

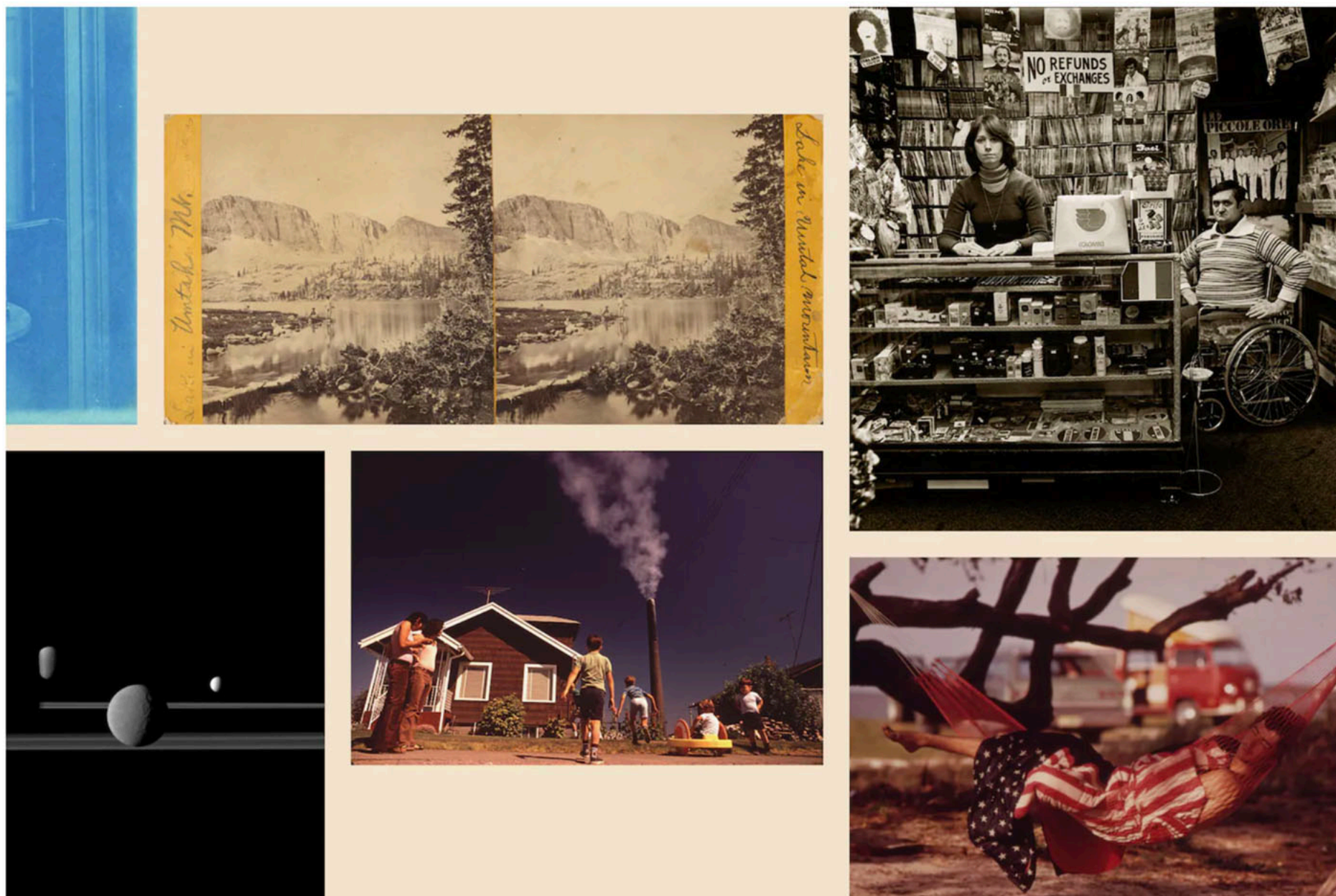
# The art we own

The intersection of government and art tells the story of America



By [Bronwen Latimer](#)

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(Illustration by Shikha Subramaniam/The Washington Post; Thomas William Smillie/Smithsonian Institution Archives; Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress; Joan Clark Netherwood/National Endowment for the Arts/Smithsonian American Art Museum; NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute; Gene Daniels/Environmental

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Leaders in the federal government have always known art conveys information. Early on, Congress commissioned John Trumbull to create four paintings about the Revolutionary War that still hang in the U.S. Capitol. When a photograph still had to be fixed on a glass plate negative with chemicals, the first federal photographer, John Wood, photographed the government as it was being built.

Abraham Lincoln was the first politician to understand the power of a photograph. He posed for photographers regularly and he employed three — Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan — to photograph scenes during the Civil War. Some of them traveled on survey expeditions with geologists and artists after the war ended.

Federal agencies still hire photographers to help legislators and citizens see the work that is being done. NASA has always used photographs and video to highlight its work. Scientific organizations use imagery to explain their work. When the Environmental Protection Agency started in 1970, it launched an ambitious project called “Documerica,” hiring photographers across the country to tell the story of pollution and environmentalism.

Military agencies have continued to use photography as both reconnaissance tools and evidence. At the Central Intelligence Agency Museum, art plays two roles: The first is to keep the accomplishments of previous generations alive among the current staff, and the second is to offer a place for contemplation and solace. Twenty-nine paintings from the Washington Color School can be found in the collection.

The Kennedy administration rejuvenated the relationship between art and the government during the 1960s, calling on federal agencies to elevate the work of the best and brightest. During a speech at Amherst College, one month before he died, President Kennedy said, “If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth.” Soon afterward, in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were established.

Extensive archives online can be found at the National Archives, each presidential library and in many museums. Many curators are preparing for the semiquincentennial, the 250th birthday of America. “We collect with the idea these images help convey the part of the story that is important to the story of America,” says Ann Shumard, senior curator of photographs at the National Portrait Gallery.

The Art in Architecture program at the General Services Administration ensures art enriches and dignifies federal spaces. (The Works Progress Administration art pieces are maintained here as well.) Each time Congress approves a capital budget for restoration or construction, half of 1 percent is allocated to art — either the restoration of existing art or the commission of a new piece. Care is taken in each project to include the community, and the evidence is everywhere — in courthouses, federal buildings, ports of entry and public spaces.



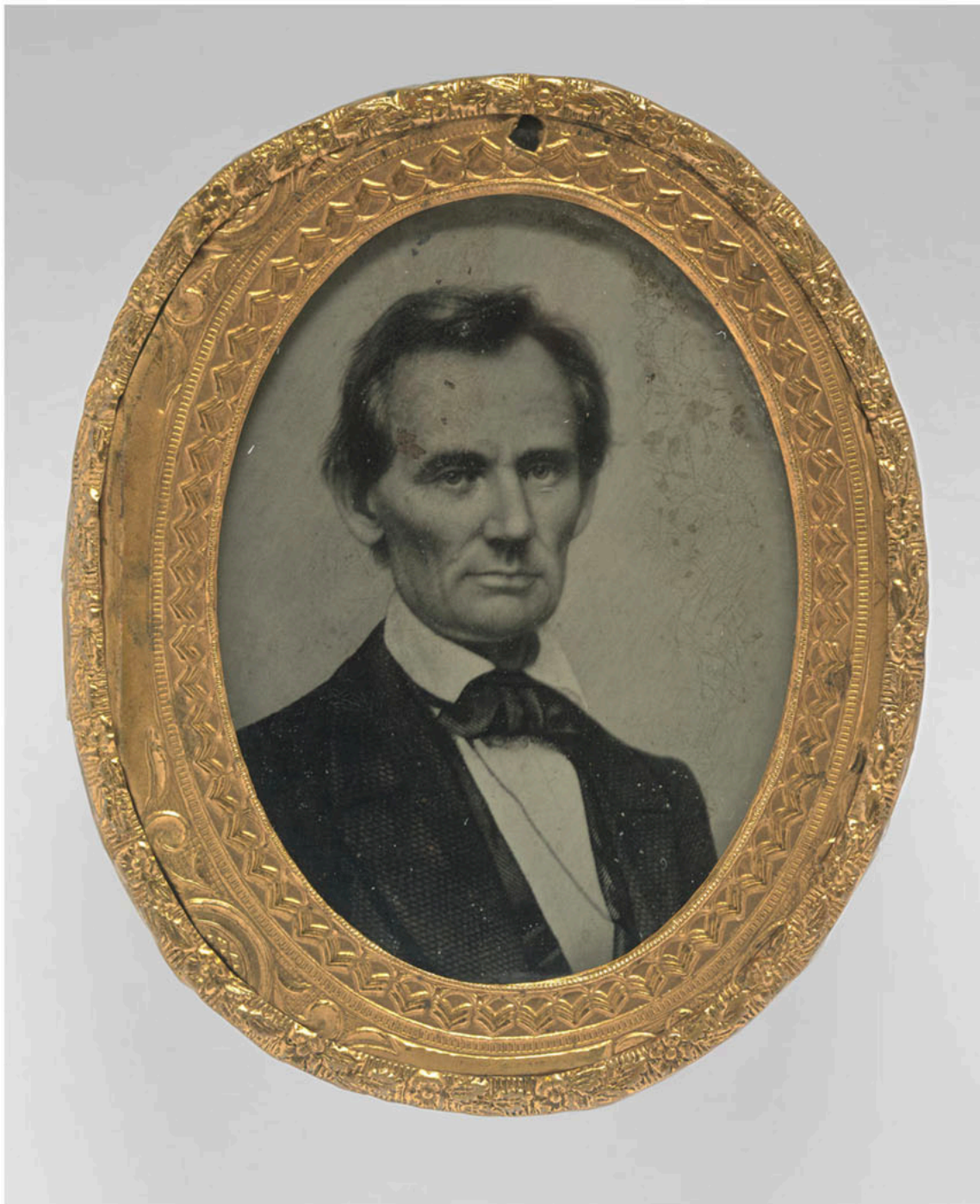
"Declaration of Independence," a painting by John Trumbull, was commissioned by Congress and hangs in the Capitol Rotunda. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)



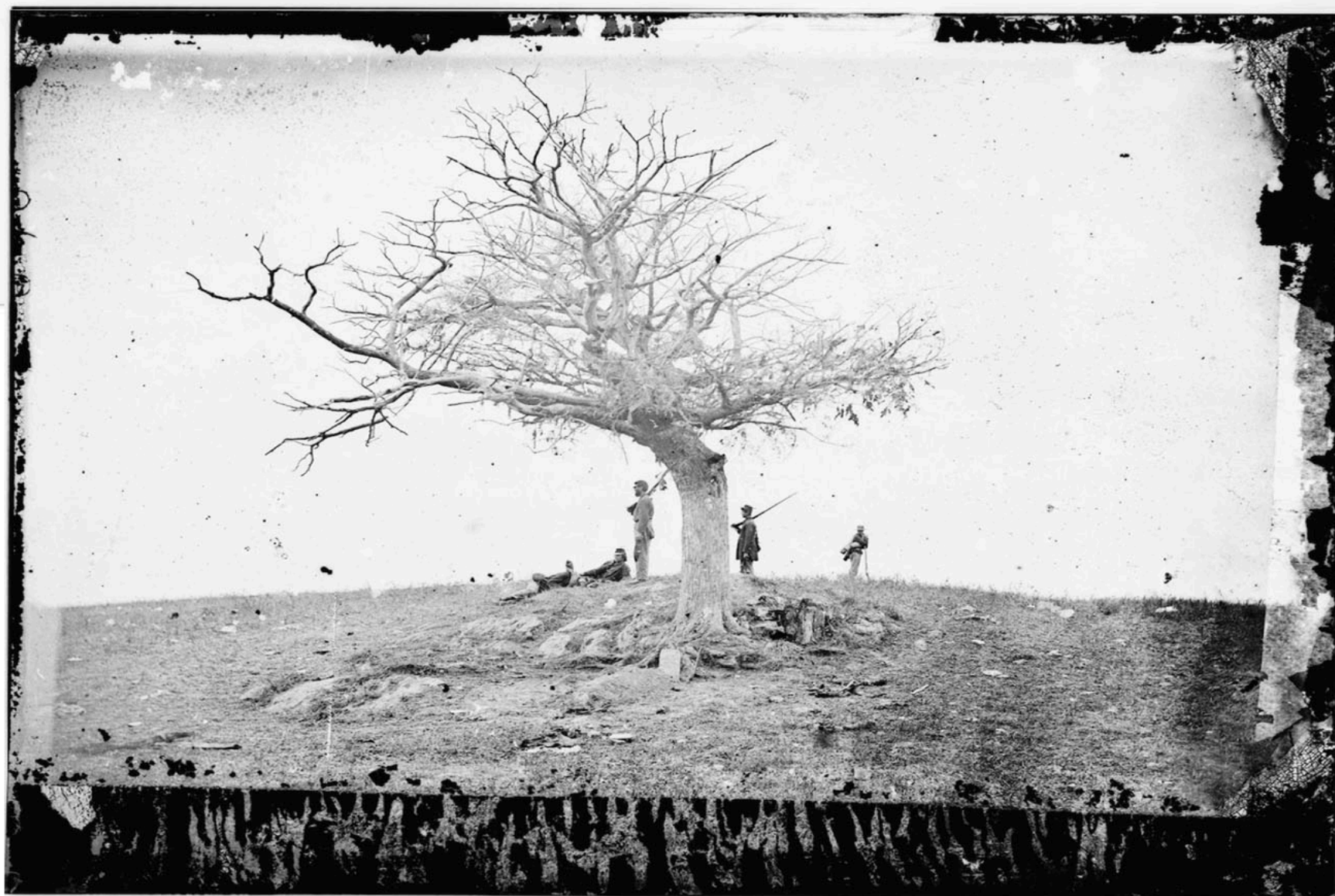
Photographer John Wood shows how the Capitol dome was built, in photos taken between 1860 and 1863. (John Wood/Library of Congress)



A detail from the statue "Progress of Civilization" by Thomas Crawford, on the east pediment of the Senate wing in the U.S. Capitol. (John Wood/Library of Congress)



Photographer Mathew Brady made a portrait of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 that circulated in a variety of formats, including this campaign pin. (Mark Gulezian/National Portrait Gallery/Smithsonian Institution)



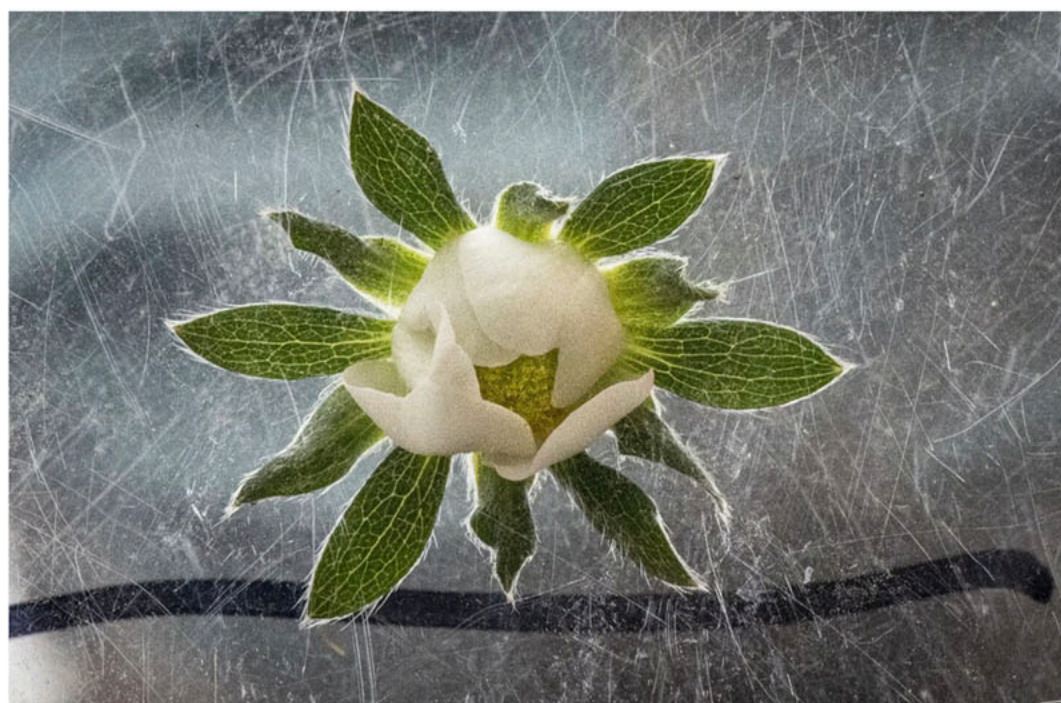
Soldiers stand near a grave in Antietam, Md., in 1862. (Alexander Gardner/Library of Congress)



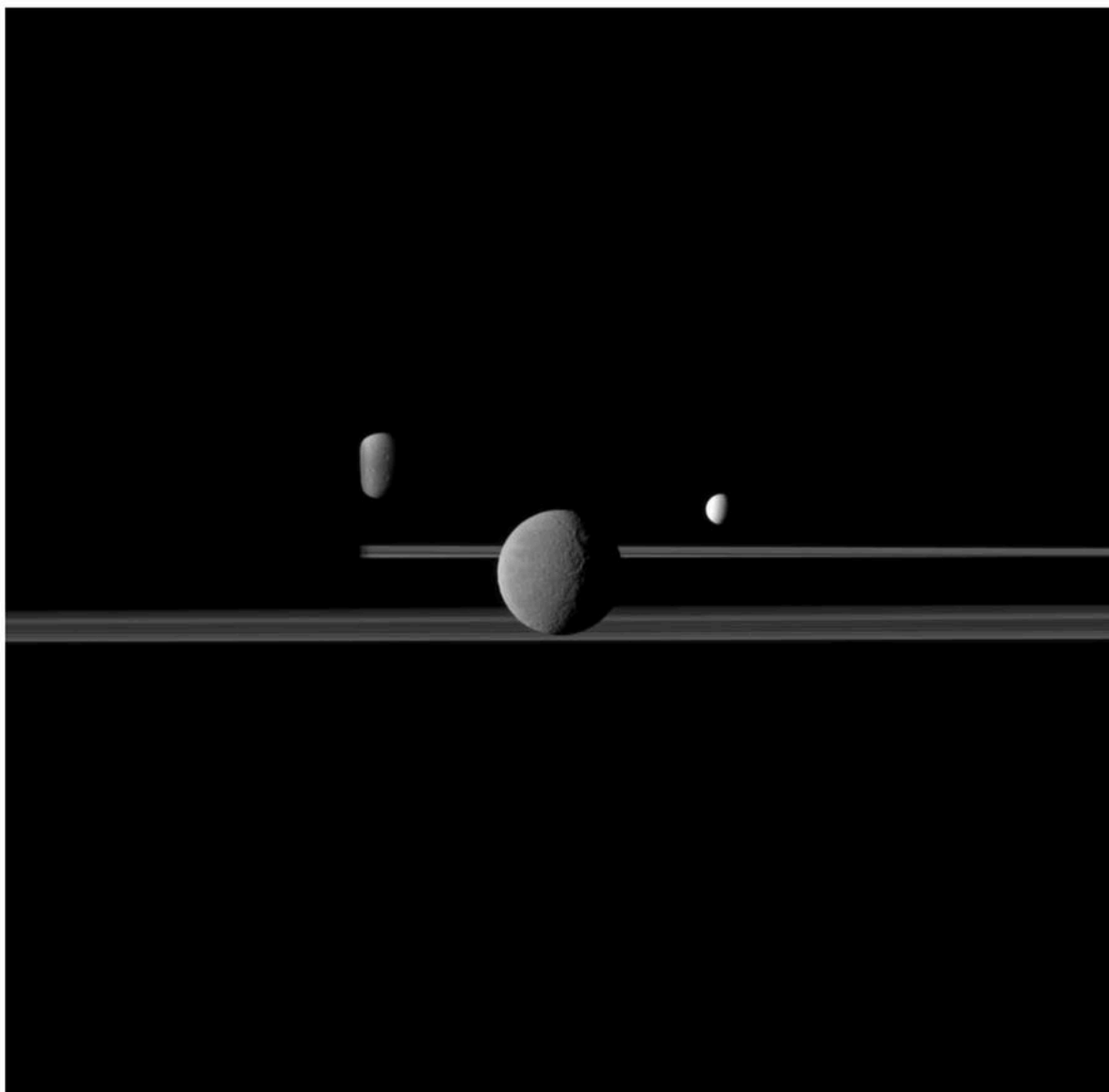
Timothy O'Sullivan was among several photographers who accompanied surveyors as they explored the West for the U.S. government. This is an albumen print of a stereograph image of a lake in the Uinta Mountains in Utah taken around 1870. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress)



Painter Thomas Moran created the "Chasm of the Colorado" from 1873-1874 depicting what is now Grand Canyon National Park after he accompanied a geologist on a survey expedition. (U.S. Department of the Interior Museum)



Researchers for the U.S. Department of Agriculture study strawberry pollen collected from flowers placed upside down and dried on a labeled plastic plate. (Lance Cheung/USDA)



NASA has employed photography to amaze and inspire lawmakers and citizens. The Cassini spacecraft captured three of Saturn's moons, from left, Dione, Rhea and Enceladus, against the darkened night side of the planet. (NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute)



"Project Documerica," an ambitious photographic exploration of environmental issues, was commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency not long after it was established in 1970. Above, a woman rides on a graffiti-covered subway in New York in 1973. (Erik Calonius/Environmental Protection Agency/National Archives)



Children play at a home home near Tacoma, Wash., in 1972. The smokestack in the background, part of one of the most polluted operations in the country, was demolished in 1993. (Gene Daniels/Environmental Protection Agency/National Archives)



Pedestrians walk near Stanton Street in El Paso in June 1972. (Danny Lyon/Environmental Protection Agency/National Archives)



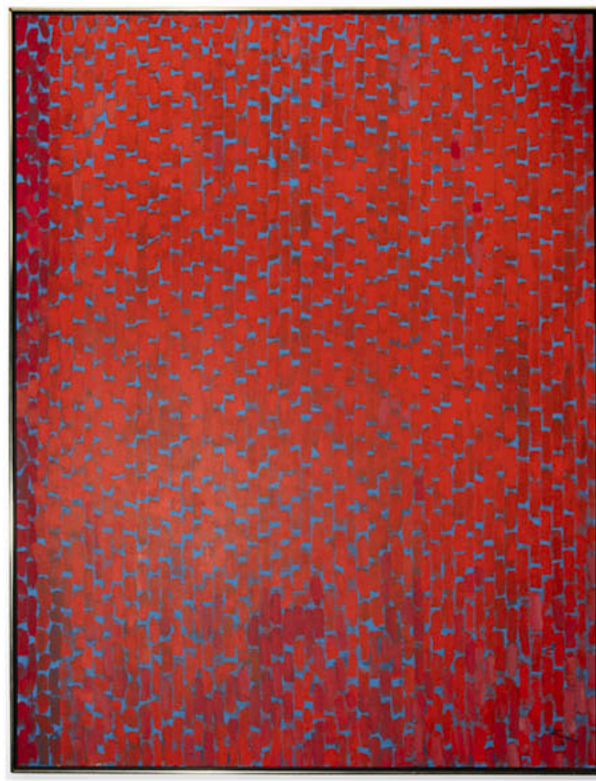
Photographer Edward Steichen worked for the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I. Here, he photographed bombs being dropped on Montmédy, France. (Edward Steichen/Library of Congress)



Emil Edgren, working for the Army Signal Corps, photographed an American 82nd Airborne soldier in a clash with German soldiers as he ran across a Belgian field in World War II. (Emil Edgren/Library of Congress)



"Les Marguerites Fleuriront Ce Soir," a painting by Jeffrey W. Bass, depicts spy Virginia Hall sending radio transmissions. Hall, who had a wooden leg, worked for the British government and then the Americans. (Collection of Central Intelligence Agency)



A painting by Alma W. Thomas, "Mars Reflection," is one of 29 paintings from the Washington Color School donated by Vincent Melzac to the CIA. (Collection of Central Intelligence Agency)



President John Kennedy, far left, and first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, second from right, gather with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, far right, and others to look at Leonardo da Vinci's painting "Mona Lisa" on loan from the Louvre in Paris to the National Gallery of Art in 1963. (Marion S. Trikosko/U.S. News & World Report/Library of Congress)







An essay by three female photographers about life in East Baltimore was part of a photographic survey commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts from 1976-1981. This photograph is entitled "Awards Ceremony at Boy Scout Camporee, Patterson Park," from 1980. (Elinor Cahn/NEA/Smithsonian American Art Museum)



"Korean Children at Graduation Exercises at Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate Preschool," from 1979. (Elinor Cahn/National Endowment for the Arts/Smithsonian American Art Museum)



"Rosemary and Raul Marconi in Their Italian Import Shop, Italian Canta, Highlandtown," from 1978. (Joan Clark Netherwood/NEA/Smithsonian American Art Museum)

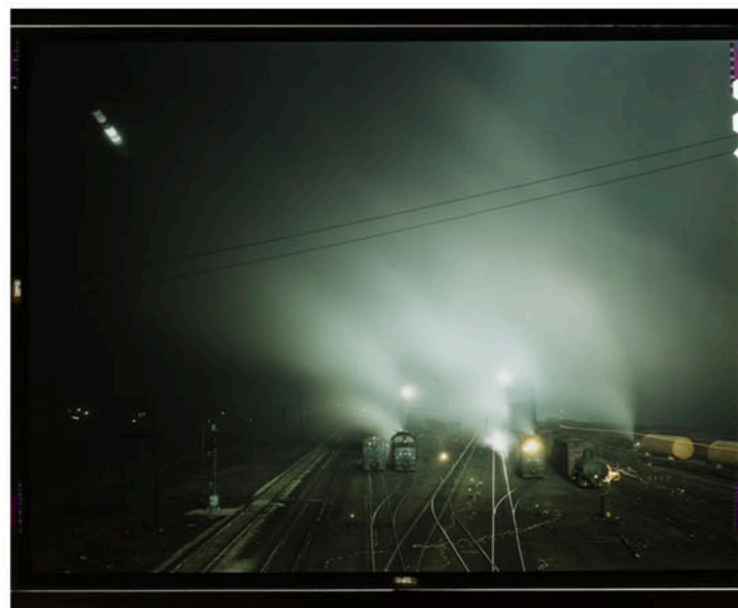




"Two Viewers of the 'I Am an American Day' parade, East Baltimore Street, 1977" is part of the ambitious project commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts from 1976-1981 to tell the story of the United States. (Joan Clark Netherwood/Smithsonian American Art Museum)



Theodore Roosevelt speaks with the Rough Riders at a military camp in Montauk Point, N.Y., in 1898. Roosevelt would become president three years later. (Frances Benjamin Johnston/Library of Congress)



The photographs that make up the collection created by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression are the most famous of the government's work. Here, trains sit in the Santa Fe Railroad yard, in Kansas City in March 1943. (Jack Delano/Farm Security Administration/Library of Congress)



Curators are constantly looking for art and photography to build the whole story of American history. Only a few photographs of Ko K'un-hua, a scholar from China, exist. Harvard College hired him to teach a course about Chinese language, and the small collection of books that he assigned became the school's first acquisitions in any East Asian language. (CPA Media/Alamy)



President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama wear 3D glasses while watching the Super Bowl with friends in the family theater of the White House in 2009. (Pete Souza/The White House)



A sculpture by Matthew Moore, "Passage," hangs between two buildings in the Mariposa Land Port of Entry in Nogales, Ariz. This port is one of the busiest for Mexican products entering the country. (Michael Lundgren)



A sculpture by Ralph Helmick, "Stella," was installed at the U.S. border crossing in Madawaska, Maine, in 2023. (Deschaine Digital)



Alyson Shotz installed a giant mosaic in the ceiling, "The Robes of Justitia," in the Fred D. Thompson Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Nashville. (John Schweikert)

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