

# A Staggering Revolution

**A CULTURAL HISTORY OF  
THIRTIES PHOTOGRAPHY**



**John Raeburn**

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John Raeburn

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Frontispiece:  
"Anna May Wong, 1931"  
(Courtesy of Corbis, Inc.)

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For Kathleen

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# Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xv

A Calendar of Thirties Photography xvii

1. The Rebirth of Photography in the Thirties 1
2. Disestablishing Stieglitz 19
3. Group f.64 and the Problem of California Photography 30
4. An Eastern Beachhead 48
5. Edward Steichen and Celebrity Photography 61
6. MoMA's "Big Top" Show 80



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7.	Camera Periodicals and the Popular Audience	93
8.	Culture Morphology in Berenice Abbott's New York	114
9.	Farm Security Administration Photography and the Dilemmas of Art	143
10.	Farm Security Administration Photography in the Aura of Art	162
11.	The Nation's Newsstands	194
12.	The Photo League, Lewis Hine, and the Harlem Document	219
13.	Seeing California with Edward Weston	246
14.	Photography at High Tide	276
	Afterword: "The Cultural Establishment of Photography"	293

Notes 303

Index 361

Photographs follow page 302

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## Preface

By the mid-1970s photographs made a generation earlier under the aegis of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) became ubiquitous enough to be visible even to someone like me, trained to do an American studies mostly grounded in written documents. Although Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* and Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* had indicated how visual art might enlarge and enrich cultural analysis, even in those pathbreaking books verbal sources did most of the heavy work of clearing the way and mapping the terrain; the visual evidence on which they drew came from the prestigious medium of easel painting. If I ever thought of photographs it was as illustrations, diverting addenda that brighten a book but could without significant loss be dispensed with. That they might be resources for cultural history in their own right didn't occur to me. But my imperiousness couldn't withstand the flood of FSA photographs that suddenly seemed to be everywhere, in monographic collections by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, compilation volumes edited by the project's director Roy Stryker and Hank O'Neal,

an institutional history by F. Jack Hurley, and—most revealing for me—William Stott’s exploration of the intertwining of the documentary impulse with thirties culture. With so many books about the FSA appearing almost simultaneously, even I wasn’t blind enough to fail to appreciate the superb artfulness of these pictures or, with Stott’s help, grasp what they might reveal about life in the depression.

My parents came of age in the thirties—they were twenty at the time of the Crash—and seeing the FSA photographs made the atmosphere in which they began their adult lives palpable to me as nothing else ever had, not even their own stories. I also soon found a less intimate use for them in a course I taught from time to time on the thirties. There, I used them to supplement the mostly literary texts in a manner not so different from discrete book illustrations. But over time as I read up on the FSA project I began to learn how to think about them in ways that honored their independent specificities so they contributed more substantively to illuminating the depression era’s culture. I had no reason to question the implicit assumption of this new scholarship from which I was learning so much—that the documentary pictures of the FSA and thirties photography were virtually synonymous, not least for purposes of cultural history. But then, browsing in a bookstore sometime later, I came upon a reprint edition of Berenice Abbott’s New York photographs, which seemed to me as artful and culturally rich as the FSA’s although with considerably different valences. Stott had not mentioned her project, nor in my other reading had I run across discussions of it.

My admiration for Abbott’s photographs unwittingly supplied the impetus for this book, for it led me to want to read about them. But I discovered that little had been written about them since the thirties—catnip to a scholar—although much in the decade itself, including a number of articles in camera publications and profiles in two of the era’s most successful new magazines, *Coronet* and *Life*. From these contemporary sources it became apparent that at the time Abbott’s project had been at least as admired as the FSA’s.

From perusing the periodicals I couldn’t help noticing as well pieces about a remarkable number of other talented photographers, among whom Margaret Bourke-White, Edward Steichen, and Edward Weston showed up most often. Bourke-White’s visibility came as no surprise because later writers about the FSA had reiterated James Agee’s derogation of her studies of impoverished southerners in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Its stature as a best-seller exacerbated the pictures’ offensiveness for these critics, although I couldn’t help noticing that their objections hadn’t occurred to most of her contemporaries. But Steichen’s and Weston’s public prominence surprised me more because the photographic histories I had been consulting emphasized Steichen’s participation in the Photo-Secession, saying little about his later career, and characterized Weston as a formalist whose work appealed primarily to an esoteric circle of admirers. Clearly, like Abbott both had a

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larger visibility and more appreciative audience during the thirties than these historians had acknowledged.

The disparity between later imputations of the FSA's preeminence and the broader array of talent hailed in contemporary sources led me to want to reconstruct the photographic culture that was actually visible in the thirties. Who were the era's leading photographers, which of their pictures were seen, how were they contextualized, and what conduits made them accessible to audiences? It soon became apparent that to answer these questions required moving beyond attention to Alfred Stieglitz's impresario activities and those of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which dominated what modest attention scholars had given to photography's diffusion. A group of young middlemen and women had come to the fore and developed a number of new channels to bring photographs to the public, and they invented means as well to educate viewers about them. The result was that artful photography entered the public arena to a degree it never had before. These activities produced an atmosphere in which its audience became a genuinely popular one that—thanks to periodical and book reproductions and traveling exhibitions—spanned the nation rather than being concentrated solely in metropolitan centers. New venues and audiences inevitably invigorated photographers, too, so much so that the term *renaissance* aptly characterizes their collective achievement in these years.

Examining thirties photography through this wider-angle lens produced some surprising revelations besides enlarging the census of its leading workers. Rather than a force for promoting the gospel of photography as art, some young people viewed Stieglitz as an impediment to it, and they sought to disestablish the authority he had accrued over the previous three decades. As a consequence, no individual or institution enjoyed the exclusive power he had once exercised to define artistic photography or denominate its reigning adepts. MoMA, through its photography exhibitions, bid for gatekeeping authority, but a significant fraction of photography's art world did not concede it. The museum's shows reflected the medium's increased visibility but did not initiate it or alone sustain it. In fact, several omnibus exhibitions—mounted without institutional backing and displayed in unconventional spaces in such locations as Rockefeller Center, department stores, and a World's Fair—attracted far more attendees than any MoMA show. Moreover, they better indicated photography's public appeal and the democratic composition of its audience. Finally, MoMA's establishment in 1940 of a department—usually regarded as the triumphant conclusion of the long campaign to install photography as a fine art—actually seemed to me to spell the end of the special circumstances that allowed photography to flourish in the thirties.

Mapping the sociology of photography's art world thus revealed a more varied and complex terrain than I had first imagined. The FSA still figured importantly

in it but as one prominent feature among several others. Two chapters here discuss the FSA—its ambivalent tacking between being an artistic undertaking and a public relations one, the special circumstances that government patronage imposed on the photographers, and its efforts to secure the approbation of the art world—but I have not examined in much detail any body of work made by the several talented photographers who worked for it. There are two reasons for this exclusion. First, of all the achievements in thirties photography, pictures by the FSA staff have been most fully and intelligently assessed by Stott, James Curtis, Cara Finnegan, Paul Hendrickson, F. Jack Hurley, Karin Ohrn, Miles Orvell, Maren Stange, Sally Stein, Alan Trachtenberg, and others. There is a rich body of literature about them that I didn't want to reiterate. Evans's contribution to the era's masterwork, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, has especially attracted substantial and intelligent commentary, although inasmuch as the book's impact in its time was small it had only modest relevance to my survey. Second, and paradoxically, the FSA file is so capacious and various that no single photographer's work can represent it. Because my focus is on the project's institutional activities, highlighting specific photographers would have been too partial. Much remains to be discovered about the FSA pictures—many are still largely unknown—and a satisfactory history of the entire project remains to be written, but a less comprehensive account serves my special purposes.

I instead examine concentrated bodies of work that have attracted less careful attention in our time but were widely admired in the thirties and highlight the relationship between a photographer's creative afflatus and broader cultural themes. Steichen's celebrity portraits for *Vanity Fair* reached the largest audience any photographer had ever enjoyed for a related group of pictures, earning him the sobriquet of "the greatest of living photographers." They not only comprised a pantheon of widely admired Americans but also indicated how little the depression diminished the nation's romance with consumer culture. Abbott's New York studies hardly alluded to the depression but formulated an ambitious cultural history of the city that charted the economic, political, social, cultural, and even psychological alterations that accompanied its transformation in two centuries from a provincial outpost of empire to the world's leading metropolis. MoMA's Beaumont Newhall hailed Bourke-White's 1937 ethnographic survey of Muncie, Indiana (the Middletown of the Lynds' famous study) as the era's finest documentary effort. When *You Have Seen Their Faces* appeared later that year her pictures elicited unanimous critical praise for the very characteristics for which Agee and others would later indict them. Weston's project of photographing the West, supported by the first Guggenheim Fellowship ever awarded to a photographer, supplied copious opportunity to demonstrate his extraordinary formal mastery. It also served his cultural ambition to be a force in transforming the consciousness of fellow citizens, "to open new roads for those ready to travel" as he put it. *California and the West*, the project's most impor-

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tant outcome, gave literal expression to his metaphoric ambition and recounted in prose (by his wife Charis Wilson Weston) and photographs the Westons' travels on western highways in discovery of sites that when seen through his lens would make his vision palpable.

I've also given special attention to two other bodies of less widely seen work because both grew out of organizations that played key roles in thirties photography. Group f.64 in California owed its existence to its members' resentment of eastern hegemony in photography's art world, which they determined to counter with a group exhibition at San Francisco's de Young Museum in 1932. This event has usually been understood as motivated by a formalist agenda, specifically to derogate California's neo-impressionist pictorialists by asserting the primacy of the group's "purist" esthetic. At least equally, the exhibition put forward an argument for a distinctive western way of seeing and bid for national recognition of it. In New York, the Photo League campaigned for documentary and more generally made itself a center for photography with an ambitious schedule of classes, lectures, and exhibitions. It also encouraged members to undertake collaborative projects, one of which, the Harlem Document, is among the decade's finest photographic achievements, although that may only be inferred from its surviving remnants because it never achieved the book publication for which its makers hoped and its archive no longer exists.

When Newhall proclaimed that in the thirties "we were on the brink of a revolution as staggering as any photography in its hundred years of existence had experienced," he was thinking of the new channels for its dissemination and the popular and heterogeneous audience they created. But these circumstances equally affected photographers; venues for display expanded, encouraging an extraordinary number of gifted workers to step forward so audiences enjoyed access to pictures by an efflorescence of talented adepts unmatched before or since. The work reflected enlarged confidence in the medium's potential as several of the most gifted undertook integrated investigations that aspired to formulate cultural arguments too complex to be addressed by discretely conceived images, however masterful. In an unprecedented way such superior photographs became integral to popular culture, and in what follows I explore the reciprocity of these sociological and artistic developments and how the dynamic they set in motion made the thirties the most vigorous and creative decade in American photography's history.

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Harold Corsini, a member of this group, and his wife Mary warmly welcomed me into their home, and he patiently and thoughtfully answered my questions about the Photo League. Nick Natanson generously provided key information about an



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exhibition that he had gathered during his own research on African Americans in FSA photography.

xvi

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My wife, Kathleen Kamerick, to whom this book is dedicated, read chapters, offered sound advice, and bucked me up when I needed it. I am thankful every day to have her as my life's companion.

Acknowledgments

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# A Calendar of Thirties Photography

- 1929** Berenice Abbott returns from Paris with Eugène Atget's archive  
*Hound and Horn* begins to publish artistic photographs  
*Steichen, the Photographer* by Carl Sandburg
- 1930** *Fortune* begins publication  
Edward Weston's first New York show at the Delphic Studios  
The Harvard Society for Contemporary Art exhibition, International  
Photography  
Atget's first American exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery
- 1931** Julien Levy establishes a New York gallery to feature photography  
Charles Sheeler gives up photography to concentrate on painting  
One-person shows at the de Young Museum, San Francisco, by Willard  
Van Dyke and Weston

- 1932** One-person shows at the de Young Museum by Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Brett Weston
- Group f.64 founded; exhibits at the de Young Museum
- MoMA exhibition of photomurals
- Alfred Stieglitz fifty-year retrospective at An American Place
- Edward Weston* published by Merle Armitage
- Men at Work* by Lewis W. Hine
- Hound and Horn* features Charles Flato's essay on Mathew Brady
- 1933** Lloyd Rollins dismissed as director of the San Francisco museums
- Adams meets Stieglitz at An American Place
- Adams and Van Dyke open galleries in the Bay Area
- Adams's first New York show at the Delphic Studios
- Carmel Snow becomes editor of *Harper's Bazaar*
- Walker Evans's one-person show of nineteenth-century architecture at MoMA
- 1934** *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait* edited by Waldo Frank et al.
- Stieglitz's seventieth birthday exhibition at An American Place
- Death of Doris Ulmann
- Martin Munkácsi joins *Harper's Bazaar*
- Levy attacks the "great S's" of American photography
- 1935** Lincoln Kirstein's national broadcast on the history of photography
- U.S. Camera* annual commences publication
- First annual *U.S. Camera* exhibition, Rockefeller Center and traveling venues
- First annual Leica photography show, Rockefeller Center and traveling venues
- Beaumont Newhall joins the staff of MoMA
- Resettlement Administration (RA/FSA) photographic project begins
- Works Progress Administration hires Abbott, and the project Changing New York results
- Making a Photograph* by Adams

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- 1936** *Vanity Fair* merges with *Vogue*  
Adams's one-person show at An American Place  
*Life* commences publication  
*Coronet* commences publication  
Formation of the Photo League, New York
- 1937** Photography, 1839–1937 exhibition, MoMA and traveling venues  
*Look* commences publication  
Weston awarded the first Guggenheim Fellowship to a photographer  
Evans leaves the Farm Security Administration (FSA)  
*You Have Seen Their Faces* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White  
*Popular Photography* commences publication
- 1938** *Land of the Free* by Archibald MacLeish  
Edward Steichen retires from the Condé Nast magazines  
*U.S. Camera Magazine* commences publication  
First International Photographic Exposition, Grand Central Palace, New York  
American Photographs, Evans's one-person exhibition, MoMA
- 1939** *Changing New York* by Abbott, with captions by Elizabeth McCausland  
*An American Exodus* by Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange  
Hine retrospective at the Riverside Museum, New York  
Documents of America, FSA traveling exhibition sponsored by MoMA
- 1940** Lange laid off by the FSA  
*Look* publishes selections from the Harlem Document  
Evans awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship  
*California and the West* by Charis Wilson Weston and Edward Weston  
A Pageant of Photography at the San Francisco World's Fair  
MoMA Department of Photography established

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**1941** *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Evans  
*Twelve Million Black Voices* by Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam

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Lange awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship

*U.S. Camera Magazine* changes format and becomes a monthly

In the Image of America, FSA exhibition at Rockefeller Center and  
the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia

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# A Staggering Revolution

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# 1

## The Rebirth of Photography in the Thirties

### **A Democratic Art**

Triumphantly concluding his 1940 survey of “photographic art” for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Edward Weston observed that the thirties had witnessed “a perceptible growth of interest in and understanding of photography as an art medium.” His experience encouraged that gratifying assessment. Ten years earlier his audience had been miniscule and mostly regional because no means existed to bring pictures like his before a broader viewership. He had not even exhibited in New York. But by 1940 hundreds of thousands had seen his work, in that year alone visitors to the Golden Gate International Exposition (the San Francisco World’s Fair) and the Museum of Modern Art, readers of the *U.S. Camera* annual and *Popular Photography* magazine, and purchasers of two new books, *Seeing California with Edward Weston* and *California and the West*. Not only was his audience larger but it was also, as he suggested, better informed thanks to a plethora of new display and educative channels



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