ROBERT FRANK'S REVOLUTIONARY PHOTOS OF EVERYDAY AMERICA

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After the turmoil and struggle of World War II, the 1950s have often been seen as a time of ease, consumerism, and low unemployment. Americans were happy and optimistic. Cars, televisions, kitchen appliances, and other consumer goods became easily accessible to millions of Americans during this period. Jobs were easily obtained, unlike the preceding era marked by the Great Depression, and wages were higher. Many considered and still consider the 1950s as the golden era of America. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had helped lead the United States to victory in World War II, was president, and an immensely popular one at that. He was charismatic, had a winning smile, and reassured the masses that American prosperity would continue. President Eisenhower was viewed as a calm and endearing leader, which helped him become a fixture of stability in the 1950s. To many, there were endless opportunities during this decade, but it also had its downfalls. There was still segregation, teen rebellion, the threat of communism, and war. The 1950s, like every other decade, faced various problems, but the majority would look back on it "warmly."[1] As the following photograph indicates, everyone seemed to like Ike, and America was a time of "happy days."[2]

Many Americans enjoyed the 1950s, but it was not all perfect. The standard of living was high and many people were happy, yet there were still some questionable circumstances. Civil rights were questioned, there was the uncertainty of the upcoming war, and rebelling teenagers caused concern for fearful parents. This was also the time that the modern civil rights movement began with blacks and whites coexisting, but unsteadily. International affairs and high tension were a concern because the 1950s was an era filled with the threat of war. The Cold War frightened Americans, and the result was the "Red Scare," which caused Americans to worry their worlds could be obliterated by a nuclear bomb at any moment.[3] Clearly, there were a multitude of problems in the 1950s, but not many people wanted to focus on the bad. Why did they not want to concentrate on their predicaments, whether they were good or

1 Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 932.

2 "1952 Presidential Campaign," *National Archives and Records Administration*, March 5, 2017. https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/presidential/1952_campaign.html.

3 Alan Brinkley, "The Fifties," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, April 9, 2012. https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/fifties/essays/fifties.

bad? Well, the question was easily answered: The truth was not comforting.[4] It was so much easier and understandable that Americans would prefer to watch the most recent Hollywood Western or listen to Frank Sinatra sing about love and loss.

The truth though was harsh. Segregation and racism were rampant, the Cold War and communism were not only possibilities, they were realities, and teens were openly daring. Few would have been aware of all these problems if not for Robert Frank a Swiss photographer who, in the years 1955-1957, travelled throughout the United States taking gritty, true pictures of real people and situations.[5] He was an unprecedented and blunt man that cut through the false beliefs of the 1950s in America. His goal was not to take stunning or aesthetically pleasing images, but to capture hidden meanings and feelings of the country. Frank was an outsider looking-in on the American experience, and his photographs remain a testament to what life was really like in America in the 1950s.

Frank grew up in a "sad household" in the 1930s.[6] His family was not close, and his father might as well have been absent for all of the concern he held for his family. His upbringing was filled with neither love nor contentment; instead it consisted of harsh times like the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Change from Frank's gloomy and precarious life in Zurich was a necessity to him, and it would lead him to the United States, a land filled to the brim with opportunities, good times, and wealth. It was the place to be, or so he thought. Once Frank entered America, he discovered the stark contrast between the place he had heard about and the one in which he found himself. He learned that 1950s America was no more perfect than other areas of the world. This disheartened him to some extent, yet this imperfect America would lead to one of his greatest works. It brought out the artist in Frank, and he became inspired. He continuously snapped pictures. He could not capture images fast enough. In regards to his picture taking, he once stated, "Hurry! Hurry! Life goes fast."[7] Frank was not known for clear, symmetric, or perfectly lit photographs. Instead, he was known for his timing and the content of his images. His pictures told a story of the real America, which until Frank was unprecedented.

Frank's photographs depicted the hidden truth of America during the 1950s. The images showed elation, depression, segregation, love, wealth, patriotism, loss, and much more. Frank showed the world every emotion possible. He never altered his photographs to make them look better or more professional. The whole point of his images was to invoke the truth of America. He showed that the real America was not full of good times, affluence, and perfection. It was, in actuality, a fraud. Frank revealed to the world that America, while thriving, still had obstacles to overcome. "Ultimately, it is Frank the artist, not Frank the coincidental historian, that interests us," writes Leonard Buszkiewicz. "While his photos are primary historical documents and we may *turn* to them for their historical content, we *return* to them time and time again for their artistic qualities. For his photos are, in the truest sense, works of art."[8]

4 *Ibid.*

5 Nicholas Dawidoff, "The Man Who Saw America," *The New York Times,* July 2, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/magazine/robert-franks-america.html.

6 *Ibid.*

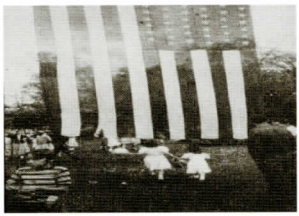
7 *Ibid.*

8 Leonard Buszkiewicz, "They Wouldn't Let Me In: The World and Work of Robert Frank in Post-War America" (master's thesis, Indiana University South Bend, 2002), 8.

Without these breathtaking images, Americans would never have known the beautiful veracity of the time or how to change it.[9]

Images caught by Frank were taken anywhere, of anyone, and of anything. They were meant to show accuracy and authenticity. A prominent Frank photograph is of a black woman, wearing something a nanny or maid would wear, holding a white baby. During this time period it was not uncommon for a black woman's job to be that of a caretaker of white children. It was hard for white women to get a job, so it was especially difficult for black women. This woman most likely took the job as nanny for a white family because she had no other job offers. Blacks were still facing ridicule and segregation during this period. They had many restrictions and were forced to work wherever they could just to make enough money to survive. Blacks were paid less and worked longer hours. Frank's image shows the black woman smiling wanly and persisting through all the hardships she has been forced to endure. Her strained smile tells its own story, and it is one of segregation, stereotypes, and condescension. This black woman had a tough and difficult life. Her life and smile were essentially the opposite of those in this next photograph.[10]

This young, good-looking, and smiling couple is the epitome of wealth. They are healthy, well dressed, and surrounded by expensive items. The woman wears a lavish dress that was probably custom-made for her, while the man wears a fitted, handsome suit. They seem well-



Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac, The Americans (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 5. (RFTA)
The following images were published in The Americans.

to-do, happy, and in love. The two appear to be standing in the hall of a hotel or large mansion, but as long as it is upscale, they care little of their location. They do not have to worry about being in a place where they will encounter discrimination or ejection because of their skin color. The couple probably has little or no worries in the world. They are white, rich, and most likely well educated. Neither appeared to have experienced hard labor, segregation, or threats like the black woman in the previous photograph. They are members of the upper class and will presumably lead an uncomplicated life full of ease. This image shows how well some whites lived, while most blacks were struggling. These two young adults showed their carefree nature. The younger generation during this time was just looking for fun and change[11]

This next photograph by Frank depicts teens straying away from the traditional and acceptable forms of entertainment. Everywhere kids were beginning to develop their own sense of style and fun. Teens were rebelling, listening to rock-and-roll, dressing in leather jackets,

9 Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac, *The Americans* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 5.

10 Frank and Kerouac, *The Americans*, 35.

11 Frank and Kerouac, *The Americans*, 171.

and defying their parents. Parents were scared of the sexually provocative music and comics that enamored their children. This image is only one of many where teens and young adults lounged around a jukebox listening to their anarchistic music. Many in the photo wear daring and less socially acceptable clothes inspired by people like Elvis Presley. Older adults considered Presley's dancing and his look too sexual, but younger people idolized him. Another large influence for rebellion was the Beats, a conglomeration of writers and poets who drifted away from the conventional. The Beats poet Allen Ginsberg thought that American life was too materialistic and was morally wrong. In his part two of his poem "Howl," he offered his view of American life: "Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!"[12] Moloch represented all that was fallacious in America, and to many, the "threat of more war."[13]

The Cold War and fear of communism were major components of 1950s America, and people feared the consequences of a future war, yet Frank's above image illustrates a time of freedom and little worries. It shows kids playing, laughing, holding hands, and the American flag as the centerpiece. This picture has a lot of meaning behind it. It shows that in the 1950s America was synonymous with freedom, family, and happiness. Frank caught a time of complete innocence and a strong sense of unity. He showed that America was patriotic and secure, but what would the impending war and communist movement mean? America during this time period was mainly positive and successful, but it would have its own obstacles because as the conservative economist Milton Friedman pointed out: "Freedom is a rare and delicate plant."[14] Freedom was precariously balanced, and change would need to occur to fix that. Our nation would fight to make America "a safe and free place" for all.15

A free, secure, and happy America was the ultimate goal. Communism, segregation, and the Cold War were not the preferred topics of conversation. The average citizen wanted to focus on all of the positives of the 1950s. This decade had new technology, new forms of recreation, and a sense of excitement. Most people in this era were genuinely happy. This sense of elation and joy is obviously showcased on the women's faces in the above photograph. Yet without a doubt, they are thinking of fallout shelters and of the world that might occur after a nuclear. These women appear to be young, in their early twenties. Based on their stylish clothing, they also look as if they are unaccustomed to even the concept of poverty. The image also seems to insinuate that they, most likely, have never experienced hunger pangs or worry over where they will obtain their next meal. These young ladies are the embodiment of affluence. This period in America encompassed "personal and national anguish," carefree

12 Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), 262.

13 Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 956-957.

14 Foner, *Voices of Freedom*, 256.

15 Frank and Kerouac, *The Americans,* 43.

moments, and an overwhelming amount of naiveté.[16]

Robert Frank and all his photographs would deeply influence the United States, but not until later in time. He caught real, controversial images of real people. Frank showed the true identity of America through his camera lens, a lens that hid nothing, not discrimination, not poverty. The photos brought out the truth and reality of the 1950s. Frank used his own technique to display America in this period. He did not try to soften or enhance the images. His lack of perfect photos made them even more believable and famous. "Robert Frank was all that one should not be in the nineteen fifties' America," states Buszkiewicz. "He was a rebel, a non-conformist, a foreigner and an avant-garde artist."[17] He was not a euphemistic artist, as showcased by his photographs, and while he is now well known for his great works of art after World War II, he was not originally. He was, to many in the 1950s, an unusual man capturing seemingly random photographs, but later he would be so much more. Frank would be seen as a great contributor to American history because of his work. He kept to the hard facts of the 1950s, and he did this because the truth, to him, was more vital than trying to maintain that America was a perfect nation. This time *was* full of affluence and wealth, but it had many challenges. America would deal with tough issues, but eventually would overcome them. The way Frank captured this time period allowed future generations to reflect on the underlying turmoil of the 1950s.

16 Buszkiewicz, *They Wouldn't Let Me In*, 45.

17 *Ibid.*, 31.