

Photography Until Now

February 18–May 29, 1990

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MAJOR HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

PHOTOGRAPHY UNTIL NOW, an exhibition celebrating the medium's sesquicentennial and the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography, opens at the Museum on February 18, 1990. This is the Museum's first loan exhibition to survey photography's history since Beaumont Newhall's landmark centenary presentation PHOTOGRAPHY: 1839 - 1937. The current exhibition and its accompanying publication offer a basic reinterpretation of the evolution of photographic tradition, enriched by new research and the discovery of little-known historical work.

On view until May 29, PHOTOGRAPHY UNTIL NOW has been organized by John Szarkowski, director of the Museum's Department of Photography. The exhibition and publication are supported by a generous grant from Springs Industries, Inc., and are part of the Springs of Achievement Series on the Art of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art.

PHOTOGRAPHY UNTIL NOW, comprising approximately 275 images, and the book by Mr. Szarkowski depart from the pattern of conventional photographic history. Instead of treating the technical evolution of the medium and the achievements of its most talented practitioners as basically unrelated issues, Mr. Szarkowski sees the history of photographs in terms of the dynamic interaction of technological development and individual genius, of social and economic challenge and personal response.

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The exhibition's presentation focuses on the most influential factors in each stage of photography's development. During photography's first half-century, rapidly evolving methods for fixing an image interacted with photographers' expanding awareness of the medium's commercial and artistic possibilities. Later the impact of the photomechanical revolution, which allowed the mass reproduction of photographs in ink, revised the list of subjects that were economically viable. More recently, television has displaced print as the standard method of pictorial reportage. During the same period the conception and teaching of photography as a fine art have changed. These developments are reflected in a generous selection of pictures by acknowledged masters of the medium as well as by approximately forty images made by unknown photographers.

Early methods of photography are represented by examples of the daguerreotype and the calotype, in use from about 1839 until the mid-1850s. The daguerreotype--a method that produced unique objects--was used principally to make portraits for private use. Because the calotype, on the other hand, was capable of producing multiple images, it enabled photography to serve cultural and national aims, as in the extraordinary photographs in the exhibition made by the Scottish team David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in the mid-1840s, and those of the French calotypists active in the 1850s, including Charles Nègre and Henri Le Secq.

Products of the wet-plate (or collodion) system combine the extraordinary clarity of the daguerreotype with the potential for multiple original prints. The deliberate, conceptual nature of the wet-plate system, which was employed from about 1855 to 1880, was an important factor in the professionalization of photography, while the size and clarity of its prints made it an excellent medium for recording sites and monuments, the aftermath

of battle, or likenesses of public figures. Among such works represented in the exhibition are wet-plate pictures made by Roger Fenton in England, Charles Marville in France, and Timothy O'Sullivan and others in the United States who sharpened their skills during the Civil War and made extraordinary photographs in the West in the 1860s and 1870s, when American photography came of age.

In the 1880s, the introduction of the gelatin or dry emulsion process, together with the commercial genius of George Eastman, transformed photography. The simple new methods that made possible "photography for everyone" created new tasks for the medium, such as the analysis of movement, and introduced a more spontaneous, improvisatory approach. Also in that decade, the halftone screen was developed as a means of reproducing the illusion of the continuously graduated tones of photography. Coupled with the relief printing processes, the halftone block made possible a more intimate integration of words and pictures that had been absent from books since the invention of movable type, and it fundamentally altered photography's ends and means. The exhibition includes inventive examples of the news illustrations and advertisements that incorporated photography, drawing, and type on a single page by the beginning of the twentieth century.

A mass audience was provided for photography by the picture publications pioneered in Germany in the 1920s. With it came the need to invest a subject with the glamour or importance possessed naturally only by a few objects or individuals, leading to the development of celebrity portraiture and fashion photography, represented by outstanding selections in the exhibition by photographers such as Adolf de Meyer and Irving Penn.

The increasing authority of the publications was accompanied by a concern by photographers for the integrity of their work. With the picture magazines' decline in the 1960s, photographers like Penn, Robert Frank, and

Garry Winogrand adapted the styles of fashion or photojournalism to personal expression. This change also coincided with the erosion of the professional photographer's influence after a century of dominance.

The explosion of photographic education in the 1960s and 1970s brought a new, resolutely artistic perspective to photography and once again revised the conception of what a photograph could be. By the 1970s, color photography had become an important medium for many artists. Modes of photography were developed that explore modernist concerns, such as the fictionalized self-portrait and staged scenes or studio tableaux made to be photographed. Artists also enlisted photography to document conceptual works of many kinds, thus giving it a broad presence within contemporary art. The exhibition concludes with pieces made during the 1980s by artists including Tina Barney, Lee Friedlander, David Hockney, Chris Killip, Judith Joy Ross, Lucas Samaras, Cindy Sherman, and William Wegman.

Following its New York showing, PHOTOGRAPHY UNTIL NOW travels to The Cleveland Museum of Art (June 27 - August 19, 1990).

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.