

# VERSO

AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT THE OGDEN MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN ART

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2010

## Walker Evans' Louisiana: Photographs from the Collection of Jessica Lange



Walker Evans

[Greek Revival Townhouse with Men Seated in Dourway, New Orleans]

March 1935

Silver gelatin print

Walker Evans is recognized as the most important and influential American photographer of his generation. Working in what he called the “vernacular style,” Evans forged an approach that preferred the everyday to the precious and the factual over the artful. Although he often photographed inanimate objects, with architecture and signage being among his most lasting subjects, he also captured the harsh realities of American life in the grips of the Great Depression. John Szarkowski, long time curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, observed in *Looking at Photographs* (1973):

*“Evans's work seemed at first almost the antithesis of art. It was puritanically economical, precisely measured, frontal, unemotional, dryly textured, insistently factual, qualities that seemed more appropriate to a bookkeeper's ledger than to art. But in time it became clear that Evans's pictures, however laconic in manner, were immensely rich in expressive content. His work constitutes a personal survey of the interior resources of the American tradition, a*

The works in the Ogden Museum's current exhibition were taken during two sequential trips to Louisiana in 1935 and 1936. The first, funded by Gifford Cochran, was to form the basis of a never-realized book on antebellum Southern architecture, and the second, just after Evans began working for the Farm Service Agency of Roosevelt's New Deal, captured the architecture of New Orleans, the plantations of River Road, New Iberia, and the areas outside of Baton Rouge. His primary tool was an 8X10 view camera, supplemented by a 5x7 Speed Graphic and a Leica 35mm. Many of these vintage prints show variations from later prints, and some are examples of simple mistakes. Evans discussed these errors in a diary entry from this time, where he observed that most of the negatives were "... very successful, very exciting, some very good, some shocking errors. Tend to overexpose, tend to raise the lens board too much, leaving corner rings." Some of these mistakes have become a part of the larger photographic language, and are sometimes purposefully emulated by subsequent photographers.

The photographs of the American South constitute a major body of work within Evans' life work. He immediately began exhibiting his Louisiana photographs, and many of them have been regularly included in subsequent exhibitions and publications. Evans' best known photographs of the South were made in Hale County, Alabama in July and August of 1936, and published in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), with text by James Agee. Although the subject of the South waned in Evans' output after his leaving the Farm Services Agency in 1938, his connection to New Orleans remained strong. During his first trip to New Orleans, he met Paul and Jane Ninas at the Arts and Crafts Club in the French Quarter. Jane, herself an artist, became Evans' guide during his two trips in the mid-thirties, and in 1941, became the first wife of Walker Evans, until they divorced in 1955.



Walker Evans

[Woodlawn Plantation, Belle Chase, Louisiana]

The architectural photographs in this exhibition follow the same model as his architectural photographs shot in Cuba two years before in 1933. Objective, frontal and documentary in intent, these photographs are a testament to the ebb-and-flow of endurance and loss of the architectural fabric of Louisiana. ~  
David Houston, 2010

*Walker Evans' Louisiana: Photographs from the Collection of Jessica Lange* will be on display through January 2, 2011 on the third floor of the Ogden's Goldring Hall. All works are generously on loan from Jessica Lange, who is not only a talented actress, but a skilled and accomplished photographer herself. Special thanks are also owed to Joshua Mann Paillet and A Gallery for Fine Photography, New Orleans.