

Billie Holiday, Lisette Model

Billie Holiday

Lisette Model

American, c. 1940s–1950s

Image: 9 3/4 x 7 1/16 in.

Sheet: 9 15/16 x 8 1/16 in.

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Background Information

Here, the photographer Lisette Model has captured the **jazz** singer Billie Holiday with a faraway look in her eyes, in a moment when she is unaware of the camera. Model draws the viewer's attention to the singer's introspective expression through careful composition. The diagonal lines created from the microphone stand, the singer's A-line skirt, and the folds and stripes in the tent ceiling lead the viewer's eyes toward Holiday's face.

In the 1940s, Model photographed in nightclubs and on jazz beats. She snapped portraits of popular and influential jazz musicians like Harry James, Eddie Condon, and Bunk Johnson. Inspired by these images, she began work in the 1950s on a book of photographs of jazz musicians. Model and her agent, Henrietta Brackman, conceived of the idea of the book, which would be accompanied by the poems of **Langston Hughes**. Model was impressed by Hughes's poems, and his reputation as an authority on jazz music made him a natural collaborator for the project.

Trained as a musician as a child, Model was attracted to the ambience of the jazz world and the prospect of photographing performers and audiences at music festivals. Over five to six years, she produced close to eight hundred negatives of jazz concerts at various venues and festivals, including the Music Inn, the Newport Jazz Festival, the New York Jazz Festival at Downing Stadium on Randall's Island, and Central Plaza. Her images at these concerts capture simple silhouettes of musicians immersed in the music and oblivious to the world around them. The last photograph Model made for the jazz project was an image of a deceased Billie Holiday lying in a coffin in 1959.

Model and Brackman searched in vain for funders to publish the volume on jazz, but they were unsuccessful. According to Model, one reason the book did not receive funding was due to her left-wing views.



Jazz, Billie Holiday, Lisette Model

About the Artist

Lisette Model (American, born Austria, 1901–1983)

Lisette Model began her creative life as a student of music. Through the **avant-garde** composer Arnold Schönberg, with whom she studied piano, she became exposed to the **Expressionist** painters of early-twentieth-century Vienna. She never formally studied photography but took it up in the 1930s while living in Paris. An early piece of advice received from a colleague—“Never photograph anything you are not passionately interested in”—became her motto.

Model often photographed both the wealthy elite and working classes, indicating her interest in class struggle. Her images can be categorized as “**street photography**,” a style that developed after the invention of the hand-held camera, which made quick, candid shots possible.

Model eventually settled in New York, where she met with quick success as a photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* magazine and as an artist, with her work exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. For thirty years she taught photography in New York, where she instructed and befriended Diane Arbus, who continued Model's personal approach to photography.

References

Thomas, Ann. *Lisette Model*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1990.

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at this photograph. What do you notice about this woman?

Look closely at the woman's clothing and hairstyle. Also look at the microphone. When do you think the photograph was taken? (*The full A-line skirt, hair roll pulled to the side, and outdated microphone make the photograph look like it was taken several decades ago.*)

How would you describe the woman's facial expression? (*faraway look, introspective, unaware of the camera, etc.*)

What other details do you notice about this woman?

Where was the photographer in relation to the subject when she took this picture? (*below the singer*)

Why might the photographer choose this point of view? What do you think she is trying to communicate? (*The singer was likely on a stage and the photographer was in the audience. The low angle makes the singer appear slightly larger than life.*)

How would the depiction of the singer be different if the photograph was taken at a wide angle or head-on? (*If taken head-on, the composition may not be as dynamic; If taken at a wide angle, the singer might look smaller in relation to the background, and therefore viewers may not focus on her, etc.*)

How do lines create movement by leading your eye through the composition? (*The lines of the microphone, skirt, tent stripes, and fold of the tent all lead the viewer's eye toward the singer's face.*)

Based on what you know about Holiday and her music, which qualities do you think the photographer captured? (*She looks larger than life, which is fitting because she is considered one of the greatest jazz singers of all time. She sang with depth of feeling and a range of emotions, and the faraway look in her eyes may reveal that she is lost in the music.*)