

Shout Freedom!

Photo League Selections from the Columbus Museum of Art

The Photo League was a unique, grass-roots collective of amateur and professional photographers who were committed to the transformative power of photography in effecting social change. “Upon the photographer,” they proclaimed, “rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today.” The organization was founded in New York City in 1936, the same year as the launching of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal administration. Some of FSA’s small band of photographers, including Dorothea Lange,



Morris Engel, Harlem Merchant from Harlem Document, 1937.



Weegee, Manuela Hernandez Holds Manuel Jimenez in Her Lap, July 30, 1941.



Walter Rosenblum, D-Day Morning, Omaha Beach, 1944.

John Vachon, and Arthur Rothstein, were also actively involved with the Photo League. In some ways, the League was its urban counterpart. Unlike the federally funded and relatively short-lived FSA, however, the Photo League endured for fifteen years until its demise in 1951 as a result of McCarthy-era politics. It was a democratic forum for dialogue, education, technical development, and social interaction and provided the only not-for-profit photography school in the U.S. The League welcomed all, and many who participated, men and women alike, were first-generation immigrants. Shared darkrooms and exhibition spaces offered affordable means to pursue their art as well as to gain exposure at a time, with few exceptions, that predated photography’s acceptance in museums and galleries.

Shout Freedom! comprises fifty-five photographs by forty-seven photographers among the hundreds who were active in the Photo League in the early to middle decades of the twentieth-century. All of the works are from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA), which has made a commitment to building its Photo League holdings comprehensively and cohesively. Today the collection includes more than 250 works from this under-recognized organization whose members chronicled turbulent chapters in our history—from the Great Depression to World War II to the Cold War. **Shout Freedom!** emphatically acknowledges the importance of the Photo League’s contribution to our broadening understanding of the twentieth-century American experience.

League Beginnings

The Photo League had its origins in the Workers Film and Photo League, an organization of filmmakers and photographers founded in 1930. By 1933 “Workers” had been dropped from the name. The workers Film and Photo League in turn was affiliated with Workers International Relief, a group active in socialist causes, including the production and distribution of visual propaganda of the working-class to respond to the themes of capitalism favored in Hollywood. Founded by visionary photographers Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, the Photo League emerged when the still photographers split from the filmmakers over a division in ideology. Avant-garde filmmakers Paul Strand and Ralph Steiner founded Frontier Films but remained deeply involved with the Photo League throughout its existence. Strand in particular was revered as a mentor, a member of the advisory board, photographer, teacher, lecturer, author, and editor.

Key precedents in American social documentary photography include Jacob Riis and Lewis W. Hine. Riis’s ground-breaking exposé *How the Other Half Lives*



Jerome Liebling, Butterfly Boy, New York 1949.



Sol Libsohn, Hester Street, 1945.

published in 1890, probed tenement life on New York’s Lower East Side. Hine’s photographs of children factory workers in the first decades of the twentieth century helped bring about child labor reforms. Like Strand, Hine was a highly esteemed role model for Photo Leaguers and until his death in 1940 was a presence at the League. Led by influential teachers Grossman and Aaron Siskind, the League was united under this progressive umbrella in its shared focus on confronting issues of poverty and social injustice. While many active in the League found their subjects in New York City, some reached beyond its urban origins to rural America, South America, and Europe. During World War II especially, many members dispersed; Walter Rosenblum and W. Eugene Smith went to the European theaters where they became acclaimed war photographers; Grossman and Charles Rotkin, among others, went to Central and South America.

Women and the League

In an era that generally did not support women working outside the home, photography drew disproportionate numbers to the professional world. Because the medium lacked status in the fine-art hierarchy perhaps it was more open to women practitioners. Moreover women had historically been associated with social causes. In 1929 publisher Henry Luce hired Margaret Bourke-White as the first female photojournalist for *Fortune* magazine, and in 1936

Life magazine debuted with her photograph of the Fort Peck Dam on its cover. Concurrently federal funding supported projects such as Berenice Abbott’s 1937 photographic record *Changing New York* and the documentary work of Lange and Marion Post-Wolcott for the FSA. The Photo League in particular provided a wide range of opportunities; women actively participated in leadership roles as advisors, members, editors, administrators, guest lecturers, workshop instructors, and teachers. *Photo Notes*, the League’s official newsletter, references some eighty women working in various capacities throughout the organization’s existence.

The Red Scare

The League endured across three decades and by its demise, hundreds of photographers had participated in its myriad activities. It was the heart and soul of social documentary photography and had ambitions to grow into a Center for American Photography until U. S. Attorney General Tom C. Clark declared the League a subversive organization in 1947. An increase in membership in the wake of the accusation and the critically acclaimed 1948 group exhibition *This Is the Photo League* were no match for the impact of the blacklist. The 1949 trial of Communist Party officials included the shocking testimony of Angela Calomiris, an FBI informant who had infiltrated the League for seven years. She claimed that its membership included



Dan Weiner, Autorama Top Hats, 1950s.



Rebecca Lepkoff, Lower East Side, 1947.

Communists and was a front for party activities. By 1951 the rising tide of McCarthy-era hysteria had sealed the League’s fate and it was forced to disband. The fallout from Cold War paranoia had ruinous and lasting consequences for many members. Careers were dismantled, passports were seized, and Rosalie Gwathmey went so far as to destroy her negatives, fearing that her work might futher impact her husband, painter Robert Gwathmey, who was a frequent target of FBI surveillance.

These photographs are stunning pictorial records and visual stories from our history, as well as striking works whose message transcend the written record. Their immediacy resonates today as a potent voice that alerts us to the present by evoking the past.

Catherine Evans, Chief Curator
Columbus Museum of Art

Checklist Unless otherwise indicated all works are vintage gelatin silver prints and bear the credit line: Photo League Collection, Museum Purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth M. Ross, the Derby Fund, John S. and Catherine Chapin Kobacker, and the Friends of the Photo League.

1	Berenice Abbott American, 1898-1991 <i>Gunsmith, 6 Centre Market Place</i> February 4, 1937 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches	12	Arnold Eagle American, born Hungary, 1909-92 <i>Railroad Platform, Simpson Sign, New York</i> 1940s 8 5/6 x 7 15/16 inches	23	Rosalie Gwathmey American, 1908-2001 <i>Shout Freedom</i> 1948 or later 7 7/8 x 6 11/16 inches	34	Jack Manning American, born Jack Mendelsohn, 1920-2003 <i>Violet Greene of West 127th Street Cleaning House, New York City from Harlem Document</i> About 1939 8 1/2 x 7 11/16 inches	45	Joe Schwartz American, born 1913 <i>Sullivan Midget 2, Greenwich Village</i> About 1939 16 x 20 inches
2	Alexander Alland American, 1902-89 <i>The Old Bridge</i> 1938 9 5/8 x 7 7/8 inches	13	Jeanne Ebstel American, born Jeanne Friedberg, 1905-2000 Untitled 1940s 22 x 18 inches	24	Rosalie Gwathmey American, 1908-2001 <i>Charlotte, North Carolina</i> 1945 7 1/2 x 9 1/8 inches	35	Lisette Model American, born Austria, 1901-1983 <i>They Honor Their Sons</i> About 1940-42 9 7/8 x 13 inches	46	Aaron Siskind American, 1903-1991 Untitled from <i>Harlem Document, The Most Crowded Block in the World</i> About 1940 13 1/8 x 10 3/8 inches
3	Lucy Ashjian American, 1907-93 Untitled from <i>Harlem Document</i> About 1936-40 7 x 8 11/16 inches	14	Eliot Elisofon American, 1911-73 <i>Child Bride, Age 15, Memphis, Tennessee</i> 1940 10 3/16 x 13 inches	25	Morris Huberland American, born Germany, 1909-2003 <i>Bread Line</i> Late 1930s 6 13/16 x 7 5/16 inches	36	Lida Moser American, born 1920 <i>Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, New York</i> 1949 5 7/8 x 3 15/16 inches	47	W. Eugene Smith American, 1918 <i>Soldier with Canteen, Saipan, WWII</i> 1944 13 1/4 x 10 7/16 inches Gift of Richard M. and Elizabeth M. Ross
4	Marynn Older Ausubel American, 1912-80 <i>Two Boys Seated on the Steps</i> About 1940 9 3/8 x 7 3/4 inches Gift of Steven Nordman	15	Eliot Elisofon American, 1911-73 <i>WPA Cleaned This Area... Keep it Clean</i> About 1940 10 3/8 x 13 1/4 inches	26	N. Jay Jaffee American, 1921-99 <i>Chair with Sign, East New York, Brooklyn</i> 1950 9 3/8 x 6 13/16 inches	37	Marvin E. Newman American, born 1927 <i>Halloween, South Side</i> 1951, printed later 7 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches Gift of Steven Nordman	48	Ralph Steiner American, 1899-1986 <i>Two Cars</i> About 1935 9 1/2 x 7 5/8 inches
5	Lou Bernstein American, 1911-2005 <i>Father and Children on Blanket</i> 1943 18 x 22 inches	16	Martin Elkhort American, born 1929 Untitled 1949 8 1/16 x 9 7/8 inches Museum purchase, Derby fund	27	Sidney Kerner American, born 1920 <i>Mother and Child, Washington, D.C.</i> 1946 10 5/8 x 14 inches	38	Ruth Orkin American, 1921-85 <i>Best's at Scarf Counter, New York</i> About 1950 20 x 16 inches	49	Louis Stettner American, born 1922 <i>Men Looking at Concentric Circles, New York</i> 1951 16 x 20 inches
6	Vivian Cherry American, born 1920 <i>Children in Button Coats</i> 1947 12 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches	17	Morris Engel American 1918-2005 <i>New York City, Coney Island</i> 1939 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches	28	Rebecca Lepkoff American, born 1916 <i>Lower East Side</i> 1947 10 9/16 x 11 13/16 inches	39	Ruth Orkin American, 1921-85 <i>Outdoor Concert, Lewisohn Stadium, New York City</i> 1948 7 5/16 x 9 5/8 inches	50	Erika Stone American, born Erika Klopfer, Germany, 1924 <i>Lower East Side Façade</i> 1947 10 1/2 x 13 1/4 inches
7	Bernard Cole American, born England, 1911-92 <i>Three Children in Stairwell Entrance</i> 1940s 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches	18	Morris Engel American, 1918-2005 <i>Harlem Merchant, from Harlem Document,</i> 1937 7 3/8 x 9 7/16 inches	29	Rebecca Lepkoff American, born 1916 <i>Just for Two Now</i> 1947 7 9/16 x 9 3/8 inches	40	Marion Palfi American, born Germany, 1907-78 <i>There is No More Time - Wife of the Lynch Victim</i> 1949, printed later 21 x 17 inches	51	Weegee (Arthur Fellig) American, born Usher Fellig, Poland, 1899-1968 <i>Manuela Hernandez Holds Manuel Jiminez in Her Lap</i> July 30, 1941 10 3/8 x 13 3/16 inches
8	Harold Corsini American, 1919-2008 <i>Union County, Kentucky (Driller's Helper, J. Danrold, Cleans Hands with Waste)</i> September 1944 7 1/2 x 7 7/16 inches	19	Godfrey Frankel American, 1912-95 <i>Cody, Wyoming, Heart Mountain War Relocation Authority</i> July 1945 10 9/16 x 13 3/16 inches	30	Leon Levinstein American, 1910-88 <i>Brooding Man</i> 1950s 22 x 18 inches	41	Sol Prom American, born Solomon Fabricant, 1906-89 <i>Bowery, New York</i> 1937 7 1/2 x 8 1/8 inches	52	Dan Weiner American, 1919-59 <i>Autorama Top Hats</i> 1950s 8 15/16 x 13 9/16 inches
9	Jack Delano American, born Russia, 1914-97 <i>Interior of New FSA Client Edward Gont Home, with One of 11 Children Asleep</i> August 1940 9 7/16 x 7 3/16 inches	20	George Gilbert American, born George Gelberg, 1922 <i>American Faces, New York</i> 1940 20 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches	31	Sol Libsohn American, 1914-2001 <i>Hester Street</i> 1945 9 15/16 x 10 1/16 inches	42	David Robbins American, 1912-81 <i>Antiwar Demonstration</i> About 1941 20 x 16 inches	53	Sandra Weiner American, born Sandra Smith, Poland, 1921 <i>East 26th Street</i> 1948, printed later 6 3/16 x 9 3/8 inches
10	Jack Delano American, born Russia, 1914-97 <i>Miner at Dougherty's Mine, near Falls Creek, Pennsylvania</i> August 1940 9 3/8 x 6 7/8 inches	21	Leo Goldstein American, 1901-71 <i>East Harlem Child</i> 1949 6 5/16 x 5 1/16 inches	32	Jerome Liebling American, born 1924 <i>Butterfly Boy, New York</i> 1949 9 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches	43	Walter Rosenblum American, 1919-2006 <i>D-Day Morning, Omaha Beach</i> 1944 21 x 17 inches	54	Bill Witt American, born 1921 <i>The Eye, Lower East Side, New York</i> 1948 7 7/16 x 8 3/16 inches
11	Robert Disraeli American, born Germany, 1903-88 <i>Two Girls Looking in Cutlery Shop, New York</i> About 1950 8 x 5 1/2 inches	22	Sid Grossman American 1913-55 <i>Couple Embracing, Coney Island</i> About 1947 7 13/16 x 8 3/4 inches	33	Jerome Liebling American, born 1924 <i>Cop's Hat (Union Square), New York</i> 1948 6 11/16 x 7 9/16 inches	44	Walter Rosenblum American, 1919-2006 <i>Prisoners, D-Day Morning, Normandy Beach</i> 1944 7 11/16 x 9 5/8 inches	55	Max Yavno American, 1911-58 <i>Muscle Beach, Santa Monica</i> 1949 7 7/16 x 9 1/2 inches

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Itinerary:

August 26 - November 7, 2010	Muskegon Museum of Art, MI
January 21 - March 20, 2011	Ball State University Museum of Art, Muncie, IN
May 21 - September 4, 2011	Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, IA



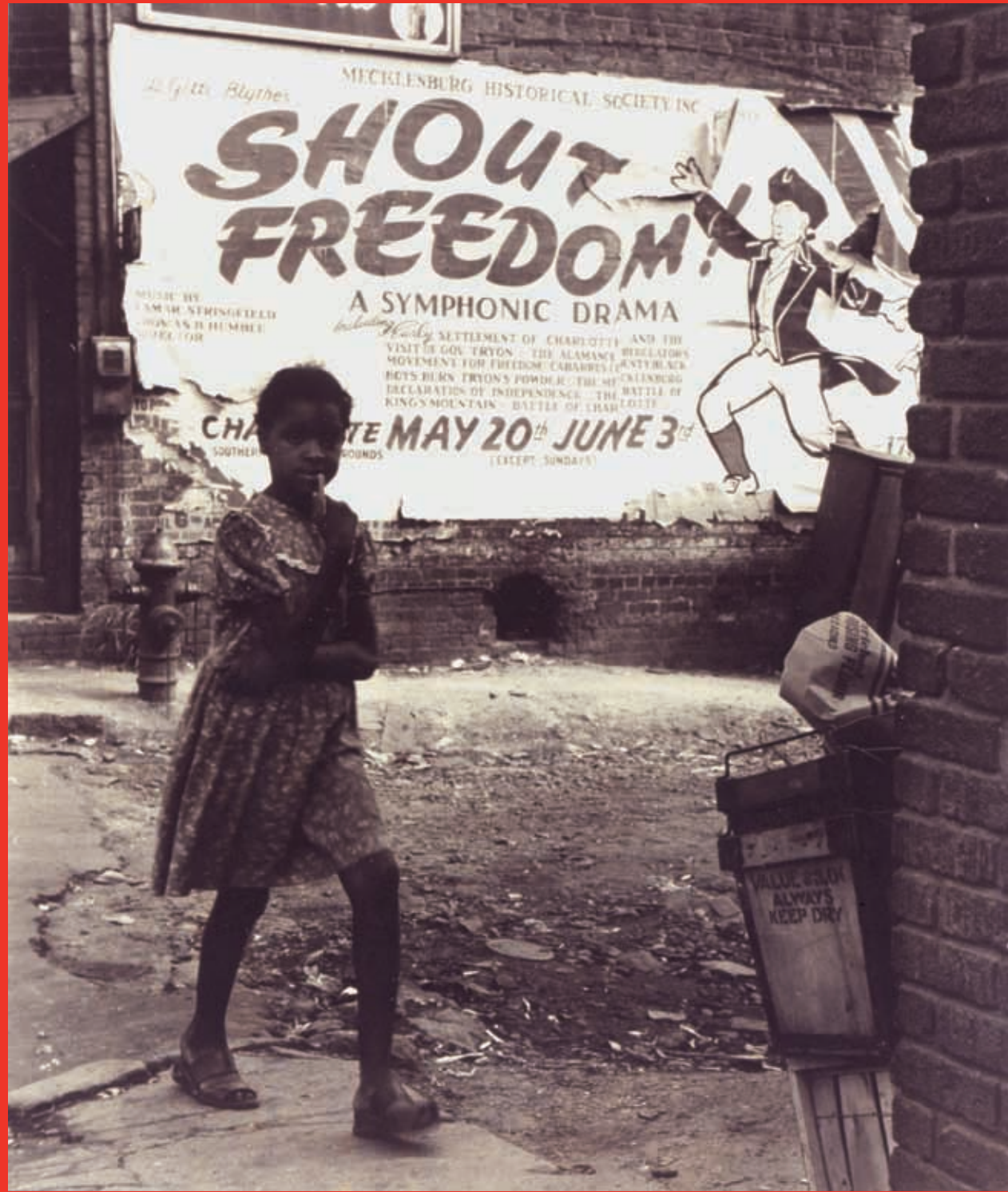
Lucy Ashjian, *Untitled from Harlem Document*, about 1936-40.

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