

# A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
**RICHARD  
SAUNDERS**

BERMUDA  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY

**Richard Clive Saunders (Bermudian, 1922-1987) applied an artist's eye to documentary photography. Like his mentor Gordon Parks, Saunders was born into segregation. The realities of institutional racism in Bermuda propelled him to leave the island and shaped the direction of his photographic career. "What matters to me are people and their feelings," said the photographer, aware of the power of his images — which were published in *Ebony*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *Life* and *The New York Times* — to bring about social change.**

***"Above all it is the dignity of man, of whatever colour, creed or persuasion, that must come through in my photographs."***

Born in Bermuda in 1922, Saunders was first introduced to photography as a young boy by a local photographer who saw his interest and passed on old equipment for him to play with. He moved to the US with his parents at the age of eight, attending boarding school where he was able to study photography. The family moved back to Bermuda after the outbreak of WWII and he joined The Camera Store on Queen Street where, as a teenager, he worked as an apprentice to David Knudsen.

Saunders then spent a short stint in the Bermuda Police Service (BPS), quickly being transferred from constable to police photographer after a photograph that he took of a set of fingerprints left on

a windowsill led to the arrest of a repeat offender. Leaving the BPS to focus on his passion, Saunders teamed up with local photographer Hilton Hill who had recently returned from studying in Boston. He assisted him in his studio, processing and developing film, and worked with him on a range of freelance photographic assignments.

Frustrated by the restrictions of segregation in Bermuda, which led to him being twice denied a job as a darkroom assistant by the Ministry of Tourism on the basis of his race, in 1947 Saunders moved to New York. He studied at the Modern Photography School at Brooklyn College and The New School for Social Research which, in 1934,

had become the first institution to offer a university level photographic course. It was in NYC that Saunders met Gordon Parks, having first encountered him as a child in a YMCA Camera Club in the 1930s. Parks, widely recognised as one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century, would become a close friend and mentor to Saunders.

Born in Kansas, Parks dedicated his life to documenting the effects of both racism and poverty on African American families. His iconic photographs in the 1940s-1970s broke barriers and defined a generation, as he became the first African American staff photographer at *Life*, America's most influential photographic magazine.

Parks helped Saunders get a job at Lenscraft, a photographic lab, developing and printing work by leading photographers of the day such as Henri-Cartier Bresson, one of the founders of Magnum Photos. There, Saunders was able to closely observe their work and learn from it. He later described his time at the lab as "almost better than school." It would leave a lasting impression, shaping the way that Saunders processed and printed his own film.

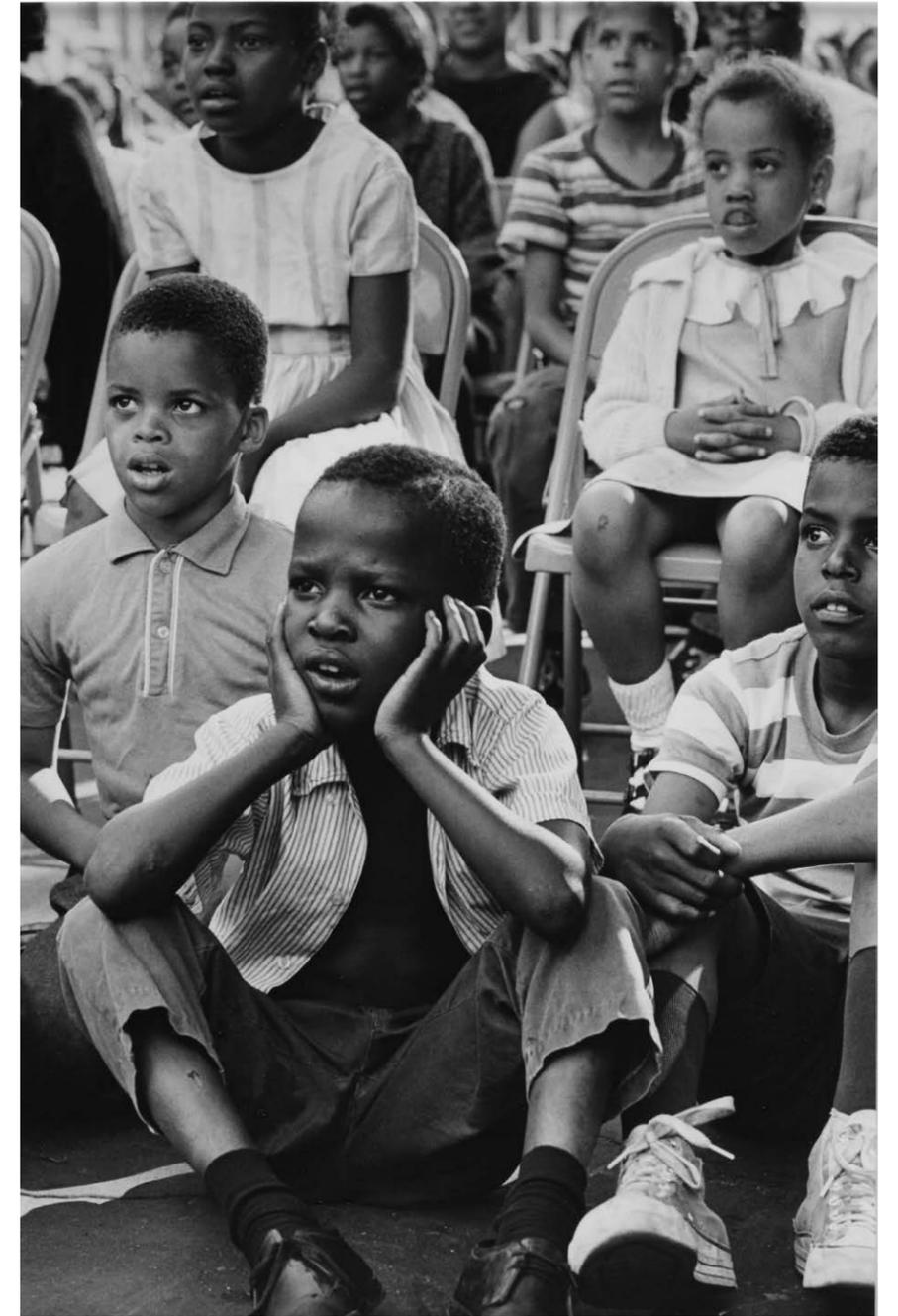
Manipulating the images in the darkroom, he was able to crop the images and refine the saturation to draw the eye in, printing on silver gelatin photographic paper to enhance the intensity of the images.

It was at Lenscraft that Saunders was first exposed to the work of Roy Emerson Stryker, considered the father of documentary photography, who would go on to become one of the foremost influences on his career. In the 1930s, Stryker had been made head of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) Historical Section, where he launched a country-wide photography programme to document the struggles of the great depression, as part of a government campaign to highlight awareness and drive legislative change.

The FSA programme and the group of photographers that Stryker hired, which included Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks and Walker Evans, changed the direction of documentary photography. Almost 100 years later, the programme, which not only provided historical records but also told the human stories of those living through them, is still regarded as a touchstone for documentary photography today.

Stryker would look for photographers who, in his words, had an "insatiable curiosity, the kind that can get to the core of an assignment, the kind that can comprehend what a truck driver, or a farmer, or a driller or a housewife thinks and feels, and translate those thoughts and feelings into pictures that can be similarly comprehended by anyone."

Gordon Parks introduced Saunders to Roy Stryker in the late 1940s, and Stryker hired Saunders to work on a documentary series that he was overseeing for Standard Oil,



once the world's largest petroleum company, which captured the impact of the oil industry on life in rapidly developing small towns and industrial centres across the USA. A number of the FSA photographers were involved in the project, including Parks.

In 1952, Saunders worked with Stryker again, this time documenting the redevelopment of the City of Pittsburgh. Stryker was renowned for

insisting that his photographers knew their subjects intimately before photographing them, an insistence which saw Saunders move into the Hill District of Pittsburgh, living there for several months before taking a single photograph.

He stayed in Pittsburgh for two years and took close to 5,000 photographs of the area. "I don't know how many of my photos were ever used to



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support the primary purpose of the project,” said Saunders, “but you couldn’t hide the fact that they were a social commentary, through the eyes of a photojournalist, on Black life in a major US city.”

During this time Saunders developed a recognisable style, illustrated by the photographs in this exhibition, which leave a graphic impression characterised by pattern, repetition and contrast. “In most cases I look for pattern and design,” he said. Referring to *Celebration of the Mass, Douala, Cameroon, 1971*, which captures seven nuns, dressed in white from head to toe, sitting elegantly side by side, he says: “This picture has a rhythm to it, in the way the nuns are sitting, the positioning of their feet.”

Though tightly controlled, the composition of his photographs was never the result of art direction or interference, but of a strong sense of balance when approaching a picture. “Arranging them or directing them would do violence to a situation which should only be interpreted truthfully,” he once said. “To change it would change the truth.”

“My job is to report things as they are, not to arrange them as I think they should be. Once I start to pose people, my photos lose their natural look, and they cease to be honest reporting.”

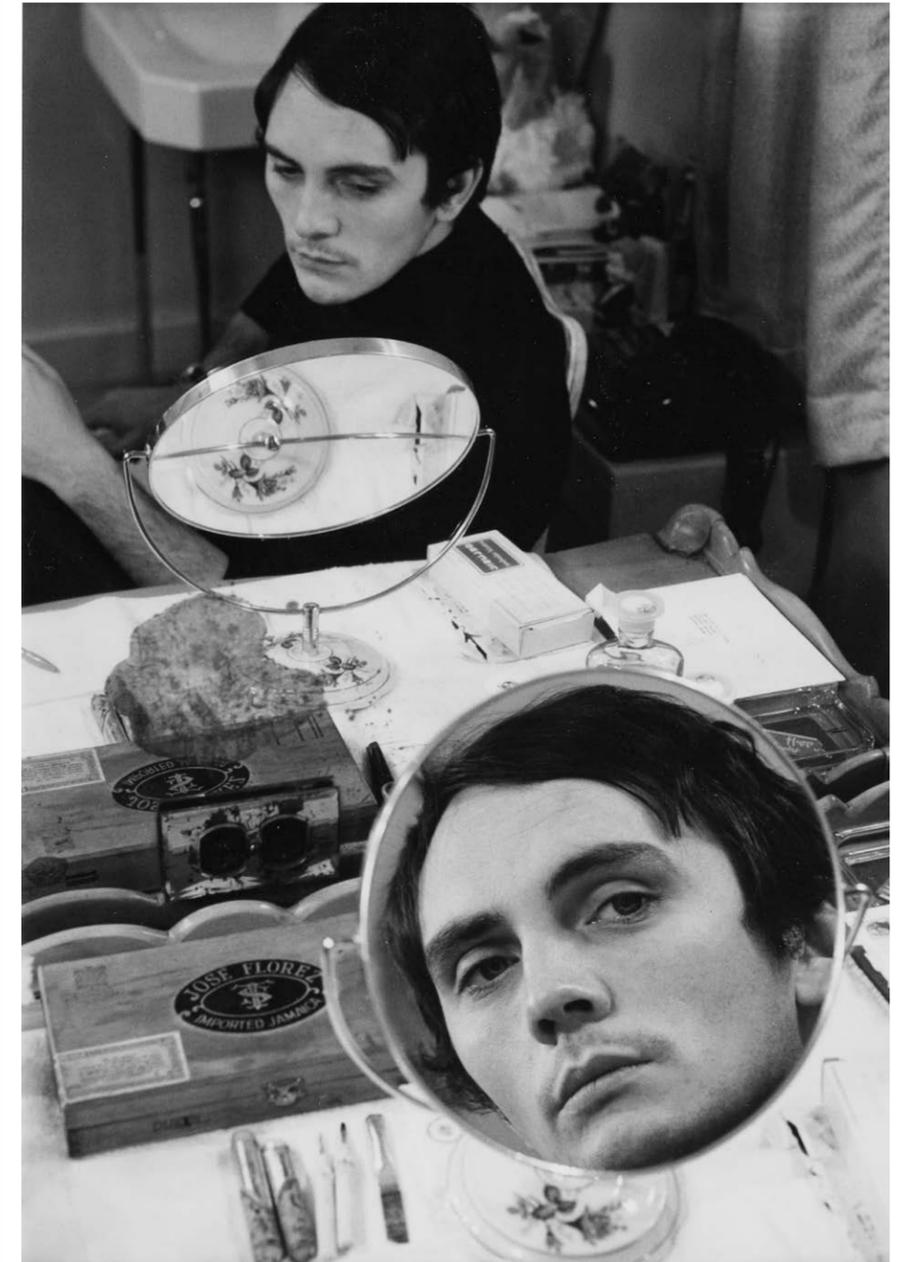
In 1953, Saunders was selected as one of 25 emerging photographers by Edward Steichen, then the Director of the Photography Department

at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to be included in the *Always the Young Strangers* exhibition at MoMA. Steichen, considered a pioneer in the realm, described the exhibition as presenting “samplings from the beginning of a new decade of photography.”

Two years later, Saunders became a US citizen, with Gordon Parks as his sponsor. His career reached new heights and he was commissioned by *Life*, *Time* and *The New York Times* in the decade that followed. As a Black photographer working in a predominantly white arena during a pivotal time for race relations in both the USA and Bermuda, Saunders, like Parks, was aware that the personal was political. Every frame told a story.

In 1962, Saunders turned down a role as a staff photographer on *The New York Times* to concentrate on his freelance work. That same year he held his first exhibition in Bermuda, at The Camera Store on Queen Street, where he had first cut his teeth. Throughout his lifetime, Saunders divided his time between the US and his home in Spanish Point, Bermuda. Locals always knew when he was home — looking out for the very tall man driving a small blue Volkswagen. A large, gentle man with a magnanimous demeanour, he was held in high esteem as a local who had left the island and done well in the world in the face of segregation, and the community would look forward to hearing of his adventures whenever he came home.

Swapping a successful freelance career for a role as a foreign correspondent for the US government, in 1967 Saunders became International Editor for *Topic*, a magazine published by the United States Information Agency (USIA), now the Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs bureaus within the US State Department. *Topic* ran from 1965 to 1994 and covered art, international politics and emerging technologies. As part of a commitment to cultural exchange, the magazine was printed in both English and French and was aimed at audiences in Africa, often focusing on Americans with family ties to the continent such as Miles Davis, Martin Luther King Jr, and a young Barack Obama.



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Saunders stayed in this role until his retirement in 1986, during which time his photographs appeared in almost every issue of *Topic*. Over 20 years, he took close to 50 trips to Africa, visiting more than 30 countries, moving seamlessly between photographing heads of state and documenting rural life across the continent. “I never took pictures of what people thought Africa was about,” he said. “I was there to record what

I saw when I saw it [...] I never felt strange in Africa. It was always like going home.”

In 1973, the USIA held an exhibition of Saunders’ work in Africa, which showcased 59 of his best photographs. The exhibition opened at the US Information Service Lincoln Library in Kumasi, Ghana, and toured the continent for two years, displayed in libraries, galleries and cultural centres the length and breadth of Africa.



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“I was a witness to everything,” Saunders told Bermuda’s *The Royal Gazette* shortly after his retirement in 1986. “Whatever I saw, I was a part of — I didn’t try to change it, didn’t attempt to change it. I simply tried to document it.”

“In those days Africa was just beginning to develop,” he explained. “When I first went in, it can’t have been more than ten years after the

first independent African nation had come into being. It was an exciting period — you could actually see the changes occurring from one month to the next.”

During his lifetime, Saunders was awarded many honours for his contributions to photography, including the International Black Photographer’s Award (1982) and the United States Information Services Honour

Award (1986). Of his chosen path, Saunders said: “It’s been a way of life for me that I wouldn’t trade for anything.”

“Photojournalism has been a very rewarding and fascinating career for me. As I look at my friends who are lawyers, or doctors, I think how bored they must be. For me there is always a different room, a different sunrise, different people with different ideas — and always a new experience tomorrow.”

Richard Saunders died in 1987 at the age of 65, just days before receiving the first ever Lifetime Achievement Award from the Bermuda Arts Council. The award was presented posthumously to his wife, Emily Saunders.

After his death, Saunders was acknowledged by Congressman Charles Rangel of New York for his contributions to both photography and civil rights. Gordon Parks, who described Saunders as one of his dearest friends, told *The Mid Ocean News*, “He was a first-rate person as well as a very fine photographer.”

The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington expressed interest in collecting Saunders’ photographs and bid for his work but his wife, who was the executor of his estate, decided that they should go to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, which is where he had wanted them to go. However, as a project of the USIA, there was a Congressional ban on the domestic distribution of *Topic*, and it became clear that an



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act of congress would be required to release his photographs taken for the magazine.

In 1988, Congressman Rangel wrote to Charles Wick, then director of USIA, about the best way to preserve Saunders’ archive. A congressional waiver was sought and secured, and legislation was introduced to move his work from the USIA to the Schomburg Center, which is now a custodian of 20 years of photographs taken by Saunders for *Topic*. His wife donated 30 of his photographs to the Bermuda National Gallery’s permanent collection, from which this exhibition is drawn.

With an instinctive eye for framing the shot and playing with visual cues, Saunders’ striking photographs, taken on 35mm film, capture a distinct moment in time and provide a unique way of seeing. “One of my aims,” he once said, “is to tie the human factor, the human drama, in with the technical aspects of [film] development and make it exciting and interesting for the viewer as well.”

As local photographer Hilton Hill observed: “Richard always had a talent for finding the centre of interest in a photograph. It was an in-born ability to compose and emphasize more than just a portrait of a scene or individual.”

**“Photography is communication; a photograph is nothing unless it is seen, and unless it conveys something of life to the viewer.”**

– RICHARD CLIVE SAUNDERS



**BROCHURE ARTWORKS**

COVER

**James Brown, Kaduna Airport, Nigeria, 1970**

Silver print  
13.75 x 9.25 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**01. Theatre in the Street, Harlem, 1967 for The New York Times**

Silver print  
13.75 x 9.25 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**02. Celebration of the Mass, Douala, Cameroon, 1971**

Silver print  
9.25 x 13.75 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**03. Terence Stamp, 1964 for The New York Times**

Silver print  
13.75 x 9.25 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**04. Members of the 4-C Club listening to instructor, Upper Volta, 1972**

Silver print  
13.75 x 9.25 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**05. Chicago Housing Project, 1957**

Silver print  
9.25 x 13.75 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

**06. Malcom X with Elijah Muhammed and Muslim Dignitaries, 1950s**

Silver print  
9.25 x 13.75 in  
Collection of Bermuda National Gallery

Exhibition curated by Eve Godet Thomas

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