

## Robert Frank



Santa Fe, New Mexico (1955)

It is slightly startling to recall that the US decision to build an Interstate Highway System was only passed by Congress in 1956, the year after Robert Frank had begun his car journeys across the USA on a two-year long photography project that eventually led to his watershed book, *The Americans*.

Frank was photographing America at a time when America had become obsessed with the automobile, and families had begun to travel long distances by car purely as a leisure activity. This obsession forms one of several core themes that run through *The Americans*, and photographs of roads, cars, car accidents, drive-in movies, and related matters recur throughout the book.

And so, about half way through the book, we come upon the photograph above of an abandoned gasoline station, captioned simply 'Santa Fe, New Mexico'. But Frank is not merely 'documenting' America in the late 1950s; and this photograph is not merely a 'record shot' of a gasoline station. Frank was, rather, concerned to express his emotional reaction to the emptiness, sadness and hypocrisy that lay behind much that was vaunted in 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'. So here we see a forlorn, deserted gasoline station in an almost barren landscape.

Yet there is something much more important photographically about this picture, something that speaks to why Frank is widely considered to be one of the most influential twentieth-century photographers, and why The Guardian's photography critic, Sean O'Hagan, wrote that *The Americans* "changed the nature of photography, what it could say and how it could say it... it remains perhaps the most influential photography book of the 20th century."<sup>[1]</sup>

It speaks to Frank's greatness as a photographer that he even thought this gasoline station might make a photograph at all. It is the sort of subject that, even now, most of us would not bother to photograph. And the way Frank photographed it is certainly not in the manner of the formally elegant Cartier-Bresson, nor the other Modernist, humanist and romantic photographers and photojournalists then gracing the pages of *Life* or *Time* magazine.

In important ways, this is an astonishing photograph. Frank must have stopped in the desert when he spotted this scene as he passed along the road. He must have had the thought – but could not have been certain – that this would make a photograph, even as he was framing it in his viewfinder. He must have hoped, as he moved around to get the right place, that all the elements – the sign, the five pumps, the telegraph pole, the hose stand – would work in a picture. But he could only have known for sure when he looked at the negative.

And this, of course, is what matters: how this looks in a photograph. Because this unprepossessing collection of things is held together as a picture by the arrangement *that the camera sees* when the photographer stands in a particular place, frames in a particular way, and presses the shutter at a particular time. (Though that last point is less of an issue when, as here, things are not moving much!).

So the photograph is not a 'magic window' through which we somehow 'experience' a 1950s petrol station near Santa Fe, New Mexico. It is a photograph — how these things looked to a camera, a picture on the page of a book that presents us with an arrangement of things. That's all that we experience directly: how this picture looks on the page, as a picture. (While we look at it, we may also have particular thoughts and feelings, though they are not the photographer's responsibility.)

*The Americans* changed what could be in a photograph and how photographs could look. Sixty years later, Frank's photographs can still challenge us.

[1] [O'Hagan, Sean \(2014\). "Robert Frank at 90: the photographer who revealed America won't look back". \*The Guardian\*, 7 November 2014.](#)