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Photographer Harry Callahan Centennial Celebrated at the National Gallery of Art, Washington October 2, 2011–March 4, 2012



Harry Callahan, *Eleanor, Chicago*, 1948

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Joyce and Robert Menschel

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Washington, DC—The year 2012 marks the centenary of the birth of Harry Callahan (1912–1999), whose highly experimental, visually daring, and elegant photographs made him one of the most innovative artists of the 20th century.

On view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art from October 2, 2011, through March 4, 2012, ***Harry Callahan at 100*** will explore all facets of his work in some 100 photographs, from its genesis in the early 1940s Detroit to its flowering in Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s, and finally to its maturation in Providence and Atlanta from the 1960s through the 1990s. In 1996, the Gallery organized the exhibition ***Harry Callahan***, which traveled to Philadelphia, Atlanta, Detroit, and

Chicago, and included numerous works on loan from the artist.

"Using the rich holdings of the Gallery's own collection of Callahan's work, as well as a large collection of photographs on long-term loan from the artist's widow, the exhibition will reveal the remarkable consistency of his vision and will demonstrate how his strong, inventive formal language repeatedly enriched his art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the Trellis Fund.

The Exhibition

Organized thematically and chronologically, *Harry Callahan at 100* will examine Callahan's work in relation to the places where he lived and to his family, unveiling his unparalleled devotion to both his subjects and the medium of photography.

In his earliest photographs made in and around Detroit, Callahan explored the limits of the camera, constructing photographs of multiple exposures in both black-and-white and color. In works such as *Twig in Snow* (c. 1942) and *Store Front and Reflections* (c. 1943), he sought to capture simultaneously the simplicity and complexity of nature and the theater of urban life.

Callahan continued his aesthetic and technical experiments through photographs of his wife, Eleanor. His nudes play with dramatic contrasts of light and dark: his layered multiple exposures reveal Eleanor's body against landscapes and frosted glass windows (*Eleanor, Chicago*, 1948). His photographs of his wife and their daughter, Barbara, in the lake, the city, and the woods (*Eleanor and Barbara, Lake Michigan*, c. 1953) exploit the spontaneity and intimacy of snapshots—yet, paradoxically, were made with a large, cumbersome 8- x 10-inch view camera.

Callahan's twin interests in the city and the land expanded during his years in Chicago and Providence, where he created both spare and evocative photographs of the natural landscape and complex compositions of urban architecture and pedestrians. He began to document anonymous women on the streets of Chicago, first in close shots of squinting eyes, open mouths, and downcast faces seen in

Chicago (1950), then in full-figure shots from a low angle that feature the women against backgrounds of skyscrapers and flagpoles, as in *Chicago* (1961).

In the 1970s Callahan returned to color photography, continuing to push the boundaries of the medium, seen in the well-known *Providence* (1977). Taken in Atlanta and during travels abroad, his late photographs emphasized vibrant colors, long shadows, and the complex humanity of urban life, seen in *Morocco* (1981) and *Atlanta* (1985).

Harry Callahan (1912–1999)

Born in Detroit in 1912, Callahan began to photograph in 1938. Although he received no formal training in the medium, his exceptional talent was immediately recognized. In 1946 László Moholy-Nagy hired him to teach at the Institute of Design in Chicago. There and at the Rhode Island School of Design (he moved to Providence in 1961) he taught generations of younger photographers, inspiring them both with the creativity of his vision and his steadfast commitment to the medium. In a career that spanned nearly six decades, he repeatedly explored a few select themes—his wife Eleanor and daughter Barbara, nature, and the urban environment. Yet each time he returned to a familiar subject, he reinvented it, endowing each photograph with both a personal and symbolic significance.

Curator

The exhibition curator is Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art.

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General Information

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Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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Backgrounder: The Collection of Photographs at The National Gallery of Art, Washington

The National Gallery of Art's collection of over 8,000 photographs encompasses the history of the medium, from its beginnings in 1839 to the present, and concentrates on the finest examples by the medium's masters. In December 1948, when Georgia O'Keeffe was deciding where to place the largest and most important collection of photographs by her late husband, Alfred Stieglitz, the seminal American photographer, she visited the Gallery. With keen observation and astute judgment, she noted both small details as well as the larger symbolic importance of the newly opened museum. The Gallery, she wrote to a friend a few days later, "as you probably know, hasn't a speck of dust anywhere." More significantly, though, she realized that "Stieglitz worked for the recognition of photography as a fine art--the National Gallery means something in relation to that." The museum, she concluded, "seems like a peak--something finished--standing alone." With that auspicious visit, the National Gallery inaugurated its collection of photographs.

Collection Begins with Stieglitz "Key Set"

In 1949 Georgia O'Keeffe and the Alfred Stieglitz Estate donated 1,311 photographs by Stieglitz and placed on deposit a remarkable collection of 331 portraits of O'Keeffe, which were later given to the Gallery in 1980. The Gallery's Stieglitz collection, known as the "Key Set," is an unparalleled selection of his photographs, containing at least one print of every mounted photograph in Stieglitz's possession at the time of his death. Carefully selected by O'Keeffe to include the finest examples of his work, it thoroughly documents all aspects of his seminal contribution to the art of photography. This remarkable collection--the world's largest--includes over 300 of his evocative studies of clouds, called *Equivalents*, made from 1922 to 1937, and over 170 portraits of his friends and colleagues from throughout his career. Other

highlights are exceptionally rare examples of Stieglitz's earliest work made in Europe in the 1880s and 1890s, as well as studies of New York from the 1890s through the 1930s.

In 1990, a separate department of photographs was established, and since then the Gallery has expanded its holdings of photographs beyond the Stieglitz collection and now has work representing the finest examples of the art of photography from the last 160 years by more than 180 photographers.

19th-Century Holdings

Among the earliest works in the collection are a small but choice group of photographs by the inventor of the medium, William Henry Fox Talbot. A remarkably talented individual with exceptionally broad interests, Talbot, frustrated by his inability to draw on his honeymoon trip to Italy, embarked on a series of experiments in the 1830s to fix permanently the image of nature. One of his early works was *Orléans Cathedral* (1843), a photograph he made on a trip to France in 1843. With its delicate architectural details and its bold framing and composition, this photograph demonstrates Talbot's fascination not only with photography's ability to record the world, but also with the camera's gift to see it in new and exciting ways. Other important 19th-century British photographers represented in the Gallery's collection include Julia Margaret Cameron, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Roger Fenton, Francis Frith, and Peter Henry Emerson. Cameron's photograph of her niece, *Julia Jackson* (1867), is one of one of the many powerful portraits of her friends and family for which she was celebrated.

The Gallery's collection also has fine examples by the first generation of 19th-century French photographers, including Gustave Le Gray, Charles Nègre, Henri Le Secq, Édouard-Denis Baldus, and Charles Marville. Many of these early photographers were trained as painters and brought highly refined aesthetic sensibilities to the new art of photography. Le Gray's *Beech Tree, Forest of Fontainebleau* (c. 1856), with its broad expanses of light and shade and its evocative description of an ancient tree whose roots are barely connected to the earth below, succinctly represents the approach and concerns of many of these early French photographers. Nadar's study of the painter and caricaturist *Honoré Daumier* (1856–1858) is another masterpiece from this period. Although Nadar was celebrated for his portraits of the rich and

famous personages of the Third Empire in France, he depicted his friend and colleague wearing a simple peasant's jacket, thus demonstrating Daumier's touching humility.

20th-Century Photographers

Among the greatest strengths of the collection are large and important groups of photographs by several major 20th-century American practitioners: Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Frederick Sommer, Robert Frank, Harry Callahan, and Lee Friedlander. Modeled after the Stieglitz collection, these holdings include works from throughout each photographer's career and illustrate all aspects of their important contributions. For example, the Paul Strand collection contains not only the earliest known print of his groundbreaking modernist photograph *The White Fence* (1916), as well as his compelling urban studies, such as *People, Streets of New York, 83rd and West End Avenue* (1916), but also superb examples of his nature studies from the 1920s, his views of both New Mexico and Mexico in the 1930s, his studies of New England from the 1940s, and his photographs of Italy, France, and the Hebrides from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s.

The core of the Ansel Adams collection is the "Museum Set," a selection of 75 photographs made by the photographer himself to represent his finest landscape photographs from the early 1920s through the 1960s, such as *The Tetons and the Snake River* (1942), which encapsulates the monumentality of the American West.

The Walker Evans holdings include significant examples of his work, from his earliest studies of New York City made in the late 1930s to some of his last Polaroids from the 1970s, and are distinguished by a large and important group of his photographs made in New York subways between 1938 and 1941.

The Robert Frank collection is equally as impressive. Including many unique and rare works from the beginning of his career as a photojournalist in Switzerland in the 1940s, up to his most personal and evocative studies of the early 1990s, this collection contains all of the photographs from his 1989 retrospective survey *The Lines of My Hand*. It also includes bound volumes of photographs, such as *Peru* (1948), and *Black, White, and Things* (1952), as well as all of the contact prints for his seminal publication, *The Americans* (1958/1959), and supplementary work

prints.

Other important photographers whose works have come into the collection include the renowned Hungarian-born American photographer, André Kertész, Soviet photographer Alexander Rodchenko, and American postwar photographers Harry Callahan, Irving Penn, and Lee Friedlander. The Friedlander holdings include the only complete set of vintage prints he made for his book *Self-Portrait* (1970) and a complete set of prints for his book, *Lee Friedlander* (2000).

More contemporary photographs have also been added to the collection including, most recently, a James Casebere work, *Sing Sing* (1992), and a group of photographs by Richard Misrach. The Gallery also expanded its holdings of photographs from the first half of the 20th century with acquisitions of more than 30 photographs by Eugène Atget and Charles Sheeler's images of his house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. A significant collection of works by women photographers, such as Berenice Abbott, Ilse Bing, Lotte Jacobi, Alma Lavenson, and Marvin Breckinridge Patterson were also added to the collection.

With the opening of five new galleries for the permanent display of photographs in the West Building, these works, as well as others from the rapidly growing photography collection, will often be on view in temporary exhibitions at the Gallery. However, because photographs are fragile and subject to deterioration if exposed to light and atmosphere for extended periods of time, they are stored at other times. Each year numerous visitors--students, scholars, as well as the general public--take advantage of the Gallery's Photograph Study Room and are given the opportunity to examine and enjoy these important examples of the art of photography. Photographs not on view can be seen by appointment only by calling the Department of Photographs at (202) 842-6144.

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*[Note: This article is an updated version of an essay by Sarah Greenough, curator and head, Department of Photographs, National Gallery of Art, which first appeared in National Gallery of Art, Washington, a special issue of **Connaissance des Arts** (2000).]*

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