



# AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY AN INTRODUCTION



a0  
Sleeve of the triple soundtrack album  
Woodstock, Cotillion (record label) 1970,  
with a photograph by Burk Uzzle  
Colour offset  
Marcel ten Hooen Collection

On a Saturday afternoon in August 1969, Bobbi Kelly, her boyfriend Nick Ercoline and a few friends set off by car from the city of Middletown, New York. Their destination was a dairy farm in Bethel, forty miles away, where a four-day music festival had started the previous day. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair would go on to acquire legendary status in the counterculture of the 1960s. Nine months later, in May 1970, a triple soundtrack album came out, with songs by a number of the acts that had performed there. When Kelly saw the record sleeve, she realized she would have to confess to her mother that she had been at Woodstock. For on the front of the sleeve she and her boyfriend stood wrapped in a quilt prominently in the foreground of the photograph that Burk Uzzle had taken at dawn on Sunday. That morning, nine months earlier, she had intended to be home in time for Sunday service. But there was no way now of denying that she had spent the morning at the festival instead of attending church.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Woodstock found its way into people's living rooms on a record cover, showing just how deeply photography – by then 130 years after its invention – had infiltrated everybody's lives. Moreover, it had secured a permanent place in newspapers and magazines and was even beginning to conquer the art world. It had not always enjoyed such omnipresence, however. Indeed, when photography was first introduced in the United States shortly after its invention in Europe in 1839, it was only practised on a very small scale and photographs were produced and seen by relatively few people. During the ensuing decades, however, the visibility and impact of photography increased exponentially. Throughout its almost two-hundred-year history, photography seems to have been in a constant state of transformation due to the fast-rising number of users, its rapidly increasing publishing options, the many applications and its constantly growing status, prominence and influence. This book shows the place that the new medium assumed in American society and the diverse ways in which photographs have been produced and used.

## An international perspective

Why would the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam compile a book and an exhibition on American photography? The answer is fairly simple: in addition to its focus on national art and history, the Rijksmuseum has traditionally kept a close eye on international developments, and this especially applies to photography, which the Rijksmuseum Print Room has collected since 1994.<sup>2</sup> When in 2005 the museum decided to no longer confine itself to the nineteenth century, and to collect twentieth-century photography as well, it soon became aware that one of the great players in the history of photography was underrepresented: the United States. The gap was even more glaring given that since World War II America had become a global *superpower* in just about every field: politics, military strength, space travel, economy, technology, sport, science, literature, film, television, jazz and pop music, and fine art. American culture was everywhere.

After 1945 a leading role awaited the United States in photography, too, as it took over from Europe as trendsetter. Photography had been invented there a century earlier, but it was not long before America matched Europe in its technical and aesthetic prowess and inventiveness. The United States was even a forerunner in some fields, such as advertising photography, which rapidly became widely practised. In the 1930s and 1940s, when many talented

photographers fled the worsening political situation in Europe and settled in the United States, Europe was still an important driving force. Later, however, America definitively traded-in its role as importer for that of exporter. From then on, a variety of trends crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction.

American photography is not necessarily better or even different from the photography from other continents, but it is better known, more visible and more influential. The fact that in the United States so many excellent photographs were published in magazines, catalogues, photobooks, etc., which were also distributed internationally undoubtedly contributed to this. Moreover, the history of American photography offers ample opportunity to show the role that the medium has played in the public and private lives of individuals, in politics and culture and in the image-building and documentation of a nation and its people. This would also be possible were we to choose photographs from another country, but on the whole photography plays a bigger role in American society than anywhere else.<sup>3</sup>

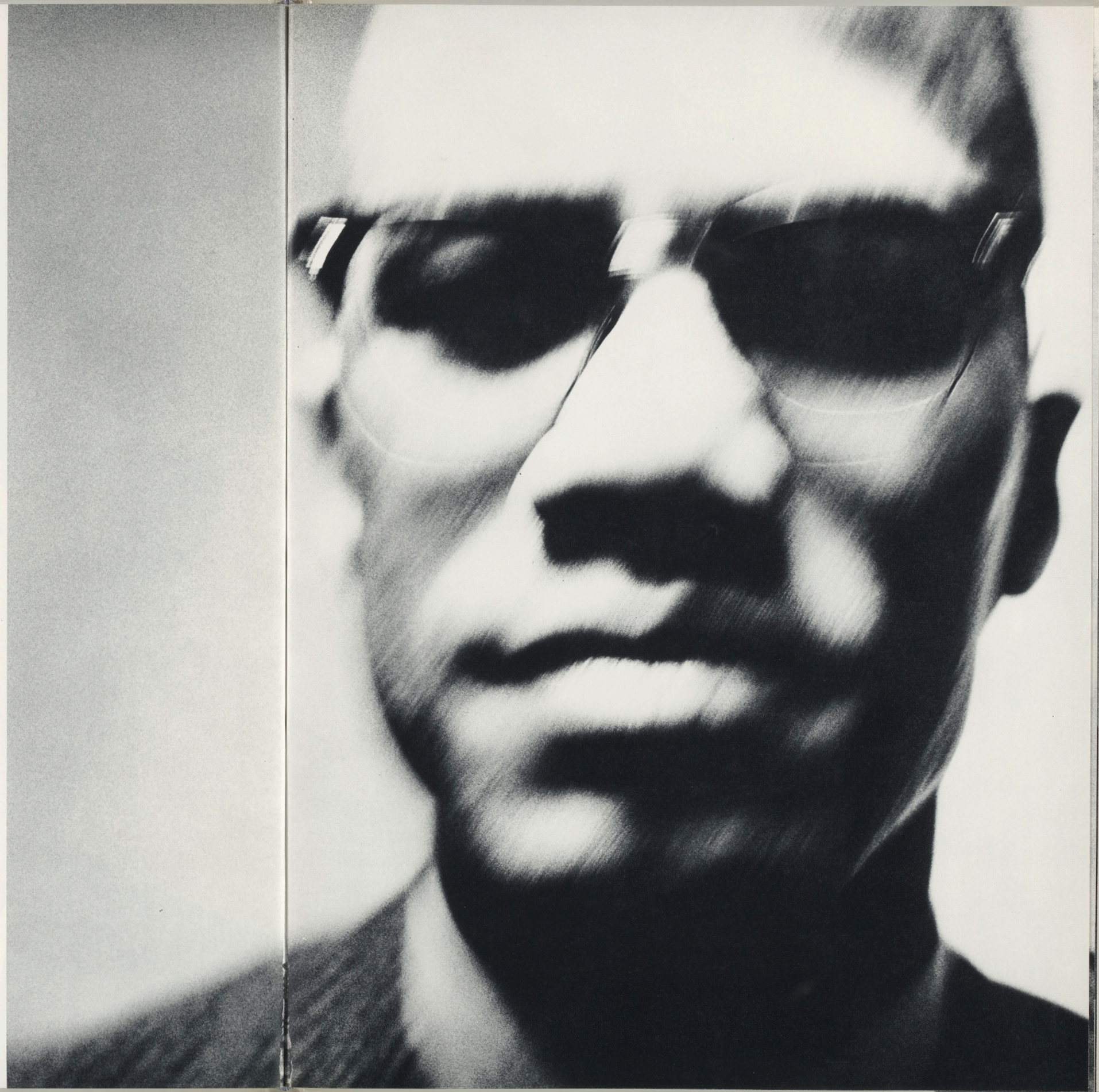
For all these reasons, it is unthinkable that the United States should be absent from a museum that aspires to provide an overview of the developments in twentieth-century photography. Since 2007, when our sponsor Baker McKenzie substantially increased the financial possibilities for purchasing new acquisitions, a concerted effort has been made to remedy the underrepresentation of American photography. The time is now ripe – after the museum's books and exhibitions on nineteenth and twentieth-century photography from different countries, *Modern Times* (2014) and *New Realities* (2017), respectively – for us to present the results of fifteen years of collecting American photography. The core of the book and the exhibition *American Photography* consists of photographs from the Rijksmuseum's own collection, supplemented by important loans from diverse public and private collections in the United States, where photography as a medium has been collected from an early date.

The themes which form the backbone of the book and the exhibition have been chosen on account of their relevance to photography, although they also touch on social, political and economic issues. The subjects successively discussed are: the freedom photographers had (or were *not* granted) to carry out their work according to their own insights; the portrayal of the American Dream; portraits and the degree of control exercised by the sitter or the photographer; the impact of photography on certain social issues; photography in the private setting; how advertising, among other genres, played with the realism with which photography is often associated; the alleged neutrality of landscape photographs; and lastly, the transformation of photography into an art form in the course of the twentieth century.

## In search of America

In many cases the photographs presented here also offer a window on America and its history. However, this book is emphatically not a history lesson where photographs merely serve as *illustrations*; it is a history of *American photography*. It is about the medium and what it proved capable of. Our starting point was to show the United States *as seen through the eyes of American photographers*. Photographers – especially over the past seventy-five years – have increasingly come to reflect on events and developments in their country in their work. Many of them

Brother Malcolm X, Black Nationalist leader



# THE AMERICAN DREAM



a1  
Anonymous  
Family Standing beside their Car, c. 1957–1960  
Chromogenic print (Kodak Instamatic), 76 × 76 mm  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

A mother poses with her two children in a wide street lined on either side with red-brick houses with steps up to them [a1]. The family looks extremely fashionable: the mother is in elegant high heels; the girl is dressed in an impeccable cream suit with a fur collar, knee socks and is holding a handbag or handkerchief; and the boy wears a fawn coat, a white shirt and a brown tie. The children have a matching hat or cap and the mother a flat, wide-brimmed straw boater with a ribbon band, that was in fashion towards the end of the 1950s. The American family are dressed in their Sunday best. The sun is shining, they are standing beside their car, which looks like a 1951 Chevrolet De Luxe. The car door is already open. They are about to drive off, probably to a festive event or to church. The father of the family takes a quick colour snapshot with his Kodak Instamatic before they set off. Other cars are parked along the pavement behind the Chevrolet. This photograph, taken around 1960, embodies for many people the 'American Dream': the dream of prosperity as it found form in the United States mainly after World War II.

The concept of the 'American Dream' had been introduced only a few decades earlier, in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Historian James Truslow Adams, who had previously written books about the founding and history of New England, wished to analyse the American ideals and ideology in his latest book. He wanted this to be accessible to a wide audience and to set out American history and identify the typical American values it upheld. Adams' description of the concept of the American Dream was relatively vague: 'a better, richer and happier life for all citizens of every rank.'<sup>2</sup> The notion of the American Dream recurred several times in his analysis and, among other things, he asserted that the ordinary citizen must be assured of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', exactly as Thomas Jefferson had worded it one and a half centuries before in the Declaration of Independence.

The American Dream would ultimately make the whole world wiser and more prosperous, the writer argued. This was a mission and task for America, a 'dream of hope' and progress. The book was due to come out in 1931 and he had already thought of a title: *The American Dream*. But the publisher settled instead for *The Epic of America*.<sup>3</sup> The book would be reprinted many times, not on account of the title, but because of the introduction of the appealing and hopeful notion of the American Dream. For Adams the dream was not just about prosperity. He was not, for instance, a supporter of the New Deal, an extensive package of government measures with which President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to boost the economy from 1933 to improve the lives and welfare of the people. Adams felt that the government stimulated vacuous consumerism and materialism, and that this sweeping government intervention would mean the American citizens giving up their autonomy and the possibility of taking their lives into their own hands. Over the years, however, the idea of the American Dream would further evolve, quite independently of the author, and would prove to be an elastic term which was interpreted in different ways by different people and in different eras.

The concept of the American Dream is deeply rooted in the history and the culture of the United States. Many early colonists came to America in pursuit of social and economic freedom. Besides this element of freedom, the Declaration of Independence, which was drawn up in 1776 after the United States gained its independence from England and was based on the liberalist thinking of the seventeenth-

century British philosopher John Locke, also describes the principle of equality: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' The Constitution, drawn up in 1787, built on this. Freedom and equality as premises of the American Dream run as guiding principles through the country's political history in an interesting succession of variants, each time in a different form, adjusted to suit the period. A long line of presidents have appealed to this set of typical American values: from Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama, who gave his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) the subtitle *Reclaiming the American Dream* and with his message of hope, optimism and equality won the elections in 2008.

The term does not only offer opportunities on the side of the sender – be it philosopher, writer, politician, or president; the general public has shown itself to be particularly receptive to it as an ideal, a goal, a basis for good citizenship. Meanwhile, the American Dream has become a standard expression, not just in America, but also in Europe and many other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> It generally stands for a world of opportunity, hope, progress and individual success. For a long time now, right up to the present day, it has been *the* embodiment of the United States itself, and encapsulates the possibility of climbing the social ladder, the path leading to wealth and success, an ideal achievable by everyone. In this respect it is interesting to note that the eight hundred thousand young people who entered the United States illegally as undocumented children from Mexico and Latin America and who succeeded in securing residential status in 2017 were called 'dreamers'.<sup>5</sup> As a concept, the American Dream is powerful and flexible: apparently its exact meaning varies with every background.<sup>6</sup>

## Upward mobility

The American family portrayed in the illustrated magazine *Life* in 1956 also had a dream [1].<sup>7</sup> Their dream was to own the electrical equipment in the photograph, which would, of course, have improved their lives no end. It is a tableau that extends over the whole spread, precisely matching the width of the open garage where various items of electrical equipment are ostentatiously displayed. The photographer stood – possibly somewhat higher, on a ladder – with his view camera right in front of them to get as much as possible in the picture. From right to left, we see the father in leisurewear who, with his son in jeans and cowboy hat, is cleaning the outboard motor. On the right is a battery by Delco Remy, the make being promoted in this advertisement, and for which the mother company General Motors must have had to dig deep into its pockets. The company commissioned the picture from a photographer who produced this kind of advertising photograph more often, and who will forever remain anonymous. The photographer would presumably also have organized the models for the photograph. On the left, two smaller fair-haired boys are playing on the ground with toy lorries. Between them – again with a Delco battery – is Dad's electric lawn mower.

It is fascinating how the 'happy family' formed the focal point in advertising photographs of the time. Another issue of *Life* showed advertising photographs which had been made during the shooting of a musical film by the well-known director Dick Powell.<sup>8</sup> For this photograph the



FORD CUSTOM RANCH WAGON (Top)

MERCURY MONTEREY (Bottom)

FORD COUNTRY SQUIRE (Top)

FORD PARKLANE (Bottom)

MERCURY CUSTOM (Top)

## Work wagons are dream wagons — in THE FORD FAMILY OF FINE CARS

These are the Cinderella cars.

Once station wagons were just work wagons. Now they are glamor cars, too—dream wagons from the Ford Family of Fine Cars to carry almost anything beautifully.

There are plenty of reasons why almost 50% of all station wagons sold are Mercurys and Fords. The clean styling, for example: young and fresh as the new houses on the edge of town. And the comfort of a sedan: seats

that feel like lounge chairs; a ride that reminds you of the smoothness of a swan floating across a quiet pond.

Ford and Mercury wagons can carry more weight because the load space is specially reinforced with ribbed steel. On top of the steel, there's a rug of tough material that resists loading scrapes or scuffs and little boys' roughhousing.

Loading is easier: lift gates hold tight in any position; tail gates lock level. With center seat flipped down (and rear

seat out in a jiffy) you get load spaces up to *nine* feet long.

The nine station wagons in the Ford Family of Fine Cars are six Fords, three Mercurys. They carry six to nine passengers in comfort, and all sorts of extra elbows, knees and groceries. They have power, comfort, and safety features that distinguish the Ford Family of Fine Cars.

And you get their beautiful trade-in or resale value, too.

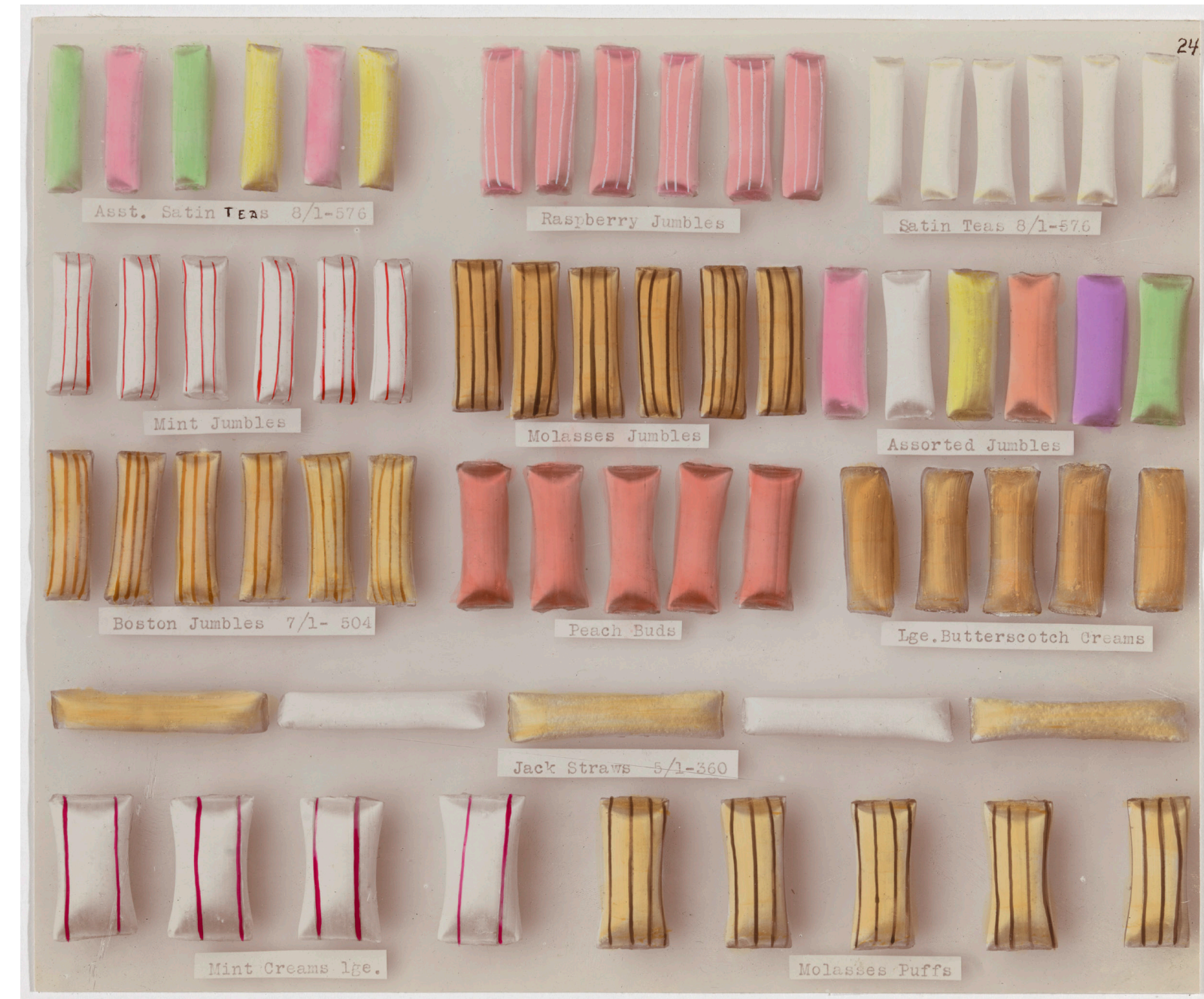
You may haul shovels and shrubs in them by day—or cart all the kids in the neighborhood to the beach. But these cars are high-fashion to take you to the country club dance, too. The Cinderella cars! The moment you see them you'll start having your own ideas. See them soon.

**THE FORD FAMILY OF FINE CARS:** FORD • THUNDERBIRD • MERCURY • LINCOLN • CONTINENTAL MARK II



14  
Bill Stettner (1938–1994)  
*717 Stars and Stripes Forever?*, 1970  
Colour offset, 740 × 1020 mm  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

15  
Ming Smith (1951)  
*America Seen Through Stars and Stripes, New York City*, 1976  
Gelatin silver print, 318 × 470 mm  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (VA), inv. no. 2016.241;  
Adolph D. and Williams C. Williams Fund





45  
Detroit Photographic Co. (publisher)  
*Home of Rip Van Winkle Sleepy Hollow, Catskill Mountains, 1902*  
Photochrom, 178 × 228 mm  
New-York Historical Society, New York

46  
*The Morning Glory, Yellowstone National Park, 1902,*  
*in Yellowstone National Park, Detroit*  
(Detroit Photographic Co.) 1905, unpagged  
Photochrom, 178 × 229 mm  
Rijksmuseum Research Library, Amsterdam