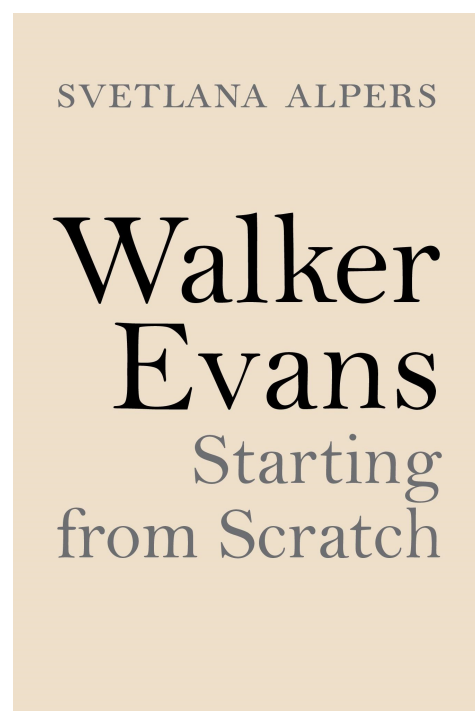


Walker Evans: Starting from Scratch

by Svetlana Alpers. Princeton University Press, October 2020. 416 p. ill. ISBN 9780691195872 (h/c), \$39.95.

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In *Walker Evans: Starting from Scratch*, Svetlana Alpers, professor emerita of art history at the University of California, Berkeley and visiting scholar in art history at New York University, reintroduces the reader to the seemingly familiar territory of Walker Evans's oeuvre. Alpers's specialty is Dutch Golden Age painting, and although she has previously written on Tiepolo, Rubens, Bruegel, and Velazquez, she turns her attention here to a photographer most well-known for his work for the Farm Security Administration during the American Great Depression.

The book, thorough in its approach, comprises a preface and introduction, seven chapters spanning Evans's life and work (Evans's France: Real and Virtual; The Possibility of the Medium; Cuban Days; Evans's America: Life and Art; Subway Portraits; Time Out for Fortune; and Turning In), an afterword, notes, a list of illustrations and index, and an acknowledgments section. It includes 143 black and white plates, from

the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Library of Congress, placed at the beginning of the text and thirty-seven illustrative figures complementing statements made within the body of the text.

Interestingly, this book is as much about Alpers's discovery of the field of photography as art as it is about Walker Evans's work. Alpers lays out her approach by listing four main points of the book, all of which speak to the idea of starting from scratch. Alpers posits that photographing the world does not come out of a tradition but rather from a fresh act of looking. Likewise, Evans's turn to the camera instead of pen indicates a new start. The notion of starting from scratch epitomizes the "quintessential situation of America, and what made photography an

American medium.” Finally, she argues, the phrase reflects her own feelings when turning her focus from the study of historic painting to Walker Evans and from Europe to America. (p. x)

In this extensive and detailed biography, the author is most interested in connecting Evans’s literary inclinations (documented and interpreted) to his photographic work. As she outlines important events in his life, Alpers makes connections between Evans and nineteenth-century French writers Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire as well as photographer Eugene Atget and painter Paul Cezanne. Later, she connects his work to American writers William Faulkner and Elizabeth Bishop. Throughout her analysis, the reader is presented with a new perspective on Walker Evans’s work, rendering the presumed familiar unfamiliar in a decidedly nuanced and enjoyable way.

This book is recommended for art libraries, museums, and institutions that support art history, museum studies, and photography programs.