Fact Sheet

“American Cool”

What does it mean when we say someone is cool?

Exhibition

“American Cool”
Feb. 7 through Sept. 7, 2014

Where

National Portrait Gallery
Eighth and F streets N.W.
“American Origins” galleries, first floor

Summary

What do we mean when we say someone is cool? Cool carries a social charge of rebellious self-expression, charisma, edge and mystery. “American Cool” is a photography exhibition featuring 100 portraits of icons who have contributed an original artistic vision to American culture and are symbolic figures of their time.

Cool is an original American concept and remains a global obsession. In the early 1940s, legendary jazz saxophonist Lester Young brought this central African American sensibility into the modern vernacular. Cool became a password in bohemian life connoting a balanced state of mind, a dynamic mode of performance and a certain stylish stoicism. A cool person has a situation under control with a signature style.

Cool has been embodied in jazz musicians such as Miles Davis and Billie Holiday; in actors such as Johnny Depp, Faye Dunaway and Robert Mitchum; and in singers such as Elvis Presley, Patti Smith and Jay-Z. They emerged from a variety of fields: art, music, film, sports comedy, literature and even political activism. “American Cool” is the zeitgeist taking embodied form.

These icons are captured by some of the most important fine-art photographers of the 20th century, including Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Annie Leibovitz and Herman Leonard.

“American Cool” will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog of the same title, published by Delmonico Books, with essays by the curators of the exhibition: Joel Dinerstein, James H. Clark Endowed Chair in American Civilization and director of the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South at Tulane University and Frank H. Goodyear III, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

“American Cool” is made possible by the support of the History Channel.

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