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# The Americans



## Synopsis

First published in France in 1958, then in the United States in 1959, Robert Frank's *The Americans* changed the course of twentieth-century photography. In 83 photographs, Frank looked beneath the surface of American life to reveal a people plagued by racism, ill-served by their politicians and rendered numb by a rapidly expanding culture of consumption. Yet he also found novel areas of beauty in simple, overlooked corners of American life. And it was not just Frank's subject matter--cars, jukeboxes and even the road itself--that redefined the icons of America; it was also his seemingly intuitive, immediate, off-kilter style, as well as his method of brilliantly linking his photographs together thematically, conceptually, formally and linguistically, that made *The Americans* so innovative. More of an ode or a poem than a literal document, the book is as powerful and provocative today as it was 56 years ago.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like an elusive text in search of itself, Robert Frank's 1958 book *The Americans* has changed format each of the four times it's changed publishers. From the text heavy French version to the oversized aperture reprint, Frank has continued to refine his work each time it appears in print. In the Scalo version, the place-name captions have been removed from the pages opposite the photographs and collected in the back of the book. Forget any ideas you might have of Frank's book being a travelogue. In place of the itinerary, the Scalo edition finally establishes the ORDER of the book's photographs as the crucial ingredient in Frank's complex vision of America. The

83-photograph sequence cuts between elliptical narrative of the open road and comparative sociology of dead-end lives as Frank turns free association into inescapable logic and then back again. The result is the most masterful combination of photographs in book form. The subjects of Frank's photographs roam this fractured typology like prophets locked in an unstable time loop. Geography no longer takes center stage as the formative element of their photographic selves. In some small but significant way, the Americans in the Steidl edition reclaim the intentionality of their sadness, anger, and alienation. The bitter and often unwilling nature of their engagements with Frank take center stage, each as profound an act of refusal as Frank's own denunciation of the pasteboard optimism of '50s America.

We're lucky to have this edition. Robert Frank is an old man with health issues now. That he is healthy enough to oversee this work is wonderful. Everything about this edition - especially in comparison to the 2007 Delpine edition I purchased earlier this year - is first-rate. I wish I had known this was coming out! The book is a little smaller than the Delpine, but that's the only real negative (if it is one) I can think of. The main thing to me is that the photos themselves are how Frank intended them to look. Gone are the overly-lightened faces that plague the Delpine book. This is a pet peeve of mine that kills many photos in this Photoshop age. This is very obvious in the New Orleans trolley photo. In the Delpine work, the faces of the white passengers are totally washed out, and the black faces are awkwardly lightened (someone apparently thought they were helping Frank's work). That's all corrected here. In this Steidl edition things are shown as they were intended. One can even see details in the face of the man at far left, even though it is partially obscured by a window reflection. Also, on several photos more of the frame is visible. This was most noticeable to me in the Butte, Montana photo of the woman looking out the car window, with several children in the back seat. A good portion of the left side of the photo is now visible, along with more shown on the top and bottom. The new crop just seems more "right." Not too mention that the face of the child in the middle of the photo is too light in the older edition. Simply put, comparing the two editions is an eye opener. I first saw these photos years ago in a much earlier edition (I believe it was the 1969 Aperture work) and I still marvel at the depth of the images in that printing. I don't have that edition in hand, so I can't do a direct comparison, but I believe the Steidl images are much closer to that ideal. Frank prefers his images a little on the flat, low-key side. Another difference is that the photos are now printed on a non-glossy paper. I was surprised at this at first, but now I believe it works much better for this book. In short, if you want an accurate, lovingly-printed edition of *The Americans* at a reasonable price, this is the one. Highly recommended.

Robert Frank with this small little book changed the course of photography. He changed the way people take photographs. He changed the way we look at photographs. He changed the definition of what was an acceptable or good photograph. The way Monet and Picasso changed how one could paint, Frank changed the way one could photograph. How did he do this? He basically introduced the "iconographic photograph" to the world. Take for example, his picture in the Americans of a political rally for Ike. It is of a man standing against a blank wall, playing the tuba. But the tuba's opening obscures his face, all you see is the big blank dark opening of the tuba where his eyes and mouth are supposed to be. And then right behind the tuba, almost coming out of it, a flag, an American flag, though shapeless, and formless and it snakes out of the picture. On the man's lapel is a big "For Ike" button. At the time, this was a radical photograph and statement about politics and the role of the individual in political life; remember this was 1957. There are many many many other photographs like this throughout the Americans: St. Peter taking on City Hall. The American flag covering the faces of the people at a parade. The jukebox everywhere. The signs screaming "No Negroes Allowed" while on the next page is a photograph of an older black woman holding in her arms, caring for, a young white baby. Frank clearly asking, screaming, why is it okay for them to care for babies but not okay for them to use the same toilet as you? It is a subtle but very powerful book. And once you see it, once you get it, you can never see a photograph the same way again. He has influenced every photographer who has come after him. Without Robert Frank there would be no Gary Winograd, Eugene Richards, Gilles Peres, William Klein, Bruce Davidson, Alex Webb, Salgado, Danny Lyon, James Nachtwey, Lauren Greenblatt, Ron Haviv, or Herb Ritts. This book is the starting point for anyone interested in photography, or at least photography after 1958 when this book was first published.

this is the only book to buy if you are interested in photography. every image is true. if you ever have a chance to view the actual prints, don't miss them. i have learned more about photography from looking at this book than any other source. it is a masterpiece.

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