

## Walker Evans: Subways and Streets

Walker Evans is a name synonymous with the documentation of American life during the 20th century. His work transcends time, offering viewers a lens into the everyday lives of ordinary people. One of his most compelling bodies of work comes from his series of subway portraits, a revolutionary approach to candid street photography that influenced generations of photographers. Let's explore the significance of Evans' subway series, his impact on street photography, and how he managed to create these evocative images.

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### The Subway Series: Capturing Unfiltered Humanity

Walker Evans' subway portraits, primarily shot between 1938 and 1941, remain one of the most iconic projects in the history of street photography. These portraits were taken secretly, capturing passengers as they traveled on the New York City subway. The result was a raw, unfiltered glimpse into the faces of everyday people.

**Evans sought authenticity.** He wanted to photograph individuals as they truly were, without the self-consciousness that often accompanies being in front of a camera. His subjects ranged from the working class to children, to immigrants, offering a mosaic of life in mid-20th century New York.

The series was later published in his 1966 book *Many Are Called*, which presented these subway photographs alongside text by James Agee. The title emphasized the universal nature of the human condition, highlighting the anonymity and vulnerability of city life.

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## A Revolutionary Approach to Street Photography

Walker Evans' subway portraits were a pioneering effort in street photography for several reasons:

1. **Candidness and Authenticity:** Evans captured people in unguarded moments, free from any performative behavior. This approach set a precedent for the candid nature of modern street photography.
2. **Use of Concealed Equipment:** To avoid detection, Evans used a small 35mm Contax camera, hidden under his coat. He attached a cable release to the camera, allowing him to take photographs discreetly. This technique was revolutionary for its time and demonstrated the lengths to which Evans went to preserve the natural behavior of his subjects.
3. **A Focus on the Everyman:** While street photography often seeks dramatic moments or aesthetic compositions, Evans celebrated the mundane. His portraits emphasized the beauty and dignity of everyday people, providing a deeper, more emotional connection.
4. **A New Perspective on Public Spaces:** Evans transformed the subway into a stage, where each commuter became an actor in the silent theater of urban life. This perspective encouraged future photographers to explore the emotional depth of public spaces.

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## The Impact on Street Photography

Walker Evans' subway portraits reshaped how photographers approached candid photography in public spaces. Here's how his work continues to influence the genre:

- **Pioneering Discretion:** Evans' hidden-camera technique inspired later photographers, like Helen Levitt and Garry Winogrand, to explore methods of capturing candid moments without interfering with their subjects.
- **Empathy Through Observation:** Evans' focus on the unvarnished realities of life influenced street photographers to seek emotional authenticity over dramatic scenes.

- **A Democratic Vision:** By photographing ordinary people in ordinary settings, Evans democratized street photography, proving that every subject has a story worth telling.
  - **Technical Innovation:** His creative use of hidden equipment foreshadowed modern techniques like shooting from the hip or using compact, discreet cameras like the Ricoh GR series.
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## The Legacy of Walker Evans

Walker Evans' subway portraits are a testament to the power of street photography as a medium for truth-telling. By capturing unguarded moments in the lives of strangers, Evans revealed the quiet poetry of urban life. His work reminds us that even the most mundane settings can be filled with beauty and emotion, provided we take the time to look closely.

Today, Evans' influence can be seen in the work of countless street photographers who aim to capture the world as it is—unposed, unfiltered, and profoundly human. His subway portraits continue to inspire, reminding us of the power of observation and the endless stories that unfold in public spaces.

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## Key Takeaways

- **Evans' subway portraits celebrate authenticity and the beauty of ordinary life.**
- **He pioneered hidden-camera techniques to capture candid moments.**
- **His work profoundly shaped street photography, emphasizing emotional truth and democratic representation.**

Walker Evans didn't just document life—he revealed it. His subway series serves as a timeless reminder of the power of photography to connect us with the humanity around us.

