

Robert Frank

Memories

12/09/2020 – 10/01/2021

Robert Frank, who was born in Zurich in 1924 and died last year in Canada, is widely regarded as one of the most important photographers of our time. Over the course of decades, he has expanded the boundaries of photography and explored its narrative potential like no other. Robert Frank travelled thousands of miles between the American East and West Coasts in the mid-1950s, going through nearly 700 films in the process. A selection of 83 black-and-white images from this blend of diary, sombre social portrait and photographic road movie would leave its mark on generations of photographers to come. The photobook *The Americans* was first published in Paris, followed by the US in 1959 – with an introduction by Beat writer Jack Kerouac, no less. Off-kilter compositions, cut-off figures and blurred motion marked a new photographic style teetering between documentation and narration that would have a profound impact on postwar photography.

It is quite possibly the single most influential book in the history of photography; however, rather than being a spontaneous stroke of genius, Frank had worked on his subjective visual language for years. Many of his photographs from Switzerland, Europe and South America, as well as his rarely shown works from the USA in the early 1950s, are on a par with the famous classics from *The Americans*. The photographer's early work, which remained unpublished for editorial reasons and is therefore little known to this day, reveals connections to those iconic pictures that still define our image of America, even today.

At the heart of the exhibition *Robert Frank – Memories* is the narrative force of Robert Frank's visual language, which developed in opposition to all conventions and only received international recognition after Frank had already abandoned photography and turned to the medium of film. The exhibition mainly features vintage silver gelatin prints from the collection of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, which either come from the former collection of Robert Frank's long-time friend Werner Zryd (now owned by the Swiss Confederation) or were donated to the Fotostiftung Schweiz by the artist himself. They are complemented by a number of loans from the Fotomuseum Winterthur. A presentation of the books and films that publisher Gerhard Steidl released with Robert Frank over a period of more than 15 years accompanies the exhibition (in the corridor leading to the library and in the seminar room).

Early Work

In March 1947, Robert Frank arrived in New York following an adventurous journey on a cargo ship. The young, ambitious photographer had found Switzerland too stifling and he hoped to gain new freedom in America liberated from social and family obligations. The photographer carried a 6×6 Rolleiflex and a small spiral-bound book of 40 photographs taken during his apprentice years from 1941 to 1946. This portfolio included landscapes, portraits, personal photojournalistic works, and meticulously executed still lifes, all of which reveal that the 22-year-old was a highly skilled photographer. It is therefore unsurprising that influential Harper's Bazaar art director Alexey Brodovitch swiftly hired Frank as an assistant photographer after seeing his portfolio and first test photos.

In the magazine's in-house photo studio, Frank photographed fashion industry products from clinical shots of women's shoes and every imaginable accessory to laboriously staged fashion shoots and occasionally even photojournalistic assignments offering a little more freedom. Frank was successful and rose through the ranks, but quickly realized that this industry cared only about money, an attitude to which he couldn't reconcile himself. Only a few months later, he quit his job in order to be able to work wholly free of constraints. He traveled to Peru and Bolivia the following year and often used his 35 mm Leica. Later he recalled: "I was making a kind of diary. I was very free with the camera. I didn't think of what would be the correct thing to do; I did what I felt good doing. I was like an action painter."

Frank returned to Europe in spring 1949. He photographed the yearly cantonal assembly in the Swiss canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, during which citizens (exclusively men back then) voted by a show of hands. However, he was unsuccessful in placing this story with a major periodical, even though he circulated the images via the acclaimed agency Magnum. Evidently, Frank had focused too little on the actual events. He was more interested in the bystanders' stances than in the pomp of government officials wearing tailcoats and top hats. His photographs of this assembly prefigure the penetrating and critical gaze he would later level on America's societal and political landscape. Here as there, his was an outsider's subjective and inward-looking perspective.

Black White and Things

In late 1949, the international magazine *Camera* published a first selection of Robert Frank's work. The accompanying text described him as a photographer who loved "truth and unvarnished reality", as someone "whose thirst for experience compelled him to get out and capture life with his camera". Indeed, Frank worked chiefly in Paris, London, and Spain between 1949 and 1953, frequently traveling between Europe and the US. He reported on a bullfighter in Spain and observed life in London's financial district. In Paris he took pictures of objects – mostly chairs and flowers – photographs he assembled in an album dedicated to his future wife. In subsequent years, he shook off any sentimental tendencies.

Frank continued his attempts to publish both smaller and more substantial stories and photo essays in glossy magazines such as *Life*, but with limited success. His reportage on Welsh coal miner Ben James, which appeared in *U.S. Camera* 1955 annual, was a rare exception. But Frank found himself less and less able to reconcile himself with the conventional view of photography as a universal language accessible to all. Instead, he increasingly distanced himself from print media's expectations and developed a strong aversion to what he once termed stereotypical "*Life* stories", "those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end".

In autumn 1952, Frank created *Black White and Things* with his Zurich-based friend Werner Zryd. This handmade book comprising 34 photographs was an attempt to counter these expectations with something new: an intuitively ordered series of photos with neither text nor linear narrative structure, introduced simply by Saint-Exupéry's famed lines from *The Little Prince*: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Accordingly, *Black White and Things* is a kind of three-part visual poem: "Black" evokes death, materialism, loneliness, and anonymity; "White" evokes home, love, religion, and camaraderie; and "Things" engages with diametrical oppositions such as friendship and cruelty, and affection and solitude. The order and pairing of the images sparks thoughts, associations, and feelings. Yet Frank's evocative arrangement is intentionally ambiguous and open: "Something must be left for the onlooker, he must have something to see. It is not all said for him."

America, America

After a further trip to New York – which he assured his mother would be his last – Robert Frank applied for a Guggenheim fellowship in October 1954. His project proposal was for an “observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere”. The result was to be a book, for which he had already won support from Arnold Kübler, the long-standing editor of the Zurich-based culture magazine *Du*, and Robert Delpire, a young publisher in Paris. Thanks to help from Alexey Brodovitch, Walker Evans, Edward Steichen and others, Frank was the first European photographer to be awarded this generous fellowship. The award made it possible for him to set off on his now-legendary road trips across the US in spring 1955.

Over almost two years, Frank took more than 20,000 photographs on his travels. He made roughly 1,000 work prints in the autumn and winter of 1956–57, which he pinned to the walls and laid on the floor of his apartment. At the time his home was East Village, New York, where artists including Alfred Leslie and Willem de Kooning also lived. Over many months Frank made countless passes through his photographs, eliminating those images he was unsure of and focusing on specific themes. He constantly rearranged the selection that was gradually coming together until he had a first mocked-up book with just under 90 images and the provisional title *America, America*. Frank took this book with him when he traveled to Europe in summer 1957, showing it to Delpire and his Swiss photographer friend Gotthard Schuh.

Over the years, the America photographs not included in his final selection disappeared into archives and collections or even got lost altogether. Only recently has it been possible to ascertain that many of the rejected and unpublished photographs were of the same caliber as the 83 book images Frank and Delpire agreed on. Frank’s contact sheets show that these photos were often taken directly before or after the images that have become icons of photographic history. Rather than putting forth a single message, Frank’s dark take on 1950s America contains impressive variations, facets, and excursions that made a powerful impression on many, including his early supporter, Schuh. Schuh wrote to his young friend: “I don’t know America, but your photographs frighten me because in them you show, with visionary alertness, things that affect us all.”

The Americans

Following the first French edition of *Les Américains*, Robert Frank’s book was published as *The Americans* in New York in 1959. The English edition dropped the cover illustration and the selection of texts on America (which Delpire had insisted on over Frank’s protests), and added an introduction by Jack Kerouac. Frank had much in common with the Beat poets, though he only met them after his Guggenheim-funded travels. Like Kerouac’s main character in *On the Road*, Frank crisscrossed the country with apparent aimlessness, working spontaneously. Moreover, his work shares a stylistic consonance with Beat literature: Frank had abandoned all technical conventions and photographed intuitively instead. Many of his photographs are underexposed and grainy; they frame a scene and omit key details; their horizons are slanting and the lighting is often murky. Frank’s focus was the everyday, the fleeting, and the marginal. People are shown turning away from the camera, and his landscapes are desolate and bleak, “really more like Russia”, as Frank once remarked to Kerouac. He flouted the rules he had learned during his early training as a photographer in Switzerland in order to be as true as possible to his subjective experience and to capture unvarnished reality. Kerouac’s introduction begins with the words: “That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes out of the jukeboxes or from a nearby funeral, that’s what Robert Frank has captured in tremendous

photographs taken as he traveled on the road around practically forty-eight states in an old used car (on Guggenheim Fellowship) and with the agility, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow photographed scenes that have never been seen before on film ...”

The Americans is a long, poetic image arc with cross-references, digressions, and associations, but also mental leaps and ambiguities, which provoked many critics. Although most acknowledged that Frank’s photographs were highly powerful, they read his take on Americans as a malicious attack on the country. Frank, a Jewish foreigner, was resented for picking up on the racism, hollow patriotism, commodified cheer, and political corruption lurking behind the façade of American society. Even before his groundbreaking book was published, Robert Frank wrote: “Above all, I know that life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference. Opinion often consists of a kind of criticism. But criticism can come out of love. It is important to see what is invisible to others.”

Martin Gasser, Curator

Robert Frank Chronology

9/11/1924	Born in Zurich.
1941/42	Apprenticeship with the photographer and retoucher Hermann Segesser in Zurich.
1942–44	Photography apprenticeship and employment with Michael Wolgensinger in Zurich, first experiences as a still photographer for film.
1944/45	Assistant to commercial photographer Victor Bouverat in Geneva.
1946	Head of laboratory at the graphic design atelier Eidenbenz in Basel. Compiles the portfolio <i>40 Photos</i> .
1947	First trip to New York and employment as a photographer at <i>Harper’s Bazaar</i> .
1948	Travels to Peru and Bolivia and then compiles the artist’s book <i>Peru</i> .
1949	Returns to Switzerland, photographs the cantonal assembly in Hundwil. First comprehensive publication in the journal <i>Camera</i> .
1950	Marries the artist Mary Lockspeiser.
until 1955	Works as a freelance fashion photographer and photojournalist and travels several times between Europe and the USA.
1951	Birth of his son Pablo.
1952	Visits photographers in Switzerland with Edward Steichen from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, including Gotthard Schuh und Jakob Tuggener. Produces the artist’s book <i>Black White and Things</i> with his friend Werner Zryd in Zurich.
1953	Is featured by Edward Steichen in the exhibition <i>Post-War European Photography</i> at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
1954	Birth of his daughter Andrea.
1955	Becomes the first European photographer to be awarded a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation for a photography project, extended in 1956.

1955/56	Travels for months through large parts of the USA in a second-hand Ford.
1955	Inducted into the “Kollegium Schweizerischer Photographen” at the suggestion of Gotthard Schuh and included in the group exhibition <i>Photography as Expression</i> at the Helmhaus Zurich.
1957	Visits Gotthard Schuh in Zurich and shows him the first maquette of his planned book.
1958	<i>Les Américains</i> is published by Delpire in Paris with texts selected by Alain Bisquet.
1959	<i>The Americans</i> is published by Grove Press in New York, without texts, except for an introduction by Jack Kerouac. Produces his first film <i>Pull my Daisy</i> with Alfred Leslie and more or less gives up his photographic work at the same time.
1962	Co-founder of the New American Cinema Group and the Film-Makers' Cooperative.
1972	His autobiographical book <i>The Lines of My Hand</i> is published by Lustrum Press, New York, and as a limited edition by Kazuhiko Motomura in Tokyo.
1976	The Schweizerische Stiftung für die Photographie dedicates the first exhibition at the newly opened photo gallery at the Kunsthaus Zürich to Robert Frank.
1994	To mark his 70th birthday, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., dedicates the major retrospective <i>Moving Out</i> to him; in 1995 it is also shown at the Kunsthaus Zürich.
2004	Tate Modern in London presents the exhibition <i>Storylines</i> , which is also shown the following year by the Fotostiftung Schweiz and the Fotomuseum Winterthur. The catalogue, edited by Gerhard Steidl, Göttingen, marks the beginning of a long-term publishing collaboration between Frank and Steidl.
09/09/2019	Dies in Inverness, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Robert Frank: Books and Films, 1947-2019

The accompanying exhibition *Robert Frank: Books and Films, 1947-2019* explores Robert Frank's rich bookmaking history with Steidl.

Gerhard Steidl began working with Robert Frank in 1989, when Swiss publisher Walter Keller asked him to print Frank's *The Lines of My Hand* for his imprint Scalo: "You'll both get along well on press", Keller had said. And so Robert Frank traveled to Steidl at Düstere Strasse 4 in Göttingen for the first of many times, to be on press and sign off each printed sheet.

After Scalo closed its doors in 2004, Steidl started to publish as well as print Frank's books, beginning a long-term working friendship that encompassed every aspect of Frank's creativity – from reprints of his classic and some lesser-known books (*The Americans*, *Zero Mostel Reads a Book*), the publication of previously unseen projects (*Seven Stories*), newly conceived volumes (*Tal Uf Tal Ab*, *Good Days Quiet*), as well as his complete films on DVD (*Film Works*).

In Gerhard Steidl's words: "Our aim has been to ensure the legacy of this original and seminal artist and that his work will be available and accessible for years to come – all in a form and to a standard that Robert personally oversaw."

There is also a book *Robert Frank: Books and Films, 1947-2019*, available in the Fotostiftung museum shop.

Special events

Due to the current situation, registration is required for participation in one of the following special events at www.fotostiftung.ch (limited capacity):

Sunday, 13 September, 11:30 a.m.

Making Books with Robert Frank. Lecture by Gerhard Steidl, publisher (Göttingen) and curator of the accompanying exhibit *Robert Frank, Books and Films 1946-2019*. 8 Swiss francs.

Sunday, 15 November, 11:30 a.m.

Distant Closeness – Robert Frank and Robert Walser. Tour with discussion with Reto Sorg, director of the Robert Walser Centre, Berne, and Martin Gasser, curator of the exhibition. 8 Swiss francs.

Sunday, 6 December, 11:30 a.m.

Switzerland in a Suitcase. Robert Frank's Journeys Between Europe and America. Guided tour with curator Martin Gasser. 8 Swiss francs.

Every Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. and every Sunday at 11:30 a.m. there is a public tour of one of the exhibitions at the Centre for Photography.

Info: fotostiftung.ch/en/exhibitions/guided-tours/ (no registration necessary).