

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



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NEW THEORY EXAMINED IN EXHIBITION OF PAINTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY: PAINTING AND THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY, an exhibition consisting of some 40 paintings and drawings dating from 1780 to 1840, as well as a comparable number of photographs representing some of the best and most original work of early photographers, will open at The Museum of Modern Art in the East Wing Galleries on May 9. The exhibition, directed by Peter Galassi, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Photography, will remain on view through July 5, 1981.

Photography was invented in the early decades of the nineteenth century by four or five individuals working independently of each other. Each of the inventors combined two scientific principles that had been known for some time: first, that light passing through a small aperture in one wall of a dark chamber would form an image on the opposite wall; second, that certain light-sensitive chemicals could be used to render that image permanent. The former principle had been known for hundreds of years, the latter for nearly a century.

Despite the lapse of time between the discovery of these principles and the invention of photography, historians have generally concentrated on scientific and technical issues, paying little attention to the role of artistic tradition in the invention of photography. Consequently, photography has been regarded generally as an artistic outsider, a technical accomplishment which proceeded to disrupt the course of painting. BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY will challenge this approach. "Photography was not a

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bastard left by science on the doorstep of art," states Mr. Galassi, "but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition."

The paintings and drawings to go on view, primarily from European collections, are landscapes by such master artists as Constable and Corot and by some of their talented but less well-known contemporaries. Many of these works, such as the oil sketches by Francois-Marius Granet, have never been seen before in the United States. The photographic section of the exhibition, drawn from the Museum's Collection and other public and private collections, presents work by outstanding early photographers, including William Henry Fox Talbot, Gustave Le Gray, and Timothy O'Sullivan.

Ever since the Renaissance invention of linear perspective, artists had considered vision the sole basis for representation: every perspective picture shows its subject as it would be seen from a particular point of view, at a particular moment. Yet only gradually did painters develop formal strategies capable of suggesting the immediacy and relativity of everyday visual experience. Only after centuries of experiment did they come to value pictures that seem to be caught by the eye rather than composed by the mind. Photography, Mr. Galassi contends, was born of this fundamental transformation in artistic value.

The fragmentary, contingent perceptions that characterize modern art first appear in force in the small landscapes exhibited in BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY. Modest in scale and ostensible ambition, these works are often astonishingly inventive. They represent the emergence of a tentative but profoundly original sense of pictorial order, based on a heretical concern for the visual aspect of the most humble things. The pictures are, in Galassi's view, "the clearest

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symptom of the broad artistic transformation that catalyzed the invention of photography. These landscapes present a new and fundamentally modern pictorial syntax of immediate, synoptic perceptions and discontinuous, unexpected forms." Galassi continues, "It is the syntax of an art devoted to the singular and contingent rather than the universal and stable. It is also the syntax of photography." The photographic section of the exhibition illustrates this argument by demonstrating the artistic capital that the best early photographers made of the new pictorial strategy, which painters had long been inventing and which photographers could not avoid.

Following the opening of the exhibition, the Department of Education will present, in conjunction with the Department of Photography, a series of lectures exploring the artistic context of photography's invention. Peter Galassi will deliver the first of these lectures, a consideration of the exhibition's major thesis, on Tuesday, May 12 at 8:15 p.m. The following Monday, May 18, Robert Rosenblum, Professor of Fine Arts at New York University, will speak. The last lecture on Tuesday, May 26, will be by Kirk Varnedoe, Associate Professor, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Tickets for the lectures are \$4, members \$3, students with current I.D. \$2.50. Tickets will be available at the Lobby Information Desk or by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope with payment to Education Department, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.

Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography, a 156-page catalogue, will be published by The Museum of Modern Art to accompany the exhibition, and will be distributed by the New York Graphic Society. Included will be an introductory essay by Mr. Galassi and 80 single-page plates of works in the exhibition, 8 of them in color. In addition,

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the book will contain a catalogue entry for each work and an extensive bibliography. Before Photography will sell for \$22.50 clothbound and \$12.50 paperbound.

After the exhibition closes at The Museum of Modern Art, it will travel to Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska; The University of California's Frederick S. Wight Art Galleries in Los Angeles; and the Art Institute of Chicago.

BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY and the lecture series exploring its thesis have been made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Sharon Zane, Associate Director, 956-7295, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.
