IN OCTOBER 1935, THE AMERICAN photographer Walker Evans took a permanent position with the agency that would become the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA). A month later, New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened the nation’s first major exhibition of work by the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Both are signal moments in American art history. While the MoMA opening initiated a string of events that eventually would make van Gogh an American icon, Evans’s work over the next eighteen months is generally regarded as his definitive contribution to American photography. The FSA assignments themselves undoubtedly provided the key provocation for this extraordinary creative streak; however, Evans’s approach to these assignments owes a great and largely unacknowledged debt to the MoMA exhibition. Although I know of no direct record that Evans either saw the van Gogh show or explicitly acknowledged its influence on his government photography, the circumstantial evidence for such influence is clear in the facts of Evans’s life, in the photographs themselves, and in the texts that shaped their creation and reception.

It does no disservice to the quality of Evans’s photography to note that his career benefited from the influence of well-placed friends among MoMA’s executive staff. In the early 1930s, Evans lived in New York and traveled in a social circle that included many of the young museum’s curators, directors, and advisory council members, including Alfred Barr, Thomas Mabry, Dorothy Miller, and Lincoln Kirstein. The museum began hiring Evans to photograph its exhibitions in 1930, and in 1933 MoMA’s architectural galleries displayed thirty–nine of his photographs of Victorian houses—the result of a collaborative project conceived by Kirstein. During his eighteen months with the FSA, Evans maintained close contacts with MoMA, and this relationship bore fruit in the 1938 single-artist exhibition American Photographs, a first both for the museum and for Evans. In 1935–36, then, Evans’s tours throughout the South coincided with an increasing nationwide recognition of a triumph both for the artist van Gogh and for Evans’s friends at MoMA.
In itself, of course, this historical parallel offers no evidence that the painter’s work influenced the photographer’s. Indeed, at first glance few visual artists share less in common. Van Gogh was a painter of storm and stress; the reviews considered here are unanimous in emphasizing his drama, color, and energy. The most consistent notes in Evans’s imagery, on the other hand, are reticence and stasis. With few exceptions, Evans worked in sharp-focus, black-and-white photography, usually with a large-format architectural camera that leant itself to static subject matter. Most of his photographs avoid dramatic angles and strong tonal contrasts, concentrating instead on straight lines and muted, middle-range tones. Reviewers often emphasized this technique’s distance from the painterly tradition (labeling it “antigraphic,” for example), and Evans himself encouraged this line of evaluation. However, Evans also consistently sought venues for and encouraged readings of his photography as specifically modern art. It is here that van Gogh’s nineteenth-century drawings and paintings and Evans’s twentieth-century photography begin to converge.

Although critics have previously noted only an isolated similarity linking these two artists, both Evans’s photographic practice and contemporary evaluations of it depended on a particular and pervasive interpretation of van Gogh that conjoined documentary realism and modernist idealism. This understanding developed, I will demonstrate, both within and as a response to the “van Gogh phenomenon” of the middle 1930s—a widespread mass-cultural celebration of van Gogh sparked by the MoMA exhibition.

This influence did not end with Evans, however, and that brings me to a second, larger point. The van Gogh phenomenon—fundamentally a set of texts and interpretive practices that spanned the divide between modernism and mass culture—provides a template vital to the understanding of the 1930s documentary movement in general. Van Gogh’s influence on Evans represents only a single moment in a broader trend: the dependence of thirties documentary photography on the fine arts. Throughout the decade, documentary photography traveled alongside reproductions of artistic masterpieces in the same mass-media and artistic circles, and their proximity shaped valuations of both the photography and the art. In these years, for example, van Gogh became a documentary artist whose great strength lay in his sympathetic and accurate vision of agricultural life and labor. In a similar manner, the painter’s empathetic persona infused the photographic record promoted by the New Deal, reinforcing the photography’s aesthetic and moral authority and, therefore, its rhetorical effect. Thirties documentary claimed the mantle of science, but it did so within a discourse that mobilized the aesthetic, expressive, and visionary resonance of modernist art. It was from this contradictory mixture—a combination enabled by the mingling of mass culture and high art in the decade’s photographic media—that documentary drew its persuasive power.

To elucidate this argument, I first take up the van Gogh phenomenon, examining the process that transformed an obscure nineteenth-century Dutch painter into
the most celebrated artist of the European tradition. I then investigate the visual parallels linking paintings and drawings from the van Gogh exhibition to some of Evans’s most renowned documentary photographs. Finally, I analyze the textual accompaniments to Evans’s work, with a particular emphasis on an extraordinary and influential interpretation of Evans’s imagery—James Agee’s contribution to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a collaborative documentary book on the lives of three families of Alabama tenant farmers. A close examination of Praise’s text demonstrates that Agee read Evans’s documentary practice as nothing less than a revolutionary means of visual representation, one appropriate to a new stage of modernity. And like Evans himself, in forging this new vision Agee drew on the aesthetic and political resonance of van Gogh’s example.

The van Gogh Phenomenon

Opening on 5 November 1935, MoMA’s single-artist exhibition Vincent van Gogh presented 127 drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings by the artist on three floors of the museum’s townhouse at West 53rd Street. Originally scheduled for six months and seven venues, the exhibition finally closed its second installation at MoMA fourteen months later. Its extended tour included ten cities, and by September 1936 more than fifty others had offered to serve as host. More than 900,000 people attended the show (including 227,000 in San Francisco alone), an audience that surpassed the total for any previous single-artist exhibition in U.S. history. In the process, van Gogh’s blockbuster success secured the six-year-old museum’s status as one of America’s most influential cultural institutions. As one historian noted, “It is unlikely—indeed, inconceivable—that any other art exhibition has ever had such an immediate impact on the public taste as the van Gogh show.”

Van Gogh’s appeal astonished both supporters and opponents, who struggled with one of the questions that concerns this essay: Why van Gogh? What fueled the enormous appeal of this particular painter at this moment in American history? Or, as a newspaper columnist in Cleveland put it, “Just what combination of circumstances is it that causes people to flock in swarming multitudes to see the works of a single crazy Dutch painter as if he were a combination of Ringling Bros. Circus, Jack Benny and a two-headed horse?”

The motive forces behind such widespread appeal were surely heterogeneous, and what follows will not attempt to answer this question definitively. A clear contributing factor, however, was the merchandising frenzy that surrounded the exhibition, fed in part by the new museum’s “expert press-agentry.” The show’s popular success, for example, generated two reprintings of Lust for Life, Irving Stone’s 1934 fictionalized biography; a Reader’s Digest condensation of that novel; reproductions in the Sunday rotogravure sections of major newspapers across the country; multiple new editions reproducing van Gogh’s paintings; a popular edition of the artist’s
letters to his brother Theo; and a vogue for the painter’s palette and iconography in the period’s fashions, shop-window displays, and advertising.

Shoppers walking down Fifth Avenue in the fall of 1935, for example, would discover that MoMA was not alone in appreciating van Gogh’s broad appeal. Within weeks of the exhibition’s opening, ARTnews commended the results of the commercial vogue that accompanied it:

Seldom has an exhibition aroused such enthusiasm as that at the MoMA and never within our memory has there been such constant visual reinforcement from unexpected sources. . . . Now prints of the greater part of the artist’s oeuvre appear so inescapably in window after window that even the casual stroller is likely to gather without effort impressions that equal in extent those usually obtained by earnest students from special brochures and books.9

Led by Saks Fifth Avenue, New York’s retailers capitalized on van Gogh’s sudden popularity, integrating his palette and style into their window displays and their merchandise.10 Some readers condemned ARTnews for praising such commercial exploitation, but others supported it on populist grounds:

I feel that art is not only for the “privileged few” who visit art galleries, but also for the world at large and I believe that our country would benefit greatly by having more shop windows making use of the decorative values of Van Gogh. . . . If the colors and styles of today are to be chosen from the palette of Vincent Van Gogh, I think that here is a just cause for much rejoicing.11

Of course, such an argument runs counter to the l’art pour l’art formalism that became MoMA orthodoxy after World War II. These merchandising initiatives promoted a thing that Americans learned to call kitsch, and in traditional histories of American modernism this is the opposite of “art.” Because MoMA often appears in such histories as the standard-bearer of an elitist and hermetic formalism, the suggestion that the museum supported this trend might seem surprising.12 Nevertheless, in the 1930s l’art pour l’art represented only one among a diverse array of competing aesthetic faiths, and good evidence suggests that MoMA encouraged the commercial frenzy that grew up around its exhibition.13 In the context of the Great Depression’s economic and cultural crises—a moment when the boundaries separating institution art from mass culture blurred considerably—both the museum and its canonical modernists could be seen as vital contributors to commercial culture. That the museum would support this blending of commerce and art should not surprise us, since its original charter claimed that encouraging the application of the modern arts “to manufacture and practical life” would be a central aspect of the new museum’s mission.14 Through its van Gogh exhibition, the museum achieved this goal with unprecedented success.

Although MoMA’s publicity campaign for the exhibition met strong criticism from within the museum community, Alfred H. Barr, the museum’s founding direc-
tor, proved to be at least ambivalent about encouraging the painter’s mass appeal.15 In a contemporary press release, for example, Barr argued that van Gogh’s popularity among “the great aesthetically naive public” was “just what the artist himself would most passionately have desired.”16 As this quotation suggests, both van Gogh’s “passionate desires” and the wellsprings of his contemporary appeal proved to be contentious topics in the wake of MoMA’s success. The exhibition, “hailed by the radical press no less than by the fashionable periodicals,” became the site of an explicitly political debate that attempted to make sense of the contradictory legacies inscribed within the painter’s biography and oeuvre.17 Rather than through any authoritative resolution, however, it was these contradictions themselves that made the painter a depression-era icon.

In short, Vincent van Gogh found a huge and passionate American audience in the middle thirties because the fundamental discontinuities of his art and life resonated with the contradictions of a society reeling from economic meltdown. Basic categories of knowledge and evidence were in crisis, and within this contested terrain the image of the modern artist as impassioned and truthful seer took on resonant importance. The artistic subject “van Gogh” came to stand for a social vision that could reconcile irreconcilables, bridging the divide that separated nature from culture, art from science, fine art from vernacular, and the metaphysical from the physical realms. And because these reconciliations remained imaginary, depression-era discussions of van Gogh’s achievements took on a characteristically ambivalent form.

From the Borinage to Arles

Vincent van Gogh’s life and oeuvre are both marked by a number of false starts and discontinuities. Born in 1853 and raised in southern Holland, van Gogh embarked on numerous careers and failed, during his lifetime, in all of them. Van Gogh worked first as a picture salesman at a family gallery, then as a bookseller, a teacher, an evangelical minister to poor miners in Belgium, and, finally, in the last ten years of his life, as an artist. His paintings themselves demonstrate unusual shifts of style and subject matter. In the 1930s this variety was read (as it often is today) as a split between early and late periods, divided at 1886, when van Gogh moved to Paris and encountered impressionism firsthand. Van Gogh’s drawings and paintings before this period demonstrate the strong influence of the early Dutch masters and later realists including Honoré Daumier and Jean-François Millet. Their emphasis is on draftsmanship, tonal variation, and genre scenes, while their palette draws from a muted range of blacks, grays, browns, and greens. In Paris, the most fundamental elements of van Gogh’s art transformed. Contrasts of color replaced those of tone, an emphasis on painting replaced drawing, and the
early concentration on the lives of proletarian and agricultural laborers shifted to a more varied range of landscape, still life from nature, and portraiture. Present-day assessments of van Gogh’s oeuvre generally privilege these later canvases, most created in the French provincial towns of Arles and St. Rémy during the final five years of the painter’s life.

Compared to present-day evaluations, however, the most widely circulated interpretations of the 1930s gave great weight to van Gogh’s early work in Belgium and the Netherlands. Irving Stone’s 1934 *Lust for Life*, for example, devoted more than eighty pages to van Gogh’s evangelical and artistic ministries to the Belgian miners in the Borinage, while abbreviating or ignoring many of his later, more artistically productive periods. In 1936, Stone published articles in conjunction with the MoMA openings in New York and San Francisco, and his approach is apparent in many other reviews as well. As a result, drawings and paintings that are today treated as preliminary and unschooled were often given an attention equal to that of the later, postimpressionist canvases. One final, broad tendency in the period’s interpretations merits notice here. Despite the numerous shifts and discontinuities in van Gogh’s life—and despite a simultaneous understanding of van Gogh’s oeuvre as bifurcated by the encounter with impressionism—1930s readings of van Gogh were also marked by attempts to articulate the artist’s life and art as a unitary narrative of struggle toward redemption.

An important part of the answer to “Why van Gogh?” lies in these two contradictory tendencies. The painter’s depression-era popularity depended on this structural dichotomy between the early and late periods, read as a narrative of contest and reconciliation. Their combination in the work of a single artist enabled viewers to stage van Gogh’s oeuvre as a scene of revolutionary struggle. In such readings, the artist’s tortured, visionary personality acted as the middle term of a hoped-for dialectical synthesis—between a suffering realism associated with an earthy, agricultural past and a transcendent idealism connected to a redeemed, modernized future.

American interpretations of van Gogh’s art did not, of course, spring up fully formed in response to the MoMA exhibition. As Carol Zemel has demonstrated in her groundbreaking *The Formation of a Legend: Van Gogh Criticism, 1890–1920*, a substantial critical tradition was already established in Europe before van Gogh’s full-scale introduction to the American public in 1935–36. Critical reactions to the MoMA show followed the major themes of this tradition, stressing

- a symbolist aesthetics that emphasized painterly form—color, line, and brushstroke—and a subjectivist and mystical idealism;

- a biographical approach that read van Gogh’s life as a parable of romantic alienation and unrecognized genius, in which the paintings became expressive records of the artist’s struggle, heroism, and redemption; or
a socialist reading that emphasized van Gogh’s debt to the earlier realist movements in Holland and France, finding in the painter’s art and life the embodiment of anticapitalist, communitarian ideals.

Occasionally these interpretations appeared in relatively unmixed form. A review in the radical journal Art Front, for example, took a purely socialist standpoint, dismissing the “color-occultism” of van Gogh’s postimpressionist period in favor of his early work among the poor: “In our own day, van Gogh might not have found his original efforts to speak to the working people in whose society he lived so inconsistent with the movement of art.” In contrast, Herbert McBride of the New York Sun valued only the later canvases, which he read as the products of mystical ecstasies, moments when the painter “left all earthy, animal attributes behind him, and became pure spirit, giving out emanations entirely unexplainable to us lesser mortals.” Absent this otherworldly inspiration, McBride argued, van Gogh was “an exceedingly commonplace painter.”

In general, however, reactions to the MoMA show were more discordant. Most reviews praised both the early and the later work, and most did so by mixing elements of two or more of the approaches that I have labeled symbolist, biographical, and socialist. This complexity is itself significant, and I will delineate its layers and effects through close readings of three important reviews of the exhibition: first, from the New York Times, then as now the source of American journalism’s most authoritative art criticism; second, from the communist weekly New Masses, an important venue in light of van Gogh’s continuing status as a “people’s artist”; and third, from a lengthy article published in the American Magazine of Art that attempted to draw together van Gogh’s early and late periods as the combined legacy of “the real Vincent, the social visionary, the brilliantly lucid thinker, the revolutionary artist.” Because these three reviews register tensions characteristic of many others, they repay careful scrutiny.

The overt structure of the argument presented by the New York Times’s reviewer Edward Alden Jewell, for example, is dialectical. Jewell articulates van Gogh’s early career as the first stage in a confrontation of polar opposites: the artist, aspiring to pure spirit, confronts nature, both in his recalcitrant materials and in the prosaic material world of his peasant subjects. Jewell then posits moments of triumphant synthesis, as van Gogh catches “fugitive glimpses of a beauty that can transfigure everything” (emphasis added). These fleeting moments bring heaven to earth, gratifying van Gogh with visions of “a real ideal life.” The swirling line and hallucinogenic color of the later canvases—for Jewell the “fullest splendor” of van Gogh’s art—therefore become images of synthesis and fulfillment. However, a close reading of the review demonstrates that Jewell’s proposed dialectic unravels by its end, entangled within the text’s contradictory valuations of van Gogh’s working-class subject matter.

In sum, the ground of Jewell’s evaluation changes dramatically as it moves from
the Dutch period to the later work in France. The early *Potato Eaters* (fig. 1), for example, is celebrated for its evocation of smoke and potato steam; Jewell consistently praises such images for their fidelity to the meanings of the pictured scenes. Later work is praised for its innovative brushstroke and unique “signature.” In both sections, van Gogh’s sinuous line and self-taught figuration become meaningful, but in works like *The Potato Eaters* they signify the painter’s solidarity with the men and women portrayed, while in later canvases they become signs of a uniquely expressive personality. The review thus shifts ground from mimesis to expression, but Jewell blurs these essentially contradictory valuations of art through references to van Gogh’s “sincerity.” The word appears throughout the review, and the morality Jewell discovers in van Gogh’s earnest struggle allows him to claim that the works are simultaneously faithful representation and impassioned, transcendent expression. Finally, the reviewer suggests that museum patrons who identify with the ethical core of van Gogh’s artistic project—tortured, aspiring, passionate, and sincere—take on the moral authority ascribed to the artist himself, an authority that Jewell earlier equated with the poverty and humility of agricultural labor.

Thus, although the realist aura attributed to van Gogh’s early work seems to
disappear by the end of the review, it in fact sustains Jewell’s aesthetics. True feeling for the artworks can only be achieved by a penetration through the canvas and into the “tortured, aspiring heart” of the human subject posited on its other side. This movement is framed as a transcendence of material resistance, and Jewell first envisions the artist as its agent, confronting his peasant models and painterly media. The marks of van Gogh’s struggle are left on the canvas, and these are endowed with a Christian, utopian resonance. Finally, the sympathetic audience embraces this tortured artistry, completing their journey into van Gogh’s tortured heart.

Jewell’s final emphasis on the artistic personality was not uncommon in the 1930s, and it is not surprising to find such a reading in a mainstream venue like the New York Times. What distinguished the van Gogh show from other exhibitions, however, was the breadth of its appeal. What might surprise, for example, is the point-by-point resemblance to Jewell’s van Gogh demonstrated by the artistic persona constructed by the communist weekly New Masses.

Like Jewell’s, Stephen Alexander’s van Gogh is the hero of a moral crusade, struggling toward visions of something very like “the real ideal life.” And like Jewell, Alexander presents this vision as the combined product of van Gogh’s early and late periods. Alexander claims van Gogh for “the great tradition of revolutionary art,” arguing that his entire oeuvre reflects a single, coherent goal:

Both his early work and his later, impressionist paintings are complementary aspects of a single fundamental attitude. Van Gogh was in search of truth. Violently, uncompromisingly in search of truth. He loved humanity and nature warmly and with passionate intensity. . . . He set down on canvas and in drawings his straightforward observations and knowledge of life about him in essentially the same manner . . . whether it was a weaver at work, a peasant woman’s head, or a vase of flowers.

The key to van Gogh’s truth is once again empathy, and the signs of this empathy are once again the marks of the painter’s “crude, sincere, and direct methods.” Like Jewell, Alexander equates the paintings’ seeming crudity with their creator’s sincerity. The weaver referred to by Alexander, for example, is probably the Weaver: Interior with Three Windows, painted fifteen months before The Potato Eaters and hung near the later canvas in the MoMA installation. Like The Potato Eaters, the Weaver uses blocky, simplified forms and a flattened, unconventional perspective to portray a working-class figure within a darkened interior. The result is a grim and foreboding image of the artisan’s working life, and Alexander pours scorn on those who rejected or ignored it during van Gogh’s life:

What need had a smug, effete mercantile bourgeoisie for these deeply sympathetic, tragic statements of the lives of the working class on the walls of their luxury homes? They would have none of this awkward, uncouth lout . . . who did not know how to draw, nor the meaning of art. (30)

Here again, van Gogh’s awkward draftsmanship is taken as a sign of inspired difference, a sympathetic identification that supports and sustains his canvases’ real-
ism. In the following sentence, however, Alexander assimilates the dramatically different *Sunflower* canvases under the same sign: “Van Gogh’s dynamic, radiant statements about nature were no better received than his earlier statements about humanity” (30).

For Alexander, then, all of van Gogh’s varied, modernist challenges to the artistic tradition—simplified figuration, flattened perspective, and dazzling, discordant color—become signifiers of the artist’s revolutionary perception and moral authority. Despite their differences, the New Masses and the New York Times made similar linkages between conflict, passion, truth, and painterly form. While Alexander privileges the painter’s early realism and Jewell the later postimpressionism, both critics depend on a synthesis that crosses the polar oppositions of a realist/idealist divide. Van Gogh’s work becomes a record of the painter’s lifelong battle to transcend a vale of suffering, marking his struggle toward (for Alexander) “a decent and a better world” and (for Jewell) a “real ideal life.”

The correspondence submerged within these competing stories of opposition, confrontation, and Christlike passion—both tales spun around a Dutch artist who had died almost a half century before—became more explicit in a long article published a few months later in the American Magazine of Art. Like Jewell and Alexander, Gertrude Benson presented van Gogh as a brilliantly perceptive seer, a revolutionary artist whose artistic vision manifests a synthesis of idealist and materialist oppositions. It was this combination, Benson argued, that fueled the MoMA exhibition’s phenomenal success.

Between 1929 and 1936, Benson writes, American audiences lost interest in “refinements of form and color for their own sake, in abstract invention and construction, in easel-egocentricities”:

The economic débâcle brought with it the rediscovery of the subject, and, in a sense, the rediscovery of van Gogh. A man who could write in 1882—“To stroll on wharves, and in alleys, and in streets, and in the houses, waiting rooms, even saloons—that is not a pleasant pastime unless for an artist. As such one would rather be in the dirtiest place where there is something to draw than at a tea party with charming ladies. Unless one wants to draw ladies, then a tea party is all right even for an artist”—such a man is curiously in tune with our own age.21

As this passage signals, the Great Depression forms a constant background for Benson’s evaluation of van Gogh; in both form and content, the passage reflects the documentary aesthetic that shaped public discourse about the economic crisis. Benson builds her appeal to van Gogh’s realism around a quotation from the artist’s letters, reinforcing the documentary factuality of this evocation of “the dirtiest places.” However, like Jewell, Benson simultaneously registers a lack of ease; the qualifications “in a sense” and “curiously” manifest a significant tension.

It is indeed curious to claim the painter of the *Starry Night* and the *Night Cafe* as a realist; yet these equations of crudity, sincerity, and realism echo in multiple thirties reactions: “What remains, and pulls him through, is something stirring
about the struggle, something that flows from an impassioned search after truth. . . . it is the prosaic realist who ultimately prevails, crude, hampered, but indomitably honest.”

Or again, from the journal *Parnassus*: “What if van Gogh has no chic, in the sense of slickness? He had what is infinitely better—sincerity, zeal, and vision.”

Or, as Alexander of the *New Masses* put it in short, “His simplicity was tantamount to a fanatic honesty” (29). The realism of van Gogh was, for the 1930s, an *impassioned* realism, grounded in the poverty and misery of the artist’s life, and signified by the marks of intensity in his art. As the quotations here suggest, this “stirring struggle,” “zeal,” and “fanatic honesty” supported van Gogh’s claims to truth.

As a result, van Gogh’s persona takes its place among the reliable, passionate eyewitnesses peopling the subgenre William Stott identifies, in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, as “vicarious” documentary reportage. In such texts, the impassioned reactions of a first-person narrator were meant to guide the audience’s feelings about the events portrayed. Noting the period’s fascination with Walt Whitman’s “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there,” Stott writes, “To be trustworthy, a speaker needed to be the man or a firsthand witness; if he had suffered also, it would help” (36).

For widespread American audiences during the thirties, van Gogh’s suffering clearly supported the authenticity of his pictures. “Tortured Soul,” for example, a *Reader’s Digest* condensation of Irving Stone’s biography, portrayed van Gogh’s life in the Borinage as one long, anguished process of identification: “Now he was living like the miners, eating the same food, sleeping in the identical bed. . . . At last he was one of them, and had won the right to bring them the Word of God.”

Stone’s concurrent emphasis on van Gogh’s Christian evangelism, however, suggests the second, idealist side of the painter’s appeal. Like Benson, Stone equates the impulses that led van Gogh to Christian ministry with those that took him to Arles as a postimpressionist painter. Both journeys became the quests of a utopian visionary. Unlike Stone’s abrupt conflation, however, Benson’s reading of the later canvases consistently places van Gogh within a contested social terrain. Sustained by the sturdy provincialism of his line and the lyrical mysticism in his palette, van Gogh emerges as both man-of-the-people and utopian socialist. His oeuvre figures, simultaneously, a forthright, earthy realism and a prophetic idealism. It is on this unstable combination that van Gogh’s extraordinary appeal was founded, and it is on this same combination that documentary expression depended.

**Walker Evans: Art and the Machine**

At President Roosevelt’s prompting, in 1935 the U.S. Congress created a new federal agency, the Resettlement Administration (RA), to address the agricultural crises brought on by the Great Depression and a series of widespread natural
disasters. Although the world of New York museums and art galleries might seem remote from such a project, in its first year the RA allocated part of its $277 million budget to a task that seemed remarkable, even at the time.\footnote{While devoting most of its energies to removing small farmers from overcultivated land, the agency also hired a corps of photographers to make a comprehensive record of America’s agricultural regions and their inhabitants. The result of this initiative is an archive of more than seventy-seven thousand photographs, today housed in the Library of Congress.}

Many other federal agencies employed photographers, of course, both before and after the New Deal. What made this project extraordinary was the fact that the RA claimed to be creating both historical documents \emph{and} works of art:

There are three ways of evaluating photographs: as a mere record; for their immediacy and news value; as works of art. . . . In the photographic work of the Resettlement Administration it was decided to submit all material to the three foregoing criteria.\footnote{In June 1936, the RA claimed success. Its photography’s unprecedented popularity “in the press, the literature, and in the art circles of the United States” fully justified this novel approach. This was the same span of months during which the nation became fascinated with Vincent van Gogh, whose images of rural and provincial folk began to seem “curiously in tune” with the contemporary moment.}

More so than other documentary photographers, Walker Evans can illuminate this congruence of painting and photography. My reading of Evans is not, however,
Van Gogh in Alabama, 1936

a part of the critical tradition that seeks to distinguish his practice either from the aims of his federal employers or from the work of other documentary photographers. As the RA’s First Annual Report suggests, the agency encouraged all of its photographers to pursue artistic aims, and the extraordinary work produced by FSA photographers including Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Ben Shahn testifies to the success of this approach. However—and largely due to his special relationship with MoMA—Evans’s photography circulated more frequently within explicitly high-art contexts; as a result, a close reading of the texts that surrounded Evans’s work helps make visible the appeals to artistic iconography and poetics that underlay most of the period’s documentary photography. And for Evans in particular, the van Gogh phenomenon sparked by MoMA’s blockbuster success provided the key artistic context.

The most fundamental similarity linking van Gogh and Evans lies in their shared emphasis on agricultural life and labor, and two metonymic representations of that labor are the source of a frequently remarked parallel. Evans’s photograph of Floyd Burroughs’ Work Boots, made in 1936, echoes the theme of several paintings made by van Gogh between 1886 and 1888, including the Still Life: A Pair of Shoes that was a part of the MoMA exhibition. Both images present a pair of well-worn shoes within a flat, horizontal plane, and both share obvious similarities in treatment and angle of vision. A number of critics have commented on this parallel, but none have noted that Evans’s explicit homage points toward a more comprehensive influence.
Although Evans did not make such overt reference to a particular artwork in any other photograph, his portrayal of rural and provincial life invites constant reference to van Gogh’s. In *Farm Kitchen, Alabama* (fig. 2), for example, Evans presents a collection of objects sitting foursquare on bare wooden flooring. The fine grain of the print reveals the objects’ rich and varied textures while maintaining a characteristically narrow, middle-tone range. The space is lit to emphasize the objects’ three-dimensional solidity, yet the minimal shadows limit reference to a context outside the frame. As a result, the stove, chair, containers, and utensils recall similar objects in *Vincent’s Bedroom at Arles* (fig. 3), a painting that Evans had admired at MoMA’s inaugural exhibition in 1929. In both images, the diagonal lines of floor and walls lend an energy to the enclosing space, while the objects’ strong outlines and muted tones endow them with a solidity and static serenity. The effect is that of a portrait; in both images, the homely objects of provincial life take on the aura of subjectivity that Walter Benjamin has posited as the hallmark of fine-art objects.

These parallel visions of rural and provincial spaces extended to their inhabitants. During the same period that Evans recorded the interior shots discussed here, for example, he made another photograph, called *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, that
recalls a pen-and-ink drawing included in the MoMA exhibition (fig. 4). In this 1883 drawing, van Gogh uses hatching to shade both the background and the woman’s clothing and face, and a lightly pigmented wash softens the contrast between ink and paper. The result is a softened, striated texture that merges the figure with its background. In his 1936 portrait of tenant farmer Allie Mae Burroughs, Evans made a number of choices that resulted in a cognate image (fig. 5). First, in the print made for the 1941 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Evans closely cropped the negative around the woman’s head and shoulders, resulting in a close-up framing, like van Gogh’s, dominated by the figure’s head and upper torso. Second (and unlike most of his other portraits), Evans here kept the unpainted wooden background in sharp focus. Combined with the close cropping, this makes the horizontal grain of the weathered pine boards an integral part of the image. At least one contemporary observer noted the echoes in figure and ground: “the sharp horizontals of eyebrows, eyes and mouth . . . are repeated in the three parallel shadows of the clapboard wall behind, and . . . the camera’s light emphasis on the early wrinkles and the puckered forehead . . . are delicately repeated in the grain of the wood.”35

The same critic, Lionel Trilling, also stressed that Evans’s photograph pre-
sented a flatly lit, full-frontal portrait: “It was ‘sat for’ and ‘posed’ . . . the sitter gains in dignity when allowed to defend herself against the camera” (100). In her direct gaze and expression, Trilling argues, Burroughs “refuses to be an object at all—everything in the picture proclaims her to be all subject” (101). This reading emphasizes qualities that distinguish Evans’s photograph from van Gogh’s earlier drawing. Rather than as a specific individual, van Gogh’s figure is cast as an emblematic, generalized “peasant woman” through his use of side lighting, indirect gaze, and meditative expression.

This was not the limit of either Evans’s or van Gogh’s variations on the tradition of portraiture, however. The subjectivity of Allie Mae Burroughs was not always as apparent as Trilling seemed to assume. For example, in the 1938 American Photographs exhibition, Evans chose to caption the photograph “Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife.” This vocational label—a standard practice for all FSA photographers—marked Burroughs’s visage as a generic type rather than an individual portrait. And, like Burroughs, the other men and women pictured in American Photographs become representatives of social types: “American Legionnaire,” “Cuban Ship Loader,” “Flood Refugee,” and “Main Street Faces.”

A similar generalized portraiture was also standard practice for the later van Gogh; most of the forty-nine portraits he painted in Arles are presented as icons or emblems of social roles (for example, shepherd, soldier, lover, and postal worker). Like the ones in American Photographs, van Gogh’s various figures “seem like those
of stock characters in a social primer or an *encyclopédie*, and, taken together, they constitute a social panorama of Provençal citizens.\(^{36}\)

Moreover, these parallel approaches yielded similarly complex results. Both artists borrow from the tradition of portraiture, for example, to give the men pictured in *Portrait of an Actor* (fig. 6) and *Landowner* (fig. 7) an individualist aura. At the same time, the generic labels mark the men as emblematic of their type or class, and both portraits mix conflicting signs of authority and disrespect. The haughty stare and cravat of the *Portrait of an Actor*, for example, are undermined by van Gogh’s treatment of both the suit and face. The suit is dashed off in bold, simplified lines that suggest cartoonlike forms of caricature, while the fleshy features of the actor’s face are subtly distorted and incomplete. A viewer could easily conclude that the hauteur is the result of theatrics, or wine, or both. In a similar manner, the *Landowner’s* square stance and direct, faintly hostile stare combine with the suit and necktie to suggest economic and social authority. At the same time, these marks are rendered vaguely ridiculous: the man’s slumped posture; rumpled, poorly fitting suit; and equivocal gaze all undercut the figure’s claim to authority.

Finally, though—and despite the many other direct parallels that appear throughout Evans’s FSA photography—the most comprehensive influence Evans took from van Gogh is not manifest in any particular painting or photograph. Instead, it lies in the two artists’ systematic blending of vernacular, mass-cultural, and
modernist artistic styles. Van Gogh’s *La berceuse*, for example, combines the bold outlines and flattened, simplified forms of vernacular art with a flamboyantly modernist palette (fig. 8). As the reviews cited earlier demonstrate, 1930s audiences often read such uses of vernacular form as signifiers of van Gogh’s identification with his rural and provincial models. At the same time, however, *La berceuse’s* palette added discordant references. In a letter to his brother, van Gogh compared the canvas to “a chromolithograph from a cheap shop,” thereby claiming the populist appeal of brightly colored, inexpensive, mass-manufactured art. The MoMA exhibition paired the canvas with this quotation, and the museum argued that these aspects of the painter’s art signified both van Gogh’s modernism and his populism: “For it is only recently that his gay, decorative, exaggerated color, his tortured drawing, his flat, unconventional perspective and the direct and passionate emotionalism have attracted rather than repelled the general public.”

Like van Gogh, Evans constructed an avant-garde aesthetic that appropriated the forms of vernacular and mass-cultural figuration. In both artists’ work, these traditions are transformed through incorporation into resolutely modernist projects. The bold lines and flat planes rendered by Evans’s *Butcher Sign, Mississippi* (fig. 9), for example, share a family resemblance with the chair and figure in *La berceuse*; both images recontextualize the iconography of self-taught, vernacular painting and crafts. The *Butcher Sign* may stand for a host of such images in Evans’s oeuvre—the FSA archive documents his methodical search for such folk iconography. And like van Gogh, Evans integrated vernacular iconography into a style that resonated with modernity. A MoMA press release for *American Photographs*, for example, argued that

The word modern in its truest sense aptly characterizes Mr. Evans’ work as it is “straight” photography, so factual that it may almost be called functional. Its insistence is upon the utmost clarity and detail of the image. Combined with this technical skill is Walker Evans’ genius for composition.

Evans’s genius for composition established its modernism in at least two ways. It was, first of all, “anti-graphic.” A reviewer applied this label to Evans’s 1935 exhibition at Julian Levy’s gallery in New York, and it was taken up by Lincoln Kirstein’s article in *American Photographs*. The phrase suggested that the camera’s mechanical nature allowed its operators to break free from the stifling weight of the painterly tradition. As machine, the camera could reveal ways of seeing different from—and more in tune with modernity than—images created by the human hand. Evans’s photographs jolted viewers out of their visual complacency through the “shock-value” of unexpected angles of vision and juxtapositions of objects. But despite the shock, the photographs presented their subject matter as “still real and without distortion.”

This aura of realism resulted from Evans’s deliberate choice of rectilinear angles, repetitive imagery, and geometric form. The photographer’s preferred tool
**Figure 8.** Vincent van Gogh, *La berceuse (Madame Roulin)*, 1888–1889. Oil on canvas, 92 × 73 cm. (F504). Courtesy of the Kröller-Müller Museum.

**Figure 9.** Walker Evans, *Butcher Sign, Mississippi*, 1936. Gelatin silver print, 17.6 × 19.8 cm. Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.
Figure 10. Walker Evans, *Interior Detail, West Virginia Coal Miner’s House / Coal Miner’s House, Scotts Run, West Virginia*, 1935. Gelatin silver print, 23.6 × 16 cm. Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

was an architectural camera that allowed him to correct for optical distortion. The results are evident in photographs like *Negro Church, South Carolina, 1936*, whose ruler-straight lines are more regular than those that would be seen even by a human observer standing in front of the church. Evans composed dozens of such images; their repetition, regularity, and linearity signified the inhumanly clear vision of a functionalist, utilitarian, “machine-age” modernism.

Second, Evans’s practice claimed the mantle of modernism through a surrealist juxtaposition of disparate objects. Like the combinations of vernacular craftsmanship and mechanical precision evident in his architectural photographs, these juxtapositions often combined signifiers of the timeless and the new. His *Interior Detail, West Virginia Coal Miner’s House* (fig. 10), for example, brought together the curvilinear arcs of a handmade rocking chair with the machine-cut angles and photorealism of advertising signage. Evans was particularly drawn to such combinations of mass culture and folk craftsmanship, but the trope is widespread throughout the period’s documentary photography. As James Guimond has observed, such images expressed “the strange mixtures of times, activities, and cultural influences that mingled and jostled with one another in the FSA photographers’ America.”42 However, these discordant combinations of visual styles—vernacular, mass-cultural,
and high-art modernism—did more than simply express the contradictions of the age; the readings of Evans and van Gogh considered here suggest that they also enforced the rhetorical impact of both van Gogh’s art and FSA photography. In short, both the paintings and the photographs appealed simultaneously to nostalgia for a mythic past and to an embattled faith in a better future.

For thirties audiences, however, one fundamental difference distinguished van Gogh’s art from documentary photography. Van Gogh signified the past in two ways: his artistic innovations were those of a previous generation, and his folk models were the peasants and townspeople of a distant place and time. The objects of Evans’s camera, on the other hand, were very much alive, understood to be living and working in the cotton-growing regions of the South. By mobilizing visual tropes borrowed from Vincent van Gogh, in other words, Evans created complex and contradictory modern emblems: real pictures of disintegration and desperate need, which simultaneously figured a politically resonant, utopian hopefulness.

The best record of this complexity lies in the text that has become the privileged gloss on Evans’s depression-era practice: the 481 pages of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, written by James Agee as a complement to Evans’s documentary portrait of three rural families in Alabama. In early 1936, Agee recruited Evans for this documentary project on sharecropping in the American South. The FSA agreed to free Evans for the assignment, and that summer he and Agee traveled to Alabama, located three “representative” families, lived with and near these families for several weeks, and then returned to New York. Although not published until 1941, Agee’s final version of the experience offers the best source for consideration of the textual and conceptual environment in which Evans worked. Agee’s contribution to Praise is important in its own right, but a full treatment is beyond the scope of my argument here. As a frame for Evans’s image-making, however, Agee’s text demonstrates that the van Gogh phenomenon deeply marked the contextual environment surrounding Evans’s praxis.

Like Agee and Evans in 1936, van Gogh sought out and created images that emphasized the back-breaking effort, humility, and everyday hardships of agricultural workers. Van Gogh’s letters invested this project with a moral fervor, and this closely parallels the tone and emphasis of Agee’s contribution to Praise. For example, the following quotation appeared as the epigraph to Dear Theo, the best-selling collection of van Gogh’s letters published in 1937:

The figure of a labourer—some furrows in a ploughed field—a bit of sand, sea and sky—are serious subjects, so difficult, but at the same time so beautiful, that it is indeed worth while to devote one’s life to the task of expressing the poetry hidden in them.

It is difficult to imagine a better epigraph for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, published four years later. Notably, the context of van Gogh’s assertion emphasizes its embattled, insistent tone. Both this tone and van Gogh’s characterization of his subject matter—difficult, beautiful, and, above all, serious—echo throughout
Agee’s prose, and these are only the first of dozens of close textual parallels. Throughout Praise, Agee combines this passion with a painter’s concentration on form and color, and this obsessive attention to sensory detail gives the text its most distinctive trope. A passage from another of van Gogh’s letters, also published in the 1937 Dear Theo, offers a representative analogue:

The people here instinctively wear the most beautiful blue that I have ever seen. It is coarse linen which they weave themselves, warp black, woof blue, the result of which is a black- and-blue-striped pattern. When this fades, and becomes somewhat discoloured by wind and weather, it is an infinitely quiet, delicate tone which just brings out the flesh colours. (336)

Compare this to Agee’s lyrical description of the structure and tone of the tenant farmers’ denim overalls:

[Through hard use, the] whole shape, texture, color, finally substance, all are changed. The shape, particularly along the urgent frontage of the thighs, so that the whole structure of the knee and musculature of the thigh is sculptured there; . . . The texture and the color change in union, by sweat, sun, laundering . . . into a region and scale of blues, subtle, delicious, and deft beyond what I have seen elsewhere approached except in rare skies, the smoky light some days are filmed with, and some of the blues of Cézanne. (267)

This excerpt comes from Agee’s four-page description of overalls, part of a thirty-page chapter called “Clothing.” The explicit reference to Cézanne should not obscure the great debt Agee’s prose owes to that of another postimpressionist. The most characteristic tropes in Praise’s text—an artist’s attention to sensory detail, infused with a deeply Christian, passionately expressed preference for the realities of the working poor—Agee found in van Gogh’s letters. From the van Gogh phenomenon that exploded simultaneously with its composition, Agee’s text took a final, compelling, and cautionary tale. Praise’s rhetorical framework is structured by its reaction to the commercial frenzy for van Gogh’s images and words. Although Agee’s prose is clearly literary in its roots and aspirations, the text repeatedly expresses anxiety about Praise’s likely reception:

Above all else: in God’s name don’t think of it as Art. Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or as authority in one form or another. . . . Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again . . . and is the kiss of Judas. (15)

The blending of Christian and artistic themes here once again recalls van Gogh, but the text’s disavowal of art does not. The trope marks a distinguishing element in Praise’s rhetoric, one articulated in reaction to the mass-cultural assimilation of van Gogh and other representatives of “high art”:

People hear Beethoven in concert halls, or over a bridge game, or to relax. . . . van Gogh is the man who cut off his ear and whose yellows became recently popular in window decoration. . . . Kafka is a fad; Blake is in the Modern Library. (14)

This reaction against the mass-cultural absorption of high art haunts Agee’s contribution to Praise. It is worth stressing again that in the years Agee’s text took shape,
this conjunction was most apparent in the mainstream fascination with van Gogh. *Praise*’s disgust with the “castration” of great artists—“one by one, you have absorbed and have captured and dishonored, and you have distilled of your deliverers the most ruinous of all your poisons”—recalls the *New Masses* reviewer’s contempt for the bourgeois audiences of the van Gogh exhibition: “What perversion of history and the meaning of a great artist. What bitter irony.”

The *New Masses* reacted by claiming van Gogh for revolutionary art, arguing that artists aligned with the Communist Party continued van Gogh’s search for truth “in a more organized, clear, and conscious manner.” Agee reacted by creating *Praise*’s text—a work of dense, heterogeneous, and difficult prose, clearly indebted to modernist formal experimentation, yet one that insistently disavowed the label “art.”

American literary critics have been slow to recognize that Agee’s rejection of the category “art” is itself a characteristic trope of many kinds of modernism. Because the various movements of the historical avant-garde occupy a more secure niche in the art-historical canon, it is not surprising that an art historian first made this point in relation to Agee’s text. Identifying the rhetoric of a socially conscious, utilitarian modernism within *Praise*, Margaret Olin argues that the book can best be read as a site of interchange between “two modernist discursive modes,” documentary and “hermetic art.” Although Olin does not pursue the point, this combination closely resembles the radical formalism that characterized avant-garde movements like Soviet constructivism: an outwardly focused, socially engaged artistic praxis that aligned formalist experimentation with social revolution. Nor was this resemblance as distant as it might at first appear. In a short list of artistic influences cited in 1938, *Time* magazine aligned Evans with the constructivist filmmaker Dziga Vertov.

Like the constructivists, in 1937 Agee defined modern art as the linkage of formal experimentation and radical politics: “Any new light on anything, if the light has integrity, is a revolution.” Continuing the optical metaphor, Agee argued that a strictly Marxian lens was limited, and, moreover, “a willingness to use and still more to try to invent or perfect still other lenses may well become all but obligatory and can in any case scarcely avoid being useful.” In *Praise*, published four years later, the metaphors of light and lenses became explicitly photographic:

One reason I care so deeply about the camera is just this. So far as it goes . . . and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth. (234)

In *Praise*, the camera becomes the central instrument of Agee’s attempt to forge nothing less than a radically new way of seeing and knowing. However, both this passage’s passionate advocacy and its repetitive qualifications are characteristic of Agee’s references to the camera. The anxieties expressed about the reception of great artists like van Gogh are equally apparent in Agee’s discussion of photogra-
phy. Through its misuse, Agee complains, this “central instrument of our time” has spread a “nearly universal . . . corruption of sight” (11).

These perceived limits of science and art, photography and the printed word, are the motivation for the text’s obsessive return to the language and example of van Gogh. Responding to the author’s own experiences in Alabama and to Evans’s photographic portrayals of it, Agee’s text effectively transfers the structure of van Gogh’s early and late periods—empathetic, suffering realism counterpoised with an ecstatic, transcendent idealism—into the dialectical oppositions that mark Praise. Agee reaches toward a particular synthesis of science and fine art, combining the objective realism of the camera with the visionary Christian humanism he associates with van Gogh.

Such contradictory imbrications of art and science, past and future, vernacular, mass, and modernist traditions mark Agee’s text as very much of its time; similar patterns are manifest within the broader fascination with the nation’s countryside and agricultural workers. In short, documentary photography aroused great passion during the depression because it provided a stage for a bitter political and cultural struggle over the requisites of modernity. What is striking about thirty readings of Evans’s photography is their explicit partisanship, particularly when compared to recent interpretations of the photographer as somehow blithely indifferent to the political warfare waged through his imagery. Writing in American Photographs, for example, Lincoln Kirstein claimed that Evans’s attitude was that of “a member revolting from his own class” (197). The photographer Ansel Adams made a similar point in a different way: “[American Photographs] gave me a hernia. I am so goddam mad over what people think America is from the left tier.” While Adams’s photography celebrated the nation’s natural beauty, Evans recorded its social schizophrenia.

Notably, despite Evans’s “anti-graphic” preference for the iconography of poverty and decay, his depression-era defenders made frequent references to high art, usually in support of the photographer’s moral authority. For example, a review of the American Photographs exhibition in Los Angeles discovered in Evans a clarity and compassion reminiscent of Rembrandt: “There are people who will insist that we should not look at poverty or starvation or frustration because these are too ugly. It was said of Rembrandt too.” Evans’s blending of “historical documents” and “works of art,” in other words, served as a weapon in hard-fought battles over the proper role of government in addressing the poverty, starvation, and frustration caused by the Great Depression.

Because the American South played a pivotal role in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition—and because the South was Walker Evans’s chosen terrain—the photographer’s particular combinations of modernist, mass-cultural, and vernacular forms took on a compelling political edge. In 1938, after eight years of debilitating economic crisis and six years as president, Roosevelt declared the American South to be “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.” Southern poverty fed condi-
tions that held the entire nation in the grips of depression, Roosevelt argued, and the president charged one of the New Deal’s public relations arms, the National Emergency Council, to prepare a brief, persuasive tract that would make his case for change. At the time, per capita income in the wealthiest southern state ranked below that of the poorest state outside the region. Millions of southerners lived on the edge of starvation, and southern tenant farmers were the poorest of the poor, often enduring lives of abject misery. Seeking an image that would resonate with a public that must be moved to action, the council drew a remarkable parallel. Many of the South’s tenant farmers, the Report on Economic Conditions of the South noted, are “living in poverty comparable to that of the poorest peasants in Europe.”

There can be no doubt which images of European peasantry came to mind first in 1938. These were images whose accuracy was ensured by their creator’s moral authority, grounded in Vincent van Gogh’s Christlike image of suffering and self-sacrifice. They were also images with powerful political resonance. Locating European peasantry on American soil challenged the centuries-old Jeffersonian ideal of citizen-farmers, a keystone of arguments made by the New Deal’s many southern opponents. In appeals that resonated with broad streams of American ideology, southerners led by the Vanderbilt Agrarians posited agricultural society as a fertile, arcadian space that sustained both material abundance and a democratic, classless society. The equation of southern tenant farmers and European peasants argued, in contrast, that southern agriculture perpetuated a rigid caste system that chained farmers to lives of poverty and exploitation.

However, while van Gogh helped underscore the Report’s portrait of southern society as brutalizing and pathological, the allusion accomplished a further task as well. For audiences in the 1930s, van Gogh’s imagery combined earthy populism with brilliant modernism—his empathetic visions of agricultural folk stood beside dazzling painterly innovations, vital with the energies of a redeemed modernity. In the photography promoted by the New Deal—claiming, simultaneously, to be both artworks and historical documents—similar juxtapositions proved to be extraordinarily persuasive.

Notes

2. Evans’s interpreters generally accord enormous weight to these eighteen months with the FSA. See, for example, Pare Lorentz, “Putting American on Record,” Saturday Review of Literature, 17 Dec. 1938; and John Szarkowski, introduction to Walker Evans (New York, 1971).
4. Ibid., 63, 85.


10. In January 1936, Saks Fifth Avenue dedicated ten storefront windows to reproductions of van Gogh’s paintings paired with clothing and accessories inspired by the painter's oeuvre. Photographs of these displays are included in MoMA’s Public Information scrapbooks (microfilm reel MF 6, frames 696–700). For newspaper clippings that illustrate the same trend in advertising and department stores throughout the nation, see, for example, MF 6, frames 692–94, 701, 759, 938, 979.


13. Personal correspondence housed in the museum’s Department of Registration archives also supports this conclusion. See van Gogh exhibition (no. 44), “Dept. and Catalogue Material File, Corresp. o–z.”


31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Some of the most interesting commentaries are found in Stott, Documentary Expression, 273–75; T. V. Reed, Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers (Berkeley, 1992); Fredric Jameson, Post-modernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, N.C., 1991); and Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill, “Borrowed Shoes,” Artforum, April 1988, 111–17.
36. Carol Zemel, Van Gogh’s Progress (Berkeley, 1997), 88.
38. A useful compilation of such images appears in Walker Evans, Walker Evans: Signs (Los Angeles, 1998).
43. James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 2d ed. (Boston, 1969). All subsequent citations are from this edition and will appear as page numbers given in parentheses within the text.
45. Agee notes that he read van Gogh’s letters in a 26 Dec. 1935 letter, shortly before he took on the assignment that became Praise. See James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), 75.
51. Ibid.
52. Ansel Adams quoted in Lynes, Good Old Modern, 158.
55. Ibid., 46, 21, 22.

Van Gogh in Alabama, 1936
56. Although one-third of tenant farmers were African American in 1938, publicity for the New Deal often ignored the systematic racial oppression that intertwined with economic oppression in the South. Agee’s attempts to confront his own culpability in rendering black southerners invisible are discussed in Michael Staub, “As Close as You Can Get: Torment, Speech, and Listening in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” Mississippi Quarterly 61, no. 2 (1988): 147–60. The most comprehensive study of African Americans in FSA photography is Nicholas Natanson, The Black Image in the New Deal (Knoxville, 1992).