.” What classic truly means is “inexhaustible.” By that standard, “The Americans” is a classic through and through.

Frank, a Swiss immigrant, had lived in New York for a decade. His sense of discovery as he explores a continent-size country becomes our own. Elements recur: American flags, television screens, Black Americans (here not consigned to the margins of society). Cars and highways and gas pumps and a drive-in theater (all ways of escape). Religion (another way of escape). Most frequent of all, people staring off into space. That, too, is a way of escape, though to be lost in thought is still to be lost.

Light defines photography, but space defines “The Americans.” America is the land of sprawl, a dream kingdom of spread. A photograph is inimical to sprawl, the frame a form of confinement from which there is no visual exit. Frank offers a constant tension between space (enclosure) and those inhabiting it. The great gift of getting to see these pictures arrayed on a wall instead of placed individually on a page is how electric that tension becomes.



Robert Frank's "Drive-in Movie — Detroit," from "The Americans." ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

There's a further tension: between the specificity of what we see and the mystery of what Frank evokes. Put another way, these images are so much of a particular time (the sheer '50s-ness of the cars and clothes) yet also absolutely timeless (timelessness is as much a part of being classic as inexhaustibility is). Frank's sequencing isn't about location or chronology or theme — or only very rarely (a series of crosses occurs just past the midway point). It's about feel. The progression of images is as intuitive, and assured, as the images themselves.

As part of its 75th anniversary observance, in 2006, the Addison exhibited the images in a grid, on the second floor at the top of the staircase. It was a bravura hanging, at once marvelous and a bit overwhelming. Now the pictures are in several galleries on the first floor. They follow the order of the book, but the experience of them is very different. Several of the differences are obvious: the scale of the images, their physical presence, the visual interplay among them allowed for by this arrangement, which turning pages back and forth can't provide.

The biggest difference is, for lack of a better word, evaluative: Seeing the photographs together on a wall makes you appreciate, as the cumulative effect in a book can't, of just what an achievement "The Americans" is. Not achievement in the sense of influence or milestone — though it's certainly those things. A visitor is likely to know that already; or, if not, the wall text points it out (the Addison's indispensable Allison N. Kemmerer curated the show). No, it's achievement as sheer artistry: as fine as all the images are, more than a dozen photographic greatest hits, instantly recognizable to anyone with much familiarity with the medium — and no less instantly indelible to anyone seeing them for the first time.



Lewis Hine's "Girl With Loom, Cotton Mill," circa 1910. ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

Among those dozen or so is Frank's [photograph of a New Orleans trolley](#) (more people staring off into space, each of them confined within a window frame within the picture frame). It's also in "An Incomplete History." That title's a bit rich for a show with barely 30 photographs, but their quality is such that that's OK.

There are some very famous images here: Alfred Stieglitz's "The Steerage," Robert Capa's "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman," Diane Arbus's "Child With a Toy Hand Grenade." Notice the faint, and unsettling, chime between the Capa and Arbus. Note, too, how the subject of Lewis Hines's "Girl With Loom, Cotton Mill" stares into the camera — as so few of Frank's people do. That trolley photograph isn't the only reaching out to the Frank show.

"History," like classic, can be a loaded word in this culture, with its worship of the new and hunger for the next. At least one image in "Incomplete History" bears witness to the contemporaneity of history. Even without knowing the identity of the man on the left in Danny Lyon's "John Lewis at the Cairo demonstration...," from 1962, the image would be deeply moving. Knowing it's Lewis, who died in July, lends the image that much more emotional force — and all the more political relevance.



Danny Lyon's "John Lewis at the Cairo demonstration. Basis for SNCC poster, 'Come let us build a new world together,' Cairo, Illinois," 1962.ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

There are just 14 photographs in “Roy DeCarava,” but they’re so abundant in variation and texture that that in no way feels like a limitation. The Addison’s Tessa Hite curated both this show and “Incomplete History.”

DeCarava is that rare photographer for whom darkness matters nearly as much as light. The gradations of tone he achieves are a marvel: the way Elvin Jones floats, almost incorporeal, in the background of “Coltrane and Elvin”; the spectral slinkiness of the subjects in “Dancers”; the way the young woman’s white gown erupts from the shadows in “Graduation Day.” The contrast between her elegant dress and the vacant lot she stands in is even more shocking. Formalism can be an excuse for ignoring social realities. For DeCarava, it allowed for a different, and often more acute, approach to them.



Roy DeCarava's "Graduation Day," 1949ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

ROBERT FRANK: THE AMERICANS
AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY: 1860s to 1960s
ROY DeCARAVA

At Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Andover Academy, 180 Main St., Andover, through April 11, "Frank"; Feb. 21, "Incomplete History"; and Jan. 3, "DeCarava." 978-749-4000, addison.andover.edu