

ROBERT FRANK AND TODD WEBB: ACROSS AMERICA, 1955

In April 1955, two highly talented artists, Robert Frank and Todd Webb, set out to discover America through their photography. At a time of post-WWII prosperity, the country was awash in commercial images circulating in newspapers, magazines, billboards, and television—images Frank and Webb felt reduced the American experience simply to consumerism. Both artists, in fact, had been working successfully in the field of commercial photography and thus contributed to the prevalence of advertising

imagery. Working individually, Frank and Todd applied for fellowships from the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 1954 to create photo essays as they traveled across mid-century America. Todd Webb wished to “depict vanishing Americana and what is taking place,” while Swiss-born Frank stated his project would be driven by “what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere.” This exhibition brings these simultaneous projects together for the first time.

On their travels, both photographers were forced to reckon with the unvarnished truths of the United States and their own place within its systems and culture.

Ultimately, Frank's and Webb's reexaminations of what it means to be American reveal the complexity of their undertakings, their unique perspectives and artistry, and the impossibility of discovering a singular vision of America.

Robert Frank (1924-2019)

Untitled, ca. 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



“When you grow up in Switzerland you want to get out because it’s a small country. . . In 1947, I came to America because I knew America was a big country and it was the future . . . but life here was harder. . . And I stayed and I’m glad I stayed,” Robert Frank noted.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Assembly Line, Detroit, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



After Robert Frank visited the Ford assembly plant in Detroit, he wrote, "Every [car] factory is really the same but this one is God's factory and if there is such a thing—I am sure that the devil gave him a helping hand to build up what is called Ford's Rouge Plant." The duality of the plant that Frank describes in words is also evident in his photograph. The blurred rows of workers leading into a seemingly infinite distance inspires not only awe in the size and efficiency of the plant but also horror for the workers trapped in such an inhuman environment.

Robert Frank (1924-2019)

Trolley, New Orleans, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Target Collection of American
Photography, museum purchase funded by
Target Stores



Robert Frank (1924-2019)

U.S. 90, En route to Del Rio, Texas, 1955

Gelatin silver print

Gift of the Pablo Frank Trust



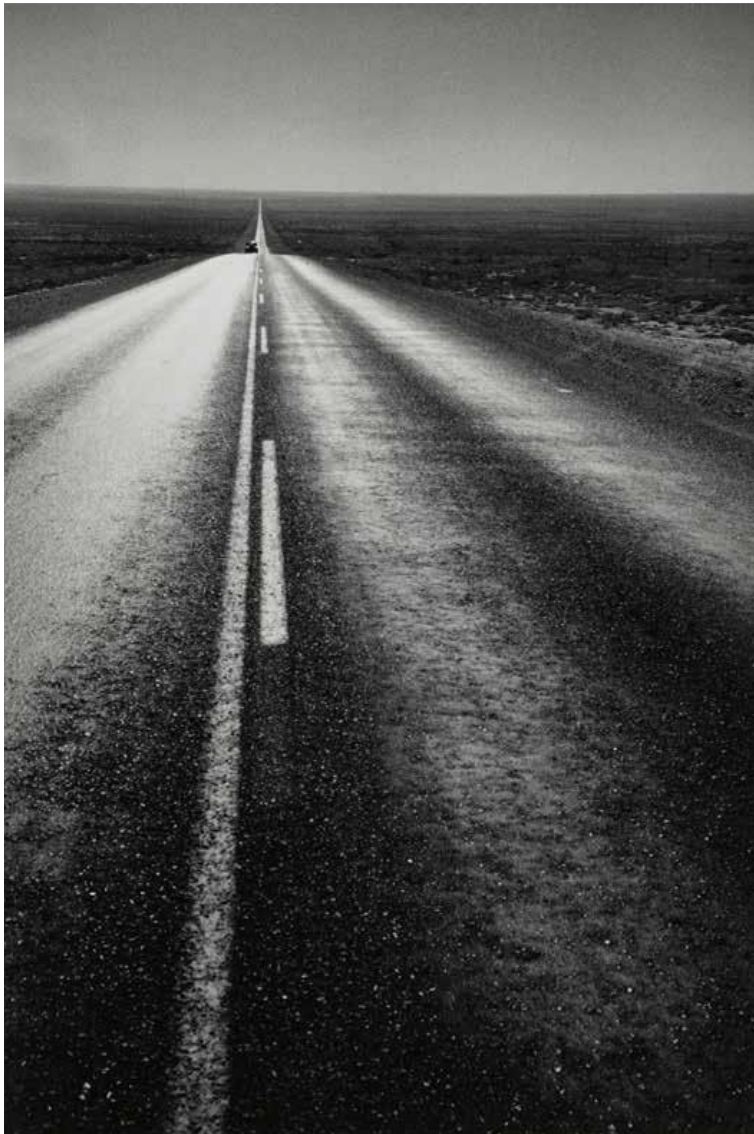
Robert Frank had a young family in 1955. He had married the artist Mary Lockspeiser and welcomed son Pablo in 1951 and daughter Andrea in 1954. While Frank completed most of his cross-country project alone, the family traveled together at times. Here, Frank photographs his wife and children in the car. "The best time for my photography was also the hardest to support my family," recalled Frank.

Robert Frank (1924-2019)

U.S. 285, New Mexico, 1955

Gelatin silver print

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



Robert Frank made several trips throughout the United States in a used Ford. For Frank, the quick method of travel matched his energetic photographic style and his restless personality. His cross-country project was an ambitious artistic effort, one that required constant adaptation. "I have been going forward, traveling my road while looking out," he wrote. "I am listening to my voice. The landscape changes and me too."

Todd Webb (1905-2000)

Between Lovelock and Fernley, NV, 1956,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland ME



Walking, boating, and biking across the country was no small feat. Several times on his journey, Todd Webb noted the seemingly endless distance between cities. "The trip itself as it stretches out assumes the dimensions of a saga," he wrote to his wife, Lucille. "There was one stretch between Lovelock and Fernley—40 miles without a tree or blade of grass and an inferno of heat."

Robert Frank (1924-2019)

Covered Car, Long Beach, California, 1955-56, printed 1972-77

Gelatin silver print

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and Nanette Finger



Todd Webb (1905-2000)

Oregon City, OR, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland ME



THE START

Though working separately, Robert Frank and Todd Webb started their cross-country journeys in New York City. As they continued, both photographed bars, cowboys, crowds, odd architecture, parades, and trolleys. Although the photographers were drawn to similar subject matter, their images are distinguished by their idiosyncratic approaches and unique artistic styles. Frank, traveling quickly by car, utilized a shot-from-the-hip style using a 35mm camera. Webb, walking thousands of miles carried a variety of equipment including a

larger, view camera and created precise and carefully composed photographs.

At 30 years old, Swiss-born Robert Frank (1924–2019) made several trips throughout the continental United States in a 1950 Ford Business Coupe. His photographs paired movement with selective focus, some shot from the window of his moving car. With his bold, confrontational style of photography, Frank critiqued America's social divisions and economic inequalities while depicting its people with grace and compassion.

Todd Webb (1905–2000) was 49 years old when he walked, boated, and biked his way across the country. Webb's pedestrian pace matched his measured method of image capture. His photographs are characterized by a sense of stillness. Webb revealed, often humorously, the empty promises behind American consumerism.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

You Bet, CA, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Gas Station, Salt Desert, UT, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Wrecked Car Lot, Stoystown, PA, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Public Park, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

San Francisco, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Though Robert Frank shot more than 20,000 frames during his journey, he declared, "This is my favorite picture." Recalling the moment of *San Francisco's* making, he said, "I was sitting down—sitting on the grass—behind these people, then he looked back. . . . It's the look you often get as a photographer when you intrude. They both have the same idea about me."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

*Picnic Ground, Glendale, California, 1955–
56*

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Public Park, Cleveland, Ohio, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



“That was the political [element in my work], that people were taken advantage of, that [they] really couldn’t make it, would never make it. Those people I felt passionate about,” Robert Frank explained. In each of his photographs, Frank emphasized the compassion he felt for the average American, those without riches, social standing, or political power. Frank’s photographs captured these citizens on film with tenderness and understanding, an artistic means of embracing them.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Yacht Club Member, St. Louis, MO, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb was amused by the numerous yacht clubs he encountered while boating on the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers. Before his trip, he had imagined that a yacht club was a formal and high-class establishment. He quickly found, however, that “the yacht club is a very casual sort of an organization—beer on Sunday for members and things like that.” Not a single member owned a yacht; still, they proudly announced their membership in the club with a sense of superiority.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Car Lot, San Francisco, CA, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Knotts Berry Farm, Buena Park, CA, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



At the Western-themed amusement park Knotts Berry Farm, Todd Webb photographed a tourist with a straw hat and flip-flops with one child roped to his belt and another strapped to his back. The tourist pays attention to neither child, focused instead on his own experience. Matching the wry humor of the image, Webb noted, "There seems to be little humility among the tourists."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Ski Lift, Lake Tahoe, CA, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Pismo Beach, CA, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



This was one of the last photographs Todd Webb took on his journey. He had reached California and traveled down the coast to this southern beach. The emptiness of the landscape gave him time to reflect. "I think my project worked out very well. I have been tired and lonesome but never bored. I have made several thousand photographs and met and said goodbye to hundreds of people. It will all add up to something fine, I think."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Beaufort, South Carolina, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Charleston, South Carolina, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



“[Traveling in the South] was the first time I had seen segregation in practice,” Robert Frank recalled. “I walked down the street there and I saw that woman—and I thought how strange it is that these people that had on their mind continuously the question of black and white would give their babies to a Black woman.”

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

*Men's Room, Railway Station, Memphis,
Tennessee, 1955*

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



Robert Frank's photograph of a shoe shine in a men's restroom is a searing indictment of both U.S. race relations and the indignities forced upon the lower classes. It was the type of scene Frank encountered all too frequently on his travels. "I was compassionate," he said. "I had a feeling of compassion for the people on the street . . . that made me work so hard until I knew I had something. . . . I had America."

Robert Frank (1924-2019)

Elevator, Miami Beach, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Uninterested in straight-forward or simplistic images, Robert Frank noted, "When people look at my pictures, I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice." This photograph of a young elevator operator dreamily gazing into space while people rush past invites a reconsideration of the everyday moments and interactions that, like the mixture of words in a poem, attempt to express human nature.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Coffee Shop, Railway Station, Indianapolis,
1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



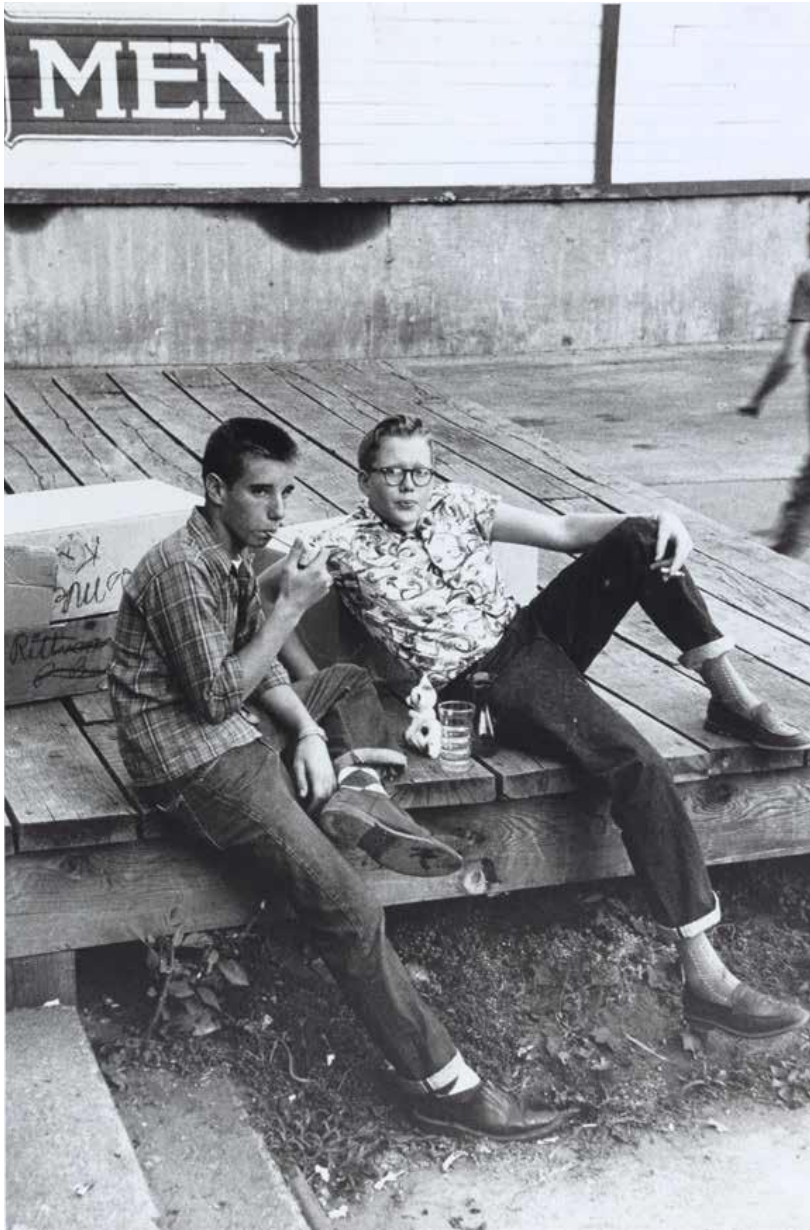
“The world moves very rapidly and not necessarily in perfect images,” Robert Frank noted. Frank’s style disregarded widely held rules for perfect photographic composition and precise clarity in favor of movement and emotion. Although *Coffee Shop, Railway Station, Indianapolis* is slightly blurry and improperly exposed, those elements add to the artistry, emphasizing the shiny, unnatural environment of the coffee shop and the uncertain glance of the anonymous waitress.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Amos Park, Sandusky, Ohio, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

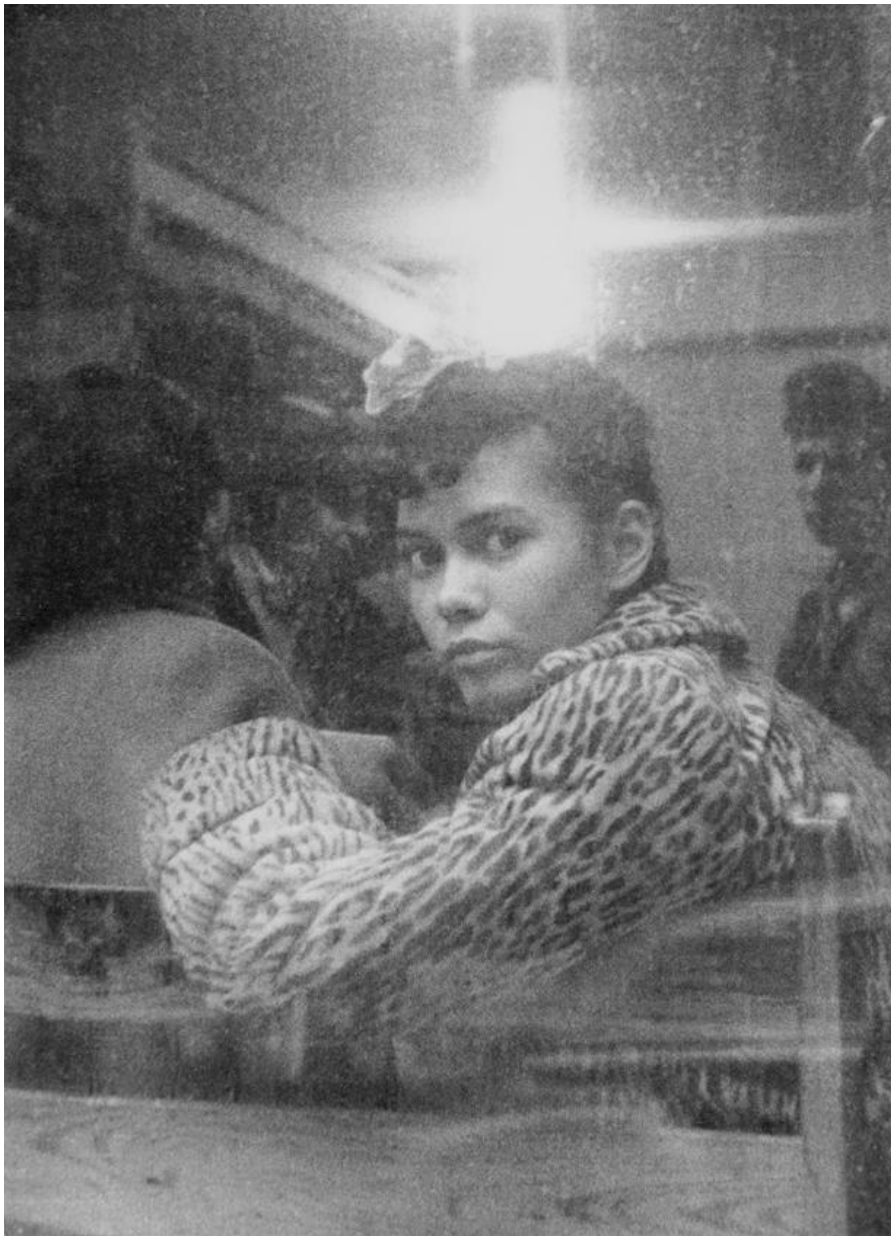


Robert Frank (1924–2019)

New York City, ca. 1947–51

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



“In New York . . . you’re either dismissed or recognized, make it or not make it,” noted Robert Frank. In 1955, Frank’s photographic work—expressing his feelings and created in series—was out of step with popular photography. He accepted this outsider status, and in his work, he embraced others he felt were similarly dismissed. In this striking portrait, Frank celebrates this anonymous woman and recognizes her individuality by carefully framing her in the window and including an angelic halo of light above her head.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Clifton Ray Durham, Shawneetown, IL,

1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



“I seem to have a talent for meeting people, for liking people, and they respond,” Todd Webb noted. The kinship Webb established with those people he met is evident in his astute portraits. Clifton Ray Durham, a young man who had quit school and dedicated himself to piloting boats on the Ohio River, posed for Webb on the banks of the river. The artist articulated Durham’s steady character, one beyond his years, by capturing his relaxed and wise gaze.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Shorty Allen, Cape Girardeau, MO, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



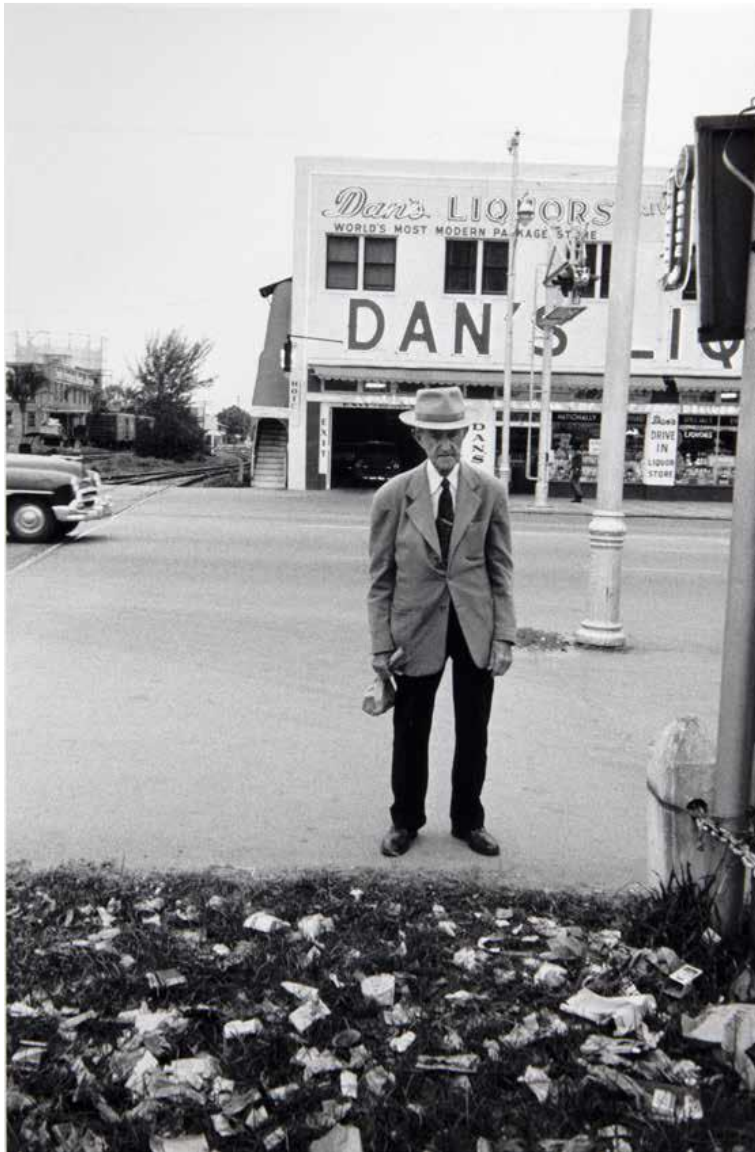
“Met an old man on the Mississippi where I camped one night [named] Shorty, [an] 81-year-old Spanish-American War veteran. He came down the river on a rowboat from Omaha in 1902 and found the same place to camp that I did. He has been there ever since,” Todd Webb wrote in a letter home.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Florida, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Robert Frank never shied away from capturing the harsh reality of American life. Trash heaps, hostile strangers, and liquor stores were significant subjects for the artist because they were part of American life. "I was aware that I was living in a different world—that the world wasn't as good as [the ideal image of America]. . . . It was a myth that the sky was blue and that all photographs were beautiful."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Quitting Business, Aliquippa, PA, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Scenes like this one in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, provoked Todd Webb to examine the link between money and success in America. Amid products offered “at cost,” the elderly proprietor stands slumped with his hands in his pockets, his blank expression and weary posture suggestive of defeat. Webb decided, “One of my big troubles is that I can never generate enough desire for money to be ruthless—which is pretty much what it takes for success in our society.”

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Pawnee Rock, KS, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Amish Horse Sale, New Holland, PA, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



As Todd Webb walked across the United States, he traversed towns, talked to the people he met, and participated in local events like this Amish horse sale. His slow, immersive approach allowed him to see and understand much about the country and human nature. This greater comprehension resulted in more dynamic and complex photographs like this one, which contrasts the stoic postures of the traditionalist community with the rapidly moving horse. "I have been around the world a lot and I have seen many things. And yet I feel that I have just begun to see," Webb wrote.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Long Beach, 1955–56

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of P / K Associates



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Farmers, Baldwin, KS, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



In his journal, Todd Webb wrote, "Had a good morning at Baldwin grain elevator. Talked to the workers and to the farmers who were bringing in their early wheat. . . . The grain elevator is certainly the architectural symbol of Kansas towns. . . . Miles without a tree. Almost nothing but hot sky and flat dry fields."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Political Rally, Chicago, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



“It’s a big country,” Robert Frank noted about his journey. “There’s a lot. And it was wonderful to take a trip across America, to see all that. I mean, that’s how you learn about the country.” As he traveled the United States and learned, Frank developed his own vision of America. He expressed that vision in his work with surprising compositions and a bold style that challenged the photographic status quo and idealized images of the nation. In this photograph, he frames a man obscured by his own zealous patriotism, caught up in the music and pageantry of a political rally.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1955–56,
printed 1972–77

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by
Target Stores



Robert Frank thought of America as the mecca for “everything that is made and sold and consumed,” and often aimed his cameras at consumer excessiveness. “Here it is, broken—used up—smashed to pieces—thrown away—left to rot.

Mattresses, record players, TV sets, bottles, glasses, clothes, toys, furniture, automobiles, photographs, art . . . more is produced than can possibly be consumed,” noted Frank.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

William S., New York, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Pinup, ca. 1955–56

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Washington, D.C., ca. 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank

Foundation



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Convention Hall, Chicago, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger, 83.91



“Once someone is aware of the camera, it becomes a different picture, you know,” Robert Frank noted. “People, they’ll change.” For Frank, remaining unnoticed was essential to the creation of a successful photograph. Whether on the street or at a political rally, the artist aimed to capture unaltered and imperfect moments of the American experience.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

City Fathers, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Taken from the point of view of the crowd, Robert Frank's *City Fathers* depicts New Jersey's powerful, top-hatted men positioned above the masses. The perspective highlights the uneven social and economic positions of Americans.

"Power and Money; and that, especially the latter, is the mark of success upon which the system insists," Frank observed. "That's the way it is in America . . . sad but true."

ROBERT FRANK

Robert Frank's reputation was growing in 1955. He had achieved success contributing commissioned photographs to magazines such as *Harper's Bizarre*, *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Look and* developed friendships with renowned artists such as Walker Evans, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning Young, and Edward Steichen. He was a peripatetic traveler to Europe and South America, honing his eye and refining his art. America, however, remained unconquered territory. When he returned to the United States after several years abroad in 1953, he wrote, "This is the last

time that I go back to New York and try to reach the top through my personal work.”

The first recognition of his artistic success came in 1951 when Frank entered and was awarded second prize in *Life's* Contest for Young Photographers.

Frank produced 28,000 photographs on his cross-country trip and selected 83 to appear in *The Americans*. At the time of publication, the book was highly criticized for its radical style and unflinching vision of the United States, but it has since become one of the most lauded and best-selling photobooks ever produced. Frank's

distinctive approach to photography would influence generations of artists.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Bar, Gallup, New Mexico, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Shot with the camera held inconspicuously at his hip, Robert Frank's *Bar, Gallup, New Mexico* demonstrates the artist's intuitive vision. The compressed point of view and dramatic lighting emphasize the roughness of the crowd, all framed without Frank looking through his camera's viewfinder. "I didn't want to be seen with a camera," he recalled. "That's a tough, tough bar."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Drugstore, Detroit, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Untitled, ca. 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Texas National Bank, Houston, Texas, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



In Houston, Robert Frank photographed the glossy, newly opened Texas National Bank at 1300 Main Street. Utilizing an increased depth of field and a tilted composition, Frank created an unbreachable division from the banker in the background by means of an unpassable river of desks and chairs. Rather than an indictment of the city, the photograph was Frank's critique of economic systems that keep money and power out of reach for so many. Frank would return to Houston many times over the subsequent decades. "I think fondly of Houston," he noted.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Highland Boatyard, Aliquippa, PA, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Yackles Fish Market, Henderson, KY, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905-2000)

Train Station, Kansas City, MO, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Bedford, PA, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



AMERICA AS MYTH

Acutely aware of America's inequalities, Robert Frank—who emigrated to the country from Switzerland in 1947 at the age of 23—noted, "America is an interesting country, but there is a lot here that I do not like and that I would never accept. I am also trying to show this in my photos." For his part, Todd Webb was disappointed in "the material prosperity and spiritual poverty" he found along his journey. The truth they encountered was irreconcilable with the idealized American image from popular media. Yet, in the distance between the myth and reality,

both men found fertile ground for their art.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Wagon Wheel Bar, Moab, UT, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb often spent his evenings at local bars, enjoying a cold drink after a day of travel and chatting with the townspeople. Webb, a friendly stranger on an epic journey, would quickly become the most popular man at the bar. “The people were very nice,” he wrote after a visit to the Wagon Wheel Bar. “Outside of the fact that we could find little of common interest to talk about, we got along fine . . . but in a place like that I can understand that there is a certain hunger for strangers.”

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Bar, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1955–56

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Wharf Bar, San Francisco, CA, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



“San Francisco . . . is an alive city,” Todd Webb wrote in his journal. “And full of hell too. I have seen many bars with signs out announcing that they open at 6AM.”

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Love Your Enemies, Pittsburgh, PA, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Garden City, KS, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Interested in the overlooked and uncelebrated, Robert Frank found the roads and roadside amenities outside of town just as fascinating as the towns themselves.

Frank photographed the sign and pumps of this gas station in New Mexico from a low angle, presenting them jutting into the sky as if these structures were the skyscrapers of a metropolis. "The places that interest me are on the way," he noted.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Untitled, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of P / K Associates



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Half Way, Kinsley, KS, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb always planned to cross the central states on bicycle, but the heat and endless stretch of plains in Kansas made him buy his bike a few towns earlier than expected. "Walking here is tougher—because of the weather. So hot in the sun. And so far between places," Webb wrote in his journal. He was thrilled to reach this milestone, marking the center of the country and the halfway point of his journey.

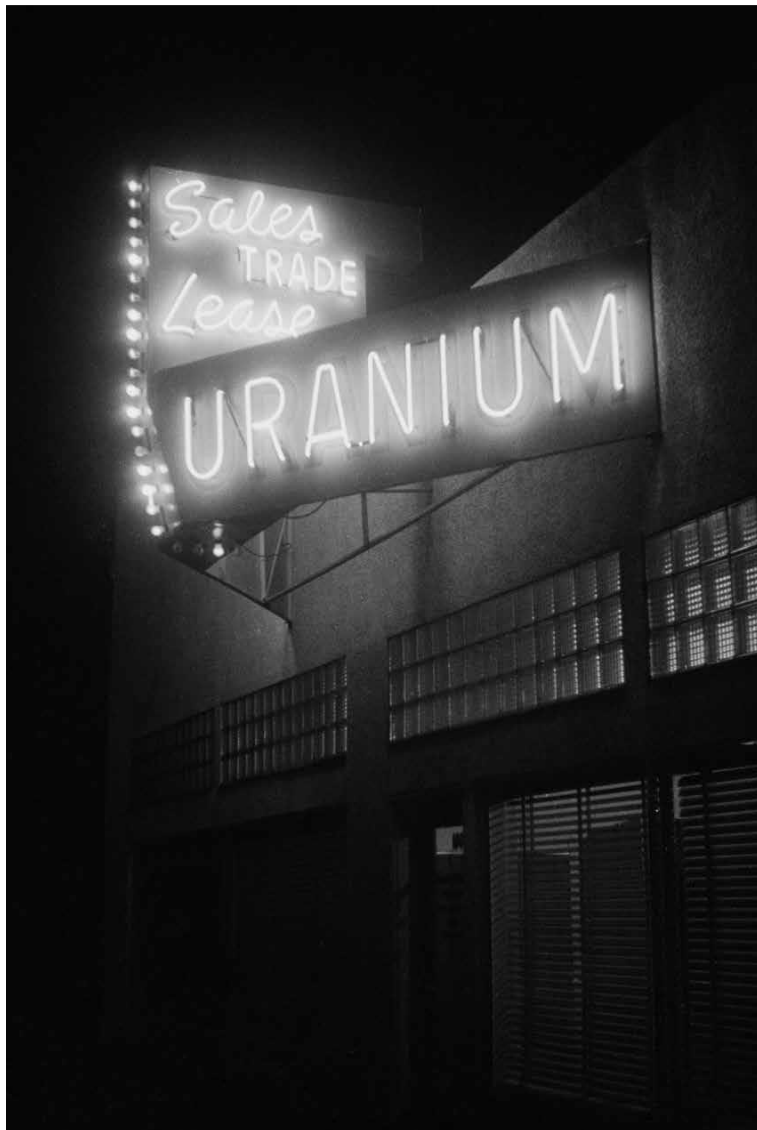
Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Uranium, Grand Junction, CO, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb was surprised by the booming uranium economy in Grand Junction, Colorado, in 1955. It seemed as though everyone had been struck with "uranium fever." Webb was interested in documenting every aspect of this craze; however, the plan was foiled by a mistake. He explained, "At Grand Junction I found myself in the heart of Uranium Country. I was able to make some pictures . . . but ruined a couple of rolls of film when I inadvertently set two of my cameras down on a pile of very hot uranium ore."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Salt Lake City, UT, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Though Salt Lake City was promoted as a pious town in 1955, Todd Webb found it to be surprisingly seedy. His image, which depicts an angelic figure inside a dirty saloon, pokes fun at this disparity. "Salt Lake City now looks more like LA," Webb noted. "Miles on State Street of used car lots, motels, drive-ins, and bars. It is still a Mormon town, however. . . . Along with religion they seem to have pretty good appreciation for wine, women, and song."

Todd Webb (1905-2000)

*Four Men, Burlingame, KS, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Train Station, Kansas City, MO, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Joe, Abiquiú, NM, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Diner, Ouray, CO, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Wagon Wheel Bar, Moab, UT, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Bar, Dodge City, KS, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



The incongruity of a tough, local saloon and the childlike gumball machine on the bar is the focus of Todd Webb's photograph of Dodge City. For Webb, the entire town was full of inconsistencies. He wrote, "Dodge City is a little pitiful about trying to keep its title of 'Cowboy Capital of the World.' I don't think a cow has shown a teat in town for years—let alone a real cowpoke."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Town House Motel, Ontario, OR, 1955,
printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



TODD WEBB

Todd Webb had reached the top of the photographic field by 1955 having built friendships with luminaries in the art world such as Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz, and by having his work featured in several exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. Still, he wanted to challenge himself, free of commercial constraints. Webb decided to walk, boat, and bike across the country in six months. "I wouldn't want the walking feat to be the point of the thing," he wrote. "My primary purpose is to collect material . . . really fine photographs of America."

Despite the more than 10,000 photographs he produced during his journey, Webb never published any of his work from 1955, choosing instead to move on to other projects. Most of the artist's photographic negatives and prints were sold in 1976 to a dealer who never exhibited or published any of the material, and the whereabouts of this material became unknown after the dealer's death. The archive was rediscovered in 2016. This exhibition marks the first time that the photographs assembled here have been exhibited.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Beauty Queens, Lexington, MO, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



In Lexington, Missouri, Todd Webb caught a local parade and was amused by the scene. He noted that the event featured "teens in prairie wagons dressed in five-hundred-dollar evening dresses." At the conclusion, the artist spied those same beauty queens standing against a road barrier, one with a paper cup clamped awkwardly in her teeth. For Webb, the odd vision summarized the absurdity of the whole affair.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Republican Headquarters, Greensburg, PA,
1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Safety Day Parade, Lancaster, PA, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



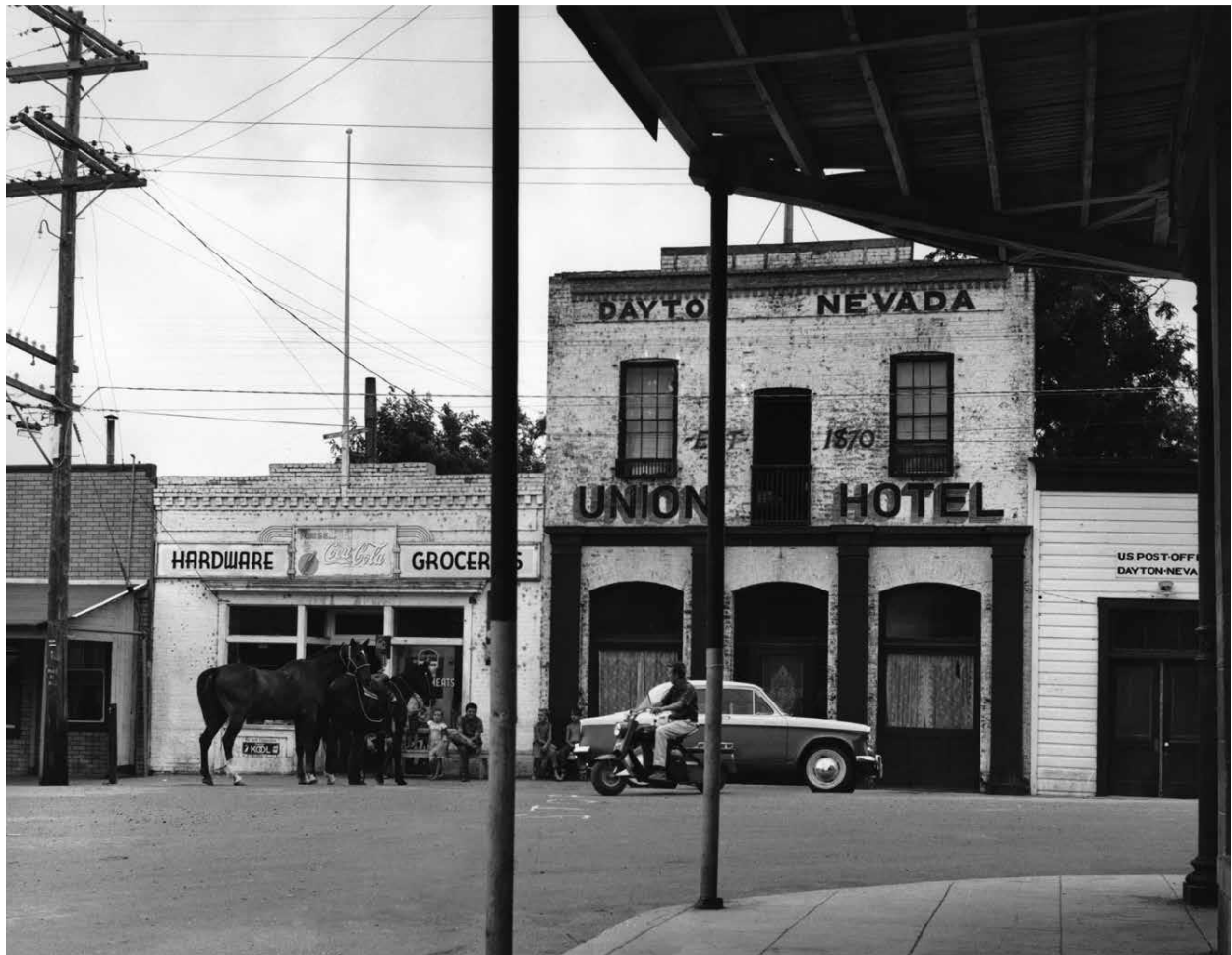
“There is something so dull about suburbia,” Todd Webb lamented several times during his journey. In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he photographed a kindred spirit, one who was also irked by the rituals of the suburbs. At the center of Webb’s photograph, a young girl participating in a local parade wears a bored and exasperated look as she trudges along the route.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Union Hotel, Dayton, NV, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Rodeo, Lexington, NE, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb called Lexington, Nebraska, “one of the cleanest and neatest towns I have seen—and probably one of the dullest.” Uninterested in such sanitized visions of America, Webb sought out moments in which the glare of perfect facades was blinding. This humorous photo evinces the town’s overzealous efforts to be perfectly American.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Buffalo, Garden City, KS, 1955, printed
2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



“As soon as I got in [to town] I looked up Ralph Junger who is the game warden and tends the buffalo herd. He took me out in the rugged sage brush country of the buffalo,” Todd Webb noted in his journal. “Fine thing to see at close quarters. . . . I feel such a lucky man to crowd such wonder into my life at this time.”

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Cowboy, Lexington, NE, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Rodeo, New York City, 1955–56

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Bonneville Salt Flats, UT, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Outside of the Bonneville Flats, Todd Webb created this image of travelers dwarfed by gigantic neon signs. The image summarizes Webb's experience on his cross-country journey. He wrote, "I do have a pretty good picture of the part of America I passed through—have shown some sign of the material prosperity and the spiritual poverty that I felt so strongly."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

St. Francis, Gas Station and City Hall, Los Angeles, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



“Los Angeles is a big city, and one can photograph a lot here,” Robert Frank wrote in 1955. Yet rather than photographing any of the well-known vistas, Frank produced this image of Los Angeles. An empty multilane highway stretches from end to end of the frame, while a hazy, empty sky diminishes any clear view of the buildings. In the foreground, a silhouetted religious statue seems to bless the emptiness. As Frank described it, his time in Los Angeles was as unpleasant as a hospital stay, a sterile and strange place seemingly outside of real life.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

New Mexico, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of P / K Associates



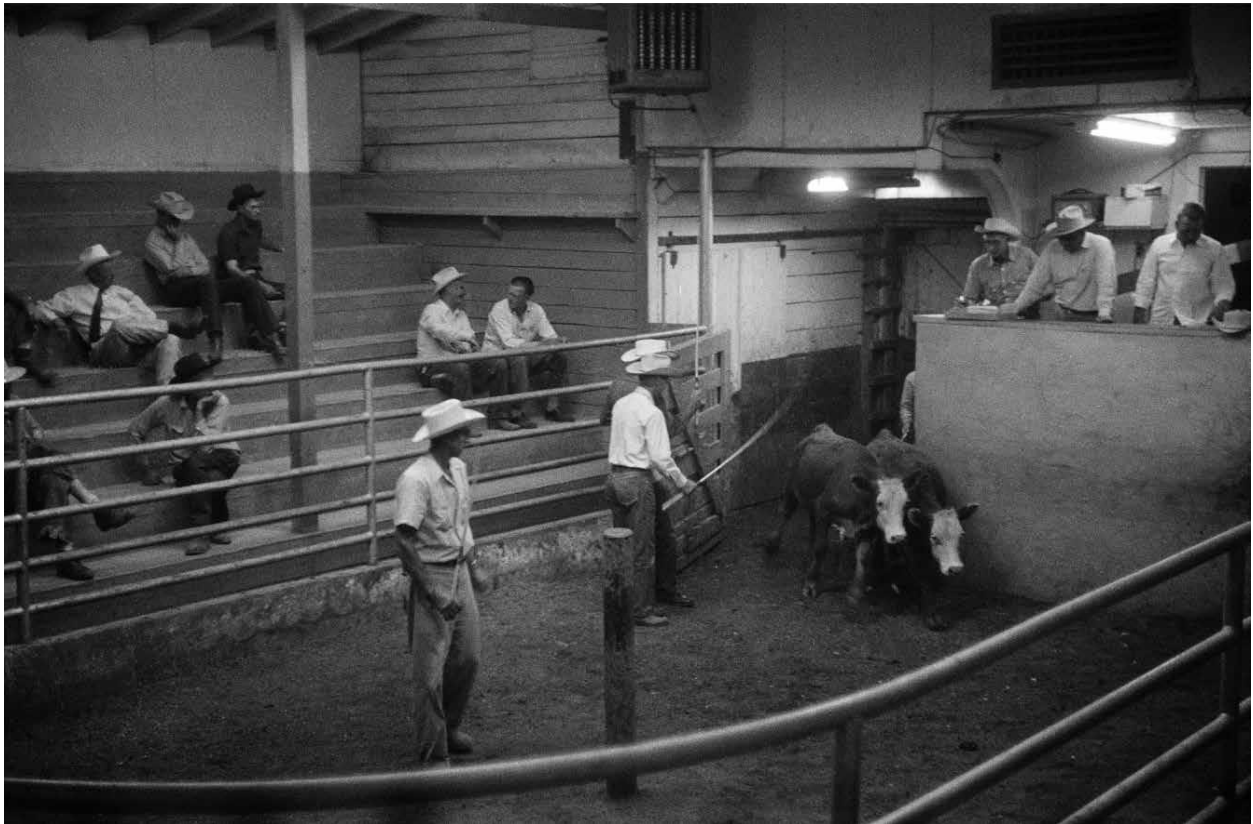
Robert Frank's clear-eyed vision of the racial and class inequities that permeated the United States was a stark contrast to the positive, idealized images of America popular at the time. *New Mexico* is an unforgiving visual document, exposing the plight of those forced to the bottom of American society. Frank affirmed his truthful approach: "You have to have a foot in the world, and not on a rose petal."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Stock Auction, La Junta, CO, 1955, printed
2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



“There was a stock auction going on here when I arrived,” Todd Webb wrote in a letter to his wife, Lucille. “People wear cowboy clothes here. Got to know a rancher from New Mexico who had brought a truckload of steers to sell.”

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Blacksmith Shop, Silverton, CO, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



“The town of Silverton is almost a ghost town,” Todd Webb noted in his journal.

“Few people live here now but many of the old buildings survive.”

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

*U.S. 30 between Ogallala and North Platte,
Nebraska, 1956*

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Untitled, ca. 1955

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Robert Frank's life and work were always intertwined, and his images echo his personal history and experience. "It seems nothing is really behind you, girls you have known, or your children, or the town you came from. It's all still with you in some way," he noted.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Opera House, Ste. Genevieve, MO, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Salt Lake City, Utah, 1956, printed 1977

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

View from Hotel Window, Butte, Montana,
1956, printed 1972–77

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and
Nanette Finger



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Hotel Lafayette, Gallipolis, OH, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



FINDING THEMSELVES

Along their journeys, Robert Frank and Webb constantly assessed their characters and photography, a practice that provided them with clarity about themselves and art's role in shaping attitudes about American life.

Faced with the conventions of mainstream America he encountered, Todd Webb wrote in his journal "Each person has a set of values—sometimes there is no realization of this. What are your values? . . . I don't fit into this society too well. I don't have the drives and ambitions to be a

so-called success. And yet, I am a success.” Frank wrote to his parents from Los Angeles, “Since I have been working on the Guggenheim project, my attitudes about what I am doing have changed. . . America is an interesting country but there is a lot here that I do not like and that I would never accept. I am. . . trying to show this in my photos.”

As their respective travels went on, both artists reflected on their projects. Todd wrote “Time and the War have made many of these things I hoped to see and do ancient history...Times have changed and so have I.” Frank stated: “Most of

these photographs express my strong opinion towards the subject, often it is admiring and optimistic, sometimes critical and satiric."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Barber, Abiquiú, NM, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Barbershop through Screen Door,
McClellanville, South Carolina, 1955

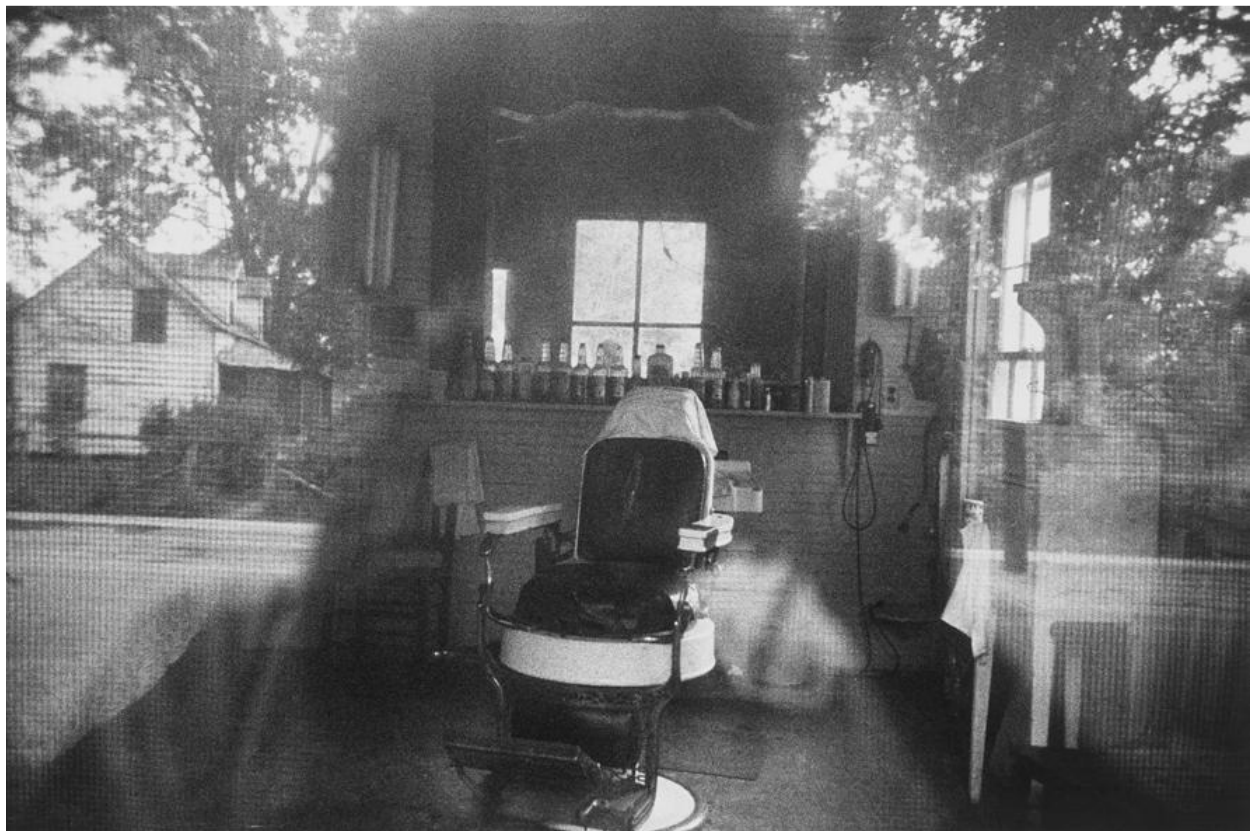
Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores

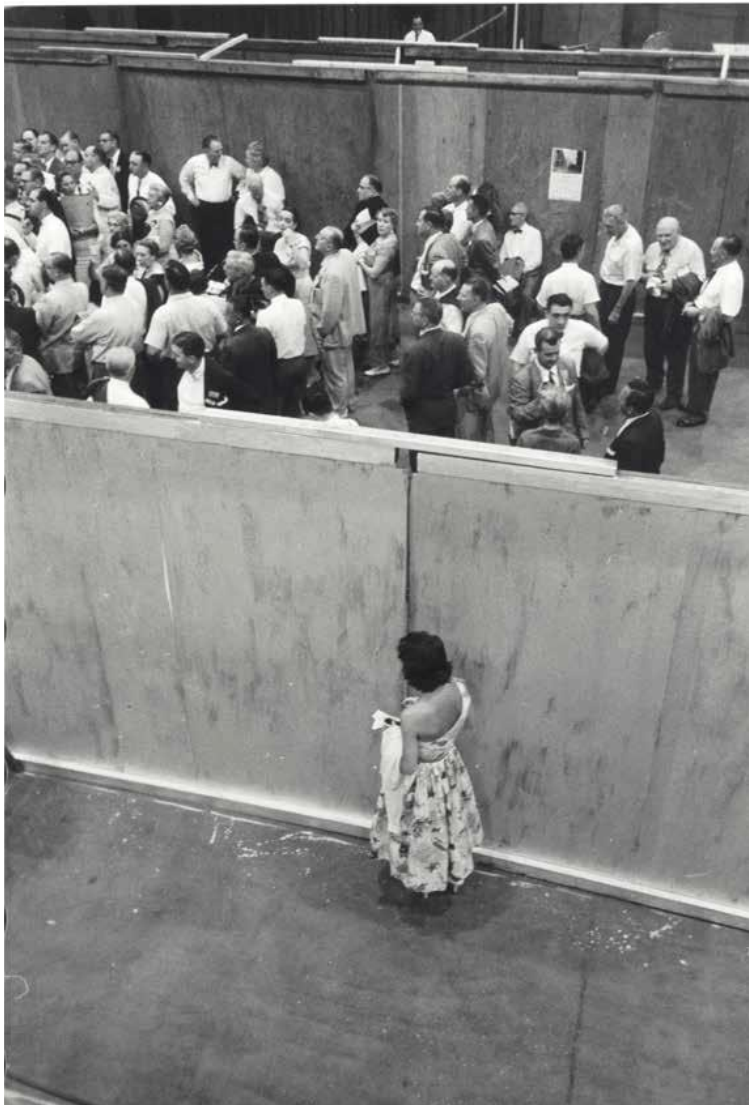


Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Untitled, 1956

Gelatin silver print

The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation



Many of Robert Frank's photographs depict Americans who are isolated, on the margins, or alienated. This image, taken well above street level, shows one young woman separated from the crowd. The increased distance from the subject and the distinct, physical barrier that splits the woman from the crowd convey a powerful sense of loneliness. Frank advised, "It's better to be miserable in a group on a weekly basis than to have to drag yourself through time and city alone."

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Kansas City, MO, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Gravesite, Virginia City, NV, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Untitled, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of P / K Associates



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Char-Coal, Irwin, PA, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Trolley, San Francisco, CA, 1955, printed
2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Staley Feeds, Baldwin City, KS, 1955,

printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



In 1955, magazines, television, and advertisements often portrayed the Midwest as the “heart” of the country, the stereotypical America. Yet, then as today, more Americans lived in cities than in midwestern towns or on farms. Todd Webb’s portrait of the Staley Feeds proprietor, standing on his porch, plays with that conceit. “This is America—not the whole story—but almost typical,” he joked.

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Oregon Lumber, OR, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Upon reaching Oregon, Todd Webb wrote in his journal, "Town after town is built around the lumber mill—piles of logs, stacks of cut lumber, the ever-smoking beehive-looking sawdust burner. . . . I can't help but wonder where all the great trees I see on truck after truck on the road come from. Great trees—a hundred or more years old . . . how can they ever be replaced?"

Todd Webb (1905–2000)

*Top of the Empire State Building, New
York, NY, 1955, printed 2023*

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb began his journey by climbing to the top of the Empire State Building, capturing the immense American city over the shoulders of other visitors. "I had to have a starting point . . . and I chose this place," he wrote in his journal. "There is quite a crowd here now. . . . It is such an American sight."

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Yom Kippur–East River, New York City,
1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of Manfred Heiting, The Manfred
Heiting Collection



Robert Frank's ambitions were different than those typical of his Swiss and Jewish upbringing. He noted, "Most people of that class who were my age . . . would come to America and stay for six months and then go back. . . . Because for them life was good; there were no surprises. . . . They had their families and they took over the businesses and they all were well off. I'm well off too, but my way." Frank's image identifies a kindred spirit in the young boy at right, who faces a different direction, not joining in the ritual around him.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Canal Street, New Orleans, 1955, printed
1972–77

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores



Todd Webb (1905–2000)

Zoo, St. Louis, MO, 1955, printed 2023

Inkjet print

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



In St. Louis, Todd Webb captured this poignant image of a young Black girl walking with her head down, as a White mother behind her clutches her possessions to her chest and stares in alarm. Webb's image freezes the movement, and his careful focus draws the mother in scathing detail. Unmistakable in this image is Webb's indictment of the everyday discriminatory acts that fed the larger evils of his time.

Robert Frank (1924–2019)

Standard Oil Refinery, Baton Rouge, 1955

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of P / K Associates



CASE IN GALLERY

Todd Webb (1905-2000)

Coast to Coast, 1957

Book maquette

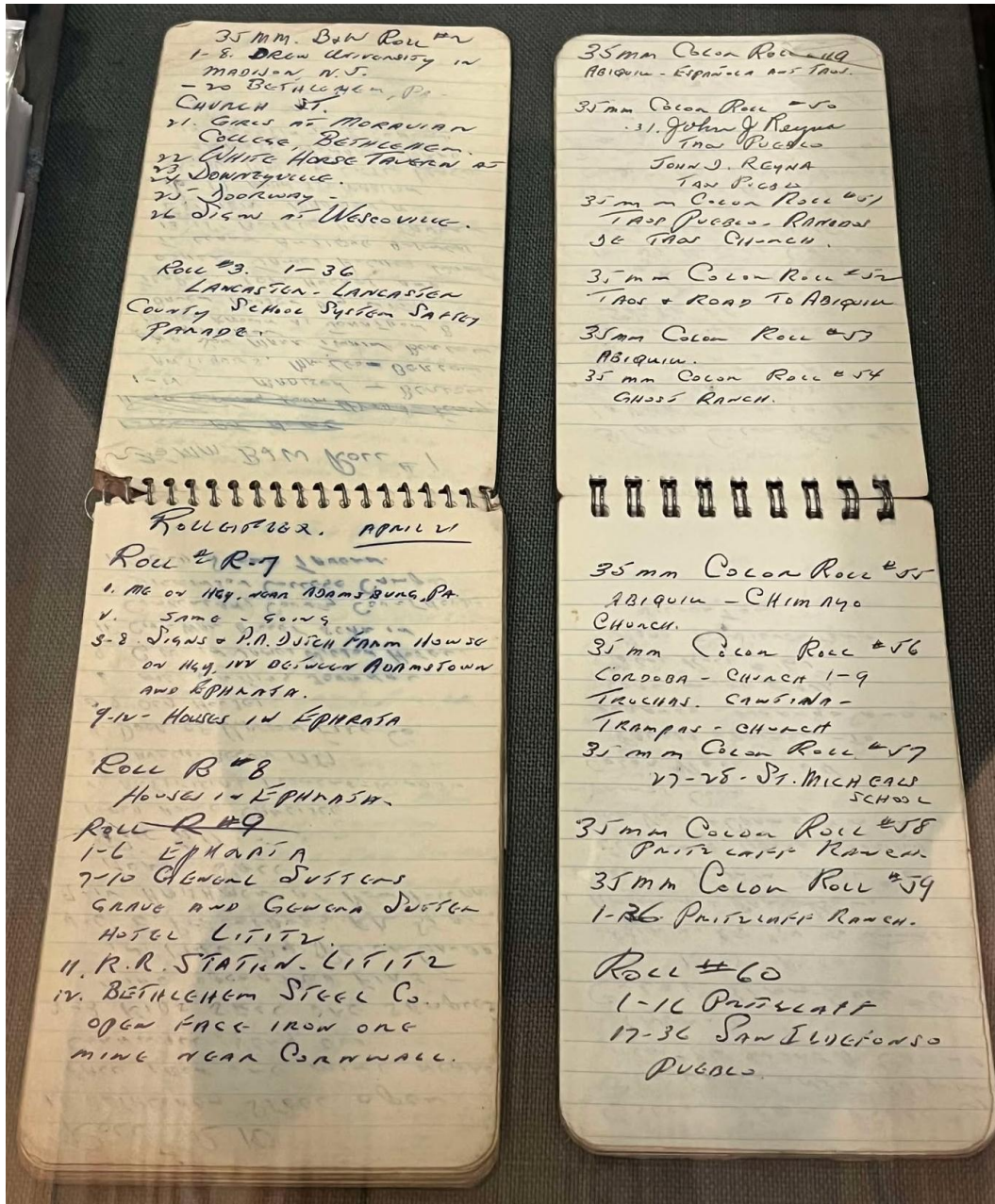
The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Todd Webb (1905-2000)

Travel Notebooks, 1955

The Todd Webb Archive, Portland, ME



Walker Evans (1903-1975)

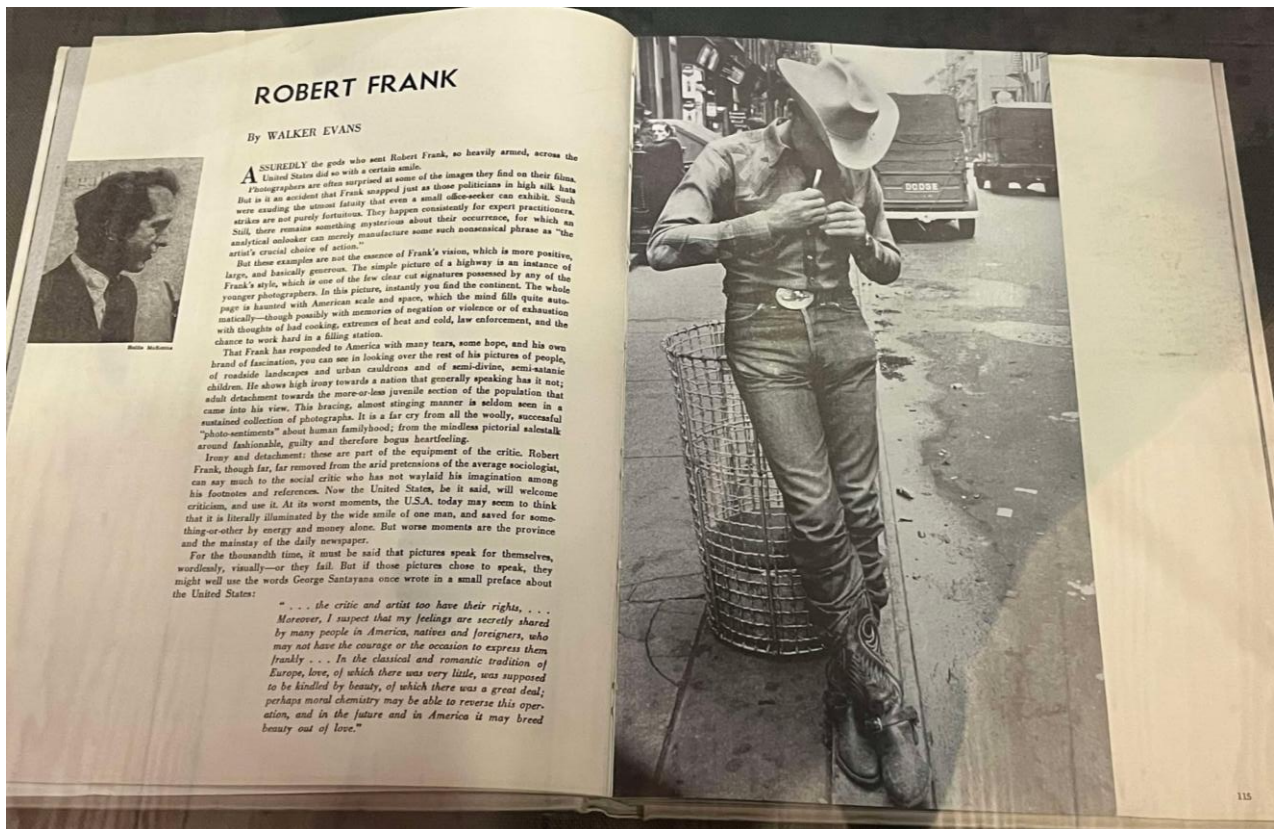
Photographs by Robert Frank (1924-2019)

"Robert Frank" in U.S. Camera, 1958, New

York: U.S. Camera Publishing Corp., 1957

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Courtesy of the Hirsch Library



Robert Frank (1924-2019)

The Americans, 1958

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Target Collection of American

Photography, museum purchase funded by

Target Stores

