

Exhibition Explores How Photography, Graphic Design, and Magazines Transformed Mid-Century American Visual Culture

Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine

April 3 — July 11, 2021

New York, NY, April 2, 2021 — The Jewish Museum will present ***Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine***, an exhibition exploring how photography, graphic design, and popular magazines converged to transform American visual culture from the 1930s to the 1950s. The exhibition will be on view from April 3 through July 11, 2021.

Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine highlights a time when avant-garde techniques in photography and design reached the United States via European émigrés, including Bauhaus artists forced out of Nazi Germany. 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. The unmistakable aesthetic made popular by such magazines as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* — whose art directors, Alexey Brodovitch and Alexander Liberman, were immigrants and accomplished photographers — emerged from a distinctly American combination of innovation and pragmatism.

Featuring over 150 works including vintage photographs, art book layouts, and magazine cover designs, the exhibition considers the connections and influences of designers and photographers such as Richard Avedon, Lillian Bassman, Lester Beall, Margaret Bourke-White, Louis Faurer, Robert Frank, William Klein, Herbert Matter, Lisette Model, Gordon Parks, Irving Penn, Cipe Pineles, and Paul Rand. The exhibition is organized into five sections: “Art as Design, Design as Art,” “Fashion as Desire,” “The Contested Page,” “Reimagining Industry,” and “Graphic Effect.”

Despite the looming shadow in the 1930s of World War II, the magazine and book-publishing world thrived in New York City. The section “Art as Design, Design as Art” explores the ways the city’s budding graphic-design culture gave rise to a diversity of photography—as it absorbed literary, painterly, and cinematic elements—and challenged the conventional distinction between the fine and the applied arts. In 1933, Alexey Brodovitch founded the Design Lab in Philadelphia as a weekly gathering of students to focus equally on photography and graphic design. Brodovitch dared a generation of

photographers and designers to challenge their formal conventions and encouraged and expected the flouting of rules.

“Fashion as Desire” highlights the fusion of art and fashion during the 1940s, when American modernism in magazine publishing established itself during the boom economy of the war years. Photographers such as Erwin Blumenfeld, or Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, both influenced by Brodovitch, as well as by Edward Steichen, merged art and fashion in their work, and altered the genre of portraiture.

In post-war America, magazines began to set aside their lofty aesthetic goals. “The Contested Page” explores this shift, when magazines exceeded the bounds of consumer culture and touched instead upon realities such as class, race, and social status. The work in this section evinces a broad transformation in documentary photography. Gordon Parks, the first Black photographer hired at *Vogue*, went beyond fashion and expanded both the political and aesthetic boundaries of photography. Photographers were not just interested in making work that pleased the eye but also sought to challenge the status quo. Also included is the work of two pioneering art directors: Cipe Pineles, who helped create *Charm*, “the magazine for women who work,” and Lillian Bassman (also a noted photographer), who helped promote the careers of Richard Avedon and Robert Frank at *Harper’s Bazaar*. Those represented in this section, from the proto-feminist Frances McLaughlin-Gill to Lisette Model and Parks, believed in the power of mass media to make visible that which needed to be seen and to confront the stereotypes that had dominated popular culture.

“Reimagining Industry” focuses on the period of the 1940s and 1950s when business executives realized that a competitive edge could be gained by hiring artists and designers to promote their company’s house journals. This was particularly true for industries whose connection to innovation was key to their success. For instance, in 1945, Will Burtin was hired as the art director for *Fortune* magazine, where he demonstrated an extraordinary knack for graphically communicating scientific phenomena and theory. He then went on to *Scope*, a house periodical for scientists and the medical community sponsored by Upjohn Pharmaceuticals. This journal, previously shaped by Lester Beall into an unexpected visual publication, is considered to be the most artistically designed biomedical journal in history. Examples of covers and spreads from each journal, as well as *Westvaco Inspirations for Printers*, are included in this section.

“Graphic Effect,” the final section of the exhibition, shows how photographers in the 1950s moved towards a more interpretive, idiosyncratic viewpoint, becoming less concerned with a transparent narrative. Their work began to question Henri Cartier-Bresson’s famous notion of the “decisive moment” in favor of their own, equivocal perception of it. Lisette Model rejected the



“decisive moment” in her work and emphasized the significance of the snapshot. At this time, photographers were increasingly frustrated with editorial control, and many of them, such as Louis Faurer and Saul Leiter, were disinclined towards photojournalism. This concluding section illustrates how photographers ensured that their images have the last word.

The exhibition is organized by Mason Klein, Senior Curator, The Jewish Museum. Exhibition design by Leslie Gill and Ines Yupanqui, Leslie Gill Architect; graphic design by Yeliz Secerli; and lighting by Clint Ross Collier.

Publication

The accompanying catalogue by Mason Klein, with essays by Maurice Berger, Leslie Camhi, and Marvin Heiferman, is published by the Jewish Museum and Yale University Press. The essays draw a lineage from European experimental design to innovative work in American magazine design at mid-century and offer insights into the role of gender in fashion photography and political activism in the mass media. The book is available worldwide and at [the Jewish Museum's Cooper Shop for \\$45.00](#).

Programs

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Jewish Museum will present a series of virtual public programs including a conversation with Senior Curator Mason Klein and exhibition designer Leslie Gill, a video series featuring artists and curators, and art-making workshops. Programs will be announced at a later date.

Mobile Tour

An [audio tour](#) featuring Mason Klein accompanies the exhibition. It is easily accessible on any device with internet access, for both on-site and off-site use.

Support

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About the Jewish Museum

Located on New York City's famed Museum Mile, the Jewish Museum is a distinctive hub for art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds.



Founded in 1904, the Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. Devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, the Museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs, and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 4,000 years. The public may call 212.423.3200 or visit TheJewishMuseum.org for more information.

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