

The Family of Man

A Reappraisal of "The Greatest Exhibition of All Time"

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An exhibition of photographs, called The Family of Man, opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on 26 January 1955. It subsequently traveled to several cities in the USA and then to 69 exhibition venues in 37 foreign countries. Measured by the number of people who visited the exhibition, or bought its catalog, The Family of Man is probably the most successful exhibition in the history of photography. It is also, probably, the most controversial - in the sense that serious photographers seem to still disparage the exhibition's intents and achievements whenever its name is mentioned. This fact, in itself, is significant when the exhibition is more than 30 years old.

In addition there are many middle-aged photographers who might have been too young in 1955 (or were uninterested in photography at the time) who did not see the exhibition yet still hold vague prejudices against the show due to picking up assumptions and insinuations through their conversations or readings. Then again, there is the new generation of photographers who may never have heard of The Family of Man.

For the latter, especially, it is necessary to itemize a few facts about The Family of Man, and the astonishing nature of its success, before examining the reasons for its low esteem among the photo-intelligentsia.

The Family of Man was organized by Edward Steichen who had been the Director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art since July 1947. In the following eight years of his tenure, all the exhibitions arranged by Steichen were historical, didactic or artistic. All of them placed emphasis on the photographer. (This is an important point which will be reviewed later in the article).

In order to provide a few examples, the following exhibitions of photographs were organized by Steichen for the Museum prior to The Family of Man.

Historical shows included: "Photo-Secession Group" (1948); "Roots of Photography: Hill-Adamson, Cameron" (1949); "Roots of French Photography" (1949); "Lewis Carroll Photographs" (1950); "Then, 1839, and Now, 1952" (1952). Didactic exhibitions, deliberately organized for their teaching potential and their influence on young photographers, included: "Music and Musicians" (1947); "In and Out of Focus" (1948); "The Exact Instant" (1949); "All Color Photography" (1950); and, the most didactic of all, a series of shows entitled "Diogenes with a Camera" (beginning in 1952). The idea of

this series was to “demonstrate various ways, from literal representation to abstraction, in which photographers approach the truth.” Showcases for individual talent included: “Three Young Photographers: Leonard McCombe, Wayne Miller [who later became Steichen’s assistant on *The Family of Man*], Homer Page” (1947); “Four Photographers: Lisette Model, Bill Brandt, Ted Croner and Harry Callahan” (1948); “Six Women Photographers: Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt, Dorothea Lange, Tana Hoban, and Hazel and Frieda Larsen” (1949); “Five French Photographers: Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau, Ronis, Izis” (1951); and so on.

Although these lists of exhibitions at the Museum between 1947 and 1955 are brief selections, they will serve to indicate the pattern which Steichen had set - and which the photographic community had come to expect.

The Family of Man defied expectations, as we will discover.

Steichen began preparations for *The Family of Man* in 1952. In that year he visited 29 cities in 11 European countries in his quest for photographs which would fit his theme. At the same time, through press releases and interviews, Steichen requested submissions from all and sundry. Any camera owner could send in prints, however rough, as long as they were unmounted and no larger than 8 x 10 inches in size. Even contact prints were acceptable (except from 35 mm). In exchange, Steichen promised that all submissions would be acknowledged but that no prints would be returned and no payments or prizes would be awarded for any photographs.

The response was astonishing - over 2 million photographs “from every corner of the earth” were submitted.

Right from the start of the project, Steichen's premise for the exhibition was clear. It is worth quoting his statement in detail, in order to clarify his intent and the purpose of *The Family of Man*. Steichen wrote:

We are seeking photographs covering the gamut of human relations, particularly the hard-to-find photographs of the everydayness in the relationships of man to himself, to his family, to the community, and to the world we live in. Our field is from babies to philosophers, from the kindergarten to the university, from the child’s home-made toys to scientific research, from tribal councils of primitive peoples to the councils of the United Nations. We are interested in lovers and marriage and child bearing, in the family unit with its joys, trials, and tribulations, its deep-rooted devotions and its antagonisms. We want to show the selflessness of mother love and the sense of security she gives to her children and to the home she creates with all its magnificence, heartaches, and exaltations, and the guiding hand of the father toward his son. There can be special emphasis on children, as the universality of man is not only

accepted but taken for granted among children. We are concerned with the individual family unit as it exists all over the world and its reactions to the beginnings of life and following through to death and burial . . .

As Steichen acknowledged, this would be “one of the most ambitious photography undertakings attempted by any art museum.”

During 1954, the 2 million photographs were edited down to 10,000 possibles, and finally cut down to 503 images, representing 273 photographers (163 Americans) from 68 countries.

The selects were then specially printed from the original negatives (borrowed from the photographers) in order to fit the exhibition, designed by architect Paul Rudolph. The photographer had no choice in the print size: the individuality of the photographer and the integrity of the image were submerged (some would say, subverted) into the exhibition’s thematic premise and its design requirements. Some prints were blown up to mural size while others were tiny album-size; some images were isolated on screens, while others were free hanging or overlapped with different pictures; images were mounted on transparent walls, or cut out as free standing silhouettes, or placed on revolving stands.

Carl Sandburg (Steichen’s brother-in-law) wrote a short but fulsome prologue and the exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art on 26 January 1955, filling the whole second floor.

The Family of Man was a photographic phenomenon - at least to the public.

In the first two weeks, more than 35,000 viewers flocked to see it, “smashing all previous attendance records for any photographic exhibition ever held by the museum.” In one day (22 February - a national holiday: Washington’s Birthday), 6,000 people attended the show, which was “the most spectacular attendance record in the museum’s 25 year history.” Each day, long lines waited outside the Museum for the doors to open: “They lined up outside the Museum as at movie theaters.” When the show closed at MOMA (103 days later), more than 270,000 viewers had seen it, “the largest in American photography exhibition history.”

The Family of Man then toured the USA, with venues at Minneapolis (where per capita attendance was even greater than in New York), Dallas, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

The exhibition, in all these cities, “received heavier press coverage than any comparable ‘artistic’ event in our history.”

The catalog to the exhibition was equally successful. It was published initially in two versions: a \$1.00 paperback (later reduced to 50¢) and a \$10.00 deluxe hardback

version. The catalog included every image in the exhibition (although not in the same sequence or presentation), the prologue by Sandburg, and an introduction by Steichen. Its editor was Jerry Mason and the pictures' captions were written by Dorothy Norman.

Within three weeks of publication, the dollar edition alone had sold 250,000 copies and bookstores throughout New York reported that it was at the top of their bestseller list. By 1961, it had sold over 1 million copies and had reached 10 editions. One columnist believed that "The Family of Man will become as much a part of the family library as the Bible."

At the close of the exhibition's American tour, it traveled abroad under the auspices of the United States Information Agency.

It traveled to 37 countries (69 exhibition venues), and was equally adored in such diverse cultures as South Africa and Japan, and Russia and Guatemala. The Family of Man was extraordinarily popular wherever it went. An American visitor to Guatemala, for example, described how thousands of Indians came down from the hills, barefooted and on mules, to stand, transfixed, before these photographs.

By the end of its world tour in 1961, it was estimated that The Family of Man exhibition had been seen, in person, by 9 million people. Add to this figure the unknown millions who have seen the catalog in the intervening 30 plus years and the result is the single most successful exhibition/publication in photographic history.

Steichen was showered with honors. Among others, he received the Newspaper Guild's Front Page Award, and awards from the American Society of Magazine Photographers, the Philadelphia Museum School of Art, the National Urban League and Kappa Alpha Mu for the "Greatest of all photography exhibitions." He was awarded several Honorary Doctorates, the Silver Progress Medal from The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, and the first Annual Award from Nippon Kogaku "for outstanding achievement in fostering international understanding through photography."

But if Steichen emerged as photography's most persuasive salesman and the public wholeheartedly embraced the exhibition's dramatic gesture of reverence for the oneness of Man throughout the World, the photographic community was less than enthusiastic. The attitude of photographers which emerged from the photographic press was largely noncommittal, often churlish and occasionally outright condemnatory. There was not a single aspect of the exhibition which was not criticized by photographers - its presentation, its ideological premise, its reflection of a personal (i.e.. Steichen's) bias, lack of emphasis on individual photographers, its exclusion of "creative" photography, its use of quotations (from Genesis to Joyce), and, of course, its inclusion of specific images.

A few specific comments will provide a flavor of this criticism:

“The very concept of The Family of Man is rather trite. What is worse it is based on ignorance if not a lie.”

It is an “awesome exercise in naivete, oversimplification, and sentimentality.”

“one is asked to accept its cosmic One Man declaration and to fight through its pretentious presentation . . . a display so elaborate that the photographs become less important than the methods of displaying them.”

“Mr. Steichen’s choice is the surface of things, reproduced as clearly as possible with a nice moderate respectable gloss.”

“. . . some people object that The Family of Man is not art at all, but a social and anthropological document, and . . . ought to be moved from its present location to the Museum of Natural History.”

“The Family of Man leaves the art of photography exactly where it was before, suffering from widespread confusion about its aesthetic status - a confusion which ‘The Family of Man’ itself has now done so much to congeal.”

“What is disheartening is to see the agency (Museum of Modern Art) which claims to preside over the artistic values of photography tumble so easily into . . . vulgar ideological postures.”

It would be possible to provide scores of quotations along similar lines, and many more dealing with specific attacks on individual images (“the picture of the father and boy would be useful for an illustration in Parents Magazine or an ad for baby food”) or on other aspects of the exhibition. Sandburg’s prologue was “a heavy dose of this verbosity, which reads like nothing so much as a schoolboy imitating a young American poet of forty years ago . . .”)

But the point is already clear enough: In spite of, often because of, The Family of Man’s phenomenal public success, the photo-intellegentsia disowned it - and has been faintly embarrassed by it since 1955.

After a gap of more than 30 years, it might be possible to place the exhibition and its unfortunate reputation into context and perspective.

Leaving aside subjective quibbles, such as Sandburg’s “verbosity” or the disagreements over the inclusion of specific images, the major issues which have sullied The Family of Man can be discussed under two general topics: 1.) photography and 2.) ideology.

The photographic issue is quite clear: The Family of Man made no attempt to stress the unique image as the creative result of a special individual. This was not photography as Art but photography as communication, in the service of a theme, which not only took precedence but also totally subjugated the individuality of both image and author.

To photographers in the 1950s this was a crushing blow. For decades, photographers had coped with a sense of artistic inferiority. There was precious little, if any, support for personal image-making from grants and fellowships; galleries and museums rarely showed photographs; there were only a handful of academic institutions in the U.S. which treated photography with any degree of seriousness; few monographs were published and generally photographers lived isolated creative lives, rebuffed as serious image-makers and relegated by society to the status of wedding photographers or news cameramen.

The one flowering oasis in this creative desert was the Museum of Modern Art. From Steichen's appointment as Director of Photography in 1947, photographers had a champion, a spiritual leader and, through his exhibitions, a sense that they belonged to a wider community of dedicated artists.

Steichen's exhibitions, as already noted, stressed the continuing rich history of the medium, taught young photographers, through the images of master photographers, the principles of creativity with a camera, and selected individuals whose work was displayed with as much care and attention and seriousness as that by any artist in any other medium. By 1950, Jacob Deschin (Say it with your Camera, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc.) was echoing the consensus of opinion among the ranks of photographers when he declared: "Steichen must be considered chiefly as the symbol and the hope of all forward-looking photographers who would like to see camera work placed on the high level in public opinion now enjoyed by other arts." One reason for this extraordinary reputation was that Steichen's exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, prior to 1955, gave full attention to the photograph as Art, and to the photographer as a serious, committed, creative individual who ranked equally with any artist, whether in painting, sculpture, music or poetry.

The Family of Man shattered that emphasis on the individuality and uniqueness of the photographic image. Now, photographs were merely subservient to the theme, relegated, once again, to the status of journalistic or advertising illustrations. What did it matter if the theme was a moral one? The photographs were not displayed as monuments to the medium but as symbolic pictures, like individual letters in a sentence. It was the totality of the photographs, The Theme, which drew attention, not individual images which only served to reinforce the idea. At that time, 1955, Steichen's volte face in his stand on photographic exhibitions was shocking in its suddenness and startling because, in the absence of any other photographic activity of equal importance, all eyes were on the Museum of Modern Art.

This sudden disrespect for photography, as it seemed, especially from such a revered figure as Steichen, was compounded by Rudolph's exhibition design. Not only were images blended into the show's theme, but also they were "mistreated" - blown up, hung from ceilings, stuck on revolving "merry-go-rounds," cut out into silhouettes, made into horizontal tables, curved around poles, stuck on top of one another and so on.

It is understandable why photographers were disappointed or infuriated. Steichen was not only fraternizing with the enemy (the public) but was paying his way into its favor with the currency (photographs) of his friends. No wonder the friends, the photographic community, felt betrayed.

The opposing viewpoint is that "betrayal" is only appropriate if the "betrayed" were not forewarned and aware of the action, and did not actively contribute to its success.

Yet, right from the beginning stages of *The Family of Man*, Steichen made his approach, and his justification, abundantly clear. He intended to use photography for a moral purpose, not a demonstration of photographic art. "This exhibition," Steichen explained, "will require photographs, made in all parts of the world, of the gamut of life from birth to death with emphasis on the everyday relationships of man to himself, to his family, to the community and to the world we live in." He saw the exhibition "as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world." *The Family of Man*, he affirmed in the closing sentence of the exhibition's introduction, "has been created in a passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man." He did not say . . . in a passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in photography, which is what photographers wanted to hear - and which they had expected from Steichen's previous exhibitions.

Implicit in the exhibition's intent is the idea of a mass audience. Photographers and connoisseurs of photography were intended viewers of the show only in that they were members of the family of man. As John Stanley wrote in The Commonwealth (1 July 1955):

But it was not really a photographic exhibition; its raison d'etre was not to show the techniques or history of photography, nor to praise the photographers, professional and amateurs, living and dead; its raison d'etre was the praise and appreciation of the human family in the silencing variety of its conditions - and the promotion of love.

The whole point of the show was to generate warmth and good feeling among the maximum number of people throughout the world - not to promote photography or photographers. The critics, then, attacked the exhibition for not accomplishing what it never intended. Steichen was playing a different game, with different rules.

One of these “rules” was that the photograph had to be intelligible, at least on a subject matter level, to the intended audience, which included both Muscovites and Guatemalan Indians. The vast majority of the photographs, therefore, were of the documentary/journalistic type. Content over Form.

Just to confuse matters, Steichen, perhaps to assuage the photographic critics, asserted that The Family of Man was “an exhibition of creative photography . . .” But as Phoebe Lou Adams pointed out (Atlantic Monthly, April 1955): “Creative seems not quite the right term for this style. Transferred to writing, for instance, it would put a news reporter in the same line of business as a writer.” This is a debatable point, of course, but it should not obscure the issue which disturbed photographers: The Family of Man left “the art of photography exactly where it was before, suffering from widespread confusion about its aesthetic status - a confusion which The Family of Man itself has now done so much to congeal” (Hilton Kramer, Commentary, October 1955).

In the mid-1950s, photographers were obsessed, even more so than now, with the art claims and social status of the medium. Steichen was expected to continue in his role as their champion for these claims. By “pandering” to mass appeal, he had let them down.

It should be emphasized at this point that photographers did not believe that Steichen had lowered his photographic standards and included “less than the best.” Indeed, the contributors to The Family of Man read like a Who’s Who of great photographers of the ’50s (including, to mention a few credit lines from the opening pages of the catalog: Wynn Bullock, Roy de Carava, Louis Faurer, Robert Doisneau, Ernst Haas, Wayne Miller, Werner Bischof, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliot Erwitt, George Rodger, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Robert Frank, Irving Penn, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Bill Brandt, Russell Lee, W. Eugene Smith and so on).

The objection was that these photographers had not been highlighted as Artists but that their images were mere illustrations of a theme.

This Theme - Steichen’s notion of the essential oneness of mankind received the most devastating criticism. His “devoted love and faith in man” and his touching faith in the ability of photography to reflect this notion, seems excessively naive, sentimental and even mawkish is our own more cynical era. But there is no doubting Steichen’s sincerity or the responsive chord which it struck among the public.

The timing of the exhibition could not have been more appropriate - at least in America. Fear of Communism, for example, had reached an unprecedented level in the early 1950s, epitomized by the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 and the televised public hearing of charges

of Communist subversion by Sen. Joseph McCarthy in 1954. The U.S. Senate voted to condemn McCarthy in December, producing a sudden thaw in the Cold War - and *The Family of Man* opened the following month. The “Geneva Spirit” of accord and peace dominated the political process, following the summit meeting in July the same year. “Suddenly”, as one political columnist enthused “you, (Americans) are catapulted into a world completely beyond your worries and concerns of the moment.” (Augusta Strong, *Daily Worker*, 1955). Americans relaxed, and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the pursuit of The American Dream. Personal and family happiness prevailed and a spirit of optimism lasted through the rest of the decade, swamping individual opposition to the good life. Initial publication of *The Americans* by Robert Frank, a more somber, critical view of American culture, was an obvious photographic victim of this rampant determination to see the country, and the world, through rose-colored spectacles.

The Family of Man reflected, and reinforced, this sunny vision of humanity; Steichen’s romantic ideology perfectly coincided with what the public wanted to hear, and see.

Steichen demonstrated his notion of the oneness of Mankind by sorting the photographs in sections, each one of which shows people of varied races and nationalities engaged in similar kinds of activity. In order of the exhibition, it is discovered that people fall in love, get married, have children, go to work, while the children go to school, enjoy themselves by singing and dancing, eat and drink and then they die. But Mankind survives and the exhibition closes with romping children and, last of all, in Eugene Smith’s “Walk to Paradise Garden,” depicting his own children emerging from darkness into glorious sunshine.

Steichen’s effigy of the human race is virtuous, patient, loving, pious, hard-working, and noble. It endures the threat of extinction (represented by a single image: a color photograph of an atomic explosion) and emerges into a Utopia populated by happy children. Voilà. Mankind is not only all one, it is all good.

Critics of *The Family of Man* did not need to stretch their faculties in order to discover that this view of humanity was slightly myopic. And it was Steichen’s ideology, his illusionary image of the world (not as it was, but as he wanted to believe it was) that made photographers uncomfortable with, or embarrassed by, the exhibition. Steichen, the intellectual/artistic giant of contemporaneous photography, was seen as a simple (some claimed: simple-minded) romantic of pygmy political acumen.

A few critics were incensed beyond mere embarrassment, considering Steichen’s view of mankind to be both artistically and politically dangerous. Perhaps the most cogent and lucid of these critics was Hilton Kramer. Writing under the title “The World’s Most Talked About Photographs” (*Commentary*, October 1955), he lambasted the exhibition which “embodies all that is most facile, abstract, sentimental, and rhetorical in liberal ideology”; he castigates “the vacancy of thought which characterizes this nation of ‘relatedness’”; he reminds us “of how little reality is represented in this visual morality

play”; he regrets that photography is peculiarly vulnerable to “this sort of ideological infection”; and he is disheartened to see that “artistic values of photography tumble so easily into the vulgar ideological postures.”

But this is more than artistic quibbling, insists Kramer. Steichen’s use of photography in *The Family of Man* has far more important, political, repercussions:

(It is) a self-congratulatory means for obscuring under a blanket of ideology which takes for granted the essential goodness, innocence, and moral superiority of the international “little man”, “the man in the street,” the abstract, disembodied hero of a world-view which regards itself as superior to mere politics. “The Family of Man” is thus a reassertion in visual terms of all that has been discredited in progressive ideology.

The political ramifications implicit in Steichen’s show deserve closer scrutiny, but they are not relevant in this context except to note the outer fringe of criticism. It would also be unfair to note photographers/critics reactions to the exhibition without off-setting Kramer’s political agitation with a more enthusiastic response. The painter Ben Shahn (who appears as a photographer in *The Family of Man*) was quoted in the American Artist (May 1955):

Let us also note that it is not at all surprising that the public turns to the Steichen show with such undivided enthusiasm. The reason is, I am sure, that the public is impatient for some exercise of its faculties; it is hungry for thinking, for feeling, for real experience; it is eager for some new philosophical outlook, for new kinds of truth; it wants contact with live minds; it wants to feel compassion; it wants to grow emotionally and intellectually; it wants to live. In past times all this has been largely the function of art. If art today repudiates this role, can we wonder that the public turns to photography . . . ?

In conclusion: there are no conclusions.

Photographers will continue to view *The Family of Man* with some feelings of trepidation in that it raises questions about the artistic, social, cultural and political roles of the medium which have yet to be answered. Indeed, *The Family of Man* is a microcosm of all the issues which have haunted photography throughout its history. And that is why the exhibition is so unsettling to photographers. To “the man in the street” these issues are irrelevant: he/she continues to enjoy the show. Perhaps Steichen was right. Perhaps his “devoted love and faith in man” was not so naive after all. Perhaps, among the more than 9 million viewers, some lives were irrevocably changed. Perhaps, therefore, the world today, for all its faults, is marginally more peaceful, secure and happy because of the ideals shared through the exhibition’s images.

I, for one, am willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

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