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**AMERICAN MODERN BRINGS THREE KEY FIGURES IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY  
TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME**

**More than 140 photographs by Icons Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and  
Margaret Bourke-White on View in New Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago**

A special exhibition that explores the evolution of documentary images through the work of three of the foremost photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from **February 5 through May 15, 2011. *American Modern: Abbott, Evans, Bourke-White***

presents more than 140 iconic images by **Berenice Abbott** (1898–1991), **Walker Evans** (1903–1975), and **Margaret Bourke-White**

(1906–1971)—all taken between the years of 1929, when the stock market crashed, and 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. This exhibition not only shows, for the first time, the photographs of Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White in relation to one another, but it also chronicles how documentary photography had a hand in transforming modern art in America.



It was during this period, the 1930s, that photographers pushed the genre of documentary photography to the forefront of public culture in the United States and onto the walls of newly opened museums and art galleries. Photographic activity blossomed in America during the Great Depression, and the genre of documentary emerged as a primary mode of relaying and understanding contemporary events and the nation's role in them. While the world was in a turbulent state—national

and international economies were being severely tested, political systems were in flux, and Europe was preparing again for war—Americans recognized their own viable cultural heritage and sought to record and expand that history. Indeed, the country's literary, artistic, and architectural expressions all flourished in the period's explosion of popular literature, the founding of new art museums, and the establishment of New Deal government-funded arts programs.

At the same time, advances in technology, production, and distribution transformed mass media in the United States: Americans enjoyed weekly picture magazines, radio broadcasts, and popular movies in unprecedented numbers. Photography played an especially critical role in contemporary culture, appearing in books, newspapers, and magazines as well as being accorded exhibitions in art museums and galleries. It could be argued that it was during this decade that photography became a truly popular art, infiltrating every home and newsstand and captivating an anxious audience. And photography began redefining itself, crossing the boundaries between public and private use, impersonal documentation and expressive creation, and popular visual culture and fine art.

*American Modern* examines the practice of documentary photography through the work of three of the most important photographers of the decade, each of whom contributed a fundamental, independent, and novel idea about documentary to the common pool of artistic practice. For Berenice Abbott, who photographed [she established a portrait studio first, so I am tweaking this] the transformation of New York City into a modern metropolis, it was the notion that photography was a means of critical dialogue and communication. She always seemed to include a human element that suggested the sacrifice or promise of living alongside new buildings [they're not all negative images]. Walker Evans, who worked with the Farm Security Administration, shot some of the most iconic images from the Great Depression. He thoroughly investigated the idea that photography has a unique and essential relationship to time. Evans was not as captivated with the new urbanization as Abbott; he tended to photograph people within environments exhibiting a universal humanity, even amid a great deal of tragedy. As Evans said, at the time, "I'm doing this for the record alone." Margaret Bourke-White—the first female photographer for *Life* magazine and the first female war correspondent—fused the logic and pageantry of modern industry with the drama and individual narratives of its subjects. Her images emphasized the diminution of humans framed by the colossus of industrialization, placing anonymous workers amid enormous gears, smokestacks, and turbines. Machinery became a heroic element, the people dwarfed by their scale if not the business of production itself. Together for the first time in the exhibition, these works offer a compelling glimpse of a moment of great transformation in the United States and suggest how documentary photography reframed artistic priorities across many media.

A scholarly catalogue, published by the University of California Press, accompanies the exhibition. The 213-page *American Modern* includes spectacular images by Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White, and features essays by co-curators Jessica May, Sharon Corwin, and Terri Weissman. It can be purchased in hardcover for \$39.95 in the Museum Shop.

In conjunction with *American Modern: Abbott, Evans, Bourke-White*, a symposium titled “**Material Witness—Documentary since the 1940s**” will be held on **February 4, 10:45 am–4:00pm**, in the museum’s Fullerton Hall. The program is open to the public and free with registration by calling **(312) 857-7138** or online.

*American Modern: Abbott, Evans, Bourke-White* was co-organized by the Amon Carter Museum and the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine. The exhibition is curated by Jessica May, assistant curator of photography at the Amon Carter Museum; Sharon Corwin, the Carolyn Muzzy Director and Chief Curator of the Colby College Museum of Art; and Terri Weissman, assistant professor of art history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The Chicago presentation is curated by Katherine Bussard, associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The exhibition and accompanying publication have been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, and the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Support for the Chicago presentation of this exhibition is generously provided in part by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Generous support is provided by members of the Exhibitions Trust: Anonymous, Kenneth and Anne Griffin, Thomas and Margot Pritzker, the Earl and Brenda Shapiro Foundation, and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Sullivan.

IMAGE: Margaret Bourke-White, *Delman Shoes*, 1933. Gelatin silver print. © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Margaret Bourke-White Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

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