

The versatility of Photography

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Through the technique of photography visual images of events, people and places can be recorded. It can also be a creative tool to produce works of art.

The word photography means 'drawing with light'. While the first recorded photographs needed up to eight hours exposure from the sun as (moving) light source, the light source is now fixed and pictures are captured in an instant. Yet the creative effect of moving light is still being explored. Light can even become the subject itself. (See **Light trail**, p.96. Worobiec.)

History of photography

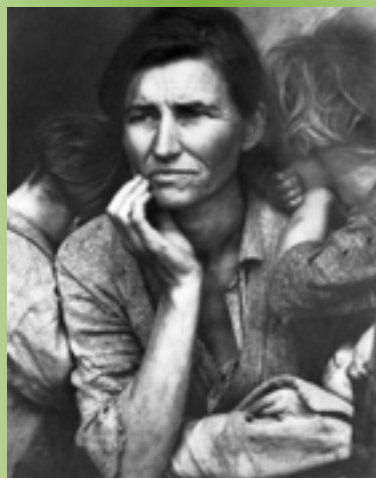
The camera concept, light entering through a pinhole of a light tight room or box causing an upside down reflection at the back, was already used by 16th century artists to assist them to draw accurately.

In the 19th century, light sensitive chemicals were applied on metal plates to capture and keep the images made by a camera. William Henry Talbot first fixed images permanently on paper (1839). Flexible gelatine film was introduced in 1881. By the end of the 1880s over 20 000 professional photographers in America, Britain and Germany opened up a new world to the public, previously only seen if they travelled there.

Two directions developed: those who aimed at recording information and pictorialist photographers who emphasised aesthetic qualities. The Pictorialists turned to the Impressionists, Whistler and the Japanese art for inspiration. Philip Henry Emerson (1856-1936) advocated focusing on individual



*This photograph (**Light trail**) was taken in a studio where a figure was draped with Christmas tree lights and walked past the camera, while the film was exposed for 5 seconds. The colour saturation was enhanced in Photoshop*



***Migrant mother**, Dorothea Lange, 1936. Gelatin silver print. A social document - showing strength of spirit in the midst of poverty during the American depression*

features (similar to human sight), instead of recording everything in a photograph in sharp detail. Both the subjects chosen and the darkroom techniques employed deviated from the norm. While techniques were developed at first to produce an accurate presentation of the subject, specific effects (emitting halftones or details or changing tonal values) were now aimed for, with various chemicals.

Documentary photography

Rapportage blossomed after World War One. The smaller, more portable 35mm camera was invented in the 1920s. Politicians and famous people were often captured (and caught off guard) and ordinary people photographed. **Life Magazine** (United States, launched 1936) and **Picture Post** (Britain 1938) contributed to an explosion of photographic images in the media. Pictures of foreign places were published, the everyday life of the working class and behind the scenes of government. By highlighting the hardship people endured, it was hoped to bring about social change. (Dorothea Lange (1895-1965); **Migrant mother**, p.175. Lucie-Smith) the dignity of the subject was maintained. Black and white photography dominated for 50 years.

Every aspect and conflict of World War Two was photographed. Lee Miller (female war correspondent) accompanied the American army across France into Germany. She also revealed the reality of the Holocaust at Dachau. With the help of the police radio, Weegee (Arthur Fellig, 1899-1968) arrived first at a crime or accident scene, which enabled him to capture a raw, brutal and uncensored vision of life.



Above left: **Violon d'Ingres**, Man Ray, 1924. Partial rayograph. In surrealist style the photographer has superimposed the violin apertures onto the model



Above: **Untitled**, Jerry Uelsmann. 1969. Silver gelatin print. Here the photographer has manipulated various photo images to create an art work

Colour photography

The brothers Lumière marketed the first colour photographs in 1904. Although being used for snapshots, commercial fashion and advertising, colour was initially not used for art photography. In 1976 William Eggleston surprised the public with his exhibition of mundane, everyday objects photographed in colour.

Photography integrated avant-garde art as well. Francisco Infante made open-air installations in the 1980s, to be photographed and thereby reduced to two-dimensional images.

In a series of self-portraits Cindy Sherman shows various roles of women in society, films and the media. The function of images from films remembered by American society is highlighted.

Joel-Peter Witkin reverts back to the Victorian and Edwardian ideal of photographic 'art'. His post-modern photographs portray a world of death and deformity, with images of freaks, cripples, corpses and horrors, while deliberately flouting social and sexual conventions. Images are scratched, stained and mistreated to acquire the patina of nineteenth-century prints.

Eventually an original photograph is not created, but an existing one re-introduced. Images we have become accustomed to, receive a fresh meaning when seen in an unconventional way.

Digital cameras, introduced in the 1990s, use a charge-coupled device (CCD) instead of film. Light focused on the CCD is changed into electronic signals. Images can be viewed immediately on the liquid crystal screen (LCD). Software eliminates the

Television started taking over the role of the documentarists when it became popular in the 1950s and finally displaced photography and the press as the primary means of information in the 1970s. This strengthened the position of photography within the arts.

Photography as art

The mechanical process of photography challenged the definition of art, so that it was initially not seen as part of the mainstream art world. By the 1990s photography was finally shown alongside sculpture and painting.

Like the twentieth century painters, photographers aimed to create a personal, visual language. Photographic images contribute to debates about truth, our culture and the role of the image, while challenging accepted viewpoints.

The contemporary photographer pushes the expressive qualities of the medium in order to transcend conventional borders. In an attempt to break away from the 'documenting' role of photography, images have been solarised and negatives microwaved to delete information and destroy the illusion of reality. Textures introduced obscure detail. Line, form, colour, texture and composition have been manipulated, while not regarding the rules of proportion and perspective.

In an attempt to keep in step with the current surrealist art movement, Man Ray (1890-1976) created a visual pun by superimposing the f-shaped apertures of the violin on the image of the naked back of his mistress (**Violon d'Ingres**, p.143. Lucie-Smith).

Jerry Uelsmann used the camera in **Untitled** (p.293. Lucie-Smith) to create an image rather than record the visible truth. It corresponds with the Surrealist, René Magritte's art.



Self-portrait, Cindy Sherman. 1983. The various roles of women in society are the subjects of her most notable photographs

Bernd and Hilla Becher used photography as a vehicle for conceptual ideas. They documented the fast-disappearing industrial typology, with its working class way of life. Although seemingly objective, the images are suffused with emotion and hidden political agenda.

chemical processes and lengthy dark-room printing.

Techniques used

Multi-exposure

Photographs record a fraction of a second in time, but time and place can be extended. With some old format cameras more than one image can be exposed on the same frame or sheet of film. Alternatively, the film can be rewound and exposed again. Success is determined by the subject matter selected, tonality and weight of each exposure. The same result can be achieved digitally.

Multi-exposure movement

Movement can be shown by using a slow shutter speed, causing the subject to blur. Alternatively, by using multi-exposure on the same sheet or film, the moving image will be repeated in a slightly different place on the film. Exposure time is determined by the number of exposures.

Multiple printing

With two or more negatives images can be altered during the printing stage, resulting in a credible, but not necessarily naturalistic final image. Digitally monochrome and colour pictures can easily be merged. Non-photographic images (drawings, paintings, letters, maps, leaves, flowers, textured paper, et cetera) can be digitally incorporated by using a flatbed scanner.

Photomontage

Images that deal with a chosen concept or idea are grouped together and rephotographed. This was popular in the early 20th century. The Dadaists combined photographs, drawings and newspaper cuttings to produce witty and ironic images with a social or political message. David Hockney joined photographs of details of a scene into one picture that relates to cubism, with its fragmented and broken-up perspective. Images are even deliberately distressed by crumpling, tearing, ageing and staining photographs. (For example, Morel Defler, p. 23. Luciana.)

Infrared photography

Invisible infrared wavelengths that relate to colours are made visible by infrared film. When a strong beam of infrared is reflected (for example, foliage in a landscape) images will be light, while objects that absorb infrared will be dark (blue sky and water will be almost black). Highlights will give an ethereal, halated look. Infrared is recorded as red, red



*Morel Defler, from the series **No man's land**. Toned and hand-coloured silver gelatin print. Defler erases the image with sandpaper from the negative, prints it on silver gelatin paper in sepia tones and hand-colours it*



Altered identities, Alida Fish. Digitally-altered and toned photograph (51 cm x 41 cm)

as green and green as blue. Visible light is blocked out from the light-sensitive film with filters. With yellow or red filters, blue can be removed to produce blue in the final image. Similar images can be manipulated digitally as well.

Printing in edges

To prove truth and integrity, the whole negative was printed during the photojournalist tradition, showing the rebate. In the dark-room a cardboard mask gives the same effect. Interesting edges can also be made with torn

paper, rough brush painting and liquid emulsion. When cropping work digitally, ready-made digital frames can be utilised or one's own designed.

Soft focus and blur

The lens most often focuses on one plane (the film), so depth of field and sharpness are adjusted by alternating the aperture or the lens. With creative camera controls and printing techniques, a personal view of the world can be achieved (see Philip Henry Emerson). Special filters will diffuse the light and even Vaseline smeared on the outer edges of a filter creates a softened effect. These effects can also be achieved digitally.

Alternative methods of toning

Classic darkroom toning processes include sepia, selenium, gold, copper and iron-blue toning. More chemical possibilities have been developed and digitally virtually any colour combination is possible. With selective toning only a section of the print is toned.

Digitally altered

Andreas Gursky uses a large format camera that enables him to capture a tremendous amount of detail on a large sheet film for two to three metre images. Shapes are digitally exaggerated by straightening horizons, repeating lines, enhancing colour and deleting details, while still maintaining credibility (for example, Alida Fish, p. 127, Luciana).

Even when seemingly visually recording, photography is a 'false reality...forged and directed by the artist.' Yet, much processed and altered, photographic images still seem to represent something which took place in real life.

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