

# A LOOK AT LOOK

BY MARY PANZER

Daniel D. Mich, the longtime editor of *Look* magazine, once said that the great American illustrated magazine was a form that blended “pictures with words to create a new means of communication.” For nearly forty years, from 1937 through 1971, *Look* and *Life* were a pair of big, shiny, competitive twins in this market (*Life* started a few months earlier and lasted a few months longer, though at the end *Look* reached more readers). *Life*, a weekly, emphasized news and timely events, while *Look*, a biweekly, was devoted to features, the stories behind the news, and the man in the street. Ultimately, both publications lost audience and advertising to television. *Life* and its photographers have maintained a public presence thanks to Time/*Life*’s canny exploitation of its archive (most recently made available through Getty’s website). *Look*, the property of Cowles Communications, dropped from sight—along with the work its talented staff photographers published in the magazine’s pages—effacing an important link in the historical chain that unites the documentary photography tradition of the 1930s with present practice.

Shortly after the publication of *Look*’s final issue (October 1971), the Cowles family placed the magazine’s archive in the Library of Congress. More than 3.5 million images—both published and unpublished—organized into thousands of story files, including negatives, proof sheets, and prints, arrived in December 1971 and remained there, uncataloged. Even today, although text records of each story file can be accessed online, no images appear. The photographs in *Look* have thus remained virtually unseen for more than thirty-five years.

*Look*’s vision of America, as a democracy made up of families whose differences comprised the nation’s strength, was reflected in its deliberate focus on race, on women’s changing roles, on the new and the young, and on the underdog. To today’s eyes, the pages inevitably appear naïve, particularly the visual and verbal rhetoric of the 1950s and ’60s, in both the editorial stories

and the colorful ads that paid the way. But *Look*’s distinctive philosophy, innovative for its time, guided the entire magazine, from editorial and writing to design and photography—as outlined in publisher Gardner Cowles Jr.’s 1985 memoir, *Mike Looks Back*; in *The Technique of the Picture Story* by Dan Mich; in *Walking on the Edge of the World*, a memoir by writer George B. Leonard; and in interviews with photographers such as Arthur Rothstein, John Vachon, and Paul Fusco. With these resources and more, a handful of scholars have recently begun to study *Look*.

In 1937, John and Gardner Cowles Jr. founded *Look* in Des Moines, seat of the Cowles publishing empire. Both brothers were New Dealers. Gardner took over the magazine while John ran newspapers in Des Moines and Minneapolis and nurtured their holdings. In 1940 the magazine moved to New York and took off, touting popular democratic ideals and old-fashioned Midwestern values.

As a biweekly, *Look* produced fewer issues than its weekly rivals, and its approach to journalism had to be somewhat different from theirs. The cover story closed about six weeks before the magazine arrived in the mailbox or on the newsstand. Though it was impossible to cover breaking news, *Look* could send out writers and photographers for weeks or even months to work on a story. In 1961 Fusco and writer George Leonard did a long story on the Cold War, traveling the length of the Iron Curtain to document communities that thrived along the border, with a stop to examine both sides of Berlin. In 1949, cub photographer Stanley Kubrick (later the renowned filmmaker) spent several weeks following a young boxer, Walter Cartier, as he prepared to fight in Madison Square Garden—lounging at home, working out at the gym, relaxing on the beach, and then the intense minutes of the fight itself—all compressed into a layout that resembles a movie storyboard. Vachon and reporter Thomas Morgan went to the Midwest in 1957 to do a cover story for a special issue

