



# James Van Der Zee photographs, circa 1908-1935

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## Summary

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**Collection Title:**

James Van Der Zee photographs, circa 1908-1935

**Source:**

John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture

**Creator:**

Van Der Zee, James, 1886-1983

**Abstract:**

Collection comprises 42 photographs taken by James Van Der Zee, known for his portraits and documentation of daily life in Harlem, N.Y., especially during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s). There are views of parades, athletic teams, a Baptist group, a first-grade Harlem classroom, and the interior of Van Der Zee's studio, as well as fictionalized settings and poses conveying hopes, dreams, and humorous situations. Subjects include an elegant couple in raccoon coats, a soldier, a female impersonator, a funerary portrait of a man in an open casket, Black Hebrews, Black Cross nurses, Marcus Garvey in regalia during a parade, entrepreneurs Madam C.J. Walker and her daughter A'Lelia, boxer Jack Johnson, and entertainer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Included is a self-portrait of the photographer playing a violin, circa 1930. An early portrait of Van Der Zee's first wife and daughter was taken around 1908, in Lenox, Massachusetts, his birthplace. Average print size is roughly 10 3/4 x 12 inches. Almost all are exhibit prints created mostly in the 1980s from original negatives. Acquired as part of the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture at Duke University.

**Extent:**

.5 Linear Feet (1 box)

**Language:**

Materials in English.

**Collection ID:**

RL.11758

**Permalink:**

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1ht53>

**Preferred Citation**

Identification of item], James Van Der Zee photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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## Background

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### Scope and Content

Collection comprises forty gelatin silver exhibit prints and two vintage prints of images taken by photographer James Van Der Zee, known for his portraits and documentation of daily life in Harlem, N.Y., especially during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s). There are views of parades, athletic teams, a Baptist group, a first-grade Harlem classroom, and the interior of Van Der Zee's studio, as well as fictionalized settings and poses conveying hopes, dreams, and humorous situations. Included is a self-portrait of the photographer playing the violin, circa 1930. Other subjects include an elegant couple in raccoon coats; a 1923 soldier; the New York Black Giants baseball team; a female impersonator; a man in an open funeral casket with a superimposed poem extolling fatherhood; a group of African American Hebrews in front of the Moorish Zionist Temple; Marcus Garvey in regalia during a parade; a Garveyite with his son; entrepreneurs Madam C.J. Walker and her daughter A'Lelia in their "Dark Tower" salon with a large group of friends; boxer Jack Johnson; and a double exposure portrait of entertainer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

Prints are arranged in chronological order. The earliest images, from 1908, are of Van Der Zee's first wife and daughter, probably taken in Lenox, Massachusetts, Van Der Zee's birthplace, and a blacksmith, probably taken in Virginia, where Van der Zee spent some time before moving to New York.

The exhibit prints were created from original negatives chiefly from 1981-1983, under the supervision of James Van Der Zee until his passing in 1983. Others were printed around 1987 by his widow Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee. All prints bear titles, dates, edition information, and copyright on verso. Most are from runs of 250 limited edition prints created for various exhibits. Some are signed by the photographer.

The majority of the prints measure 10 x 12 inches (sheet dimensions); image sizes range from 10 1/8 x 8 to 10 x 2 5/8 inches.

### Biographical/Historical

Born in Lenox, Massachusetts on June 29, 1886, James Van Der Zee moved to Harlem, New York City as a young man, and had already established his own photography studio on West 135th Street by 1916; sometime in the early 1930s he moved his flourishing studio to 272 Lenox Avenue. He became one of the

leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance and was much sought after due to his talent for portraiture.

in 1969 his work was featured in a 1969 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, "Harlem on my Mind," after which, already in his eighties, he enjoyed a revitalized career and received many accolades. He received the Living Legacy Award from President Carter in 1978, and was named a fellow of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Van Der Zee died in Washington, D.C. on May 15, 1983, shortly after receiving an honorary doctorate from Howard University. His widow, Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee, manages the James Van Der Zee estate. His work is held by major U.S. cultural institutions and has been exhibited around the world.

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## Arrangement

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Prints are arranged in chronological order.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Statement

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### Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

## Use Restrictions

The copyright interests in this collection have not been transferred to Duke University.

Publishing requests should be directed to Mrs. Donna Van Der Zee (donnavanderzee1@aol.com), who retains the copyright on all materials in this collection.

For more information, consult the copyright section of the Regulations and Procedures of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

## Acquisition Information

The James Van Der Zee photographs were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library as a purchase from the James Van Der Zee Estate in 2019.

## Processing Information

Processed by Paula Jeannet, August 2019.

Accession(s) represented in the collection guide: 2019-0076.

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## Names and Subjects

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- African American celebrities -- Portraits
- African American children -- Portraits
- African American families -- Portraits
- African American men -- Portraits
- African American photographers -- New York (State) -- New York
- African American soldiers -- Portraits
- African American women -- Portraits
- African American portrait photographers
- African Americans -- Portraits
- African Americans -- New York (State) -- New York -- Social life and customs -- 20th century
- Black Hebrews -- New York (State) -- New York -- Photographs
- Female impersonators -- New York (State) -- New York -- Portraits
- Harlem Renaissance
- Middle class African Americans -- United States
- Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Photographs

- Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Religious life and customs.
- Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Social conditions -- 20th century
- Black-and-white photographs
- Gelatin silver prints
- Portraits
- Staged photographs
- John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture
- Johnson, Jack, 1878-1946 -- Portraits
- Garvey, Marcus, 1887-1940 -- Portraits
- Van Der Zee, James, 1886-1983 -- Portraits
- Robinson, Bill, 1878-1949 -- Portraits
- Robinson, A'Leia Walker, 1885-1931 -- Portraits
- Walker, C. J., Madam, 1867-1919 -- Portraits
- Black Cross Nurses -- New York (State) -- New York -- Photographs
- Universal Negro Improvement Association

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## Collection Inventory

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### Vintage Prints, 1924, 1944

**Physical Description:** 2 prints

**Scope and Contents**

Original gelatin silver prints by James Van Der Zee.

Black Cross Nurses, 1924 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0001

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 5 5/8 x 9 5/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 8 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Black Cross Nurses, 1924](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title from an online image: "Black Cross Nurses at UNIA Parade Honoring Marcus Garvey." UNIA was the United Negro Improvement Association, led by Black nationalist Marcus Garvey. Recto bears editing marks; verso carries GGG Studio stamp at 272 Lenox Avenue, indicating the print may have been created after 1930.

Father, 1944 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0002

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 7/8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 7 7/8 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Father, 1944](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title from an online image: "Father's Farewell." Image of man in open casket surrounded by flowers, with superimposed narrative extolling fatherhood. Verso bears the GGG Studio stamp at 272 Lenox Avenue.

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### Exhibit Prints, circa 1908-1935

**Physical Description:** 40 prints

**Scope and Contents**

These prints were created from original negatives under the supervision of James Van Der Zee mostly from 1981 to 1983. Others were printed around 1987 by his widow Donna Admussen. All prints bear titles, dates, edition information, and copyright on verso. Most are from a run of 250 limited edition prints created for various exhibits. Some are signed on the verso by the photographer. With few exceptions, they are embossed in the lower right corner with the seal of the James Van Der Zee Estate.

The Village Blacksmith, 1908 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0003

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [The Village Blacksmith, 1908](#)

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Kate and Rachel, circa 1908 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0004

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Kate and Rachel, circa 1908](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Kate and Rachel Van Der Zee were the first wife and daughter of James Van Der Zee.

Cousin Susan Porter, 1914 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0005

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Cousin Susan Porter, 1914](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title from another online image: "Cousin Suzie Porter." This portrait of Van Der Zee's cousin was taken in her Harlem home.

---

Daydreams, circa 1915 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0006

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 1/8 x 5 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Daydreams, circa 1915](#)

---

Future Expectations, 1920 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0007

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 7 1/2 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 1/8 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Future Expectations, 1920](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed. Alternate title from online images: "Wedding Day (Future Expectations)."

---

The Actor, 1922 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0008

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 6 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [The Actor, 1922](#)

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Emma and Children (Reading), 1923 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0009

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 7 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Emma and Children \(Reading\), 1923](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

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The Last Good-Bye, 1923 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0010

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 7 1/2 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [The Last Good-Bye, 1923](#)

---

Nude by Fireplace, 1923 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0011

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 1/8 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 9 7/8 inches

**Digital Object:** [Nude by Fireplace, 1923](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title from online image: "Nude, Harlem."

---

Garveyite and Son, 1924 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0012

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 1/8 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Garveyite and Son, 1924](#)

---

Marcus Garvey in Regalia, 1924 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0013

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 6 3/4 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 11 x 14 inches

**Digital Object:** [Marcus Garvey in Regalia, 1924](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Garvey appears seated in a car with several others during a parade.

---

Newsstand, Lenox Avenue, 1924 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0014

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 6 x 9 1/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Newsstand, Lenox Avenue, 1924](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title from another online image: "Parade Along Lenox Avenue."

---

Parade Along Seventh Avenue, circa 1924  
(online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0015

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 x 9 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 9 1/2 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Parade Along Seventh Avenue, circa 1924](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title: "A Parade Going South on 7th Avenue at 139th Street, Harlem."

---

Gypsy Woman, 1925 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0016

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 9 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Gypsy Woman, 1925](#)

---

Portrait of Four Clerics, 1925 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0017

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 1/8 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Portrait of Four Clerics, 1925](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

---

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Basketball Team, Cornell, 1926 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-  
P-0018

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 9 x 6 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 8 inches

**Digital Object:** [Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Basketball Team, Cornell, 1926](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

Beau of the Ball, 1926 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0019

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 1/8 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Beau of the Ball, 1926](#)

---

Renaissance Casino, 1927 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0020

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 1/8 x 9 3/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 9 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches

**Digital Object:** [Renaissance Casino, 1927](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

---

Undeclared War, 1927 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0021

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 7 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Undeclared War, 1927](#)

---

Dance Class, 1928 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0022

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 5 3/4 x 9 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Dance Class, 1928](#)

---

First Grade, St. Mark's School, 1928 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0023

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [First Grade, St. Mark's School, 1928](#)

---

Union Baptist Church, 1928 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0024

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 1/8 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Union Baptist Church, 1928](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

---

Barefoot Prophet, 1929 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0025

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x 10 1/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Barefoot Prophet, 1929](#)

---

The Dark Tower, 1929 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0026

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [The Dark Tower, 1929](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Interior shot of large group at CJ and A'lelia Walker's home and salon in Harlem; both women appear in the photograph.

---

Going on a Long Journey, 1929 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0027

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Going on a Long Journey, 1929](#)

---

Moorish Jews, 1929 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0028

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 1/8 x 12 1/8 inches

**Digital Object:** [Moorish Jews, 1929](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed. The Moorish Zionist Temple of the Moorish Jews was founded in 1921 by a follower of Marcus Garvey, Mordecai Herman, who appears in the group photograph.

---

Secretary, 1929 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0029

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 7 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Secretary, 1929](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

---

"You Will Find Him at the Elk's Club", circa 1929 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0030

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 9 3/4 x 7 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** ["You Will Find Him at the Elk's Club", circa 1929](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Full title appears on negative; "You Will Find Him" and the date appear on verso. The studio address, 109 W. 135th St., appears on the negative.

---

Bond Bread, 1930 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0031

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 10 x 8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Bond Bread, 1930](#)

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Interior, GGG Photo Studio, 1930 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0032

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 7/8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 11 x 14 inches

**Digital Object:** [Interior, GGG Photo Studio, 1930](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed. Interior of Van Der Zee's studio, location not determined. Beginning in the early 1930s, prints with an address stamp bear this location 272 Lenox Avenue.

---

New York Black Giants, circa 1930 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0033

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [New York Black Giants, circa 1930](#)

Poolside, circa 1930 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0034

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 2 5/8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 7/8 x 14 inches

**Digital Object:** [Poolside, circa 1930](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Group portrait of approximately 50 children at a community pool.

---

Drum Beat, 1931 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0035

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 1/2 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Drum Beat, 1931](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

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James Van Der Zee, 1931 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0036

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 9 7/8 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [James Van Der Zee, 1931](#)

**Scope and Contents**

1931 appears in negative; 1930 on verso.

---

Couple in Raccoon Coats, 1932 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0037

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 7/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 11 x 14 inches

**Digital Object:** [Couple in Raccoon Coats, 1932](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Alternate title: "Couple, Harlem."

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Goin' Home, 1932 (online item available) Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0038

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x 10 1/8 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Goin' Home, 1932](#)

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Thanksgiving, St. Mary's Convent, 1932 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0039

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Thanksgiving, St. Mary's Convent, 1932](#)

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Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, 1933 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0040

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 6 7/8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, 1933](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed. Double exposure portrait.

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Jack Johnson, 1933 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0041

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 7 7/8 x 10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 12 x 10 inches

**Digital Object:** [Jack Johnson, 1933](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Signed.

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The Heiress, circa 1936 (online item available)

Box 1 > Image RL.11758-P-0042

**Physical Description:** Image dimensions: 8 x10 inches; Sheet dimensions: 10 x 12 inches

**Digital Object:** [The Heiress, circa 1936](#)

**Scope and Contents**

Date on negative appears to be 1936; date on verso is 1935.

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