LIFE: Six Women Photographers

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Selected PR Images

The New-York Historical Society is proud to present the work of six prominent women photographers, whose iconic work for LIFE magazine was integral to Henry Luce’s vision for an “American Century.” On view in the Center for Women’s History’s Joyce B. Cowin Women’s History Gallery, the exhibition features more than 70 images by Margaret Bourke-White, Marie Hansen, Martha Holmes, Lisa Larsen, Nina Leen, and Hansel Mieth, who were among the few women photographers employed by LIFE between the late 1930s and the early 1970s.

Margaret Bourke-White, photograph from “Franklin Roosevelt’s Wild West,” LIFE, November 23, 1936
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Margaret Bourke-White became one of the first four staff photographers at LIFE in 1936.
Margaret Bourke-White, photograph from “Franklin Roosevelt’s Wild West,” *LIFE*, November 23, 1936
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*Bourke-White’s photograph of the Fort Peck Dam, a New Deal project in Montana, graced the inaugural cover of LIFE on November 23, 1936. This image of one of the dam turbines was part of the photo essay.*

Hansel Mieth, photograph from “International Ladies’ Garment Workers: How a Great Union Works Inside and Out,” *LIFE*, August 1, 1938
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*Hansel Mieth was hired by LIFE in 1937, where she produced socially engaged photo essays over the next seven years.*

Hansel Mieth, photograph from “International Ladies’ Garment Workers: How a Great Union Works Inside and Out,” *LIFE*, August 1, 1938
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*On view in the exhibition is Mieth’s 1938 photo essay about the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, which offered a sympathetic view of organized labor during the Depression.*
On display is Marie Hansen’s photo essay about Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) recruits at their training center in Des Moines, Iowa.

Hansen’s story acquainted Americans to women’s participation in the military: over the course of the war, 150,000 women joined up and thousands were deployed.
Thousands of Leen’s images were printed in LIFE over nearly three decades. On view in the exhibition, Leen’s 1947 photographs of the “American Woman’s Dilemma” presented stark options for women that all involved motherhood and housework, a clear attempt at circumscribing women’s choices in the postwar era.

Leen also photographed single working women for “American Woman’s Dilemma,” but most of those photographs, such as this one, were not printed in the magazine.
Martha Holmes, photograph from “Mr. B.,” *LIFE*, April 24, 1950
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*Martha Holmes began photographing for LIFE in 1944. On view in the exhibition are Holmes’s 1950 photographs of mixed-race singer Billy Eckstine, including one of Eckstine being embraced by a white fan—a provocative image that Holmes felt was one of her best because she felt that it “told just what the world should be like.” Henry Luce supported this opinion.*

Martha Holmes, photograph from “Mr. B.,” *LIFE*, April 24, 1950
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*The story drew vicious letters from the public, and the fallout damaged Eckstine’s career.*

Lisa Larsen, photograph from “Tito As Soviet Hero, How Times Have Changed!” *LIFE*, June 25, 1956
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*At the height of the Cold War in 1956, LIFE sent Lisa Larsen to document the Kremlin visit of Yugoslavia’s President Josip Broz (known as Tito). She captured the immense crowds, later believed to be present under duress.*
Lisa Larsen, unpublished photograph from “Tito as Soviet Hero, How Times Have Changed!” LIFE, June 25, 1956
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Larsen’s published photographs emphasize the official pomp of the occasion while unused images reveal her eye for intimate portraits.