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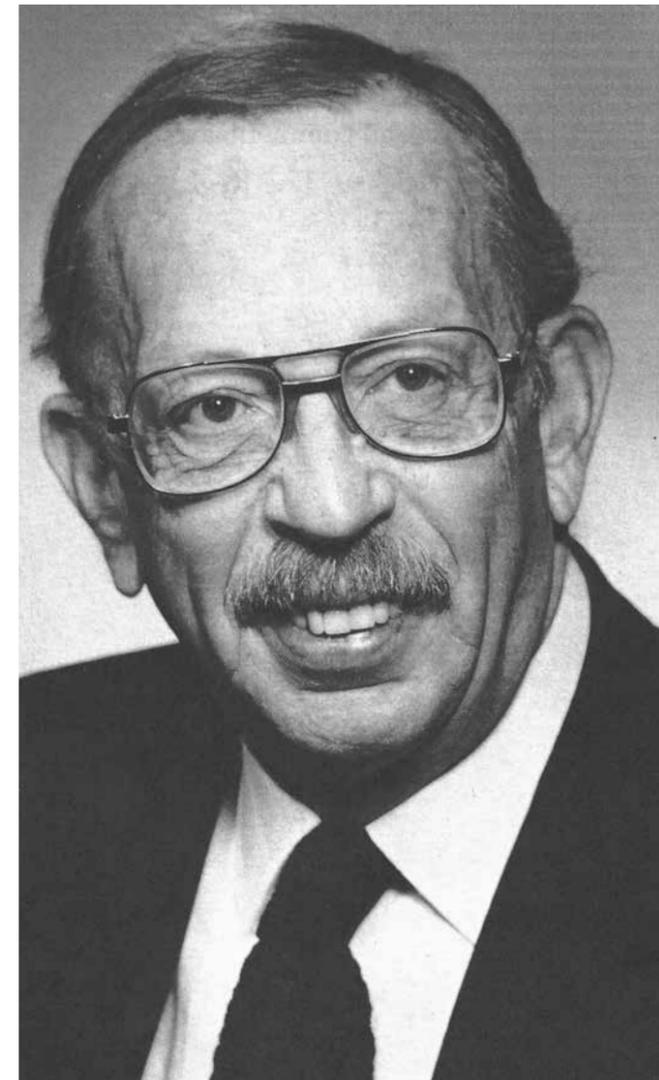
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# Frank Miller

The Pulitzer-winning *Des Moines Register* cartoonist possessed an outside-the-lines view of the world

Text by AVERY GREGURICH Images courtesy of THE DES MOINES REGISTER



**Left:** The portrait of Frank Miller that appeared in the book *Frank Miller* that the *Des Moines Register* published in 1983. Courtesy of the *Des Moines Register*. **Opposite:** A poster for a 1970s Percival Gallery opening featuring Miller's artworks.

In the *Des Moines Register* newsroom, it was never hard to know which desk was Frank Miller's.

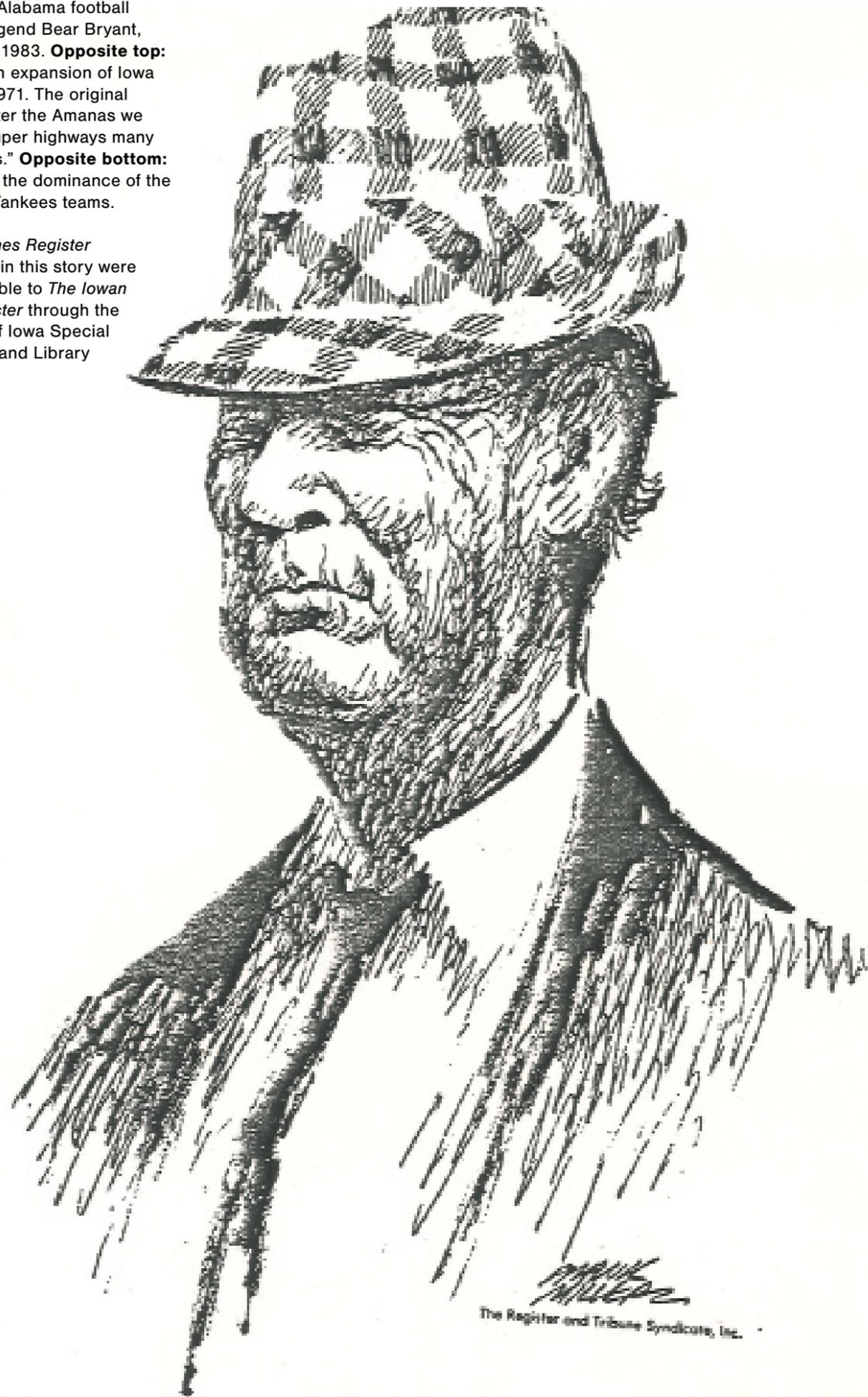
"If you believe in reincarnation, Frank probably in a previous life was an unmade bed," says Randy Evans, longtime journalist and Opinion Editor at the *Des Moines Register*. "He had cartoons piled up next to his drawing board; he had ink and watercolors everywhere."

David Yepsen, a longtime *Des Moines Register* political columnist and current host of IPTV's *Iowa Press*, sat next to Miller in the newsroom for many years. Yepsen remembers "a drawing board, pens and pencils, bottles of ink and paper stock, tape and an easel, and just junk. He had books that people had sent him and articles that he would read that would inspire him."

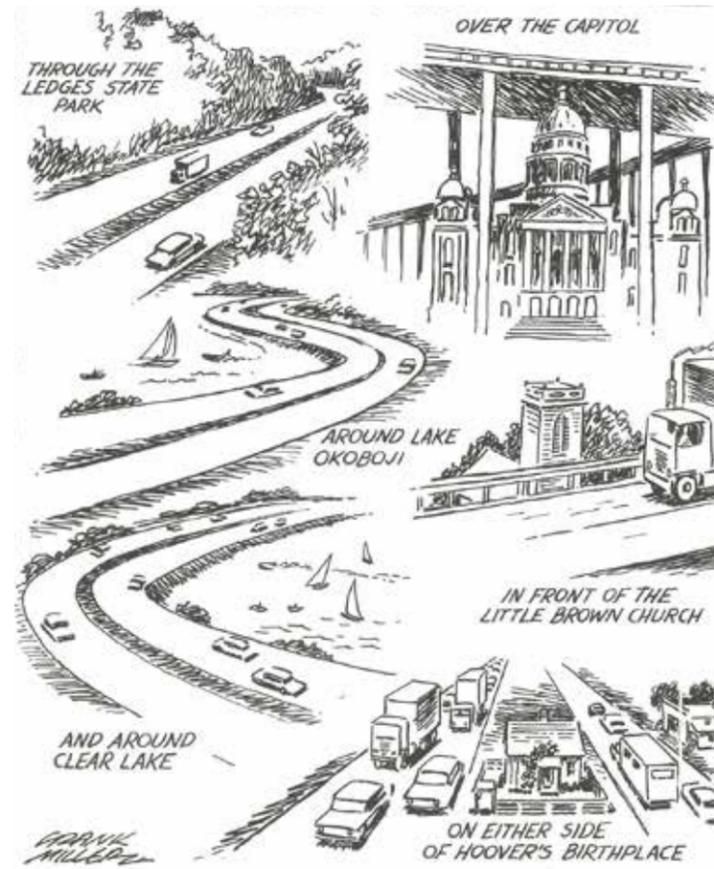
It was from this desk that pigs began to talk, donkeys and elephants put on ties and top hats, and a slightly disheveled, rotund, and moustached everyman, the unequivocal illustrated consciousness of Iowa, first took shape. It was there that the mess and mirth of the larger world was distilled into ink and lead over 10,000 times for the 30

A tribute to Alabama football coaching legend Bear Bryant, who died in 1983. **Opposite top:** A critique on expansion of Iowa highways, 1971. The original caption: "After the Amanas we can build super highways many other places." **Opposite bottom:** Miller noted the dominance of the late 1970s Yankees teams.

All *Des Moines Register* illustrations in this story were made available to *The Iowan* by the *Register* through the University of Iowa Special Collections and Library Archives.



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Another glorious autumn

years that Miller served as the *Des Moines Register* editorial cartoonist. His thoughts and images were often the first things seen by thousands of Iowans in homes across the state and thousands more readers in syndicated newspapers across the country.

He knew his position well and respected it. Throughout his career, Miller followed a credo he had drafted early on:

"We can face our crises today with tears and dejection or with grins and determination," he wrote. "I prefer the latter and that is why I draw flip and funny cartoons about the H-bomb, fallout shelters, and World War III. As far as I'm concerned, humor is not a luxury; it is a necessity."

Frank Miller was born and raised in Kansas City, where his father was a staff artist at the *Kansas City Star*. He studied at the University of Kansas and the Kansas City Art Institute, where he met his future wife, Cathy.

During World War II, he served in the Third Army in Europe under General George S. Patton. When he returned to the United States, he worked as his father had as a staff artist for the *Kansas City Star*. In 1951, two years after the retirement of "Ding" Darling, *Des Moines Register* editor Kenneth MacDonald wrote to Miller about the possibility of his joining the staff. Miller had been recommended by Karl Mattern, who had taught him at the University of Kansas. The letter was a few months late.

"Last May," Miller wrote back to MacDonald, "I was called to active duty with the Army Reserves, and as I write I am in San Francisco ready to ship to Korea." In the margin of his typed response, he included a cartoon.

"Damn . . . And I Always Did Like Des Moines!" says a fully-armed, cigarette-smoking sergeant reading MacDonald's letter.

After 18 months in Korea serving in the Seventh Division, Miller returned to the United States and exchanged his combat fatigues for newspaperman's clothes in downtown Des Moines.

Iowans were first introduced to the lines of Frank Miller in 1954. His first editorial page cartoon appeared on May 27 during the heart of the Army-McCarthy hearings. The hearings, footage of which were featured prominently on national television news broadcasts, included testimony that Joseph McCarthy had tapped phone calls of various members of the U.S. Army during his Communist witch hunt of the early 1950s.

In Miller's cartoon, three figures are huddled around a phone receiver beneath an ominous lamp. A wiretapping



**Above:** This 1962 cold war-era cartoon earned Miller a Pulitzer Prize in 1963. **Right:** Miller paid close attention to national issues. **Opposite left:** A 1982 portrait of Johnny Cash. **Opposite right:** Miller had fun with space exploration in this 1969 cartoon.



permit is tucked loosely in one of the figure's back pocket. As he holds the phone out for the other two figures, he says, "We accidentally tapped the wrong line, Chief. Get a load of what this dame's telling on her husband."

Even in his first cartoon, hallmarks of the quintessential Miller cartoon are present: a distrust of political power, cast fittingly in shadow, juxtaposed with a colloquial humor that perfectly humanizes the nameless figures.

The figure of Miller himself was sort of cartoonish.

Chuck Offenburger, longtime writer of the *Des Moines Register* column *Iowa Boy*, remembers Miller as a tall man, "maybe 6' 2" and always well-dressed. He was kind of thin, kind of hunched over, with a big kind of droopy moustache and often a cigarette in his hand. He was not stooped, but he kind of loped and ambled around the newsroom."

"The funny thing about him is that with all those fine lines and careful drawings, he was kind of uncoordinated," remembers former editor and president of the *Des Moines Register* Michael Gartner. "Sometimes he'd join some of

us for coffee at Moran's Cafeteria in the mornings, and we always flipped coins to see who'd pay. Often as not, he'd flip his coin onto the floor or into his coffee."

If Miller was a bit bungling and clumsy in his own body, his cartoons and their points of view were anything but. Unafraid of any topic and, more important, unafraid to take a position, Miller explored everything from gender roles, race, inequality, to terrorism.

One of his most ardent and consistent criticisms was that of the then growing gun activists. As a veteran of two wars, Miller disdained seemingly blind trust and belief in the power of weapons.

"Even 50 years ago he was getting cranky letters from gun lovers about his cartoons," Randy Evans remembers. "He had a rubber stamp that in big bold letters said BULLSHIT. He would get these cranky letters, and he would get his stamp out, stamp them, and send them back."

No other cartoon better embodies and communicates his distrust and great fear of the power of nuclear weapons than

his 1963 Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoon. In it, two figures crawl around the crater of a now unrecognizable Earth, one saying to the other, "I said—we sure settled that dispute, didn't we?"

Maybe his greatest skill was the ability to navigate between the severe and the mundane. From one day to the next, Frank Miller would consider world destruction and then the incredible annoyance of motorized lawn mowers. True to his self-penned credo, he pursued the idiosyncrasies of the everyman as forcibly as he traced down political figures and current events.

Take, for example, the New York Yankees. Miller's yearly World Series cartoons always came with a disclaimer: It could only be considered an official World Series if one of the teams playing was the New York Yankees.

"Frank really didn't like bullies except for one group of bullies: the New York Yankees," retired *Register* reporter Tom Witosky says.

"I once asked him, 'Frank, are you a real baseball fan? Do

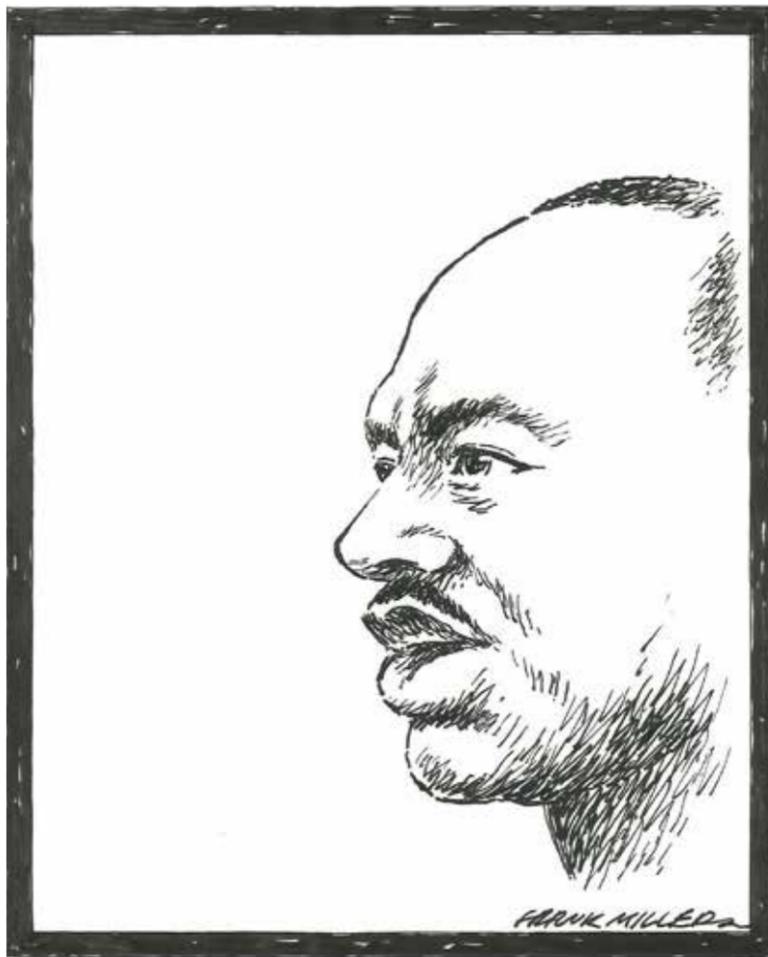
you particularly like the Yankees?'" Chuck Offenburger says. "And he said 'No.' Some artists have their foils, and I think that was Frank's foil."

Along with his daily editorial cartoons, Miller produced many watercolors capturing scenes throughout the state. He was mostly enamored with the 100 brick and limestone county courthouses across Iowa, balloons rising over Indianola every summer, and picturesque Iowa barns.

"Here was a guy who was in the paper constantly, and you would think that when the weekend rolled around he would want to just do anything else," Randy Evans says. "But that was when he was out driving around Iowa doing watercolors."

Every year, his artwork was featured at the Percival Gallery in downtown Des Moines. Chuck Offenburger remembers invitations floating around the newsroom and Miller stopping by his desk to deliver one to him. Offenburger was honored to be invited, but he told Miller politely that there was no way that he would be able to purchase one of Miller's works.

"Don't even think about buying one of my paintings!"



**Left:** A 1968 tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., who had recently been shot to death. The caption read, "I have a dream that this nation will rise up ..." **Above:** "Nobody likes us anymore" is how Miller crafted the caption for this cartoon about the Beatles.



**Above:** The same year that gunmen injured both President Reagan and Pope John Paul II (1981), Miller drew this cartoon with the caption "National Emblem." **Right:** Miller served in the army in Europe during World War II and later in Korea. In 1965, during U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Miller created this cartoon with the caption, "Some of us are, fella. Some of us are."



Offenburger remembers Miller exclaiming in laughter.

"Why don't you just come. And when you get over there, there will be a bunch of rich people in there looking at my paintings. When you see a group of them looking closely at one of my paintings, amble up there and stick your head in there amongst them and say, "Oh my God. I don't know how the man does it. He's a genius." That's all you have to say and walk away. That will really help me."

"I followed my orders," Offenburger laughs, remembering. "I don't know if he sold any paintings that night, but I sure gave it a hell of an effort."

There are other stories of Miller's seeming nonchalance in regard to his own artistic works, including an infamous story that saw Miller selling his cartoons and etchings at a garage sale for a quarter a piece. Most who worked with him in the newsroom remember stopping by Miller's desk to praise him for a cartoon only to be presented with it right there, Miller saying, "I'm glad you liked it." Readers across the state would write in and compliment a particular cartoon, and by the end of the workday, Miller would have

mailed the original cartoon to them.

"A lot of people would write in and ask Frank for cartoons, and they would send money in. A lot of the times, Frank would send them off and throw the money in a drawer," David Yepsen says. "I was there after he passed away when they started going through his stuff, and in every other drawer there were wads of cash that he had thrown in there."

"Six months later, I was looking around for some extra file cabinet space, and I opened this drawer, and there was a bunch more cash!" Yepsen says, laughing.

Most attribute Miller's near disregard of the possible value of his work to a cartoonist's viewpoint: It was always on to the next one.

"It kind of blows my mind, but I can almost understand it," says Brian Duffy, former *Des Moines Register* cartoonist and Miller's successor. "Throughout his career, he probably drew well over 10,000 cartoons. At that time, they were all paper, so the question is 'Where do you store all of this stuff?'"

"One day he walked into my office and said, 'I don't care what you think. I'm not going to end up sleeping in the alley like those guys below the building. I'm a drunk, and I'm going up to Methodist to get help,'" Michael Gartner remembers. "That floored me. I didn't know he was a drinker, and neither did his colleagues."

He pursued treatment and continued to return to the facility frequently in the last years of his life. His cartoons and artwork hang prominently on the walls of the Powell Treatment Center in Des Moines.

Chuck Offenburger recently had a conversation with a man who stopped him just off a bike trail near Herndon, Iowa.

"Who was that guy at the *Register*, the cartoonist? He was a Pulitzer Prize winner," he said. I said, 'Frank Miller.' He said, 'Yeah. When I was in treatment at the Powell Treatment Center, Frank Miller was around there, and he would come in and visit with different classes. That guy was great for me. He pulled me through because when I realized that somebody as successful as he was could have faced this disease himself at an earlier time and overcome

it, I knew there was hope for me.' I think that was true of an awful lot of people that he helped."

Tom Witosky entered the *Des Moines Register* newsroom in the late '70s after Miller's treatment. "He always had a look of empathy on his face," Witosky says. "Having gone through a lot of problems that a lot of people go through, he had a deep and abiding feeling for others, I think."

Miller died on a Thursday in the parking lot of the Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines. On Thursdays Miller would walk around the mall, observing Iowans, how they walked, what they bought, what they said. He was just 57.

"Miller owned the state. He really had a lock on Iowa. People were just absolutely shocked," Chuck Offenburger says.

"I marvel at the way his brain worked and the way that he could take something that was commonplace and view it in a way that was not so common. That takes a real eye," Randy Evans says. "We are so serious these days that we need people like Frank to remind us of the enjoyment of life and that we can see the positives in all of us and not just the negatives." ■■

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Organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in collaboration with the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

Support provided by The Donald and Marilyn Keough Family. Generous in-kind support for this exhibition is provided by Tru Vue, Inc. and Aiyve. Local support is provided by the Hunt and Diane Harris Family Foundation.

Wynn Bullock (American, 1902-1975), *Old Typewriter*, 1951, gelatin silver print, 7 1/16 x 97/16 in., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Gift of Lucinda W. Bunnen for the Bunnen Collection, 2012.594, © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

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