

A Nimble Arc: James Van Der Zee and Photography

Emilie Boone

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In *A Nimble Arc*, art historian and educator Emilie Boone shifts focus from photographer James Van Der Zee's renowned Harlem Renaissance work to his role in documenting and advancing "quotidian" Black American life.

Van Der Zee was born in 1886. His self-taught skills were augmented by his early training as a department store photography assistant. He maintained a studio in Harlem for decades, and throughout his long life, he photographed a range of notable Black figures, including Countee Cullen and Jean-Michel Basquiat. But beyond Van Der Zee's portraits of writers, entertainers, and artists were his photographs of other Harlem residents, like an elegant woman posing by a piano with a white cat and a statuesque preacher known as the "Barefoot Prophet." Van Der Zee was also the official photographer of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by flamboyant and fervent Marcus Garvey.

By the 1940s, Boone notes, formal portraiture had become less fashionable; more people were buying their own cameras. To attract new business, Van Der Zee placed ads in magazines for mail-order photograph restoration, copying, and enlargement services. In a fascinating interpretation, the book compares the mailing of photographs to Van Der Zee's urban studio to being like a variant of the Great Migration. Images of Black Americans traveled northward to be later returned, revitalized, and preserved for future generations.

Beyond its survey of Van Der Zee, the book highlights other Black photographers of the era, including Eddie Elcha and Winifred Hall Allen. There is also an extensive recounting of Van Der Zee's inclusion in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 *Harlem on My Mind* exhibit. Though the exhibit showcased Harlem as a cultural capital, its curation excluded the Harlem art community.

A Nimble Arc broadens James Van Der Zee's legacy amid a savvied history of twentieth-century Harlem.

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