

# Educator Resource Guide:

Everson Museum of Art  
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Image: Helen Levitt, *New York (Children with Broken Mirror)*, c. 1940. Gelatin silver print on paper, Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia. Gift of Mrs. Robert O. Levitt, © Film Documents LLC.



*Helen Levitt: In the Street*  
February 6, 2016 – May 8, 2016



EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART

## AN INTRODUCTION

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*Helen Levitt: In the Street* showcases a selection of street photography from the Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, GA by the iconic Helen Levitt, a 20th century New York City photographer. Levitt spent over seventy years on the streets of New York capturing the expression of the city and its people. Both her unpretentious nature and a small camera with a right-angle viewfinder led Levitt to capture her subjects unaware and allowed her to document street scenes with a raw honesty for which she is admired.

*Helen Levitt: In the Street* is organized by Telfair Museums, Savannah, Georgia. This exhibition is made possible through the generous support of Mrs. Robert O. Levitt.

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## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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This educator resource guide was designed by the Education Department for use in conjunction with field trips to *Helen Levitt: In the Street*, or for use as a stand alone classroom resource. The materials included here contain curriculum connections and can be adapted for use at any grade level.

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

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Curator of Education  
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Kimberly A. Griffiths  
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# Artist Biography

## HELEN LEVITT (1913 - 2009)

Helen Levitt was born on August 31st in 1913 in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, NY. Her father was Russian-Jewish and he ran a wholesale knitware business. When Helen was in her teens she dropped out of high school to pursue photography.

Levitt started her career as a photographer when she was 18 years old. She worked out of a portrait studio in the Bronx where she would develop and print photographs. In 1938, when Levitt was 25, she brought her portfolio to photographer Walker Evans and filmmaker James Agee. They quickly recognized her talent and took the young artist under their wings.

In 1943, not long after her introduction to Evans and Agee, Levitt had her first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled *Photographs of Children*. This marked the beginning of a long, successful career of documentary expressionism.

Levitt is best known for her black and white street photography from the 1930s and 40s because it provides viewers with both artistic insight and historical documentation. During this time period, Levitt took most of her photographs in Spanish Harlem and other poor New York neighborhoods, not because she hoped to make a political statement, but because those communities lived largely in public spaces. She was particularly fond of photographing children. Levitt would capture children in genuine moments of creativity, adventure, and innocence.

Levitt famously used a small Leica camera with an attachment called a right-angle viewfinder, or *winkelsucher*, which allowed her to take photographs almost completely unnoticed by her subjects.



In 2001 Melissa Block of National Public Radio (NPR) asked Levitt to talk about what she had captured in her photography. "Just what you see," Levitt said. "If it were easy to talk about, I'd be a writer. Since I am inarticulate, I express myself with images."

Documentary Expressionism was an artistic style born in 1930s America. Levitt was a key player in the formation of the style.

In Levitt's obituary *The Guardian* wrote, "She combined a passion for in-depth recording of the lives of migrant workers and city slum-dwellers with an artistry and a particular delight in children all her own."

# Photography Tools

Typically a right-angle viewfinder is used to extend the reach of a camera so photographers can work in difficult situations with greater ease. For example, if a photographer sets a camera on the ground to capture the movements of an ant colony, the construction of a camera makes it very hard to look into the viewfinder without moving the camera. A right-angle viewfinder attachment allows the photographer to comfortably see through their viewfinder without repositioning the camera.

Helen Levitt used her right-angle viewfinder to photograph people without their knowledge. She could hold her camera to the side, look down into her viewfinder, almost like looking at her shoes, and frame, focus, and take a photograph. This allowed her to capture her subjects in candid, unposed moments.



Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940, Gelatin silver print  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia  
Gift of Marvin Hoshino, © Film Documents LLC



1930 Leica Camera



How a right-angle view finder works



Modern right angle view finders



# Inspirations

Henri Cartier-Bresson (right) was a French photographer who travelled the world to capture moments in history both large and small. Like Levitt, Cartier-Bresson also used a small Leica camera. In fact, Levitt decided to purchase a 35-mm Leica and start photographing on her own after seeing the works of Cartier-Bresson.

## HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON (1908 - 2004)



Henri Cartier-Bresson (left)  
*Alicante, Spain, 1933*  
Gelatin silver print  
Julien Levy Collection  
Special Photography  
Art Institute of Chicago



## WALKER EVANS (1903 - 1975)

Walker Evans was an American photographer known for his work depicting rural American life on behalf of the Farm Security Administration in the mid 1930s. Evans and Levitt worked closely together for a number of years, with Levitt sometimes accompanying Evans on his photoshoots.



Walker Evans  
*(Street Scene)*  
*Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936*  
Gelatin silver print  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
New York

# Visual Thinking Strategies

When looking at the photograph with your students, utilize Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). VTS is an open ended method for discussing art that focuses on the process of observation. The basics of VTS are listed here to help you get started.

Let's take a minute to look at this picture.

Create a substantial pause to allow students to look carefully at the work in front of them. Many instructors will set a timer to ensure they do not cut observation time short.

What is going on in this picture?

Be sure to allow students to answer openly and honestly. This is not the time to look for "correct" answers.

What do you see that makes you say that?

This encourages students to refer back to the work to support their interpretation. In doing so they are learning the basics of visual research and documentation.

As facilitator listen carefully and point toward the areas mentioned by the student. When the student has completed the thought, paraphrase what was said without judgement or corrections.

What more can we find?

Encourage other students to follow the same process of interpreting the art and supporting their thinking with visual documentation.



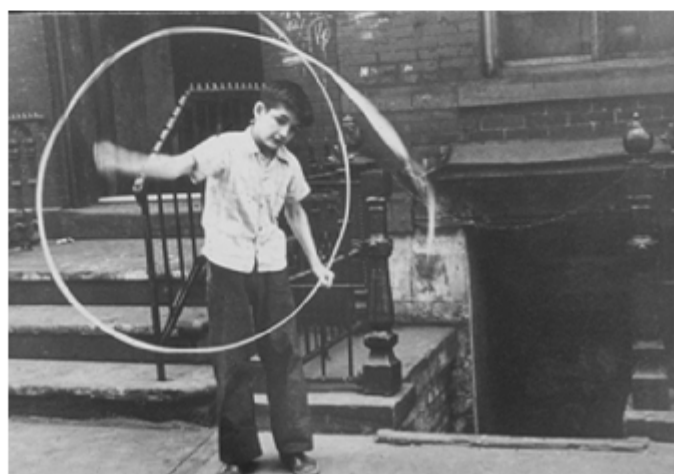
Helen Levitt, *Gypsies - N.Y.*, c. 1940  
Vintage gelatin silver print on paper  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah,  
Georgia, Gift of Mrs. Robert O. Levitt,  
© Film Documents LLC



Helen Levitt, *New York*, 1940  
Gelatin silver print on paper  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah,  
Georgia, Gift of Richard and Elizabeth  
Devereaux, © Film Documents LLC

# Looking Closer

Levitt's photographs are successful because of their composition, or the elements that make up the photograph. In her work, Levitt used line and shape to make the story of a photograph come alive. When talking about her work with your students, look closely to find individual shapes and lines. Then take a step back and discuss how those elements work together to create a composition.



Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, Gift of  
Dr. and Mrs. Robert O. Levitt, © Film Documents LLC

In the photograph above, the eye is immediately drawn to the circle the ribbon creates. This circle is a negative shape, or a shape that is not filled. Negative shapes are often framing objects, people, or scenes. In this photograph the ribbon frames the boy as he twirls it through the air. Levitt utilized a negative shape to bring attention and intrigue to the subject of the photograph.

When discussing the role shapes play in a photograph's composition, ask your students how the story of the photograph would change if the shape was not in the photograph or if the shape was in a different location.

How would the story of the photograph change if there were no ribbon?

How would it change if half of the ribbon was not in the photograph?

What would the photograph be like if the ribbon did not form a circle?

What would it be like if the boy was not framed by his ribbon?





Helen Levitt, *New York (Children with Broken Mirror)*, c. 1940  
Gelatin silver print  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia  
Gift of Mrs. Robert O. Levitt, © Film Documents LLC



Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940  
Gelatin silver print  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia  
Gift of Marvin Hoshino,  
© Film Documents LLC



Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940  
Gelatin silver print on paper  
Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia,  
Gift of Philip Perkis, © Film Documents



# Activity

## BEFORE TRAVELING TO THE MUSEUM

### Activities for the Classroom

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#### Activity I: A Picture is Worth 1000 Words\*

Have students select a photograph from the exhibition to study. Once they have chosen, let them observe the photograph for a while. This might be a good time to use VTS with your students.

After the observation period have students write a story inspired by the photograph. Ask them to write about the events leading up to the moment in the picture or to write about what happens after the picture was taken. Allow them to be creative!

\*This activity can also be adapted for a shorter time period. Instead of having students write an entire story about a photograph, ask them to create a newspaper caption. It may help to have some examples of newspaper captions available for reference.

#### Activity II: Line and Shape

Show some images from the exhibition to your students and talk about the use of line and shape in Levitt's compositions. Look through the vocabulary provided in this guide for terms.

Have students point out the shapes and lines that they see. Then discuss the role they play in the image. Is it big or little? Does it draw attention to one part of the photograph? Does it divide the photograph into sections?

After your discussion, have students make their own compositions using line and shape. Provide them with paper shapes and lines that can be arranged together and glued down to create a finished piece.

What other materials could you use to make a line and shape composition?

Cut out and laminate large paper lines and shapes. Attach magnets, velcro, or tape to the back. Then have students collaboratively arrange a composition on the wall.

Collect 3-D objects to use as shapes and lines. A lid makes a good circle, a ruler is a good line, and boxes make great squares and rectangles. Have your students use the objects to collaboratively create a sculptural composition.

# Activity

## DURING THE MUSEUM VISIT

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### Activity I: In a Word

Cut out the words from the following page and hand each student a word. Ask them to find a photograph that can be described using the word they were given.

Alternatively, make copies of the following page and ensure that each student has a copy of all of the provided words. For each photograph they encounter, have students look through their list and choose a word to describe it.

You may also want to come up with words of your own to hand out, or let the students think of their own list of adjectives before visiting the museum.

When students have matched their words to a photograph, discuss their choice using VTS. Ask students what they see in the photograph that supports their choice.

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### Activity II: Oral Story Telling

Choose a photograph as the subject of your oral story telling. After observing the image in silence, tell your students that you will work together to tell the story of the image. Use the following questions to help guide your class.

- Who is/are the main characters?
- How do you know?
- Are they alone? Why?
- What are they doing?
- What are they thinking?
- How do they feel?
- What is happening in this scene?
- What happened just before?
- What is going to happen next?
- What is the most important part of this story?



**JOYFUL**

**BLEAK**

**QUIET**

**MYSTERIOUS**

**SILLY**

**GROSS**

**SOMBER**

**MAGICAL**

**BUSY**

**PLAYFUL**

**TENSE**

**CREEPY**

# Vocabulary

## actual lines

Actual lines are lines that can be seen in an image. They can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, and they might outline shapes or divide planes.

## bird's eye view

Bird's eye view is when a photograph's point of view is from above or looking down at the subject.

## composition

Composition is the way lines and shapes are arranged to form an image.

## framing

Framing is the presentation of visual elements in an image, especially the placement of the subject in relation to other objects. Framing can make an image more aesthetically pleasing and keep the viewer's focus on the framed object(s).

## geometric shape

Geometric shapes are shapes such as triangles, circles, and squares.

## implied lines

Implied lines cannot be seen in the image, but we often imagine where they are. For example, you could imagine a line coming from the fingertip of a pointed finger to the object that the finger is pointing to.

## monochromatic

Monochromatic is a word that describes the use of one color in many shades and tints.

## negative shape

Negative shapes are shapes that are not filled in, such as a hula hoop or an open window.

## organic shape

Organic shapes are shapes that look natural or are naturally made. For example, a puddle or a maple leaf.

## point of view

Point of view is the angle that the photograph is taken from.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Print

*I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*  
by Wendy Ewald and Alexandra Lightfoot

### Web

Atget Photography: Helen Levitt, <http://www.atgetphotography.com/The-Photographers/Helen-Levitt.html>

Helen Levitt *New York Times* Obituary, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/30/arts/design/30levitt.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/30/arts/design/30levitt.html?_r=0)

### Films

*In the Street*, 1948. Levitt worked as cinematographer and editor.

*The Quiet One*, 1948. Levitt worked as cinematographer and writer.

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## SCHEDULING A TOUR

The Everson provides guests of all ages an opportunity to enjoy, learn, and connect with art through a variety of free docent-led tours. Choose from one of our many thematic tours or take a general tour of the permanent collection or temporary exhibitions.

Docent-led tours are available ***Wednesday through Friday, 10:00 AM – noon***. Afternoon and weekend tours are available on a limited basis. ***Tours are one hour in length.***

Group size is limited to ***60 people maximum***, but larger groups may reserve two consecutive sessions. One docent will be assigned to every ten students.

To schedule your tour please contact Qiana Williams, Associate Curator of Education (315) 474-6064 x303 or email [qwilliams@everson.org](mailto:qwilliams@everson.org) at least three weeks in advance. Tour dates book quickly, so it is recommended that you have alternate dates in mind. Please find a tour request form attached to this packet.



## RELATED PROGRAMMING

### CLASSES

#### Digital Photography for Teens

Ages 13-17

February 16-19 (Tues-Fri)

9:00am-3:00pm

Members \$150, Non-Members \$185

Unlock the lens in this hands-on photography class and learn the art of digital processing. Students will have the opportunity to discover street photography and produce work in a professional photo lab. To register contact Qiana Williams, [qwilliams@everson.org](mailto:qwilliams@everson.org) or (315) 474 6064 x303.

### FAMILY PROGRAMS

#### Sunday Funday

Sundays February 7th – May 1st

2.00pm-4.00pm, Free with museum admission

Drop into the Everson for fun, free activities, hands-on crafts, games and more led by our dedicated volunteers.

#### Artful Tales

1.00pm, Free with museum admission, Drop-in

February 13th *What Zeesie Saw on Delancey Street*

March 5th *Last Stop on Market Street*

April 2nd *Toys in Space*

May 7th *Nana in the City*

For children ages 3 and up and their caregivers. Enjoy an afternoon of storytelling and gallery exploration with a Museum docent.

#### Baby and Me Tour

11:30am, Free with museum admission

February 19, March 11, April 8, May 6

Moms, dads and caregivers can enjoy a tour while babies enjoy the stimulating colors and shapes of the artwork. Tours will focus on a different theme each month.

#### Family Day

April 9th, Noon-3pm, Free

Rosamond Gifford Sculpture Court

Explore the galleries and join in art making for the entire family! Have fun and sketch a cityscape using colorful chalk. Build a fantastic hybrid animal/plant using clay and natural materials. Paint a vibrant wax resist landscape using crayons and paint. Join in a family friendly tour with a museum docent. Check out what's new in the galleries and engage in lively conversation about what you see.

## HAPPENINGS

#### Salsa Night

February 11, 5.30-8pm

Cover charge Members \$10, Non-Members \$15

Spice up your Thursday with an evening of salsa music, dancing, wine tasting and art. Learn the basics of salsa with a lesson then move to the sizzling sounds of salsa and merengue with a dance partner. Savor the art of *In The Street* with a guided tour. Enjoy light refreshments and wine tasting courtesy of Branch. Glasses of wine or bottles available for additional purchase.

#### Salsa Night: Kids' Night Out

February 11, 5.30-8pm

Members free, Non-Members \$15 per child/ \$10 per additional sibling

Ages 5-12, Pre-registration required

Bring the kids to Salsa Night and enjoy a parents' night out while the kids let their imaginations run wild at the Everson. Enjoy art making, play time, movies, stories, and more while you heat up the dance floor with your partner. Pizza and juice included. To register contact Kimberly Griffiths, [kgriffiths@everson.org](mailto:kgriffiths@everson.org), (315) 474-6064 x308

#### Gallery Walk: Helen Levitt's Heart

Free with museum admission

March 24th, 6.30pm

Join us for an evening exploring *Helen Levitt: In the Street* with artist and Professor at Columbia University, Thomas Roma.

### EXHIBITION

*The Way I See It*

January 16 - February 28

A selection of photographs by Syracuse City School students in response to the street photography of Helen Levitt and other contemporary photographers. Working in collaboration with Syracuse University's Photography and Literacy Project (PAL Project), students from Edward Smith School, South West Community Center and Institute of Technology at Central were given cameras and asked to document their world. Classes met with Syracuse University student mentors on a weekly basis.





EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART

TOUR REQUEST FORM

REQUESTOR'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ TODAY'S DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL/ORGANIZATION: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

AGE OF GROUP: \_\_\_\_\_ NUMBER IN GROUP: \_\_\_\_\_ (60 VISITORS MAXIMUM PER TOUR)

Please note the Everson Museum is open for docent led tours from Wednesday to Friday, 10:00am—5:00pm, and limited tours are available Saturday & Sunday, from noon—5:00pm.

**\*\*SCHOOL GROUP TOUR POLICY:** *There should be a chaperone to student ratio of 1:10, (excluding staff who accompany special needs students). ALL guests must wear name-tags (first name only.)*

TENATIVE DATE OF TOUR: \_\_\_\_\_ PREFERRED TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

ALTERNATE DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ PREFERRED TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

**TYPE OF TOUR:**

We offer many types of tours. Please select a tour type by checking your choice below:

- |   |  |  |                                   |
|---|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Visual Thinking Strategies | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Art History   | <input type="checkbox"/> Ceramics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> iPad Pals (Presentations)  | <input type="checkbox"/> K—12                            | <input type="checkbox"/> College-level | <input type="checkbox"/> Seniors  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> General                    | <input type="checkbox"/> French Speaking (limited basis) |  |                                   |

**OFFICE USE ONLY:**

DATE RECEIVED: \_\_\_\_\_ INFORMATION TAKEN BY: \_\_\_\_\_ ALTRU CALENDAR ENTRY DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ DOCENT CALENDAR ENTRY: \_\_\_\_\_  
STATISTIC DATA ENTRY DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ CONFIRMATION PACKET SENT ON: \_\_\_\_\_ CONFIRMATION SENT TO DOCENTS ON: \_\_\_\_\_

DOCENTS CONFIRMED:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

PLEASE SUMBIT FORM TO: [QWilliams@everson.org](mailto:QWilliams@everson.org)

401 Harrison Street • Syracuse NY 13202 • 315-474-6064 x 303 • [eversonmuseum.org](http://eversonmuseum.org)