Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine

During the second quarter of the twentieth century, photography became part of everyday life as mass media, particularly photo-driven newspapers and magazines, began to flourish. In Europe, members of the avant-garde propelled photography well beyond representation. The camera, long prized for its capacity to convey an objective reality, could astound, unsettle, or disorient the viewer by systematically upending convention. Such artist/photographers advocated for the "New Vision" by stressing the camera's technological superiority over the human eye. In its up-to-the-moment register of a rapidly changing world, photography soon matured into the preeminent medium of modern awareness.

Advanced artists, many of whom were Jewish, were forced to flee fascist Europe and immigrate to the United States. They often shared not only an eclectic range of skills—in painting, photography, and graphic design—but also the idealism of their time, with its promise of collaboration in the service of both art and industry. Such ideas were developed at the Bauhaus, the avant-garde art school open in Germany between 1919 and 1933, which sought to integrate these opposing objectives through the applied arts (the combination of aesthetics, design, consumer need, and problem solving). The creative consequences of this merging of the talents of cutting-edge photographers, editors, and adventurous art directors, in the wake of the Great Depression, made publishing and

Modern Look focuses on this golden age of magazine publishing from the late 1930s to the 1950s, when photography and design contributed to and reflected the rapid development of mass culture in America. Whether in the service of advertising or fashion, image-making began to burgeon as the relationship between photography and text grew more nuanced. As the standard of photojournalism rose, so did the power of the photograph. In magazines like *Life* or *Look*, it came to be understood as a potent new language, superseding the written word as a means of kindling the imagination.

Pictorial magazines also became an important cultural venue for examining the realities of class, identity, and social status, as well as their readers' aspirations. Photographers did not just produce compelling, artfully inventive images that changed mass media's relationship to photography; they also challenged viewers to reconsider their own relationship to the world and their place within it. Many of the artists in this exhibition showed their audience how photography could elicit empathy and prompt social change. Digital photography and social media, ubiquitous in our time, have had a similar exponential impact on society and culture as a whole, continuing to shape the way we see and communicate.

Mason Klein
Senior Curator