

***Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine*****STOP LIST**

- 110 Introduction
- 111 PM and A-D Magazines
- 112 Alexey Brodovitch, *Cotillion (Ballerinas Leaving the Stage)* from the book *Ballet*
- 113 Martin Munkacsi, *Lucile Brokaw, Piping Rock Beach, Long Island*
- 114 Lillian Bassman, *Wonders of Water, Untitled (Suzy Parker)*, and *(Blowing Kiss) Barbara Mullen*
- 115 Gordon Parks, *Charles White, Chicago, Illinois*
- 116 Gordon Parks, *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama*
- 117 Frances McLaughlin-Gill, *Nan Martin, Street Scene*
- 118 Gordon Parks, *Untitled, New York [Frances McLaughlin-Gill and Bettina Graziani outside Hunter College]*
- 119 Frances McLaughlin-Gill, *Elise Daniels on First Avenue, New York*
- 120 Frances McLaughlin-Gill, *Third Avenue Series, New York*
- 121 Leslie Gill, *Rest for the Stomach and Lipstick Pots*
- 122 What's New Magazine, 1941
- 123 Saul Leiter, *Canopy*

## 110. Introduction

CLAUDIA GOULD:

Hello, and welcome to “Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine.” I’m Claudia Gould, Director of the Jewish Museum.

This is an exhibition about American photography and design, but the story begins in Germany. During the 1920s, in the emerging field of graphic design, German artists, designers, and photographers were creating new ways of looking at the world around them.

Many of the artists and designers of the German Avant Garde were Jewish. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, their opposition to modernist and experimental art, and, of course, their persecution of anyone practicing such art, drove a generation of photographers and artists to emigrate to America.

In the United States, flourishing mass circulation magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, *Vogue*, and *Harper’s Bazaar* offered an ideal platform for their work. And these talented European émigrés also inspired the American art directors and photographers with whom they worked.

Such collaborations led to a golden age in magazine photography and design, that extended from the late 1930s, through the 1950s, producing images of exceptional beauty and inventiveness, while also contributing to and reflecting the rapid development of American mass culture.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

## 111. PM and A-D Magazines

NARRATOR:

This case highlights the innovative graphic design featured on the covers of *AD* and *PM* magazines during the 1930s and 40s. These American magazines were started by a man named Robert Leslie. Here's curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN:

He's quite an unsung and even unlikely hero of the graphic arts industry in New York.

NARRATOR:

He was an obstetrician...

MASON KLEIN:

But his passion was printing. And in 1929, he began what was called The Composing Room, a printing shop. And by the mid-'30s, he had //started a little gallery space and developed two journals; well, one journal to begin with, called *PM*, for Production Manager.

NARRATOR:

*PM* was basically a trade journal for graphic designers, and would later change its name to *AD*, for Artistic Director.

Look for the yellow cover for *AD*. There's a spotlight on a small photograph of Will Burtin, who designed the cover. He presents himself at this modest scale, standing before the tools of his trade: a protractor and an angle square, which form the letters "A-D".

Burtin was an émigré from Germany, and impressed many.

MASON KLEIN:

He, in fact had impressed Joseph Goebbels, who was the propaganda minister for the Nazi Party, and Hitler himself had asked him to sign on and develop propaganda for Hitler. And Burtin absolutely refused and had to leave, obviously...He left, came to the United States, and would have an incredible effect in elevating the artistic quality of magazines like *Fortune*; he even took over a niche magazine called *Scope*, and it's still noted as arguably

the best, biomedical journal ever done.

NARRATOR:

The *PM* and *AD* magazines played an instrumental role in showcasing avant-garde work by European émigrés like Burton...who then went on to modernize the look of industry publications and mass-market magazines like *Fortune*.

Editor Robert Leslie also fostered work by up-and-coming American designers and photographers, who learned from the European luminaries they were now collaborating with. You'll get to know a few of these Americans later in the show.

MASON KLEIN:

So there was this camaraderie, in the sense of collaboration, that prevailed at The Composing Room, with Leslie not only inviting everybody to show their work, but he introduced everyone. So there was this constant social life that made these émigrés integrate and assimilate with so much more ease.

**112. Cotillion (*Ballerinas Leaving the Stage*) from the book *Ballet***

NARRATOR:

These photographs are part of a series taken by Alexey Brodovitch, the famous art director who revolutionized magazine layouts at *Harper's Bazaar*.

Brodovitch was no stranger to ballet: After escaping the Russian Revolution, he'd painted backdrops for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris. By the mid-1930s, he was in New York.

MASON KLEIN:

He photographed over a two-year period, some ten or more ballets. He just used, a handheld camera; he had in certain cases, bleached the negatives; he used available light. He slowed the shutter down to about a fifth of a second. And this resulted in blurred images of the moving dancers, and in contrast, very grainy negatives. They violated almost every accepted convention of good photographic technique, which was exactly what he wanted.

NARRATOR:

These images are also important because of the way they capture movement. Traditionally, photographers were trained to capture dancers and athletes at moments when time seemed to stop – for example, a dancer leaping in mid-air, or a goalie catching a ball.

MASON KLEIN:

What Brodovitch wanted to do was to extend movement. He wanted to experience or reflect a corps de ballet on the stage, as they were twirling and touching and moving without any sense of arrest or stop in their movement. And it's quite remarkable.

NARRATOR:

He published these images in a book called *Ballet*, which you can see on the monitor next to the vitrine. The book is legendary, but also quite rare, because most of the 300 original copies were destroyed in a fire...and a second fire destroyed many of the photographic negatives. Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN:

I remember in my own experience, seeing this book for the first time in 1971. And I'll never forget how I reacted to it. It was completely new. How extraordinarily graphic and dark and even the cover of the book one should

take note of, because he selected this serif type called Bodoni, which is very classical. And he was also, I think, playing with the idea of the proscenium, the stage. The last image that we show on the monitor is another reference to the camera; the shutter closing, the oculus. And it's the closing of the curtain, sort of alluding to, in its folds, the diaphragm of the camera.

**113. Lucile Brokaw, Piping Rock Beach, Long Island**

NARRATOR:

The story behind the creation of this unprecedented fashion photograph is a great one. It starts with Carmel Snow, the *Harper's Bazaar* editor who hired Alexey Brodovitch, whose ballet series we just saw. In order to modernize the magazine, she also needed to seek out new photographers.

MASON KLEIN:

She heard that Martin Munkacsi, the Hungarian living in Berlin, who had gained a good deal of fame and success as a sports photographer, was in New York, for two days. So Snow immediately hired him to reshoot a swimwear feature that had been initially shot in a studio.

NARRATOR:

They decided to shoot the new feature on a Long Island beach. It was a brisk October day. Munkacsi didn't speak a word of English, so communicating with the model was difficult.

MASON KLEIN:

But he started getting involved with all of these hand gestures and trying to signal that he wanted her to come toward him, and then he would run away and dramatically signal that she should come. And then she understood that she was supposed to run. He caught her in full stride. And all of a sudden they had this image of a taut-limbed Brokaw, the model's name was Lucile Brokaw, running by the seaside, her bathing cape billowing out behind her. And it just simply demolished every convention of fashion photography, by its sheer frank athleticism and vibrancy.

**114. Photographs by Lillian Bassman: *Wonders of Water, Untitled (Suzy Parker),* and *(Blowing Kiss) Barbara Mullen***

NARRATOR:

These elegant photographs are by Lillian Bassman. She was Brodovitch's assistant for many years, and largely responsible for designing the magazine *Junior Bazaar*. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN:

She always had visions of everything she commissioned, and no one would ever do what she imagined. So Brodovitch simply said to her: Well, why don't you start shooting it yourself? And she did it with a certain gusto, but she did everything with extraordinary passion.

NARRATOR:

These three photographs are from relatively early in her career.

MASON KLEIN:

But you see how already, how she was trying to meld fashion with art. She developed a very signature style, capturing a very dreamy black-and-white kind of portraiture of models. Cropping, toning, bleaching and using gauzes and tissues to dematerialize her figures that much more.

Even in *Barbara Mullen Blowing Kiss*, the one with her beautiful silhouetted figure, and then the ghostly image reflected in the mirror behind her...that sort of abstracted image of her was what Lillian would gravitate toward years later.

NARRATOR:

In the vitrine in the next room, look for the black-and-white outline of a woman in a coat and dress, adorned only with a few quick strokes of yellow paint. It's a fashion image, but the pared-down lines and color give us only the barest suggestion of what these garments look like. Brodovitch did use it in Harper's Bazaar...

MASON KLEIN:

But here he had to actually write in the margins: "This is dangerous." Meaning



that she had maybe gone too far in making invisible the very product they were trying to sell.

Bassman, by the way, and her work as a photographer, may have never been noticed by the art world if it weren't for a trash bag full of her negatives that were found when she was already in her seventies. So it's amazing to think that she had a whole second career, beginning in the '90s, where she was seen as cutting-edge.

**115. *Charles White, Chicago***

NARRATOR:

This portrait was taken by the groundbreaking Black photographer Gordon Parks.

MASON KLEIN:

Portraiture was a genre that was very important for Parks, who was keenly aware of how, in the general media, black lives were rarely portrayed positively, but rather stereotypically if they were represented at all. Portraiture for him, therefore, became an opportunity to represent black lives with a richness and purpose that he felt were missing.

In 1941, Parks photographed his friend and artistic peer, Charles White, as someone in command of his life, who, like himself behind his camera, held the means to harness his own destiny. Thus, the emphasis on the painter's self-determination and self-possession, as he is pictured leaning into the picture frame, holding his brushes, that is, his tools of power and self-expression. And peering out in the same direction as the sage elder in the mural behind him.

NARRATOR:

The older man in the painting has a furrowed brow and a clenched jaw. He looks stoic, but also resigned.

MASON KLEIN:

In contrast, White's calm, youthful face, smooth forehead and passionate focus, convey an idealistic youthfulness and range of visionary possibilities.

## 116. *Department Store, Mobile*

NARRATOR:

When Gordon Parks became *Life* magazine's first Black staff photographer in 1949, he changed the way the magazine depicted Black lives.

MASON KLEIN:

Take, for example, Parks' photograph of Joanne Thornton Wilson and her young niece, standing in front of a theater. It was taken to illustrate a *Life* magazine story on segregation.

NARRATOR:

At first, we see these two as individuals: A little girl in a lacy white dress, standing alongside her beautifully-dressed aunt. But then our eyes are drawn to the jarring, neon sign above them.

MASON KLEIN:

Gordon Parks' involvement with mass media was based on his understanding of photography's power to change perceptions about race. As he commented, "I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs." And the magazine page offered an extraordinary platform for him to create meaningful change.

NARRATOR:

During this period, when Black people appeared in magazines like *Life*, it was usually within photographs that focused on protest, violence, and poverty. Parks had to convince white editors to include images that, like this one, showed Black Americans going about their everyday lives with dignity.

MASON KLEIN:

With an extraordinary degree of tenderness and elegance, Parks was, above all, seeking to motivate empathy. He said, "I felt it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of the photograph."

NARRATOR:

Parks had a parallel career as a successful fashion photographer, and in 1947, he became the first Black photographer to shoot for *Vogue*. He also wrote bestselling novels and memoirs. And in 1969, he became the first Black American to direct a Hollywood feature film.

**117. *Nan Martin, Street Scene, First Avenue***

NARRATOR:

You might recognize the building in the background of this photograph...it's the United Nations building, and it was still under construction when Frances McLaughlin-Gill took this photograph. In the foreground, the actress Nan Martin poses with her back to us. To tell us more about this image, here's Leslie Gill, daughter of the photographer and the designer of this exhibition.

LESLIE GILL:

You see a woman who is clearly affluent, looking at the newspaper, absorbing the world. In the backdrop of a building that actually contains much of the activity of the moment. So on one hand, this shows a woman who is worldly; on the other hand it shows her outside of the actual venue that she could potentially be participating in.

NARRATOR:

It's still a fashion photograph, and our eyes are drawn to the prominent collar on the model's houndstooth jacket, her pearl necklace, and her black cloche hat and gloves.

LESLIE GILL:

On the other hand, if you read deeper, there is always a commentary on who we are as a society, who we exclude, who we include, and how they absorb the information that they have, to contribute back into the world.

NARRATOR:

McLaughlin-Gill herself was a pioneering contributor to the visual world. At only 24 years old, she became the first woman photographer to work full-time for *Vogue* magazine. And to an industry dominated by men, she brought a new perspective.

LESLIE GILL:

I think that you can see from the work that she advocated for women.

These were women that went out into the world and engaged in the world, absorbed the world. Contributed to the world. And that is the importance of the work.

**118. *Untitled, New York [Frances McLaughlin-Gill and Bettina Graziani outside Hunter College]***

NARRATOR:

In this double portrait by Gordon Parks, we see photographer Frances McLaughlin-Gill looking through her camera at the model Bettina Graziani. Gordon Parks and McLaughlin-Gill were colleagues, but they also developed a more personal bond.

LESLIE GILL:

They started together at the same time at *Vogue*, and they remained friends throughout their life. And to me, Gordon understood the challenges that my mother had professionally, and was again very sympathetic towards them.

NARRATOR:

Both were outsiders and trailblazers within their field – McLaughlin-Gill because of her gender, and Parks because of his race. McLaughlin-Gill's daughter, Leslie, explains

LESLIE GILL:

And so the photograph that he takes of her both sees the model and my mother as subjects. And in doing so, he was able to show two very different women at work.

NARRATOR:

Here, both women are taken seriously as two people doing two different jobs. It's no accident that in the caption that accompanied the photograph in *Life* magazine, the model Bettina Graziani is described as "at work modeling fall college clothes."

It's also no accident that Parks posed the two women across the street from New York City's Hunter College, which was founded to educate young women of all backgrounds.

**119. *Elise Daniels on First Avenue, New York***

LESLIE GILL:

The image we're looking at here is of Elise Daniels on First Avenue. This was one of my mother's favorite images from this period of time.

NARRATOR:

Francis McLaughlin-Gill had begun shooting for *Vogue*. And the magazine's art director, Alexander Liberman, wanted her to bring something different to the table...something very unlike the formal, static fashion photos that had traditionally appeared in the magazine.

LESLIE GILL:

What Liberman asked my mother to do was to try and find a breath in her work. And to some way begin to explore a sense of time. So she walks into the city and takes models photographed in their daily lives. And that begins to bring in a sense of an individual that goes beyond their looks...

NARRATOR:

For example, in this photograph, the model Elise Daniels isn't just an elegant clothes hanger.

LESLIE GILL:

It shows a woman confident in her own skin. She looks directly at the camera, but in the reflection of the window behind her, you see two people; her child looking at her, and her husband, bending over.

You see the complexity of her life, the things that she's balancing. But at the same time, deviate from what perhaps she wants as her primary interest in the world.

So the use of shadow, the use of reflection to tell the complex story of women is something that my mother returns to again and again, to show that women are multifaceted, that they are complex and that they are unique individuals.

120. *Third Avenue Series, New York*

LESLIE GILL:

We're looking at a series that my mother took over about a period of a year-and-a-half where she took models out into the street and showed them along Third Avenue. These were the beginning of what we now know as the *College Series*, that showed young women just emerging from their youth, and going into the world. In these three pictures, she shows very different personalities.

NARRATOR:

Look for the image of a young woman holding her purse. Behind her, an old man using a cane walks away. And in the foreground, we see the blurred half-face of a young boy.

LESLIE GILL:

Three people sharing a moment in time, but all with separate viewpoints and points of view about their life and one another. The young woman looks forward and she is both hesitant and confident at the same time. She is ready to engage with the world, but she shows some hesitation about the future.

NARRATOR:

It was an uncertain time, because these photos were made just after the cataclysm of World War Two.

In the photograph at bottom, we see a woman in a plaid suit. She's in motion, striding forward.

LESLIE GILL:

And yet her face is cut off, which was extremely adventuresome, both for the photographer and for the publication, to imagine seeing a woman slightly blurred, slightly out of focus, but so determined and a kind of flâneur in the city. She's absorbing the city, and she's moving forward with her life.

NARRATOR:

The third photograph shows a young woman looking into a window.

LESLIE GILL:

And to me, what's unusual here is that it allows a woman to be in repose, gathering herself and her thoughts. That to me is a very unusual thing to see happen in a fashion magazine at this point. It is simply someone comfortable in their own skin.

And I think many models would say that my mother made them feel comfortable. And so, to me, this is a very poignant image because of its repose. And because of its calm in a time, again, that was a really challenging moment in history.



### 121. *Rest for the Stomach and Lipstick Pots*

NARRATOR:

This black and white photogram was created by Leslie Gill—father to the Leslie Gill you’ve been hearing from, and husband to photographer Frances McLaughlin-Gill.

LESLIE GILL:

In this case, you can see him experimenting with where the type is going to be placed. He’s thinking about it at the time that he does the exposure. The band that runs horizontally becomes the place, in his mind in this outtake, where the text is going to be.

He is someone who’s conversant with typography. He is an art director, he is a painter, he draws, he can do illustration.

So, in a sense, someone who thinks about the magazine, the publication, as being the end product, rather than the next generation who sees the photograph as somehow challenging or contesting the page.

NARRATOR:

Gill was about 12 years older than his wife, Frances McLaughlin-Gill. She represented that next generation. Gill’s generation was defined by the impact of World War Two, which broke out just as his career was taking off. His image of lipstick pots was created just after he returned from the war.

LESLIE GILL:

The images that he takes from this period tend to be very, very still. His work goes inward, he contemplates the world through objects and through these still lives that he creates. And you can see that there’s this need for a sense of order, a sense of calm and a sense that the boundary of the page is the boundary of the world. No air is in this page. It’s a vacuum. It suggests the human being, but it pulls the human being out of it.

NARRATOR:

This strikingly modern photograph appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar*, where Gill collaborated with art director Alexey Brodovitch.

LESLIE GILL:

And so the combination of Brodovitch as this very influential

and experimental man, and then my father's sense of minimalism, I think, created an image which is very powerful and clearly influences the generations to come.

## 122. Cover of What's New

NARRATOR:

In 1941, the American graphic designer Lester Beall created this dynamic cover for *What's New*, a magazine published by a company called Abbott Pharmaceuticals. Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN:

And you see that it's layered, its use of photography and asymmetry and reverse perspective is quite dramatic. And then his use of word boxes, or text boxes, sort of anticipating the layering and the simultaneous themes, the postmodernism of the 1980s and '90s...and this was in the 1930s, late '30s.

NARRATOR:

Beall's innovative designs were influenced by the work of avant-garde European artists and designers, many of them now émigrés in America.

MASON KLEIN:

And he had synthesized a lot of the techniques of these modernists. And then had appropriated to the extent that he could sort of imprint it with his own personality, with his own humor, with his own emphases.

NARRATOR:

It might seem surprising that a pharmaceutical company would commission a cutting-edge designer like Beall to work on their in-house magazine. But in fact, during and after World War Two, it was important for companies like Abbott to position themselves as forward-looking, optimistic, cutting-edge, even futuristic. For exhibition designer Leslie Gill, this period was notable for the way that designers and industry leaders came together...and...

LESLIE GILL:

...Envisioned a future that we couldn't see yet and tried to give it a vibrancy and tried to give it visual clarity. And part of that was a sense of cooperation and partnership with industry.

And their collaboration allowed for experimentation to happen, much of which really helped and played out as a future which was brighter and better for American society.

123. *Canopy*

NARRATOR:

These three images from the 1950s are by the photographer and painter Saul Leiter.

MASON KLEIN:

And they present Leiter in his most poetic and lyrical best, looking through veils and windows into sort of shadows and realizing how refracted and fragmented vision can be in the city.

NARRATOR:

He made a living with commercial fashion photography, but on the side, he pursued his own artistic vision with street photographs like these.

MASON KLEIN:

They create such a sense of, uh, extraordinary voyeurism; a voyeuristic quality that...I mean it's just, when I first saw his work I just thought it was so emotional, it was so affecting, it was so powerful. And you see him achieve that as well in these three final works in the show, in color. They're so complex and yet at the same time you know that he just went from step to step and he captured these. And they are so comparable to abstract paintings that we have to see him or think of him as both a painter and a photographer. He actually painted his black-and-white photographs, so he remained a painter.

NARRATOR:

In a talk he gave to fellow artists, Leiter argued that abstraction wasn't something they'd invented.

MASON KLEIN:

Instead it was something real and constantly accessible, as long as one had the capacity, as he put it, to see it.

NARRATOR:

He described it like this:

MASON KLEIN:

There are things that are out in the open, and then there

are things that are hidden. And life has more to do...the real world has more to do with what is hidden, no?