

Celebrating Women's History Month

Margaret Bourke-White

(1862 - 1937)

Margaret Bourke-White dedicated her career to photographing the defining images of 20th century history. In the process, she made history as a pioneering photojournalist.

Margaret was born in the Bronx on June 14, 1904. Her father was a printing industry engineer and an amateur photographer. Margaret considered following her father's career, and took summer school engineering courses at Rutgers in 1921, but began turning to photography during her freshman year at Columbia.

Her father's death made it difficult to continue college, but a local philanthropist paid Margaret's way to the University of Michigan, where she worked as a yearbook photographer. A short-lived marriage took her to Case Western Reserve in Ohio, and after a divorce, she graduated from Cornell in 1927.

Throughout these years, Margaret helped pay her own way by selling photos and teaching photography at summer camps. After graduating, she moved to Cleveland to specialize in industrial photography, which she hoped to turn into modern art while making money from business commissions.

Because of her subject matter, the risks she took for good pictures, and her attractive appearance, Margaret became newsworthy herself. Her pictures impressed Henry Luce, the publisher of Time magazine, who hired Bourke-White in 1929 as the first staff photographer for *Fortune*, an illustrated business magazine.

Bourke-White moved to New York's skyscraper Chrysler Building, where she climbed outside to take powerful pictures of the bustling metropolis. Her work for *Fortune* took her all over the world. She published a picture book, "Eyes on Russia," portraying the country's rapid industrial development, and remained fascinated with technology in all forms.

A *Fortune* assignment to the "Dust Bowl" of the American Midwest confronted Bourke-White with the human suffering of the Great Depression. Her own struggles to make ends meet helped her empathize with the stricken farmers, and the pictures published in the book "You Have Seen Their Faces" gave her modern world a more human face.

In 1936, Bourke-White became a staff photographer for Luce's newest magazine, *LIFE*, which used photographic essays as a new way to report news in-depth. The first issue featured Bourke-White's photographs inside and on the cover. *LIFE*'s photographers became celebrities themselves, with Margaret Bourke-White the most glamorous of all.

For years, Bourke-White had anticipated a world war and wanted to photograph the defining event of her generation. By chance, she was the only foreign photographer on the scene when Germany invaded Russia in 1941. When America entered the war, Bourke-White became the first woman war correspondent attached to the Army Air Force. She covered dangerous bombing raids and followed the troops through North Africa, Italy, and the Nazi death camps.

After the war, Margaret Bourke-White continued to travel the world, photographing leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and humble men like South African coal miners. When Parkinson's Disease ended her career in photojournalism, her fight against the illness inspired a TV movie. She continued to write, remained on *LIFE*'s staff until 1969, and was remembered when she died on August 27, 1971, as a photographer who had achieved her life's ambition.



Self-Portrait, 1943, courtesy of The Sandor Family Collection

For more information about Margaret Bourke-White and her photography go to <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/margaret-bourke-white?all/all/all/all/0>. This is one of a series of four Celebrating Women's History Month profiles, written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - News Media Literacy/Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2019.