

# A CITY SEEN

TODD WEBB'S POSTWAR NEW YORK, 1945-1960



## A City Seen

Despite being one of the most accomplished photographers of the twentieth-century, Todd Webb remains unrecognized as the skillful master of street photography that he was. Webb was motivated by a desire to find the remarkable in the quotidian and spent the postwar years photographing New York City observing and documenting moments of stillness and human connection in a city known for its crowds and movement. Rather than concentrating on the glamorous nightlife and modern, shining towers often seen in magazines such as *Life* or *LOOK* in the postwar years, Webb created masterly sensitive portraits of the day-to-day lives and neighborhoods of working-class people, and honed in on the subtle details of city life that often went overlooked.

Webb was conflicted about how to continue to create this meaningful personal work while making enough money to survive, and was acutely aware that his focus would not catapult him into a career as renowned photographer. Nonetheless, Webb pursued his passion and continued to photograph the vibrant, unmistakable city that is New York.

*A City Seen: Todd Webb's Postwar New York, 1945-1960* is comprised of approximately 130 vintage black and white photographs, from children at play in Harlem to the billboards and signs of Times Square. Webb's body of work ranks among that of his friends and contemporaries Alfred Stieglitz, Lisette Model, Harry Callahan, Berenice Abbott, and Helen Levitt, whose work is highlighted in the exhibition alongside Webb's portraits of them. Although Webb never became famous, his contemporaries instantly recognized his outsized talent and unique perspective, which is only now being discovered and appreciated by the rest of the world.



I. Todd Webb. LaSalle Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Harlem, New York, 1946.

## Career

Webb had many careers before ever picking up a camera: a stockbroker in the 1920s, a prospector out West during the Great Depression, and an office clerk at Chrysler, to name a few. It wasn't until the late 1930s that his interest in photography flourished, after he joined the Detroit Camera Club and studied under Ansel Adams. At the onset of World War II, Webb was drafted into the Navy. Before reporting for duty, he came to New York City where he met Alfred Stieglitz, who encouraged his pursuit of photography. The war brought him to the Pacific theater, but all the while he was determined to return to New York and spend at least one full year dedicated to photography.

In late 1945 Todd Webb moved into an apartment on 123rd Street in Manhattan, with his good friend Harry Callahan. With a keen eye and a tremendous amount of ambition, Webb created a landmark body of work that captured every facet of the city. Armed with a large-format camera and tripod, Webb worked relentlessly, chronicling the city from a newcomer's perspective. He documented New York's postwar contrasts, from high-powered businessmen in Midtown and the Financial District to the remnants of old ethnic enclaves in the Lower East Side and street peddlers scattered throughout Lower Manhattan, focusing always on the city's beauty and humanity. One year turned into many, and Webb lived and photographed primarily in New York until 1960, making the medium his life's work.



II. Todd Webb. Near Fulton Fish Market, New York, 1946

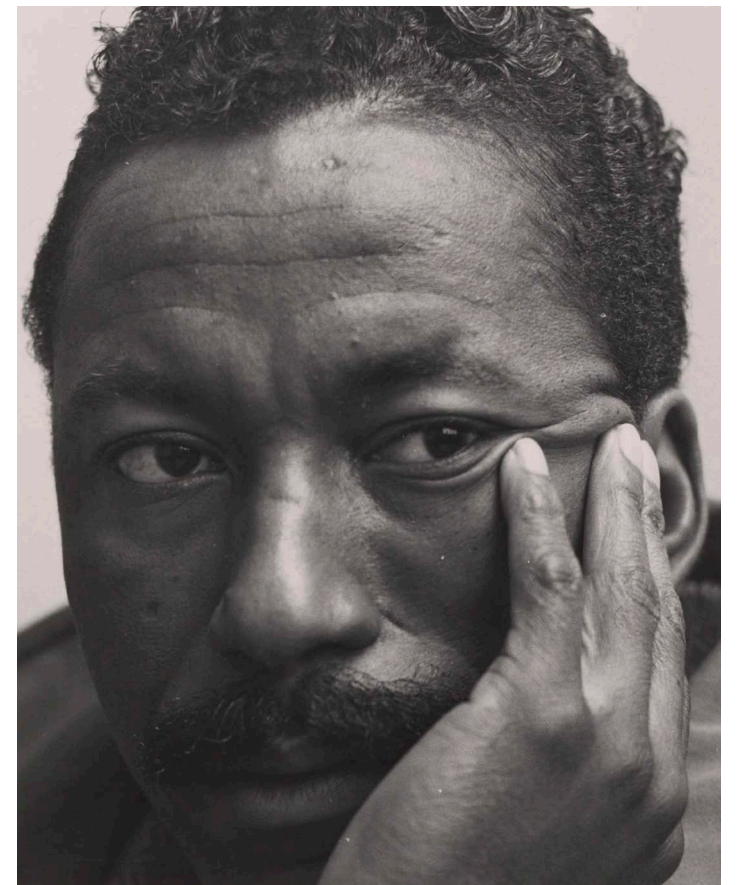
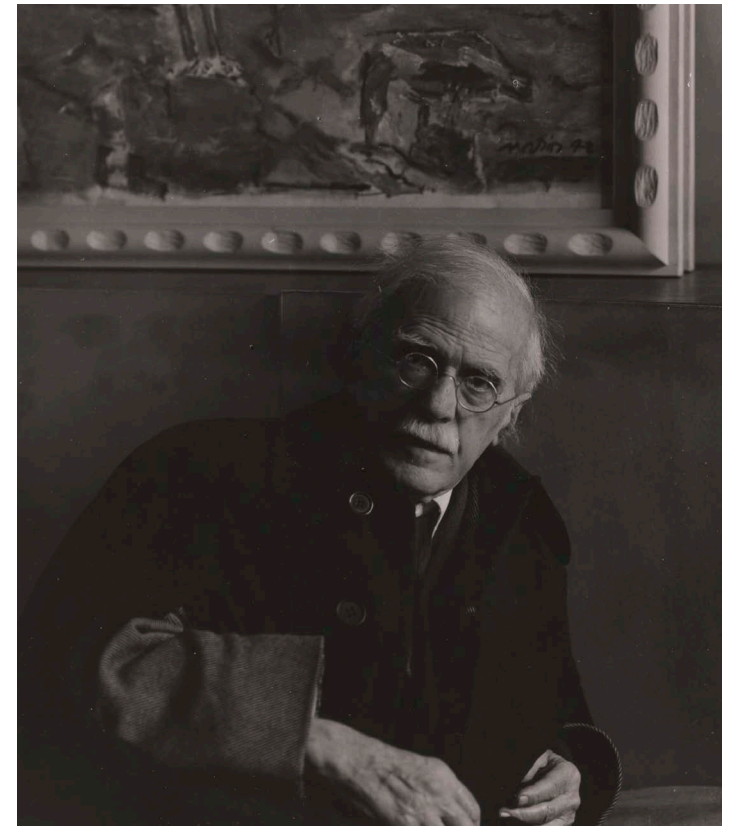
III. Todd Webb. 3rd Avenue EL looking south from Fulton Street Station, New York, 1948





## Illustrious Circles

Webb moved in the most illustrious art and photography circles of the postwar era, becoming close with Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Beaumont Newhall. He counted such notable photographers as Berenice Abbott, Minor White, Helen Levitt, Lisette Model, Gordon Parks, and Edward Steichen among his friends. His images—subtly complex, elegant, and conveying the sense of discovery that inspired him—have been compared to the work of Eugene Atget, as both photographers captured cities on the brink of major transformations. The ability to study the work of his contemporaries, discuss ideas, and share his own images had a profound impact on Webb's craft and his confidence, and opened many doors for him as a professional photographer.



- IV. Todd Webb. Vanderbilt Place from 42nd Street Overpass, New York, 1946
- V. Todd Webb. Berenice Abbott, 1951
- VI. Todd Webb. Alfred Stieglitz, 1946
- VII. Todd Webb. Gordon Parks, 1951

V.

VII.



## Signs in the City

Webb developed a fascination with a wide variety of signage in the city. He turned his lens on handwritten notes by showkeepers, political posters, and advertising placards and billboards on streets in every neighborhood. Although many of these photographs are devoid of people, they exemplify another of Webb's strategies for depicting the human presence in the city.

"I have an intense interest in and feeling for people," he wrote in one of his journals. "Often, I find subject matter with no visible persons to be more peopled than the crowded street scene. Every window, doorway, street, building, every mark on a wall, every sign, has a human connotation." Webb kept a detailed journal of his early years in New York City, and his excitement for photographing New York is palpable on every page and in every image.



X.



IX.

VIII. Todd Webb. Times Square, New York, 1946

IX. Todd Webb. 3rd Avenue and the Bowery, New York, 1946

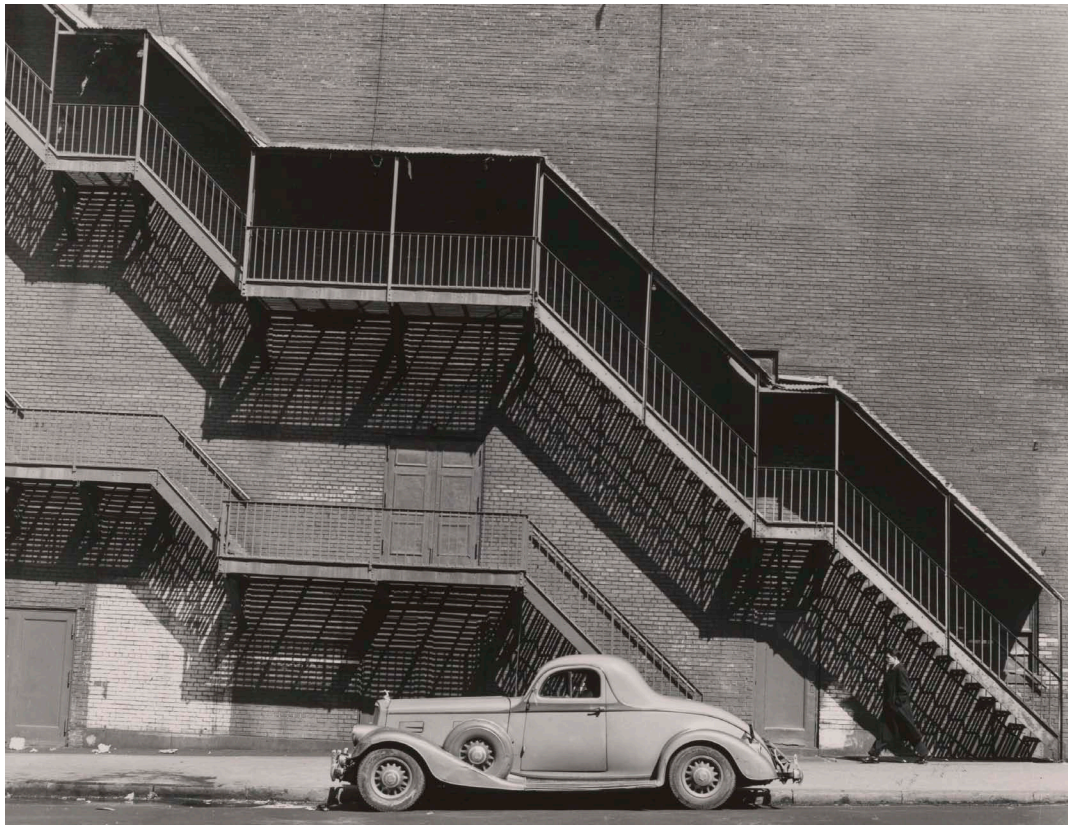
X. Todd Webb. East 7th Street, New York ("Welcome Home McSorley Boys"), 1946

"Life goes on about me, and I am a living breathing part of it. I feel things, the people, the buildings, the streets, and I have something to say about them and my medium is photography."

- Todd Webb, August 5, 1946



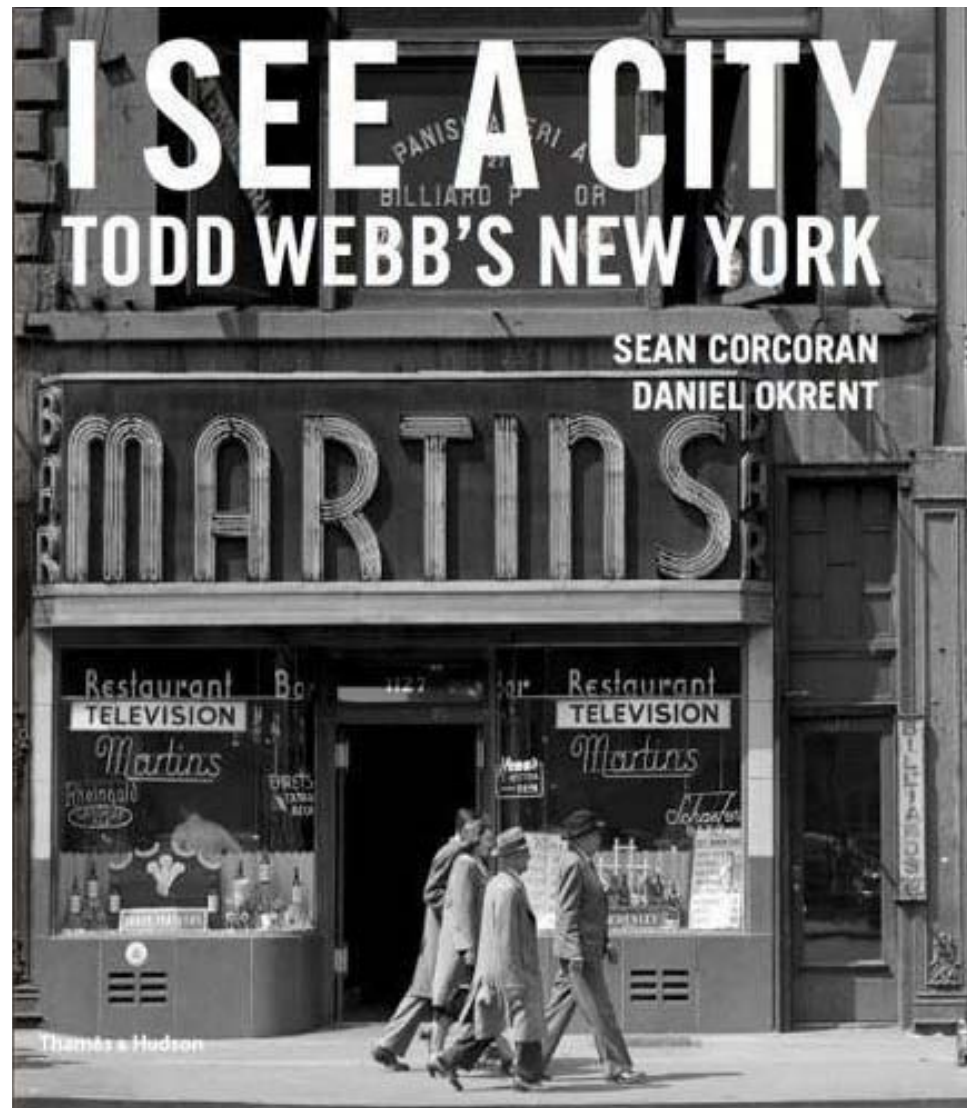
XI.



XII.

XI. Todd Webb. 125th Street, New York (Soldier getting a shoe shine), 1946  
XII. Todd Webb. Mr. Perkin's Pierce Arrow, Harlem, New York, 1946  
XIII. Todd Webb. Maise, Queen of the Bowery, New York, 1946





## Companion Book

The exhibition is accompanied by **I See a City: Todd Webb's New York**, with essays by Sean Corcoran and Daniel Okrent, and published by Thames & Hudson. The book focuses on the work Webb produced in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s. Webb photographed the city day and night, in all seasons and in all weather. Buildings, signage, vehicles, the passing throngs, isolated figures, curious eccentrics, odd corners, windows, doorways, alleyways, squares, avenues, storefronts, uptown, and downtown, from the Brooklyn Bridge to Harlem.

The book is a rich portrait of the everyday life and architecture of New York. Webb's work is clear, direct, focused, layered with light and shadow, and captures the soul of these places shaped by the friction and frisson of humanity.

The New York Times Book Review said, "I See A City: Todd Webb's New York shows an upbeat, down-market post-World War II Manhattan, filled with sidewalk vendors and one-story sheds and hand-painted signs... His pictures present a vividly comestible pedestrian-eye view, one that invites you to walk into that pawnshop, take a seat on that streetcar."

## About the Museum of the City of New York

The Museum of the City of New York fosters understanding of the distinctive nature of urban life in the world's most influential metropolis. It engages visitors by celebrating, documenting, and interpreting the city's past, present, and future.

Founded in 1923 by Henry Collins Brown, a Scottish-born writer with a vision for a populist approach to the city, the Museum was originally housed in Gracie Mansion, the future residence of the Mayor of New York. Completed in 1932, the Museum's current home is a Georgian Colonial-Revival building constructed by Joseph H. Freedlander on land owned by the City of New York.

Over the years, the Museum has amassed a considerable collection of exceptional items, approximately 750,000 objects including prints, photographs, decorative arts, costumes, paintings, sculpture, toys, and theatrical memorabilia.



Top and Bottom: Installation, *A City Seen: Todd Webb's Postwar New York, 1945-1960*, Museum of the City of New York, 2017



Front: Todd Webb. LaSalle Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Harlem, New York, 1946  
Back: Todd Webb. The Battery, New York, 1945; Times Square, New York, 1946

### Curator

Sean Corcoran

### Number of Works

Approximately 130 vintage black and white photographs

### Availability

Spring 2021 – Winter 2024

### Booking Period

12 weeks, can be prorated for a shorter or longer presentation

### Exhibition Requirements

Fine art museum security; 2,000 – 3,000 square ft.; facility report subject to approval by the Museum of the City of New York

### Shipping

Host venue covers the cost of incoming and return shipping to the Museum

### Loan Fee & Expenses

Please enquire for loan fee and prorated crating fee

### Contact

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