

Photography

During Harlem's transition in the early part of the twentieth century, many African-American photographers were opening studios and exhibiting their works in the Harlem community, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. Their clients were artists, entertainers, families, and visitors to Harlem. These photographers were producing works of lasting value, much of it was race conscious and many were romanticized portraits of dignified African-American men, women, and children. Some of the better known photographers were James Van der Zee, Walter Baker, James Latimer Allen, R.E. Mercer, twin brothers Marvin and Morgan Smith, Winifred Hall Allen, and Austin Hansen. Beginning in the 1920s and lasting through the 1940s there were many camera clubs in the New York area where members came together to discuss the latest techniques of photography. Many of the photographers whose images are in this portfolio were from the Harlem community. Where possible, these photographers have been identified.

Reading a Photograph

To introduce this history kit as a unit project, display all the images for the students. Have students make note of questions these images provoke. They will be the basis for future discussions. Before relating the background information supplied with an image, ask your students to examine the photographs and describe what they see. Encourage them to extract as much detail as possible.

1. Give the photograph a name which will help others identify it. What is happening in the picture?
2. What year do you think the photograph was taken? List evidence from the photograph which supports your hypothesis.
3. Explain how this photograph will add to our understanding of the historical time period.
4. What objects in the picture can students identify? Where was it taken? List every item found in the photograph. You should go into detail describing the number of people, their clothing, the number of different buildings, the type of cars, plants, etc. Also include information about the environment, such as the time of day, the climate, the season, and the appearance of the surroundings.
5. Why did the photographer take this picture? What new questions does this photograph raise? Write your questions and the sources you might use to answer them.
6. Locate photographs that document the history of your community. Local newspapers, libraries, or museums are good places to start your research. Schools often keep copies of old yearbooks in their archives.

7. Have students select one of the African-American photographers from the era 1900-1940 and write a report on him/her.

Note: When using photographs as documentary evidence it is important to remember that photographs can be staged or altered. Also, the photographer may be shooting scenes to represent a particular viewpoint. When using photographs for research, don't draw conclusions from just one print. Further sources must be utilized, such as historical records, other photos, books, or oral history.