

An Enduring Present: Photography's Gift

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It has been my experience in my thirty years as a curator of prints and drawings and photographs that photography exhibitions have the most universal appeal. The reason is divivable. We are comfortable with photography, because we all make them. This gives us a unique frame of reference to judge whether a photograph is good or bad — good being one that we wish we had taken. Photography can also be the most despised of exhibits. Remember Robert Mapplethorpe. There is something more disturbing for many people in a photograph that is deemed pornographic than a drawing of the same sort, because we know that the photograph is real.

The camera doesn't lie. It has been a companionable machine for the last 160 years. It is incapable of prejudice. We trust it more than our memories, and so we consign to this apparatus, regardless of our ignorance of its mechanics and chemistry, the best moments of our lives — birthdays, graduations, marriages, births and in the Victorian era, deaths.

The inherent truthfulness of photography, which is to us its advantage, was to its disadvantage in being admitted to the realm of fine arts. No museum seriously collected photographs until the 1940s. Here is what Philip Gilbert Hamerton, an English critic had to say in 1860. "Photography is not a fine art, but an art science, narrow in range, emphatic in assertion . . . its literalness, its mechanical exactitude, and incapacity for selection and emphasis are antagonistic to the artistic spirit."



Certainly, at that date photography was imperfect. Take, for instance, Carlston Watkins' photograph of Half Dome in Yosemite made one year later. Watkins had to trundle one ton of equipment 200 miles by mule from San Francisco to reach the pristine valley. His camera

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Martin Krause

measured 31 inches on a side. His 18 by 22 inch glass plates weighed four pounds apiece and he was carrying 100. He had to transport a dark tent and the necessary chemicals to process the negatives on site. In those days, a photograph could not hold detail in both a bright sky and a shadowed foreground, so Watkins chose to overexpose his negative to capture all the detail in the rocks and trees at the expense of a nuanced sky and a rippling Merced River, which becomes in the process an unnaturally calm surface. Unlike painters of that era like Albert Bierstadt who were working at Yosemite, Watkins did not have the advantage of removing an offending tree or obtruding rock, but he did have the advantage that his view would be accepted as actual. Watkins' photographs convinced Congress that an Eden actually existed in the far west and that it should be preserved as it was in 1864 when Abraham Lincoln designated Yosemite as our first national park.



These technical difficulties had been overcome by 1938 when Ansel Adams took a photograph from nearly the exact same spot. I have been of the opinion that there is little virtue in a photographer reshooting a view that has previously been captured on film, and I often use these two photographs of Half Dome to make that point. But these two photographs are so different in format, tone and clarity that one might choose one over the other. No two photographs can be identical since moments in time do not repeat themselves, nor do any two photographers approach their subject in identical ways.

For this reason, Hamerton was fundamentally wrong. A camera is actually incapable of telling the truth. It removes one of the universe's three dimensions; it confines itself to the sense of sight, it reduces the infinite to a handy-sized sheet of paper; and it stops the perpetual motion of the spheres. Like any machine, it fabricates, and its handler, the photographer, is a habitual fabricator. In response to the general opinion in 19th century art circles that a photographer could not be a fine artist, because he was incapable of lying, I will show some examples that prove that a photographer — every photographer — is just as capable of a lie as the best painter and if that is the criterion, must have equal entré to the pantheon of fine artists.

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In 1950, Robert Doisneau photographed this kissing couple from a sidewalk café across from the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. The image captured so perfectly our predispositions about the romantic character of the French that this photograph became an immediate icon of the French love of life.



In that same year on the other side of the Atlantic noted New York street photographer, Arthur Fellig better known as Weegee the Famous photographed in infra-red film a remarkably similar embracing couple in a darkened movie theater wearing those silly cardboard glasses common at the time for viewing 3-D movies. In its way it is as perfect a reflection of American culture and mores as Doisneau's was of the French.

In 1990, Doisneau was summoned into court by a couple who recognized themselves in the photograph and felt that they were due some compensation. It was only then that Doisneau fessed up. The woman in the photograph was an actress, the man, her boyfriend and the event

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Martin Krause

staged. Almost unbelievably, the Weegee photograph has a similar back story. We acquired it last year in a trove of Weegee photographs that was deemed worthy of an article in the *New York Times*, illustrated with this image. I got a call the next day from a lady in Boca Raton. That was her in the picture and her husband. They were close friends of Weegee and the smooch was a set-up. Our belief in the literal truth of these two photographs is shattered. What we believed to be a photograph of a “decisive moment,” as Cartier Bresson called such lucky breaks, was instead a decided moment. But on another level, should we deny the photographer the right to invent, to design, and to create a story which has never been denied to other artists? Indeed in the Renaissance, *inventione*, *disegno* and *historia* were the barometers by which a painter's genius was gauged. The fact that we found truth in the images of Doisneau and Weegee is a credit to their perception.



A more obvious fabrication was literally constructed by Scott Mutter. He excelled in the technique of photomontage, a technique as old as the invention of glass plate negatives in 1850. By sandwiching a negative of a grove of trees on the campus of the University of Illinois with another of the parquet floor in the performing arts center there, and masking out what wasn't useful to him, Mutter created his *Forest*. Most people react by calling it surreal, but it has little in common with the chaos of the world of dreams. There is rightness to the pairing, and Mutter preferred the term “surrational.” That term has everything to do with Mutter's unorthodox path to photomontage. He was not trained in photography, but in Chinese language. He had learned that in Chinese calligraphy, one character representing an object, when combined with a second objective sign created a third character which stood for a concept. His photographs partook of the same rational construct.

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At first glance, one would not believe that this wonderful caprice by Harry Callahan is a photograph at all. By photographing this weed against a winter sky in Detroit and by overexposing it in the darkroom to remove all extraneous detail, Callahan crafted an image that has more kinship to a whimsical Paul Klee line drawing than to a landscape. Callahan took the notion to the limit, but all photography is an abstraction of nature, just as all painting is an abstraction as Paul Gauguin precociously said in 1890.

If one considers a camera a tool like a paint brush or chisel, and the photographer as a man or woman with all the rights and prerogatives of any other artist, then there should not have ever been any doubt that the cream of the crop would rise to the level of fine art. In terms of its embrace by the public in the forms of photography or of its off-spring, film and video, and in terms of its impact on its sister arts, photography is the significant art of our time. It is no coincidence, that at the invention of photography in 1839, painters went off in search of subjects that couldn't be seen with the eye or the lens: Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstraction.

A photograph only tells a frail truth. Its importance is what the viewer brings to the table. It is like Dumbledore's pensieve. It is a preserve jar from which memories can be elicited, emotions engaged, history revealed and human associations connected. The aggregate of billions of photographs by billions of photographers over the past century and a half have created a chronicle of the mundane such as never existed before. This is the significance of photography — the gift of an enduring present.