

Kamoinge artists portrayed the day-to-day life of people of all ages at play, work, rest, or travel within the city. In some of these works, the photographers evoked the physicality of the street, revealing traces of rich texture on sidewalks, walls, fabric, and skin. In others, they captured visual rhythms in shadows and reflections, inscriptions on building walls, chalk marks on city streets, patterned clothing, and stylish hats on moving and still figures. They also depicted intimate friends and acquaintances in portraits and interior views that reflect quiet moments.

As Kamoinge member Shawn Walker said: “The way we approached photography was improvisational. I know what I’m going to play, but I don’t know the notes I’m going to play.” While their photographs were often born of a split-second impulse, an awareness of art history also informed their work. The Workshop’s artists have variously cited the influence of fellow photographers such as Roy DeCarava, W. Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Gordon Parks, Hugh Bell, and Dorothea Lange, all of whom combined observation with their own personal impressions.

Love of music was at the heart of the Kamoinge Workshop—it served as a bond between members and was a passion they all shared. Jazz often provided a soundtrack for the group’s meetings, and the photographers were acutely aware of the key elements shared between that art form and their own, such as pacing, improvisation, and a mix of technical expertise, knowledge, and intuition. “Making something out of nothing,” as Ming Smith said, “I think that’s like jazz.”

Individual musicians such as Miles Davis or John Coltrane, along with rehearsals and live performances by figures as diverse as Mahalia Jackson and Sun Ra, provided important subject matter for Kamoinge artists. Black musicians were also a powerful source of inspiration for Kamoinge members to develop their own voices in photography. As C. Daniel Dawson stated, “The highest standards of excellence that we had in the Black community were the musicians.”

The Kamoinge artists often emphasized abstract or surreal elements of walls, streets, bodies, and natural forms in their photographs. Some of these works—such as Albert R. Fennar’s *Salt Pile* (1971) and Herb Robinson’s *Faces* (1979)—feature purely formal and aesthetic aspects of image-making. Others, Shawn Walker’s *Tiffany’s Window on 57th Street, NYC* (1968–72), for example, include contrasting light and shadow that suggest a surreal or symbolic reading. Still others highlight elements of abstraction that have overtly social and political resonance, including Louis Draper’s *Congressional Gathering* (1959) and Adger Cowans’s *Jackson Mississippi* (1963).

Kamoinge photographer Louis Draper noted that a significant factor in the formation of the Workshop was “the emerging African consciousness exploding within us.” During the 1960s and 1970s, many Kamoinge members traveled to African countries that had recently gained independence from colonial rule, and other international locations with significant African diasporic communities. Some worked outside the United States on films or on assignment for magazines, and in their off-hours made time for their own art. Members, such as Anthony Barboza, Draper, and Ming Smith, depicted people engaged in the ebb and flow of everyday life in Senegal. Shawn Walker’s photographs from Cuba capture moments of collective activity and pause among workers and children, while Herb Robinson’s images of Jamaica portray an intimate connection to his environment. The global reach of Kamoinge members’ travel expanded their sense of an international Black community, and likewise contributed to the worldview they brought to their work in the United States.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many Kamoinge members photographed historically significant moments in Black Americans' struggle for civil rights. Some members traveled to the South, like Herbert Randall, who went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to photograph the community and volunteers involved in the Freedom Summer project there, which aimed to increase Black voter registration and also included temporary Freedom Schools for Black children. In New York, other members photographed figures such as Malcolm X, newsboys selling issues of *Muhammad Speaks*—the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam—and Harlem-based street orators like Edward “Pork Chop” Davis, who espoused a philosophy of Black pride and economic self-reliance. Many Kamoinge members also engaged the theme of civil rights on a symbolic level in their photographs—in some cases by depicting the American flag in street scenes that complicate the icon's implication of shared national values. Rather than providing a journalistic record of the time, the photographs exhibited here represent insightful images of Black Americans that were largely lacking from contemporary mainstream publications, galleries, and museums.