Out of many, one: Glimpses of the USA by Charles and Ray Eames, The Family of Man by Edward Steichen, and universal thought in cold war propaganda

Elizabeth Lane Altimus
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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OUT OF MANY, ONE: 
GLIMPSES OF THE USA BY CHARLES AND RAY EAMES, 
THE FAMILY OF MAN BY EDWARD STEICHEN, AND 
UNIVERSAL THOUGHT IN COLD WAR 
PROPAGANDA 

A Thesis 

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the 
Louisiana State University and 
Agricultural and Mechanical College 
In partial fulfillment of the 
requirements for the degree of 
Master of Arts 

in 

The School of Art 

by 
Elizabeth Lane Altimus 
B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 2008 
May 2012
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful parents, Bill and Nelda Altimus. Their encouragement, love, and support continue to inspire me. This is for you.
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ABSTRACT

America at mid-20th century was experiencing unprecedented growth and a flourishing economy. After surviving the devastating events of the Great Depression as well as World War II, the United States had emerged a superpower. But the US was not alone in this new role as the Soviet Union also experienced tremendous growth. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into the darkest days of the Cold War. The threat of Communism worked citizen and politician alike into a frenzy of fear while Joseph McCarthy became an infamous figure whose name is still synonymous with red-baiting.

By the late 1950s, however, there seemed to be a thaw in US-Soviet relations and an attempt to repair the damage between the two countries commenced. In the summer of 1959, the American National Exhibition took place in Sokolniki Park in Moscow. During a six week period, over 2,700,000 Soviets were introduced to American manufacturing and culture. The exhibition was also an example of the dominant architectural style preferred by the US during the 1950s, that of Modernism. George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames, Jack Masey, and Buckminster Fuller all participated in the overall design and look of the exhibition.

While the exhibition’s architecture proudly displayed American design and manufacturing, the individual side shows were much more universal in their intent. The film by Charles and Ray Eames, Glimpses of the USA, and Edward Steichen’s famous photography exhibition, The Family of Man, were both used to help portray America to a Soviet audience. Since Cold War rhetoric often relied upon domestic imagery to justify foreign policies, the American family was key to US-Soviet understanding. The universal idea that man is essentially the same the world over was a message US government agencies promoted and should be studied in relation to the Civil Rights era that followed it.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Life* magazine’s January 7, 1957 cover featured a color photograph of then Vice President Richard Nixon embracing two small girls wearing costumes (Fig. 1).¹ A photo of a vice president engaging with individuals during a diplomatic trip abroad seems rather benign. The caption, however, “Hungarian Refugees and Vice President,” adds an entirely new political dimension to an otherwise conventional photo. *Life* magazine was covering the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the attempts made by the US to solve the resultant refugee crisis. The children in the photo, then, represent what Vice President Nixon called “the kind of people who make good Americans.”² The media, post-World War II, created a sense of middle-class domesticity in order to buffer periods of great social upheaval. In the 1950s, the American people faced troubling issues like the Cold War, the threat of atomic obliteration, and increased racial tension. Since so much of man’s understanding of society is created from visual imagery, the photograph proved to be the United States most powerful weapon in combating America’s fears after World War II.

Fig. 1 Photo of Richard Nixon, Loomis Dean, *Life* magazine, January 7, 1957.

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² Ibid., 3.
After surviving the turbulence of the Great Depression and a Second World War, America had high expectations for the 1950s. “America in midcentury is truly a land of plenty,” wrote A. W. Zelomek in 1959.³ Zelomek’s book A Changing America: At Work and Play’s first chapter was called “Modern Man: A Pause for Reflection,” and indeed, there was much to reflect upon. Since the US, unlike Europe, was exempt from having to rebuild entire cities, the US economy was flourishing and by the 1950s was experiencing exceptional growth. But America was not the only superpower to emerge from WWII, since the progress in the Soviet Union was also spectacular.

According to Stephen J. Whitfield, “vigilance against Communism was a national priority during the darkest days of the Cold War, from the late 1940s until the mid-1950’s.”⁴ Abroad, the government took military measures to combat Soviet expansion, while at home, politicians attempted to demonstrate their devotion to their country with impassioned rhetoric. During this period in history, men and women in government saw themselves as “frontline warriors defending a way of life they considered sacred if imperfect.”⁵ Joseph McCarthy was a Junior Republican Senator from Wisconsin who rose to infamy for his hard stance on Communism and Communist sympathizers. His red-baiting would eventually lead to his censure in 1954, and his image never recovered. But the damage had already been done, and US-Soviet relations only worsened.

The popular culture of the decade drove anti-Communist ideas and feelings home for the average American. Literature, film, and television hammered the theme of the Communist enemy attempting to undermine the American way of life. Another form of propaganda that

proved influential was the US government’s involvement with foreign trade. While the Soviets had invited Western nations to participate in trade fairs for years, the US had something more powerful in mind. No event illustrated the ideological concerns of the Cold War greater than the one that took place deep in the heart of Communist Russia.

For six weeks in the summer of 1959, the US government hosted the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park in Moscow. The objectives were to overwhelm the Soviets with the material benefits of capitalism and to expound upon its virtues versus communism. The exhibition was an architectural and artistic triumph of Modernism and some of the biggest players in the movement assisted in the endeavor. George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames, Jack Masey, and Buckminster Fuller created the structures that were used in Moscow. Modernism may have been created in Europe, but by the mid-20th century, it had been thoroughly adopted as the preferred architectural style to be employed by the US government.

The exhibition’s architecture proudly displayed American design and manufacturing but the individual side shows were much more universal in their intent. The film by Charles and Ray Eames, *Glimpses of the USA*, and Edward Steichen’s famous photography exhibition, *The Family of Man*, were both used to help portray America to the Soviet people. The twelve-minute film presented the complexity of America, while the photographs portrayed family life in all its diversity that would eventually bring unity “to a world divided by politics and living under the threat of nuclear extinction.”6 The film told the viewer that we were all alike, and the photographs told them we would all have to learn to live together.

If the atomic bomb could effectively end the world, the United States government believed the imagery of the nuclear family could be exploited to save it. Wendy Kozol, writing

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6 Jack Masey and Conway L. Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller, 2008), 212.
of Life magazine’s use of domestic photographs during the 1950s, suggests that “Cold War rhetoric frequently relied on family imagery to justify foreign policies.”7 Economics also played a huge role as consumers were encouraged to do their patriotic duty to help sustain American growth. One way in which the US government could simultaneously encourage consumerism and promote America abroad was in its participation in international trade fairs.

During the 1950s, US government agencies, like the USIA, enlisted the help of the most innovative Modernist architects, designers, and artists in the country to craft an image of American prosperity to promote capitalism in communist countries. Edward Steichen’s photographs and Charles and Ray Eames’ film were specifically chosen in 1959 to dispel American myths to the Soviet Union. Using the American individual as their point of reference, these artists and designers used universal themes devised from the ideas that have defined Western society since the Enlightenment. Heralded in their own time, the Eames film and Steichen’s exhibition have received vast amounts of criticism in the subsequent decades for their sentimentality and their exclusion of minorities and racial strife. A thorough investigation of the American National Exhibition in Moscow and its universal theme could help to bring context to the fight for equality and justice that eventually led to the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

CHAPTER 2: GLIMPSES OF THE USA

The American National Exhibition in Moscow

In June 1957, while giving an interview on CBS’s Face the Nation, the Soviet Party leader Nikita Khrushchev issued an invitation to the United States for an “academic, cultural, and scientific exchange.”8 Earlier attempts at such an enterprise had gone nowhere, as relations between the two world powers remained unyielding. But by 1957, there seemed to be a thawing

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7 Kozol, Life's America, 17.
8 Masey and Morgan, Cold War Confrontations, 154.
in US policy, and President Eisenhower agreed to Khrushchev’s offer of an international exhibition. On December 29, 1958, after much negotiating back and forth, an agreement was reached and it was decided that the Russians would exhibit in New York while the Americans would exhibit in Moscow during the following year.

President Eisenhower chose George V. Allen as the official coordinator for the American National Exhibition in Moscow and appointed Harold “Chad” McClellan to the post of general manager. Both men were more than qualified for the Moscow endeavor, as Allen was then serving as the Director of the USIA, while McClellan was a former Assistant Secretary of Commerce for International Affairs. Eisenhower knew the power of propaganda or “the P-factor,” as he called it, and used it to his advantage both as a soldier and as a politician. President Eisenhower believed that “effective propaganda could help ensure world peace and promote democracy.”

When Eisenhower established the United States Information Agency in 1953, its mission was “to understand, inform and influence foreign publics in promotion of the US national interest, and to broaden the dialogue between Americans and US institutions and their counterparts abroad.” The USIA was an independent agency that operated outside the United States and reported directly to the President. According to Eric Sandeen, the USIA promoted “the deep morality characteristic of the US” by showing that America stood for “positive values, including the positive freedoms: freedom to learn, to debate, to worship, to work, to live and to serve.” The USIA accomplished this objective by engaging with the world by means of

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9 Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 155-156.
international broadcasting, exhibitions, and exchange programs, all of which became a large element of American foreign policy during the 1950s.

At this time, the US government was becoming increasingly concerned about the growth of Communist influence abroad. After Khrushchev’s *Face the Nation* appearance, the US government recognized an opportunity to spread its pro-capitalist agenda into the heart of Communist Russia. At a cost of over $3 million allotted by President Eisenhower, the American National Exhibition’s official purpose was to increase mutual understanding between the two world superpowers. The unofficial purpose, however, was much more political. Among the exhibition’s goals were to “demonstrate the superiority of the American Way over the communist system, to install envy, de-legitimate the regime and ruin the Soviet population for products available only to Western consumers.”

The Russians were given the facilities of New York City’s Coliseum, and the Americans were to build an exhibition space in Moscow. The Soviet exhibition opened in New York on June 30, 1959, while the Moscow show opened a month later on July 24, 1959. While the US focused on the ideology of postwar American abundance by displaying a cornucopia of consumer goods, the Russians brought products of heavy industry to New York. The Soviet display emphasized machinery, science, and technology, such as computers, farm machinery, and televisions. The Soviets proudly displayed the ingenuity that had produced both Sputnik and gigantic intercontinental ballistic missiles. In 1959, the New York City Coliseum was only a few years old and was easily able to hold such an exhibition. But the Soviet’s exhibition failed to generate much buzz, and all eyes turned towards Moscow.

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15 Sandeen, *Picturing An Exhibition*, 137.
In September 1958, the USIA named Jack Masey as Chief of Design and Construction for the ANEM. During WWII, Masey was drafted into the Army and worked within the same camouflage unit as the painter Ellsworth Kelly, the photographer Art Kane, and the fashion designer Bill Blass.\textsuperscript{16} After the war, Masey worked at *Architectural Forum* and attended the Yale School of Art and Architecture. After graduating from Yale, Masey was stationed in New Delhi, India as an Exhibits Officer by way of the US State Department.\textsuperscript{17} The success of the US Pavilion at the Indian Industries Fair in 1955, with which he was charged, made Masey more than qualified to lead the exhibition in Moscow.

Masey immediately asked Buckminster Fuller and George Nelson to help with the planning of the exhibition. It would in fact be George Nelson, however, who suggested that Charles and Ray Eames also join the design team. Nelson flew to Los Angeles to persuade the design couple to take part, and there were three days of discussion, culminating in an evening in the Eames house on which all the basic decisions for the fair were made. After conferring with the couple, Nelson created a basic outline: a dome (by Bucky Fuller) to be used “as a kind of ‘information machine’” and a glass pavilion (by Welton Becket) “as a kind of bazaar stuffed full of things.”\textsuperscript{18} A third structure was needed to shelter open-air presentations, and this took the form of the plastic umbrellas.

The main issue in regards to the success of the exhibition was the compact timeframe, as the dome, the pavilion, and the umbrellas needed to be completed within seven months. The items to be housed within the structures needed to be selected as well. While the Soviets enjoyed the new and spacious New York City Coliseum, no such building existed in Moscow. At first,

\textsuperscript{16} Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 38.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
the Russians suggested Gorky Park in the center of Moscow, but the buildings proposed were deemed unsuitable. D.G. Borisenko, who was the chairman of the Russian team, proposed Sokolniki Park, which was fifteen minutes from the center of the city but had neither an existing building nor paved roads.\textsuperscript{19} This shortcoming did not bother the American design team, as they considered the 80,000 square feet of open exhibition space an opportunity to build their Modernist structures from the ground up.

The Sokolniki Park site consisted of a seven-acre triangular area with the pinnacle pointing towards the visitor entrance (Fig. 2). Beyond the entry was the welcoming building, which led to a large dome that was surrounded by three open-air exhibitions covered by the inverted plastic umbrellas. One cluster of umbrellas covered a stage for a fashion show, while another covered \textit{The Family of Man}, an exhibition of photographs curated by Edward Steichen. A third sheltered Peter Blake’s large photographs of American architecture.\textsuperscript{20} Behind the gold dome was an information booth and beyond that the now fan-shaped glass pavilion.

\textbf{Fig. 2 Plan of the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959.}

\textsuperscript{19} Masey and Morgan, \textit{Cold War Confrontations}, 156.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 164.
There would also be supplementary areas for the display of a house, automobiles, boats and farm equipment. A stand would distribute free samples of Pepsi-Cola, which was one of the few products to gain access to the Soviet market as a result of the exhibition. Khrushchev loved the soft drink. He was less than thrilled, however, with the mock voting booths that had been assembled. Some of the USIA’s more popular exhibits from earlier shows supplemented the Moscow exhibition, including Disney’s Circarama, RCA’s color television, and IBM’s RAMAC computer, now programmed with the answers in Russian to 3,500 questions about the United States (Fig. 3). The most frequently asked question was, “What is the meaning of ‘the American Dream?’” The films and computer were all housed in additional, smaller domes.

**Fig. 3 Soviet visitors at IBM’s RAMAC computer, ANEM, 1959.**

Jack Masey selected Buckminster Fuller to assist in Moscow due to the success Fuller had experienced in previous fairs. Fuller, in record time, had provided a geodesic dome for the USIA’s 1956 exhibition in Kabul, Afghanistan that had stunned engineers. For the ANEM, Fuller took into consideration the heavy Soviet snow loads and decided to build a hard-shell dome known as the Kaiser dome. The dome was seventy-eight feet high and two hundred feet in

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22 Ibid.
diameter. This dome model’s skin bore seventy-five percent of the load, while the frame bore only twenty-five percent.\(^{23}\)

The dome was constructed using gold anodized aluminum panels that were assembled in parts (Fig. 4). The interior area of the dome spanned 23,800 square feet and displayed one of the main attractions. The aluminum dome offered *Glimpses of the USA*, a twelve-minute film by Charles and Ray Eames that was projected onto seven twenty-by-thirty-foot screens.\(^{24}\) After the film, visitors could tour the scientific and technical exhibitions located within the dome. These eight exhibitions were positioned around the dome’s interior perimeter and focused on labor, agriculture, public health and medicine, education, space research, peaceful atomic research, plastics, and basic scientific research.\(^{25}\) Guides were able to move over 5,000 people an hour through the space.

![Fig. 4 Completing construction work on the roof of the Dome, Moscow, 1959.](image1)

![Fig. 5 Scale model of the Jungle Gym located inside the Glass Pavilion.](image2)

Moving past the dome, the visitor next entered the fan-shaped glass pavilion for which George Nelson was responsible. This building would house the consumer goods and other objects. The design team also believed that showing a grocery store could acquaint Soviet

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23 Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 171.
housewives with the Western phenomenon of one-stop shopping. Nelson hired the architect Richard Barringer to design a prefabricated steel frame structure to display “the stuff” within the pavilion, which was soon nicknamed the Jungle Gym (Fig. 5).26 The glass pavilion was segmented like a Mondrian painting, featuring suspended panels of color that created and divided individual interior spaces. Barringer’s design doubled the available floor space by adding multiple levels that roughly equaled the size of a city block.

Nelson requested that American manufacturers assist him with the objective of filling the Jungle Gym with a vast array of objects. Items like toys, sports equipment, domestic appliances, hi-fi equipment, TV sets, cameras, clothing and textiles were all displayed to portray the abundance of America.27 RCA gave color televisions, Singer supplied industrial and domestic sewing machines, and Levi Strauss gave stacks of Levis that were quickly stolen by Soviet visitors.28 The glass pavilion is also an example of the dominant architectural style of the 1950s, Modernism. While the structure displayed a multitude of items, it could have also doubled as a Herman Miller showroom. Mid-century modern furniture by Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and George Nelson were all used throughout the structure. Modernism, even if it was distinctly European in origin, was the official architectural style of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, which was consistent with the building policies of the US government of the period.29 American embassies designed during this decade were created by some of the nation’s leading modernists such as Walter Gropius and Eero Saarinen.

The plastic umbrellas constructed to protect the outdoor exhibitions were designed by George Nelson and a professor from MIT, Albert Dietz. These irregular clusters of translucent

26 Masey and Morgan, Cold War Confrontations, 162.
27 Ibid., 192.
28 Ibid.
fiberglass shelters were installed over the architectural exhibition curated by Peter Blake, a fashion show, and Edward Steichen’s touring photographic show, *The Family of Man* (Fig. 6).

At first, Nelson wanted something resembling a tent. Not wishing to use fabric, Nelson took cubes of foam and carved them with a spoon before gluing them together to achieve an umbrella-like shape. Since time was a major factor, the use of plastic fit their tight schedule as well as possessing the added bonus of bestowing the structure with a “rare and exhilarating lightness.”

One of the most discussed aspects of the entire exhibition was the model home that was displayed on the site (Fig. 7). While the design team’s first inclination was to call on one of the country’s largest builders, William Levitt, who had erected some 17,450 houses at his Levittown, Long Island development between 1947 and 1951, to assist with the exhibition, Levitt declined. Once he learned that he himself would have to provide for all of the expenses, Levitt walked away from the proposition. Instead, the team chose the architect Stanley H. Klein, who had also provided thousands of development homes for Americans. After admiring the home, the US press claimed, “Possibly the star attraction, the American home on display has been mobbed

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31 Oldenziel and Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen*, 64-65.
from opening day…X-61 is a Cold War celebrity.”\(^{32}\) While the house was filled with mid-century modern furnishings from Macy’s, it was the kitchen that would become famous.

In what has become one of the most iconic photographs of the Cold War, then American Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev lean over the railing of the model home’s kitchen (Fig. 8). Nixon, who was a strong opponent of Communism, saw Moscow as an opportunity to score political points back in the US. In the photo, Nixon converses with Khrushchev while boxes of S.O.S. pads and Dash laundry detergent sit atop a washing machine.\(^{33}\) Their discussion has been dubbed the “Kitchen Debate” and became a prime example of American-Soviet relations during the middle of the twentieth century.

![Image of Nixon and Khrushchev in kitchen]

**Fig. 8** Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev during their “Kitchen Debate” in the “Splitnik” house.

The confrontation between the two leaders took place at two different sites, a sixteen-minute exchange in the television studio in the Glass Pavilion, and a forty-five minute exchange in the model home.\(^{34}\) While the two men discussed many things, rockets and jazz music among them, their conversation has been interpreted as a test of wills between capitalism and communism. Some feminists believe the debate puts “the American kitchen in the context of the exhibition as a whole, demonstrating how the international language of modern architecture

\(^{32}\) Crowley and Pavitt, *Cold War Modern*, 158.

\(^{33}\) Oldenziel and Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen*, 59.

\(^{34}\) Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 198.
became the American government’s most important form of propaganda at the Moscow exhibition and, more generally, during the cold war.”

The model American dream home was inhabited by a fictitious “typical” American family named the Browns. The popular department store Macy’s sent their in-house designer Matthew Sergio to decorate the house for the imaginary family, which consisted of two parents and their two children. A tongue-in-cheek pun regarding Sputnik, the “Splitnik” allowed Soviet visitors the opportunity to wander through a typical American home. The rambler, or ranch home, was a one-story, 44-foot by 26-foot rectangular house with an open-plan living and dining room. A small coat closet separated the front door from the living room. Two smaller bedrooms faced the front, while the larger master bedroom faced the back. The home had one and one-half bathrooms between the kitchen and master bedroom. According to Greg Castillo, the home featured “pale blue wall to wall carpeting, contemporary furniture, a closet filled with colorful towels and linens, and the consumer electronics said to be indigenous to almost every modern American home.” It cost $14,000 to build and was allegedly affordable by the average US worker.

US sources estimated the daily attendance at the ANEM at around 55-77,000, totaling 2,700,000 over the entire six-week period. The Russian press professed to be less impressed than their visitors. They questioned the affordability of the objects and housing shown. Considering the cost of the items from Macy’s and the income available to the average American household, these were legitimate questions from the Russians, but not questions the Americans

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35 Oldenziel and Zachmann, Cold War Kitchen, 61.
36 Ibid., 69.
37 Ibid., 65.
39 Crowley and Pavitt, Cold War Modern, 160.
particularly wished to acknowledge. They also took exception to the architecture, as Pravda wrote of Fuller’s dome: “A beautiful golden half apple. But what about the rotten half the Americans are not showing us?”

Showing a more hospitable side, Nikita Khrushchev commented on the dome’s technology and even issued an invitation for Fuller to come to Russia to teach his engineers.

The US media hailed the ANEM as an American success that also provided a lift in popularity for Richard Nixon. The US government’s aim had been to change the image of Americans as capitalist warmongers and to replace it with something that, instead, stressed the freedom of choice the average American enjoyed under a democratic structure. It is difficult to try to analyze the success of the Moscow exhibition because there was little to which it could be compared. From a USIA perspective, the ANEM “confirmed the success of a particular method of presentation, one that combined architecture and consumerism, but above all, human contact.”

Charles and Ray Eames were innovators in the relatively new field of mass communication, and they challenged conventional ideas in regards to how information was presented. The very epitome of these ideas, it could be said, is contained within the film the Eames Office produced for the exhibition in Moscow.

Charles Eames

Charles Ormand Eames Jr. was born in St. Louis, Missouri on June 17, 1907 and was raised in a comfortable and established family. The death of his father at the age of thirteen, however, resulted in a downward shift in the family’s material circumstances. Out of necessity, Charles Eames sought work as a laborer at the Laclede Steel Company in 1921, where his skills

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40 Abercrombie, George Nelson, 173.
41 Masey and Morgan, Cold War Confrontations, 248.
42 Ibid., 251.
in drawing led to a promotion to an engineering draftsman (Fig. 9). He would often trace his success back to his early school days, as his kindergarten was based on the Froebel system. Charles Eames later described this particular system as one concerned with blocks of shapes, and it may well account for his abiding interest in structure.\textsuperscript{44} His drafting skills were so strong that a rival firm, the Aitkens Mill Company, offered him a scholarship to study engineering, but, by then, he knew he wanted to become an architect.

![Fig. 9 Charles Eames at the Laclede Steel Mills, 1922-23.](image)

Charles Eames headed to Washington University in 1925. The architecture program was “a classical Beaux-Arts school where about three hundred students were taught how to make traditional sketches and copies.”\textsuperscript{45} His enthusiasm for the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, however, did not endear Eames to his professors. Due to his support of Wright, coupled with the fact that Eames was working many late hours at an architecture firm, Trueblood and Graf, he was asked to leave the university in 1927. While Eames was not overly concerned with Wright’s forms, he felt that Wright was an important figure and therefore deserved further study.

In 1929 Charles Eames courted and married Catherine Dewey Woermann, who was a fellow architecture student at Washington University. While on their honeymoon, the couple traveled to Europe, stopping in places like Rome and Siena. There, they studied classical and

\textsuperscript{44} Kirkham, \textit{Charles and Ray Eames}, 10-11.

\textsuperscript{45} Eames Demetrious, \textit{An Eames Primer} (New York: Universe Pub, 2001), 56.
medieval architecture as well as the work of the modernists such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius. Charles Eames would later describe this first European exposure as electrifying, like “having a cold hose turned on you.” The couple returned to an America that was much different from the one they had left. The Depression shattered the architectural trades, and between 1924 and 1933, employment in the building industry fell by 63%.

Eames sought employment with the government, working for the Works Progress Administration, and assisted in the Historic American Buildings Survey by measuring homes in St. Louis, St. Genevieve, and New Orleans. Eames founded a small architectural firm in 1930 to stay afloat and took on two partners. Jobs were few and far between, but the firm managed to acquire small projects like churches and residences. One of these small churches, St. Mary’s Church, in Helena, Arkansas was published in *Architectural Forum*. This church’s design caught the attention of Eliel Saarinen, who was so interested that he contacted Eames to inquire about the firm’s future projects.

This inquiry proved to become one of the most important moments of Charles Eames’s life. When planning began on the Meyer House in 1936, Eames began to correspond with Saarinen. Eames visited Cranbrook during this period of design, not only to coordinate with Cranbrook staff members, who produced stained glass, rugs, and metalwork for the house, but also to introduce himself to his new mentor. Following the completion of the Meyer House in 1937, Eliel Saarinen invited Charles Eames to Cranbrook with the proposal of a fellowship to further his architectural and design education.

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48 Ibid., 18.
49 Ibid., 22.
The Cranbrook Academy of Art was established by the Detroit newspaper magnate George C. Booth in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Booth had been inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement and was concerned about the level of design in the US. At this time, Eliel Saarinen was the Visiting Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan but became Cranbrook’s director in 1932. By 1939, Eames began teaching as an instructor of design and was promoted to head of the Department of Industrial Design by 1940. While these years were professionally successful, Eames’s personal life proved more complicated, and he and his wife divorced in 1941.

At Cranbrook, Eames met Eliel Saarinen’s son, Eero, and the two men became lifelong friends (Fig. 10). Eero Saarinen was two years younger than Charles Eames and also worked at Cranbrook as an instructor. Eames began to work alongside the Saarinen’s in their architectural office, taking on assorted projects. Eero Saarinen loved competitions and encouraged Charles Eames to enter them as well. This eventually led to the two of them finding the competitions more stimulating than their teaching positions and they began to pursue them wholeheartedly. It was while working on one such competition, The Museum of Modern Art’s Organic Design in Home Furnishings competition, that Charles Eames met his wife Ray.

![Image of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen at a Cranbrook party, 1940.](image.png)

Fig. 10 Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen at a Cranbrook party, 1940.

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50 Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 45.
51 Ibid.
Ray Kaiser Eames

In a working relationship between a husband and wife team, it can be difficult to distinguish the individual merits of each member’s contribution. Since Charles was far more outgoing than his wife, Ray Eames has received little credit for their work. In fact, Ray Kaiser, born on December 15, 1912 in Sacramento, California, was an essential part of America’s most vibrant design team.\(^52\)

After graduating from the May Friend Bennet School in Millbrook, New York, Kaiser moved to New York City, where she enrolled at the Art Students League as a painter. Besides studying under the German émigré artist Hans Hofmann, Ray Kaiser took dance classes with the legendary American choreographer Martha Graham.\(^53\) Kaiser later followed Hofmann when he left the Art Students League and attended his Manhattan school and summer schools in Cape Cod. Hofmann’s work of this period often dealt with abstract forms and bright primary colors, and their influence would make their way into the furniture Ray would later create with Charles.\(^54\)

After her mother’s death in 1940, a friend of Kaiser’s encouraged her to attend the Cranbrook Academy of Art. That September she began to audit weaving classes with Marianne Strengel and helped to prepare the final drawings for the *Organic Furniture* competition. Although Ray was only there for four months, her time at the school proved fruitful. After quietly acquiring a divorce from his first wife, Charles proposed to Ray and she accepted. By 1941, Charles and Ray had committed to a future together and decided to leave Cranbrook for California.

\(^{52}\) Stungo, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 12.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 13.
\(^{54}\) Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 33.
The Eames Office

Charles and Ray Eames arrived in Los Angeles on July 5, 1941. Following World War II, Californian modernism represented easy and comfortable living and came to symbolize the “good life.” According to Pat Kirkham, the “Eameses played a major part in shaping Californian modernism in the thirty-odd years they worked there and California was not without its influence on them.” Leaving Michigan permitted the couple to withdraw from the community atmosphere of Cranbrook and allowed them the space to experiment on their own. For Ray Eames, the West Coast also represented a reprieve from the East Coast gender-specific wife/mother roles intrinsic to that part of the county.

Two years after arriving in California, they settled into 901 Washington Boulevard in Venice, where their business remained for the next forty-five years. Their office has been described as a sort of modern-day Renaissance workshop that was part museum, part funhouse, and part design and film studio. While probably best known for their innovative and award-winning furniture, the Eames Office made over eighty films and created some of the most progressive exhibitions of the twentieth century. The couple counted IBM, Herman Miller, Westinghouse, The Museum of Modern Art, and Pan American Airlines among their patrons. But their largest client by far was the United States government.

In an interview in 1969, Charles and Ray Eames discussed the “natural overlap” that existed in their work for the government as a kind of symbiotic relationship which focused on “the natural environment, the objects of everyday life, and conversations with other nations.” Their contracts with the US government dated back to the very beginning of their office in 1942.

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55 Kirkham, Charles and Ray Eames, 52.
56 Ibid., 88-89.
58 Ibid., 151.
Their first paid assignment as designers was to manufacture molded-plywood leg splints and body litters for the United States Navy, and the couple was able to produce over 150,000 splints by the time the war ended (Fig. 11).  

**Fig. 11 Charles Eames, Leg Splint, molded plywood, 1942.**

During World War II, the magazine *Architectural Forum* asked Charles Eames along with other architects to design a new *City Hall for 194X*, which was to be a typical postwar community. Eames, along with partner John Entenza, considered “the heart of the community” to be “the house of government” and represented a place that was not complete without the direct participation of the people who helped to shape it. The interdependent indoor and outdoor spaces aligned the city’s political power, art life, and civic life in close proximity so as to encourage close collaboration.

In 1947, the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Association solicited designs for a memorial dedicated to the memory of the former president and to western expansion. This memorial would provide programs based on Jefferson’s belief that men’s knowledge of each other was “the instrument with which to improve the lot of men of all races and all creeds under Democracy.” Thomas Jefferson was a kind of hero of Charles and Ray Eames, who inspired them to create a kind of antimonument with no central commemorative structure. Instead of

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61 Ibid., 157.
following traditional models, they imagined a type of center that would present information using graphic art, film, radio, and recordings.

By 1977, Charles and Ray Eames had achieved world fame but they considered their crowning achievement to be *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exhibition. Funded by IBM, another of the design team’s clients, the USIA planned to celebrate the Bicentennial by asking Charles and Ray Eames to create *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exhibition, which was the most multifaceted project ever undertaken by the Eames Office, taking nearly five years to complete.62 The designers chose to concentrate on how the ideas of the European Enlightenment were acknowledged and translated into political action in America’s earliest days. This was not too surprising considering the Eameses were “steeped in the liberal, humanist, rationalist, ‘enlightened’ tradition in American thought which dates back to that time.”63

While *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* was the largest initiative the Eames Office had ever taken on, it was poorly received. Accused of “information overload,” the show featured a staggering array of pictures, text, and objects that overwhelmed the audience. Yet the exhibition stands out as evidence for how Charles and Ray Eames anticipated the computer and foreshadowed the age of the internet. But between the plywood splints and *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exhibition, their most fascinating work for the government remains the film they created in 1959 for the American National Exhibition in Moscow.

**Glimpses of the USA**

In 1959, George Nelson and Jack Masey asked Charles and Ray Eames to produce a film on “a day in the life of the United States” in the Buckminster Fuller dome to serve as an introduction to the ANEM. The Eames Office, consisting of Charles Eames, Ray Eames, John

Neuhart, Parke Meek, Jeremy Lepard, Lucia Capacchione, Robert Staples, and John Whitney, proposed a multiscreen presentation called *Glimpses of the USA*. The film was projected simultaneously onto seven large screens and was composed of more than 2,200 still and moving images designed to “provide a visual summary of the complexity and diversity of American life” (Fig. 12). While Charles Eames narrated the film, he was accompanied with music composed by friend and colleague, Elmer Bernstein. The presentation also included live-action segments like industrial methods and a scene from Billy Wilder’s film, *Some Like It Hot*. A sultry Marilyn Monroe winked to millions of astonished Soviets.

![Glimpses of the USA inside the Dome, ANEM, 1959.](image)

**Fig. 12 Glimpses of the USA inside the Dome, ANEM, 1959.**

The reason why George Nelson suggested Charles and Ray Eames for the USIA endeavor was because the three of them had previously worked together. In 1952, George Nelson was invited by Lamar Dodd, chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Georgia in Athens, to create an entirely new form of educational presentation. Nelson asked Charles Eames to assist with the project, and the two began to reexamine the undergraduate

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64 Neuhart and Eames, *Eames Design*, 239.
65 Ibid., 177.
curriculum. *A Rough Sketch for a Sample Lesson for a Hypothetical Course* was delivered in 1953 and represents the first public multi-media presentation to be held in the United States.66

Their aim was to replace the traditional lecture with a new style of teaching that presented slides, film, narration, printed visual information, sound, and even smell that could be piped through the room using a ventilation system. Nelson and Eames hoped to “break down compartmentalization by helping the students make links and cross-references between subject areas.”67 Their ideas were not well received by the teaching staff, as the proposal did away with many of the teachers’ positions. In order for their ideas to be better understood, Nelson and Eames decided to create an example of what they were talking about.

The Rockefeller Foundation agreed to fund the presentation. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. was brought on as a consultant, with Alexander Girard acting as an assistant. There were two films by Nelson and two by Eames. According to Pat Kirkham, the Eameses’ sections, *Communications Process* and *Communications Methods*, were based on “the belief that what an individual receives from a particular message or image depends on what the individual brings to the experience of receiving, an idea commonplace enough now but not so in 1953.”68 The lesson played to packed audiences but proved far too costly to implement. It was, however, a significant milestone in the Eameses’ quest to present information in audiovisual form. The multi-screen approach first attempted in the *Sample Lesson* derived from their film-editing practices, which often used still images as well as motion sequences.69 The *Rough Sketch*, however, laid the conceptual foundation for the Moscow film that came six years later.

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67 Ibid., 318.
68 Ibid., 320.
69 Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 166.
*Glimpses of the USA* devoted nine minutes to the typical work day and three minutes to the typical weekend of the average American. Pulled from many different sources, it included photographic footage drawn from the archives of Magnum Photos, Photo Researches, the magazines *Fortune, Holiday, Life, Look*, the *Saturday Evening Post, Sports Illustrated*, *Sunset*, and *Time*, and individual photographers such as Ferenc Berko, Julius Shulman, Ezra Stoller, Ernst Braun, George Zimbel, and Charles Eames himself.70 Friends and associates of the Eameses’ also contributed, including Eliot Noyes, George Nelson, Alexander Girard, Eero Saarinen, Billy Wider, Don Albinson, and Robert Staples.71 The images and clips were combined into seven separate 35mm film reels projected simultaneously onto the twenty-by-thirty-foot screens installed in the geodesic dome (Fig. 13). Four screens were positioned above the bottom three.

![Fig. 13 Lucia Capacchione organizing images for *Glimpses of the USA*.](image)

The film opens with the soft and calming narration of Charles Eames explaining that even on seven screens, twelve minutes is not enough time to tell one nation its story to another. The first images are from outer space, showing stars and nebulae, before moving through aerial views of the city at night. In a universalist vein, Charles Eames states, “When we look at the night sky, 

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71 Ibid.
these are the stars we see. The same stars that shine down upon Russia each night."72 The camera moves inward until city lights seen from above fill the screens. The early morning comes on with aerial views of landscapes from different parts of the country: deserts, mountains, hills, seas, and farms.73

Image after image display the relatively new American phenomenon of the planned suburban neighborhood like Levittown. Their individual swimming pools and backyards are also revealed. Some modern apartment buildings from various cities are shown, but their close-up becomes more prominent later in the film. As the camera descends to the ground, there are details of newspapers and milk bottles sitting at front doors, and the first signs of human existence are associated with domestic spaces.74 Families have breakfast at home while men leave for work. They kiss their wives and babies, get into vehicles, and wave good-bye while children leave for school on buses.

_Glimpses_ moves forward with the male breadwinner of the family driving in his car across the vast highways and byways of the American interstate system (Fig. 14). Traffic, bridges, and on-ramps taken from aerial view give the audience a taste of the vastness of the American landscape. While father is off at work, the children from earlier reappear in their respective schools and playgrounds. The colleges and universities educating America’s youth come into view, and institutions like Dartmouth, the University of Georgia, and the Illinois Institute of Technology are shown.

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72 Charles and Ray Eames, Directors, _Glimpses of the USA_, 1959.
73 Colomina, _Domesticity at War_, 245-250.
74 Ibid.
Fig. 14 Seven screens of *Glimpses of the USA*, Charles and Ray Eames.

The film next dives into a theme of which the Russians would surely have been aware. The film moves from the universities to private industry. A proletariat thread seems to weave its way through the film, as Charles narrates: “These are the laboratories and these are the industries they serve, surrounded here by the parked automobiles of the workers.”75 Expansive parking lots show plots of paved space filled to the brim with Oldsmobile’s and station wagons. Big industry is portrayed with milling and hydroelectric power. The film next travels from the factory to the farm as aerial shots of crops fill the screens. Airplanes are shown spraying the fields with pesticides. Images of individual farmers are revealed, and for the first time, the viewer is shown minorities. Mexican farm labor as well as African Americans make their debut. Their special position is not hard to understand, even to a Soviet audience.

The produce scene of farm labor is superseded by views of American shopping centers, which Charles Eames compares to the “old marketplace.”76 Supermarkets and stores like Sears take center stage, and they, too, are surrounded by large parking lots filled with cars. *Glimpses* was now showing the Soviets where Americans bought all of the items of daily life that were displayed in the dome and glass pavilion. The supermarket was one of the larger attractions at

75 Charles and Ray Eames, *Glimpses of the USA*, 1959.
76 Ibid.
the ANEM, as it was obviously a new concept for the Russians. The film then takes the viewer from the grocery store back to the home as the housewife prepares dinner with the food she has just purchased.

Meanwhile, back in the city, the American nightlife takes shape and the Bernstein musical score takes on a jazz-like note. Miami Beach, the Las Vegas Strip, and Times Square are shown with swarms of people. The bright lights of Broadway shine, and marquee signs announce the top shows of the day. Marilyn Monroe makes her cameo among Broadway showgirls. Pat Kirkham believes that it did not matter that Marilyn Monroe was not known in Russia at the time; there was simply “recognition of an attractive woman caught by the camera in a basic but powerful human act of communication.”

The film’s plot zooms back to the American suburb to discuss the weekend. Charles Eames states that, “On Saturdays and Sundays, there is time to relax. Time to catch up on the small jobs around the house.” Men are shown mowing and watering their lawns while children read the comics from the newspaper. Sunday arrives and with it, time to be with loved ones and friends in quiet contemplation. Families are shown in their Sunday best, attending religious services in various houses of worship. While the Christian faith is clearly present, other denominations are not excluded. Photographs of synagogues, mosques, and Mormon and Buddhist temples were all included to present a well-rounded image of American faith.

The music picks back up as American leisure becomes the focus. Visitors walk through art galleries and museums like MoMA in New York City, where paintings by Picasso, Leger, and Kline are exhibited. The outdoor public park is then shown as children fly kites while parents lounge on blankets. Sporting activities like skiing, golf, football, tennis, and sailing have their

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77 Kirkham, Charles and Ray Eames, 323.
78 Charles and Ray Eames, Glimpses of the USA, 1959.
moment. America’s favorite pastime, baseball, was represented by a photograph of 80,000 people in Yankee Stadium. As a nod to Charles Eames’s passion for the circus, the Ringling Brother productions made an appearance.

As Bernstein’s score picks up and reaches its crescendo, performers like Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong are exhibited singing and playing before the screens explode with firework displays. Finally, the viewer is back at home while preparations for bed are made. Children brush their teeth, are read bedtime stories, and then hugged and kissed goodnight. The Eameses own grandchildren make an appearance as a young boy is embraced by his older sister. Husbands and wives also embrace before the ending scene.

The final image came from Ray Eames. There was debate about how they should end the presentation. Some wanted to conclude with a shot of a jet airliner taking off, “to symbolize progress and the drawing together of different peoples in the global village that some saw as the inevitable result of high-speed air travel and other modern technologies.”79 The embarrassment America experienced over Sputnik was still keenly felt but Ray Eames wanted to end the show on a more human note. The shots of families saying goodnight, although bringing a strong sense of closure, lacked the formality of a true ending. Ray decided the final image should be a close-up of a bowl of flowers in hopes of associating feelings of friendship.80 She chose forget-me-nots for their association with constancy and simplicity. This proved to be a true stroke of genius, as not only do these flowers symbolize remembrance in Russia, but their Russian name, nezabutki, literally translates as “forget-me-not.”81

79 Kirkham, Charles and Ray Eames, 323-324.
80 Ibid., 324.
81 Ibid.
Beatriz Colomina believes that “Glimpses breaks with the linear narrative of film to combine snippets of information, into an ever-changing mosaic of American life.” And yet, the message of the film is linear and consistent with the official agenda presented by the Kitchen Debate. From the stars in the sky to people kissing good-night, the film emphasized universal emotions while at the same time explicitly reinforcing the material abundance of the United States. One of the goals of the ANEM had been to install envy in the hearts of the Soviets for products that were beyond their reach. The sequence of photos from the swimming pools, to the stocked kitchens, and then the supermarkets conveyed a message that “yes, we are alike,” but “we also have more than you.”

The Eames film turned out to be one of the most popular exhibits at the fair, second only to the automobiles and RCA color televisions. Sixteen times a day, groups of five thousand visitors were brought into the dome every forty-five minutes. Three million people saw the presentation, and the dome floor had to be resurfaced four times during the six-week run (Fig. 15). US media outlets like Time magazine called it the exposition’s “smash hit,” the Wall Street Journal described it as the “real bomb shell,” and US officials believed it was “the real pile-driver of the fair.” The main complaint amongst the Soviets was that the film moved too fast and that there were too many images to possibly comprehend, a drawback that some American critics also noted.

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82 Colomina, Domesticity at War, 256.  
83 Ibid.  
84 Ibid.  
85 Ibid., 251.  
86 Ibid.
The Eames film used the most cutting edge media techniques of the mid-20th century. Designers today should appreciate the fact that “the Eames film presaged a transformation from design as being product-related to design as information-based.” But for all its technological advances, it has not been spared from scrutiny. Many critics view the film as a whitewash job as only happy, white Americans were portrayed. While minorities were featured, it was always in the context of labor, service, or entertainment.

While it is true that poverty and race issues were not explored in the Eames film, neither was America’s military might. In the aftermath of World War II, organizations like the USIA hoped for films filled with tanks, guns, and soldiers. Indeed, the USIA asked to preview the film prior to the ANEM, but Charles refused. When Charles and Ray Eames were asked to provide their ideas on America, they pulled from personal experience. They were happy, white Americans who were the living embodiment of the “American Dream.” The Eames film, however, was not the only aspect at the ANEM that was based in US propaganda. The four-year-old Edward Steichen photographic exhibition, *The Family of Man*, had faced far more scrutiny for its use of sentimentality yet was considered still powerful enough to be included in the ANEM.

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87 Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 167.
CHAPTER 3: THE FAMILY OF MAN

Edward Steichen

Edward Jean Steichen was born in Luxembourg on March 27, 1879 to peasant farmers, Marie Kemp and Jean-Pierre Steichen. Edward Steichen’s mother was so absolutely positive her son was destined for greatness that she moved her family to America, “which she had heard of and dreamt about as the land of freedom, equality, and unlimited opportunity.” Before relocating to Milwaukee in 1889, the family settled in Hancock, Michigan, where Steichen’s father worked in the copper mines while his mother opened a millinery shop. Steichen’s formal education ended at the age of fifteen, and he began a four-year apprenticeship at The American Fine Art Company. In Milwaukee, Steichen had helped found the Art Students’ League and had parlayed his apprenticeship in the lithography studio into a job paying twice the going wage. He may have made his living from his lithographs, but by sixteen he was hooked on photography. As the firm had numerous accounts with brewers, flour mills, and pork packers, Steichen persuaded his employer that lithographs of livestock based on his own photographs would attract more customers than the stylized illustrations then used to publicize farm products.

By the time Edward Steichen became interested in photography, the medium was only one step away from Daguerre. Those who regarded themselves as artists still saw photography as a direct competitor to painting. But in this fight, Steichen met an ally in Alfred Stieglitz in New York. Stieglitz was the leader in the struggle for the recognition of pictorial photography as an art. Steichen and Stieglitz met while Stieglitz was hanging an exhibition at the Camera Club and asked to see Steichen’s portfolio. Stieglitz eventually bought three prints, thus beginning

88 Edward Steichen, A Life in Photography (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1963), unpaginated.
89 Ibid.
their long and often turbulent relationship. By 1900, Steichen was in Paris devoting exactly two weeks to the formal study of painting at the Julian Academy, one of the many schools on the Left Bank. After his teachers told Steichen his work was “cold, lifeless, and slick,” Steichen packed up his paints and picked up his camera.92

Steichen was originally visiting Paris to see the Rodin exhibition that was located just outside the gates to the Paris World’s Fair of 1900. The famous Balzac sculpture had caused quite a scandal, and the young photographer was eager to see it. He also took in the Old Masters at the Louvre and modern art at the Luxembourg, encountering Impressionism for the first time. There, he saw Degas, Manet, Pissarro, and Sisley, but Monet stirred him the most. He met the giants of the intelligentsia of Parisian society, the Steins, Picasso, and Matisse. He was fascinated by the riches of the city, though rarely so overwhelmed that he could not ask for someone to pose for him. Steichen’s “talent and determination, coupled with the honest flattery of boyish admiration, opened doors of salons and ateliers that might have been closed to a more timid man.”93 Auguste Rodin became a particularly close acquaintance, eventually becoming a benevolent father figure to Steichen.

As the famous came to know him, Steichen’s own fame spread. He exhibited his work in London and Paris, and when his money ran low, returned to New York to set up as a portrait photographer. All of Parisian society, politicians, actresses, and the nobility, flocked to his studio to pose for a “Steichen.” In 1902, Steichen joined the New York Camera Club and became reacquainted with Alfred Stieglitz. Together, the two men created the photographic group Photo-Secession and in 1905 bought gallery space at 291 Fifth Avenue (Fig. 16). Steichen used his European contacts to bring the modernist movements and masters into the gallery, and

92 Steichen, Edward Steichen, 6.
93 Ibid.
291 began to be known as the place where avant-garde European art was displayed. Steichen sent back to Stieglitz works of art by Picasso, Brancusi, Matisse, and Cézanne that would eventually appear in the famous Armory Show of 1913.  

![Fig. 16 Eugene, Stieglitz, Kühn and Steichen Admiring the Work of Eugene, 1907, platinum print, Yale Collection of American Literature.](image)

At the outbreak of World War I, Steichen fled his French farm just one day ahead of the Germans’ arrival and safely arrived in New York. Even though Steichen was over the age for the draft, he volunteered and was sent back to France, serving two years as a photographic reconnaissance officer with the American Expeditionary Forces. Given the rank of lieutenant, Steichen was assigned to the photography section of the Army Signal Corps, where he revolutionized aerial photography by using open-cockpit biplanes which proved instrumental for accurate information gathering. Returning to his farm in Voulangis after war’s end, Steichen became depressed and entered a state of despair that today would probably be diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Calling them “finger exercises,” Steichen photographed over one

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thousand negatives of a white cup and saucer placed on graduated scales from white to gray.96 This activity possibly provided a form of occupational therapy for a man seeking refuge from the horrors of war.

With a new, hard-edge style and in a better mental state, he went back to New York to immerse himself in commercial photography.97 Condé Nast hired Steichen in 1923 as a portrait photographer at Vogue and Vanity Fair magazines. Steichen’s fame allowed him into the world of the “rarified atmosphere of class, chic, and almost-old money that prevailed in the magazine’s offices.”98 This was not Steichen’s first foray into fashion photography, for he had previously worked for the French house Poiret. Steichen’s editorial style proved to be rather simple compared to the magazine ads of the period, and his methods were “a splash of cold water on the advertising format of the day.”99

By the 1930’s, Steichen was bored by fashion photography, and he quit in 1938. He effectively ended his career as a professional photographer but did not end his work in photography. Despite being in his late sixties, Steichen volunteered for military duty in World War II and led a group of young naval photographers through the South Pacific. Assigned to the aircraft carrier Lexington, Steichen and crew covered the taking of Kwajalein Island by the Marines (Fig. 17).100 The Lexington was fired upon and hit in the stern by a torpedo, with Steichen shooting the entire episode.

96 Steichen, A Life in Photography, unpaginated.
97 Steichen, Edward Steichen, 7.
98 Ibid., 7-8.
99 Ibid., 8.
100 Steichen, A Life in Photography, unpaginated.
Fig. 17 Edward Steichen aboard the *USS Lexington* during World War II.

During WWII, Steichen organized two exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art, *Road to Victory* and *Power in the Pacific*. When the war came to a close, the museum’s Board of Trustees created the position of director for the Department of Photography. This pleased Steichen immensely, as he felt that “MoMA was the one museum that, on the initiative of Alfred Barr, from its inception had given photography more recognition than it had ever been accorded by any other institution in the world.”¹⁰¹ By far the most famous of the exhibitions was *The Family of Man* from 1955. Steichen created the show as a call to peace in troubled times, and today the exhibition has traveled thousands of miles and has been seen by millions of people.

**The Museum of Modern Art**

In 1929, a new museum was established in New York City. Its founding Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ambitiously set out to create “the greatest museum of modern art in the world.”¹⁰² By the time Steichen joined the Museum in 1947, the Museum of Modern Art, as well as New York City, was considered the foremost source for modern painting, sculpture, architecture,

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photography, film, and industrial design. Of Steichen’s appointment, Nelson A. Rockefeller, President of The Museum of Modern Art, said:

Steichen…joins with The Museum of Modern Art to bring to as wide a public as possible the best work being done in photography throughout the world, and to employ it creatively as a means of interpretation in major Museum exhibitions where photography is not the theme but the medium through which great achievements and great moments are graphically presented.\(^{103}\)

During World War II, the Museum’s program changed from strictly artistic endeavors to incorporate the events of the war. MoMA held thirty-eight contracts for various governmental agencies, which included the Office of War Information, the Library of Congress, and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.\(^{104}\) Of these thirty-eight exhibitions, nineteen were sent to various countries around the world, while nine were shown at MoMA. The Museum’s Film Department analyzed enemy propaganda films, and an Armed Services Program was established to provide occupational therapy programs for disabled veterans.\(^{105}\)

While working as a naval photographer, Steichen mounted several exhibitions for MoMA before officially joining the Museum staff in 1947. His first war-related exhibition for MoMA was *Road to Victory* in 1942. *Road to Victory* attempted to “help eliminate vestiges of what had been a powerful isolationist movement before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.”\(^{106}\) The visitor first walked past photos of expansive country and endless farmlands before moving on to small towns. The next section displayed sources of government-sponsored industrial power like dams and generators before expanding to images of war arsenals and of battleships under

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\(^{103}\) Bee and Elligott, *Art in Our Time*, 89.  
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 76.  
\(^{105}\) Ibid.  
construction. The show concluded with a massive photomural of tightly packed soldiers, which attempted to serve as an inspiring portrayal of the US.

*Road to Victory* also illustrated Steichen’s interest in modernist exhibition design (Fig. 18). After the scenes of battleships, the exhibition’s designer, Herbert Bayer, turned the road the viewer was on into a ramp. Mary Anne Staniszewski writes that “moving through the exhibition was an imaginary foray in participatory democracy.” Bayer painted the ceiling, walls, and floor white, which created a neutral background for the pictures. Staniszewski also states that “this type of presentation resulted in an aggressive montage of forceful images and Steichen came to prefer it throughout his career at MoMA.”

**Fig. 18 Edward Steichen’s *Road to Victory* exhibition, MoMA, 1942.**

In the 1945 exhibition *Power in the Pacific*, the military and Museum alliance was even more obvious (Fig. 19). Photographs taken by Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard photographers show the American soldier in action. *Power in the Pacific* was more representative of war imagery than the *Road to Victory* had been. Pictures of rockets firing from

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carriers aimed at enemy ships, men lifting a wounded airman from a crippled plane, and a skipper’s relief over the safety of his crew were all on display in this exhibition.

Fig. 19 Edward Steichen’s *Power in the Pacific* exhibition, MoMA, 1945.

After mounting a third war-related exhibition concerning the Korean conflict, Steichen found himself frustrated that his work was not leaving a lasting impression upon the viewer. Steichen had banked particularly on the Korean exhibition “to make a thought-provoking impression on the world, for this war had undergone a more realistic photographic interpretation than any other.”¹¹² The exhibition was led by the work of David Douglas Duncan, whose book *This Is War* had enthralled Steichen with its strong charge on the issue of global conflict.¹¹³ While some found the photos repulsive and others deeply moving, they all left the museum and promptly forgot about them. He decided that he had been working from a negative viewpoint and “that what was needed was a positive statement on what a wonderful thing life was, how marvelous people were, and, above all, how alike people were in all parts of the world.”¹¹⁴

The genesis of the “theme” exhibitions produced at the Museum of Modern Art, *Road to Victory, Power in the Pacific,* and *The Family of Man,* lay in the desire to have a series of

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¹¹³ Ibid.
¹¹⁴ Ibid.
photographs collectively communicate a significant human experience.\textsuperscript{115} For Steichen, his significant experience harkened back to his early days in Milwaukee. After he called a Jewish boy a derogatory name, Steichen’s mother explained to him “that all people were alike regardless of race, creed, and color.”\textsuperscript{116} This was possibly the single most important moment of Steichen’s childhood, and he claimed that that day the seed was sown for \textit{The Family of Man} exhibition.

\textit{The Family of Man}

In 1938, Edward Steichen, like thousands of others, walked past the Farm Security Administration’s photographic exhibition in New York’s Grand Central Terminal. President Roosevelt, in 1935, had formed the Resettlement Administration (RA) as part of his New Deal for America “to establish assistance programs and agencies during the Depression years.”\textsuperscript{117} The RA eventually became the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937 and employed thirteen photographers including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Ben Shahn. These men and women were charged with documenting rural communities throughout America that had been hit the hardest by the Great Depression. The FSA Grand Central Station exhibition used the medium of photography to educate the public and to arouse viewers’ sympathetic emotions. Documentary photography, then, “focuses on the underclasses in a society, the disenfranchised, the poor, or the common man.”\textsuperscript{118} Thus began the impetus for \textit{The Family of Man} exhibition Edward Steichen created seventeen years later.

By 1952, Steichen was a well-respected member of the art world in his capacity as the director of The Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Photography. After the success of his previous shows, Steichen began to plan “the most ambitious and challenging project

\textsuperscript{115} Steichen, \textit{A Life in Photography}, unpaginated.  
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{117} Bezner, \textit{Photography and Politics in America}, 3.  
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 5.
photography has ever attempted.” Responding to the threat of the possible nuclear annihilation of America at midcentury, Steichen labored to compose a portrait of humanity. He envisioned the show “as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life, as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.” To accomplish this, Steichen went to work acquiring images that depicted the universal qualities of family life. Wendy Kozol writes that “domestic portraits often explain ambiguous and conflicting issues in recognizable, even comforting, terms.” In Steichen’s mind, the “universal man” would soothe Cold War fears and calm social uncertainties.

With the Rockefeller family bankrolling the endeavor to the tune of $100,000, Steichen and his staff spent the next three years preparing the exhibition. For the last two of these, he was assisted by Wayne Miller, who had worked with Steichen during WWII. Steichen rented a loft over a strip club on 52nd Street, and this acted as the operation’s base (Fig. 20). Steichen was assisted by Wayne Miller and his wife Joan Miller, while Dorothy Norman collected the quotations that formed the exhibition’s text. Carl Sandburg, Steichen’s brother-in-law, wrote the prologue, and architect Paul Rudolph designed the exhibition.

![Edward Steichen and staff assembling The Family of Man exhibition, 1955.](image)

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120 Ibid., 236.
121 Kozol, *Life’s America*, viii.
Steichen cast a wide net, issuing calls for photographs to professionals and amateurs alike. The main source for the exhibition turned out to be the *Life* magazine files. Miller dove into the *Life* archives to discover whether or not photographs could be found that properly captured Steichen’s vision. Miller waded through 3.5 million images and spent between seven and nine months searching through collections of photographs from all over the world. Steichen himself traveled to Europe, where he met with hundreds of photographers from eleven different countries.

In addition to Steichen’s European visits, Miller traveled to Washington to examine the files at the National Archives and the Library of Congress, which is where he was able to locate the Farm Security Administration collections. While *Life*’s archives proved to be the most helpful, Miller and Steichen solicited photographic services such as Black Star and Magnum, as well as the SovFoto collection, for pictures of the Soviet Union during the war years. Two million photographs were sent directly to MoMA for consideration, and from those two million, the photos were screened until the team had ten thousand. In order to reach the goal of five hundred photographs, it was decided that Wayne Miller would select pictures having to do with men and men’s work, while Joan Miller made the final selection pertaining to women and children. The final count for the show came to 503 photographs from 68 countries taken by 273 men and women from all over the world.

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124 Ibid., 41.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid., 45.
The phrase “the family of man” was drawn from Carl Sandburg’s poem that served as an interlude from his six-volume Abraham Lincoln biography, *The People, Yes*. Eric Sandeen writes that “the image conjured up of people, dignified through their fundamental, family units above the undifferentiated mass, sketched the construction of Steichen’s exhibit.” Steichen combined the humanism of Sandburg’s words and coupled them with a modernist aesthetic in order to help tell the tale of an overall, combined humanity.

A firm awareness of the exhibition’s layout is crucial to understanding *The Family of Man*’s visual impact (Fig. 21). The show “unfolded as a series of themes relating to the life of the family and depicted through universalized experiences.” Issues like courtship, marriage, childbirth, education, old age, and death were all explored as the visitor followed a serpentine path throughout the space. For the exhibition, Rudolph used transparent materials, invisible or slight support structures, dramatic lighting, and dark and light colored walls. Rudolph’s design mirrored the photographers’ subject matter in an effort to connect the two ideas together.

![Fig. 21 The Family of Man plan, MoMA, 1959.](image)

Winding up the stairway at The Museum of Modern Art, visitors were met with a giant proscenium framing the entrance that had been covered with wallpaper depicting an endless sea

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129 Ibid., 43-44.
130 Ibid., 46.
131 Ibid., 47.
of faces (Fig. 22). The exhibition took over the entire second floor of the Museum, and on the entrance’s left wall read the poetry of Carl Sandburg that acted as an introduction to the show:

There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world
and her name is All Women.
There is only one child in the world
and the child’s name is All Children.
A camera testament, a drama of the grand canyon of humanity,
an epic woven of fun, mystery and holiness here is the Family of Man.132

![Fig. 22 Edward Steichen’s The Family of Man exhibition, MoMA, 1959.](image1)

![Fig. 23 Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada from Manzanar, California, 1944, silver gelatin print.](image2)

The first section, that of courtship, consisted of photographs suspended on a clear lucite strip. Sandeen writes that “through that transparent screen one could see the family portraits, enticing the visitor toward the center of the exhibition, and one could glimpse Ansel Adams’s spectacular Mount Williamson on the back wall” (Fig. 23).133 Walking past the Adams photo, the viewer turned right and walked past the courtship section, “complete with a hospital curtain that earned the nickname ‘the bassinet,’ containing pictures of birth.”134 The viewer then wandered through the next section, where the family theme was conveyed with photographs of children

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133 Sandeen, Picturing An Exhibition, 47.
134 Ibid.
playing and with their parents. Around the corner, the visitor reached the centerpiece of *The Family of Man*. Giant enlargements of families from Sicily, Japan, Bechuanaland, and the United States hung from the ceiling.\(^{135}\) Underneath the photos, a platform of crushed marble created a holy effect at the center of this representation of the universal family (Fig. 24).

![Fig. 24 The Family of Man exhibition, universal family section, MoMA, 1959.](image)

From there, viewers were encouraged to wander freely about the exhibition. Sandeen writes that “along the back wall Steichen attempted to create a space dominated by curved forms that held rectangular photographs: a wheel of pictures stood immediately in front of the visitor, and at the end of the room two convex panels framed the far wall.”\(^{136}\) Photos of children all around the world playing ring-around-the-rosie lent themselves to the circular design. This section was accompanied with John Masefield’s caption “Clasp hands and know the thoughts of men in other lands.”\(^{137}\)

Staniszewski describes the installation as diverse, as “photographs were installed in myriad arrangements, at eye level, above the viewer’s head, in dynamic layouts as seen in the dancing and music section, and as huge, solid, dramatic wall murals such as the massive Ansel

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\(^{136}\) Sandeen, *Picturing An Exhibition*, 47.

\(^{137}\) Ibid.
Adams photo." The show’s tempo was supposed to take the viewer on an emotional journey. Staniszewski goes on to describe how “the layout, tone, and pace changed as the viewer moved from the extremely joyous themes to the more thoughtful sections dealing with human relations, education, and death.” The convex panels along the back wall were devoted to mourning, and Steichen contrasted these stark photographs with Andreas Feininger’s *Fifth Avenue, New York* (Fig. 25). Here, Steichen wished to contrast human suffering with man’s endurance and fortitude.

![Fifth Avenue, New York, Andreas Feininger, 1948, silver gelatin print.](image)

**Fig. 25 Fifth Avenue, New York, Andreas Feininger, 1948, silver gelatin print.**

The viewer then turned left and entered a narrow corridor of galleries devoted to somber themes such as “religious expression, loneliness, compassion, aspirations, hard times, famine, inhumanities, revolt, teens, human judgments, voting, and government.” One of these galleries contained the “faces” section, which consisted of nine individual portraits representing diverse races and ages set against a wall painted a dark gray. Steichen chose to display a mirror in the center of the faces section, “where more explicitly than anywhere else in the show the visitor saw

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139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
him or herself as a member of ‘the family of man.’” The nine portraits consisted of three men, three women, and three children, all in various states of unease and distress. Past the nine portraits, one confronted the photograph by Raphel Platnick of a dead soldier, his weapon embedded in the ground. Beside the photograph of the soldier was a quote Steichen chose from Sophocles: “Who is the slayer, who the victim? Speak.” In order to prepare the viewer for the dramatic space beyond, the lighting became somber, with just one overhead bulb.

The viewer now reached the most important image of the entire exhibition. The climax of Steichen’s story was the warning about the atomic age and all of its possibilities. Thus, this picture was to be the most powerful and shocking of them all. Staniszewski describes the room as “darkened and its walls painted red; there the viewer confronted what was exceptionally dramatic in an exhibition where every other image was black and white, a large, lit, color transparency of an exploding hydrogen bomb.” The six-by-eight-foot color transparency glowed orange in a space that forced the viewer close to the cloud. After viewing over four hundred black and white photographs, the image of total annihilation shocked the public back to reality.

The last section contained photographs of couples, accompanied by a line from Ovid, “We two form a multitude.” These were juxtaposed to a sixteen-foot mural of the United Nations General Assembly and its charter. Steichen and his team wanted to close the show on a message of hope for humanity and felt that the UN served as a symbol of potential salvation for warring humankind. Since its charter attempted to “reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights and in equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,” Steichen placed a last call

141 Staniszewski, The Power of Display, 244.  
142 Sandeen, Picturing An Exhibition, 48.  
143 Ibid.  
144 Bezner, Photography and Politics in America, 134.
for peace and disarmament. The viewer left the exhibition walking past a roomful of photographs consisting of children at play. The last photo in the entire show was one that W. Eugene Smith made of his two children in 1946, *The Walk to Paradise Garden* (Fig. 26). In this picture, an older brother leads his younger sister by the hand out of the wilderness into the light beyond.

![Fig. 26 The Walk to Paradise, Eugene Smith, 1946.](image)

*The Family of Man* was a blockbuster hit and was by far the most popular photographic event of the 1950s. It broke all attendance records at MoMA and led to the production of a book that is still in production today. The popular paperback book that cost one dollar has sold over four million copies. Lili Corbus Bezner writes that “some praised its popularity and ability to draw nations together; still others found fault with Steichen’s philosophical dominance and vision; still others dislike the design and the way photographs were printed and presented.”

Knowing what a propagandistic treasure they had with the exhibition, the USIA took *The Family of Man* on a grand tour, and between 1955 and 1962 the show appeared in thirty-eight

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countries and was seen by over nine million people. Steichen relinquished control of the photographs and became a spectator, occasionally meeting up with the show as it toured the world. The most important stop on the international tour, according to Steichen, was the American National Exhibition in Moscow during the summer of 1959.

*The Family of Man in Moscow*

The selection of *The Family of Man* at the American National Exhibition in Moscow was such an important event that Steichen himself showed up on the opening day, July 25, 1959. The photographs did not initially figure into the plans for the ANEM. However, the Moscow exhibition’s advisory board, “feeling that…its political and humanistic overtones made it a very appropriate part of the exhibition,” was able to convince the powers that be to include it. Staniszewski believes that “the show’s photojournalistic realism and vision of a humanity whose character matched a mythic 1950s American ideal made it a perfect vehicle to promote the State Department’s interests at a time when modern art was off-limits to such support.”

The biggest issue facing its inclusion in the ANEM was assembling a set worthy enough for travel. The original set had circulated to museums throughout the world and had suffered major water damage while in storage in Lebanon. Eventually, the US government provided $40,000 in mounting, lighting, and staffing costs, with the plastics industry donating the display pavilion under which the photographs would be housed. The fifth and final copy of photographs to be circulated by the USIA combined new prints with salvageable fragments from other sets.

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147 Sandeen, *Picturing An Exhibition*, 95.
148 Ibid., 131.
The installation design for *The Family of Man*, similar to its MoMA iteration, was another example of American modernist architecture. *The Family of Man* was housed under George Nelson’s umbrellas so that “the petals of the parasols allowed pictures to be displayed as curved panoramas (Fig. 27).” 151 Similar to the work of some International Style architects like Le Corbusier, the ceiling in Moscow for *The Family of Man* filtered natural light through the open clearstory. The difference in aesthetics between the MoMA iteration and the Moscow version was the influence of the space race. In New York, *The Family of Man* was located within the Museum of Modern Art as one example of artistic expression. In Moscow, Steichen’s show was incorporated into the greater body of an international fair. Four years after its opening night in 1955, *The Family of Man* was outside, among the people, housed in a plastic shell. The very materiality of the enclosure speaks to just how far technology had come in such a short period of time.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 27 The Family of Man outdoor exhibition at the ANEM, 1959.**

*The Family of Man* exhibition in Moscow drew huge lines and was one of the more popular aspects of the ANEM. Steichen, by this time, was eighty years old but made sure that he made it to the fair’s opening day. Steichen, along with his brother-in-law Carl Sandburg, felt that Moscow was “the high spot of the project” and “the culmination of the four-year tour.” 152

151 Sandeen, *Picturing An Exhibition*, 150.
152 Ibid., 138.
He was even allowed to sit on the podium with Khrushchev, Nixon, and other dignitaries. They sat facing a sea of photographers, and Steichen aimed his small Minox camera right back at them. A guest of the State Department, Steichen roamed the exhibition like any other tourist.

Ever the photographer, Steichen stood in the same position for twenty minutes in *The Family of Man* outdoor exhibition and photographed the Russian audience experiencing his show. He specifically chose the section devoted to parents and babies and decided that, “if I were to say the snapshots had been made in Wisconsin or Iowa or New England, the statement would be accepted without question.” Even after four years, Edward Steichen still believed in the humanist power that *The Family of Man* represented.

Steichen was particularly eager to meet Russian photographers and even met two of the contributors to *The Family of Man* that Wayne Miller had discovered going through the SovFoto collection four years prior. But Steichen stressed that he wished to meet professional photographers and journalists, not “the so-called art photographers.” One of the questions the Russian photographers asked Steichen was why so few pictures from Russia had ended up in the exhibition. Steichen explained that every time they sent a request to the Ministry of Culture in Moscow, they were sent large groups of abstract photographs, but no shots of the Russian people. As a sort of apology, Steichen told the men assembled that he “did not think the Russian journalist photographers had been represented in the pictures” they received.

Edward Steichen was in Russia for two weeks, and in his autobiography he wrote “these contacts left me with the impression that the Russian people were more like Americans than the people of any other country I have visited.” As curious and as eager as he had been to travel to

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154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
communist Russia, he was even happier to leave it. Steichen felt that the political repression in Russia was actually palpable, and that he was not able to breathe freely until he reached the West, stating that “freedom is something that is in the air of a country.”

CHAPTER 4: WE ARE ONE

The Universal Aspects of Cold War Propaganda

For Charles and Ray Eames, as well as Edward Steichen, 1950s humanist documentary photography served as an affirmation of cultural and universal values. Just as it had worked for the FSA photographers during the Depression, documentary photography had “been a useful trope that distinguished a humanistic perspective many image makers embraced and explored in twentieth-century photography.” When challenged with the task of representing the vastness of humanity to audiences around the world, to individuals who spoke different languages and held wildly different political views, both Steichen and the Eameses used the power of the photograph to enable man to speak to man.

This desire for universal understanding stems from the Enlightenment thought that so intrigued Charles and Ray Eames their entire career. Throughout their attempts to have “conversations with other nations,” the design couple used the US government as their platform to address the social issues of the day, and the US government used them right back. In fact, it is fascinating that demure government agencies patronized the Eameses in the first place, as they “were widely regarded as cutting edge and hardly in the mainstream of American culture.”

Even though the couple crafted an apolitical public persona and avoided supporting any one particular political party, they were in fact very liberal.

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157 Steichen, A Life in Photography, unpaginated.
158 Bezner, Photography and Politics in America, 1.
159 Albrecht, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames, 151-152.
In a diagram drawn by Charles for the 1969 exhibition *What Is Design?*, Charles and Ray appear as the nucleus, while lines connect them to circles representing their clients, the USIA, here called Moscow, the Department of State, the Smithsonian Institution, the Department of the Interior, IBM, Herman Miller, Eero Saarinen, George Nelson, and the Museum of Modern Art, among others (Fig. 28). A similar diagram from 1976 prepared for *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, depicts the “American Revolution as a galaxy of American patriots, European and American scientists, and other cultural innovators who orbit around the twin suns of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (Fig. 29).”

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161 Ibid., 153.
In each bubble diagram, “the connectedness of individuals and the sharing of information represent and, at the same time, obscure complex relations of conflict and competition, of power, profit, and politics.”¹⁶² For Charles and Ray Eames, the corporate world and the Revolution represented channels for communication. The Eameses' “understanding of the origins of America and its government and of contemporary American society was predicated on their experience of that government and their place in that society.”¹⁶³ Thus, the reason why Glimpses appears the way it does, an upbeat portrayal of happy, white Americans, is that for Charles and Ray Eames, that was their American experience. Just as Edward Steichen had done before them, the Eameses drew from their personal experience of living in America as a universal model to show their communist counterparts that people were the same the world over.

One aspect that cannot be overlooked regarding The Family of Man and Glimpses of the USA are their formal similarities. Charles and Ray Eames most assuredly would have known about Steichen’s exhibition at MoMA. Given the Eameses’ collaborative past with the Museum, they probably even saw the show in person. The photographs were simply too famous for the couple not to have known about them. In regards to the creation of their film, the Eames Office followed a similar path Steichen had blazed four years earlier. They used the same resources such as the archives of Magnum, Life, and Time to supplement their own collection. The strongest aesthetic similarities between the film and the exhibition exist in their handling of children. The closing scenes in Glimpses of parents kissing children goodnight and putting them to bed could have easily have fit into the MoMA show in 1955.

Awarded great praise in their time, both the film and the photographic exhibition have been the subject of much criticism since their debuts at mid-century. With the rise of abstract

¹⁶³ Ibid.
and personal photography by the late 1950s and early 1960s, many critics dismiss these exhibitions as Cold War relics dripping with sentimentality. The war in Vietnam only widened the gap between the American dream and the American nightmare. Therefore, for the past fifty years or so, the Eames film and the MoMA exhibition’s universal and political ideals have frequently led to charges of blatant propaganda.

The famous black and white photographs taken by the FSA that so strongly influenced Steichen, which in turn strongly influenced Charles and Ray Eames, implied objectivity and honesty. In this regard, viewers are at a disadvantage, for they are not privy to the circumstances of the photo’s creation. The photographer is able to manipulate the viewer’s understanding of the picture in a myriad of ways, but the audience will never know. For the Road to Victory exhibition, Steichen appropriated Dorothea Lange’s photograph of a Texan man who had been forced to become a migratory worker during the Great Depression (Fig. 30). Steichen juxtaposed this photo with one of the attack on Pearl Harbor above a smaller photograph of two laughing Japanese diplomats. The Lange photo was given the caption, “War, they asked for it, now, by the living God, they’ll get it.”

Even though the photograph’s origin lay in the Depression, the image was used for wartime purposes to fit into the show’s universal narrative. For Steichen and his contemporaries, “the absolute truth of photographic prints was not a subject for discussion.”

The worldwide success of *The Family of Man* made it ripe for critique. Probably the harshest criticism regarding Steichen’s show came from Susan Sontag. Her book *On Photography* indicts the exhibition for its assumption that the human condition is universal. Sontag believed the exhibition was “the last sigh of the Whitmanesque erotic embrace of the nation but universalized and stripped of all demands.” She accused Steichen of attempting to numb the pain of war and its consequences in order to suppress the viewer’s resulting queasiness. These photographs for Sontag preached to the choir, the choir being 1950s America which needed consoling and coddling from the danger of a foreign threat. Probably the biggest issue that was raised in relation to Steichen’s exhibition was not necessarily what he chose to show, but what he decided to delete that drew most critics’ ire.

**From the Cold War to the Civil Rights Movement**

While the greatness of the United States was put on display at the ANEM during the summer of 1959, at home the drumbeat of racial tension began to beat louder and louder. The very real and very delicate issue of promoting democracy abroad while brutal discrimination

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against minorities in America was in practice, proved to be a strategic landmine for the US government. The question of whether America lived up to its own ideals had, of course, been raised before by activists like Frederick Douglass. Speaking in a tone Edward Steichen would have appreciated, Douglass argued that “slavery was a crime against the human family” and that it therefore belonged “to the whole human family to seek its suppression.”

In 1944, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. In this report, Myrdal wrote that “all Americans shared an American creed, a belief in ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice and a fair opportunity.” These Enlightenment ideas conflicted with the racism that was so prevalent in the US. Since America’s involvement in World War II had been a battle against racism and religious persecution, “racial segregation and disenfranchisement seemed to belie the great sacrifices the war had wrought.”

The late 1950s represented an era that buffered great war with great domestic strive. Along with a baby boom and a strategic focus on consumption, the United States attempted to promote the image of the happy American family as a capitalist success story. With the US hoping to “reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing.” This contradiction in actions and ideology led the Soviet Union to capitalize on this flaw, displaying America’s race issues prominently in anti-American propaganda.

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168 Ibid., 8.
169 Ibid., 9.
170 Ibid., 12.
Edward Steichen created *The Family of Man* to challenge viewers’ minds, but even he had to submit to certain societal norms. At the beginning of the exhibition’s MoMA run, one image was removed from the show. *Death Slump at Mississippi Lynching*, a photograph from 1937, was submitted to MoMA for *The Family of Man* by an unknown photographer (Fig. 31). The photo depicted a black man, lynched and chained to a tree. Even though the photo was published in the February issue of *Life*, the image was not reproduced in the show’s catalog. Steichen’s assistant Wayne Miller later explained that the image “was removed because he felt that this violent picture might become a focal point” and that “the presentation of material was dissonant to the composition.”

![Death Slump at Mississippi Lynching](image)

**Fig. 31 Death Slump at Mississippi Lynching, unknown photographer, 1937.**

At the time, Steichen said the image was important to him, as it represented “a shocking, repugnant image of truth concerning his own country’s racism.” The image may have been removed due to its specificity to American racism, and Steichen may have feared its possible political consequences. But by removing the photograph, “Steichen also removed the most

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specific, repulsive image of oppression and the dehumanizing aspects of white supremacy.”

The history surrounding the lynching photograph underscores the state of American commentary that existed during the Cold War. While some photographers eagerly sought out subject material that was critical of the US, by the 1950s this practice was highly discouraged.

Steichen had reason to be concerned. The ANEM’s predecessor, the International Exposition in Brussels in 1958, had had an extremely controversial exhibition called “Unfinished Business.” According to Jack Masey:

In 1956, when the US complained bitterly at the UN about the brutal Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising, the Soviets countered by pointing to the US’s deplorable record with race relations: the brutal murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi and Rosa Parks’ arrest in Alabama was soon followed, in 1957, by the school desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The “Unfinished Business” exhibition would, therefore, openly and honestly discuss domestic issues within the US. The presentation acts like a timeline depicting the “efforts being made towards progress for the underprivileged while presenting images of hope for the future.” In a move that was probably influenced by Steichen’s The Family of Man exhibition, the last image was of a group of small children playing ring-around-the-rosy. While the issues regarding race in America were not finished, the exhibition seemed to say, they were at least being addressed.

Visitors were brought into the three separate sections of the exhibition by guides who were there to explain the material and to answer questions. The first section was a “chaotic crystal” that had a crumpled exterior (Fig. 32). The second section was a simplified polyhedron, while the third and final section had smooth rectilinear walls. The exterior walls designed by Leo Lionni made a transition from chaos to reason, while the interior addressed “the Negro, the

173 Bezner, Photography and Politics in America, 163.
174 Masey and Morgan, Cold War Confrontations, 128.
175 Ibid., 129.
City, and Nature." The concept for the “Unfinished Business” exhibition was based on the idea that as the viewer walked through the three spaces, the confusion regarding the issues became clearer and, therefore, more easily understood.

Fig. 32 Model of Leo Lionni’s “Unfinished Business” exhibition for the International Exposition in Brussels, Belgium, 1958.

While the Belgian press praised the US government for its honesty, politicians back home were furious that America was airing its dirty laundry to foreign audiences. Senator Strom Thurmond and Representative Mendel Rivers pressured President Eisenhower to close the show. Three weeks later, the exhibition was re-opened after changes were made to the areas that had previously been deemed offensive. One of these changes, a sign that was placed over a photograph of mixed race children at play, stated that “the image did not represent US policy but rather the individual freedom of choice available in the US.” Given Steichen’s relationship with the US government and his military past, he may have feared angering or insulting the public. He eventually bowed to peer pressure to remove the lynching photo, but the fact that out of two million images, it made it to the show at all is rather remarkable for 1955.

176 Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 137.
177 Ibid., 135.
178 Ibid.
Glimpses of the USA too was criticized for its lack of minority imagery. Of course the film could have been more inclusive, but Charles and Ray Eames knew their audience. The images they selected were all chosen to tell a very specific story to the Soviet Union. The goal of Edward Steichen’s exhibition was to challenge people’s perceptions of the world and the cruelty within it. He hoped that by displaying as many facets of human life as possible, regardless of race, creed, or color, the universal desire for peace would counter any thoughts of future nuclear proliferation. For the Eameses, their mission was to portray the joy of living in America and the universal benefits of capitalism. Charles Eames himself admitted that even on seven screens, a twelve-minute film was not enough time for one nation to tell its story to another. Both the Eameses and Steichen nonetheless tried.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Following World War II, the US government used the image of American domesticity to promote the benefits of capitalism abroad. After the shocking events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the photograph proved to be the United States most powerful weapon in combating America’s newest enemy, Communism. With all of the changes that post-WWII society brought, the US government realized it needed an ally in shaping just what the new face of America would look like. It is interesting that two designers from California and one photographer from New York via Paris were their choice. But all three were patriots, and all three answered their country’s call when asked.

It is easy to criticize The Family of Man and Glimpses of the USA with the distance of fifty-three years for their sentimentality and naiveté. But each is a product of its time and should be judged within the parameters in which they were conceived. Yes, the American National Exhibition in Moscow was blatant propaganda, but all involved knew that from the beginning.
The selection of Charles and Ray Eames and Edward Steichen’s contributions of film and photography tempered the cornucopia of American consumerism with a universal message for peace. While the ANEM promoted the almighty dollar and American manufacturing, the Eames film and Steichen’s exhibition were calls for civility in uneasy times. The Enlightenment philosophy, dating back to the days of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson, of the dignity of the individual, the equality of all, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom strongly influenced the lives and careers of Charles and Ray Eames and Edward Steichen. Their work came together for six weeks in the summer of 1959, but later guided an entire generation striving for racial freedom and equality.
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Lucia Eames Demetrios d.b.a. Eames Office: Figures 9, 10, 12
Magnum Photos: Figure 20
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VITA

Elizabeth Lane Altimus was born and raised in Bossier City, Louisiana. She attended Louisiana Tech University where she acquired a Bachelor of Interior Design with a minor in art history. After working for a Steelcase dealer in Shreveport, Louisiana for two years selling commercial furniture, she decided to continue her education in art history. She decided to write her master’s thesis in regards to mid-century modern design, film, and photography. In May of 2012, Beth will graduate from Louisiana State University with a Master of Arts.