

***The Family of Man* and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America**

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In the early spring of 1955, more than a quarter million people streamed through the doors of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They came to immerse themselves in *The Family of Man*. An exhibition of 503 photographs of men, women, and children, made by 273 photographers from around the world and selected by photographer Edward Steichen and his assistant, Wayne Miller, *The Family of Man* filled the entire second floor of the museum. A series of temporary walls designed by architect Paul Rudolph channeled visitors through the images, allowing them to move at their own pace, to pause where they liked, and to pool at pictures of particular interest. Visitors gazed at photographs of children dancing, families gathering, and men and women of myriad nations working, walking, marrying, fighting. Some pictures dangled from wires overhead, some hung from poles, and at least one faced downward from the ceiling. Some filled entire walls, while others were as small as a handbill. Together, the installation and the images left few places where visitors could turn and not encounter a picture of another person doing something they were likely to recognize.

The Family of Man quickly became one of the most popular exhibitions in

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the museum's history and quite likely the most widely seen collection of photographs ever created. In the wake of its run at the Museum of Modern Art, copies of the show traveled around the United States and, thanks to funding from the United States Information Agency (USIA), to thirty-seven foreign countries as well. The USIA estimates that more than 7.5 million visitors saw the exhibition abroad in the ten years after it opened in New York.¹ By 1978 the exhibition catalog had sold more than 5 million copies, and it remains in print today. Since 1994 the exhibition has even enjoyed a permanent home in a castle in Clervaux, Luxembourg.

In the decades since it first appeared, however, *The Family of Man* has also become a whipping boy for middlebrow midcentury aesthetics and for an oppressive view of the public that it ostensibly encoded. Since the early 1970s, critics have attacked the show as a species of American mythology (Roland Barthes), an attempt to paper over problems of race and class (Christopher Phillips, John Berger, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau), and even an act of aesthetic colonialism (Allan Sekula).² These critiques in turn have rested on two kinds of claims, one about the exhibition and another about the sort of public it represents. First, even the most sympathetic analysts of recent years have argued that the show was essentially a *Life* magazine photo-essay writ large. In this view, Steichen and his

1. John Szarkowski, "The Family of Man," in John Szarkowski and Museum of Modern Art (New York), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-century at Home and Abroad* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 13.

2. Roland Barthes, "La grande famille des hommes" ("The Great Family of Man"), in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 173–76; Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October*, no. 22 (1982): 27–63; John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "'The Family of Man': Den Humanismus für ein postmodernes Zeitalter aufpolieren" ("The Family of Man': Refurbishing Humanism for a Postmodern Age"), in *"The Family of Man," 1955–2001: Humanismus und Postmoderne; eine Revision von Edward Steichens Fotoausstellung ("The Family of Man," 1955–2001: Humanism and Postmodernism; a Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen)*, ed. Jean Back and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (Marburg, Germany: Jonas, 2004), 28–55; Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 15–21. For a summary and analysis of critical responses to the show to 1999, see Monique Berlier, "The Family of Man: Readings of an Exhibition," in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, ed. Bonnie Brennan and Hanno Hardt (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 206–41. For a recent collection of essays on related themes, see Back and Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *"The Family of Man," 1955–2001*. There have been two particularly important exceptions to the string of highly critical responses to the exhibition. For a nuanced discussion of the political and cultural context in which the show appeared, see Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: "The Family of Man" and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995). For a persuasive reading of the exhibition's images in relation to one another and of the show's efforts to foster a new globalist subjectivity, see Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

colleagues arrayed their images like words in a sentence so as to deliver a particular message to a relatively passive audience. Second, critics have suggested that the images chosen for the exhibition, coupled with their arrangement at the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere, sought to contain problems of sexual and racial difference within the symbolic confines of the nuclear family. And third, since the USIA sponsored its travels, some have implied that *The Family of Man* belongs alongside covert violence, puppet governments, and military invasions as a tool of American imperialism.

Without for a moment denying *The Family of Man*'s middlebrow aesthetics or the facts of racial, sexual, and political repression in 1950s America, I want to scrape away several decades' worth of critical disdain and illuminate a deeply democratic, even utopian, impulse that drove the show and much of the early audience response to it. I particularly want to revisit the antiauthoritarian politics behind its design and the modes of attention it solicited from visitors. Though recent critics have depicted the exhibition as a sort of visual monolith, bent on delivering a pro-American message, Steichen and his audience saw the show as something very different. At the start of World War II and again at the start of the Cold War, the intellectuals, artists, and policy makers Steichen traveled among saw the rise of authoritarianism as a simultaneously social and psychological problem. In totalitarian countries, they argued, mass media delivered propaganda messages directly from the mouths of dictators; as a result, they undermined their citizens' abilities to reason and transformed them into automatons. When Steichen and his team designed *The Family of Man*, they sought to build a media environment that would have the opposite effect. He and his designers presented viewers with an array of images, displayed in varied sizes, at different heights, and at all angles. This heterogeneous form of installation asked viewers to follow their own course among the images, to focus on the pictures that were most meaningful to them, and to knit their subjects into the fabric of their own personalities.

Analysts at the time saw this sort of perceptual and psychological work as a foundation of what they called the "democratic personality."³ In 1955 sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists largely agreed: each society had its own, dominant personality type.⁴ Authoritarian (i.e., fascist and communist) nations

3. Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 53, 186.

4. This belief grew largely from what was known as the "culture and personality" school of anthropology. For an overview of this school's impact on ideas of mind and state in the period, see Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 33–52. For a bibliography of works by school members, see Bert Kaplan, "A Survey of Culture and Personality Theory and Research," in *Studying Personality Cross-Culturally*, ed. Bert Kaplan (Evanston, Ill.: Row Peterson, 1961), 9–90.

tended to be built around authoritarian individuals; democratic countries tended to be built around a more open, more tolerant, more rational alternative. In both cases, sustaining a particular form of government required promoting a particular state of mind. To that end, Steichen and his colleagues hoped to find a way to help Americans embrace their differences and to make them the basis of national unity. *The Family of Man* thus became less a vehicle for a single message than a three-dimensional arena in which visitors could practice acts of mutual recognition, choice, and empathy—the core perceptual and affective skills on which democracy depended.

From a half century away, however, we can also recognize the exhibition as a fulcrum moment in the development of an increasingly ubiquitous mode of media power. Even as Steichen gave Americans what he and they saw as a democratic degree of freedom in relation to imagery and so to one another, he asked them to pursue their individual experiences within collective terms set by his own aesthetic expertise. Though visitors moved at their own pace through the galleries, though they could enjoy an enormous variety of visual opportunities for pleasure and engagement with others both like and unlike themselves, they also made their choices in terms that had been set for them, long before they entered the room. In other words, even as it freed Americans from the massifying effects of totalitarianism and its media, *The Family of Man* invited them to adjust themselves to a softer but equally pervasive system of management.

Such invitations to construct identities in terms set by the media around us have become commonplace today. And they point to a paradox: even as *The Family of Man* championed a far more open, tolerant, and diverse society than we remember, it also helped deliver us into a world in which media constantly ask us to manage ourselves in terms set by faraway others.

Making *The Family of Man*: The Official History

Before we can explore the exhibition's role as a precursor to contemporary media forms, we need to revisit the now-canonical story of its creation. As told by the never-modest Steichen and the many journalists and historians who have followed his lead, *The Family of Man* emerged primarily out of Steichen's own heroic impulses. One of the best-known American photographers of the early twentieth century, a chronicler of America's artistic and corporate elites, and, from 1947 to 1962, the director of the Museum of Modern Art's Photography Department, Steichen was in his midseventies when he started working on *The Family of*

Man. He came to do the show, he later claimed, because earlier exhibitions that he had organized had failed to spark antiwar activism. During World War II, Steichen served as the head of a navy photographic team and also staged two large and popular photography exhibitions designed to boost American morale: *Road to Victory* in 1942 and *Power in the Pacific* in 1945, both at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1951 Steichen organized a third exhibition at the museum focused on combat, *Korea—the Impact of War in Photographs*. He hoped these shows would help viewers come to hate warfare, but they didn't:

Although I had presented war in all its grimness in three exhibitions, I had failed to accomplish my mission. I had not incited people into taking open and united action against war itself. . . . What was wrong? I came to the conclusion that I had been working from a negative approach, that what was needed was a positive statement on what a wonderful thing life was, how marvelous people were, and, above all, how alike people were in all parts of the world.⁵

In the wake of his Korean War exhibition, Steichen began scouting for images to include in such a project. He and Miller scoured the files of the Farm Security Administration (FSA); the National Archives; the Library of Congress; photo agencies such as Black Star, Magnum, and the Soviet Union's SovFoto; and magazines including *Life* and *Seventeen*.⁶ Steichen also traveled to Europe seeking images. He reached out to friends such as Dorothea Lange, a foremost FSA photographer, and they in turn promoted the project among their colleagues. In a 1953 recruiting letter headlined "A Summons to Photographers All Over the World," for instance, Lange told her peers that the exhibition would "show Man to Man across the world. Here we hope to reveal by visual images Man's dreams and aspirations, his strength, his despair under evil. If photography can bring these things to life, this exhibition will be created in a spirit of passionate and devoted faith in Man. Nothing short of that will do."⁷

In a draft of this letter, Lange listed thirty-three terms that she thought might inspire her colleagues. They still serve as a convenient map of the conceptual field within which she and Steichen were working:

5. Edward Steichen, "The Museum of Modern Art and 'The Family of Man,'" in *A Life in Photography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), chap. 13.

6. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, 41.

7. Dorothea Lange, letter, January 16, 1953, quoted in Szarkowski, "The Family of Man," 24.

Public Culture

Man	Friends	Government
Universal	Work	Competition
Timeless	Home	Invention
Love	Worship	Beauty
Create	Peace	Migration
Birth	Conflict	Fear
Death	Abode	Hope
Family	Hunger	Cooperation
Word	Pestilence	Dream
Father	Communication	Woman
Mother	Ancesters [sic]	Descendents [sic] ⁸

With the assistance of Lange and many others, Steichen and Miller ultimately reviewed 2 million images. They winnowed these to 10,000 and then, working in a small loft on Fifty-Second Street, to the 503 photographs that ultimately hung in the museum. Steichen all but prohibited abstract images from the exhibition. Instead, he drew primarily on the realistic snapshot aesthetics of contemporary photojournalism. Steichen and Miller's final selection included images by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Robert Capa, and Lange; it also featured images by photographers who through less mainstream work were soon to make their names, such as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, and Bill Brandt. Steichen thumbed through literature and journalism too, seeking quotations to accompany the images on the museum's walls. He turned to his brother-in-law, poet Carl Sandburg, for help. Sandburg wrote a prologue for the exhibition; its walls ultimately also featured passages from the Bible, Navajo Indian lore, and even the writings of acerbic philosopher Bertrand Russell.

When the exhibition finally opened in 1955, the museum and the press made a great deal of Steichen and Miller's editorial efforts. Most reviewers loved the show. Many lauded Steichen as a sort of author, who spoke in what he and reviewers alike called the "universal language" of photography, and the exhibition as a text, an essay even.⁹ Over the years, however, critics have come to decry what they see as Steichen's transposition of the photo-essay from magazine page to museum wall. For the past forty years at least, most have agreed with journalist Russell Lynes's 1973 account, in which he wrote that *The Family of Man* "was a vast photo-essay, a literary formula basically, with much of the emotional and

8. Lange, letter, January 16, 1953, 24.

9. Photography, said Steichen, "communicates equally to everybody throughout the world. It is the only universal language we have, the only one requiring no translation." Edward Steichen, "Photography: Witness and Recorder of History," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 41, no. 3 (1958): 160.

visual quality provided by sheer bigness of the blow-ups and its rather sententious message sharpened by juxtaposition of opposites — wheat-fields and landscapes of boulders, peasants and patricians, a sort of ‘look at all these nice folks in all these strange places who belong to this family.’”¹⁰

In the post-1960s writings of Lynes and others, the notion that the exhibition was an essay and the implication that Steichen was its “author” have supported the idea that the show modeled the conformity of 1950s American culture rather than the identity-centered diversity of later decades. In these accounts, Steichen has become a patriarch, the curatorial equivalent of a Cold War politician, manipulating his audience with bombast. His power resides principally in the images he has selected. The manner of their installation at the Museum of Modern Art goes largely unanalyzed. Their audience, largely absent, can present no explanation for the show’s unceasing appeal. Melted down into the anonymity of attendance figures, those who visited the exhibition and bought the book become dupes: unlike the citizens of parti-colored post-countercultural 1973 or, for that matter, our own more networked era, the museum visitors of 1955 remain trapped in black and white in an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*. “Look at all these nice folks . . . who belong to this family” indeed.

A New Genealogy

Since the 1960s, critics have also tended to view the exhibition as an act of instrumental Cold War propaganda — for a heterosexual, racist, class-hardened way of life in America, and for that way of life abroad. Yet *The Family of Man* did not emerge solely in response to the cultural politics of the 1950s. Rather, it grew as much, if not more, from the cultural politics of the early 1940s. As several art historians have noted, the design and installation of *The Family of Man* owe a great deal to the 1942 propaganda exhibition that Steichen organized at the Museum of Modern Art titled *Road to Victory*.¹¹ Though some have used that connection to suggest that *The Family of Man* was just another propaganda show, such arguments ignore the intellectual context of the early 1940s out of which *Road to Vic-*

10. Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 325.

11. See Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, 44; and Stimson, *Pivot of the World*, 83–84. See also Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 207–60; and Jorge Ribalta, *Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, and Museu Colecció Berardo, Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to the Family of Man, 1928–55* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2008), 350–60, 416–32.

tory emerged. By revisiting that context, we can restore the long-forgotten links between the aesthetics of *Road to Victory* and *The Family of Man*, the psychology of what was then called the “democratic personality,” and the ideal of a simultaneously diverse and unified American public. In light of this history, *The Family of Man* looks far less like an attempt to erase human distinctions than it does an effort to model a mode of governance that might sustain them.

At the start of World War II, American psychologists, sociologists, and even many artists agreed: totalitarianism was a psychological as well as a political condition. Confronted with the question of how nations as cultured as Germany or Italy or Japan could have rallied behind dictators and taken up arms, American intellectuals pointed to authoritarian trends in family structures and in the use of mass media. Most focused on the German case, and many agreed with Frankfurt School refugee Max Horkheimer. Writing immediately after the war, he described the typical German family in the pre-Hitler years as a cauldron of submerged emotion, ruled over by a brutal father—a father whose cruelty was amplified by the economic chaos of the Weimar years. Children in such a family obeyed their father, yet they also looked outside the family, to higher authorities who might give them love, respect, and an economically effective station in the world. Adolf Hitler when he came to power, Horkheimer suggested, became that external, paternal authority, and German citizens became his obedient children. Even as the mass militarization of German society in the 1930s fractured families, the Nazis depicted Germany as a national family, united by shared bloodlines, under assault by racial and sexual inferiors.¹² In 1938 the first sentence of *The Nazi Primer*—a sort of Boy Scout manual for Nazi youth—put it this way: “The foundation of the National Socialist outlook on life is the perception of the unlikeness of men.”¹³

According to Horkheimer and many other analysts at the time, Hitler succeeded in promoting the notion of the nation as a family and enforcing racial and sexual distinctions in large part through the help of mass media. The rise of industrialism had atomized society, and mass media had gradually become a centralized force with which to keep individuals productive within the system as a whole. When Hitler came to power, he appropriated that apparatus, yoked it to terrorism, and dramatically amplified its atomizing effects. Thanks to mass ral-

12. Max Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper, 1949), 359–74.

13. Fritz Brennecke, Paul Gierlichs, William Edward Dodd, Harwood Lawrence Childs, and Hitler-Jugend, *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth*, trans. Harwood Lawrence Childs (New York: Harper, 1938), 5.

lies, radio and film, and the predations of Nazi thugs, wrote Horkheimer, “individuality cracked . . . yielding something that is close to the atomized, anarchic human being.”¹⁴ At the same time, Horkheimer argued, authoritarian mass media offered these broken individual psyches new personality patterns to imitate: in that way, even as it made them more isolated, fascist propaganda bound individual Germans more closely together.

Such views confronted American intellectuals and politicians of the early war years with three intertwined problems. First, they reminded Americans that fascists might come to power here as well. In the late 1930s, uniformed fascists could be seen on American streets and their voices could be heard echoing over the airwaves. The Catholic demagogue Father Charles Coughlin, for example, endorsed and helped publish the anti-Semitic tract known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. By 1938 his spewing of anti-Semitic and pro-fascist propaganda could be heard by a regular audience of 3.5 million radio listeners. A Gallup poll taken in January 1939 reported that some 67 percent of these listeners agreed with his views.¹⁵ Second, such views forced white American intellectuals to acknowledge the omnipresence of racial prejudice in their country. In 1940, for instance, the widely read anthropologist Ruth Benedict became an early voice in what would soon swell to a chorus of calls for an end to racism in the United States. In a book titled *Race: Science and Politics*, Benedict dissected and dismissed fascist claims for the scientific basis of racism, overseas and in America, and called for racial equality in the United States. “Our founding fathers believed that a nation could be administered without creating victims,” she argued. “It is for us to prove that they were not mistaken.”¹⁶ Third, the success of totalitarian propaganda overseas exacerbated a distrust of mass media in the United States. The radio and the print press appeared to have been key weapons in the fascist takeovers of Germany and Italy in particular. Was there something about the mass media themselves, many Americans asked, that tended to de-individualize societies? And if so, might radio and the paper press help undermine American democracy?

These questions took on a new urgency as America entered the fray. How, many

14. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Continuum, 2004), 83.

15. Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 392. Alongside Father Coughlin, Americans could track the activities of William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Legion of America—an anti-Semitic paramilitary group formed in 1933 and modeled after Hitler’s Brown Shirts and Mussolini’s Black Shirts. They could also follow the Crusader White Shirts in Chattanooga, Tennessee; the American National-Socialist Party; and, of course, the Ku Klux Klan. For more than a few Americans in the 1930s, fascists were not merely threats from overseas. They lived next door.

16. Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1940), 256.

analysts and policy makers asked, could an American society riven by racism and class distinctions achieve the unity it would need to defeat the fascist states? Propaganda would undoubtedly be part of the answer, but if it was, how could Americans use media in a way that would not produce the atomizing psychological effects seen in Germany and elsewhere? As Horkheimer would later put it, “Democracy [cannot] hope to emulate totalitarian propaganda, unless it undertakes to compromise the democratic way of life by stimulating destructive unconscious forces.”¹⁷ How, then, could the United States create media that would promote democratic unity without implanting a totalitarian mind-set in American citizens?

The answer to this question would substantially shape the design of *The Family of Man*. To see how, we need to return to the summer of 1940, when Britain and France were already at war with Germany and many Americans feared they would soon join them. In those months, Manhattan became a center for reimagining American media, especially in relationship to the individual personality and to the ideal of democratic morale. At the center of this work was a long-forgotten collection of the era’s leading psychologists, sociologists, and journalists, called the Committee for National Morale. Founded by Arthur Upham Pope, a Manhattan-based curator of Persian art, the committee included journalists Edmond Taylor and Ladislav Farago, psychologists Gordon W. Allport and Kurt Lewin, and anthropologists Ruth Benedict, Gregory Bateson, and Margaret Mead, among more than sixty other affiliates. Members of the committee offered advice to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his cabinet, published widely read reports on German propaganda and strategy, and wrote extensively on morale, for both the popular and the professional press.

The committee paid particular attention to distinguishing fascist from democratic morale. In his 1941 committee-sponsored study *German Psychological Warfare*, for example, Farago pointed out that many Americans believed that “the German is a robot.” In fact, he explained, “the Nazis intend him to be exactly that in the mass-psychological sense.”¹⁸ Committee members largely agreed that totalitarian propaganda worked to divide the emotions from reason. It amplified the emotions and muted the voice of logic. The fascist citizen thus became a fractured person, blown hither and thither by the voice of the Führer, on the winds of feeling alone. Intelligence and will were decoupled, and the self was crippled, as a person and as a citizen.

17. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 82.

18. Ladislav Farago, Lewis Frederick Gittler, Kimball Young, and Committee for National Morale, *German Psychological Warfare* (New York: Committee for National Morale, 1941), 51.

Democratic morale, however, worked to integrate the personality. Emotion and reason, intellect and will, evaluation and action—all could be one. From that integrated, internal psyche, the individual could make the emotionally grounded and rationally informed choices on which democratic action depended. Democratic unity in turn could be found not in the unreasoning mass but in the voluntary gathering of independent individuals behind a single purpose. In a 1942 volume, committee stalwart Allport, a Harvard professor, attempted to define what he called “the nature of democratic morale.” “In a democracy,” he wrote, “every personality can be a citadel of resistance to tyranny. *In the co-ordination of the intelligences and wills of one hundred million ‘whole’ men and women lies the formula for an invincible American morale*” (italics in original).¹⁹

But what kind of media could promote such unity? Allport himself had written in the mid-1930s about the potentially democratizing effects of radio, but by 1941 many analysts associated mass media with potentially totalitarian forms of control.²⁰ These media, they argued, penetrated the unconscious, stirring an irrational desire to fall into line behind the dictatorial power of commercial interests in industrial societies and behind the dictators ruling in Germany, Italy, and Japan. What kind of media, analysts wondered, could stir the reason, integrate the psyche, and so simultaneously help promote individual well-being and democratic solidarity?

Herbert Bayer and *Road to Victory*

The members of the Committee for National Morale could raise but not answer these questions. They were writers, after all, not media makers. As the war got under way, however, the leaders of the Museum of Modern Art took up their challenge. Starting in the late 1930s, the museum became an extraordinary forum for the development of pro-democratic propaganda and for debates about what forms it should take. Within its walls, artists met diplomats, anthropologists developed materials for cultural training, and soldiers sought solace for the psychological wounds of combat. As the war wound on, the museum did direct propaganda work for the government, created and circulated exhibitions that supported Amer-

19. Gordon W. Allport, “The Nature of Democratic Morale,” in *Civilian Morale*, Second Yearbook of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, ed. Goodwin Watson (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), 18, quoted Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 48.

20. Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper and Brothers), 1935.

ican policies, and developed an armed services program to support soldiers in the field and veterans at home.

Of all the work they undertook, museum officials were perhaps proudest of a single exhibition, the 1942 propaganda blockbuster *Road to Victory*. The exhibition “was not only a masterpiece of photographic art but one of the most moving and inspiring exhibitions ever held in the museum,” they recalled at a meeting three years later.²¹ It was also the place at which Steichen first mastered the aesthetic strategies that he would later employ in *The Family of Man*. In the fall of 1941, at the request of museum trustee David McAlpin, Steichen began trolling through thousands of photographs, almost all from government collections. Of the 150 images that Steichen eventually chose, more than 130 came from the FSA.²² The rest came from the army and navy, various press agencies, and several other government bureaus. Like Steichen’s own work at the time, the images tended to be “straight” photography—that is, they depicted their subjects mostly in a head-on, straightforward manner, with clear, sharp lines and a strong documentary flavor. Steichen also recruited Sandburg to create a text for the show. Finally, in what turned out to be an inspired decision, the Museum of Modern Art’s director of exhibitions, Monroe Wheeler, paired these two middlebrow American realists with a representative of the European avant-garde, Bauhaus refugee designer Herbert Bayer.

Before emigrating to the United States in 1938, Bayer had labored in the German Bauhaus as a student and then an instructor of design. He became best known for his work in typography, including his development of the all-lowercase typeface used in many Bauhaus publications. After leaving the Bauhaus in 1928, Bayer also worked as an exhibition designer. In 1930 he and former Bauhaus colleagues Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy designed the German contribution to the *Exposition de la Société des artistes décorateurs* at the Grand Palais in Paris.²³ Bayer was responsible for a display of mass-produced everyday objects. Conventional exhibition practice of the time suggested that Bayer should arrange his objects and images either at eye level or as they might be seen in an actual

21. “The Minutes of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees and Members of the Corporation of the Museum of Modern Art Held on Thursday, November 15, 1945,” in *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, February 1946, 5.

22. Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 135.

23. Paul Overy, “Visions of the Future and the Immediate Past: The Werkbund Exhibition, Paris 1930,” *Journal of Design History* 17, no. 4 (2004): 337–57; Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 25–27.

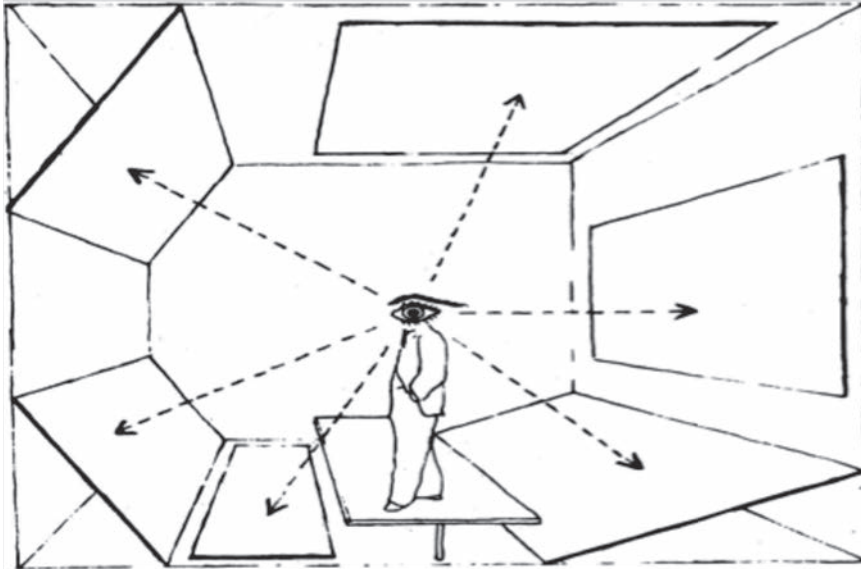


Figure 1 Herbert Bayer, "Diagram of 360 Degrees Field of Vision," 1935.

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living room. This model aimed to ease visitors' perceptual labors: all viewers had to do was to point their eyes in the right direction and they would see what they were intended to see. Exhibition organizers did the work of selecting images and of making them meaningful.

Bayer, however, took a very different tack. Drawing on the insights of gestalt psychology, he had come to believe that viewers should be surrounded, even overwhelmed, by materials. For Bayer, images and artifacts were like puzzle pieces waiting for viewers to put them together into individual patterns—that is, *gestalts*—of their own devising. To illustrate this view, Bayer drew a picture of a man whose head was nothing but a giant eyeball. In front of the man, he drew seventeen screens—some arrayed at eye level, but others angled down from the ceiling, and still others angled up from the ground. Titled "Diagram of Field of Vision," the image was later reprinted in a catalog of the exhibition; by 1935 Bayer had expanded the diagram and fully surrounded his viewer with screens. The "Diagram of Field of Vision" became the basis of Bayer's installation for the Paris exposition. In his gallery of furniture and architecture, Bayer hung rows of chairs from the walls and arrayed enlarged photographs of buildings in front of, above, and beneath the eyes of the spectator.

By today's standards, such an innovation might seem mild, even trivial. From a time in which digital screens bombard us with images from every conceivable angle and in places as diverse as football stadiums, airplanes, and bedrooms, it is difficult to imagine how important Bayer's new strategy actually was. In addition to marking a shift in the techniques of museum display, it embraced and made visible an entirely non-Freudian theory of media reception. Within most accounts of mass media at the time, only the makers of messages enjoyed independent agency in selecting and making meaningful sequences of images and sounds. Their messages entered the minds of their audiences through the trapdoor of the unconscious first spotted by Freud and left those minds fractured and irrational. Within Bayer's extended field of vision, however, fragments of media surrounded viewers—viewers who in turn reached out to the images they saw, selecting, arranging, and integrating them in their minds into their own individual gestalts. In Bayer's work, viewers took charge of both the viewing process and the construction of their psyches. As a result, at least in theory, viewers became more independent and psychologically whole.

At the Bauhaus, this sort of individual integration formed the heart of the curriculum. The founders of the Bauhaus hoped to produce industrial-age artists who could integrate multiple materials into their production and multiple senses into their perceptions. In 1930s Paris, Bayer's extended field of vision transformed the Bauhaus ideal of professional integration into an act of apperception. In New York in 1942, Bayer's field became a tool for the psychological and social integration of a new kind of American citizen. By granting American viewers high degrees of agency with regard to the visual materials around them and at the same time controlling the shape of the field in which they might encounter those materials, Bayer and Steichen could lead them to remake their own morale in terms set by the field around them. That is, American viewers could exercise the individual psychological agency on which democratic society depended and so avoid becoming the numb mass men and women of Nazi Germany. At the same time, they could do so in terms set by the needs of the American state, articulated in the visual diction of Bayer's extended field.

Bayer designed *Road to Victory* as a road, curving through the entire second floor of the Museum of Modern Art and winding by images and texts of varying sizes. When they entered, visitors encountered a floor-to-ceiling photograph of Utah's Bryce Canyon and huge portraits of three Native American men. The words "ROAD TO VICTORY" floated over their heads on nearly invisible wires. A text by Sandburg translated the images into words: "In the beginning was virgin



land and America was promises—and the buffalo by thousands pawed the Great Plains—and the Red Man gave over to an endless tide of white men in endless numbers.” From there, visitors meandered by vistas of grain waving in wide-open fields, to views of small-town life—a farmer carrying a bushel of corn, an image of grain elevators in Montana, a glimpse of a middle-aged woman in front of her clapboard house. Visitors found the sheer number of such images powerful and their meaning clear. Elizabeth McCausland, reviewing the show for the *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, spoke for many visitors when she wrote, “All these are familiar aspects of American life. . . . This is the stuff of which we build a people and its traditions.”²⁴

Having explored the American nation’s roots in its landscape and the character of its people, visitors then moved on to images of the war itself. As they rounded a curve, they came upon a jarring juxtaposition: a huge photograph of a warship exploding at Pearl Harbor, while underneath it, in a separate photograph mounted in a bit of montage, two Japanese government officials laughed above the inscription “Two Faces.” A temporary wall met these images at ninety degrees. On it, an

Figure 2 Albert Fenn, installation view of exhibition *Road to Victory*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

24. Elizabeth McCausland, “Photographs Illustrate Our ‘Road to Victory,’” *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, May 31, 1942, repr. in *Photo Notes*, June 1942, 4.

American farmer looked bravely into the distance. Below him, Bayer, Steichen, and Sandburg had written, “War—they asked for it—now, by the living God, they’ll get it.”

The exhibition then opened onto scenes of American troops in training, of airmen raining down in parachutes on an unseen enemy, and of bombs doing the same. “Smooth and terrible birds of death,” captioned Sandburg, “smooth they fly, terrible their spit of flame, their hammering cry, ‘Here’s lead in your guts.’” Visitors passed vistas of American warships, sailing on windblown, choppy seas—in Sandburg’s words, “Hunting the enemy, slugging, pounding, blasting.” At last, at the end of the exhibition’s road, visitors confronted an enormous, floor-to-ceiling, panoramic overhead photograph of row upon row of American soldiers marching. These soldiers might well have looked like the anonymous masses shown in fascist exhibitions from the thirties had they not featured inset images of middle-aged, white, and mostly rural American couples—clearly meant to be the symbolic parents of the marchers—sitting in front of their houses, on their sofas, and, in one case, outdoors on what looked like a reviewing stand. Visitors to this final scene were surrounded—by American troops, but also by the same sorts of American citizens they had seen at the start of their journey through the show. Where a fascist exhibition might have asked its viewers to melt into an anonymous mass, this final set of images asked Americans to preserve their individuality, their roots, even as they formed into a fighting machine.

Such an appeal struck a deep chord in audiences. Across the summer of 1942, more than eighty thousand people visited the exhibition.²⁵ Reviewers fell over themselves to praise it. “It would not at all amaze me to see people, even people who have thought themselves very worldly, nonchalant or hard-boiled, leave this exhibition with brimming eyes,” wrote critic Edward Alden Jewell in the *New York Times*. Jewell particularly praised the exhibition’s ability to reveal essential aspects of American character and to help visitors feel them as their own. If other exhibitions had simply depicted “a nation at war,” wrote Jewell, this one “reveals the very fiber of the nation itself.” By drawing visitors down a road, by arraying images above and below eye level, and by mixing images of life at home with life in the army, Jewell argued that the exhibition drew visitors into a new form of emotional citizenship. “I think no one can see the exhibition without feeling that he is a part of the power of America,” wrote Jewell. “It is this inescapable sense of identity—the individual spectator identifying himself with the whole—that makes the event so moving.”²⁶

25. Christopher Phillips, “Steichen’s ‘Road to Victory,’” *Exposure* 18, no. 2 (1980): 38.

26. Edward Alden Jewell, “Portrait of the Spirit of a Nation,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1942.

Jewell lacked Bayer's gestaltist orientation, but his review proclaimed the successful repurposing of Bayer's technique: in *Road to Victory*, Bayer, Steichen, and Sandburg had offered visitors the chance to experience themselves as individuals in charge of their own movements and, at the same time, to extend the reach of their senses across the American continent and all the way to foreign battlefields by means of the photographs on the walls. Viewers could use their eyes to imaginatively stitch themselves into the fabric of the American nation. McCausland of the *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican* put the point succinctly. *Road to Victory* did not "mold" the visitor's opinions, she wrote, "for that word smacks of the Fascist concept of dominating men's minds."²⁷ Instead, it offered visitors tools and settings with which to remake their own personalities in democratic, pro-American terms.

Rereading *The Family of Man*

When Steichen began developing *The Family of Man*, he drew on the tactics and the social networks he had created with *Road to Victory*. He also found himself confronting a series of problems much like the ones the members of the Committee for National Morale had faced in the first years of World War II. In the early 1950s, many Americans believed that authoritarianism again threatened American democracy. Overseas, the Nazis had been defeated, but the Soviet Union and China now took their place in the popular American imagination. At home, the right-wing demagogues of the 1930s had faded from the airwaves, but Senator Joseph McCarthy had lately turned the country upside down in his search for Reds. And over both, a new threat loomed: the hydrogen bomb.

Social analysts and policy makers once again framed these issues in psychological terms. In a 1954 speech in New York, even President Dwight D. Eisenhower could be heard describing the Cold War as a conflict between two different psychological camps: "The world, once divided by oceans and mountain ranges, is now split by hostile concepts of man's character and nature. . . . Two world camps . . . lie farther apart in motivation and conduct than the poles in space."²⁸ As they had in the early 1940s, American intellectuals struggled to define these poles in terms of democratic and totalitarian personality types. Perhaps no single work articulated the nature of totalitarian personality as clearly or as influentially

27. McCausland, "Photographs Illustrate," repr. in *Photo Notes*, 3. For a parallel argument and similarly positive comments on the show, see Kenneth Burke, "War and Cultural Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 3 (1942): 404–10.

28. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Address at the Columbia University National Bicentennial Dinner," Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, quoted in Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 135.

as the 1950 volume *The Authoritarian Personality*. Building on analytical frameworks developed by psychologist Erich Fromm in 1920s Germany and survey data gathered in 1940s America, Theodor W. Adorno and his three coauthors brought visions of totalitarian selves and societies from the Nazi era into the Cold War. Like the social scientists of the Committee for National Morale, they agreed that personality emerged in a process of social interaction. Authoritarian personalities and authoritarian societies mirrored each other: both were rigid, hierarchical, violent, and self-consciously homophobic and ethnocentric. And both succumbed easily to the power of mass media. Indeed, the authors defined the “potentially fascistic individual” as “one whose [personality] structure is such as to render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda.”²⁹

Social scientists and policy makers who hoped to resist the spread of communist authoritarianism in the early 1950s faced three challenges familiar from World War II: they needed to define the democratic personality, to develop a democratic mode of national unity, and, finally, to deploy a form of media that did not trigger authoritarian impulses in their audiences but rather bolstered democratic personality traits. In 1951 political scientist Harold D. Lasswell took on the first and second of these challenges in his book-length essay “Democratic Character.” Lasswell traveled extensively across the social worlds of American psychology and sociology in this period, and his book reflects the consensus then emerging among his colleagues. Like the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Lasswell argued that character, culture, and nation were to some degree isomorphic.³⁰ Societies tended to produce personalities that were in sync with their collective values and tended to do it within the family and within the larger adult social milieu. To reconstruct nations after World War II, he suggested, it was also necessary to reconstruct the characters of their citizens. Likewise, to keep both America and foreign states out of the clutches of authoritarians, it was necessary to promote the democratic personality.

According to Lasswell, the core of the democratic personality was “an open as against a closed ego.” Lasswell’s description of this openness is worth quoting at length:

The democratic attitude toward other human beings is warm rather than frigid, inclusive and expanding rather than exclusive and constricting. We

29. Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, in collaboration with Betty Aron, Maria Hertz Levinson, and William Morrow, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950), 1.

30. Harold D. Lasswell, “Democratic Character,” in *The Political Writings of Harold D. Lasswell* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), 487–91.

are speaking of an underlying personality structure which is capable of “friendship,” as Aristotle put it, and which is unalienated from humanity. Such a person transcends most of the cultural categories that divide human beings from one another, and senses the common humanity across class and even caste lines within the culture, and in the world beyond local culture. (495–96)

If authoritarians would not tolerate racial, sexual, or cultural differences, democrats would. Lasswell’s model of the democratic psyche embraced both the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind and integrated them into a single affective-intellectual unity that would be capable of making informed political choices. Democratic people empathized with others and yet retained sufficient detachment so as not to lose their ability to reason independently. They also maintained a “deep confidence in the benevolent potentialities of man” (502).

In 1951 such a vision could not escape the gravitational pull of superpower politics. Six years after winning World War II, Americans were struggling to establish a new relationship with the nations of the world. Part of that relationship was determined by the fear of communism, especially during the Korean War. But part of it was also determined by the memory of fascism. The Germans, the Italians, the Japanese—each had predicated their assaults on their neighbors on the basis that they were different from and better than other types of human beings. To assert the unity of mankind in 1951 was to differentiate America from its former enemies. It was also to speak up for racial and political tolerance inside the United States. At the same time that McCarthy was beginning his witch hunts, Lasswell and his colleagues were arguing that the definition of a true American was his or her ability not to spot potential enemies but to reach across barriers of race, class, and nationality and so defuse interpersonal and international tensions. For Lasswell, writing as the threat of nuclear annihilation hung in the air, the future of the United States and of the human race depended on Americans’ ability to celebrate difference and to make it the basis of national unity. By doing so, the United States could not only reduce social tensions within its own borders but also model a tolerant, peaceful global order.

Like his predecessors on the Committee for National Morale, Lasswell could articulate the nature of the democratic personality and the unified yet diverse condition of a democratic polity. But he could not build the media forms in which individuals could practice these ways of being. That project fell to Steichen and the Museum of Modern Art. In a letter to Henry Ford II seeking funding, museum director René d’Harnoncourt set Steichen’s new project within a framework out-

lined in the Ford Foundation's annual report of 1950. Writing in the dominant idiom of the day, the foundation trustees argued that all of humanity faced a choice between two modes of living. "One is democratic," they wrote, "dedicated to the freedom and dignity of the individual. The other is authoritarian, where freedom and justice do not exist, and human rights and truth are subordinated wholly to the state."³¹ From a distance of sixty years, it is easy to layer these words onto the global map of the Cold War and so to see them as promoting a new American hegemony. But it is harder to recognize that within that work, there was another, antistatist impulse. The trustees of the Ford Foundation articulated this impulse with characteristic white-collar restraint: "Human welfare," they wrote, "requires tolerance and respect for individual social, religious, and cultural differences. . . . Within wide limits, every person has a right to go his own way and to be free from interference or harassment because of nonconformity" (7).

To make such individual freedom a reality, the trustees advocated a mode of control that, following Michel Foucault, we now call governmentality. Democracy was not simply a design for state government, they explained. "It is a way of total living, and to choose it means to choose it again and again, today and tomorrow, and continuously to reaffirm it in every act of life" (17). The job of government was not to direct the specific choices of citizens but rather to set a principled framework within which they might make their own choices. For the trustees, such a system was the opposite of the hierarchies of fascism and communism, in which people were slaves or masters. In the more egalitarian democratic system, they wrote, "principles become actions" (9). The job of the Ford Foundation in the coming years would be to promote such principles—and, by implication, such a mode of control—worldwide.

D'Harnoncourt in his letter to Ford described Steichen's planned exhibition as a model of such a democratic world. Steichen's project, he wrote, would be a "demonstration of this basic concept of a free society." The exhibition was "not to be a propaganda show" but was to offer a "dramatic statement of faith in which our beliefs will be told by means of the faces, actions and achievements of free people from all over the world."³² In other words, while Steichen's show would have a message in the general sense, it would not seek to *impose* its views on the audience. Rather, it would attempt to build a framework of principles, draw visitors into that framework, and there allow them to see themselves as free individu-

31. Ford Foundation, "Report of the Trustees of the Ford Foundation," September 27, 1950, 16.

32. René d'Harnoncourt, draft of "Letter to Henry Ford, II," n.d., 2, in René d'Harnoncourt Papers, ser. 7, folder 85, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

als among many others. Naturally, this strategy had a nationalist purpose in the early 1950s. As d'Harnoncourt told Ford, he had contacted the State Department and the Economic Cooperation Administration (the bureau charged with overseeing the Marshall Plan) and all agreed: the exhibition could have an enormous international impact. In particular, such a show and its related publications could, d'Harnoncourt wrote, "encourage others to participate in our struggle against thought control and the totalitarian state."³³

At the same time, however, the exhibition would not pull its punches with regard to racism or poverty in the United States. Some months after he wrote to Ford, d'Harnoncourt prepared a memo proposing the exhibition that would ultimately become *The Family of Man*, but which was then called *Image of America*. The exhibition would demonstrate America's economic prowess, social progress, and democratic ideals; it would also make visible its flaws: "The existence of race prejudice and political corruption, for example, will not be denied but will be presented as a challenge in the continuing fight for the fullest realization of American ideals," wrote d'Harnoncourt.³⁴ Without question, d'Harnoncourt, like Steichen, failed to address modes of discrimination that preoccupy us today. Moreover, he clearly promoted Steichen's exhibition as an emblem of the United States and the nation itself as a model for the globe. But we should not let these issues blind us to the calls for social justice echoing through d'Harnoncourt's correspondence and the 1950 Ford Foundation report.

With those calls in mind, it is easier to make sense of the extraordinary appeal of *The Family of Man* when it opened in 1955. In a country that had gone to war to stop the aggression of regimes built around "the unlikeness of men," the exhibition offered a view of humanity in which all people, including former and contemporary enemies, could be seen as equal. In an America torn by bigotry, demagoguery, political dissent, and sexual and religious repression, a country with regions in which simply speaking publicly about some of these issues could get a person beaten or even killed, the exhibition recast groups that were under assault as collections of individuals with rights no different from those of all other citizens. Moreover, it did so with an aesthetic that promoted the exercise of those faculties on which the democratic personality depended: choice, free association, the recognition of the other as a human being like oneself, and the active integration of one's surroundings into one's own unique and whole way of being.

33. D'Harnoncourt, draft of "Letter to Henry Ford, II," 3.

34. René d'Harnoncourt, "Image of America (Working Title), Outline of an Exhibition," June 25, 1951, 1, d'Harnoncourt Papers, ser. 7, folder 85.

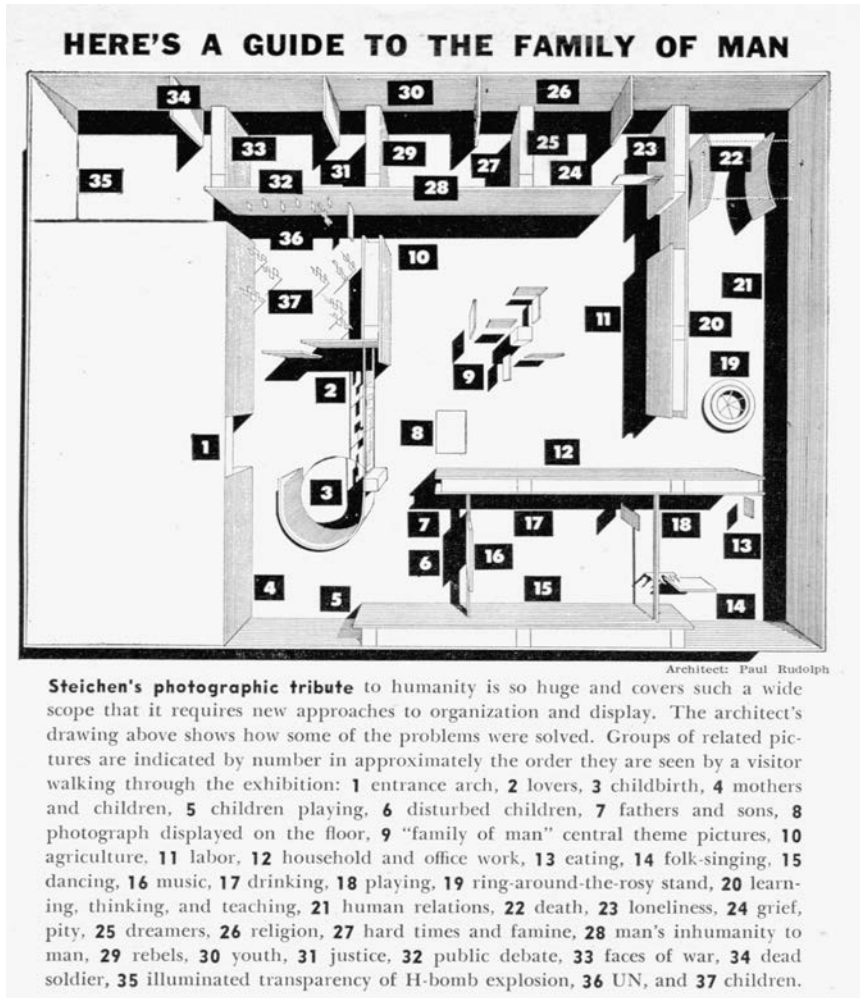
When visitors arrived at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, they encountered an exhibition that drew extensively on the extended field of vision aesthetic and the pro-democratic, gestaltist psychology of viewing that characterized Steichen's earlier *Road to Victory*. As they moved toward the stairs that would take them to the second-floor viewing galleries, visitors received a pamphlet with a prologue by Sandburg that set the interpretive stage. "The first cry of a newborn baby in Chicago or Zamboango, in Amsterdam or Rangoon, has the same pitch and key," it announced, "each saying, 'I am! I have come through! I belong! I am a member of the Family.'" Lest his audience miss the point, Sandburg explained that in the exhibition, "you travel and see what the camera saw. . . . You might catch yourself saying, 'I'm not a stranger here.'"³⁵

Pamphlet in hand, viewers then passed into an entryway and under an arch covered with images of a huge crowd seen from the air. Directly in front of them, they saw a river. To walk under the arch and into the exhibition space was to step into the river of humanity, flowing through time. But it was very definitely *not* to become part of an anonymous mass. On the contrary, when they left the foyer, visitors largely left images of crowds behind. As they entered the exhibition proper, visitors faced a Lucite wall hung with images of individuals and couples—sitting under a tree, chatting on a street corner, kissing, working—as well as a wedding procession. By implication, the entryway reminded visitors that much as America had defeated the fascists of World War II, the Americans of 1955 could defeat the new authoritarian forces of massification at home and abroad and enter a peaceful, global society of individuals. Moreover, as Sandburg had told them, they would not be strangers; on the contrary, in all of the racial and cultural differences they would see, they would recognize themselves.

It would be easy to characterize this logic as emblematic of a sort of national narcissism in Cold War America and even perhaps of the imperial desire to remake the globe in America's image. While such thoughts may indeed have hovered in the minds of officials at the State Department, to focus on them exclusively is to miss the exhibition's more rebellious, antinationalist elements. Consider the layout of the exhibition. Rudolph, its architect, has described his design as "telling a story."³⁶ Over the years, critics have agreed: many have characterized the show as drawing viewers down a thematic tunnel. At the entrance to the exhibition, they

35. Carl Sandburg, prologue to Edward Steichen and Museum of Modern Art (New York), *The Family of Man: The Greatest Photographic Exhibition of All Time—503 Pictures from 68 Countries* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Maco Magazine Corp., 1955), 3.

36. Paul Rudolph, interview by Mary Anne Staniszewski, December 27, 1993, quoted Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 240.



Steichen's photographic tribute to humanity is so huge and covers such a wide scope that it requires new approaches to organization and display. The architect's drawing above shows how some of the problems were solved. Groups of related pictures are indicated by number in approximately the order they are seen by a visitor walking through the exhibition: 1 entrance arch, 2 lovers, 3 childbirth, 4 mothers and children, 5 children playing, 6 disturbed children, 7 fathers and sons, 8 photograph displayed on the floor, 9 "family of man" central theme pictures, 10 agriculture, 11 labor, 12 household and office work, 13 eating, 14 folk-singing, 15 dancing, 16 music, 17 drinking, 18 playing, 19 ring-around-the-rosy stand, 20 learning, thinking, and teaching, 21 human relations, 22 death, 23 loneliness, 24 grief, pity, 25 dreamers, 26 religion, 27 hard times and famine, 28 man's inhumanity to man, 29 rebels, 30 youth, 31 justice, 32 public debate, 33 faces of war, 34 dead soldier, 35 illuminated transparency of H-bomb explosion, 36 UN, and 37 children.

Figure 3 Floor plan of *The Family of Man*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955.
Popular Photography, May 1955, 148. © Bonnier Corporation All rights reserved. Used by permission

note, Steichen placed images of love and marriage; in its central hall, pictures of large, established families; and in its final, narrow passages, images of old age, death, and, at the very end, childhood once again. To walk through the exhibition was in some sense to walk through Steichen's vision of the life course—a vision that critics have castigated for its patriarchal, heterosexual conventionality.

At the broadest level, such readings make sense. Steichen did indeed structure the show to take visitors from birth to death and even to rebirth at the end. Yet critics writing in this vein have dramatically underplayed both the flexibility of Rudolph's installation and the range of social, racial, and national possibilities represented in the pictures on the walls. Seen from overhead, Rudolph's plan for the exhibition reveals that it did not in fact require visitors to take each life stage in sequence. Nor did it demand that they move through the exhibition together in a herd. After entering the museum's second-floor galleries, visitors turned right, into a small, circular area that Rudolph had lit with fluorescent lights and hung with thin curtains to suggest hospital wards. On the walls, viewers saw pictures of a woman in labor, a child being born, and mothers nursing. After that, however, visitors were on their own.

As viewers left the birth pavilion, the exhibition space opened out and presented them with an array of choices. To their right, they faced a display of images of children and, visible beyond it, a walkway with images of families playing and celebrating together. If they walked straight ahead or turned left, they found themselves in the open center of the exhibition. There they encountered enormous, wall-sized images of family groups hung from the ceiling at different heights and facing different directions. In a single glance, viewers could take in a Japanese farm family in traditional dress, a polygamous African family outside their hut, two images of rural Italian farm families, and a multigenerational, white American family, posed around a woodstove, with portraits of nineteenth-century ancestors on the wall behind them. Seen individually, these images could be read as stereotypical depictions of "primitive" Africans, "tradition-bound" Japanese and Italians, and "hillbilly" Americans. But seen together, as they were meant to be, the images *challenged* stereotypes. Far from privileging either whites or Americans, the photographs in fact equated them with two groups suffering extraordinary prejudice in America at that moment—Africans (and, implicitly, African Americans) and our former enemies, the Japanese—and with our other former enemies, the Italians. To stand among these images was to stand in a three-dimensional environment built along the lines laid down by theorists like Lasswell: it was not to perceive the Africans or Japanese as somehow lesser people but, instead, to recognize a *likeness* between them and more dominant groups. Though the images certainly echoed stereotypes, they also solicited empathy—and that at a time when such fellow feeling was rare in the United States.

From the central area, visitors could turn right and examine the hallway of families playing, if they had ignored it at first, or they could walk forward, into a long, baffled room with massive landscapes on the walls. These last images



included Adams's *Mount Williamson* and fields of waving grain and, set here and there among them, smaller, varied images of European peasant families at the dinner table and Mongolian horsemen galloping across the steppes. At the opening to this room stood a wheel, the size of a small merry-go-round on a children's playground. Mounted on the wheel were images depicting children from around the world playing ring-around-the-rosie. And at the other end, large convex panels hung from the wall, with images of funerals and mourning. In each case, visitors confronted images of individuals from around the world engaged in activities that Steichen saw as both regional and universal. Moreover, viewers encountered those images at eye level, overhead, and well below the waist. They were in fact surrounded by the families of the globe.

Viewers could linger among all these images for as long as they liked. They could return to either of the long rooms or to the central family area as well. But when they were finished with these zones, they had to turn into a long hallway, with images jutting from the walls at ninety degrees. About halfway down this

Figure 4 Ezra Stoller, installation view of the exhibition *The Family of Man*. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

hall, they faced a wall with nine close-up portraits of identical size and, set among them, a mirror. Alongside these pictures, Steichen placed the words of Russell: "The best authorities are unanimous in saying the war with hydrogen bombs is quite likely to put an end to the human race. There will be universal death—sudden only for a fortunate minority, but for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration." The portraits in turn featured the suffering faces of three men, three women, and three children and, among them, an American soldier, fresh from battle, almost certainly in Korea. At the center of these pictures, the viewer saw his or her own face. Steichen and Miller removed the mirror after two weeks, having come to believe that it was "corny and wrong."³⁷ But the hope behind it remained. As Steichen put it, "When people come out of this show they'll feel that they've looked in a mirror; that we're all alike."³⁸

Even as they saw themselves in the mirror, viewers could glimpse beyond the faces another wall and a soldier, nationality unknown, facedown in the dirt, his rifle stuck in the ground to mark his body. When they turned and walked past the soldier, visitors entered a chamber and faced the one color image in the show: an eight-foot-tall transparency of a mushroom cloud. Until this point in the exhibition, visitors could meander among an array of images; this picture of a hydrogen bomb exploding was a choke point, a single image that every viewer had to confront before moving on. For Steichen, the image clearly represented what might happen to the human race if individuals failed to recognize the qualities they shared. In 1955 America, the image also likely reminded American viewers that it was their country as much as or more than any other that was driving the atomic threat.

Beyond the bomb, viewers continued down a wide hallway and faced a series of portraits of male-and-female couples, each labeled "We two form a multitude." These images hung like street signs at a ninety-degree angle from a wall-sized picture of the United Nations General Assembly. Just beyond the delegates, again at a ninety-degree angle, viewers could see the torso of a woman, draped in flowers, walking along the edge of the ocean. And beyond her, they came in turn to a roomful of pictures of children playing and, finally, to one of *Life* photographer W. Eugene Smith's best-known images, *The Walk to Paradise Garden*. Just as they were preparing to leave the exhibition hall, visitors saw Smith's two toddler subjects, walking up out of a darkened, leafy bower. In the exhibition catalog, the

37. Wayne Miller, interview by Mary Anne Staniszewski, July 18, 1996, quoted Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 244.

38. Edward Steichen, "'The Family of Man,'" *Vogue*, February 1, 1955, 168, quoted Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 244.



caption to this image reminded viewers of its meaning in an atomic era, that there was “a world to be born under your footsteps.”³⁹

In its final spaces, *The Family of Man* was as heavy-handed in its message as a supermarket greeting card. Yet to read the exhibition simply as a piece of propaganda is to conflate two very different modes of persuasion. By 1955 the term *propaganda* had come to connote the attempt to deliver the concentrated views of a state or a corporation into the minds of audience members in such a way as to disable their ability to recognize alternatives, empathize with any force other than the propagandist’s, or even see themselves as independent creatures. *The Family of Man*, in contrast, sought to make visible a new, more diverse, and more tolerant vision of both the United States and the globe and to do it in such a way as to enhance viewers’ intellectual and emotional independence. The exhibition was an effort to help produce citizens who might see themselves and racial others as equals and who might see in the strangeness of African polygamy a mirror of down-home, white America. The key to this process was not simply asking viewers to see others who were like themselves. Instead, it was borrowing the extended

Figure 5 Wayne Miller’s wife and children in front of a picture of the H-bomb at *The Family of Man* exhibition. © Wayne Miller/Magnum Photos

39. Saint-John Perse, quoted in Steichen, *The Family of Man*, 192.

field of vision technique developed by Bayer and deploying it in a new political context. With images literally all around them, visitors to *The Family of Man* had to make choices about where to look and how to integrate what they saw into their own worldviews. This process in turn exercised the psychological muscles on which democracy and perhaps even the future of the world depended.

In 1955 a number of reviewers marveled at the show's installation and its implications for viewers. One reviewer, photographer Barbara Morgan, even argued that the combination of architectural and photographic elements in the show constituted a new medium: "Here one is instantly conscious that this is no orthodox show of 'exhibition prints' hung salon-wise. It is something for which we need a new term. . . . Several have been suggested, 'photographic-Mosaic,' 'three-dimensional editorializing,' 'movie of stills,' yet they all fail — too cumbersome — not accurate enough."⁴⁰ Morgan went on to select her own term, the "theme show," and to describe it as a new "photographic genre . . . which fuses science, photography, architecture, layout and writing into a compelling synthesis." Above all, this new genre forced individuals to develop independent psychological reactions to what they saw: "[The] juxtaposition of photographs meant to be seen in relation to each other begets new meaning to a thoughtful visitor. . . . Our blind spots and sensitivities being semantically what they are, to every thinking onlooker these cross-connected ways of life will mean vastly different things." Yet they would not lead to an *unlimited* range of interpretation. Rather, they would lead to a diverse but unified condition of interpersonal and international empathy. As Morgan put it,

In comprehending the show the individual himself is also enlarged, for these photographs are not photographs only — they are also phantom images of our co-citizens; this woman into whose photographic eyes I now look is perhaps today weeding her family rice paddy, or boiling a fish in coconut milk. Can you look at the polygamist family group and imagine the different norms that make them live happily in their society which is so unlike — yet like — our own? Empathy with these hundreds of human beings truly expands our sense of values.⁴¹

Conclusion

Over the next decade, the images that made up *The Family of Man* would be repackaged into books and portable exhibitions. They would be separated from

40. Barbara Morgan, "The Theme Show: A Contemporary Exhibition Technique," in n.a., "The Controversial Family of Man," *Aperture* 3, no. 2 (1955): 24.

41. Morgan, "Theme Show," 26.

one another and reprinted one at a time and in clusters, in magazines and newspapers around the world. Though in many cases installers imitated Rudolph's exhibition design for the Museum of Modern Art, few had spaces such as the museum's second floor with which to work. Installers and publishers sometimes removed key images from the show. Steichen himself pulled the image of an African American lynching victim after it gained what Steichen felt was undue attention.⁴² In 1956 exhibitors in Japan replaced the transparency of the exploding atom bomb with images of atomic victims in Nagasaki; ultimately, they removed these as well.⁴³ In 1959 the Soviet Union had the image of a begging Chinese boy removed when the show arrived in Moscow. And from the very beginning, the central image of the final passage, the color transparency of the hydrogen bomb explosion, was included only in the hardcover version of the exhibition catalog.⁴⁴

These elisions must have made the exhibition as a whole more palatable to American government officials and perhaps to readers and visitors as well. But even without these images, *The Family of Man* carried with it undercurrents of protest and of utopian globalism that would flow directly into the 1960s. Less than a year before Rosa Parks would sit down in the front of the bus, Steichen and Miller built a model of the kind of world civil rights activists were soon to call for. Did that world encompass all human differences? No. Did Steichen and Miller's vision acknowledge any kind of sexuality other than heterosexuality? No. But at one of the most gender-conservative, race-sensitive, and hypermilitarized moments in American history, *The Family of Man* presented a three-dimensional environment in which Americans were asked to accept practitioners of alternative sexuality (polygamy) and members of routinely demonized groups (Africans, Japanese, and Communist Russians and Chinese) as people like themselves. And they were asked to reject warfare as a crime against the species.

What most contemporary critics of *The Family of Man* overlook is that the exhibition asked visitors to practice the perceptual skills on which the development of democratic personalities — and thus the control of democratic societies — depended. In keeping with Bayer's extended field of vision, the makers of *The Family of Man* surrounded their audiences with images. At one level, each image

42. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, 49. As Sandeen points out, the photograph was published in *Life* alongside other images from the show on February 14, 1955.

43. John O'Brian, "The Nuclear Family of Man" (lecture, Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima City University, Hiroshima, December 6, 2007), repr. in *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, www.japanfocus.org/-John-O_Brian/2816 (accessed April 14, 2011).

44. Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 247. As Staniszewski notes, the image appeared behind a family of visitors, in a "photographic footnote" created by Miller.

offered a viewer a potential moment of identification. At another, however, the pictures acted as an ensemble, an array of images that visitors needed to rearrange within their own psyches. In the process of aggregating and organizing these images, visitors could, at least in theory, engage in a degree of self-formation not open to citizens of authoritarian regimes. Most important, they could emerge from this process as psychologically whole and self-directing. Unlike the citizens of Nazi Germany or of the Soviet Union, China, or North Korea whom so many Americans imagined, visitors to *The Family of Man* would not suffer from psychological fragmentation or interpersonal atomization. As a result, they would not be victimized by despots.

Nor would they run wild, however. Even as Steichen, Miller, and Rudolph offered viewers the chance to do the democratic psychological work of choosing others with whom to identify, they constrained their visitors' choices. *The Family of Man* thus modeled a more diverse and tolerant society, but also a society whose members had adjusted themselves to an array of opportunities chosen on their behalf by those in power. In comparison to fascist alternatives, the world brought to life at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 must have looked enormously individualistic, varied, and free. But even as it challenged the hierarchies of totalitarianism, the exhibition modeled the emergence of a society whose citizens were to manage themselves in terms set by the systems within which they lived—and by the experts who developed those systems.

This systems-oriented society is one that many Americans inhabit now. By seeing how it came to life within *The Family of Man*, we have a chance to relearn how we came to this place in time. Since the early 1970s, critics have focused on *The Family of Man* as an exercise in symbolic domination by an emerging superpower and on the 1950s as the quintessential epoch of the quisling citizen, the cowed white-collar man, the browbeaten housewife. Only the generation of the 1960s, these critics imply, found the courage to saw through the bars of their parents' prisons and set everyone free. But this is a myth. To revisit *The Family of Man* is to glimpse a holistic, individualistic, utopian vision that would animate the countercultural outbursts to come. At the same time, it is to remember that the midcentury effort to celebrate individual difference and to make it the basis of national unity also helped pioneer postmodern modes of mediated authority. In that sense, revisiting *The Family of Man* provides more than a new view of American culture in the early Cold War. It also offers us a glimpse of the political and historical contradictions behind the image-world that we inhabit today.