SESSION 08 · UNIT 1 — LIGHT & OBJECT · Nov 10, 2026

Walker Evans & Robert Frank

Evans 1903–1975 · American — Frank 1924–2019 · American, born Switzerland

The documentary eye, handed from one generation to the next



Trolley — New Orleans · Frank, 1955

"Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long."

— Walker Evans

KEY WORKS

- Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia, 1936 (Evans)
- Bud Fields and His Family, Hale County, Alabama, 1936 (Evans)
- Trolley — New Orleans, 1955 (Frank)
- Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1955 (Frank)

CONTEXT

Walker Evans spent the 1930s photographing the Depression-era South for the Farm Security Administration, developing a flat, frontal, almost deadpan style — no dramatic angles, no editorializing — that let ordinary American subjects, a sharecropper family, a shop window, a roadside stand, carry their own weight. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), made with writer James Agee, became the defining document of the era. Robert Frank, a Swiss immigrant who arrived in New York in 1947, has said plainly that Evans was the single greatest influence on The Americans (1958), the photobook that reinvented documentary photography, made on a two-year Guggenheim-funded road trip across the country. Frank kept Evans's willingness to look hard at unglamorous, everyday America, but replaced Evans's stillness with grain, blur, tilted horizons, and a raw, on-the-move energy that scandalized American critics when the book first appeared and then became the most influential photobook of the twentieth century. Both men were, in their own way, outsiders looking hard at what America usually looked away from.

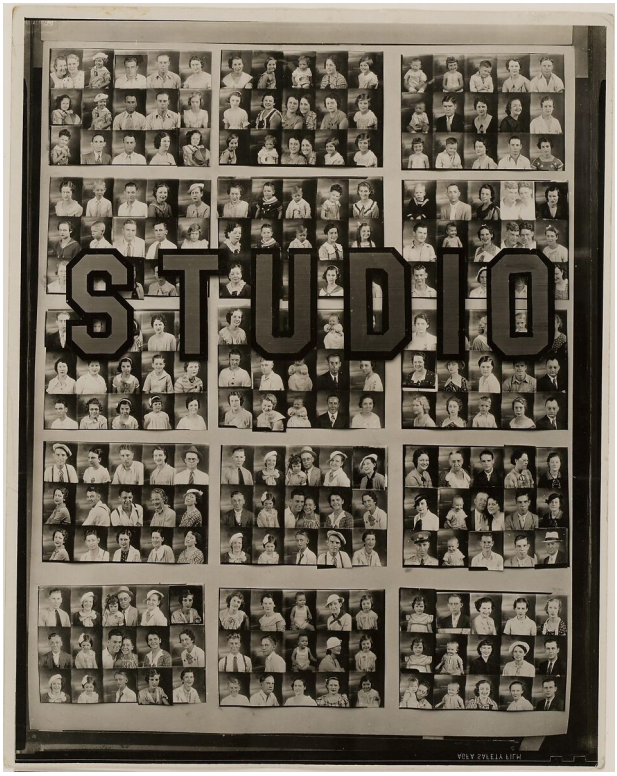
WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Frank has said outright that Evans was the biggest single influence on The Americans — and you can see it and not see it at the same time: the same refusal to look away from ordinary life, but none of Evans's stillness. Today you're revising and printing your own Unit 1 work. Look at how differently two photographers carried the same instinct forward — Evans's frontal calm versus Frank's grain and motion — and decide which one is closer to how you actually see.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Frank called Evans his biggest influence, but their pictures don't look alike — one is still and frontal, the other blurred and on the move. What did Frank actually take from Evans, if not his style?
2. Evans told students to “stare… die knowing something.” As you revise your statement and prepare prints for critique, what have you stared at long enough this semester to know something you didn't know in September?

MORE IMAGES



Penny Picture Display, Savannah · Evans, 1936



Bud Fields and His Family · Evans, 1936



Subway Portrait · Evans, c. 1938–41



Roadside Stand near Birmingham · Evans, 1936



Charleston, South Carolina · Frank, 1955



Parade — Hoboken, New Jersey · Frank, 1955