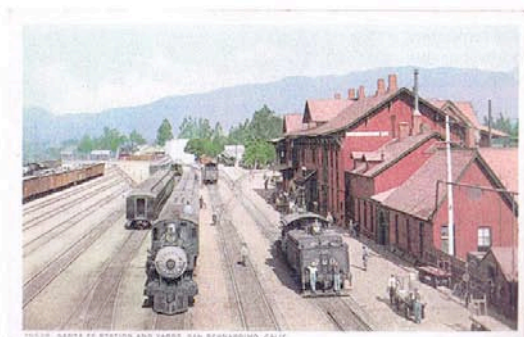


Ruppersberg, Allen. "Best of 2009: Walker Evans, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York." *Artforum* (December 2009), p. 188-191.



BEST OF 2009

# Walker Evans

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG



**JIMMY STEWART AND THE PICTURE POSTCARD** are both gone. Stewart is, of course, preserved on celluloid in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the postcard persists in a sort of half-life, circulating around dusty tourist areas nobody goes to anymore. But both are still essentially dead.

The postcard—that cheap, common image-object—came into existence around the turn of the century (there are said to have been seven hundred million sent in 1903 alone) and lasted another sixty-some years before it slowly began to disappear. Now those little pictures of everything you wanted to see are just another midrange collectible on the nostalgia circuit.

I expected to see postcards in a show titled “Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard,” curated at the Met by Jeff L. Rosenheim, but maybe not ones with quite the singular beauty I found there.

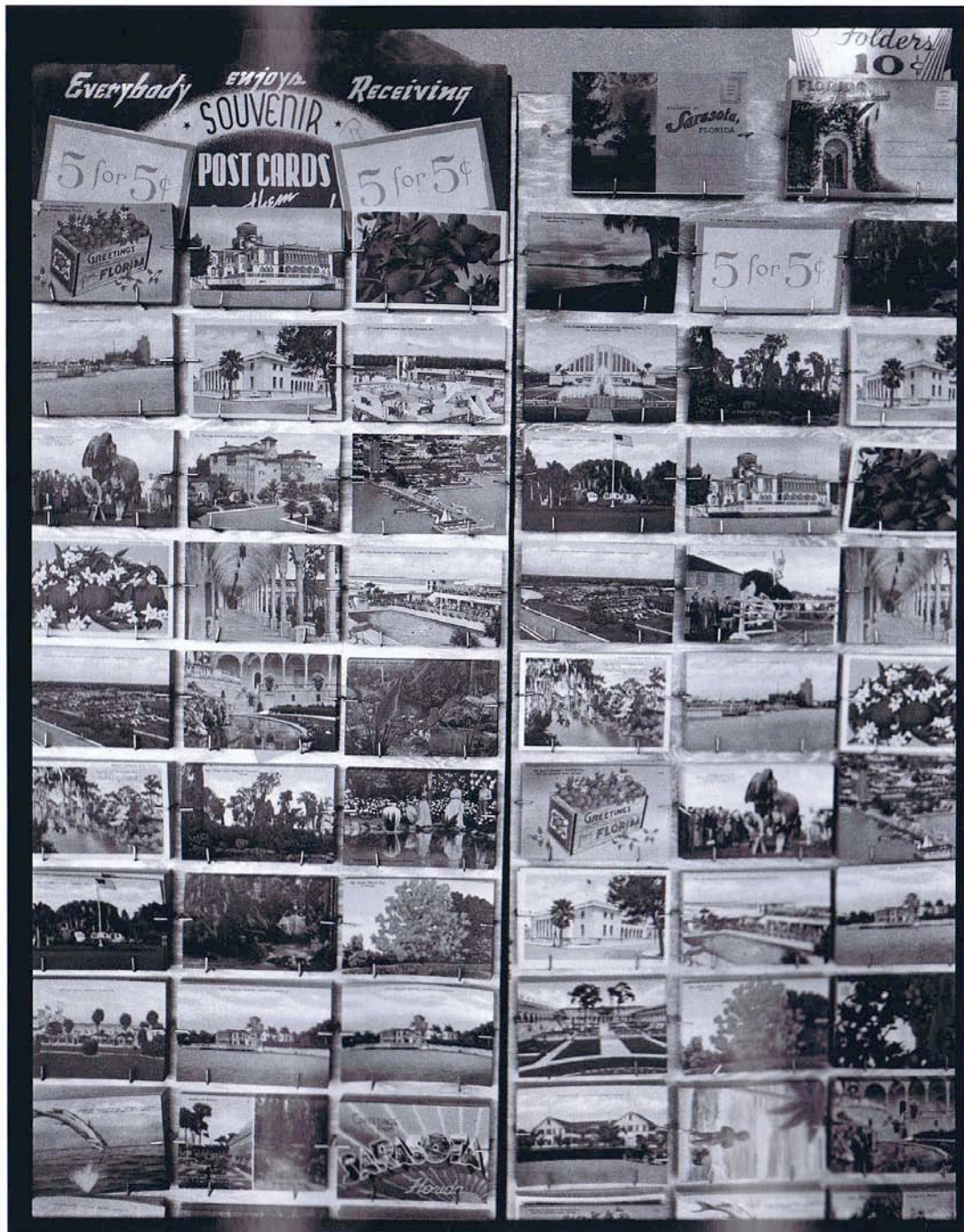
In her review of the show, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith wrote: “Before he was anything else, Evans was an obsessed collector of postcards. This exhibition reveals them as the through line, the well-spring of his art.” Perhaps because I had read the review before I saw the show, this through line—well-spring idea loomed large in my mind. By the time I got to the museum, I had translated the notion into a kind of mantra that went something like: You can see how art is made.

I have seen numerous shows mixing artworks and ephemera from an artist’s career, but I had never really sensed their deep-seated relation in a single artist’s exhibition, no matter how well focused it was. That all changed when I saw this exhibition. It presented walls of gridded postcards grouped by subject, according to Evans’s own categories, and culled from the Met’s archive of the artist’s material. Scattered throughout was a small selection of his work. What was so clearly evident in this juxtaposition was the profound visual and poetic connection between the postcards Evans began to collect as a boy and his work as an artist, its lasting influence and quality. I was dumbstruck by the simplicity of the argument before me.

This page, left, from top: Artist unknown, Bird-eye view of Lincoln, NE, ca. 1906, postcard, 3 1/8 x 5 1/2". All postcards: Walker Evans Archive/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Artist unknown, Main Street, showing Confederate monument, Lenoir, NC, 1930s, postcard, 3 1/2 x 5 1/2". Artist unknown, Tennessee Coal, Iron & R. R. Co.'s steel mills, Ensley, AL, 1920s, postcard, 3 1/8 x 5 1/2". Artist unknown, Santa Fe station and yards, San Bernardino, CA, ca. 1910, postcard, 3 1/8 x 5 1/2". This page, right: Jimmy Stewart shopping for postcards, Santa Fe, NM, 1954. Photo: Gereghly/Columbia Pictures Corp.



This page: Walker Evans, *[Street Scene, Morgan City, Louisiana]*, 1935, film negative.  
All works by Walker Evans: © The Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



**COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS** are fascinating. String collectors, button collectors, tractor collectors, newspaper collectors, record collectors, book collectors, stamp—well, maybe not stamp collectors—all seem to see something that others don't initially value and then toss it back in some way to show you what you missed the first time around. Artists, as we know, are notorious collectors, but you always wonder what came first, the chicken or the egg. The Met's exhibition went a long way in providing an answer to this magical question by, in this case, privileging collection over artwork.

As I left the show, I wondered whether other viewers could see the hand and glove as clearly as I did. Maybe I reacted so strongly because there was a parallel to my own experience, a reconfirmation of intuitions I had a long time ago as a young artist, and this enabled me to make what seemed an easy step.

But where did I learn this vocabulary of the ordinary, of the details of life found in an Evans photograph or a postcard of a small-town street scene? How and where did I come across the poetic beauty of curtains blowing from a window in a house planted in the corner of a photograph? Or of a man looking at a car next to an old gas pump? Or of an empty restaurant with a cook looking out from the kitchen as if he had just woken up on another planet?

I have to go into a little autobiography to answer these questions. When I was a young artist looking for a subject and a style, I began to collect postcards, without knowledge of Evans's penchant for the genre. They were available everywhere and they were cheap. Six for a quarter, new. And they had the anti-aesthetic qualities that I was looking for. The discovery of these images, often in the very place pictured on the card, and the accumulation of them (six thousand when I stopped) became a kind of conceptual touchstone for where I wanted to go as an artist. Some of the questions that I asked myself when looking at a postcard image were: Why was this picture taken? Why from this angle and not another? Why this time of day? Looking at them over and over again for years contributed to a visual style that continues even now.

The postcard records a fact of some kind. And just as in all photographic recording, there is a choice of subject matter, a certain distance from the camera, and all the other multiple decisions and details we see in the work of any artist. Chance and luck are found in both the postcard and the fine print. There is the occasional ordinary into the extraordinary in the postcard or the artwork. There is always a mystery there, the same sense of mystery Evans placed in his own work. The influence of this enigma on the last generation of artists goes without saying. I was primed for Evans by the same sources that had so obviously formed his vision: artless, authorless, non-art, generic, simple, and pure photographs. The disappearance of the postcard—and all the ordinary and generic views taken (in this case in the US) by countless photographers documenting their surroundings for a few bucks—will leave something missing for the next generation of artists looking for a way to picture their world and to move forward in whatever genre of art they choose.

In a 1964 lecture at Yale, Evans spoke of a "lyric" quality in his postcards (which he used to illustrate the talk itself), a quality that exists in spades in his own work. The mass-produced, overlooked, unconscious beauty of the postcard and its influence on contemporary photography (and I won't even mention "Conceptual Photography") is what this exhibition presented so clearly to me.

One still hopes that if there is enough of something, it will last forever. Here are a few examples from my own collection. □

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Opposite page: Walker Evans. *Postcard Display, Florida*, 1941, film negative. This page: Postcards from the collection of artist Allen Ruppersberg.