



**Today's Masterpiece:** Berenice Abbott, [\*Metropolitan Life Building, New York\*](#), ca. 1935. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Cam and Wanda Garner, 2020.340. © Berenice Abbott/Getty Images, Courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Rachel Jans, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month for a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is a photograph from Berenice Abbott's monumental project, "Changing New York," which chronicles the rapid transformation of the city during the 1930s. In 1921 Abbott left New York City for Europe, with ambitions to study sculpture. When she returned from Paris to American shores in 1929, Abbott was an accomplished and sought-after photographer renowned for her portraits of avant-garde artists, writers and other cultural figures. She had worked in Paris as a darkroom assistant for the noted photographer Man Ray, and honed a photographic approach characterized by an astounding sensitivity and remarkable skill. With Abbott's return to the States, she brought a fresh perspective and a determination to capture "the spirit of the metropolis. As she wrote of Manhattan, "The sweep of one's vision can take in the dramatic contrasts of the old and new and the bold foreshadowing of the future."

Abbott's *Changing New York* series features a range of subjects—modern skyscrapers, as well as harbors, highways, city squares, neighborhoods, storefronts, and hand-painted signs—that capture the essence of a specific time and place. *Metropolitan Life Building* is one of over three hundred black and white photographs that comprise this ambitious project. Captured from a low vantage point the Metropolitan Life Building looms above. A barren tree and its dark, spindly branches, overlays the image, silhouette-like, spanning the photograph and the building, from top-to-bottom and side-to-side. The repeating and orderly grid of the massive structure's windows contrasts with the natural pattern of branches and shoots. Taken together, the tree and the building are a study in such contrasts: black and white, foreground and background, nature and the built environment.

A project of this scale demands incredible resources as well as time and fortitude. She needed a car, materials, help carrying her heavy equipment, and research assistance. Abbott's many proposals for financial support were repeatedly dashed. The artist's steadfast vision for this undertaking was finally made possible by the Federal Art Project, a part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression, with selections later published in a book to coincide with the 1939 World's Fair in New York. Abbott's photographs, in scope and subject, changed the course of photography in the twentieth century and are a reminder of the excitement and possibility when seeing the world anew.

This has been Rachel Jans, thank you for listening here at Virtual SDMA.



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