

FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE

Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Goals

This activity will establish a dialog for any group of adults attending the exhibition together. Participants will explore and analyze:

How a single image can inspire, persuade, change minds, and move people to action.

The channels through which visual images were distributed to the public during the civil rights movement.

The role of visual culture in the civil rights movement.

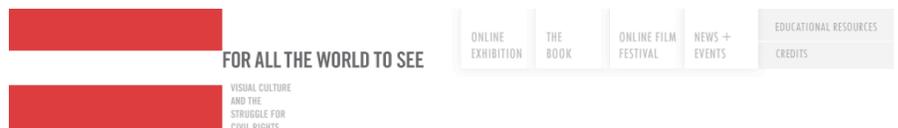
Audience

This activity is intended for adult learners in community groups, continuing education, reading or study groups, or other learning situations.

ADULT LEARNING ACTIVITY

Publishing Emmett Till: Can Single Image Changed the World?

In 1955, shortly after Emmett Till was murdered by white supremacists in Mississippi, his grieving mother distributed to the press a gruesome photograph of his mutilated corpse. The publication of the photograph inspired a generation of activists to join the civil rights movement.



For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights is organized by the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County in partnership with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Through a host of media—including photographs, television and film, magazines, newspapers, posters, books, and pamphlets—the project explores the historic role of visual culture in shaping, influencing, and transforming the fight for racial equality and justice in the United States from the late-1940s to the mid-1970s. *For All The World To See* includes a traveling exhibition, a website, online film festival, and a richly illustrated companion book.

This guide is an accompaniment to the online exhibition, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*:

<http://www.foralltheworldtosee.org>

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

In 1955, shortly after Emmett Till was murdered by white supremacists in Mississippi, his grieving mother distributed to the press a gruesome photograph of his mutilated corpse. Asked why she would do this, she explained that by witnessing with their own eyes the brutality of segregation and racism, Americans would be more likely to support the cause of racial justice. “Let the world see what I’ve seen,” was her reply. The publication of the photograph inspired a generation of activists to join the civil rights movement.

This activity asks participants to consider: who *did* and *did not* publish the image of Till's body? Who saw and did not see the graphic evidence of this event? What impact did the photograph have on viewers, and consequently, the future of the civil rights movement?

For All the World to See is the first exhibition to explore the role of visual images and objects as *agents of persuasion or inspiration* in the civil rights movement. In this activity, we will interpret a group of images and documents that had, perhaps, the greatest impact during this vital period in American history.

DURATION

Approximately forty-five minutes before visiting the exhibition, and forty-five minutes after visit.

MATERIALS

Access to *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, either online or at a physical venue. (You may also use printouts from the site if Internet access is not available in your meeting place.) These items will be our focus:

Photographer Unknown. *Bo at thirteen*, 1954

Ernest C. Withers. *Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case*, 1955

Exhibition: “Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth” *Jet*,

September 15, 1955. Website/Book: *Emmett Till in Casket*, 1955 Courtesy Chicago Defender.

RESOURCE FOR THE MODERATOR AND/OR PARTICIPANTS

Berger, Maurice. *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

<http://www.umbc.edu/cadvc/foralltheworld/book/>

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

Reflecting on her decision to distribute the photograph of the mutilated body of her son and have an open casket at his funeral, Mamie Till Bradley said,

I couldn't bear the thought of people being horrified by the sight of my son. But on the other hand, I felt the alternative was even worse. After all, we had averted our eyes for far too long, turning away from the ugly reality facing us as a nation. Let the world see what I've seen.

As a group, examine the following three objects at this URL:

<http://www.umbc.edu/cadvc/foralltheworld/section3/till.php>.

ONE

Photographer Unknown. *Bo at thirteen*, 1954

TWO

"Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth" *Jet*, September 15, 1955

Through this article among others published in African American periodicals, the horrific image of Till's body served as a call to action to a generation of young African American protesters. Activist and sociologist Joyce Ladner would later call these young people soldiers of the "Emmett Till Generation"

THREE

Ernest C. Withers. *Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case*, 1955

This twenty-page photo booklet was self-published and sold for a dollar by Ernest Withers, one of a handful of African American photojournalists to cover the trial of Till's killers. See the complete flip-book in exhibition; a single page on the website; or a full discussion in the book *For All the World to See*.

DISCUSSION

Invite participants to speculate about, or in some cases remember, answers to these questions:

Why did Mamie Till Bradley share these private images with the world?

Why did Withers self-publish his *Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case*?

Imagine—or remember if you can—the Withers book or the published photograph of Till's corpse in the setting of a home or community center. Who saw these images? What impact did they have on viewers?

VISITING THE EXHIBITION

The items in the exhibition and accompanying wall texts speak for themselves; participants should feel free to experience the exhibition directly and intimately. To stimulate conversation later, however, ask them to consider these questions, which might prompt a variety of answers depending on the time period of the item being viewed:

Who decides which images are published?

In what instances, if any, should disturbing images not be published?

Can a single image spur a movement or cause?

POST-VISIT DISCUSSION

After viewing pictures, ask the following questions for discussion:

Who did and did not publish the photograph of Till's body? What role did prejudice, fear, propriety, prohibitions against depicting brutality or violence, or cultural standards of acceptability play in the publication or the refusal to publish this image?

Who saw and did not see the graphic evidence of this event?

What do you think of the choice Till's mother made when she decided to publish pictures of her son's body?

What role did the picture play in the civil rights movement?

How has American visual culture—and its relationship to images of violence or death—changed or remained the same since the publication of the Till photograph?



For All The World To See was organized by the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County in partnership with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.



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For All the World to See was designated a "We the People" project by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The goal of the "We the People" initiative is to "encourage and strengthen the teaching, study, and understanding of American history and culture through the support of projects that explore significant events and themes in our nation's history and culture and that advance knowledge of the principles that define America."



Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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