

# RISD MUSEUM

*Urban America, 1930-1970*, December 1, 2006-February 25, 2007

Between 1930 and 1970, the composition of America's urban population changed greatly, leading to the culturally, economically, and racially diverse cities that we know today. The prints, drawings, and photographs on view present responses by many artists to the dynamic climate of the urban centers within which they lived and worked.

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought soaring unemployment to America's cities. Paradoxically, far from being a sterile period for art, Depression-era artists -- bolstered by government programs such as the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) -- took responsibility for addressing the issues in a range of representational styles that were accessible to a broad public. This Social Realist movement would influence a variety of artistic approaches over the next 30 years. In the 1940s, new job opportunities arose because of the war effort. Women entered the workforce in greater numbers than ever before, and the racial makeup of cities changed as scores of African Americans migrated northward from the Deep South. These factors and the influx of Europeans fleeing World War II infused the urban scene with a burgeoning population, multicultural vitality, and a fertile ground for the creation of music and visual arts. In the 1950s, however, anxieties over the Cold War left many Americans with a sense of unease, even with the economic prosperity that was felt in several sectors of society. Some artists became more introspective, while others focused on the alienation of life in the city. For artists in the 1960s who dealt with subjects such as Civil Rights or Women's Liberation, the approach became more confrontational.

Throughout the 40 years represented here, public spaces such as streets, entertainment venues, bars, and subways provided abundant material for artists as documentarians, as participants, and as voyeurs. There they recorded the mix of cultures, examined the notion of community, and confronted the social problems inherent in immense sociological change.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009  
*Couple Dancing, New York, 1956*  
Photogravure  
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.2

Nightlife was, and still is, a defining feature of urban life. In New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side -- primary neighborhoods for African Americans emigrating from the South -- nightlife focused on music and dancing. The legacy of Negro spirituals could be heard in the jazz, boogie-woogie, rhythm and blues, swing, and later, rock and roll that emanated from the many bars and clubs in these packed communities.



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Vincent Dacosta Smith, American, 1929-2003

Kelly Driscoll

G. W. Einstein Company, Inc.

*First Day of School*, 1965

Etching on paper

Walter H. Kimball Fund 1991.034

Smith was a member of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The group espoused the importance of politically concerned art focused on the experience of African Americans. This print, from a series that examined the South during the mid-1960s, portrays African-American children on their way to school as they are taunted by a threatening crowd of whites across the street. It describes the continued resistance to desegregation even a decade after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling by the Supreme Court.



Louis Lozowick, American, b. Russia, 1892-1973

*Luna Park*, ca. 1929

Chalk, ink, pencil, and conté crayon on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Stambler 1994.091

In the 1920s, the City of New York built an extension to its subway system, connecting downtown Manhattan to Coney Island. The extension made a day trip to the beach possible for large portions of the metropolis's population. At Coney Island, artists quickly found an intoxicating visual metaphor for the mixture of culture, class, and race in the changing urban environment. On this wall, Louis Lozowick's drawing emphasizes the electric modernity of Luna Park, one of three amusement parks at Coney Island. The social novelties of Coney Island take precedence for the other artists. Overlapping bodies, sometimes vulgar postures, and discordant personal encounters all intimate the loosening of behavioral and class restrictions at the city beach, a destination increasingly regarded as a place for hustlers, loose women, thieves, and sideshow freaks. In these images, people-watching is a seductive pastime for both artist and viewer.



Fritz Eichenberg, American, 1901-1990

*Subway*, 1933-1934

Wood engraving

Gift of the Eichenberg Trust 1995.045.2

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As city populations increased, metropolitan governments responded by broadening infrastructure in the form of light rails, subways, and buses. These additions drastically changed the look of the cityscape while creating new locales where working Americans of all genders, races, and classes traveled together. The variety and novelty to be found on public transportation provided material for many artists.

Paul Cadmus, American, 1904-1999

Weyhe Gallery, American, ca. 1935

*Coney Island*, 1935

Etching on paper

Museum purchase: Mary B. Jackson Fund and gift in memory of Courtland Roach by his friends 1999.6.1



Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978

*Marching Band, New Orleans Images: 1950-1960*, 1956

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.11

Known primarily as a precisionist painter, Crawford took up photography in 1938 and captured industrial and street scenes with a reductive, geometric perspective that reflected his painting style. A huge fan of New Orleans jazz, Crawford began to chronicle the brass-band funeral processions there in the 1950s. In this self-described effort to document African-American life in New Orleans, Crawford took many exposures of single events, which he characterized as similar to redrawing pencil lines in preparation for an oil painting. Working strictly in serial format, Crawford felt that no single shot could reveal the truth of his subject matter.



Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978

*Grand Marschal [sic]*, from the portfolio *New Orleans Images: 1950-1960*, 1956

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.3



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Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978  
*2nd Line, New Orleans Images: 1950-1960, 1956*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.4



Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978  
*2nd Line, New Orleans Images: 1950-1960, 1958*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.5



Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978  
*Bass Drummer and Cadillac [sic], New Orleans Images: 1950-1960, 1958*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.6



Ralston Crawford, American, 1906-1978  
*2nd Line, New Orleans Images: 1950-1960, 1956*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Neelon Crawford 2000.113.8



Billy Morrow Jackson, American, 1926  
*The Burden, ca. 1951*  
Wove paper  
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2001.22.2

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Morris Engel, American, 1918-2005

*Coney Island, 1939*

Gelatin silver print

Jesse Metcalf Fund 2001.65.1



Arthur S. Siegel, American, 1913-1978

*Untitled (Two women under blue umbrella)*, ca. 1948 - 1954

Dye transfer color print

Gift of Jed Fielding 2001.94.1

At mid-century, city streets were a public stage where community gathered, and for many artists they offered the most immediate access to urban life. Especially for photographers of the period, the street was the dominant setting for their investigations. The artists represented here portray varied relationships between the city and its inhabitants from a sense of connectedness to complete alienation. Some have focused on the street as a site for social protest.

Arthur Swoger, American, 1912-2000

*Norman Bluhm, Joan Mitchell, and Franz Kline, 1957*

Gelatin silver print

Museum Acquisition Fund 2003.12.1

With the international recognition of New York's Abstract Expressionist painters in the 1950s, the city emerged as the new center of the art world. During this heady period, many artists congregated at The Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village for conversation and release after working all day in the studio. Overindulgence often went hand in hand with the evening, as did heated debate. Swoger captured many candid images of luminaries in the bar, such as the painters portrayed here.



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Jules Aarons, American, 1921-2008  
*Street Game, North End Boston, 1951*  
Gelatin silver print  
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2004.32.3

A Boston-area photographer, Jules Aarons produced a number of photo essays on the immigrant communities and working-class neighborhoods of Boston. Like many mid-century artists, Aarons documented not just adult life, but childhood also, often contrasting children's innocence and sense of adventure with the severity of the urban environment. Aarons's combined interest in social documentation and the abstract geometry of the city is evident here.



Carmel Vitullo, American, b. 1925  
*"Street Pose", Providence, RI, 1969*  
Gelatin silver print  
Museum Purchase: Gift of the Artist's Development Fund of the RI Foundation 2004.59.1

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Carmel Vitullo, American, b. 1925  
*"Pizza Shop on Federal Hill", Providence, RI, 1959*  
Gelatin silver print  
Museum Purchase: Gift of the Artist's Development Fund of the RI Foundation 2004.59.6

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Gordon Parks, American, 1912-2006  
*Selwyn, 42nd Street, New York, 1955*  
Gelatin silver print  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2005.112

A man of remarkably diverse talents, Parks is perhaps best known for the photographs he made for *Life* magazine from 1948 to 1961. With subjects as varied as fashion, poverty, gang violence, and the civil rights movement, Park often conveyed an introspective view of the urban scene. In this image, shot in mid-town Manhattan while working for *Life*, Parks used soft focus and deep tonal contrast to create a tranquil moment that contrasts with the electric vibrancy of the cinema marquee.



Berenice Abbott, American, 1898-1991  
*Lyric Theatre, from the portfolio Changing New York, 1936*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Manny and Skippy Gerard 2005.137.23

Beginning in 1929, Abbott devoted herself to the portrayal of New York, especially at street level. The city had entered a massive building boom and was evolving daily. In 1935, she received funding from the Federal Art Project to continue her personal passion in a series of some 300 photographs entitled "Changing New York." This photograph documents the Lyric Theater, which was built in 1880 and converted to a cinema in 1910. Located close to the Bowery, its Depression-era clientele could pay ten cents to see a newsreel, a short subject, and two feature films.



Max Yavno, American, 1911-1985  
*Children Playing, San Francisco, California, 1947*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Manny and Skippy Gerard 2005.137.35



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Bernard Brussel-Smith, American, 1914-1989  
*Allen Street E1 #93*, ca. 1940s  
Wood engraving on paper  
Gift of Peter Brussel-Smith 2006.95.1

As city populations increased, metropolitan governments responded by broadening infrastructure in the form of light rails, subways, and buses. These additions drastically changed the look of the cityscape while creating new locales where working Americans of all genders, races, and classes traveled together. The variety and novelty to be found on public transportation provided material for many artists.



Jacob Lawrence, American, 1917-2000  
*There is an Average of Four Bars to Every Block*, from the *Harlem Series*, 1943  
Gouache, ink, and pencil on paper  
Mary B. Jackson Fund 43.565

In a letter of 1995 to a RISD curator, Lawrence wrote about this piece, which is one of a series of 30 autobiographical drawings:

"In 1930, at the age of thirteen, my mother, brother, sister and I (all migrants) arrived in New York's Harlem community. I immediately took to walking the streets of Harlem. For me, it was a most exciting visual experience! Seeing the many produce stands, churches, show makers, cigar makers, penny arcades, tenements, the beautiful lacey fire escapes, pool parlors and the many bars -- I wondered how many 'Joe's' there were in the world... The painting to which you refer came out of that experience. It was a period in my life that shall always be remembered and treasured."

[Letter dated February 21, 1995, Museum curatorial files.]





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Harry Callahan, American, 1912-1999, (RISD Faculty 1961 - 1976,  
Photography)

*Chicago, 1961*

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Harry Callahan 78.009

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Reginald Marsh, American, 1898-1954

*Two Girls on Ferry, ca. 1950*

Ink over pencil on paper

Bequest of Felicia Meyer Marsh 79.116

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James Van Der Zee, American, 1886-1983

*Atlantic City, 1930*

Gelatin silver print

Museum purchase with the aid of funds from the National  
Endowment for the Arts 80.232.14



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Robert Frank, American, b. 1924

*Mein Kampf, Times Square, 1961*

Gelatin silver print

Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 81.002



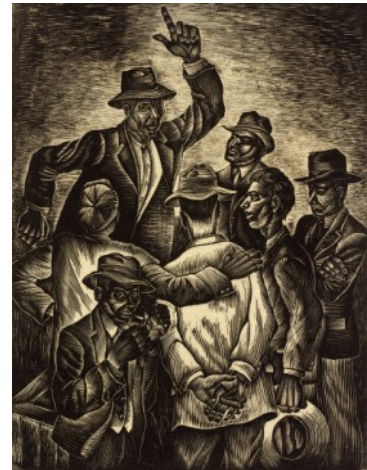
Granted a Guggenheim fellowship in 1955, Swiss artist Frank intended in his application to portray "a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present." Working in a gritty and expressive printing style, he often captured a darker side of society than most people were willing to acknowledge. His blatantly subjective images published in the book *The Americans* influenced generations of photographers. In this image, created three years after the release of *The Americans*, Frank continued his study of American life, capturing a discordant mixture of city dwellers at the most populous of urban crossroads, Times Square.

Wilmer Jennings, American, 1910-1990

*Harangue, 1941*

Wood engraving on paper

Gift of the Artist 81.094



Jennings moved to Providence from Atlanta in 1935 and was one of the first African Americans to matriculate at RISD. Primarily a printmaker, much of his work comments on the effect of urban development on the African American community. This wood engraving depicts Black workers in the North as they listen to a speaker. Based on the evidence of other similar compositions by the artist, it is likely that the subject of the speech is labor rights, such as equal pay and benefits for Black Americans.

Garry Winogrand, American, 1928-1984

*New York City (Woman in Phone Booth, Leg Up), 1972*

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Frederick J. Myerson 82.303.11



Much influenced by Robert Frank's *The Americans*, Winogrand pursued a personal definition of documentary photography. Much of his work portrayed people on the streets or in public spaces. He had a particular gift for capturing their spirit through their body language. By employing unusual viewpoints or cropping in his compositions, he emphasized the chaotic energy of his subjects in their environment.

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Garry Winogrand, American, 1928-1984  
*New York City*, 1971  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Mr. Frederick J. Myerson 82.303.8



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,  
Photography)  
*Saloon, Small's Paradise*, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1937  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.35



*The Harlem Document*, created between 1937 and 1940, was a project of the Photo League's Feature Group, a documentary production unit that focused on the disparity between socio-economic classes. The Feature Group photographers, primarily of Jewish working-class immigrant families, were approached by Black sociologist Michael Carter to collaborate on an extensive cultural study of Black Harlem. This image, one of many that Siskind contributed to the series, portrays the Harlem nightlife that attracted so many from outside the community. When a selection from the *Harlem Document* was shown at the New School for Social Research in 1939, it was accompanied by a statement:

"In the past twenty years thousands of Negroes have trekked north to increase Manhattan's colored population from 60,000 in 1910 to 224,000 in 1930. Most of them have come to escape the outspoken racial hatred of the south only to encounter a subtle, but equally cruel racial intolerance in the North.... Concentrated in Harlem's 202 square blocks they make Harlem an international Negro metropolis.... The white world discovered Harlem in the early 1920's.... Writers exploited whatever exotic manifestations an impoverished race can demonstrate. In the general rush to visit Harlem 'hot spots' the real work-a-day Negro and his numerous problems were overlooked."

Isabel Bishop, American, 1902-1988  
*In the Bus*, 1947  
Etching  
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.392

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