LIFE
Magazine

...and the Power of Photography
In the period from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War, the majority of photographs printed and consumed in the United States appeared on the pages of illustrated magazines. Among them, *Life*, published weekly from 1936 to 1972, was both extraordinarily popular, with studies suggesting that at its height the magazine reached approximately 25 percent of the US population, and visually revolutionary. It used images in ways that fundamentally shaped how its readers understood photography and experienced key historical events.

Drawing on unprecedented access to *Life* magazine’s picture and paper archives, this exhibition brings together original press prints, contact sheets, shooting scripts, internal memos, and layout experiments that shed new light on the collaborative process behind many now-iconic images and photographic stories. *Life*’s editorial and layout teams worked together, sequencing photographs and crafting brief captions to create stories that often ran across multiple pages of the magazine.

*Life*’s impact relied on its approach to visual storytelling, and its photographs played an important role in twentieth-century dialogues surrounding war, race, technology, art, and national identity. Through the vision of its founder, Henry R. Luce, its editorial teams’ points of view, and the demographics of its readers, *Life*’s stories promoted a predominately white, middle-class perspective on politics and culture. Even as technologies and the distribution of images have changed dramatically in the intervening decades, photographs remain potent tools of communication that can shape and influence our understanding of world events and cultures.
Multiple factors determined the hiring of photographers in the magazine, including the status of the assignee, the photographer's availability identified by the editorial staff, the release of period photographs in the field, and the budget constraints. 2020 has been especially challenging for the magazine, with fewer resources available for photography. "Life" has historically valued its photographers and invested in new equipment, though sometimes, photographers pitched their own ideas.

Many photographers developed specific skills and were the right choice for certain stories. On long assignments, photographers worked closely with writers and editors, frequently traveling together or working in a team. Once the assignment began, the focus was on a single subject, allowing photographers to develop a strong visual story. In some cases, hiring local photographers was important to capture the local perspective of events and experiences. Times were especially difficult during the Depression, requiring hiring decisions to be made quickly and with the right person for the job. For these reasons, "Life" often hired photographers who could capture the essence of an event or subject with a high level of detail and emotion.
Multiple factors determined the making of photographs for Life magazine, including the details of the assignment, the idea for the story developed by the editorial staff, the selection of a particular photographer for the job, and the photographer’s own decisions about how to best capture the images needed to illustrate a story. As Life picture editor Wilson Hicks noted, “A picture story starts with an event or an idea.” Life’s editorial team turned events and ideas into assignments for photographers, though sometimes photographers pitched their own stories.

Many photographers developed specific skills over time that made them obvious choices for certain stories. On being given an assignment, a photographer would frequently work with a researcher, creating a “story-building team,” and then head out with a reporter, guidelines in hand. Once the assignment began, the focus of a story might shift, and a photographer’s individual authorship, vision, and on-the-spot decisions became an essential part of the picture-making process. Photographers were expected to determine the best composition, lighting, and moment of exposure for any given scene while creating compelling images on an enormous variety of topics for Life’s readers.
Inspired by earlier European picture magazines, Time Inc. publisher Henry R. Luce created an “experimental picture department” with the goal of bringing more photography into his publications and creating a new magazine. The German émigré Kurt Safranski and other editors with experience working on European magazines created mock-ups for *Life*, including recently discovered “dummy” magazines that are exhibited here for the first time. The dummies served as precursors to a test issue of *Life* titled “Rehearsal,” which Luce mailed to potential subscribers and others. This experimentation inspired Luce’s prospectus for his picture magazine, circulated to advertisers associated with his flagship publication, *Time*, promising to “reveal, every week, aspects of life and work which have never before been seen by the camera’s miraculous second sight.”
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Vu, December 7, 1932

Berliners Illusrirte Zeitung, April 29, 1934

Le Soir Illustré, September 7, 1935

Münchner Illustrierte Presse, January 8, 1933

Princeton University Art Museum

LEFT

HENRY R. LUCE
American, born China, 1898–1967

“A Prospectus for a New Magazine,” August 1936

Facsimile

The New-York Historical Society, New York
BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT

KURT SAFRANSKI
American, born Germany, 1890–1964

Dummy A, ca. 1934

Dummy B, ca. 1934
Photographs by Martin Munkácsi (American, born Hungary, 1896–1963)

Gelatin silver prints, ink, and graphite on paper
Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto. Gift of Robert Lebeck Archive, 2019

KURT SAFRANSKI
American, born Germany, 1890–1964

Dummy I, late 1934
Photostats and ink on paper

The New-York Historical Society, New York

“Rehearsal,” dummy for Life magazine,
September 24, 1936

Princeton University Art Museum
Publisher Henry R. Luce hired Margaret Bourke-White as one of Life’s first four salaried staff photographers and its only female photographer in its early years. Having already risen to prominence as a photojournalist on the staff of Luce’s magazine Fortune, Bourke-White brought to Life expertise in photographing modern industry and human-interest stories. For the magazine’s first issue, she was assigned to shoot the construction of the massive Fort Peck Dam, one of a series of public projects and programs initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression.

Bourke-White reported to editor Daniel Longwell via telegram—a message communicated over phone lines and delivered in printed form—that she was “doing all possible on dam with changeable light.” Her monumental image graced the magazine’s first cover.
Hiring Expert Photographers

Publisher Henry R. Luce hired Margaret Bourke-White as one of Life's first four staff photographers and its only female photographer in its early years. Having previously risen to prominence as a photographer on the staff of Fortune magazine, Bourke-White brought to Life expertise in photographing modern industry and Native American scenes. For the magazine's first issue, she was assigned to shoot the construction of the Hoover Dam. Bourke-White was part of a series of public projects and programs initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression.

Bourke-White's project on wrist syringes—a medicine communicable by phone wire—also resulted in printed form—that she was "hiring a possible in form with interchangeable size". Her monumental image graced the magazine's first issue.
Telegram from photographer Margaret Bourke-White to Life editor Daniel Longwell, November 4, 1936

The New-York Historical Society, New York

Life, November 23, 1936
Cover photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

Princeton University Art Museum
Hiring Expert Photographers
Verso of Margaret Bourke-White’s *Fort Peck Dam, Montana*, 1936, with notes added over subsequent decades

*LIFE* labeled the backs of the photographs it published as a way to track them for possible reuse. This vintage press print of *Fort Peck Dam, Montana*, a detail of which graced *Life*'s first cover, features the penciled phrase “This is cover picture printed full neg[ative].” It bears a host of stamps recording its inclusion in *Time* magazine and in later Time-Life books, as well as one reading “Famous Picture: Do Not Circulate.”
Gaining Access

Despite the international reach of salaried staff photographers stationed across the world, *Life* would also contract freelance photographers and buy independent photographers’ images for specific stories. For example, a letter from the renowned Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh to *Life* editor Edward K. Thompson offering a portrait of the British prime minister Winston Churchill for publication shows the frequent collaboration between independent photographers and *Life*’s editors. Karsh’s stately portrait of Churchill was published multiple times in *Life*. 
Gaining Access

Despite the international reach of selected staff photographers stationed across the world, the CPPA would also contract freelance photographers and buy independent photographer’s images for specific stories. For example, a letter from the renowned Canadian photographer Sumne Kirk to director Edward C. Thompson offering a portrait of the British prime minister Winston Churchill for publication shows the frequent collaboration between independent photographers and the CPPA’s editors. Each artist’s portrait of Churchill was published multiple times in LGB.
YOUSUF KARSH
Canadian, born Turkish Armenia, 1908–2002

Winston Churchill, 1941
Gelatin silver print


BELOW
Letter from photographer Yousuf Karsh to Life associate editor Edward K. Thompson, January 5, 1941

The New-York Historical Society, New York
When editors at *Life* learned about the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson’s trip to China in late 1948 and his agreement to sell his photographs to one of *Life*’s European competitors, picture editor Wilson Hicks contacted the newly founded collective Magnum Photos to contract the photographer. Magnum Photos then sent Cartier-Bresson a telex—an electronically transmitted message—conveying *Life*’s directives about what to photograph. Instructions such as “go to tea houses get faces of quiet old men whose hands are clasped around covered cups of jasmine” effectively provided Cartier-Bresson with a script for what to look for in Peiping (Beijing), and his pictures show how closely he followed it.
FAR LEFT

Telex from Magnum Photos to photographer
Henri Cartier-Bresson, November 25, 1948
Facsimile

Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris

LEFT

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON
French, 1908–2004

Photographs from Peiping, 1948
Gelatin silver prints

LIFE Picture Collection
In 1948 Gordon Parks proposed to *Life* a photo-essay about Harlem gang wars. Parks then spent several weeks driving gang leader Red Jackson and his followers around, slowly gaining their trust. He then took hundreds of photographs of Jackson in his everyday life—seen here in prints and contact sheets—with his mother, brother, and girlfriend. Parks insisted on recording Jackson’s peaceful moments as a juxtaposition to the dangerous aspects of his life. Parks’s nuanced approach is reflected in the opening spread of “Harlem Gang Leader,” even as the rest of the story placed greater emphasis on more sensational moments that *Life*’s largely white, middle-class audience would have associated with gangs. The photo-essay’s success prompted *Life* to hire Parks in 1949 as its first black staff photographer.
GORDON PARKS
American, 1912–2006

Red Jackson, Harlem, New York, 1948
Gelatin silver print
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of the artist

Harlem Rooftops, Harlem, New York, 1948
Gelatin silver print

IN CASE
Spread from “Harlem Gang Leader,” Life, November 1, 1948
Photographs by Gordon Parks
Princeton University Art Museum
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

GORDON PARKS
American, 1912–2006

**Gang Member with Brick, Harlem, New York, 1948**
Gelatin silver print

**Red Jackson with His Mother and Brother, Harlem, New York, 1948**
Gelatin silver print
The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York

**Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948**
Gelatin silver print
The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York

**Night Rumble, Harlem, New York, 1948**
Gelatin silver print
The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York

FAR LEFT

**Contact sheets of negatives by Gordon Parks, 1948**
Gelatin silver prints
The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York
Life aimed to provide the public with examples of the most technically advanced photographs in a variety of fields. Gjon Mili’s stroboscopic images of a gymnast depict movement invisible to the human eye, a technical feat made possible by a stationary camera capturing a subject in motion through a rapid succession of flashes.

Managing editor George P. Hunt noted that Life regularly turned to Fritz Goro “to take pictures which everyone else says are impossible to take.” Through extensive experimentation with films and filters over hundreds of exposures, Goro photographed several applications of laser technology in images as impressive as the revolutionary invention they depict.
Innovative Photographers
FRITZ GORO
American, born Germany, 1901–1986

Red laser light focused through a lens blasts a pin-point hole through a razor blade in a thousandth of a second, 1962

Illuminated coils of projector used to create laser light, 1962

Color transparencies from digital files
LIFE Picture Collection

GJON MILI
American, born Albania, 1904–1984

Stroboscopic image of intercollegiate champion gymnast Newt Loken doing back somersault on parallel bars, 1942

Stroboscopic image of Newt Loken on horse executing leg circle, 1942

Stroboscopic image of Newt Loken doing floor leaps, 1942

Gelatin silver prints
LIFE Picture Collection
While some Life photographers shot as many as three thousand frames per story, Margaret Bourke-White was more methodical and typically created about one hundred negatives per story. The negatives on view here—made in the aftermath of the Ohio River flood in Louisville, Kentucky—reveal the photographer capturing images from different vantage points and show her interest in the graphic impact of signage. Bourke-White’s juxtaposition of the billboard featuring a smiling white family touting “the American Way” and the “World’s Highest Standard of Living” above a line of black Americans waiting for flood relief assistance highlights disparities between advertising and reality, prosperity and struggle.
Frame after Frame
MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE
American, 1904–1971

At the Time of the Louisville Flood, 1937
Gelatin silver print

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust

Digital negatives, 1937

LIFE Picture Collection
On Assignment

*Life* often planned stories focused on social issues. “Nurse Midwife” looked at the challenges faced by licensed nurse-midwives, primarily black women, in the impoverished US South. Even before it was assigned, editors outlined the story using language that reveals the systemic racism underpinning its conceptualization. Once photographer W. Eugene Smith received the assignment, he took a two-week midwifery course and interviewed candidates to be his subject, ultimately choosing Maude Callen. Smith and his assistant spent almost a month shadowing Callen in Pineville, South Carolina, as she performed births, made emergency house calls, held vaccination clinics, and taught classes at the state-run midwifery institute. Smith shot twenty-six hundred frames and wrote home about the intensity of the assignment. His contact sheets and prints of Callen’s varied and demanding work reflect more than *Life* originally outlined and would, he hoped, strike “a powerful blow . . . against the stupidity of racial prejudice.”
NANCY GENET
American, 1912–2006

“Outline for Essay on ‘Midwives,’” April 13, 1951
Facsimile
Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson

IN CASE
Contact sheets of negatives by W. Eugene Smith, 1951
Gelatin silver prints
LIFE Picture Collection

Letter from photographer W. Eugene Smith to Life
associate editor Don Bermingham, July 21, 1951
The New-York Historical Society, New York
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

W. EUGENE SMITH
American, 1918–1978

Maude followed by a woman, hiking through forest, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of International Center of Photography, New York.
The LIFE Magazine Collection, 2005

Nurse Midwife, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—
Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith
Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust

Schoolyard parking lot with people gathered to see nurse midwife, Maude Callen, South Carolina, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Princeton University Art Museum. Fowler McCormick,
Class of 1921, Fund

Newborn baby in makeshift crib near cold stove, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of International Center of Photography, New York.
The LIFE Magazine Collection, 2005

Nurse midwife Maude Callen delivers a baby, Pineville, South Carolina, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Princeton University Art Museum. Fowler McCormick,
Class of 1921, Fund

Nurse midwife Maude Callen after 27 hours at work, 1951
Gelatin silver print

Princeton University Art Museum. Fowler McCormick,
Class of 1921, Fund
“Although we did not plan Life as a war magazine, it turned out that way,” reflected Luce. Covering conflicts required Life photographers to embed with the military. During World War II the US government granted four photographers, including Robert Capa, permission to photograph the Allied landing in Normandy, France, known as D-Day. Capa recounted parts of his experience in his “caption file,” detailed notes submitted with the photographer’s film but censored by the military before arriving at Life’s offices.

Known for his harrowing photographs of the Vietnam War, Larry Burrows commented, “You can’t photograph bullets flying through the air. . . . So it must be the wounded.” Engaging in this high-risk photojournalistic endeavor, both Capa and Burrows were killed on assignments in combat zones.
LEFT

ROBERT CAPA
American, born Hungary, 1913–1954

American soldiers landing on Omaha Beach, D-Day, Normandy, France, June 6, 1944
Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of International Center of Photography, New York. The Robert Capa and Cornell Capa Archive, Purchase, with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee and John L. Steffens, 2007

BELOW

Contact sheets of negatives by Robert Capa, 1944
Gelatin silver prints

Page from caption file for photographs taken by Robert Capa, June 1944

LIFE Picture Collection
LARRY BURROWS
British, 1926–1971

Reaching Out, Mutter Ridge, Vietnam, October 5, 1966
Dye transfer print

Princeton University Art Museum. Fowler McCormick,
Class of 1921, Fund

Four marines recover the body of a comrade under fire.
On the right: French photographer Catherine Leroy,
who had flown in on a supply helicopter, October 1966
Chromogenic print

Courtesy of the International Center of Photography, New York.
The LIFE Magazine Collection, 2005

IN CASE

MAYNARD PARKER
American, 1940–1998

Page from caption file for photographs
taken by Larry Burrows, October 1966

LIFE Picture Collection

LARRY BURROWS
British, 1926–1971

Photographs from Vietnam, October 1966
Color transparencies from digital files

LIFE Picture Collection
**ROBERT CAPA**
American, born Hungary, 1913–1954

**Normandy Invasion on D-Day, Soldier Advancing through Surf**, June 6, 1944
Gelatin silver print

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust

This photograph captures a soldier’s view of D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy, France, during World War II. Only eleven of Robert Capa’s photographs of the invasion are known today. Capa claimed to have shot more than one hundred frames, most of which he said *Life* accidentally destroyed while rushing them to press. Scholars question that episode’s accuracy, though the scarcity of photographs of D-Day and this image’s inclusion in *Life* publications at least eight times—as indicated on the back of the print—ensure its continued historical importance.

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Verso of Robert Capa’s **Normandy Invasion on D-Day, Soldier Advancing through Surf**, 1944, with notes added over subsequent decades

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust
Many Life stories involved a photographer-reporter team going on assignment and then submitting detailed caption files with each prenumbered roll of film. In 1961 reporter Will Lang Jr. and photographer Paul Schutzer were assigned to document the construction of the Berlin Wall, a barrier that separated communist East Berlin from democratic West Berlin. Lang’s notes highlight his own opinions of what to look for among the captured images, revealing the reporter’s integral role in the picture selection process.

In the case of J. R. Eyerman’s photograph of captivated moviegoers wearing 3-D glasses, reporter Stan Flink’s commentary reveals that the assignment’s original focus was on the technology of 3-D film rather than on the audience.
Contact sheet of negatives by J. R. Eyerman, 1952
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

STAN FLINK
American, born 1924

Page from caption file for photographs taken by J. R. Eyerman, 1952
LIFE Picture Collection
J. R. EYERMAN
American, 1906–1985

Audience watches movie wearing 3-D spectacles, 1952
Gelatin silver print

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust

Life presented Eyerman’s photograph of an audience screening Bwana Devil, the first full-length three-dimensional movie in color, as a standalone image rather than as part of an extended photographic story. It was published in a section titled “Miscellany” above text—also printed on the back of this photograph—recounting that it was the moviegoers wearing Polaroid glasses, and not the film and its new technology, that stole the show.

Verso of J. R. Eyerman’s Audience watches movie wearing 3-D spectacles, 1952, with notes added over subsequent decades

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust
WILL LANG JR.
American, 1914–1968

Pages from caption file for photographs taken by
Paul Schutzer, August 30, 1961
LIFE Picture Collection

Contact sheet of negatives by Paul Schutzer, 1961
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
PAUL SCHUTZER
American, 1930–1967

Commemorating death of East Berlin woman who tried
to escape from sealed city, 1961

Barbed-wire tops Berlin Wall; West Berliners gather
nearby, 1961

East German policeman flashes mirror into camera
lenses of Western photographers, 1961

US tank with gun aimed at East German military vehicle
on other side of Berlin Wall, 1961

Gelatin silver prints
LIFE Picture Collection
SECTION 2

CRAFTING PHOTO STORIES

Some understated tips of this media genre: Line up stories, assign them to editors with similar interests, and let them sort into their respective sections. The most typical of these would become shorter stories, composed of photographs that were generally not part of the overall theme. The photographs either characterized the story or were used in large blocks to fill out the content. Typically, single photos, such as in a book, could be part of the story. In a larger story, however, the reader would often see a number of photographs for a photo essay article generally created from a variety of sources.

With photographic content realized for the photo essay and other stories, the art director and copy editor then collaborated with writers, researchers, and editors to create a cohesive page that would enhance the story's appearance as a photo essay or other story. The editor's task is to balance the visual and textual elements with the story's objectives. In this manner, the editor selects the typeface, size, and style of the story's elements to set the visual and textual elements in a cohesive page.

This complex editorial process continued with the typesetters working closely with the editor, producing an accurate document that could then be printed. It was a time-consuming, labor-intensive process, where the quality and design of the final product were the result of teamwork and dedication.
Once undeveloped rolls of film and caption files arrived at Life’s offices, editorial teams selected images and determined how to adapt them for the printed page. The most elaborate of these would become photo-essays, a visual format Life claimed to have invented. Photographers often shot thousands of images for a single story, and Life’s negative editors, such as Peggy Sargent (shown at right), and picture editors winnowed down the images to arrive at the final selection of photographs for a photo-essay, which generally ranged from five to eleven pages in length.

With photographic content finalized for photo-essays and other stories, the art director and layout artists then collaborated with writers, researchers, and fact-checkers to construct each page. A story’s subject could determine the approach to its appearance, as one art director explained: “One story may call for panels of continuity or action with one objective in mind. Another may call for a larger symbolic picture to set the mood and excite further interest in smaller pictures making other points.”

This complex editorial process concluded when final layouts were sent by train on Saturday evening from New York to Chicago, where the magazine would be printed by R. R. Donnelley & Sons starting Monday. Every Friday Life appeared on newsstands and in subscribers’ mailboxes.
Life photo editor Natalie Kosek reviews photographs, 1946
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

Life magazine editorial staff at work, left to right: Wilson Hicks, Daniel Longwell, John Billings, Hubert Kay, Margaret Bassett, and Howard Richmond, 1937
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection
Making a Layout

Photographic stories came alive in *Life’s* layout department. Editors reviewed draft layouts and caption text, often pinning layout mock-ups on boards to make final selections. *FYI*, Time Inc.’s internal newsletter, detailed this process in a story (at right) featuring award-winning art director Charles Tudor and managing editor Edward K. Thompson.

Few layout mock-ups exist today because they were ephemeral steps along the way to the printed page. Those that do—three are on view in these cases—show experimentation with the scale, placement, and impact of the photographs. Placeholder text indicates that the pictorial message came first.
Below

Page from FYI, Time Inc. internal newsletter, July 27, 1951
New-York Historical Society, New York

At Right

Layout mock-ups for “The Compassion of Americans Brings a New Life for Flavio,” July 1961
Photographs by Gordon Parks, Flávio After Asthma Attack, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Carl Iwasaki, Flávio being treated in Denver and Flávio on swingset, Denver
Gelatin silver developed-out paper photographs and printed text panels on paperboard
The Gordon Parks Foundation

Photographs by Gordon Parks, left; Carl Iwasaki, right
Princeton University Art Museum
Life often altered photographs for the printed page. Layouts sometimes necessitated the cropping of an image; for example, small slivers of the top and bottom of David Douglas Duncan’s Korean War image were cropped out when it appeared in Life.

Other photographs, such as W. Eugene Smith’s view from a World War II bunker, were retouched for clarity, with a dangling piece of metal visible on both the press print and the inverted contact sheet airbrushed out of the published version.

At the most extreme, Life might fabricate an image. A photocollage in which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s head is no longer centered directly below the Lincoln Memorial—in contrast to the published image—reveals experimentation with how best to visualize historical American values over Soviet communism.
Near the end of the road soldiers look but do not stop as they pass the bodies of men killed in the last Chinese ambush. These dead were picked up later, 1950.

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of International Center of Photography, New York.
The LIFE Magazine Collection, 2005
W. EUGENE SMITH
American, 1918–1978

Battle of Iwo Jima—Aftermath, from this blockhouse in face of the ridge overlooking the Marines beachhead, 4-T gun and dead Japanese soldier on left shelled everything that moved, 1945
Gelatin silver print

Collection of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.
Gift of Leo and Nina Pircher

Spread from “The Battlefield of Iwo,” Life, April 9, 1945
Photograph by W. Eugene Smith
Princeton University Art Museum

Contact sheet of negatives by W. Eugene Smith, 1945
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection
Spread from “Khrushchev Confronts the Republic,” *Life*, September 28, 1959
Photograph by Burton Glinn (American, 1925–2008)
Princeton University Art Museum

Mock-up of Nikita Khrushchev in front of the Lincoln Memorial, 1959
Photographs by Burton Glinn
Photocollage on board
LIFE Picture Collection
Negative editors made indispensable decisions, and many photographers felt these editors shaped their careers. Markings on this contact sheet attest to the discerning eye of one such negative editor, who not only chose the best of Alfred Eisenstaedt’s four shots of a sailor kissing a nurse but also suggested how to crop it to increase its impact in layout. Life printed this photograph full-page, giving it pride of place among the sixty-eight images comprising its coverage of victory celebrations at the end of World War II. This path to becoming an iconic photograph—a widely recognized and remembered image—began with a negative editor.
Spread from “Victory Celebrations,” Life, August 27, 1945
Photographs by ACME Newspictures, top left; Earl Hense, top right; Miami Herald, bottom; Alfred Eisenstaedt, right page
LIFE Picture Collection

Contact sheet of negatives by Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1945
Gelatin silver print, printed ca. 1955
LIFE Picture Collection

FAR RIGHT
ALFRED EISENSTAEDT
American, born Germany, 1898–1995

VJ Day in Times Square, New York City, 1945
Gelatin silver print
Collection of Alan and Susan Solomont
Margaret Bourke-White knew how to build a compelling narrative through photographs. For her assignment on female industrial labor during World War II, she shot tight portraits of a diverse group of workers, including the African American Lugrash Larry, the Croatian-born Katherine Mrzljak, the Mexican American Dolores Macias, and the North Dakotan Lorraine Gallinger. *Life’s* layout department chose one female worker for the issue’s cover and arranged ten of Bourke-White’s portraits to form the centerpiece of her photo-essay “Women in Steel.” The grid offered a vision of women equal in size and stature, attempting to normalize wartime female labor across racial and ethnic lines at a time of segregation and xenophobia. The crafting of this photo-essay aligned with the Office of War Information’s strategies to encourage female magazine readers to join the war effort.
RIGHT

MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE
American, 1904–1971

Flame Burner Ann Zarik, 1943
Gelatin silver print, printed ca. 2000


FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE
American, 1904–1971

Blast furnace cleaner Katherine Mrzljak, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Steel worker Theresa Arana, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Flame cutter Audrey Mae Hulse, American Bridge Company, 1943

Metallurgical observer Lorraine Gallinger, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Blast Furnace Laborer Lugrash Larry, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Welder Blanche Jenkins, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Blacksmith’s helper Victoria Brotko, 1943

Blast furnace cleaner Dolores Macias, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Flame burner Ann Zarik at Armor Plate Division, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, 1943

Gelatin silver prints

LIFE Picture Collection
IN CASE

Life, August 9, 1943
Cover photograph by Margaret Bourke-White
Princeton University Art Museum

Spread from “Women in Steel,” Life, August 9, 1943
Photographs by Margaret Bourke-White
Princeton University Art Museum

LEFT

Digital spreads from “Women in Steel,” Life, August 9, 1943
Margaret Bourke-White’s photographs often portrayed individuals as representatives of larger communities. For a story originally titled “Women in Defense Industry,”—as printed on the back of this photograph—Bourke-White shot valorizing portraits of female steel workers during World War II. Bourke-White depicts Bernice Daunora wearing what Life describes as a breathing apparatus to protect her from the blast furnace fumes.
Life invited readers of its September 27, 1963, issue to imagine the “dark and hopeless” world of twelve-year-old Sarah Jean Collins, a survivor of the white supremacist bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four girls. The article quotes at length a white Birmingham lawyer who laid blame for the racial violence on everyone who had “contributed to the popularity of hatred.” This condemnation was echoed by Life’s use of Frank Dandridge’s intensely intimate photograph of Collins, a choice underscored by a variant in which a woman and a man flank the girl's hospital bed. In the published image Dandridge takes up the woman’s position, framing an image in which he—and therefore each viewer—hovers over Collins in a bedside vigil of concern.
Aligning Image with Text
FRANK DANDRIDGE
American, born 1938

Birmingham Bombing Victim Sarah Jean Collins, 1963
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

Spread from “Birmingham: An Alabaman’s Great Speech Lays the Blame,” Life, September 27, 1963
Photograph by Frank Dandridge
LIFE Picture Collection
Life editors selected this print from nearly four hundred images taken by Frank Dandridge following the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, by members of the Ku Klux Klan. It places Life’s mostly white viewers in an intimate confrontation with Sarah Jean Collins’s cut and bandaged face. As a black man, Dandridge would have had access to Collins’s bedside in the University of Alabama’s segregated hospital, enabling him to construct this vision of concern.

Verso of Frank Dandridge’s Birmingham Bombing Victim Sarah Jean Collins, 1963, with notes added over subsequent decades

LIFE Picture Collection
A photo-essay on racial unrest in Birmingham, Alabama, exemplifies the incongruities that sometimes arose between Life’s images and text. The opening photograph by Charles Moore visually aligns Life’s predominantly white readers with the attacking firefighters, while the article’s title—“They Fight a Fire That Won’t Go Out”—underscores the futility of their actions in a period of intense civic protests by black Americans. A sequence of police attacking protesters with dogs is accompanied by text suggesting that the protestors provoked the attacks. In contrast, caption files submitted with Moore’s film indict the police for “moving in with clubs and dogs” and note that protestors threw “rocks and bricks” only after battling against the firefighters’ hoses. Although Moore’s images succeeded in showing that the white authorities were the aggressors and the black protestors victims, the text quotes no black participants, and the final page is given over to reactions from “shaken” whites.
Disparities between Image and Text

A photo essay on social issues in Jamaica, Atlantic, symbols, and text create a juxtaposition that emphasizes the disconnect between the image and the text. The label, "The Fight for Freedom", uses a visual title that paradoxically sets up a sense of liberation that is not achieved in the image. The text refers to "honey cake" but is not translated into the visual, suggesting a disconnect between the content and the message it portrays. The image of a group of people carrying a banner might symbolize resistance, but the text does not clarify this connection, leading to a disparity between the visual and the written components.
FROM LEFT

CHARLES MOORE
American, 1931–2010

Attacked by police dogs, Birmingham, May 3, 1963, 1963
Gelatin silver print
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Howard Greenberg Collection—
Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith
Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust

Police dogs are turned onto protesters during a civil rights
demonstration, Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963
Gelatin silver print
Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto. The Black Star Collection

Police using dogs to attack civil rights demonstrators,
Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963
Gelatin silver print
International Center of Photography, New York. The LIFE Magazine
Collection, 2005

IN CASE, FROM LEFT

MIKE DURHAM
American, born 1935

Page from caption file for photographs taken by
Charles Moore, May 1963
LIFE Picture Collection

Spreads from “They Fight a Fire That Won’t Go Out,” Life,
May 17, 1963
Photographs by Charles Moore
Princeton University Art Museum
FROM LEFT

ALBERT FENN
American, 1913–1995

*Life* magazine on an automated printing press at R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Chicago, ca. 1956
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

*Life* magazine in production at R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Chicago, ca. 1957
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

*Life* magazine copies, affixed with address labels, flow down a conveyor track to the shipping area, R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Chicago, April 1962
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection
From its earliest issues sold on newsstands and delivered to homes in late 1936, *Life* realized its potential power and reach. The magazine’s circulation went from 1 to 2 million between its first and second year, and it peaked at more than 8.5 million in 1969. Estimates for pass-along readership—the number of people who shared each copy of *Life* in spaces like waiting rooms and offices—suggest that the magazine may have regularly reached about one in four people in the United States. Readers did not passively consume *Life*’s photographs. They responded to them by writing letters to *Life*’s editors, purchasing extra copies of special editions, and even offering assistance to individuals profiled in the magazine.

*Life* also perpetuated its own influence by repackaging its photographs and using its technical sophistication and business savvy to outpace its competitors. The rise of television, however, caused audiences and advertisers to move away from illustrated magazines, and *Life* was compelled to end its weekly run after 1,864 issues on December 29, 1972.
LEFT TO RIGHT

A newsstand customer reaches for Life’s first issue, New York City, December 1936
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

American soldiers on the front lines read Life and Newsweek during World War II, 1944
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

RALPH MORSE
American, 1917–2014

A sailor relaxes aboard a US Navy cruiser while reading a copy of Life during World War II, 1942
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

MYRON H. DAVIS
American, 1919–2010

Mail carrier delivering Life magazine to subscriber, 1958
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection
Life’s immediate popular success quickly transformed the magazine into a recognizable brand. The magazine’s tenth-anniversary cover self-consciously reinforced its iconic status with a black-and-white photograph of a ten-year-old girl holding the first issue with only *Life*’s bold red logo printed in color. *Life* inspired a host of copycat picture magazines in Europe and the United States as early as 1938, many of which mirrored its cover design. Responding to a desire for consistent coverage of black American experiences, *Ebony* magazine built on *Life*’s successful picture magazine format. It adopted *Life*’s red logo box while also innovatively publishing color photographic covers nearly a decade before *Life* would consistently publish its own color covers.
Life as a Brand
FAR LEFT

*Life*, November 25, 1946
Cover photograph by Hebert Gehr
LIFE Picture Collection

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

*Nuit et Jour*, August 23, 1945

*Ebony*, August 1947

*Match*, November 3, 1938

*Picture Post*, August 5, 1939

*Heute*, March 15, 1947

*Point de Vue Images du Monde*, June 29, 1950
Princeton University Art Museum
Life’s editors archived photographic negatives and prints by staff and freelance photographers in an image library called the picture morgue. Once published in Life, these photographs retained their cultural relevance even beyond the pages of the magazine: Life repackaged photographs thematically into Educational Reprints to extend its news coverage into schools and libraries; Henri Cartier-Bresson chose for the cover of his book People of Moscow the same photograph featured on an earlier Life cover; and the art historian Irving Sandler appropriated Nina Leen’s group portrait for the frontispiece of his book codifying the Abstract Expressionist movement in American art.
Cover photograph by Charles Moore (American, 1931–2010)

Cover photograph by Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904–1971)

Cover photograph by John Loengard (American, born 1934)

LIFE Picture Collection

*Life*, January 17, 1955
Cover photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson (French, 1908–2004)
Princeton University Art Museum

*The People of Moscow* (1955)
By Henri Cartier-Bresson
Princeton University Art Museum

Spread from “The Metropolitan and Modern Art,” *Life*, January 15, 1951
Photograph by Nina Leen (American, born Russia, 1909/1914–1995)
LIFE Picture Collection

By Irving Sandler (American, 1925–2018)
Frontispiece photograph by Nina Leen
Princeton University Art Museum
Life took reader feedback seriously, tracking reactions from its largely white, middle-class audience, especially when covering a controversial topic. For instance, reviewing reader responses to Carl Mydans’s “Tule Lake,” a photo-essay on a California incarceration camp for Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II, reveals which letters to the editor Life decided to print in subsequent issues and the racist and xenophobic responses that the editors elected not to print. Two published letters criticize the treatment of the incarcerated pictured by Mydans, while Life’s internal reader report—a summary of all letters to the editor—notes unpublished responses from seventeen readers who proclaim that they “hate all Japs.”
LEFT TO RIGHT

CARL MYDANS
American, 1907–2004

Drum majorettes at Japanese incarceration camp, Tule Lake, California, 1944
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

Roll call is taken by the US Army at Japanese incarceration camp, Tule Lake, California, 1944
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

A game of basketball at Japanese incarceration camp, Tule Lake, California, 1944
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

Young man playing guitar in the stockade, Tule Lake incarceration camp, California, 1944
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of International Center of Photography, New York. The LIFE Magazine Collection, 2005
IN CASE, FROM LEFT

Page from “Tule Lake,” Life, March 20, 1944
Photographs by Carl Mydans
Princeton University Art Museum

Page from “Letters to the Editors,” Life, April 10, 1994
LIFE Picture Collection

BEULAH HOLLAND
American, 1909–2007

“Report on the March 20th Issue,” April 24, 1944
Microfilm facsimile
The New-York Historical Society, New York

AT LEFT

Digital spreads from “Tule Lake,” Life, March 20, 1944
CARL MYDANS
American, 1907–2004

New arrivals at Japanese incarceration camp, Tule Lake, California, 1944
Gelatin silver print
LIFE Picture Collection

Handwritten text on the back of this photograph describes “disloyal Japanese” arriving at the Tule Lake incarceration camp in Northern California from the Manzanar War Relocation Center in Southern California. The red “Used in Life March 20 1944” and “Overseas Edition” stamps signal the international reach of Life’s controversial photo-essay about Tule Lake. During World War II, Life collaborated with the US Army to create lighter-weight, advertisement-free issues of the magazine to distribute to forces deployed overseas.
“Dead men will have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them.” That editorial declaration accompanied one of the first photo-essays to picture the death and devastation in recently liberated German concentration camps at the end of World War II. These photographs by four Life staff photographers—printed in vivid detail at large scale with minimal surrounding text—challenged readers to contend visually with gruesome Nazi atrocities, even if Life refused to identify any of the victims as Jews. Time and Newsweek, in contrast, published fewer photographs and diminished imagery of the camp’s horrors by recycling shots from news agencies like ACME Newspictures and presenting them as small illustrations amid long articles.
Spread from “Atrocities,” *Life*, May 7, 1945
Photographs by George Rodger (British, 1908–1995), left page, and right page, top; Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904–1971), right page, bottom

Spread from “Nazi Policy of Organized Murder Blackens Germany for All History,” *Newsweek*, April 30, 1945
Photographs by ACME Newspictures and Signal Corp from Associated Press

Princeton University Art Museum

Spread from “Atrocities,” *Life*, May 7, 1945

Spread from “Foreign News: Germany,” *Time*, April 30, 1945
Photograph by ACME Newspictures

Princeton University Art Museum

Spread from “Atrocities,” *Life*, May 7, 1945
Photographs by John Florea (American, 1916–2000), left page; George Rodger, right page

Princeton University Art Museum
Gordon Parks’s photographs of poverty in Brazil exemplify *Life*’s international coverage during the 1960s, which tended to reinforce government narratives about the danger of communist expansion at the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Originally intended by *Life*’s editors to show how widespread poverty could provide fertile ground for communism, this story focused on young Flávio da Silva, living in one of Rio de Janeiro’s working-class neighborhoods known as favelas, with his family of ten. The photo-essay prompted readers to mail in $27,498—more than $235,000 in today’s dollars—within a year to support Flávio’s medical treatment in Denver and to fund the da Silvas’ new home in Rio. The Brazilian publication *O Cruzeiro* rejected this US paternalism and sent Henri Ballot to photograph New York City’s urban poor. Ballot’s focus on a young Puerto Rican boy and his family mimicked Parks’s images, drawing attention to the racial and social inequities in the United States.
International Reach

Synthetic nature photograph is a best new photograph for 1970. It was able to capture the essence of nature in a way that was both realistic and artistic. The photograph was taken in a natural setting, but the elements were carefully arranged to create a sense of harmony and balance. The composition includes a mix of plants, rocks, and water, creating a sense of depth and perspective. The photograph was widely praised for its ability to convey the beauty of the natural world, and it remains a classic example of nature photography.
FROM LEFT

GORDON PARKS
American, 1912–2006

Flávio After Asthma Attack, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1961
Gelatin silver print


*Life*, July 21, 1961
Cover photograph by Carl Iwasaki (American, 1923–2016)

Princeton University Art Museum

IN CASE, FROM LEFT

Spread from “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” *Life*,
June 16, 1961
Photographs by Gordon Parks

LIFE Picture Collection

Letter from *Life* managing editor George P. Hunt to Flavio Fund contributors, 1961

The New-York Historical Society, New York

Spread from “Nôvo recorde americano: Miséria,”
*O Cruzeiro*, October 8, 1961
Photographs by Henri Ballot (Brazilian, 1921–1997), left and right; Gordon Parks, left inset

The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York
Digital spreads from:


The morning after President John F. Kennedy’s death, *Life* regional editor Richard Stolley acquired exclusive rights to the amateur filmmaker Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm home movie of the assassination, guaranteeing *Life*’s sole control over the film. The national importance of the film prompted heated internal debate, including over the ethics of publishing the film stills—single frames from the movie—in color after its first black-and-white printing. *Life* eventually decided to use color in its December 9, 1963, newsstand-only memorial issue. The magazine’s handling of the film would later be praised for respectfully conveying the nation’s collective “loss of innocence.”
ABRAHAM ZAPRUDER
American, born Ukraine, 1905–1970

Frames 183, 232, 258, and 309 from the film of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, November 22, 1963
Inkjet prints from digital files
LIFE Picture Collection

IN CASE
Spread from “The Assassination of President Kennedy,” Life, November 29, 1963
Stills from a film by Abraham Zapruder
LIFE Picture Collection

Memo from Life art director Bernard Quint to managing editor George P. Hunt, November 26, 1963
The New-York Historical Society, New York

Spread from “Split-Second Horror as the Sniper’s Bullets Struck,” Life, December 9, 1963
Stills from a film by Abraham Zapruder
LIFE Picture Collection
On July 20, 1969, televisions around the world broadcast grainy live black-and-white images of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. It was *Life*’s color photographic coverage of *Apollo 11*’s moon landing in its August 8 issue and August 11 special edition, however, that had the most lasting impact. In addition to printing NASA-issued photographs with the highest-quality ink, *Life* featured exclusive content gained through its long-standing contracts with NASA astronauts. The continued reuse of *Apollo 11* photographs made famous on *Life* covers further solidifies the ties between the *Life* brand and this historic moment even fifty years later.
NASA
Apollo 11 moon landing, July 20, 1969
Television footage

*Life*, August 8, 1969
Cover photograph by NASA
Princeton University Art Museum

*Life*, special edition, August 11, 1969
Cover photograph by Neil Armstrong for NASA
LIFE Picture Collection

Cover photograph by Neil Armstrong for NASA
Princeton University Art Museum
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

**NASA**

*The Earth, from the Moon*, 1969
Chromogenic print
LIFE Picture Collection

**NASA**

*Tranquility Base and flag from lunar module window*, 1969
Chromogenic print
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Abbott Lawrence Fund

**NEIL ARMSTRONG**

American, 1930–2012

*Buzz Aldrin about to take first steps on the moon*, 1969
Chromogenic print
LIFE Picture Collection

*Buzz Aldrin walking toward Armstrong*, 1969
Chromogenic print
Collection of Rüdiger Pohl

**BELOW**

**NEIL ARMSTRONG**

American, 1930–2012

**BUZZ ALDRIN**

American, born 1930

**MICHAEL COLLINS**

American, born Italy, 1930

*Nine photographs taken during NASA’s* Apollo 11 *mission*, July 1969
Color transparencies from digital files
LIFE Picture Collection
Life announced its closure as a weekly magazine in December 1972 after years of struggling against television’s popularity as well as increased publishing and postage costs. The editors were inundated with letters thanking the magazine and begging them to reconsider. In spite of Life’s fundamental commitment to photography, the editors elected not to include a photograph on the magazine’s final cover, instead printing only headlines, including “Goodbye.”

In the years since 1972 Life has released books featuring its photographs and returned as a monthly magazine from 1978 through 2000. It continues to print special issues today.
Letters and a drawing from readers to the editors of *Life*, December 1972
The New-York Historical Society, New York

SECOND ROW, LEFT
*Life*, December 29, 1972
LIFE Picture Collection

SECOND ROW, RIGHT
Letter from *Life* publisher Garry Valk to Mrs. Charles S. Levy, January 9, 1973
The New-York Historical Society, New York
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This exhibition is curated by Katherine A. Bussard, Peter C. Bunnell Curator of Photography at the Princeton University Art Museum, Kristen Gresh, Estrellita and Yousuf Karsh Senior Curator of Photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Alissa Schapiro, PhD candidate in art history at Northwestern University.

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