

Museum of the City of New York
IMLS MFA–FY18: Collections Stewardship
Focusing the Lens: Creating Online Public Access to the Work of
John Vachon in the *LOOK* Magazine Collection
Project Abstract



The Museum of the City of New York seeks an IMLS Museums for America grant of \$185,423 in the category of Collections Stewardship to increase public access to work from *LOOK* Magazine staff photographer John Vachon (1914-1975) through digitization. This three-year project is part of an ongoing endeavor to provide online access to the Museum's *LOOK* Collection, which includes approximately 200,000 photographs related to 2,242 stories from 41 different photographers made between 1938 and 1968 for *LOOK* Magazine, and vividly documents the cultural transformation of the nation from World War II through the Cold War era. Digitization of the *LOOK* Collection began with photographers Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999), Arthur Rothstein (1915-1985), and Arthur (Weegee) Fellig (1899-1966), whose work is [currently available online via the Museum's online Collections Portal](#). If successfully funded, this 30-month project would allow for this important digitization work to continue, focusing the Museum's next efforts on a selection of approximately 18,500 photographs from 54 of Vachon's assignments, covering 50 individual topics over the course of his 25-year career with *LOOK*.

Founded in 1937 by Des Moines, Iowa newspaperman Gardner Cowles, *LOOK* focused a lens on the lives of individuals, using personal stories to narrate the nuanced political, social, and cultural issues of the day, rather than taking the broader documentary approach of a publication like *Life*. John Vachon—who made his name as a photographer working for Roy Stryker (1893-1975) at the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Great Depression—was known for his technical skill, dramatic composition, and was skilled at engaging his subjects, which often led editors to assign many of the most interesting stories to him. As a result, the assignments proposed for digitization in this project—which range from celebrity profiles, to investigative pieces on youth culture and a feature on tugboat operators in New York Harbor—capture the subtle societal and cultural issues of the era within diverse narratives. With New York City as both the lens and the prism for viewing the nation during this time period, New York emerges as simultaneously the *most* American and the *least* American city in the nation, and is essential to understanding how Americans of the mid-20th century moved within intellectual, political, cultural, social, and physical environments.

The collection primarily exists as film negatives, and this format renders the material nearly inaccessible for researchers and curators alike. As the number of images taken for a single assignment varied from a few dozen to a few hundred, at least 80% of the images in the *LOOK* collection never reached the publication's pages. If successfully funded, this 30-month project will bring to light thousands of never-before-seen images. Specifically, funds would provide for the digitization and review of nearly 18,500 images from 54 of Vachon's *LOOK* assignments resulting in comprehensive cataloging and online access to an estimated additional 11,100 digital images via the Museum's user-friendly and searchable online Collections Portal at collections.mcny.org, and basic cataloging for an approximate 7,400 duplicates and technically flawed images via special remote access or onsite appointment. The project work plan was honed during the digitization of Kubrick and Rothstein's *LOOK* work, and the Project Director will meet with all project staff on a weekly basis to ensure monthly milestones are met.

As an institution dedicated to celebrating and illuminating the past, present, and future of the country's most populous, diverse, and iconic city, the Museum directly measures the success of its projects by the impact on our audiences and our ability to reach the public through exhibitions, programming, and online tools such as the [Collections Portal](#). Adding this material to the other available digital assets presents opportunities for scholars and students, curators both within the Museum and from other institutions, and for educational purposes.