

“How To Read a Photograph”

Many writers and thinkers have tried to formulate rules on how to read images with a ‘critical eye.’ (We will briefly look at www.photoquotes.com, a non-scholarly website that has literally thousands of quotes about reading artistic and documentary photography.)

If you take courses in media studies, film theory or communications, you soon learn that especially today, we need to think carefully and critically about the images we see everyday. Today, images are almost always enhanced digitally (or entirely ‘Photoshopped’). For us, it is hard to believe that for almost a hundred years--until the arrival of digital imagery, photographs were considered a reliable means to record reality. They were vehicles of ‘truth.’ A photograph often brought the viewer closer to the real thing.

The reason, as many writers have observed, is that taking a picture was for a long time a mechanical process. The lens records an image of the world on film without human intervention (apart from loading film and pressing a button). From the early days of photography, ‘artistic’ photographers have always enhanced or manipulated images in the darkroom, but for ‘documentary’ photographers and ‘photojournalists’ and ordinary people with cameras—taking a picture was still a ‘document,’ a way to record what really happened.

Almost all of the images you will see in the La Guardia and Wagner online photo archive are historical, documentary photographs, many of which were taken by ‘ordinary’ people (not professional photographers or photojournalists)! There are exceptions, of course. ‘Official’ photographs of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia were certainly taken by ‘professionals.’ (Naturally, we expect official photographs to present their subjects in a positive way.) Furthermore, in our World’s Fair photos, you will see actual advertising[!] in the imagery produced for the various corporate pavilions. (We will be discussing the ‘Futurama’ exhibit by General Motors in this way.)

***When reading historical photographs, you might keep a few tips or techniques in mind:

- 1) Look at the whole photograph first. What do you notice first in the picture? Next, look at the details in the picture. Is there any visual information in the photo that is not apparent right away. This ‘close reading’ can help you get more out of a photograph.

2) Try to imagine the real person in a photograph. What is their life like? Are they aware of their photograph being taken? What is their position in society? (Often in the La Guardia archives, you will see people facing the same issues as today; family, friends, work, identity, community are still important!) You will often find images of people working, families, children, parents, etc. You can learn a great deal about what was important to people in the 1930s (and earlier), as well as the society and community in which people lived and worked.

3) Pay attention to the caption of the photograph. (Often, the caption gives a few additional historical details.) Does the caption and photograph answer any of the basic 'journalistic' questions? Who, what, when and where? Also, what's missing from the caption?

4) If you are familiar with the place in the photograph today, what's changed? What is different about the place in the past? What is the same? One thing to notice in Queens history is the rapid growth experienced in the borough from the 1930s onwards. Images of the 7 train being built show empty streets alongside the elevated tracks! The image of the 'ash heaps' of the 'Corona Dumps,' now the site of Flushing Meadows Corona Park, is an amazing (positive) transformation of landscape.

5) What is the tone or mood of the photo? Even though you expect 'historical' photos to be more or less 'neutral,' you will find subjects who are happy, serious, determined, proud, sad, etc. especially in a 'candid' shot. (You can also look at the arrangement of people and things in a photograph to see if they suggest a mood or tension in the frame, even in a 'happy' family or an 'enthusiastic' group of workers.)

5) Often historical photographs record a person, place, or a thing for the future with 'civic pride' and optimism, but some of the photos do document or hint at social inequalities and problems, too (such as poverty). Don't be afraid to be critical and to notice what's good and bad in society of the past through these photographs.

You can use some of these above ideas as you learn to 'read' photographs more carefully for our class.