

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Meyers, William. "Black Photojournalism' Review: Pictures Without Prejudice at the Carnegie Museum of Art" *The Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2025.



Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Charles Peaker Street Speaker, head of ANPM after Carlos Cooks passed away, on 125th street), 1968 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

An exhibition in Pittsburgh highlights the work of black photographers, both well-known and unidentified, who captured the life of their community and beyond.

Black photographer Chester Higgins Jr. (b. 1946) once told me that when he first came to New York to pursue his career as a photojournalist, he sought advice from established photographers. Gordon Parks (1912-2006), the first black photographer on staff at Life magazine, was particularly forthcoming. Parks told him, among other things, that when he submitted photos to white editors of events involving black people, they would always choose the pictures that showed them in the worst light; Higgins should be mindful of that. Higgins, who became a staff photographer at the New York Times, is represented by two prints and nine 35mm slides in "Black Photojournalism," an exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art that shows how black people saw themselves and how they wanted to be represented. It covers the period from the end of World War II to the presidential campaigns of 1984, a time of fraught racial relations. Dan Leers, the museum's curator of photography, and Charlene Foggie-Barnett, the Charles "Teenie" Harris community archivist, organized the exhibition, which includes work by nearly 60 named photographers plus 45 pictures by unidentified shutterbugs.

In 2001, the museum became the custodian of photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris's archive: 78,000 negatives plus prints and film. Harris (1908-1998) photographed the black community of Pittsburgh for four decades, shooting weddings, politicians, sports figures, entertainers, graduations, businesses, portraits, social gatherings. In 2011, the museum mounted an enormously successful exhibition of the Harris material, and Harris's work is now permanently available in a dedicated gallery. The Harris experience prompted the museum to seek out other black photographers who had similarly recorded their communities. The current exhibition was pulled together with the help of an expanded network of scholars, archivists, curators and historians. Artist David Hartt designed the show to include prints, mural-size blow-ups, 35mm color slides, microfilm, video clips, magazines, newspapers, and specially commissioned artistic photo albums.

The subjects of the pictures by unidentified photographers are a heterogeneous lot: Their titles include "Lois Alexander, Black Fashion Museum" (c. 1980); "Wallace and Walter Dawkins riding horses at Dawkins home in Sioux City, Nebraska" (1967); "Afro-American Day Parade, L-R, Terry Tarroin and Aqwi Jamal Andrews (5) stepping in tune with the Cardoza High School Band from Washington, D.C." (Sept. 18, 1982); "Untitled" (c. 1962), two girls with hula hoops; and "Thompson's Honor Dairy Advertisement" (c. 1952). The last is a picture of a baby reaching for a carton of milk, the others are of local public events or snapshots of personal significance. They are unexceptional in content and artistic quality, but collectively they illustrate a black working- and middle-class culture largely unrecognized by outsiders.

There are seven prints from the "Teenie" Harris trove; they include pictures of the Billy Eckstine Orchestra (1944), the Rev. J.A. Williams at Baptist Temple Church (1946), and a group in uniform (1945). Harris's pictures have much the same subjects as those taken by the unidentified photographers, but they are composed better, and he used a professional Speed Graphic camera so they have more detail. Ms. Foggie-Barnett, who knew Harris well, says in the catalog, "His mission was not only to cover the news but also to simultaneously counter the stereotypes African Americans were subjected to in the traditional press." His "A Pittsburgh Courier press operator, possibly William Brown, printing newspapers, possibly for a Midwestern edition" (November 1954) is fittingly on the cover of the catalog: a black man dealing with complex machinery to produce the largest-circulation black newspaper in the country.

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Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Grace Jones Photoshoot), 1980s c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

A picture like Austin Hansen's "Servicemen and ladies hold up newspapers announcing 'Victory in Japan'" (1945)—a sailor, a soldier and three women, all enormously happy—is a counterpart to Alfred Eisenstaedt's celebrated picture of the sailor kissing a woman in a white uniform in Times Square on V-J day and reminds us of black participation in important national events. A versatile photographer like Kwame Brathwaite could take a black-and-white picture of Charles Peaker, head of the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, speaking on 125th Street in central Harlem (c. 1968) and also a whimsical color portrait of a fashion model wearing a necklace made of the steel reels used in developing film (c. 1972). The mural iteration of his color portrait of Grace Jones wearing a gold record as a fascinator (1980s) is 170 inches by 164 inches, almost absurdly dramatic. Ming Smith, the first woman in Kamoinge, the New York black photography collective, is represented by "Harlemite at Hotdog Stand, Harlem, NY" (c. 1976) and two other prints. The subjects of Chester Higgins's sweet image "Father Swinging Son, Brooklyn" (1972) are backlit so they appear mostly as silhouettes; at first glance their racial identity is uncertain, they are seen as a universal parent and child, and only on closer inspection particularized as black.

The camera doesn't know the color of the photographer and has no prejudices; it serves the purposes of those who master it.

Black Photojournalism is on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art, through Jan. 19, 2026.