



ROBERT FRANK

Mary's Book



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Stuart Alexander and
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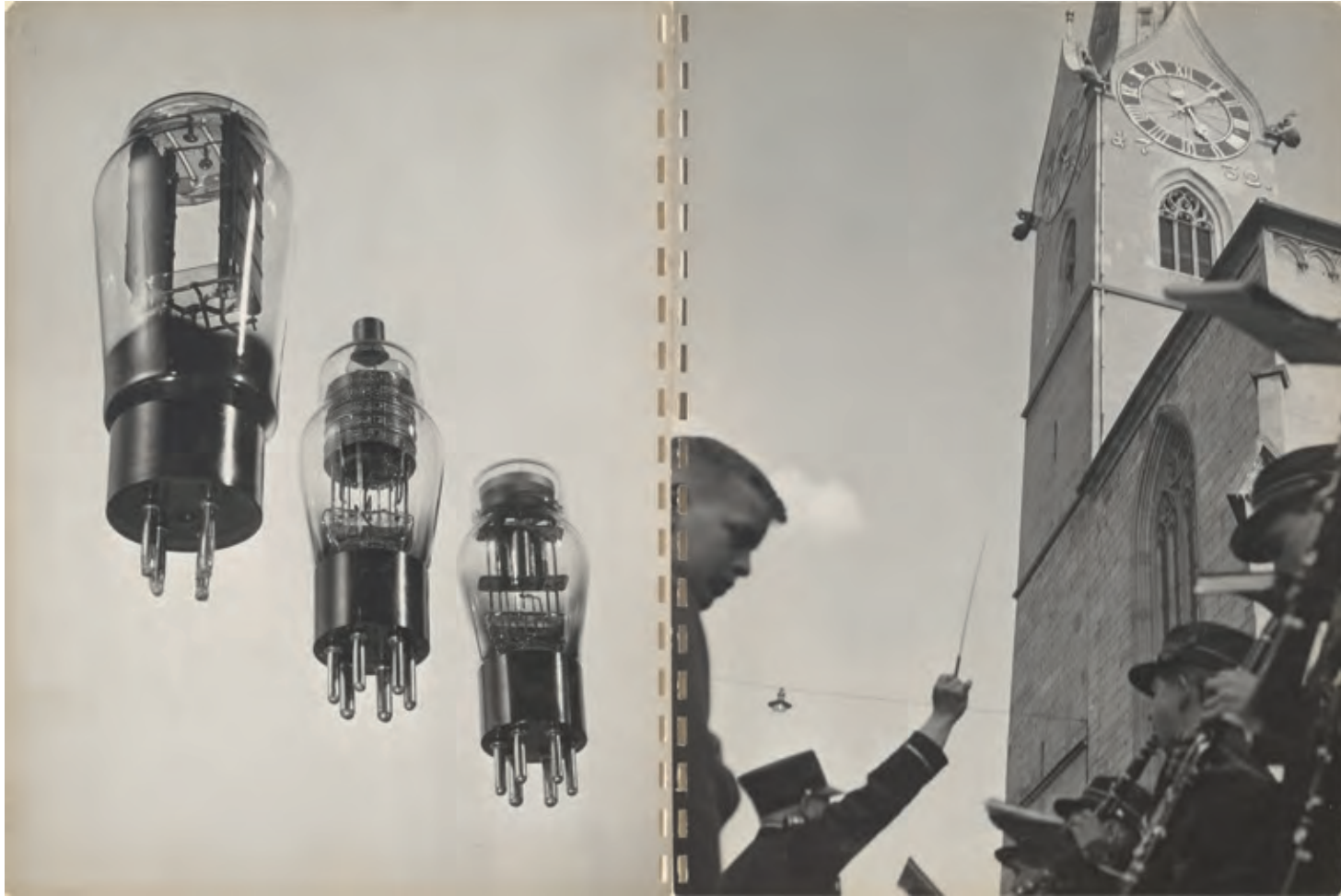


FIG. 1 Robert Frank, *40 Fotos*, 1946

IN DECEMBER 1949, the young Swiss émigré photographer Robert Frank created a unique book to send to his then-girlfriend, Mary Lockspeiser. On the book's cover is its simply written raison d'être: "This is for you. It is not much but I promised you a little story. Maybe this is not a story." *Mary's Book*, a love letter from Robert to Mary, is a series of unbound pages nestled within one another, filled with handwritten notes and hand-cut prints. The book is more than a keepsake of their burgeoning love affair. It was an important exercise in bookmaking for Frank, evidence of his maturing artistic vision, which led to one of the most influential photobooks of the twentieth century, *The Americans* (1958).¹

Robert Frank was born in Zurich in 1924, the second of two boys. His father, Henry, imported radios and record players, and in part to avoid going into this business himself, Frank began an apprenticeship in photography at the age of sixteen. As a final step in this apprenticeship, he made his first unique book, *40 Fotos*, to prove his technical mastery of many types of photography from architectural, to still lifes, to landscapes and portraiture.² Based on examples by other Swiss photographers such as Werner Bischof and Gotthard Schuh, the book is of a simple design, almost more of a portfolio, and is made up of individual photographs mounted back-to-back and joined with a spiral binding. On each spread, a full-page image faces another full-page image (FIG. 1).

Having studied French when he was younger, Frank was drawn to Paris and made an unsuccessful attempt to find photography work there in 1946. The following spring he sailed for New York. He was hired shortly after arriving by Alexey Brodovitch, the legendary art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, who was impressed by *40 Fotos*. In the beginning, Frank was charged with making straightforward photographs of fashion accessories and, later, short stories on college programs in cities such as St. Louis, Boston, and Kansas City (FIGS. 2 AND 3).³ He found himself in the midst of the leading fashion and magazine photographers of the day, and it was a heady atmosphere with far more stimulation and inspiration than he had encountered back home in Switzerland. Richard Avedon's photographs were often on the cover of the issues in which Frank's work appeared, for example. Among the new friends he made was the photographer Louis Faurer, eight years his senior and whose photographs he admired. After more than a year in New York and not necessarily enthralled by his work for the fashion magazines, Frank decided to travel alone to South America, where he could photograph freely, far from the distractions of the city and the influence of other photographers. On the urging of

1. Robert Frank, *Les Américains* (Paris: Delpire, 1958). For the most complete reference on *The Americans*, see Sarah Greenough, ed., *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/Steidl, 2009).

2. Robert Frank, *40 Fotos* (Zurich: self-published, 1946). For a facsimile, see Robert Frank, *Portfolio: 40 Photos 1941/1946* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).

3. See Stuart Alexander, *Robert Frank: A Bibliography, Filmography, and Exhibition Chronology 1946–1985* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1986).



FIG. 2 "Color at Your Feet," *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1947



FIG. 7 Elliott Erwitt, Jackie Segall, Unidentified Man, and Elliott Erwitt in Sanyu's apartment, Paris, 1949

turned Mary over to the police. Her father had her locked up in an asylum, and when Frank attempted to see her, he was intentionally misled and told she was no longer there. Ultimately, Mary's mother came to Paris and withdrew her from the asylum, taking her back to New York to finish school.¹³

Alone again, Frank traveled throughout Europe in the late summer and early fall of 1949. In August he went to Spain, and in early October he and Erwitt spent time in Venice, photographing the city, the local population, and each other (FIG. 8).¹⁴ Frank spent the rest of that fall as a flâneur exploring Paris, wandering the streets and photographing whatever caught his eye (FIG. 9). Sometimes he would concentrate on a particular subject, such as flower stands or park chairs, thinking it might make a good story for a magazine.

In December of 1949, twenty of Frank's photographs, more than half of them made since his return to Europe, were featured in the trilingual Swiss monthly magazine *Camera*, including one on the front cover (FIGS. 10A AND 10B).¹⁵ It was the first time his professional work received international recognition. Having just turned twenty-five, it was a tremendous boost to his self-confidence and also reassurance that his career was on the right track. As *Camera* editor Walter Läubli explained in the issue, "Robert Frank is a young photographer who, in his thirst for experience, steps out into the world and challenges life with his camera.... [He] loves truth, the unvarnished fact. However, he also loves to capture movement and to incorporate it in the atmosphere of his pictures. We believe that Robert Frank can teach us how to see, how to capture the subjects we meet with everyday."¹⁶

The issue also included a short article about the American photographer Louis Stettner, who was similarly based in Paris.¹⁷ Frank and Stettner had met previously in New York at the Photo League and frequently socialized in Paris. Stettner was well connected there and introduced Frank to the American photographer Todd Webb, who lived nearby, and, later, the French photographer Edouard Boubat, who became a friend and important connection.¹⁸

That same month, Frank created his unique book for Mary to tell her something of his life in Paris. Frank was inspired by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, a novella both he and Mary loved, and he mirrored its tone of a questioning child looking at the world. In the note on the front cover, Frank includes a quote from *Le Petit Prince*, although he has reversed the order of the sentences: "l'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux, on ne voit

13. Author conversation with Mary Frank, February 19, 2024; and "Oral history interview with Mary Frank," 2010.

14. Author conversations with Frank, December 11, 2015; and with Erwitt, February 17, 2016. Neither photographer remembered traveling to Venice together, yet they appear in each other's contact sheets of photos taken at St. Mark's Square.

15. Walter Läubli, "Robert Frank," *Camera* 28, no. 12 (December 1949): 358–71. Found written on the back of a print after Frank's death is "my first cover."

16. Läubli, "Robert Frank," 360.

17. "Louis Stettner," *Camera* 28, no. 12 (December 1949): 377–82.

18. Author conversation with Louis Stettner, January 18, 1999.



ONE CHAIR tilts uneasily as if it were about to move slowly away on its stiff legs. It was abandoned in the middle of a gravel path in the Tuileries gardens.



EIGHT CHAIRS are lined up in single file as if some children had been playing school in the park. Folding chairs like these can be rented for 6 francs apiece.



A PARISIAN OBSERVES A CROQUET GAME

SPEAKING OF PICTURES

A photographer in Paris finds chairs everywhere

When Robert Frank, a 26-year-old Swiss photographer, was in Paris a year and a half ago, he set out to photograph the sights of the city. On the way from his studio he walked through the Luxembourg gardens where he was attracted by the endless array of chairs that filled the park. Some were in tidy rows along the paths and fountains, others clustered under shady trees while here and there a single chair sat quietly by itself. "They all seemed to be waiting for something," says Frank. Soon he began to notice chairs all over Paris and wherever he went he photographed them—along the Champs-Élysées, under the cafe awnings, beside the sailboat ponds. When he left for New York he took with him more than 100 photographs of chairs, which to him symbolize the leisurely, relaxed way of life in Paris. "In New York," he says regretfully, "one cannot afford the time to relax in a chair. Besides," he adds, "you could not have such an institution. The people would steal the chairs."



HALF A CHAIR beside a sailboat pond is reflected in a puddle which was left by an afternoon shower.



SEVEN CHAIRS are clustered together in a social group. Renting concessions are usually given to old people and invalids, who rent armchairs for 8 francs.

FOUR CHAIRS rest in front of wall in the Tuileries. Inscription on stones commemorates work of André Le Nôtre who designed this and other parks of France.



FIG. 18 Robert Frank, *Paris*, 1949

Frank believed that the world must be understood through personal experience and not through the accumulation of outside knowledge.¹¹ After spending two years in New York, Frank went back to Europe in 1949, staying in Paris for five months. Decades later, back in the US, he reflected on this Parisian period in a conversation with the curator Ute Eskildsen: “[In 1949], I had already been in New York for two years. And in two years you become harder and you know that the beautiful and old and romantic, you don’t find it here, it doesn’t exist here.”¹² By the time of this reflection, *The Americans* had already cemented Frank as a renowned and astute chronicler of Americans and of the tensions in the US related to both urban and rural life, as well as race and consumerism, capturing complexities and the often overlooked—both individually and in groups—through his critical yet compassionate gaze.¹³ Frank returned to Paris again between 1951 and 1953 with his wife, Mary, and their newborn son, Pablo, in tow. These trips to the French capital represented a pivotal moment that stayed with him for the rest of his life, and the images he made there appeared in his books, and later prints, throughout his career—in *Black White and Things* (1952), *The Lines of My Hand* (1972), and *Flower Is...* (1985), all beginning with the one-of-a-kind handmade album *Mary’s Book* (1949).

Frank made three copies of *Black White and Things* in Zurich in the fall of 1952. A post-bound maquette (and decades later published as a commercial book), it was designed by his friend Werner Zryd and is divided into three sections: black, white, and things. It includes thirty-four tightly sequenced photographs from the US, Europe, and Peru, all interconnected visually and emotionally. As with *Mary’s Book*, *Black White and Things* begins with the same quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince*: “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Frank’s own words at the beginning of the book emphasize his interest in the emotion—whether it be melancholy, grief, or joy—that a photograph can produce in the viewer and allude to the somber, quiet, and peaceful tones throughout the book.¹⁴ Frank selected photographs of a personal nature related to his disillusionment with photojournalism at the time. He described being enraged that *Life* magazine didn’t buy his pictures, which led him to intentionally go against the concept of *Life* stories. “If I hate all those stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end then obviously I will make an effort to produce something that will stand up to all those [*Life*] stories but not be like them.”¹⁵

10. Greenough, *Looking In*, 16.

11. Greenough, *Looking In*, 16.

12. Robert Frank, quoted in Ute Eskildsen, ed., *Robert Frank: Paris* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), unpaginated.

13. For a more complete understanding of *The Americans*, see Greenough, *Looking In*; and Lisa Volpe, *America and Other Myths: Photographs by Robert Frank and Todd Webb, 1955* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

14. “sombre people and black events—quiet people and peaceful places—and the things people have come in contact with—this, I try to show in my photographs.” Robert Frank, *Black White and Things* (Zurich: self-published, 1952).

15. Robert Frank, quoted in Greenough and Brookman, *Moving Out*, 107.



FIG. 32 Robert Frank, *Paris*, 1949



FIG. 33 Robert Frank, *Paris*, 1951–52



FIG. 34 Robert Frank, *Tulip*—Paris 53A / *Lines of My Hand* 25 / *Black White and Things* 21, 1949–50

perfectly balanced with a crisp quality rather than subtle warm tones, and therefore appears to be a later print. It was perhaps made by one of the photographers who printed for him in later decades, including Danny Lyon, Ralph Gibson, or Sid Kaplan, who all worked with technical perfection and in deep and dark tonalities.

Tulip, another important Paris photograph for Frank, is in *Black White and Things*, *The Lines of My Hand*, and *Flower Is....*. The man on the left—his friend and fellow photographer Louis Stettner—holds a tulip behind his back as he looks toward a woman in sunglasses in the background. Just below Stettner’s elbow, the negative space formed by the overcoats of Stettner and the older man next to him almost looks like an elongated heart. The blending of the two dark coats makes it seem as if the older man is the one holding the tulip, which in turn draws the viewer’s attention to the heart shape. The photograph represents suspense and longing through the anticipation of Stettner’s gesture. Frank expresses the mood through innovatively capturing objects and gestures, and he creates compositions that invite reflection and emotion. What interests Frank is the flower itself and the wistful moment *before* Stettner gives the flower to the woman—the wait. The contact sheet reveals that Frank photographed a flower stand in the frame before, then photographed the tulip behind Stettner’s back twice, but did not photograph the moment when the flower was given (FIG. 34). Frank concentrated on the flower itself and the suspenseful anticipation of the moment. After including the photograph in *Black White and Things*, Frank revisited the picture in the 1970s while working with Motomura on *The Lines of My Hand*. In this later print, Frank’s blue markings in the right margin instruct the printer of the book to keep the background and the sky light, while the red arrows indicate where to crop the image (FIG. 35). While clearly a working print, with film sprockets and all, the fact that Frank signed it indicates that he saw value in the image. It was an important picture in his emotional journey of images. Similarly, Frank also signed the print of the men carrying flowers as part of the funeral cortege in its work state, also published in *The Lines of My Hand* (FIG. 36). Later, printing the frame and the sprockets became a deliberate aesthetic decision beginning with his *From the Bus* series in 1958 and reinforced from cinema (enlarging filmstrips) in his work throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.³⁶

A good example of how important Paris was for Frank is the handful of photographs that he later wrongly labeled as being from Paris. This includes the Angers photograph of the dead horse included in *Black White and Things*. In addition, Stuart Alexander

36. I am indebted to Stuart Alexander for sharing his research.



FIG. 35 Robert Frank, *Tulip* / Paris, 1950



FIG. 42 Robert Frank, *Mary, Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen*, 1951–52

a distinct photobook within the history of photobooks because it has never been fully reproduced, it did not have multiple editions or owners, and it was not disseminated or circulated.

For Frank, Paris was a place of reflection and memory, and the city allowed for experimentation and interrogation into symbols, sights, and single as well as sequenced images. Frank engaged in an ethnographic study of Paris through his visual and textual diary for Mary. As it was for many other artists, writers, and intellectuals, Paris became an idea for Frank. For the deeply philosophical and lucid artist, the city represented his younger self and hence both a place and a state of mind. His photographs taken between 1949 and 1953 represent his youthful sense of wonder and contemplation coupled with his keen observation and poetic realism. Paris was the perfect terrain for his early critical reflection. Frank projected abstract emotions and deep insight onto Parisian objects and cityscapes. In an interview in 2008, Frank recalled how life was more pleasant in Paris, but there were fewer work opportunities for him there. He stated, “In the end it’s all the same. It was easier to earn money in America than in Europe. In Paris it was hopeless.”⁴¹ Revisiting photographs of Paris at different points in his career brought him back to his younger self, perhaps a moment when dreams could come true and time stood still. Frank’s deeply introspective approach to photographing and to reconsidering his own work endured over the years. In his 1977 work *Mabou Winter Footage*, Frank lucidly declared, “I’m always looking outside, trying to look inside. Trying to say something that’s true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what’s out there. And what’s out there is always changing.”⁴²

41. Robert Frank, quoted in Eskildsen, *Robert Frank: Paris*, unpaginated.

42. Robert Frank, quoted in Brookman and Greenough, *Moving Out*, 12.



*On les voit un peu partout à
Paris—les chaises—
Quand-t-ils sont seul ils
ont l'air triste [sic].
Certainement après la pluie.
Alors il me semble qu'ils attendent.
Oh, ils ont de la patience.
Et quand-t-on est seul on
s'assois [sic]. Sur une chaise qui
se trouve à coté d'une autre.
Maintenant tous les trois
attendent.*

C'est triste.

You see them a bit all over Paris—the chairs—
When they are alone they seem sad. Certainly after
the rain. So it seems to me that they are waiting.
Oh, they are patient. And when one is alone, one sits
down. On a chair that is next to another. Now, all
three are waiting.

It's sad.



On les voit un peu partout à
Paris - Les chaises -
Quand-~~t~~-ils sont seul ils
ont l'air triste.
Certainement après la pluie.
Alors il me semble qu'ils attendent.
Oh, ils ont de la patience.
Et quand-~~t~~-on est seul on
s'assoit. Sur une chaise qui
se trouve à côté d'une autre.
Maintenant tous les trois
attendent.

C'est triste.



