

PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION

Robert Frank

Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey

ca. 1955

Gelatin silver print

13 × 19 1/8 in. (33 × 48.6 cm)

Museum purchase

PH-71-43

Robert Frank's book *The Americans* opened with this image taken at a parade in Hoboken in 1955. The faces obscured behind an American flag set the tone for his seminal book and for a new way of making and understanding documentary photography. Born in Zürich, Robert Frank was relatively new to America in 1955 when he was awarded a Guggenheim grant to photograph America during the cold-war



Eisenhower years. Compared to picture story narratives that had become common in *Life* and other contemporary magazines, Frank's less literal style is evident in the powerful ambiguity of this flag image, which leaves viewers with mixed feelings and questions about both the parade watchers and the intentions of the photographer.

Much of the critical and historical response to Frank's work attributes its strength to his fresh perceptions as an outsider who was new to American popular culture, and therefore able to focus on common things that might seem inconsequential. As a mirror of American culture, Frank's photographs are both an echo of Walker Evans's Depression-era documentary and a precursor to the pop art of the next decade, such as Andy Warhol's deadpan representation of American products and people or Jasper Johns's exploration of the flag motif.

Contemporary reviewers of Frank's book generally recognized the distinctive character of his style. But many—most notably a series of short reviews in the May 1960 issue of *Popular Photography*—were critical of what they perceived as a negative attitude toward America. For instance, James M. Zanutto in his review titled "An Off-Beat View of the U.S.A." called the book "a sad poem for sick people" and challenged: "The serious question is this: do such personal statements merit publication?" But this defensive response to Frank's openly subjective style was

PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION

anticipated and already addressed by Jack Kerouac in his introduction to the 1959 Grove Press edition of Frank's *The Americans* (featuring his "beat" misspellings): "Anybody doesnt like these pitchers dont like potry, see? Anybody dont like potry go home see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses." Perhaps the greatest achievement of Frank's images, and the reason for their lasting power, is that their challenging ambiguity and demanding questions continue to hold a mirror to our society and to inspire reflection.

