



**AMERICAN ICONS:** In 1955, Swiss photographer Robert Frank set out to discover America and wound up creating a national treasure. His two-year journey produced more than 28,000 images—only 83 of which appear in his book. “Black and white are the colors of photography. To me they symbolize the alternatives of hope and despair to which mankind is forever subjected,” wrote Frank.



## Bright Eyes

*Fifty years after its debut, Robert Frank's American vision still has us spellbound* | By Tiffany Jow |

“Above all, I know that life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference,” noted Robert Frank, the Swiss émigré whose landmark photography book *The Americans* defines the difference between indifference and clear-eyed objectivity. A half-century has brought boundless change to the land that Frank documented while vagabonding on a Guggenheim fellowship. But the photographer’s ability to glimpse through a gleaming façade and into our reality has made his tome a document not just of its time, but of our nation’s fabric.

This month, the National Gallery of Art pays homage to the book with *Looking In: Robert Frank's “The Americans,”* the most detailed examination of the project yet exhibited. Never-before-seen contact sheets, work prints and letters to friends like Jack Kerouac (who penned the book’s introduction) and Walker Evans will be on view alongside a 50th-anniversary edition of the book and an original film by the artist, who is now 84 years old. The show will travel to San Francisco’s MoMA and The Met in New York later this year.

Planning for this spectacle began years ago when Sarah Greenough, senior curator of photographs at NGA, started thinking about this golden anniversary when Frank’s show, “Moving Out,” opened at the gallery in 1994. “I knew he wouldn’t really like the idea of another exhibition that focused on *The Americans* at that point,” she says. “He really held the book at bay, feeling like a rock star who was constantly asked to sing the same song in spite of his many other extraordinary accomplishments.” But in 2004, coming off a comprehensive show at the Corcoran highlighting his work as a filmmaker, Greenough found Frank amenable to returning to his book. He was intrigued by her desire to emphasize the story of its construction and the consequences of its international fame. “I think he realized if the National Gallery didn’t do it, someone else would,” Greenough says. “We’ve had a close working relationship with him in the past, and perhaps he felt it would be best if he were tangibly involved, rather than having someone he’d never met do it.”

For an artist known for his extreme wariness of celebrity, working with a trusted friend on such a personal retrospective could not have been a better course of action. He reminisced

with Greenough about returning to his studio post-road trip, where he spread some 1,000 of his favorite work prints on the apartment floor and grouped them in categories of race, politics, work and play. He talked about the places he’d go upon entering a new town, with hotels, post offices, banks and cemeteries topping the list. “The first place he’d always go was the local Woolworth, where he’d sit at the lunch counter and just watch,” Greenough says. “He chose places where people congregate and he could quietly observe them, and intentionally never spoke to anyone he shot.”

Flags, jukeboxes and streetcars feature prominently in Frank’s visions, which were initially criticized for their seemingly careless nature. In time, the documentarian’s work would jumpstart a new aesthetic of photography. While advertisements, film and video tried to copy his fly-on-the-wall approach, Frank moved on to direct a film starring Allen Ginsberg and a documentary of the Rolling Stones. Since returning to photography in the 1970s, he’s taken on eclectic projects like shooting the 1984 Democratic National Convention and directing a music video for Patti Smith.

Although it’s hard to summarize the ideas, impulses and curiosities that unify Frank’s work over the span of his long career, his own words offer a hint of the philosophy that informs his photography. “There is one thing the photograph must contain,” noted Frank. “The humanity of the moment. This kind of photography is realism. But realism is not enough—there has to be vision, and the two together can make a good photograph.”

*The Americans* still looks fresh. And with NGA’s show opening just two days before inauguration, its significance is all the more extraordinary. “In 83 images you see Frank looking beneath the surface of American life to show a people who are plagued by racism, ill-served by their politicians and rendered numb by rapidly expanding consumer culture,” Greenough says. “I couldn’t think of anything that’s more relevant at this point in history.” ■

*Looking In: Robert Frank's “The Americans” is on view from Jan. 18–Apr. 26 at the National Gallery of Art, [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov).*