

Memphis, William Eggleston

Memphis

William Eggleston
American, Memphis, Tennessee, about
1965–1970
Gelatin silver print
9 1/2 x 6 1/4 in.
2002.38.8

William Eggleston made this image from a two-person table in a Memphis diner; the collection of shakers and condiment jars on the tabletop in front of him are blurred by the camera's close proximity. Eggleston focused on an older woman having coffee at the next table, who returns his gaze. A bright stripe on the wall behind her and a nearby neon clock sign also vie for the camera's attention. The sign's message, "Payroll checks cashed free," addresses the diner's working-class patrons—a friendly message in an alienating interior.

Diners are ubiquitous places, fixtures of American road culture where inexpensive food can be had quickly. The diner is also an iconic subject of twentieth-century American art; it featured in Edward Hopper's paintings of the 1930s and Robert Frank's photographs in *The Americans*, published in the 1950s. Eggleston's image extends their theme of lone city-dwellers sitting forlornly in harshly lit eating establishments, looking as if they are trapped there.



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About the Artist

William Eggleston (American, b. 1939)

William Eggleston assumes a neutral gaze and creates his art from commonplace subjects: a farmer's muddy Ford truck, a red ceiling in a friend's house, the contents of his own refrigerator. In his work, Eggleston photographs "democratically"—literally photographing the world around him. His large-format prints monumentalize everyday subjects; everything is equally important, and every detail deserves attention.

A native Southerner raised on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta, Eggleston has created a singular portrait of his native South since the late 1960s. After discovering photography in the early 1960s, he abandoned a traditional education and instead learned from

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photographically illustrated books by Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Robert Frank. Although he began his career making black-and-white images, he soon abandoned them to experiment with color technology to record experiences in more sensual and accurate terms at a time when color photography was largely confined to commercial advertising. In 1976 with the support of John Szarkowski, the influential photography historian, critic, and curator, Eggleston mounted *Color Photographs*, a now-famous exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. *William Eggleston's Guide*, in which Szarkowski called Eggleston's photographs "perfect," accompanied this groundbreaking one-person show that established his reputation as a pioneer of color photography. His subjects were mundane, everyday, often trivial, so that the real subject was seen to be color itself. These images helped establish Eggleston as one of the first noncommercial photographers working in color and inspired a new generation of photographers, as well as filmmakers.

Eggleston has published his work extensively. He continues to live and work in Memphis and travels considerably for photographic projects.

Questions for Teaching

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (This image depicts a woman sitting at a table in a diner. On the table in front of her are salt, pepper, sugar, and the remnants of a meal. The left side of the picture is occupied by a wall that runs the length of the image. In the upper left, above the wall, is a sign that reads "Payroll checks cashed free." The woman is sitting alone. In the foreground is a table that appears unoccupied. Behind the woman's head is white vertical stripe that seems to emanate or reflect light.)

What reactions do you think Eggleston wanted to evoke with this image? (In this image William Eggleston seeks to evoke feelings of loneliness and isolation. Eggleston's image reminds us that it is possible to be lonely even in a public space, such as a diner, that is generally intended for social interaction. The woman seems to be totally isolated, sitting in a corner, behind a wall, as if she is deliberately avoiding socializing. Eggleston's camera intrudes on this private moment, capturing an unsettling image of a solitary figure.)

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (This composition is dominated by strong *lines*. These are evident in the diagonal lines in the wall at left, which leads our eye into the image and towards the figure. The figure's position is further *emphasized* by the long vertical white stripe to her left. The signs in the upper left of the image echo the high *value* and rectangular *shape* of the white stripe and add *balance* to the composition.)