

JAMES VANDERZEE

VanDerZee was originally from Lenox, Massachusetts; he soon traveled to Harlem. He was a skilled pianist and an aspiring professional violinist. The five-piece Harlem Orchestra was created by VanDerZee, in which he also performed. He discovered photography as a hobby in his hometown of Lenox. At age fourteen he received his first camera from a magazine promotion. His interest with the toy camera led him to getting a slightly better camera with which he would take hundreds of photographs of the town and his family. He was only the second person in Lenox to own a camera, and he would develop the images himself. This early start led him to a vast and prolific career documenting each decade in his unique style.

Moving to New York, music lessons were a prime source of income for VanDerZee. At age 29, he worked as a dark room technician at Gertz Department Store in Newark, New Jersey. He would substitute as a photographer when his employer was unavailable. Patrons enjoyed his creative manner of shooting subjects. This encouraged him to open his own studio, Guarantee Photography, within two years, and he was immediately successful. In 1932, he outgrew his first studio and went on to open the larger GGG Studio (since closed, but the building with its original sign can still be seen at Lenox Avenue and 129th Street in Harlem). In these studios, many visual techniques were employed using props, architectural elements and costumes in the tradition of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. So much time was taken in posing his subjects that he often only could do three sittings a day.

During the Great Depression, and as the availability of personal cameras severely lessened the need of professional photography, the gap was filled by shooting passport photographs and miscellaneous photographic jobs to make a living. After World War II, he survived via commissions and in the field of photo restoration.

National recognition was given to him at age 82, when his collection of 75,000 photographs spanning a period of six decades of African-American life was discovered by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His photos were featured in 1969 as part of the *Harlem on my Mind* exhibition. From the 1970s until his death in 1983, VanDerZee photographed the many celebrities who had come across his work and promoted him throughout the country.

Photographic Techniques and Artistry

Works by VanDerZee are artistic as well as technically proficient. His work was in high demand in part due to his experimentation and skill in retouching negatives and in double exposures. One theme that recurs in his photographs was the emergent black middle class, which he captured using traditional techniques in often idealistic images. Negatives were retouched to show straight teeth, add jewelry, and hide bald spots. This would affect the likeness of the person photographed, but he felt each photo should transcend beyond the subject.

VanDerZee would sometimes combine several photos in one image, to present the scene as he thought it should have been. He did not limit himself to the studio, and photographed street scenes, funerals, parades and children. In one case, he added a ghostly child to an image of a wedding to suggest the couple's future. A funeral image was superimposed upon a photograph of a dead woman to give the feeling of her eerie presence.

VanDerZee was a working photographer who supported himself through portraiture, and who devoted time to his professional work before his more artistic compositions. Many famous residents of Harlem were included among his subjects. In addition to portraits, VanDerZee photographed organizations, events and other businesses.

References:

VanDerZee, James. *Drop Me off in Harlem*. The Kennedy Center.

McCollum, Sean. *Photographer James VanDerZee*. Scholastic Inc.

VanDerZee, James. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

VanDerZee, James. AFRO-America@: Art Gallery. The African American Newspaper



JAMES VANDERZEE

1886 Born: Lenox, Massachusetts
1983 Deceased: Washington, DC

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 "James VanDerZee", The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
"James VanDerZee-Selections from the Sandor Family Collection Gift", International Center of Photography, New York, NY
- 1993 "VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886-1983", National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- 1989 "Roots in Harlem: Photographs by James VanDerZee from the Collection of Regina A. Perry", Memphis Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, TN
- 1979 "The Legacy of James VanDerZee: A Portrait of Black Americans", Alternative Center for the Arts, New York, NY
- 1970 Lenox Public Library

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 "Connections," Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, CA and New York, NY
- 2007 "photo la", Santa Monica, CA, January 18-21, Jenkins Johnson Gallery
- 2005 "hrIm-pictures", The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
"African American Art-Photographs from the Collection", Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO
- 2004 "Common Ground-Discovering Community in 150 Years of Art", The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
"Ghost Stories-The Disembodied Spirit", Austin Museum of Art-AMOA, Austin, TX
"Stagestruck in America-Artists, Entertainers & Audiences, 1906-1956", Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
- 2003 "HairStories", Scottsdale Museum of Modern Art, Phoenix, AZ
"Generations-African-American Art in the VMFA Collection", Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
"Challenge of the Modern: African American Artists 1925-1945", The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- 2002 "Celebrating the Legacy III-African American Art at the Corcoran"
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
- 2001 "Narratives of African American Art and Identity"
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
"More than One", Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
- 1999 "Narratives of African American Art and Identity", The H.M. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, CA
"Narratives of African American Art and Identity-The David C. Driskell Collection", Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME
- 1998 "Tradition & Conflict: A Visual History of African-Americans in Art, 19th and Early 20th Centuries, Ledbetter Lusk Gallery", Memphis, TN
- 1997 "Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance", Hayward Gallery, London, England
H.M. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, CA
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
"Centurions: 101 Visions", Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA
- 1995 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
"African-American Art: 20th Century Masterworks, II, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY; 1996-2001



JENKINS JOHNSON GALLERY
San Francisco | New York

- 1994 "Empowerment: The Art of African American Artists", Krasdale Gallery, White Plains, NY
1991 "Eclectic Lens: Photographs from The Paul Jones Collection", Beach Institute, Savannah, GA
1983 "A Century of Black Photographers: 1840-1960, Museum of Art", Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
1968 "Harlem on My Mind", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

SELECTED PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Amon-Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX
The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
City Museum of New York, New York, NY
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Norman, OK
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
International Center of Photography, New York, NY
The Jewish Museum of New York, New York, NY
J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA
Lenox Public Library, Lenox, MA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN
The Museum of Fine Art, Houston, TX
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL
Prairie View A&M University, Houston, TX
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
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