



*NEW ORLEANS 1955*

Addison Gallery photo

Robert Frank's "Trolley, New Orleans" is a 1955 gelatin silver print that is part of the Addison Gallery of American Art's permanent collection.

# SNAPSHOTS OF AMERICA



# Museum highlights the visions of Robert Frank and Todd Webb

By TERRY DATE

Above the Addison Gallery of American Art's entrance hangs a banner with a black-and-white image of a lonely New Mexico highway narrowing to a point far on the horizon.

Just inside the gallery, on the rotunda wall, another big black-and-white photo faces visitors, this one a curving, light-splashed highway in Nevada, cars approaching from the distance.

Both photos invite viewers to an exhibit inside that presents everyday American life, in the mid-1950s, as seen through the lenses of photographers Robert Frank and Todd Webb.

The photographers, unaware of each other's projects, crossed post-World War II America on \$3,600 fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Their two visions find similar subjects – highways, cowboys, bars, the land and trolley cars – while reflecting outlooks shaped by their different ages, origins and experiences, say Lisa Volpe, curator of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, who organized the exhibit, and Addison Gallery curators.

The black-and-white photographs contemplate post-war American promise and rue its deep inequalities.

Here, side by side in 100 images on exhibit through July 31, are prosperity and poverty, corruption and virtue, and despair and hope.

The photos speak with empathy, anger, appreciation and pride. They are clean and grainy, balanced and off-kilter.

The pictures, hanging in rooms and nooks at the front of the Addison, offer visitors pictorial narratives they might recognize in their own cross-country trips.

Frank's photos would fill pages of "The Americans," black-and-white shots from his more than 25,000 pictures taken on the trip in a used Ford business coupe. He was 29 and traveled with his wife and kids during part of the journey.

He had emigrated from Switzerland in 1947, and spoke with an accent. With his New York license plates, camera and film, he apparently attracted police suspicion.

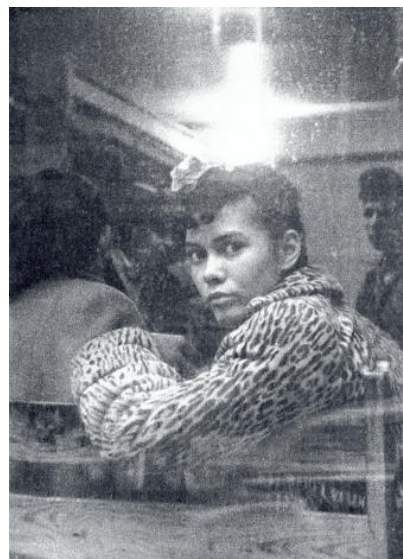
He was arrested and released three or four times during the journey, but never when he was traveling with his family, Volpe says.

Webb, who was 20 years older than Frank and a well-established art



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Todd Webb, "Clifton Ray Durham, Shawneetown, IL," 1955, printed 2023, inkjet print, courtesy of Todd Webb Archive



Copyright June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

Robert Frank, "New York City," circa 1947-51, gelatin silver print, courtesy of the June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

photographer, walked across much of the United States.

He walked from New York to Pittsburgh, where he boarded a boat and rode down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to St. Louis.

He then walked across the Great Plains until about three-quarters of the way across Kansas, when, bored by the

# Shows explore Southern photography and the permanent collection

Also on exhibit at the Addison Gallery of American Art through July 31 is “A Long Arc: Photography and the American South Since 1845.”

Addison curator Gordon Wilkins says that it demonstrates the diversity of stories in the South, a great range of subjects and presentations that examine its place in the history of photography and important contributions to its evolution.

There is identity and the legacy of slavery and the land and the impact of the Civil War and its culture and humor.

“It is a powerful show,” Wilkins says.

The show was organized by the High Museum of Art in Georgia. The Addison Gallery is the only northern venue where it is slated to be shown.

Two other exhibits on display here, also through July 31, draw from the Addison’s permanent collection.

“Laying the Foundation: Exploring the Nucleus of the Addison’s Collection” is made up of the gallery’s babies: 58 paintings donated by benefactor Thomas Cochran, a Phillips Academy alumnus, in 1928.

He was a college football coach and well-connected wealthy New York banker whose wife died young and who had no heirs, Wilkins says.

“He knew this would be his legacy,” Wilkins says.

Cochran wanted the art to inspire Phillips students.

He wasn’t a collector, but he was in the know. He had a committee, including Museum of Modern Art co-founder Lizzie Bliss, tell him what they thought was the best American art money could buy.

Homer’s “West Wind,” the first painting that Cochran donated, is a centerpiece. He paid about \$45,000 for it, the equivalent of \$800,000 in 2024, Wilkins says.

Also among the collection is the 1875 oil painting “Elizabeth at the Piano” by Thomas Eakins.

“Finding American Form: 20th-Century Selections From the Permanent Collection” is arranged thematically and reflects the different and experimental styles that emerged in the 20th century. Especially a movement from realistic to abstract visions, assistant curator Rachel



Copyright estate of the artist

Charles Moore, “Martin Luther King Jr. Arrested, Montgomery, Alabama,” 1958, gelatin silver print, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchased with funds from Lucinda W. Bunnen



Addison Gallery image

Hale Woodruff, “Picking Cotton,” 1926, oil on masonite, gift of Stefan Kaluzny

Vogel says.

Thomas Hart Benton’s 1938 painting “Cradling Wheat” has a story built into the composition. Curving bodies at work in a field establish a rhythm and give the painting a mythic quality.

African American artist Hale Woodruff’s “Picking Cotton,” 1926, uses beautiful color combinations, perspective and people at work to think about identity.

As more people moved from rural to urban centers, new modes of expression took shape as artists created works that reflect city life.

Jacob Lawrence’s “Kibitzers,” 1948,

shows people in an angular fashion, huddled and indistinguishable.

“Instead of undulating curves, we have these grids,” Vogel says.

The works convey a frantic, less connected feel.

Change continues in paintings such as Arthur Dove’s “Autumn,” 1935, the season evoked through colors and shapes.

“(The form exhibit) tells a really varied and complex history of 20th-century American art, while also really showcasing some of the true gems of the Addison’s collection,” Vogel says.

— Terry Date



Copyright Todd Webb Archive

Todd Webb, "Between Lovelock and Fernley, NV," 1956, printed 2023, inkjet print, courtesy of Todd Webb Archive

unchanging landscape, he got a bicycle and rode it to New Mexico.

There, run down by the hard travel, he stayed with friend and fellow artist Georgia O'Keeffe, Volpe says.

At O'Keeffe's insistence, he rode a scooter over the Rocky Mountains, Volpe says.

Webb's photos from the cross-country trip would remain in storage for decades, unseen by the public, until located in Oakland, California, by Betsy Hunt of the Todd Webb Archive in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.

The seed for "Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955" was planted when Hunt mentioned to Volpe that Webb had also received a Guggenheim fellowship to photograph America on a cross-country trip.

Volpe looked at 10,000 Webb negatives to select photos for the exhibit.

The Addison is a fitting venue for the show.

The gallery has all the photos from "The Americans" in its permanent collection.



Tim Jean photo

From left, assistant curator Rachel Vogel, curator Gordon Wilkins and Director Allison Kemmerer, right, stand outside the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy.

In addition, Frank was an artist-in-residence here in 1995.

He worked with Phillips Academy students, as well as students of art teacher

David Meehan at Lawrence High School.

Allison Kemmerer, director of the Addison, says that Frank, who had a reputation for being cantankerous, was warm and encouraged students.

Meehan says that Frank urged the students to go out and take pictures of what they saw. At the time, there was a rash of intentionally set fires in Lawrence.

One of Meehan's students got a photograph of a guy being arrested on a suspicion of arson.

American photographer and Phillips Academy alumnus Walker Evans recommended both Frank and Webb for the Guggenheim grants.

On display at the gallery, in a glass case, are the applications that Webb and Frank filed for the grants, the contents reflecting the photographers' different approaches to their projects.

Webb's application included six, single-space pages outlining precisely his plan and the itinerary of his walk. Frank submitted two double-spaced pages stating the project would take form as he went along. ▲