



EXHIBITING THE GAZE

Essay by Jodi Lastname

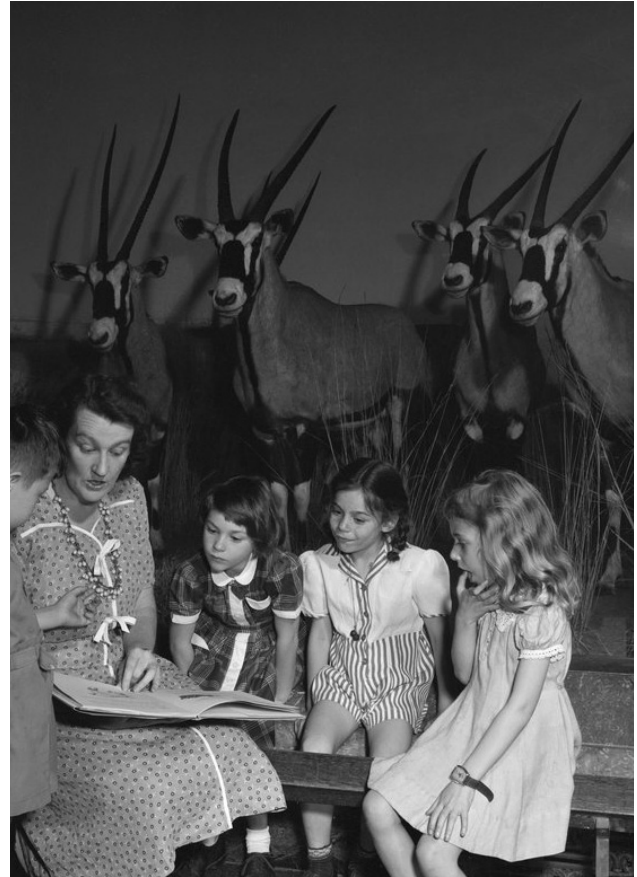
The Natural History Museum
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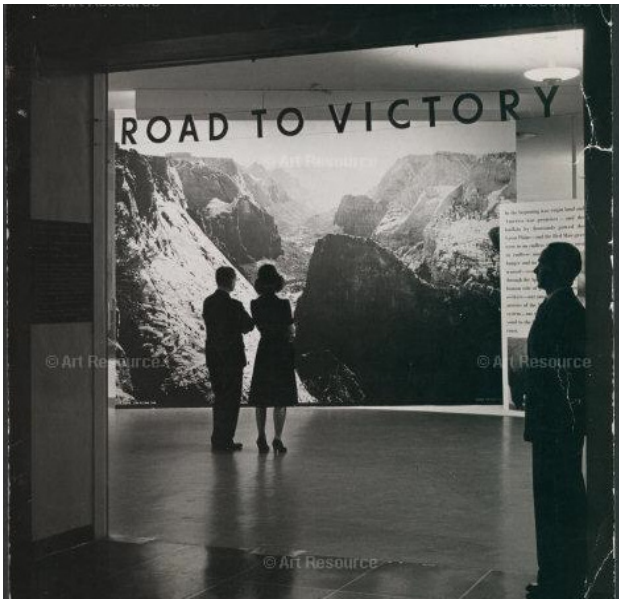
In an essay published in *Natural History* in 1941, anthropologist Margaret Mead identified museums as one of the few trusted sites remaining in a culture awash in advertising and cynicism. Rather than relying on propagandistic appeals to the emotions, museums present the truth of science. Visitors to a museum can believe in the possibility that scientific research yields knowable truths. Mead writes, “Those who enter the doors of our museums do so in a faith that they will not be tricked or deceived, that no one will seek by high-powered lighting arrangements to make the facts of science other than what they are.” A natural history museum establishes a place from which visitors see their world as knowable. For Mead, the distance between the museum and propaganda made it a valuable ally in the service of American democracy against fascism.



June 1944 – American Museum of Natural History¹

¹ American Museum of Natural History Library Image: 298163

Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1940s and 1950s also provided visitors with a way to see. This perspective combined realist photographs and Bauhaus-inspired extended field of vision techniques of display in order to inspire democratic individualism.



Visitors at the exhibition, "Road to Victory." The Museum of Modern Art, New York. May 21, 1942 through October 4, 1942.¹

In 1942, the Museum of Modern Art hosted the exhibition, *Road to Victory*, curated by Edward Steichen and designed by Herbert Bayer. The exhibition featured over a hundred photographs from the Farm Security Administration. Their documentary style echoed Steichen's own realist visual idiom. Text from poet Carl Sandberg accompanied the straight-forward seeming images. Text and images guided visitors along a path through the second floor of the museum. Beginning with a floor-to-ceiling photograph of Bryce Canyon and close-ups of three Native American men, the array of images at multiple levels presented viewers with familiar aspects of American life, continuing to the attack on Pearl Harbor and ending with a panoramic overhead photograph of marching American soldiers.

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Unlike film, which presents moving pictures to a stationary, receptive, audience, Road to Victory enabled moving people actively to engage in acts of identification with images of American resolve. Adopting the perspective offered by the exhibition they could see and admire themselves as the democratic individuals they were invited to become.

In 1955, MOMA hosted *The Family of Man*, an exhibition of over five hundred photographs from photographers from around the world selected by Steichen and his assistant, Wayne Miller. Biblical, philosophical, and spiritual quotes from different traditions accompanied the images. As Fred Turner explains, the intent was “to build a framework of principles, draw visitors into that framework, and there allow them to see themselves as free individuals among a world of others.” Visitors could organize their own movement through a space comprised of thematically grouped photographs—lovers, children, labor, eating, dancing, teaching, grief, death, dreamers, rebels,



Installation view of the exhibition, "The Family of Man." January 24, 1955 through May 8, 1955. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photographer: Rolf Petersen¹

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war, etc. At a choke point, they encountered an eight foot-tall transparency of an exploding hydrogen bomb. The final images were comprised of male-and-female couples, the United Nations General Assembly, and children playing. *The Family of Man* established a way for viewers to look at a diverse humanity and integrate, ostensibly for themselves, multiple ways of being.

The Family of Man traveled all over the world in the 1950s. In 1959 it was part of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. According to the “secret version” of the policy guidelines for the exhibition, the goal was emphasizing American products and practices that would press “the Soviet system in the direction of greater freedom.” The choice-making demanded by the extended field of vision displays would, planners suggested, enable Soviet citizens to experience American freedom. Seeing themselves from the perspective of the exhibition, Soviet citizens would think and desire like Americans. They would become democratic individualists, too.

The Family of Man offered a way of seeing such that seeing for themselves became seeing just the way the United States wanted them to see.



Photo title to come, date, photographer's Name etc¹

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s exhibitions such as the Kabul International Trade Fair, the Milan Triennale, and the Brussels World's Fair provided opportunities for fusing American individualism, global humanity, and capitalist prosperity. Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome gave material form to this idealized unity. Easily assembled as a shining, open testament to the convergence of art and design in a new architecture of freedom, it not only expressed a vision of the world as a balanced whole but induced visitors into the proper way to see this whole, a way from which division as such was constitutively excluded.

¹ Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

SOURCES

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Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental
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