

## James Van Der Zee - Masters of American Photography

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James VanDerZee was born on June 29, 1886 in Lenox, Massachusetts.

James VanDerZee was one of the first Afro-American Photographers and is remembered as one of the most important photographers of the Afro-American community.

James was a self-taught photographer whose career spanned over eighty years. His early years were spent working as a waiter at the Hotel Aspinwall in the small mountain resort town of Lenox where he purchased his first camera in 1899 from a mail-order company and began taking pictures of his family and friends. He is best known for his photographs of the people and times of the Harlem Renaissance.

James moved to Harlem in 1905 and opened his first studio in 1916 and began photographing families, weddings, celebrities, and individuals in the Harlem area. His early work included photographs of such noted celebrities as Marcus Garvey, Bojangles, Jack Johnson, Conte Cullen, and Father Devine.

During the 1920s and 1930s James photographs of individuals in what became known as the Harlem Renaissance, reflected Afro-American dignity, achievement, idealism, and success.

The author of "Reflections in Black," Deborah Willis-Braithwaite, wrote that VanDerZee's images define a people in the process of transformation and a culture in transition."

After World War II, James fortunes declined, he lost his studio and by the 1960s he and his wife Gaynella were living in poverty. His work was rediscovered in 1969 after his photographs were included in the exhibition, "Harlem On My Mind" at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was 82 years old at the time.

Gaynella died in 1976 and in 1978 James married Donna Mussenden who successfully promoted his work. From 1980 to 1983 James produced a series of portraits of famous African Americans which

included, Muhammad Ali, Cicely Tyson, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Bill Cosby. Over the years James received many awards including an honorary doctorate from Howard University.

James VanDerZee died in Washington, DC on May 15, 1983 at the age of 96.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Africana

VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983

Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present