

Photographing the City

Berenice Abbott

Berenice Abbott (1898–1991) was influenced by modernist art forms and spent several years in Europe practicing sculpture and poetry before becoming a darkroom assistant for the famed photographer Man Ray. In 1929, Abbott returned to the U.S. and began photographing New York in an attempt to document the city. Her successful one-woman show at the Museum of the City of New York in 1934 helped to secure her lasting fame as a photographer and artist. She disliked sentimental artistry and instead called her images of urban and architectural subjects “straight photography.” Abbott spent most of her career in New York City.

Pre-Reading

Is it possible to “read” a photograph like one reads an essay?



Photography Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Discussion Questions

1. What makes this view of Seventh Avenue artistic? Who might get to enjoy this perspective of the city?
2. What do you think Abbott means by “straight photography”? Use either of her two images to discuss her term.
3. If you were to take photographs of Seventh Avenue, how might your images be different from Abbott’s images?

Pre-Reading

Does it matter what a bridge looks like? Why or why not? What is your favorite bridge?



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Discussion Questions

1. When you first look at this photograph, can you tell that it is a bridge? Why do you think that Abbott chose this particular angle and composition?
2. Do you think these images are beautiful? Why or why not?
3. When you think of New York City photographs, what iconic images come to mind?
4. How has photography changed since Abbott's time?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay in which you compare Abbott's two images in terms of composition, movement, and geometry.
- Go to the New York Public Library's digital archives or the photo gallery of New York City at www.nyc.gov and find two photographs that catch your attention. Compare and contrast them.
- Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Berenice Abbott's photographs to those of Lewis Wickes Hine and Dinanda H. Nooney.

New York at Work

Lewis Wickes Hine

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874–1940) was a photographer and sociologist interested in people and their relation to work. Hine was especially interested in advocating for children and their rights, and his photographs often show workers toiling in industrial settings. He took many photographs for the Red Cross and for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). His images are widely republished, and over 5000 of his photos are held at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

Pre-Reading

Is work an interesting subject for photography?



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Discussion Questions

1. Does this look like typical construction work? Why or why not?
2. How do you think that Hine was able to take this photograph?
3. How does this photograph make you feel about the risks of work and the risks that artists take?
4. Discuss the play of interior and exterior space in this photograph.



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Discussion Questions

1. What is a sweatshop? What makes the room shown here one?
2. Discuss the space in which these men and women are working. Does it look like a factory or like a living room?
3. Some of the workers are looking directly at the camera, while others are working. Discuss the idea of posing for photographs or taking candid snapshots.
4. Why are the men at the far end of the sweatshop?

Writing Task

- Take photographs of people that you know at work or at play. Discuss your images.

Domestic Photographs of Brooklyn

Dinanda H. Nooney

Dinanda H. Nooney (1918–2004) was a documentary photographer who focused her artistic attention primarily on New York. Nooney’s first extensive photographic project documented the collapsed West Side Highway in Manhattan in the mid 1970s. Her second major project was photographing Brooklyn families. From 1978 to 1979, Nooney traveled through dozens of Brooklyn neighborhoods from Greenpoint to Sea Gate, taking photographs of many families who then recommended other families for her to photograph. These two portraits are typical of Nooney’s work; they reveal her attention to architecture, décor, and family relationships.

Pre-Reading

Does this photograph remind you of a typical dinner scene in modern-day Brooklyn?



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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the décor and the details present in this portrait.
2. Describe the people in the photo.
3. The empty chair most probably belongs to Gerald Basquiat's son, the famous artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), who left home before this photo was taken. How does knowing this detail change your understanding of the portrait?

Writing Task

- Search through your family photo albums, pick your favorite, and then write a photo-essay about it.

Pre-Reading

Does this photograph strike you as humorous or difficult to understand?



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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the composition of the photograph.
2. Nooney uses detailed titles of her photographs. Why do you think that she uses her subject's full address?
3. Compare this domestic scene with the Basquiat dinner scene.
4. How do you read the large "Continued" sign above the men?

Writing Task

- Write an essay in which you consider what the images in this section hide or obscure.