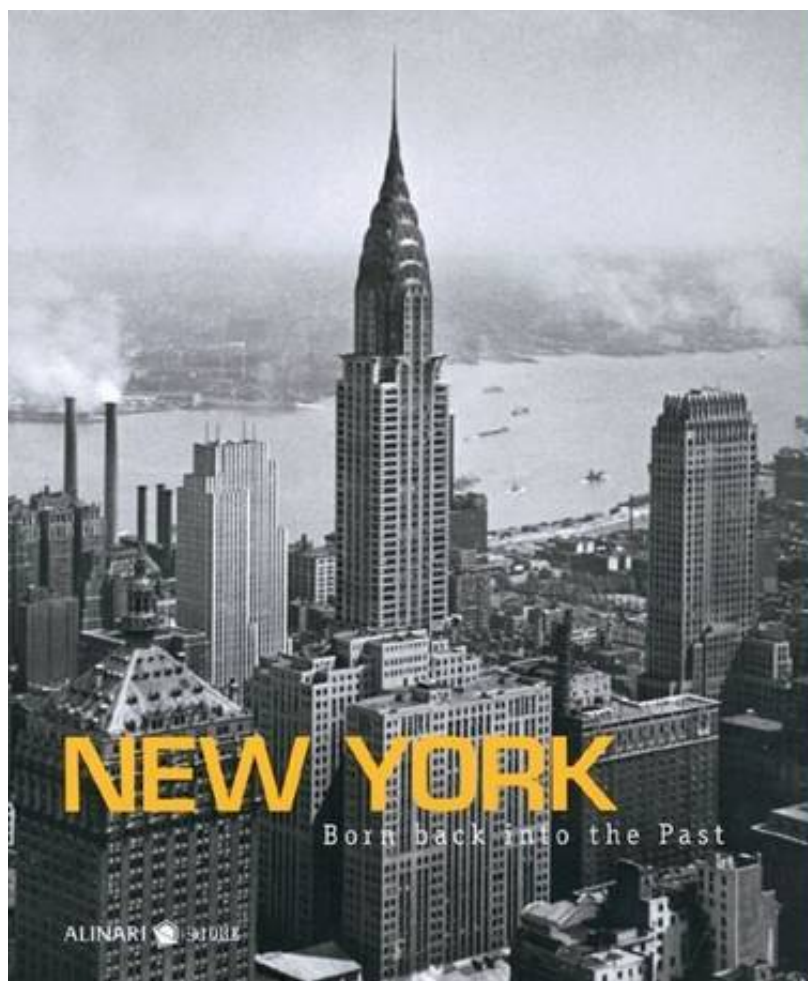


New York: Born Back Into The Past. The Hopeful Power of Nostalgia

Benedetta Grasso (June 06, 2013)



A selection of photographs from the Stefano and Silvia Lucchini Collection. "New York is a city you must behold not only with your eyes, but also with your heart [...] And we see it in ceaseless movement, dynamic in its eternal identity as a grand metropolis, perfect in its buildings, revealing its luminosity despite of being shot in black and white, always the most stirring, meeting point of different people, realities and sentiments. It is always the New York that has remained impressed in everyone's heart. Evanescant and intriguing, its arms open to hopeful thoughts, final destination of millions of fugitives. It and it alone is the new scintillating and effervescent Babylon. In hopes of a better future".

"This book is a beautiful assortment of previously unknown photographs. Though each picture evokes a different aspect of the city, the collection as a whole reflects New York's endless creative



energies and aspirations" Gay Talese

Pictures have an un-surpassed power. Especially when they are not trying to be “new” or purposely artistic. Not to say that artistic contemporary pictures are not inventive or powerful, or even subversive or emotional - they can be all of these things - but there are some photos, we sometimes find in a dusty drawer, in a book, or a family album, that convey all of these feelings and more without showing off... in quite a mysterious way.

They convey a “mystery in plain sight”. You can see everything, nothing is hidden or between the lines like in a text, it’s bare, naked, yet it’s a strange pleasure, like peeking into someone else’s mind, into their secrets.

There is a famous speech by Don Draper in the TV show *Mad Men* as he’s pitching and introducing the invention of the Kodak carousel: this technological wheel is more than a coherent narrative, it’s nostalgia; the wheel is not just moving backward, it gives “a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone”, of peeking into something physical, that catapults you into a scene that you might have never even imagined but where you immediately “ache to go again”.

It’s in this way of looking at Memory that, even in everyday life, the discovery of something mysterious belonging to a dead relative, a family member, a stranger that once lived where we lived, will always tap into something deeper.

Stefano Lucchini (among many other titles, the Senior vice president of public affairs and corporate communication for the [Eni Group](#) [2]) and Silvia Lucchini found an old album they purchased at an auction, an album by an anonymous photographer who took black and white pictures of NYC in the 1940s. In the age of the web and after asking the most prominent services it was still impossible to establish his identity.

They decided to organize this album in a collection and an exhibit at the Italian Cultural Institute which opened on June 5th 2013 and will run until July 3rd, featuring various pictures of landscapes, building and scenes from (mostly) Manhattan.

They defined the album “charming but most of all eternal”. Eternal might seem one of those cheesy generic words, but for NY eternal means paradoxically something constantly changing but imprinted unconsciously, that will eternally feel “like the first time” . In the *Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald wrote that “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.” Even jaded New-yorkers know that.

New York is narrative city. The city, like most metropolis offers characters, unaware protagonists, women that stop to catch their hat or defy the snow, children that play with water in a fountain, but the most important character remains the city itself.

It has a personality - or more than one - with its neighborhoods and facades, it escapes the poised picture-perfect suburban portrait, it’s made of stolen shots. Of course there is something for every taste, the romantic, the gritty, the realist, but overall it maintains an iconic blend that mixes this nostalgic nonchalant beauty with the need of perfection and glamour of a an exciting indescribable power.

It also changed drastically through the years - architectonically - but somehow is now an old city, some things like the Upper East Side are eerily similar to these 1940s pictures.

Don Draper also talks about a sentimental bond with the product. For those who live these streets everyday it’s almost surreal - as it would be in any city or place - to see the same views frozen in



time, to think of similar pictures snapped with an iPhone. But the sentimental bond comes from the feeling of déjà vu that goes along with most of all....the movies. And it's not a simple iconic fame, like seeing the Empire State Building after King Kong. It's more than that. I's feeling like you've walked in these streets because of the inherently magical cinematic déjà vu. Especially through the eye of the directors of the 1940s and 50s that shaped the aesthetics and dreams of many generations.

This is not a historical exhibit, more of a universal take, it uses photos to establish an identity. Today ironically we can find more similar photos everywhere...than, let's say a decade ago: we have so many ways of doing that the city has come back as a recurring character, it's everywhere around us and it helps to explain a mood, an idea or capture a fun night or moment. When people used film over digital, there was a limited number of photos and the carelessness was not always there.

That's why the freshness of the 40s feels very contemporary.

In the book that collects all of these photos, published by Alinari and accompanied by famous quotes from literature and essays, NY is often compared to Babylon, more in the sense of a chaotic blend of contradictions, bustling energy, a vertigo of beauty a constant regeneration of hope, most recently after 9/11.

It's fascinating that the actual legend tells that the gardens of Babylon were built by Nebuchadnezzar II as a gesture of love for his wife Amytis who was homesick, basically for nostalgia, a nostalgia filled with possibilities, if such thing exists.

Who knows maybe behind this mysterious photographer lies a secret gift to someone else too? Or perhaps -through this exhibit - to someone in the future that had yet to come....

On view at the [Italian Cultural Institute \(NY\)](#) [3]

June 05, 2013 - Friday, July 05, 2013

Buy book [New York: Born Back into the Past](#) [4]

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