Historian Nancy Newhall described Eugene Smith’s work as “haunting and eternal”. She considered some of his pictures to be as powerful as Michelangelo’s drawings. Critic Gene Thornton found them “reminiscent of Old Master Paintings”. High praise for a photographer. But Gene Smith’s work inspired that kind of response.

Smith accompanied American troops in the Pacific during World War II, and he documented twelve island invasions. On his thirteenth mission he was badly wounded, and he spent painful years back in America convalescing.

About this memorable photograph, Smith wrote:

The children in the photograph are my children, and on the day I made this photographic effort, I was not sure I would be capable of ever photographing again...On this day, for the first time since my injuries, I would try again to make the camera work for me, would try to force my body to control the mechanics of the camera; and, as well, I would try to command my creative spirit out of its exile...

Something compelled that this first photograph must not be a failure-pray God that I could so much as physically force a roll of film into the camera! I was determined that this first photograph must sing of more than being a technical accomplishment...I was almost desperate in this determination, in my insistence that for some reason this first exposure must have a special quality.

This photograph of his two children, strolling so sublimely carefree down an enchanting garden path, became a metaphor for more than Smith’s bold affirmation of life after the nightmare of his wartime experience. It was chosen by Edward Steichen as the triumphant closing photograph of his majestic exhibition, “The Family of Man”. Heralded around the world as the greatest photographic exhibition ever assembled, it influenced the lives and thoughts of people in virtually every country in the world.

The exhibition, of course, did not bring about the world harmony for which Steichen and the photographers who contributed to the show had dared hope. But it did achieve astonishing, if immeasurable, results. Many who viewed these affecting images went away changed forever. Their feelings for their fellow man and the fragile planet they shared were strengthened perceptibly by the compelling power of black and white photographs-pictures that told a simple but gripping tale of man’s dependency on his fellow travelers for continuing peace and happiness.