

a history of photography from 1839 to the present

george eastman house collection

therese mulligan

A history of photography from 1839 to the present is a fascinating journey that chronicles the evolution of a medium that has profoundly influenced how we perceive and document the world. From its inception in the 19th century to the digital age, photography has undergone remarkable technological advancements and cultural shifts. The George Eastman House collection, along with the insights of Therese Mulligan, provides an invaluable lens through which to explore this rich history.

Early Beginnings: The Birth of Photography (1839-1860)

The year 1839 marks a pivotal moment in the history of photography when Louis Daguerre introduced the daguerreotype process. This revolutionary technique allowed for the first time the capturing of images on a metal plate, making photography accessible to the public.

The Daguerreotype

- Invented by Louis Daguerre in France.
- Required long exposure times, making it challenging for candid photography.
- Produced unique images on polished silver-plated copper, known for their sharpness and detail.
- Quickly became popular in Europe and America, leading to the establishment of portrait studios.

The Calotype and Collodion Processes

Following the daguerreotype, William Henry Fox Talbot introduced the calotype process in 1841, which utilized paper negatives and allowed for multiple prints from a single exposure. This was a significant advancement as it laid the groundwork for modern photography.

- Calotype advantages:
- Allowed for softer images and easier reproduction.
- Marked the transition to negative-positive processes.

In the 1850s, Frederick Scott Archer introduced the collodion wet plate process, which provided a balance between the detail of daguerreotypes and the reproducibility of calotypes.

- Key features of the collodion process:
- Required the plate to be exposed and developed while wet.
- Produced sharp, detailed images and became the standard for portraiture and landscape photography for many years.

The Rise of Commercial Photography (1860-1900)

As photography gained popularity, it transitioned into a commercial enterprise. Photographers began to explore various genres including portraiture, landscape, and documentary photography.

The Impact of the Civil War

The American Civil War (1861-1865) marked a significant point in the history of documentary photography. Photographers like Mathew Brady and his associates captured the grim realities of warfare, bringing the war's brutality into public consciousness.

- Notable contributions:
- Pioneered photojournalism and the concept of capturing historical events.
- Brady's photographs were instrumental in changing public perceptions of war.

The Introduction of Roll Film and Eastman's Innovations

In 1888, George Eastman revolutionized photography with the introduction of roll film and the Kodak camera, making photography accessible to the masses.

- Key innovations:
- The Kodak camera was pre-loaded with film and was simple enough for anyone to use.
- The slogan "You press the button, we do the rest" epitomized Eastman's vision of democratizing photography.

This innovation not only changed how images were captured but also fostered a culture of personal photography, enabling families to document their lives.

The 20th Century: Evolution and Artistic Movements (1900-1950)

The early 20th century witnessed photography's evolution as both a scientific practice and an art form. It was during this period that various movements emerged, each influencing the trajectory of photography.

Pictorialism and F-64 Group

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pictorialism emerged as a dominant aesthetic, emphasizing the artistic qualities of photographs through techniques such as soft focus and manipulation.

- Key figures:

- Alfred Stieglitz, who promoted pictorialism and later shifted towards straight photography.

In contrast, the F-64 group, which included photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, emphasized sharp focus and the inherent beauty of the natural world.

- Characteristics of the F-64 style:
- Use of large-format cameras.
- A focus on the technical precision of photography.

The Rise of Photojournalism

The interwar period also saw the rise of photojournalism, with magazines like Life and National Geographic showcasing powerful imagery that documented social issues, culture, and events.

- Notable photojournalists:
- Margaret Bourke-White, who captured the Great Depression and World War II.
- Henri Cartier-Bresson, known for his decisive moment philosophy.

The Post-War Era: Color Photography and Artistic Exploration (1950-2000)

The post-war era marked a significant shift in photography, with the introduction of color film and a growing acceptance of photography as an art form.

The Introduction of Color

While color photography had been experimented with since the late 19th century, the introduction of Kodachrome film in the 1930s led to its widespread use in the 1950s and 1960s.

- Impact of color photography:
- Allowed for a more vibrant representation of life.
- Became the medium of choice for advertising and fashion photography.

Conceptual and Performance Art

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of conceptual photography, where the idea behind the image became as important as the image itself. Artists like Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall explored identity, representation, and narrative through their work.

- Key characteristics:
- Staging and manipulation of scenes.
- Focus on themes of gender, identity, and societal norms.

The Digital Revolution (2000-Present)

The advent of digital technology has transformed photography in unprecedented ways. With the introduction of digital cameras and smartphones, photography became more accessible than ever.

The Impact of Digital Technology

Digital technology has drastically changed how images are captured, processed, and shared.

- Key developments:
- Digital cameras allowed for immediate feedback and editing.
- Social media platforms like Instagram and Flickr fostered a new community of photographers and enthusiasts.

Contemporary Photography Trends

Today, photography encompasses a wide range of styles and practices. Artists continue to push boundaries, exploring themes such as identity, technology, and the environment.

- Notable trends:
- The use of photography in mixed media and installations.
- A focus on social issues through documentary photography.

The George Eastman House Collection and Therese Mulligan's Contributions

The George Eastman House, founded in 1947, is one of the world's oldest photography museums and houses an extensive collection that chronicles the history of photography.

Significance of the Collection

The George Eastman House collection includes over 400,000 photographs, 20,000 films, and an array of cameras, making it a vital resource for understanding the evolution of photography.

- Areas of focus:
- Historical developments in photographic processes.
- Impact of photography on culture and society.

Therese Mulligan's Role

Therese Mulligan, a prominent figure in the field of photography, has played a crucial role in the preservation and interpretation of photographic history.

- Contributions:
- Curating exhibitions that highlight the significance of photographic art.
- Advocating for the importance of photography in contemporary culture.

Conclusion

The history of photography from 1839 to the present is a testament to human creativity and technological innovation. From the early daguerreotypes to the digital images of today, photography has shaped our understanding of the world around us. The George Eastman House collection and the work of Therese Mulligan serve as reminders of the importance of preserving and celebrating this extraordinary art form, ensuring that future generations can continue to explore and appreciate the rich tapestry of photographic history.

Frequently Asked Questions

What significant event in 1839 marked the beginning of photography as we know it?

In 1839, Louis Daguerre introduced the daguerreotype process, which was the first publicly announced photographic process and marked the beginning of photography as a medium.

How did George Eastman contribute to the development of photography?

George Eastman revolutionized photography by introducing the Kodak camera in 1888, making photography accessible to the general public through easy-to-use roll film.

What is the significance of the George Eastman House in the history of photography?

The George Eastman House, established in 1947, is one of the world's oldest photography museums, housing an extensive collection of photographs and photographic technology, preserving the history of photography.

Who is Therese Mulligan and what is her role in the context of photography?

Therese Mulligan is a prominent figure in the field of photography, known for her work in curating and

educating about photographic history, particularly through her association with the George Eastman Museum.

What impact did the invention of digital photography have on traditional photography?

The advent of digital photography in the late 20th century transformed the field by allowing for instantaneous image capture and manipulation, significantly altering how photographers create and share their work.

How has the George Eastman House collection evolved to reflect contemporary photography trends?

The George Eastman House collection has evolved by incorporating contemporary works and new media, showcasing the changing landscape of photography and its ongoing relevance in modern art and communication.

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