

STRUCTURED VISION

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF RALSTON CRAWFORD

The American artist Ralston Crawford (1906–1978) is best known as a painter and printmaker who created semi-abstract scenes of urban life and industry. He was also a devoted and prolific photographer, working intently with the camera for 40 years. Crawford embraced the immediacy and detail of photography, using it to make studies for future paintings and exploring it on its own terms as an artistic medium.

Like his work in other media, Crawford's photographs often feature imagery related to themes of mechanical order and destruction. He also used his camera to document subjects that interested him, particularly the jazz culture of New Orleans. Created during a vital period of abstraction in American art, Crawford's photographs capture the cultural scenes and subjects from which that era's creative sensibility arose.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

You will see 60 black-and-white photographs, all taken by Ralston Crawford between 1938 and 1976.

Also included in the exhibition are two prints—a lithograph and a silkscreen—made by Crawford, along with footage from films that the artist created in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The photographs in the exhibition range from semi-abstract to documentary, with many of them featuring machinery, industrial buildings, or scenes of daily life.

The exhibition is divided into 7 sections:

- Early Work
- New York and Europe
- New Orleans
- Ships and Water
- Travel
- Signs and Texts
- Order and Disorder

GOOD TO KNOW

This exhibition is on view in the museum's photography galleries. Most of the photographs in this exhibition measure at least 7 x 9 inches, making it possible for 3-4 students to examine a single image at the same time. This guide features a small selection of works from the exhibition.

INQUIRING EYE questions that accompany each featured work focus on the visual qualities of photographic images and the choices a photographer makes. LOOKING BEYOND activities are photography challenges designed to stretch students' creativity and artistic thinking skills.

IMAGE CREDITS | This exhibition is supported by the Hall Family Foundation.

All images by Ralston Crawford, American (1906–1978). *Grain elevators, Buffalo, NY*, about 1942. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.50.15. *Third Avenue Elevated, New York, NY*, 1948. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2004.27.3908. *Hanging concrete, Cologne, Germany*, 1951. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.50.17. *Dancer and Meyer Kennedy at the Caravan Club, New Orleans, LA*, 1953. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Neelon Crawford, 2015.49.123. *Bow and rope*, 1972. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Neelon Crawford, 2015.49.15. *Rail yard scrap, Duluth, MN*, 1961. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2004.27.3910.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ralston Crawford spent his childhood in Buffalo, New York, where his father worked as a ship's captain on the Great Lakes. Crawford moved to California as a young man to study at a Los Angeles art school. He worked briefly as an illustrator at the Walt Disney Studio before returning east to continue his art studies in Philadelphia. There he encountered the work of European modernist Paul Cezanne, whose style would prove to be a lasting influence on Crawford's own work.

Crawford's early paintings featured semi-abstract, geometrical representations of bridges, highways, and factories. After witnessing the destruction caused by World War II, his enthusiasm for the industrial precision of the machine age evolved into a more complex appreciation for both order and disorder. Crawford traveled extensively throughout his career, often using his camera to capture scenes that interested or inspired him. He died from cancer in 1978 at the age of 71.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Visit the museum's website to preview works by Ralston Crawford (search 'Ralston Crawford' at art.nelson-atkins.org). Students can use images of Crawford's photographs to practice formal analysis—the process of analyzing how the elements of art and principals of design interact within a work of art. For each image, ask students to consider:

- What do you notice about the lines, shapes, textures, and values shown in this work?
- Where does your eye go first when looking at this image? How has the photographer drawn your attention there?
- Where do you see balance, contrast, repetition, and movement in this photograph?

Ralston Crawford was equally skilled as a painter, draftsman, printmaker, filmmaker, and photographer. Other photographers have experimented with multiple art forms. Invite students to use internet sources to explore works across visual media by one of the following artists:

- Charles Sheeler
- Ellsworth Kelly
- Robert Rauschenberg

What similarities do students notice between the photographs their chosen artist produced and the works he produced in other media? What differences seem most significant across art forms?

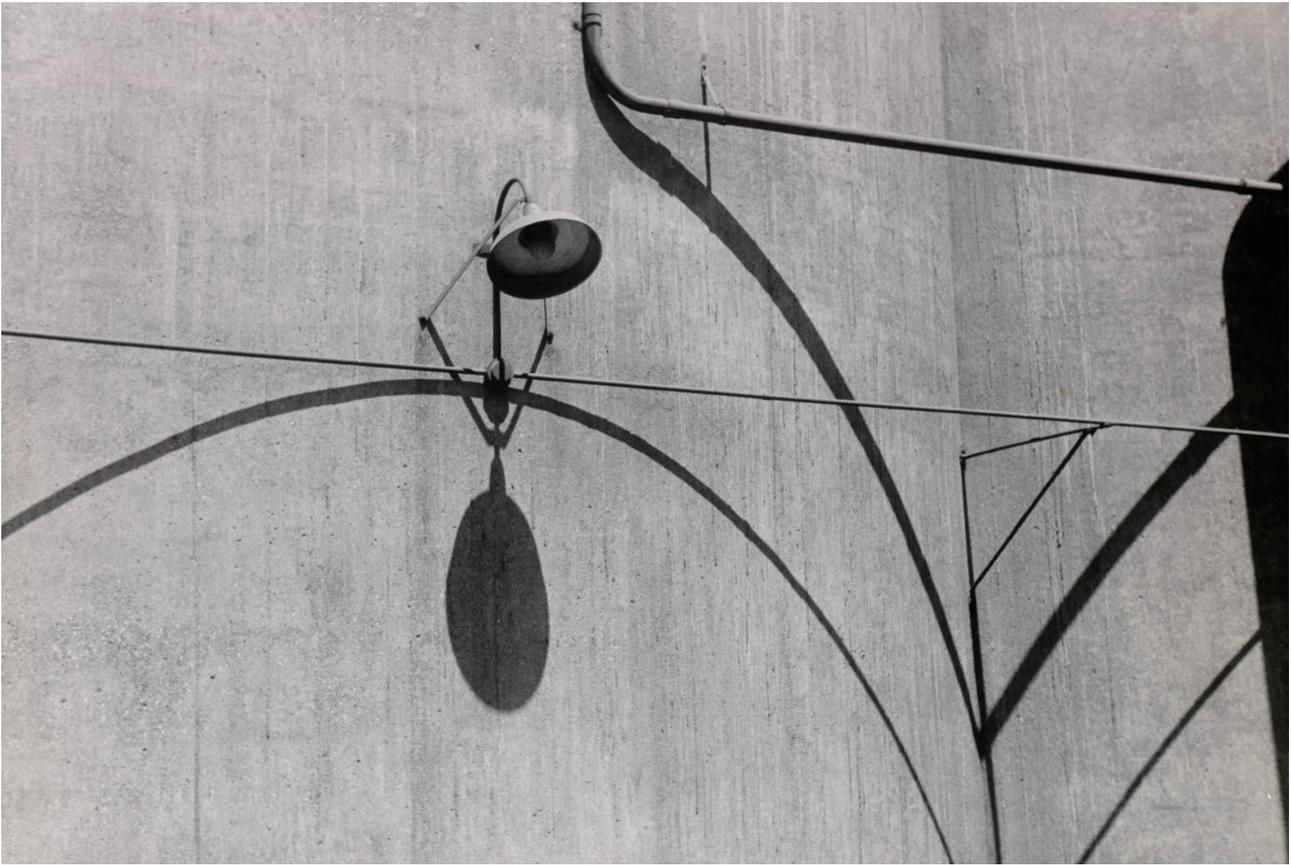
AFTER YOUR VISIT:

Have students tackle the LOOKING BEYOND photography challenges, and then invite them to share the resulting bodies of work with the class. What similarities and differences are evident in how students approached each challenge?

Instruct students to look for images of Ralston Crawford's paintings and prints online. Discuss as a class: How do these works compare with the photographs you saw at the museum?

EARLY WORK

KEY WORK: *Grain elevators, Buffalo, NY*, about 1942



Inquiring Eye

Crawford was fascinated by the geometry of industrial structures. Think about how he composed this photograph of a grain elevator.

- How did Crawford use objects and their shadows to create a sense of balance?
- Where do you see repetition in line or shape?
- Though the elevator's wall is convex, how does Crawford make it appear to be a flat surface?
- How would the photograph be different if he had taken it at a different time of day or from a different angle?

Looking Beyond

See if you can take a photograph that relies on light and shadow to create a balanced composition with interesting geometric shapes.

NEW YORK AND EUROPE

KEY IMAGES: *Third Avenue Elevated, New York, NY, 1948*

Hanging concrete, Cologne, Germany, 1951



Inquiring Eye

While Crawford did not see combat in World War II, he witnessed the war's destructive effects through his travels and other assignments. He began exploring themes of both structure and disorder through his photography. Compare the photograph taken in New York with the one taken in Germany.

- Which one seems representative of order and structure? Which one seems representative of chaos and destruction? Why?
- Does either photograph align completely with one extreme or the other? Why or why not?

Looking Beyond

Create a pair of photographs that symbolize opposite states or ideas (e.g. courage/cowardice or unfinished/complete).

NEW ORLEANS

KEY IMAGE: *Dancer and Meyer Kennedy at the Caravan Club, New Orleans, LA, 1953*



Inquiring Eye

Crawford took thousands of photographs during his frequent visits to New Orleans. Many, like this one, feature scenes from the city's jazz culture, which Crawford viewed as being both timeless and full of life.

- What aspects of this photograph suggest movement, energy, or change?
- What aspects suggest timelessness or monumentality?

Looking Beyond

Try photographing people in motion, such as children playing or athletes engaged in a sport. Can you create a photograph that captures the energy and movement of the participants in a still image?

SHIPS AND WATER

KEY IMAGE: *Bow and rope*, 1972



Inquiring Eye

While Crawford often photographed fairly mundane sights—buildings, boats, urban infrastructure—the resulting images can have a mysterious quality. Observe this photograph before reading its title.

- What do you think you are looking at here?
- How would you describe the image in terms of line and form?

Once you identify the subject, discuss:

- What about this photograph is abstract? What about it is realistic?

Looking Beyond

Explore the formal potential of everyday sights. Choose an object or area to photograph, and frame your shot in a way that reduces recognizable details to geometric lines and planes.

ORDER AND DISORDER

KEY IMAGE: *Rail yard scrap, Duluth, MN, 1961*



Inquiring Eye

Many of Crawford's photographs seem to celebrate the impressive scale and monumental geometry of industrial forms. Consider how well this image of scrap railroad cars fits with that idea.

- What adjectives would you use to describe this scene?
- What might this photograph be saying about the nature of man-made things?
- Is destruction necessarily ugly? How does this image support your answer to that question?

Looking Beyond

See if you can create a photograph that uses an inanimate object to communicate an idea.
