

National Gallery of Art Honors Robert Frank ; ; ; All Things Considered (NPR) ; 12-17-1994 ;

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JACKI LYDEN, Host: In 1959, the prevailing image of the United States was one of prosperity-back yard barbecues, new cars, juke boxes, and TV sets. That year, a book of photographs was published that so dramatically countered that view, it remains one of the most profound documents of the era. The book is called *The Americans*. Its creator, Robert Frank, was never comfortable with success. He switched to film making. But success has dogged Robert Frank. Reluctant or not, Frank is the subject of a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the first living photographer ever to be so honored. NPR's Tom Cole tracked down Robert Frank, and has this profile.

TOM COLE, Reporter: All of Robert Frank's work is autobiographical. The images in *The Americans* are what he saw, and, more importantly, what he felt, as the Swiss-born photographer traveled across this country between 1954 and 1957. His 1985 video, *Home Improvements*, is like a home movie. It begins with his 59th birthday party, and ends with him standing outside his home in a remote part of Nova Scotia. He's peering through his video camera at his reflection in a glass door, and what he says pretty much sums up his work.

ROBERT FRANK, Photographer/Videographer: [on video] I'm always looking outside, trying to look inside, trying to tell something that's true. But maybe nothing is really true, except what's out there. And what's out there is always different.

COLE: The United States is certainly different today than it was when Frank's book *The Americans* was published. Yet the book still shapes the way we see ourselves; the grainy, black and white fashion and perfume ads, the tilted horizons or deliberately blurred images in music videos, the unsentimental, slightly caustic takes on everyday scenes so popular with photographers now. They're all more or less directly descended from Robert Frank's approach to *The Americans*. But Frank is quick to point out that his book was not an immediate success. His blunt, unsentimental depictions of mugging politicians, strangely solemn parades, empty places and solitary glowing juke boxes, were criticized for presenting a negative view of America.

Mr. FRANK: The Museum of Modern Art wouldn't even sell the book, you know. I mean, certain things one doesn't forget so easy. But the younger people caught on. They really liked the book, and they pushed it. But the establishment was not there. They weren't there for a long time. But I think I never worked for the establishment, though I never looked to the establishment, so I'm doubly surprised I'm now in a very big establishment on the walls.

COLE: Frank's exhibition at the National Gallery of Art is called *Moving Out*. That's what Robert Frank does, says exhibition co-curator Sarah Greenough [sp]. He keeps changing.

SARAH GREENOUGH, National Gallery Curator: Robert is very, very much somebody who lives in the present and publicity people wanting to interview, it's always talking about the past. And he wants to get on with life, with what's happening now. He's not, by any means, living on that past glory, or feeding on it. He'd be just as happy if, you know *The Americans* just ceased to exist, as far as he was concerned now.

Mr. FRANK: I'm always glad when people pay attention to the later work. But I can't, you know, if they are also fascinated by these pictures of *The Americans*, so be it. There must be something to it. But naturally, I'm interested in going on, because I don't want to stand on that, whatever

The Americans represent.

COLE: The Americans represented a dramatic departure from what most other photographers were doing at the time. Photo journalism was in vogue, and the picture magazines wanted images that could be assembled into narratives. Frank was told that his work was too idiosyncratic, too personal. He'd already taken pictures that have since become famous; Welsh coal miners after work, their faces stained and stunned, unsmiling; a Parisian couple in a bumper car, the man's head flung back., he's giddy with joy; a gray London street, everyone walking away from the camera except one man, perhaps a banker, in a top hat. He looks uncomfortable.

Though Frank could not win over the editors of Life, he did land a Guggenheim Fellowship to make a photographic record of 'Things American, past and present.' The Americans was published three years later. When it grew too popular, Robert Frank moved on, according to Philip Brookman [sp], co-curator of the retrospective.

PHILIP BROOKMAN, National Gallery Curator: His work after The Americans really is a reaction to its success. He had said that, after the book was published, people used to come by and bring him pictures to show, other photographers would bring pictures, and they would all look like pictures from The Americans. So he realized quickly that his work really had influenced a generation of younger photographers. And he didn't want to just be that sort of general of this young army of photographers. He wanted to go on and do something different.

COLE: Frank decided he wanted to make movies. And once again, his work connected with viewers.

[music]

COLE: Pull My Daisy was based on part of an unpublished play by Jack Kerouac [sp]. The cast included Alan Ginsberg [sp], Gregory Corso and Larry Rivers. All of the acting was improvised, so was much of Frank's camera work. When the film was edited, Kerouac improvised the narration.

JACK KEROUAC: Yes, it's early, late, or a middle Friday evening in the universe. All the sounds of time are pouring through the window and the key.

COLE: The spontaneous approach to film making was similar to the way Robert Frank shot his stills. His friend, collaborator, and photography student Alan Ginsberg points out, however, that this technique is anything but careless.

ALAN GINSBERG: See the thing about spontaneity is people think, well you can do anything you want. You're undisciplined. But Robert has this fantastic education since he was 17 as an apprentice to an industrial photographer. So he knows the chemicals of it. He knows how to light a factory with magnesium flares and take a gigantic picture with one of those century universal view cameras or big box cameras. So he's got this fantastic discipline which is applies to being able to be spontaneous.

COLE: The spontaneity of the pictures Robert Frank took for The Americans reached a new generation in the 1960s. Though the photographs were taken a decade earlier, they took on a powerful immediacy for viewers in the midst of a social and cultural revolution - a New Orleans trolley, the windows framing the faces of riders - white in front, black in back - in the first frame, the face is blurred by the window glass; in the second, a sour-looking woman; in the third, two

white children, a defiant boy and his distraught sister. But the viewer's gaze stops cold at the fourth frame - a black man staring straight at the camera, a look of utter anguish on his face. Frank says the picture just happened, that he could never have planned it.

Mr. FRANK: I think you have to have a sympathy for what you photograph. You have- you have to understand, you know- sympathy, understand. Above all, you have to be very quick and know that this is the past right away if you take it out and you- then it's in that memory box and then you can take it out, look at it again and decide that it really worked, that it really contained what you felt that moment and that it was just towards what you photograph.

COLE: Frank doesn't much like to explain how he does what he does, yet even he calls some of his later work almost impenetrable. It's his most autobiographical and he uses it to come to terms with his life; growing old, his wife's illness, the death of his friend Danny Seymour, the death of his daughter, Andrea, in a plane crash, the mental illness of his son, Pablo. Frank struggles with the past and he's angry at his celebrity. Alan Ginsberg describes one assemblage in the retrospective.

Mr. GINSBERG: There's this very strange exhibit there where it takes 100 prints, really expensive prints which sell - I don't know what they were selling for, you know, \$1,200, \$2,000, \$4,000 - 100 of these vintage prints and put a nail through them and then wrapped them up with a piece of wire and tacked them to a board and said, 'This is the end of photography.'

COLE: Robert Frank doesn't want private dealers commercializing his art, turning his very personal statements into product. So he donated his collection of hundreds of original negatives and prints to the National Gallery of Art. The Gallery's Sara Greeneau remembers when she and co-curator Phillip Brookman [sp] went to the apartment Frank keeps in New York to look through the boxes of material.

Ms. GREENEAU: When Phillip and I first arrived, we found, tacked up on the bulletin board, a beautiful, beautiful statement by Robert that was, in part, a letter to us and, in part, an indication of what he thought this exhibition and this whole process was all about. And it starts out something like, 'Draw the map, the voyage made, looking with care in the beginning.'

Mr. FRANK: -life itself, I follow, no choice, like exorcising the darkness come too early. Please line up the chapters now; one, two, three. Too late to teach about photography. Just accept lost feelings, shadows in empty rooms, silence on TV, silence in Canada, bad dreams, black white and things. Enjoy every minute to the fullest. Keep busy. The memory of it all, so much of it gone. I wish that the feeling of that memory will make a sound of music.

COLE: Photographer and voyager Robert Frank. I'm Tom Cole in Washington.

[music]

[funding credits given]

[ 'Weekend Edition' promo ]

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