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## Urban vs. Rural Photography in the U.S.

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### Abstract

Our exhibition, *Urban vs. Rural Photography*, focuses on photographs that have constructed social concepts around the urban and rural landscape. The photographs of each given landscape allude to a variety of narratives, yet were all in part motivated by a political or social purpose. Though each photographer in the exhibit had a different motivation for capturing their subject, their images show how we as a society have constructed concepts around urban and rural life from these images. Because the images span many motivations and contexts, they do not holistically cover the history of either type of landscape but instead, show how different parties are able to shape these concepts over time. We want our viewers to think about the many interplaying voices and institutions that had a heavy hand in these photographs. This exhibition is not tracing the lived experiences of rural and urban life but instead tracing the narratives around these social concepts and how they were defined for the people experiencing them by the photographs.

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### Essay

This exhibition explores how images have constructed the social concepts around rural and urban landscapes. As these concepts are socially constructed, their paths affect each other and create binaries in their contrasting representations. While these images display a plethora of narratives, they share similarities in how they contribute to regional and national perceptions of the American landscape. What originally drew us to this topic was the stark contrast in the images of urban and rural life. Yet, as we researched further, we realized this was not due to innate differences between rural and urban life, but because of political and social motivations which affected the creation of the images. These motivations varied from photographer to photographer, as did the visual strategies used to compose the images. In their photographs, some photographers victimized their subjects, some even objectified them, but others displayed them as empowered. It is noteworthy that the motivations for each photograph were not always personally held by their photographers. Almost half of the photographers in this exhibit were conveying the motivations of their employers, usually the government, and were neither developing nor distributing their own photos. Though the photographers had varying motivations and the photographs had varying impacts, their images all intersect with how we as a society have constructed the concepts of rural and urban life. For each of these photos, we want our viewers to consider what qualities of urban and rural life are being portrayed and how that represents the people of those communities. What is important here to examine the political or social purpose in creating these images. We want our viewers to think about the many interplaying voices and institutions that had a heavy hand in the making of these photographs.

Ultimately, these photographs cannot be characterized as stereotypical representations of urban and rural life or entirely credited to their photographers. There's so much more to these photographs than meets the eye.

The photographs of rural scenes in our exhibition share similar political aims and agendas. They were taken in the early 20th century during the time of the Great Depression. In order to restore prosperity in America during this time, President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented New Deal Programs. As a means to gain public support for the need for these programs, the United States government commissioned photographers to document victims of the Depression and the effectual progress made by these programs. Roosevelt created a government agency called the Resettlement Administration, later known as the FSA (Farm Security Administration) to manage rural poverty in the United States. The agency hired a group of photographers for the explicit purpose of showing America to Americans. Therefore, the images of rural life from this era are not transparent documents of history and records of American life, but rather visual products of the New Deal public philosophy and politics. Dorothea Lange's *Mexicans, field laborers, on strike in the cotton picking season, apply to Farm Security Administration (FSA) for relief* and Russell Lee's *Caravan of Striking Cotton Pickers* capture the story of Mexican immigrant workers in California. They convey the struggles within the workers' communities and the FSA used these photographs to show Americans the need for government programs. The photos capture the strikers' fights and demands for their rights.

Arthur Rothstein's *High School Students, Migrant Camp* and Lange's *Arkansas Squatters* are images of American migrants who moved from the Midwest to California to seek work. Lange's photograph shows the need for government programs and initiatives to help the impoverished, and Rothstein's photograph shows the after-effects of said government programs, exhibiting how these programs succeeded by presenting migrants as well-groomed citizens to the viewer. Though these photographers captured the subjects' actual lived experiences and conditions, the photographers followed a script that explicitly told them what to photograph. The script's motivation was to portray rural communities in certain lights and present the FSA's intended political messages to the American public.

Though the urban photographs may be set in seemingly similar environments, their political and social motivations heavily diverge. Clarence John Laughlin worked in New Orleans on an artistic mission to reclaim his city's culture in a way he thought was being lost through development. In *Auto Eroticists*, Laughlin highlighted the mythical qualities associated with New Orleans and specifically, its historical architecture. By tying the architecture, which he wrote and photographed consistently throughout his career, to enticing stories, Laughlin's work made a version of the city he favored seem important for its cultural facets. His childhood spent on a plantation outside the city could have made him susceptible to favoring a disappearing version of the South and thus uncomfortable with the transformation of the city. Similar to Laughlin, Janet Delaney confronted the transformation of her city by referencing and effectively preserving one part of her city's past in her subject. In *Folsom Street Fair*, Delaney captured a member of the LGBTQ+ community participating in a pride event in the South of Market neighborhood of San Francisco. Delaney captured a subject whose identity, location, and participation in an LGBTQ+ event referenced the history of the gay community in San Francisco. Through her subject, Delaney wished to memorialize the gay community's presence and contributions to San Francisco as the city continued to build on the sites of gay history.

While Laughlin and Delaney grappled with the change their cities underwent, Jacob Riis actively tried to create change through his photography. Riis first explored New York City as a journalist covering crime. As a European immigrant himself, he was both aptly equipped and motivated to explore the conditions of poor European immigrants in *In the Sun Pressroom at 2.a.m.* and *Five Cents a Spot*. Both images are indicative of Riis' style, which attempted to invoke sympathy through the most dire and heart-wrenching representations of poverty that he could find. The sheer amount of visual evidence overwhelmed people who, because better off, were otherwise unaware of the realities of being poor in New York City. The urban photos of our exhibit showcase a wide variety of motivations to represent urban life; perhaps the multiplicity of narratives that come through reflect the heterogeneous image of cities and the people within them.

This exhibition supports the de Saisset Museum's mission statement by forcing the viewer to take a critical view of the history of California through the analysis of art. By analyzing narratives found throughout urban and rural photographs the viewer can understand their importance and place in America's history while gaining a new perspective on their effects. Though our images do not specifically revolve around Santa Clara County, the effects of their histories can be seen within it. The county used to be part of California's agricultural industry and was known as the Valley of Orchards until mass urbanization and gentrification took place due to the unprecedented influx of technology companies. The Santa Clara community today looks at these transformations to its landscape through the societal concepts of "rural" and "urban" constructed in part by the photographs of this exhibition. The goal of the exhibition is not to make a complete timeline of when these concepts of rural life and urban life originated and changed; instead, it is to show how this area of visual culture helped create or reinforce narratives in America. This exhibition is not tracing the lived experience of rural and urban life but instead tracing the social concepts around these landscapes and how they were defined for the people experiencing them by photographers.

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