Berenece Abbott  
American, 1898 –

While living in Paris in the 1920s Abbott assisted the artist Man Ray and made portraits of the major literary and artistic figures of the time, including the great French photographer Atget just before his death in 1927. It is largely due to her efforts that his work came to public attention. Abbott brought Atget’s uninfluenced documentary style to bear on New York City in the 1930s. This statement comes from Abbott’s 1935 proposal to the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project. The project was funded and published in 1939 as Changing New York.

To photograph New York City means to seek to catch in the sensitive and delicate photographic emulsion the spirit of the metropolis, while remaining true to its essential fact, its hurrying tempo, its congested streets, the past jostling the present. The concern is not with an architectural rendering of detail, the buildings of 1935 overshadowing everything else, but with a synthesis which shows the skyscraper in relation to the less colossal edifices which preceded it. City vistas, waterways, highways, all means of transportation, areas where peculiarly urban aspects of human living can be observed, crowds, city squares where the trees die for lack of sun and air, narrow and dark canyons where visibility fails because there is no light, litter blowing along a waterfront slip, relics of the age of General Grant or Queen Victoria where these have survived the onward march of the steam shovel; all these things and many more comprise New York City in 1935 and it is these aspects that should be photographed.

It is important that they should be photographed today, not tomorrow; for tomorrow may see many of these exciting and important mementos of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York swept away to make room for new colossi. Already many an amazing and incredible building which was, or could have been, photographed five years ago has disappeared. The tempo of the metropolis is not of eternity, or even time, but of the vanishing instant. Especially then has such a record a peculiarly documentary, as well as artistic, significance. All work that can salvage from oblivion the memorials of the metropolis will have value. Something of this purpose has been carried out as the exigencies of a busy life and the physical difficulties of the undertaking have permitted, but more could be done with ample leisure to devote wholly to the project and with more systematic assistance.
Tempo of the City, Fith Avenue and 42nd Street, Manhattan, September 6, 1938
Gelatin-silver print, 8½" x 7½"