

# The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951



This resource was developed for elementary, middle, and high school teachers. These materials can be used to supplement and enhance students' ongoing studies.

## AN EDUCATOR'S RESOURCE

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# Introduction

## Overview

The Photo League was a New York City-based organization of professional and amateur photographers. A splinter group of the Film and Photo League, it was founded in 1936 by photographers Sid Grossman (1913–1955) and Sol Libsohn (1914–2001). Many of its members were young, first-generation, working-class Jewish Americans.

In keeping with its educational, activist, and aesthetic goals, the League offered lectures, darkroom access, and classes on history and technique, as well as exhibition opportunities. It promoted photography as a fine art and also championed the use of documentary photography to expose social problems and instigate social change.

During its fifteen-year existence, the League was among only a handful of places in New York that offered study in documentary photography, and it was unique in offering inexpensive classes and darkroom access.

The majority of the Photo League images were taken in New York City, but members also took photographs across the United States—for instance, in rural communities in the South—and, during World War II, in Europe, Asia, and Central America. Most of the photographs document ordinary people and everyday life and celebrate democracy in all its diversity. The photographs also include images of poverty and other hardships, which is not surprising given the social conscience of most of the members.

The League published a newsletter called *Photo Notes*, through which its members' images, educational philosophies, and ideological stances and debates could be further disseminated.

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## History

Monumental social and political changes took place nationally and internationally over the course of the Photo League's history.

At the time of the League's founding, the United States was dealing with the economic, political, and social upheaval of the Great Depression. In response to the Depression, the government of President Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted a massive relief program known as the New Deal. Many League

members were inspired by this social climate to make inequity and discrimination a subject of their work.

The early 1940s witnessed the country's rapid transition from New Deal recovery to war mobilization. The League rallied around war-related projects, and half the membership enlisted. It was at this point that many women became members.

After World War II, the country experienced postwar prosperity but also the advent of the Cold War. In 1947, the Photo League, aligned throughout its history with left-leaning sentiments, was blacklisted by the U.S. attorney general for allegedly being a communist front organization. The fear and paranoia about being tied to an organization on the blacklist made it difficult for the League to retain and attract members and ultimately led to its dissolution in 1951.

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## Photo League Predecessors

The Photo League's socially oriented ethos and lineage can be traced back to the roots of the organization. The Film and Photo League (earlier named the Workers' Film and Photo League), from which it had split, was an offshoot of the Workers' International Relief (WIR). The Film and Photo League (one of many international Workers' Camera Leagues) and the German and Soviet WIR were all committed to aiding striking workers.

The League is also part of the legacy of late 19th- and early 20th-century photographers Jacob Riis (1849–1914) and, more directly, Lewis Hine (1874–1940) and Paul Strand (1890–1976). Riis had blazed a new socially conscious trail for the medium of photography by turning his lens on the hardships of tenement life on New York's Lower East Side. These photographs were published in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Hine's photographs of children working in factories, together with his other socially minded efforts, helped effect labor reforms. In addition to being an ideological forebear of the Photo League, Hine was a regular speaker and exhibitor at the League. When he died in 1940, he gave the League all his negatives, and it preserved his legacy by printing portfolios of his work and exhibiting his photographs. Strand, Hine's student at the Ethical Culture School, went on to become one of the League's staunchest supporters throughout its tumultuous history, teaching there and serving on its advisory board.



While deeply engaged with political agendas, Hine, Strand, and members of the Film and Photo League were also very much concerned with aesthetic issues. This dual focus carried through to the Photo League, whose members regarded photography as both a social tool and a powerful expressive visual form.

Despite the precedents set by these influential photographers and organizations, the documentary-style approach to photography that would be promoted by the League was not a widespread practice when the League was founded. Other schools at the time were focused on teaching commercial, fashion, or studio photography. But developments in photography, including the advent of the 35 mm handheld camera, which could be taken into the streets and on the move more readily, were bringing about a new visual information era. Photo essays—visual narratives accompanied by limited text—were appearing for the first time in magazines such as *Look* and *Life*. Soon the photo-as-document approach would become pervasive in popular media.

members of the Communist Party. An important reason for the targeting of the League was, however, the fact that the WIR, the organization from which the League was descended, was a Soviet communist organization.

The situation deteriorated further in 1949 with a shocking betrayal: during a conspiracy trial of communist officials, Angela Calomiris, a League member and paid informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, named Grossman as a communist and the League as a front organization. That the League's loose association with the radical left was now being exploited revealed how thoroughly the political and social consciousness in America had changed since the New Deal. While progressive issues of class and civil rights still mattered at the League, such subject matter was seen as dangerous in the new conservative climate of a triumphant post-World War II America.

The League could not survive in the paranoid era of the Red Scare. Its blacklisting caused its membership to decline, and in 1951 its activities ceased.

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## The Red Scare and the Photo League

The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, which began after World War II, lasted for more than four decades. One of the most infamous chapters in this war of geopolitical tensions was the Red Scare of the late 1940s through the late 1950s. During this time, fears and paranoia about communist influence and espionage were rampant. McCarthyism, named for U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, resulted in the investigations, attacks, and blacklisting of people and organizations accused—often unwarrantedly—of being communists or communist sympathizers. Being blacklisted meant more than a damaged reputation: those blacklisted faced loss of work, criminal investigation, and even imprisonment.

On December 5, 1947, U.S. Attorney General Tom C. Clark issued a list of about ninety organizations judged to be “totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive.” The Photo League was included on this list.

The League responded immediately with an open letter: “The Photo League repudiates this irresponsible and reckless smearing of its purposes and its membership. . . spearheaded by the [House] Un-American Activities Committee to stifle progressive thought in every walk of life and to intimidate by threat cultural workers in every field.” The League further denied all accusations made by the U.S. attorney general in press releases, meetings, petitions, letters, articles, and in its exhibition *This Is the Photo League*, which was mounted to demonstrate that the League was an artistic rather than a political group.

In fact, the political leanings and allegiances of the members were varied, and some League members were indeed also

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## Artistic Legacy

The Photo League helped pioneer the idea that documentary photography should not only record “reality” but should also communicate a personal perspective. League co-founder Sid Grossman, perhaps the most influential teacher at the League, especially encouraged his students to consider the emotional component of their photographs. The Photo League's teachings also fostered a spirit of experimentation, especially during and after World War II.

The League's members were passionate in their commitment to their practice but also experienced disillusionment with what documentary photography could achieve. Over time, this pushed them even further in the direction of subjective, more poetic imagery.

Ultimately, they would pass the torch, artistically speaking, to the New York School photographers of the 1950s and '1960s, among them, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, and Helen Levitt. The New York School moved photography away from the realm of bearing witness and toward the exploration of the photographers' own impressions of their environment.



# Works of Art

This section offers ideas for exploring works of art by highlighting nine unique photographs from The Jewish Museum's extensive collection.



# Rebecca Lepkoff

## *East Broadway and Canal Street*



Rebecca Lepkoff (American, b. 1916)  
*East Broadway and Canal Street*, 1948  
Gelatin silver print 8 5/8 x 7 3/8 in. (21.9 x 18.7 cm) The Jewish Museum,  
New York Purchase: Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, 1998-11

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- Describe what you see in this photograph. Where and when do you think it is? What clues make you think that?
- What do you think is happening in this scene?
- This photograph was taken on New York’s Lower East Side, a popular neighborhood among eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century. Why do you think immigrants often chose to live in the same neighborhoods as other immigrants? For an immigrant, what are the pros and cons of moving into an “immigrant” neighborhood?
- By the time this photograph was taken, many Jewish immigrants (or their families) had moved away from the Lower East Side. Why might they have left?

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## Background Information

“The City is like a theater all the time. There’s always something going on... if you’re looking.” —Rebecca Lepkoff, from a filmed interview conducted at the Columbus Museum of Art, 2010

Rebecca Lepkoff was born to Russian Jewish immigrant parents and raised on New York’s Lower East Side. Lepkoff grew up in a two-bedroom tenement apartment along with her five brothers and sisters. She bought her first camera with money earned from performing with a modern dance troupe at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City. With her new camera, she began to document the vibrant spirit of the neighborhood in which she grew up and also the area between the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges known as Two Bridges. Lepkoff developed her prints in the evenings, setting up darkrooms in the bathrooms and kitchens of the apartments she lived in over the years. She also taught photography at the Educational Alliance, a nonprofit organization founded in 1889 to help Jewish immigrants get settled in the United States.

Lepkoff joined the Photo League in 1945 and continued to document her old neighborhood, which was then in the throes of urban renewal. Tenements like the one she had grown up in were being torn down, new buildings were going up, and families were being displaced. Lepkoff would take photographs daily, often returning to sites to reconsider the scene.

Lepkoff remained a member of the Photo League until it was disbanded in 1951.

## Further Information

### Women in the Photo League

In the second quarter of the 20th century—a time when women rarely worked outside of the home—many women entered the field of professional photography, working for magazines and news agencies.

Between 1938 and 1951, more than 100 women participated in League activities, making up roughly one-quarter of the total participants during that time span. Female members held a variety of volunteer leadership positions, including those of advisor, editor, administrator, and guest lecturer. For the most part, women photographers were in their late teens or early twenties when they first came to the League. Some were educated; most came from poor families.

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## Visual Analysis

At the center of this photograph, a religious Jew is seen purchasing a *lulav*—a bundle of palm, willow, and myrtle branches—for the holiday of Sukkot. The bundle tucked under his left arm appears to be another purchase wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. With his right hand, the man gestures toward the man selling the lulavs and appears to be caught mid-sentence. This bearded man is looking at the lulav seller; however, the lulav seller fixes his own gaze downward toward the pushcart. It appears as if something in the newspaper has caught his attention as he prepares to package up the branches.

There are two more men standing to the right side of the cart. One of these two men also appears to be looking at the newspaper page, while the other has his back toward the viewer. It remains unclear at what or at what he is looking.

Another part of the newspaper can be seen sticking out from under the pile of lulav branches. It is open to the sports page with a short column and a photospread of baseball players. Judging from the bolded text, “Stewart in Stew Again,” the photographs and article are likely about Edward Perry “Bud” Stewart (1916–2000), who played for both the New York Yankees and the Washington Senators in the 1948 season—the year this photograph was taken.

In the middle ground, just behind and to the right of these four men, there is a drugstore. The word “Canal” on the drugstore’s sign is cropped off at the right edge of the photograph. Also in the middle distance, several other people are seen walking on the street and sidewalk. All of these men, like the men in the foreground, are wearing jackets, hats, and slacks.

In the background, the viewer can see a street lined with apartment buildings, one significantly taller office building,



and a bishop's crook lamppost. The slender black curve of the lamppost is seen contrasted against the backdrop of a pale and otherwise empty patch of sky in the photograph's upper-left-hand corner.

In spite of the busy nature of the composition, the viewer's attention is successfully drawn back toward the religious Jew, not only because he is at the center of the composition, but also because his jacket and hat are among the darkest values in the photograph. Moreover, the bodies of the lulav seller and the man at far right each lean inward, subtly framing the main figure.

Lepkoff's point of view reveals the unique features of the titular intersection—Manhattan's Canal Street meets East Broadway at a wide angle and dead ends there—and thereby orients the viewer. The main action of this photograph is unfolding on Canal Street, while the buildings seen in the background line East Broadway. The tall building seen near the center of the composition can be identified by its geographic location and architecture as the Forward Building, which at the time this photograph was taken was home to the Yiddish-language newspaper, *The Forward*.

It appears that Lepkoff was not holding her camera perfectly parallel to the ground when she took this photograph, as evidenced most visibly by the fact that the lamppost and the buildings in the background appear to be leaning at slight diagonals.





# Jerome Liebling

## May Day, New York



Jerome Liebling (American, 1924–2011)

*May Day, New York*, 1948

Gelatin silver print 7 5/8 x 7 15/16 in. (19.4 x 20.2 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Esther Leah Ritz Bequest, 2008–91 Digital image © 2010 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- How does Liebling crop his image in *May Day, New York*? What does he leave out of the frame? Compare this with the way Hine frames his image for *Steamfitter* (page 19). Why might each photographer have chosen to crop his image in such a manner? How might each image have a different impact if more of the scene or setting had been included?
- Describe what is going on in Liebling's image.
- Hine's and Liebling's images feature men at work, but without knowing the title of the Liebling image and the significance of May Day, the viewer might not realize that the two men seen from behind are most likely workers. How does knowing the title of Liebling's photograph influence your response?

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## Background Information

May Day (May 1) has been known as International Workers' Day since Chicago's Haymarket Riot in May 1886, when it first became associated with the struggle for improved workers' rights. In many countries, the day is marked annually with political celebrations, demonstrations, and protests—often by communists and socialists but by other groups as well.

Historically, workers in May Day parades in New York City would march down Broadway to Union Square, where rally organizers would give speeches. This event was a popular subject for League members, many of whom sympathized with the international labor movement.

Liebling's photograph was taken during New York's 1948 May Day parade. The image was taken in Union Square near the arched pavilion on the square's north side.

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## Visual Analysis

Liebling zooms in on his subjects, cropping out everything from the scene except the head and shoulders of several men and a pavilion at the upper left that identifies the setting as the north side of New York City's Union Square. The head peeking out over the main figure's shoulder—near the center, in the middle distance—is that of a police officer; one can see his hat but nearly nothing else of him. By focusing on the police officer and the workers as they come face to face, Liebling suggests the potential for dramatic confrontation.



# Alexander Alland

## Untitled (Brooklyn Bridge)



Alexander Alland (American, b. Ukraine, 1902-1989)

*Untitled (Brooklyn Bridge)*, c. 1938

Gelatin silver print 7 15/16 x 9 7/8 in. (20.2 x 25.1 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: William and Jane Schloss Family Foundation Fund, 2008-40 © Estate of Alexander Alland, Sr. Digital image © 2010 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- Describe the overall composition of this image. [symmetric, balanced]
- Where do you see the symmetry disrupted? [the lamp at left; the skyscraper in the far distance; the pedestrian, etc.]
- Describe the mood of this image. Which details contribute to creating that mood?

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## Background Information

Alexander Alland was born in 1902 in Sebastopol, Ukraine. When his mother and brother were killed in the pogroms against Jews during the Russian Revolution, Alland fled to Turkey in 1920. In Istanbul he worked as an assistant to a photographer in a department store for two years before establishing his own studio in 1922. The Turkish government was overthrown that year, and Alland immigrated to New York City in 1923, arriving penniless at Ellis Island. He married in 1930, and the young family lived for a time in the Mohegan Colony, a commune of artists and radicals north of the city. By the mid-1930s he was well enough established as a photographer to return to New York City. In 1936 he worked as supervisor of the Photo-Mural Section of the Federal Art Project (a branch of the New Deal Works Progress Administration), and made photomurals for the Newark Public Library and a library at the Riker's Island prison, employing collage techniques drawn from Russian Constructivism. In 1939 he oversaw the creation of an immense mural for the New York World's Fair, sponsored by the National Youth Administration. At this time, he was invited by the American Artists' Congress to teach photography and photo-mural technique at the American Artists School. The Congress, which boasted such notable member artists as Stuart Davis, Margaret Bourke-White, and Rockwell Kent, had been founded in 1936 by the American Communist Party to oppose fascism.

Alland's photographs of poor and immigrant subjects had a strong element of social critique. He was an active member of the Photo League by the time his images of New York City were published in *Portrait of New York*, a book with text by Felix Riesenberg produced for the World's Fair in 1939. Museums began to exhibit and acquire his work. For *Life* magazine he produced a photographic essay on ethnic enclaves in New York: *Ethiopian Jews in Harlem* and *Russians on the Lower East Side*. This series was published in the book *American Counterpoint* (1943). From 1941 to 1944 he was photograph editor for *Common Ground*, a journal with a focus on issues of social justice and minority rights; throughout the 1940s he also worked as a commercial photographer. In 1949 Alland was blacklisted for his leftist affiliations. He then became a dedicated historian of early photographers—particularly Jacob Riis—whose work he helped rescue from anonymity.

## Visual Analysis

Alland's point of view (the angle or place from which the photograph was taken) is that of a pedestrian walking across the Brooklyn Bridge toward Manhattan. This is indicated by the skyscraper—the Woolworth Building—on the left side of the composition. Other less prominent buildings are also visible on the distant skyline. Alland aligns the center of the bridge with the center of the photograph—creating a nearly symmetrical composition. By having the pedestrian walkway run off the bottom edge of the photograph, Alland invites the viewer into the pictorial space. One can see a pedestrian whose view would be nearly the same as the viewer's. He serves as our surrogate within the scene. Suspension cables rise up, leading the viewer's eyes inward and upward within the composition. A linear emphasis imparted by the crisscross patterns of the cables and guardrails runs throughout the composition.



# Consuelo Kanaga

## Untitled (Tenements, New York)



Consuelo Kanaga (American, 1894-1978)

*Untitled (Tenements, New York)*, c. 1937

Gelatin silver print 7 11/16 x 6 1/16 in. (19.5 x 15.4 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: The Paul Strand Trust for the benefit of Virginia Stevens Gift, 2008-69 Digital image © 2008 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

# Close Looking and Discussion

## Discuss:

- Describe the photographer's point of view. Where might the photographer have taken this photograph from?
  - Ask students to face the image and then close their eyes. Have them open them and take note of where in the image their eyes go first and where they subsequently travel. Ask students to reflect upon the following questions: What do you think drew your eyes to different elements? What led your eyes around the image? Was the sequence based on subject matter, values (light and dark), repeated elements?
  - Describe the visual rhythm created by the lines of hanging laundry.
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## Background Information

Photo Leaguer Consuelo Kanaga's principal subject is working-class people, most often African Americans. In this image from around 1937, Kanaga turns her lens on tenement life in New York. The dreadful housing conditions and overcrowding are only hinted at in this almost abstract composition, a forest of vertical poles and crisscrossing wires and clotheslines punctuated by patterns of white laundry.

Kanaga is known for her astute compositions and her commitment to revealing the conditions of the city's poor, particularly decaying tenements.

In addition to her successful career as a photojournalist, Kanaga also taught workshops at the Photo League. Many women were actively engaged in the world of photography at that time, which was remarkable since women were so scarce in other professions, artistic or otherwise.

Women seemed to have great empathy for marginal and minority groups, and scholars have posited that perhaps this was a result of their being a minority themselves.

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## Visual Analysis

Kanaga captures a view of the backyard space between a block of tenements. The viewer peers down into barren and unkempt backyard spaces. Above these ground-floor backyards, the view is a veritable tangle of laundry lines strung across the space. Backlit by sunlight, the laundry is, for the most part, stark white and appears to glow. The viewpoint suggests that Kanaga took this photograph from another one of these tenements.



# Jerome Liebling

## Butterfly Boy



Jerome Liebling (American, 1924-2011)

*Butterfly Boy*, New York, 1949

Gelatin silver print 10 5/8 x 10 in. (27 x 25.4 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York

Purchase: Mimi and Barry J. Alperin Fund, 2008-90

Digital image © 2008 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- How might this boy be feeling? How can you tell? [facial expression, body language, furrowed brow]
- Describe the boy's pose and body language.
- What might the weather be like? How can you tell? Which details might make this debatable?

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## Background Information

Jerome Liebling took this photograph two years after he joined the Photo League. At the center of the composition is a young boy with a furrowed brow. He looks fixedly at the photographer with an expression that may reflect his wondering why his picture is being taken or may simply be caused by having the sun in his eyes. His outstretched arms lift his coat outward and upward, commanding the space in a way that belies his slight stature. A winter coat dominates his attire, but otherwise he seems dressed for warmer weather.

The picture was taken in front of Knickerbocker Village on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a low-income housing project that replaced notorious slums. The young boy was part of a community that was growing increasingly impoverished, but he is not depicted as bereft. Instead, Liebling represents the child with dignity. Wearing a tweed coat and matching hat, the young boy almost appears older than his years.

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## Visual Analysis

The boy at the center has lifted his arms, creating a wing-like formation with his coat—the inspiration for the photograph's title. The steeply angled, downward-cast viewpoint of the camera lens emphasizes the child's small size and reinforces an adult-child dynamic, with the child's gaze looking up to meet that of the viewer/photographer. The child is on a sidewalk, and the wheel cover of a parked car is directly behind his head.

## RELATED WORK OF ART

### Weegee

### *Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*



Weegee (born Arthur Fellig) (American, b. Poland, 1899–1968)  
*Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*, c. 1940 Gelatin silver print 14 3/4 x 18 7/8 in. (37.5 x 48 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Joan B. and Richard L. Barovick Family Foundation and Bunny and Jim Weinberg Gifts, 2000–72 © Weegee/International Center of Photography/Getty Images

Liebling's and Weegee's images can both be considered urban portraits.

- What can we learn or infer about each subject's identity and personality from his portrait?
- If a photographer were to make a portrait of you in an urban environment, where would you want it to be? What would you want to be shown doing? What emotion of yours would you want it to capture?



# Weegee

## *Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*



Weegee (born Arthur Fellig) (American, b. Poland, 1899-1968)

*Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*, c. 1940

Gelatin silver print 14 3/4 x 18 7/8 in. (37.5 x 48 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Joan B. and Richard L. Barovick Family Foundation and Bunny and Jim Weinberg Gifts, 2000-72 © Weegee/International Center of Photography/Getty Images



## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- Describe the mood of this photograph. How has the artist created this mood?
- Describe the expression of the man in this photograph.
- What effect does the use of light have on the impact of the photograph?
- How would you describe the placement of the figure within the frame of the photograph? Where is his body in relation to the rest of the image?
- What did the photographer choose to leave out of the photograph?
- What clues does the photographer include about the time and place of the photograph?
- What story could you tell about this man? Where do you think he is coming from? Where do you think he is going? What do you think he is thinking?
- This photograph was taken on New York’s Lower East Side, a popular neighborhood among eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century. Why do you think immigrants often choose to live in the same neighborhoods as other immigrants? For an immigrant, what are the pros and cons of moving into an “immigrant” neighborhood?
- By the time this photograph was taken, many Jewish immigrants (or their families) had moved away from the Lower East Side. Why might they have left?

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## Background Information

In this photograph, a bright flash illuminates a man delivering bagels as he emerges from the early-morning darkness. The title of the photograph derives from a longer caption in which the photographer Weegee (born Arthur Fellig) indicates that his encounter with Max occurred at six in the morning near the Consolidated Edison Company building on 14th Street in New York City.

Calling his protagonist by his first name, Weegee alludes to a camaraderie with the workers with whom he regularly shared the deserted streets in the dead of night and the early hours of the morning. He captures Max mid-step as he looks and moves self-assuredly toward the fleeting glare of the photographer’s flash. Weegee’s flash, which he called his “Aladdin’s lamp,” allowed him to achieve his “Rembrandt light.” This is the term he used to describe the way his glowing figures emerge from the darkness. Although the street is shrouded in blackness and

the cement squares on the ground are obscured by enigmatic shadows and grime, Weegee creates a sense of place with the silhouette of a lamppost in the background.

Arthur Fellig was born on June 12, 1899, in the Austrian village of Zloczew. In 1910, he arrived at Ellis Island with his mother and brothers, joining his father, who had immigrated earlier. It was at Ellis Island that his name was changed from Usher to Arthur. The transformation to Weegee would come later.

Fellig’s family settled on New York’s Lower East Side, living in tenements and struggling to get by. He left school in the eighth grade, working a variety of odd jobs to earn money for the family. At age eighteen, he left home, taking a circuitous route to becoming the renowned photographer Weegee.

As a photographer, Weegee captured the many realms of New York City in vivid, sharp detail. His work often illuminates the seedier side of city life. Weegee probably earned his nickname from his almost supernatural “ouija”-like ability to arrive at crime scenes and take pictures before the police arrived. The police radios in his car and next to his bed certainly helped as well.

Weegee joined the Photo League in 1941. He had his first exhibition, *Weegee: Murder Is My Business*, at the League in that same year. He lectured, taught, and judged Photo Hunts—competitions in which Leaguers scoured the city to complete random, sometimes ludicrous, yet legendary, assignments.

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## Further Information

### Life on the Lower East Side

During the height of Jewish immigration, around the turn of the 20th century, a number of American cities became home to distinctly Jewish neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were often crowded urban districts, where new arrivals could find inexpensive rooms and menial jobs alongside those who spoke their language and shared their background. Despite the shock of a new world, these newcomers were comforted by the familiar sounds of Yiddish and given practical assistance by more “seasoned” immigrants from their home countries.

New York City’s Lower East Side was the largest of these neighborhoods. Historically, the Lower East Side stretched from the East River west to Broadway, and from Canal Street up to 14th Street. Before the influx of eastern European Jewry, the area had served earlier immigrants, including many from Ireland and Germany. By 1900, as new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe moved in, most of the earlier inhabitants relocated to other parts of the city. In 1915, an estimated 350,000 Jews (along with about 150,000 non-Jews) lived on the Lower East Side—an area of less than two square miles. The neighborhood percolated with a vibrant Yiddish culture.

Most residents of the Lower East Side lived in tenements—apartment buildings five to eight stories high, typically with four



three-room apartments on each floor. Usually, only one room in each apartment had windows to the outside, and often a dozen or more people would occupy a single apartment. Some families took in boarders to help cover the cost of rent. Immigrant families who “made it” were often able to leave the Lower East Side for more affluent neighborhoods in other parts of the city.

By the 1930s and 1940s, many of the Lower East Side’s Jewish immigrants (or their children) had relocated to neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Upper Manhattan, and the Bronx. In fact, many of the photographers working on the Lower East Side at this time were photographing what they viewed to be the neighborhood’s disappearing Jewish culture. But as earlier residents moved away, the Lower East Side remained an important stepping stone for new immigrant populations. In more recent decades, the neighborhood has served as a destination for immigrants from Latin American and Asian countries.

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## Visual Analysis

A figure emerges out of the predawn darkness. With his pale coat and white apron illuminated by the stark flash of Weegee’s flashbulb, the man contrasts with the dark, velvety tones of the surrounding urban space. Weegee has placed this figure at the lower-left corner of the frame. In the background, one can just make out the contours of the buildings lining the street down which Max is walking. The man is caught mid-stride, and his pace seems fairly quick. He looks straight at Weegee—or at the viewer—and one gets the feeling that a moment or two later, Max must have brushed left shoulders with the photographer as he whisked on by to his delivery site. In the background is the silhouette of a tall street lamp. The viewer can tell that this street lamp is at some distance, but within the pictorial space, it is almost directly above Max. The decorative curves of this lamp (known as a bishop’s crook) echo the more prosaic curves of the looped bagel bundles that Max carries.

## RELATED WORKS OF ART

### Lewis Hine *Steamfitter*



Lewis Hine, *Steamfitter*, 1920. Gelatin silver print. 6 5/8 x 4 5/8 in. (16.8 x 11.7 cm). Image courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, NYC.

Both *Steamfitter* and *Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade* depict a man at work.

- Describe the way each photographer portrays his worker subject.
- What might each artist be trying to communicate about his attitude or feelings toward the respective worker? Which details and compositional choices help communicate the photographer’s attitude or feelings?



## Jerome Liebling *Butterfly Boy, New York*



Jerome Liebling (American, 1924-2011) *Butterfly Boy, New York*, 1949  
Gelatin silver print 10 5/8 x 10 in. (27 x 25.4 cm) The Jewish Museum,  
New York Purchase: Mimi and Barry J. Alperin Fund, 2008-90 Digital  
image © 2008 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

Liebling's and Weegee's images can both be considered urban portraits.

- What can we learn or infer about each subject's identity and personality from his portrait?
- If a photographer were to make a portrait of you in an urban environment, where would you want it to be? What would you like to be shown doing? What emotion of yours would you want it to capture?

# Louis Stettner

## Coming to America



Louis Stettner (American, b. 1922)

*Coming to America*, c. 1951

Gelatin silver print 11 5/8 x 15 3/4 in. (29.5 x 40 cm) The Jewish Museum,  
New York Purchase: Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2003-10 ©  
Louis Stettner, Courtesy Bonni Benrubi Gallery Digital image © 2008 The  
Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- Describe the horizontal lines you see in this image. [the bench slats, floorboards, railing, rope, horizon line, the gazes of the father and child]
  - What is the focal point of this picture? Where do your eyes go first? What is it about that part of the image that makes you look there first?
  - Describe the mood of this photograph. Which details contribute to creating that mood?
- 

## Background Information

Louis Stettner (b. 1922, Brooklyn, New York) joined the Photo League in the late 1930s. There he took the course in basic technique, which he later taught (1947). During World War II, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force, serving as a combat photographer in Southeast Asia (1940–45). After the war he traveled in Europe; he rejoined the Photo League upon his return to New York. He then lived in Paris from 1947 to 1952 but remained active in the League, organizing the first exhibition of contemporary French photography in the United States at the League's gallery (1948), participating in the show *This Is the Photo League* (1948–49), and holding a solo exhibition there (1950). While working as a freelance magazine photographer, Stettner won an award from *Life* for young photographers in 1951. In 1953 he returned once more to New York, where he continued to work as photographer; among his notable projects was a photo essay on factory workers (1974–76). In 1990 Stettner moved back to France.

## Visual Analysis

At the center of the composition is a family of three, with a fourth figure cropped off in the lower-right-hand corner and another cropped off by the right edge of the frame. The benches and lounge chairs suggest that this could be a leisure boat, but the outfits of the figures and the unsmiling gaze of the man suggest a more serious journey. The man and one of the children gaze off into the distance as if they have caught sight of the coast to which they are headed. The weather is hinted at by the coats, hats, and blankets, as well as by the man's body language: his hunched posture and childlike gesture of warming his hands in the opposite arm's coat sleeve. Still, immigrants often wore all of their clothes on overseas journeys, so the weather might be less cold than the figures' clothing suggests. The foreground and middle-ground details of the photograph are in focus, while the waves in the background and the figure's lap in the extreme foreground are in softer focus. There are patterns of nearly horizontal lines throughout the composition—in the bench slats; with the parallel lines of the railing, rope, and horizon; and with the floorboards. This horizontal emphasis echoes the directionality of the father and son's gazes. The central cluster of the three figures and the chairs upon which they sit displays the full range of tones achievable with silver gelatin prints.



# Arthur Leipzig

## Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn



Arthur Leipzig (American, b. 1918)

*Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn, 1950,*

printed later Gelatin silver print 14 x 17 3/4 in. (35.6 x 45.1 cm)

The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Rictavia Schiff Bequest, 1993-

116 © Arthur Leipzig Digital image © 2010 The Jewish Museum, New York

Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- What mood is captured by this image? Which details contribute to creating that mood?
- Describe the point of view the photographer gives us of this scene.
- Describe the way that light is distributed throughout this composition. Where are the darkest areas? Where are the highlights? How do these tones guide you through the photograph?

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## Background Information

Arthur Leipzig (b. 1918) joined the Photo League in 1942 and took part in Sid Grossman's Documentary Workshop. He went on to teach the Advanced Technique class (1944, 1946, 1950) and to exhibit his work at the League while also employed as an editor and staff photographer for *PM* magazine (1942–46). Outside the League, Leipzig also took part in several group shows that included League members, among them *New Photographers* (1946), *Newly Purchased Work* (1950), and *The Family of Man* (1955)—all at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1949 he attended Paul Strand's Special Projects class before quitting the League to pursue a successful career as a freelance photojournalist. His photographs have appeared in magazines such as *Fortune*, *Look*, *Parade*, and *Natural History* and in numerous solo and later group exhibitions. Leipzig was a professor of art and the director of photography at the CW Post Campus of Long Island University for almost twenty-five years (1968–91). In 2004 he won the Lucie Award for Outstanding Achievement in Fine Art Photography.

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## Visual Analysis

Leipzig has given us a bird's-eye perspective of this scene of boys playing in the street. He probably shot the image from the upper steps of a brownstone's stoop or from a first- or second-floor apartment's window, balcony, or fire escape. The viewer looks down upon a car-lined street where ten boys play chalk games in the road while two more boys look on as they lean against one of the cars. The street is covered with chalk-drawn boats, waves, cowboy figures, patterns, letters, and numbers. In the center of the frame is a large sketch of a segmented circle. The ten boys playing are animated. Many are caught mid-jump, mid-skip, or mid-stride; others crouch. Perhaps they are playing some type of tag game involving their own sketches, and the two boys who are watching are "out." The play of dark blacks and white highlights is dominant in this piece: the black of the shiny cars and the asphalt street contrasts with the white of the chalk drawings and the boys' shirts. The strong diagonal of the street creates a dynamic composition, adding to an already lively scene.

## RELATED WORK OF ART

### Aaron Sisking *The Wishing Tree*



Aaron Sisking *The Wishing Tree*, 1937, printed later from *Harlem Document*, 1936–40 Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in (27.9 x 35.6 cm), The Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Lilian Gordon Bequest.

*The Wishing Tree* and *Chalk Games*, *Prospect Place*, *Brooklyn* both feature groups of children engaged in a common activity.

- How are the moods of these two photographs different?
- Where was the photographer in relation to the children when the photographs were taken? Why might each photographer have chosen his respective point of view?
- Try to imagine what the photographs would look like if their perspectives were reversed. How might the new point of view change your understanding of the subject matter and its mood?





# Morris Engel

## *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*



Morris Engel (American, 1918-2005)

*Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York, 1947*

Gelatin silver print 13 5/16 x 10 3/8 in. (33.8 x 26.4 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2000-63



## Close Looking and Discussion

### Discuss:

- Describe how the space of the composition is divided. Where do you see vertical lines repeated?
- Describe the facial expression of the young man sitting at the left of the image.
- Why might the photographer have chosen to capture the main action of the scene in the reflection of the mirrored wall rather than snapping an image of it directly? [The cops may have stopped him from doing so; it better evokes the sense of stumbling upon action in the city; it gives a broader sense of the setting this way; it allows you to simultaneously see people's reactions/non-reactions, etc.]
- What do you imagine may have happened just before this photograph was taken? What do you think might happen next?

unfolding behind the photographer). One of these figures appears to have been caught mid-blink with his eyes closed; the other looks sidelong at the police and the boy. At the photograph's far right, a curved window reflects windows of other buildings.

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## Background Information

Morris Engel (1918–2005) joined the Photo League in 1936. A member of Aaron Siskind's Feature Group, he participated in three projects: *Park Avenue North and South* (1936–37); *Dead End: The Bowery* (1936–38); and *Harlem Document*, an extended photo-documentation of Harlem made by a group of ten photographers (1936–40). His photographs were featured in several group exhibitions and published in *U.S. Camera Annual* (1941). During World War II and after, Engel served in the U.S. Navy, in a combat photography unit (1941–46). Upon his return to New York in 1946 he again became active in the Photo League, teaching the workshop class and serving as co-chair of a project group focusing on postwar labor issues. After the League disbanded, Engel worked as a freelance photographer and filmmaker. In 1953 *Little Fugitive*, a film he co-directed with his wife and fellow Photo League member Ruth Orkin, won a Silver Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival and an Academy Award nomination. His other films include *Lovers and Lollipops* (co-directed with Orkin, 1955); *Weddings and Babies* (1958); *The Dog Lover* (1962); and *I Need a Ride to California* (1968).

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## Visual Analysis

On first looking at this image, the viewer may find it disorienting. The main action of the scene is visible in the reflection of a mirror on a building. Two police officers are engaged in conversation with a shoeshine boy under the overhang of a theater marquee. This scene, as well as the text on the sign and banners, is seen in reverse in the mirror. The two additional figures seen at the left of the image (not in the reflection) are facing the action (which is actually



## RELATED WORK OF ART

**Rebecca Lepkoff**

***Broken Window on South Street,  
New York***

- Describe the mood evoked by each image.
- How are these portrayals of New York City similar? How are they different?



Rebecca Lepkoff (American, b. 1916) *Broken Window on South Street, New York*, 1948. Gelatin silver print 8 5/16 x 7 3/8 in. (21.1 x 18.7 cm) The Jewish Museum, New York Purchase: Esther Leah Ritz Bequest, 2008-81 Digital image © 2010 The Jewish Museum, New York Photo by Ardon Bar Hama

There is a strong demarcation of foreground (the broken window), middle ground (the street), and background (the view of the skyline) in this composition. The composition is almost divided in half lengthwise—the row of buildings (seen from the side) that ends in the shattered window fills the right half of the composition. The image includes many quintessential urban details: skyscrapers, a bridge, stoops, fire escapes, a bishop’s crook streetlamp, debris on the sidewalk, and a man walking his dog. The vertical lines of the buildings and the diagonal lines of the street direct the viewer’s eyes to the buildings in the background. This is in contrast to the immediacy of the shattered window that fills the space on the right.

- Compare and contrast the compositions of *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*, and *Broken Window on South Street, New York*. What’s similar about the arrangement of elements within the pictures? What’s different?
- Compare and contrast the photographer’s/viewer’s point of view in each image.



# Resources and Web Links

## Books

Berger, Maurice, and Joan Rosenbaum. *Masterworks of The Jewish Museum*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004.

Elkin, Tobi. Interview: *LES Photographer Rebecca Lepkoff*. The Lo-Down: News from the Lower East Side.

Evans, Catherine. *Shout Freedom! Photo League Selections from the Columbus Museum of Art*. Exhibition brochure.

Klein, Mason, and Catherine Evans. *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

Rosenblum, Naomi. *Lewis Hine. Grove Art Online*. New York: Oxford University Press: 2009.

Tucker, Anne. *This Was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War*. Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001.

## Websites

The International Center of Photography's downloadable *Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide*. This interdisciplinary guide is intended for K-12 educators who want to integrate looking at photographs into their teaching.

<http://www.icp.org>

The Jewish Museum's exhibition website, including video clips, an interactive map, and blogs related to the Photo League,

<http://www.thejewishmuseum.org>

The Lo-Down: News from the Lower East Side.

<http://www.thelodownny.com/>



# Glossary

## 35mm camera

A manual camera that uses 35mm photographic film. 35mm film gauge comes in strips that are 35mm in width and can produce multiple exposures/negatives per strip.

## Abstract

In the visual arts, a work is considered abstract when an artist focuses more on elements such as color, line, shape, tone, and pattern and is less concerned with representing a subject from the real world in an immediately identifiable way. While often the image has a source in the natural world, its forms may be simplified, distorted, or exaggerated in some way.

## Apollo Theater

The Apollo Theater is performance venue in Harlem. Since the 1930s it has been strongly connected with the African-American community with regard to its performers and its audience.

## Background

The part of the image that is in the distance and farthest from the viewer.

## Bird's Eye Perspective

In a work of art, when the subject (e.g., an entire scene, object(s), and/or a person/people) is seen from above. The artist gives the viewer a perspective similar to that of a bird flying overhead and looking down.

## Blacklisted

A blacklist is a list of people, groups, or institutions who are denied privileges, services, access, or recognition. As a term associated with the Cold War and Senator Joseph McCarthy, blacklisting refers to those who were under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee for their connections to the Communist

Party. Those blacklisted faced damaged reputations, loss of work, criminal investigation, and even imprisonment.

## Cold War

A period of military tension, threats, and political conflict between the United States (and its allies) and the Soviet Union (and its allies) that lasted from 1945 through roughly 1991. Much of the tensions stemmed from differences in political values and systems: democratic/capitalist versus communist.

## Communism

Communism is a social, political, and economic ideology. While communism as an actual governmental system has never matched the purity of the ideology, a major goal of communism is to create a far-left socialist structure that eradicates socioeconomic distinctions or divisions.

## Composition

The arrangement, structure, or organization of elements within a work of art, literature, or music.

## Cropping/Crop

In photography, to “crop” means to exclude certain elements or parts of an overall scene when taking or printing a photograph. In other words, a photographer may crop an image at the time the photograph is taken (what is or is not captured on the negative), at the time of printing (a photographer may use a frame device to print only a certain part of the negative), or even afterwards (by physically altering the dimensions of the print).

## Documentary Photography

A genre of photography that is interested in capturing, chronicling, and/or bearing witness to real-life people, events, scenes, and situations—including

significant historical events, but also everyday life.

## Ellis Island

Located in New York Harbor, Ellis Island was the United States's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 until 1954.

## Foreground

The part of an image that appears nearest to the viewer.

## Frame

In manual photography, framing refers to what is seen and captured through the camera's viewfinder or lens.

## Gelatin Silver Print

A black-and-white photograph printing process first developed in the late 1800s. The paper on which the photograph is printed is coated with a gelatin binder containing photo-sensitive (light-sensitive) silver compounds.

## Harlem

A historically African-American neighborhood in northern Manhattan.

## Harlem Document

A photography project led by Aaron Siskind and intended to be an extended study of the Harlem neighborhood. Siskind and fellow Photo League members worked on the project for close to four years. It resulted in a series of exhibitions around New York City and in an unpublished book of photographs with a sociological study written by Michael Carter.

## Jacob Riis

A Danish-born American self-taught documentary photographer. He is considered to be among the first to use photography as a tool for social reform. His books of photographs entitled *How*



*the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements* and *The Battle with the Slum* sought to expose the dehumanizing conditions in New York City's slums.

### **Lower East Side**

A neighborhood in New York City. The Lower East Side was the largest Jewish immigrant community in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Historically, the Lower East Side stretched from the East River west to Broadway, and from Canal Street up to 14th Street. Before the influx of eastern European Jewry, the area had served earlier immigrants, including many from Ireland and Germany. By 1900, as new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe moved in, most of the earlier inhabitants relocated to other parts of the city. In 1915, an estimated 350,000 Jews (along with about 150,000 non-Jews) lived on the Lower East Side—an area of less than two square miles.

### **Lulav**

A ritual object used during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. It is a palm branch bound together with sprigs of myrtle and willow that is used along with an *etrog* (citron). In the synagogue, these four species, as they are known, are waved in all six directions (front, back, right, left, up, and down) to symbolize the Divine's omnipresence.

### **Middle Ground**

The area of an image at a middle distance from the viewer.

### **Mood**

The feeling imparted by a work of art. This is a subjective quality. The mood may be related to the scene pictured, the tonal qualities of how the photograph has been printed, and/or the viewer's personal interpretation of the image.

### **New Deal**

The New Deal was a series of economic programs implemented in the United States between 1933 and 1936. President Franklin D. Roosevelt developed these programs in response to the problems created by the Great Depression. The programs aimed to help the poor and unemployed, to spur economic recovery,

and to make reforms that would prevent a repeat depression.

### **New York School**

A group of avant-garde artists, including painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, poets, dancers, and musicians, living and working in New York City in the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Often referred to by other labels, such as the Abstract Expressionists, this is the name the group preferred to be known by.

### **Ouija**

A board with numbers, letters, and select words, graphics, and symbols. Participants using the board place their fingers on a movable indicator that moves around the board to spell out or indicate answers to questions asked by those participants. Ouija believers feel that spirits are answering their questions and that supernatural forces are responsible for Ouija's actions.

### **Patterns**

When colors, lines, shapes, or tones (darks/lights) repeat in a given order.

### **Photojournalist**

A practitioner of photojournalism, which is an approach to photography, typically seen in newspapers and magazines, in which the images create a narrative about current events.

### **Pictorial Space**

Refers to the three-dimensional space captured in a photograph or implied by the illusion of depth in a drawing or painting (as opposed to the flat two-dimensional space of the photographic object, drawing, or painting itself).

### **Point of View**

In photography, the place and angle from which an artist has taken his/her photograph relative to where his/her subject was located. This point of view is then bestowed upon the viewer.

### **Portrait**

A work of art that represents a person or group of people.

### **Silhouette**

An image whose outline is clear but whose interior features and mass

appear as a solid plane of black, whether from being back-lit, shadowed, or purposefully rendered that way.

### **Sukkot**

Sukkot is a Jewish holiday with both agricultural and historical significances. Agriculturally, Sukkot celebrates the fall harvest; historically, it commemorates the forty-year period during which the Children of Israel wandered in the desert. To celebrate Sukkot, a family traditionally erects a temporary structure, known as a sukkah, in which they eat their meals during the festival.

### **Symmetry**

Correspondence in size, shape, and relative position of parts on opposite sides of a dividing line or around a center or axis. In art, symmetry is shorthand for the (more precise) mathematical terms line symmetry or mirror symmetry.

### **Tenements**

The word "tenement" originally referred to any rented dwelling that housed three or more separate families. Today, the term is generally used to describe the kind of overcrowded urban apartment buildings that many immigrants lived in during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Tenement conditions were often harsh, with poor ventilation and sanitation. A series of housing reform laws, however, gradually improved conditions somewhat by the 1930s.

### **Tones**

Refers to the lightness or darkness of colors or to the grayscale from white to black.

### **Wishing Tree**

Harlem's Wishing Tree was an elm tree on Seventh Avenue at 132nd Street, also known as the Tree of Hope. It was believed that touching the tree or even standing under its branches brought good luck. The tree stood between the Lafayette Theatre and Connie's Inn, two of the most popular entertainment venues in the city during the 1930s. Aspiring musicians and performers often visited this tree and swore by its magical powers



# Activities

## Portrait of a Class

**Aim:** To experiment with Photo League members' practice of photographing children in everyday moments.

**Grades:** 3-5, 6-8

**Themes:** Photo League

**Artworks:** Stettner: *Coming to America*, c. 1951; Liebling: *Butterfly Boy*, *New York*, 1949; Leipzig: *Chalk Games*, *Prospect Place*, *Brooklyn*, 1950, printed later; Engel: *Shoeshine Boy with Cop*, *14th Street*, *New York*, 1947

**Discipline:** English Language Arts

**Materials:** cameras (digital or film), SMART Board, computer, LCD projector

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### Procedure:

1. Begin by telling students that a large number of works by Photo League members depict children. Some of these are of children working or enduring hardship and were taken in order to try to help those children. Many others were taken to document children in lighter moments. Tell your students they will be asked to take on the role of photographer.
2. Ask each student to photograph another student in the class. You can assign students to a specific classmate. Before they take their photographs, have the students look at—together as a class—some of the following images, all of which feature children:

Morris Engel, *Shoeshine Boy with Cop*, *14th Street*, *New York*

Arthur Leipzig, *Chalk Games*, *Prospect Place*, *Brooklyn*

Jerome Liebling, *Butterfly Boy*, *New York*

Louis Stettner, *Coming to America*

Use the guided-looking questions from the Close Looking and Discussion section for each image and discuss the following:

- Can you figure out the photographer's point of view in each photograph? How close or far away was the photographer from his/her subject(s)?
  - What does the photographer include in the setting? What does the photographer crop out?
  - What facial expressions, poses, gestures, and body language does the photographer capture?
3. Ask your students to photograph another student in the class, using the photographs just viewed and the discussions around them as inspiration. Tell them they can choose the setting (classroom, hallway, playground, etc.), the point of view, the activity they want to capture, whether there will be other students or teachers in the image, whether the student will be posing or caught unaware, etc. You can coordinate and/or set some limitations based around logistical concerns with the cameras and class schedule and whether or not you have younger students. Tell them to each take two to three photographs and then select one of them for the activity.
  4. Depending on your classroom resources, scan or upload the images onto a class computer and project them or use a SMART Board for the class to view each others' work.
  5. Ask for volunteers to explain their decision making when composing their images.
  6. Have students share their reactions to photographs that were taken of them.
  7. Print out the images and compile them as a class book.



# Tell Me a Story

**Aim:** To build close looking, storytelling skills, and vocabulary.

**Grades:** 3-5, 6-8

**Themes:** Photo League

**Artworks:** Stettner: *Coming to America*, c. 1951; Leipzig: *Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn*, 1950, printed later; Lepkoff: *Broken Window on South Street, New York*, 1948; Engel: *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*, 1947; Lepkoff: *East Broadway and Canal Street*, 1948

**Discipline:** English Language Arts

**Materials:** print-outs of images in this curriculum guide, pencils and paper.

2. Next have the students write a story about one of the other images from the list above, using the discussion you just had as a model for how develop their ideas. Encourage them to think about structure (beginning, middle, end) and to incorporate a problem and solution, secondary characters not seen in the image, and other story elements you have been studying
3. Ask for volunteers to share their stories with the class. Compare examples in which students looked at the same image but came up with very different narratives.

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Note: If you teach grades 2–3, you can conduct a similar grade-appropriate activity by writing the story together as a class on the board. Alternatively, you could ask students to either draw what could happen right before the moment they are seeing in the photograph or write about what could happen right afterward.

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## Procedure:

1. Begin by telling your students that Photo League photographers spent time out and about in New York City and other mostly urban environments in order to capture life on the streets. Many of their images feel like one moment in a larger story.

Ask students to build a story around one of these photographs, using their imagination together with close observation of details in the photograph.

The following images would work well for this activity. You may choose to have your students work on the same image, or you may wish to have them use different images:

Morris Engel, *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*  
Arthur Leipzig, *Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn*  
Rebecca Lepkoff, *East Broadway and Canal Street*  
Louis Stettner, *Coming to America*  
Weegee, *Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*

As a warm-up exercise, have the students look at one of the above images together as a class before they write their stories. You may use the questions in the Close Looking and Discussion section and/or some of the following (depending on which photograph you select):

- Describe the setting of this photograph.
- Describe any people you see. [Encourage students to note how they look—their facial expressions, gestures, postures, and body language.]
- What do you think might have happened right before the moment captured in the photograph? What might happen next?





# Stand Up for a Cause: Using Photography and Writing for Social Change

**Aim:** To reflect on the ways in which photography can be used as a tool for social change.

**Grades:** 9–12

**Themes:** Photo League, Photo League

**Artworks:** Stettner: *Coming to America*, c. 1951; Liebling: *May Day, New York*, 1948; Lepkoff: *Broken Window on South Street, New York*, 1948; Kanaga: *Untitled (Tenements, New York)*, c. 1937; Engel: *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*, 1947

**Discipline:** Visual Art, English Language Arts

**Materials:** recent newspapers and magazines, pens, paper, glue sticks

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## Procedure:

1. Begin by explaining that Photo League forerunner Lewis Hine and many of the League members were interested in creating images that could effect social change. Look at and discuss some of the following images:

Morris Engel, *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*

Consuelo Kanaga, *Untitled (Tenements, New York)*

Rebecca Lepkoff, *Broken Window on South Street*

Jerome Liebling, *May Day, New York*

Louis Stettner, *Coming to America*

- To explore these images use the guided-looking questions in the Close Looking and Discussion section for each image and also discuss the following:
  - What adjectives describe the goings-on in these photographs?
  - With what aspects of society do these images seem to engage?
  - What reaction(s) do these images elicit in you? What do they make you want to know more about? What emotions do they leave you with (if any)?
  - In light of your discussion, how might an image have the power to instigate positive social change? [Encourage debate among your students.] Can you think of times in your own life when an image stirred you to do something positive for society?
2. Explain to your students that League photographers would often exhibit or publish their images with accompanying text to further communicate the social message of

their images. Sometimes they wrote the text, but other times, publishers, collaborating writers, or others were responsible for adding text to go along the images.

Ask your students to create a photo essay to champion, critique, or otherwise comment upon a social issue that is important to them. Instead of using their own images, they should select three to five powerful images from newspapers, magazines, or online publications (blogs, etc.) that relate to their issue. Encourage students to read the related articles and captions so they understand the images' original contexts.

3. Ask students to cut out the images and arrange them in a way that starts to build a narrative about the social issue they are exploring. Ask students to write text for each image. The text should be no longer than a few sentences for each picture. Remind them to keep in mind what it is they are trying to convey to their audience and the ways in which they can use language to arouse the interest and/or concern of the reader/viewer.
4. For the final product, ask students to glue all the images onto a single sheet of paper and write in the texts. They can be creative with their layout.
5. Have students pair up and share their photo essays with their partner. Partner groups should then discuss their intellectual and emotional (if any) reactions to each other's photo essays. Creators can discuss what they had hoped to communicate and express and whether their partner had the reaction they had hoped for/anticipated or not. If time permits, have a few volunteers share their work with the entire class and discuss people's varying reactions.



# Then & Now—A 21st-Century Photo Essay of New York City

**Aim:** To reflect on changing representations of New York City by comparing images by Photo League photographers with contemporary images.

**Grades:** 9–12

**Themes:** Photo League

**Artworks:** Liebling: *Butterfly Boy, New York, 1949*; Liebling: *May Day, New York, 1948*; Leipzig: *Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn, 1950*, printed later; Lepkoff: *Broken Window on South Street, New York, 1948*; Kanaga: *Untitled (Tenements, New York)*, c. 1937; Engel: *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York, 1947*; Alland: *Untitled (Brooklyn Bridge)*, c. 1938; Weegee: *Max is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant...*, c. 1940

**Discipline:** Social Studies, English Language Arts

**Materials:** digital cameras or camera phones, class computer, SMART Board or LCD projector, notebooks and pens

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## Procedure:

1. Begin by telling your students that you will be comparing images of New York City by Photo League artists with contemporary representations of the city. (You may generalize this conversation and activity if your school is not in New York City.)

Discuss some of the following images with your students:

Alexander Alland, *Untitled (Brooklyn Bridge)*

Morris Engel, *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street, New York*

Consuelo Kanaga, *Untitled (Tenements, New York)*

Arthur Leipzig, *Chalk Games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn*

Rebecca Lepkoff, *Broken Window on South Street*

Jerome Liebling, *Butterfly Boy, New York*

Jerome Liebling, *May Day, New York*

Weegee, *Max Is Rushing in the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade*

Use the guided-looking questions in the Close Looking and Discussion section for each image and also ask your students to discuss the following:

Describe the types of people, places, moments, and events these photographers from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s have photographed.

Why might Photo League photographers have been interested in showing these types of people, places, moments, and events?

This is a small selection of the work of Photo League members, but based on these examples, what kinds of people, places, moments, and events that permeate our 21st-century visual culture seem to be absent here? Where might the public have encountered the images produced by Photo League members? [exhibitions, the Photo League newsletter, magazines, newspapers]

Where do we encounter visual representations of New York City today? [Also in exhibitions, magazines, and newspapers but additionally on television and the Internet—on blogs, social media sites, and other online forums, etc.]

2. Explain to your students that it was important to the Photo League members that their work not only document society but that it also reflect their personal perspectives on their subjects.

Ask your students to create a week-long photo essay of New York City, using the Photo League members' practice of photographing neighborhoods as inspiration. Depending on your school's and students' resources, ask students to use digital cameras and/or their camera phones to take one picture each day for a week. Encourage students to photograph a variety of people, places, moments, and events. Also encourage them to experiment with different ways of framing the images and different points of view.

3. Explain that when Photo League members exhibited or published their images, they often included descriptive or evocative captions. As a 21st-century update of this practice, ask your students to write a Twitter-style caption, or tweet, for each image. Encourage them to write down their tweet just after they have taken each photograph and to keep track of the week's worth of tweets in a notebook. Remind them that tweets are limited to 140 characters.
4. At the end of the week, ask students to turn in their work. They may either email you their photographs and corresponding tweet captions or bring in their cameras to upload images onto a single classroom computer.
5. Ask each student to choose a single image and caption to share with the class. Cull all of the students' selections to create a digital slideshow (using Power Point or photo-sharing software) so you can present them to the whole class. (You may want to delegate this task to a tech-savvy student or group of students.) Share each student's work, first showing the image alone (without the tweet caption).



6. Ask students to share their impressions of and reactions to their peer's work.
7. Ask for volunteers to discuss and reflect upon their photo-journaling process and choices.
8. Ask for volunteers to share (out loud) their corresponding tweet captions. Ask the class how hearing the tweet captions changes their response to their fellow students' work.
9. Reflecting on your original class discussion, how is your class's collective representation of New York City different from the representation you saw in the selection of Photo League work you looked at together as a class? How is it similar? How is your class's collective representation of New York City similar to and different from the representations you might see today?
10. As an extension of this activity, you might ask a group of students to create a Tumblr-style blog so these photographs can be shared with a larger public. And/or you might encourage students with Twitter accounts to tweet some of their captions and links to the corresponding images and/or post them on their Facebook pages. You can ask those students to report back with any feedback they receive.

