

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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COMPLEX NATIONALISMS IN PHOTOGRAPHY ON VIEW AT THE ART INSTITUTE

Of National Interest: Photographs from the Collection Highlights Major Works by

Le Gray, Gardner, Curtis, Sander, Frank, Peress, and Singh

Of National Interest: Photographs from the Collection—opening

September 13, 2008, at the Art Institute of Chicago's Photography Galleries 2–4—features 54 powerful images directly engaged with social and political issues ranging from the mid-19th through the late 20th century. Included in this exhibition are works by influential early



photographers **Gustave Le Gray** and **Alexander Gardner**; modern masters **Edward Curtis**, **August Sander**, and **Robert Frank**; and contemporary photographers such as **Gilles Peress** and **Raghubir Singh**. Each of these photographers offer different points of view of national pride and cross-sections of society through their camera lenses.

Photography has always been a vehicle to create, document, and critique national identity, whether by a nationalist or by an individual photographer. The French government, for example, purchased the rights to the daguerreotype, one of the earliest forms of photography, in the “name of national glory” with the intention of presenting it as a gift to the people of France. In addition to honoring an invention of such genius by one France’s native sons, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, the government also recognized the practical application of this new medium for obtaining better visual representations of historic monuments, cultural treasures and other

“national enterprises.” As picture-making became popular as a medium for artistic expression, photographers throughout history—whether commissioned by others or individually inspired—became more interested in depicting genuine news events and capturing candid human moments. Some photographers also undertook projects that bolstered, documented, or even critiqued a nation’s identity. For example, Gustave Le Gray’s photographs of French military exercises were intended to boost pride in the government’s defenses, whereas August Sander set out to create a true cultural portrait of the breadth of German society. Other photographers, like Robert Frank, adopted a more critical perspective. Frank’s *The Americans* presented life in the United States as conformist, shallow, and divided. These and other photo series, each aiming to portray and thereby understand a nation, have inspired this exhibition, which is drawn entirely from the museum’s permanent collection.

Gustave Le Gray: *The Camp de Châlons*

Following France’s 1855 victory in the Crimean War, with much fanfare and pageantry, Napoleon III established an elaborate military training ground at Châlons-sur-Marne. The camp was to set a new standard of excellence for the Imperial Guard, France’s most elite military force. The emperor commissioned Gustave Le Gray to record the exercises as a testimony to France’s military superiority. Le Gray’s photographs of the dignified and proficient Guard were thus instrumental in bolstering enthusiastic patriotism.

Alexander Gardner: *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*

Since the battles of the Civil War were a distant occurrence for many Americans, photographer Alexander Gardner and others felt compelled to document the camps, battlefields, and casualties of the war for the nation. These efforts were displayed on photographers’ studio walls and reproduced in periodicals nationwide. Gardner also elected to publish two volumes of photographs in 1866 after the war had ended, intending to provide a visual and moral lesson for his fellow citizens that he hoped might prevent such violent disputes in the future.

Edward Curtis: *The North American Indian*

Responding to the idealized representations of American Indian life prevalent in the United States during the early 1900s, Edward S. Curtis endeavored to document American Indian cultures as a way to prevent their disappearance, if only in visual form. Since American Indian culture had been suppressed or wiped out by prevailing government policies in the preceding centuries, Curtis resorted to costuming his subjects and paying them to stage ceremonies for his camera. Curtis’s rich platinum prints and photogravures display a hybrid of documentary and Pictorialist modes, reflecting his simultaneous desires for accuracy and romantic expression.

August Sander: *People of the Twentieth Century*

In the 1920s, August Sander set out to systematically catalogue his fellow countrymen and women in a series of visually commanding portraits. Famously categorized by profession, class, and/or gender, the formal portraits that comprise Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century* proposed to "tell the truth about [his] age and its people." Sander's attempt to collectively portray all of German society came under scrutiny with the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s as its inclusiveness countered the Nazis' conception of an appropriate German.

Robert Frank: *The Americans*

Setting out from New York in 1955 with the support of a Guggenheim fellowship, the Swiss-born Robert Frank wanted to capture the "dream of grandeur" that he saw in the people and material culture of America. The book of the resulting photographs, *The Americans*, was published in 1958 and innovatively demonstrated his spontaneous and casual technique. Critically, Frank's project revealed American life as one marked by conformity, empty symbols, racism, shallow patriotism, and disconnection. Frank's varied view of American society was not motivated by malice. As he wrote in 1957, "Opinion often consists of a kind of criticism. But criticism can come out of love."

Gilles Peress: *Conflict in Northern Ireland*

Despite little previous professional experience as a photojournalist, Gilles Peress traveled to Northern Ireland in 1970 to photograph the escalating conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the region of Ulster. Viewing the violent discord of the 1970s and 1980s as a struggle for nationhood rather than an age-old religious dispute, Peress' dynamic photographs poignantly record not only the fighting but also the daily lives of those who persisted amidst constant tension.

Raghubir Singh: *India*

In contrast to the ubiquitous black and white images of India made by imperialist occupiers since the 1800s, Raghubir Singh's vibrant color photographs of his native country embody the sense of optimism and the rhythm of everyday life that pervade the city streets and rural villages of India. Singh views his photographs, made throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as an artistic means to engage non-Indian viewers while also helping to establish a national visual culture independent of colonial influence.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Friday, September 26, 12:00 p.m.

Gallery Talk: Exhibition Overview

Katherine Bussard, Assistant Curator of Photography, Art Institute of Chicago

Gallery 1

Tuesday, October 14, 12:00 p.m.

Gallery Talk: Exhibition Overview

Gregory Harris, Photo Researcher, Art Institute of Chicago

Gallery 1

IMAGE CREDIT: Gilles Peress (French, born 1946). *Bloody Sunday, one minute before first British paratroop regiment fires, killing thirteen civilians, Londonderry, 1972.* Gelatin silver print; 76.3 x 101.4 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Gilles Peress, 1993.93. © Gilles Peress/Magnum.

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MUSEUM HOURS:

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Thursday

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

TARGET FREE EVENINGS THURSDAY AFTER 5:00 p.m.

FREE FEBRUARY 1 TO 28

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.

Please check www.artic.edu before your visit.

Admission: Adults, \$12.00; children 12 and over, students, and seniors, \$7.00; children under 12 free; members always free. Free Evenings are free to all, except for certain special exhibitions that may require full or extra admission fee. City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Check Us Out" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago. To reach the Art Institute on the World Wide Web, contact us at: <http://www.artic.edu/aic>

The Art Institute of Chicago is a museum in Chicago's Grant Park, located across from Millennium Park.