

# Using Images for Historical Purposes

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Photographic images have to be used with a degree of caution because they are contrived and situated views of the past. In other words, they tend to not only capture a reality but they also distort that reality. We enjoy images because they enable us to personalize the story being told by the picture. We can relate to the place, people, and time because we can relate to the people and the setting. But there is a danger here. Using historical images requires the student to view them with a critical perspective that goes beyond the aesthetic pleasure of being able to bond with the subjects in the picture.

## The Photographer

But how do you obtain this critical distancing? To start, one can ask questions about the photographer's perspective and intentions. What is he/she trying to do with the picture? How is the photographer trying to manipulate the viewer? What are the clues to his/her intention? Also, what about the person or people in the picture? What is going on in their minds? What is the image they wish to present, and why do they want to present this image? As one who views the image, how does your knowledge of the photographer or the lack thereof also help shape your interpretation of his/her photograph?

These are historical questions rather than universal ones, and they go to the heart of the larger issue of "creating history." Images shape our view of the past, but they are created--and they do have a purpose. They are not just there to be observed. There is intention at work. In this sense, photographs not only reveal much but they also distort. What are the distortions at work? This is especially true of posed pictures, where the photographer situates people to depict a scene. How do these pictures differ from spontaneous shots? In other words, to the very degree that photographs personalize the past is the degree to which they are objects of emotion and means of distortion.

## The Setting

Photography is a fine art in the sense that it is a kind of nuance--an expression of the photographer's ambivalence and intuition about what is real or essential. Thus it is an object to be viewed aesthetically and personally, emotionally and beyond reason--as most art is. But it is also a composition placed within an historical setting. A photograph is a visual text that enables the viewer to use it to understand the time and place of its subject. In this sense, a photograph, unlike a painting, which is pure contrivance, is rooted in reality. A photograph makes the past essentially present in a way not possible for paintings--which are totally filtered through the vision of the artist. Visual literacy means grappling with the historical context, using the image as a means of deduction in the same way that a detective uses clues. Historical photographs are like time machines, and observers can use them to become time travelers.

## The Jim Crow Collections

The images of blacks in Jim Crow America allow for a special kind of insight in that the images can be used to allow one to think and talk about the "double consciousness" that all blacks faced: the awareness that you are an American yet also an inferior person in the eyes of the dominant whites. This awareness colors, influences, and shapes everything about the life of most black Americans in Jim Crow America. For example, the home page of the jimcrowhistory.org Web Site shows the darkened image of a black man (or is it a shadow?) ascending the staircase to enter into the segregated section of a movie house. It is a powerful image because it combines a photograph with shadow images. Even the person appears to be a shadow instead of a real

person. This is the double exposure or double consciousness that all blacks had to contend with in Jim Crow America. This image can be used as a way of introduction to the concept of visual literacy, in which one is asked to think about how the themes of segregation, disfranchisement, civil rights, and violence are depicted in this one picture. In other words, to what degree was Jim Crow (and the consciousness of it) revealed in the pictures in the gallery? Which ones do not lend themselves to these themes? One can pick images at random and test them for their double consciousness, their contextual archeology, and their aesthetic quality. This exercise, perhaps more than anything else, allows one to acknowledge that history, rather than being a stagnant, fixed piece of parchment, is instead a dynamic force changing as new generations bring their own visions and interpretations to its story.