



***Conversations* – Photography from the Bank of America Collection**

22 February 2012 – 20 May 2012

Exhibition Notes for Primary School Teachers

General Information

This exhibition, a collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is selected from the wide-ranging art holdings of Bank of America, one of the largest and most comprehensive corporate collections of photography in the world. It comprises over a hundred photographs which document the evolution of photography from the 1850s to the present day. The exhibition traces the importance of photography as a medium which, in an art historical context, has only come to the fore in the last few decades.

Conversations includes portraits, still lifes, landscapes, documentary images and experimental abstractions by many different artists. The photographs are grouped thematically to create visual 'conversations': nineteenth-century works are compared with modern, European juxtaposed with American, close-ups paired with distant views, and posed subjects placed alongside casual. There are various theme-based, historic and formal combinations and unusual juxtapositions that help to spark a visual dialogue. The photographs are from both well-known and lesser-known artists.

Among those represented are Gustave Le Gray, Julia Margaret Cameron, Eugène Atget, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Irving Penn, Lee Friedlander, Cindy Sherman, Tina Barney, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth, Vera Lutter, Vik Muniz, Richard Misrach, Stéphane Couturier, and Alec Soth.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue with texts by Matthew S. Witkovsky, Anne Havinga and Karen Haas, and Mary Cremin.

The IMMA Primary School Programme will focus on the *Conversations – Photography from the Bank of America Collection* exhibition from 22 February until 20 May 2012.

Exhibition Information for Primary School Teachers

This exhibition is based on the idea of creating conversations between photographic works. The various photographic genres represented create a picture of society's development, and individual photographs document the profound changes that society continually undergoes.

Artistic media are constantly evolving technologically. Photography has moved from the core principle of 'straight' photography to the use of digital manipulation to construct images from scratch. Photographers are challenged to make use of new technology while also creating images that arrest the viewer's attention. A variety of stylistic approaches is represented in the exhibition.

The catalogue reflects how important photography is both for documenting the everyday and for expanding our visual lexicon of how to mediate the world around us. *Conversations* traces the history of photography and its evolution, and works included document scenes from the distant past (*Seascape with Sailing Ship and Tugboat, Normandy* by Gustave le Gray, c. 1857) as well as our contemporary world of sophisticated museum audiences (*Audience 4*, Thomas Struth, 2004).

List of Artworks

Please note that a number of the following artworks may be visited during a guided tour of the *Conversations – Photography from the Bank of America Collection* exhibition. However, the particular artworks visited will vary according to circumstance on the day, and additional artworks which are not covered here may be included. The list below contains both background information for teachers and viewing suggestions for children.

→ **Francis Frith, The Ramesseum of El-Kurneh and Richard Misrach, Pyramids with Ticket Booth**

Francis Frith, The Ramesseum of El-Kurneh, Thebes, Second View, 1857-8 (Albumen silver print)

Background Information for Teachers

Since the early years of photography, artists have sought to depict historic monuments in compelling ways. Francis Frith (1822–1898) travelled to Egypt in the 1850s, keen on making images that would convey the grandeur of the ancient sites. His undertaking was laborious, requiring a caravan and porters to transport an unwieldy camera, 16x20-inch glass negatives, bottles of chemicals, and a portable darkroom. On his return to Britain, the volume Frith published was the first successful commercial endeavour to reveal the wonders of the region, and it set a standard for future generations.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

How does the photographer give you a sense of the size of this Egyptian monument? What's the name of the animal that you can see in the picture, and what would people be using it for? Think of how strong the sun must be in Egypt. If you were to colour this picture, what shades would you use? Do you think it was an advanced society that built such a building, and if so, why?

Richard Misrach, Pyramids with Ticket Booth, Egypt, 1989 (Dye coupler print)

Background Information for Teachers

Celebrated for his large colour depictions of American deserts, Richard Misrach (born 1949) travelled to Egypt to photograph the desert there in 1989. The images he captured focus on the contemporary tourist experience, combining sublime beauty with subtle commentary.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Look at the objects pictured in this photograph. Are they what you'd expect to find in a photo of a pyramid? Why is the pyramid in the background? Which details catch your attention? Look at the colours in the photograph. How would you describe the mood of this picture, and why?

→ **Robert Frank, Trolley – New Orleans and Harry Callahan, Chicago**

Robert Frank, Trolley – New Orleans, Louisiana, 1955 (Gelatin silver print)

Background Information for Teachers

The Bank of America Collection is especially strong in documentary and street photography. Swiss-born Robert Frank (b. 1924) took to the road in 1955 to photograph the United States for a book he hoped would comprise a 'visual study of civilization'. Simply titled *The Americans*, Frank's book was a shock to the public, who saw in its bleak and grainy photographs an obvious critique of American postwar culture. His picture of a racially segregated trolley in New Orleans calls to mind a multi-panelled altarpiece framing the cultural black figure like a sad-eyed medieval saint.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Robert Frank was one of the most radical street photographers during the 1950s, and his photograph is from a book entitled *The Americans*. Why did he choose such a general title? Describe the people you see and look closely at their postures. Do you notice anything about the seating arrangements? A commentator thought that the window frames looked like prison bars: what might have made him think so? The African-American man looking straight out at the photographer also looks straight at the viewer: how does that make you feel? Do you think the passengers on that trolley are likely to speak to each other? Or do they tell us something through the camera?

Harry Callahan, Chicago, 1960 (Gelatin silver print)

Background Information for Teachers

In 1960, Harry Callahan (1912–1999), who taught for many years at the Institute of Design in Chicago, made a series of photographs of pedestrians on the city's busy sidewalks. He pre-focussed his 35mm camera and shot quickly and intuitively, often without his subject's knowledge. Here two moving figures cross paths, perfectly expressing the aloneness of pedestrians in the street.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

If you were asked to make up a story about the two people in the photograph, what would it be like? Do you like the stillness of the image? Do you imagine the surrounding city scape to be noisy? (Chicago is actually a very noisy city.) The photographer has reduced the contrast to a near black or white flatness. The girl's face and hair accessories appear illuminated against the dark face of the man. Did you notice the precise geometric fore- and background?

➔ **Lewis Wickes Hine, *Child Labour* and Dorothea Lange, *Damaged Child***

Lewis Wickes Hine, *Child Labour*, c. 1908 (Gelatin silver print)

Background Information for Teachers

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1904) was an American sociologist and photographer. Hine used his camera as a tool for social reform, and his photographs were instrumental in changing the child labour laws in the United States. The portrait documents the poignant poverty that existed in the modern city.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

The girl seems to be working in a cotton mill. What is being made in that factory? Look at the floor and the walls. What do you imagine would it be like working in a place like that? How old is the girl? Have you any idea how long her working day would have been?

Dorothea Lange, *Damaged Child*, Shacktown, Elm Grove, Oklahoma, 1939

Background Information for Teachers

As part of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project, Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) documented the devastating effects of the Great Depression on rural people and their communities. It showed the plight of the poor and forgotten, particularly the sharecroppers, displaced farm families and migrant workers. This portrait is an example. Rather than in a studio, Lange's portraits were taken in situ, and this kind of journalistic photography became a means to bring issues to public attention. Her poignant images became icons of the era.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Describe the mood of this picture. What contributes to this mood? Look at the background. What made the photographer choose this particular background? Look at the eyes of the girl. What do you notice? Dorothea Lange was an influential documentary photographer. She drew that public's attention to the plight of the poor and forgotten during what's known as the Great Depression, a severe worldwide economic depression that started around 1929 and lasted about ten years. It was the longest and most widespread depression of the 20th century.

Suggested Practical Uses in the Classroom

Discuss with the children basic issues in photography such as framing, focusing and lighting. Talk about the complicated link between photography and truth, and the continuing and potentially limitless changes to the medium of photography in the digital age.

Talk about classic photographic portraits typical of a time before mobile phones with cameras. Show the children examples. Consider the physical arrangement of the sitter or sitters, the lighting, the backdrop. Do the subjects seem to be at ease, or do the portraits look posed or stiff? Is the atmosphere intimate or rather impersonal? Does the photographer with his or her camera seem present in the minds of the sitters?

The exhibition contains numerous examples of portraits. Explain that a portrait is an artistic representation of a person, eg in photography, painting or sculpture, in which the face and its expression is predominant. Discuss how the personality or mood of a person can be displayed. Point out that in photography, a portrait is usually *not* a snapshot and discuss why this is so. Have the children draw or paint portraits or self-portraits.

Introduce the notion of portraits in literature and film. Talk about what a literary portrait or self-portrait might contain. Ask the children to write a brief portrait of themselves or their friend. As for music, listen to Sergei Prokofiev's symphony for children *Peter and the Wolf* (1936) and talk about how the composer uses musical instruments to portray human and animal characters.

Mention that by the 1930s and 1940s, more and more photographers were taking up the new hand-held 35mm cameras, which allowed them to work candidly and spontaneously, sometimes without their subject's knowledge. Discuss the implications of this technical advance. Talk about why snapshots are not permissible in passports and other official documents.

The curators of *Conversations* hope to encourage audiences to think of the exhibition as one about ways of looking at art. For example, the photographer Thomas Struth draws attention to the body language and facial expressions of visitors reacting to major masterpieces. Robert Polidori in his images of Versailles focuses on the richness of the galleries, and Candida Höfer captures the play of light and shadow on museum walls, conveying something of the actual experience of strolling through art-filled spaces. Similarly, the children could be encouraged to mime or act out a gallery visit, or to describe their impressions of the actual gallery space at IMMA, or to talk about how arranging artworks in a museum may influence the way we look at them.

The visual conversations between photographs in the exhibition could be replicated by asking the children to collect pictures and photos from magazines etc. and copies of paintings that could be interestingly paired, eg, historical subjects shown alongside 21st century ones, close-ups paired with distant views, pictures of 'celebrities' next to images of 'ordinary' people, etc.