Seventy years after the close of the decade, the photographic images of the people and landscapes of the 1930s have remained relevant to American cultural identity. Students of American culture and history are invariably familiar with the iconic imagery produced for and by the Farm Security Administration, Life magazine, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. For contemporary viewers, these images, despite bearing distinctly different visual styles, are generally interpreted unquestionably as documentary photographs. But, as the authors of new book American Modern: Documentary Photography of Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White demonstrate through three case studies of the work of Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White, there was no one path to a universally accepted concept and representation of documentary photography.

The authors Weissman, May, and Corwin, selected Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White, respectively, as each photographer contributed a distinct vision of the documentary genre. In her essay, Weissman, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Illinois, presents Abbott’s documentary style as inherent to her work as a realist. Her essay focuses on the efforts of Abbott, and her companion Elizabeth McCausland, to create a great “democratic book”: a book of balanced text and image which would create a dialogue within the work and with its audience. May, Assistant Curator of Photographs at the Amon Carter Museum, explores the work of Evans within the context of his seminal museum exhibition American Photographs. May argues that Evans’ intense desire to establish himself as a modern artist, his involvement in the construction of his exhibition, and his tendency towards the self-referential in his photographs created a more personal and less instructive strain of documentary photograph than that of Abbott or Bourke-White. Lastly, Corwin, Director and Chief Curator, Colby College Museum of Art, describes Bourke-White’s evolution from documentary photographer of industry to that of social documentarian. Certainly the most commercially successful of the three photographers presented, Bourke-White’s documentary work is perhaps the most controversial due to staged poses and invented captions for her photographs.

American Modern is a welcome contribution to the field of American photography. The essays are compelling and the subjects fit well together. With the exception of Weissman’s essay, in which McCausland’s views overpower those of Abbott’s, the artists’ visions of “documentary” are clearly presented and convincingly argued. The volume itself is well designed, with beautifully reproduced photographs and clean font. Extensive bibliographic citations are included as well as a detailed chronology of the photographers’ careers. This volume is recommended for all library collections.

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