

# VitalSource Bookshelf: Humanities through the Arts

276

## Chapter 11

### PHOTOGRAPHY

#### Photography and Painting

The first demonstration of photography took place in Paris in 1839, when Louis J. M. Daguerre (1787–1851) astonished a group of French artists and scientists with the first Daguerreotypes. The process was almost instantaneous, producing a finely detailed monochrome image on a silver-coated copper plate. At that demonstration, the noted French painter Paul Delaroche declared, “From today painting is dead.” An examination of his famous painting *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (Figure 11-1) reveals the source of his anxiety. Delaroche’s reputation was built on doing what the photograph does best—reproducing exact detail and exact perspective. However, the camera could not yet reproduce the large size or the colors that make Delaroche’s painting powerful.

#### PERCEPTION KEY Execution of Lady Jane Grey

1. What aspects of Delaroche’s style of painting would have made him think of photography as a threat? In what ways is this painting

similar to a photograph?

2. Why is it surprising to learn that this painting was exhibited five years before Delaroche saw a photograph—actually before the invention of photography?
3. Examine Delaroche's painting for attention to detail. This is a gigantic work, much larger than any photograph could be at mid-nineteenth century. Every figure is reproduced with the same sharpness, from foreground to background. To what extent is that approach to sharpness of focus like or unlike what might have been achieved by a photograph of this scene?
4. How does color focus our attention in Delaroche's painting?

277

**FIGURE 11-1**

**Paul Delaroche, *Execution of Lady Jane Grey*. 1843. Oil on canvas, 97 × 117 inches. National Gallery, London, Great Britain.** Delaroche witnessed the first demonstration of photography in 1839 and declared, "From today painting is dead." His enormous painting had great size and brilliant color, two ways, for the time being, in which photography could be superseded.

©HIP/Art Resource, NY

Some early critics of photography complained that the camera does not offer the control over the subject matter that painting does. But the camera does offer the capacity to crop and select the area of the final print, the capacity to alter the aperture of the lens and thus control the focus in selective areas, as well as the capacity to reveal movement in blurred scenes, all of which only suggest the ability of the instrument to transform visual experience into art.

Many early photographs exhibit the capacity of the camera to capture

and control details in a manner that informs the viewer about the subject matter. For example, in his portrait of Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1857), a great builder of steamships (Figure 11-2), Robert Howlett exposed the negative for a shorter time and widened the aperture of his lens (letting in more light), thus controlling the depth of field (how much is in focus). Brunel's figure is in focus, but surrounding objects are in soft focus, rendering them less significant. The pile of anchor chains in the background is

278

**FIGURE 11-2**

**Robert Howlett, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel*. 1857.** This portrait of a great English engineer reveals its subject without flattery, without a sense of romance, and absolutely without a moment of sentimentality. Yet the photograph is a monument to power and industry.

©Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy

massive, but the soft focus makes them subservient to Brunel. The huge chains make this image haunting, but if they were in sharp focus, they would have distracted from Brunel. In *Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, almost everything is in sharp focus, while the white of Jane's dress and the red of the executioner's leggings focus our attention.

Brunel's posture is typical of photographs of the mid-nineteenth century. We have many examples of men lounging with hands in pockets and cigar in mouth, but few paintings portray men this way. Few photographs of any age show us a face quite like Brunel's. It is relaxed, as much as Brunel could relax, but it is also impatient, "bearing with" the photographer. And the eyes are sharp, businessman's eyes. The details of the rumpled clothing and jewelry do not compete with the sharply rendered face and the expression of control and power. Howlett has done, by simple devices such as

varying the focus, what many portrait painters do by much more complex means—reveal something of the character of the model.

Julia Margaret Cameron's portrait of Sir John Herschel (1867) (Figure 11-3) and Étienne Carjat's portrait of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1870) (Figure 11-4) use a plain studio background. But their approaches are also different from each other. Cameron, who reported being interested in the way her lens could soften detail, isolates Herschel's face and hair. She drapes his shoulders with a black velvet shawl so that his clothing will not tell us anything about him or distract us from his face. Cameron catches the stubble on his chin and permits his hair to "burn out," so we perceive it as a luminous halo. The huge eyes, soft and bulbous with their deep curves of surrounding flesh, and the downward curve of the mouth are depicted

279

**FIGURE 11-3**

**Julia Margaret Cameron, *Sir John Herschel*. 1867.** One of the first truly notable portrait photographers, Cameron was given a camera late in life and began photographing her friends, most of whom were prominent in England. After a few years she gave up the camera entirely, but she left an indelible mark on early photography.

©REX/Shutterstock

**FIGURE 11-4**

**Étienne Carjat, *Charles Baudelaire*. 1870.** The irony of this striking portrait lies in the fact that the famous French poet was totally opposed to photography as an art.

Source: The National Gallery of Art

fully in the harsh lighting. While we do not know what he was thinking, the form of this photograph reveals him as a thinker of deep ruminations. He was the chemist who first learned how to permanently fix a silver halide photograph in 1839.

The portrait of Baudelaire, on the other hand, includes simple, severe clothing, except for the poet's foulard, tied in a dashing bow. Baudelaire's intensity creates the illusion that he is looking at us. Carjat's lens was set for a depth of field of only a few inches. Thus, Baudelaire's face is in focus, but not his shoulders. What Carjat could not control, except by waiting for the right moment to uncover the lens (at this time, there was no shutter because there was no "fast" film), was the exact expression he could catch.

One irony of the Carjat portrait is that Baudelaire, in 1859, had condemned the influence of photography on art, declaring it "art's most mortal enemy." He thought that photography was adequate for preserving visual records of perishing things but that it could not reach into "anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man's soul." Baudelaire was a champion of imagination and an opponent of realistic art: "Each day art further diminishes its self-respect by bowing down before external reality; each day the painter becomes more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees."<sup>1</sup>

An impressive example of the capacity of the photographic representation is Timothy O'Sullivan's masterpiece, *Canyon de Chelley, Arizona*, made in 1873 (Figure 11-5). Many photographers have gone back to this scene, but none has treated it quite the way O'Sullivan did. O'Sullivan chose a moment of intense sidelighting, which falls on the rock wall but not on the nearest group of buildings. One question you might ask about this photograph is whether it reveals the "stoniness" of this rock wall in a manner similar to the way Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (see [Figure 2-4](#)) reveals the "mountainness" of the mountain.

**FIGURE 11-5**

**Timothy O'Sullivan, *Canyon de Chelley, Arizona*. 1873.** The American West lured photographers with unwieldy equipment to remote locations such as this. Other photographers have visited the site, but none has outdone O'Sullivan, who permitted the rock to speak for itself.

Source: The J. Paul Getty Museum

**EXPERIENCING Photography and Art**

1. Do you agree with Baudelaire that photography is “art’s most mortal enemy”? What reasons might Baudelaire have had for expressing such a view?

For some time, photography was not considered an art. Indeed, some people today do not see it as an art because they assume the photograph is an exact replica of what is in front of the camera lens. On the other hand, realism in art had been an ideal since the earliest times, and sculptures such as *David* (see [Figure 5-8](#)) aimed at an exact replica of a human body, however idealized. Modern artists such as Andy Warhol blur the line of art by creating exact replicas of objects such as Campbell’s soup cans, so the question of replication is not the final question in art. Baudelaire saw that painters could be out of work—especially portrait painters—if photography were widespread. Yet, his own photographic portrait is of powerful artistic interest today.

For Baudelaire, photographs were usually Daguerreotypes, which means they were one of a kind. The “print” on silvered copper was the photograph. There was no negative and no way of altering the tones in the print. Shortly after, when the Daguerreotype process was superseded by inventions such as the glass plate negative, it became

possible to subtly alter details within the photograph much as a painter might alter the highlights in a landscape or improve the facial details in a portrait. This is a matter of craft, but it became clear that in careful selection of what is in the photographic print, along with the attention to manipulating the print, in the fashion of Ansel Adams's great photographs of Yosemite, the best photographers became artists. Were Baudelaire alive to see how photography has evolved, he may well have changed his opinion. The work of Julia Margaret Cameron, Timothy O'Sullivan, Eugène Atget, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, and Edward Weston changed the world's view of whether or not photography is an art.

1. Baudelaire's writings suggest that he believed art depended on imagination and that realistic art was the opponent of imagination. How valid do you feel this view is? Is it not possible for imagination to have a role in making a photograph?
2. Read a poem from Baudelaire's most celebrated volume, *The Flowers of Evil*. You might choose "Twilight: Evening" from a group he called "Parisian Scenes." In what ways is his poem unlike a photograph?
3. Considering his attitude toward photography, why would he have sat for a portrait such as Carjat's? Would you classify this portrait as a work of art? What does the photograph reveal?

The most detailed portions of the photograph are the striations of the rock face, whose tactile qualities are emphasized by the strong sidelighting. The stone buildings in the distance have smoother

textures, particularly as they show up against the blackness of the cave. That the buildings are only twelve to fifteen feet high is indicated by comparison with the height of the barely visible men standing in the ruins. Thus, nature dwarfs the work of humans. By framing the canyon wall, and by waiting for the right light, O'Sullivan has done more than create an ordinary "record" photograph. He has concentrated on the subject matter of the puniness and softness of humans, in contrast with the grandness and hardness of the canyon. The content centers on the extraordinary sense of stoniness—symbolic of permanence—as opposed to the transience of humanity, made possible by the capacity of the camera to transform realistic detail.

## **Photography and Painting: The Pictorialists**

***Pictorialists*** are photographers who use the achievements of painting, particularly realistic painting, in their effort to realize the potential of photography as art. The early pictorialists tried to avoid the head-on directness of Howlett and Carjat, just as they tried to avoid the amateur's mistakes in composition, such as inclusion of distracting details and imbalance. The pictorialists controlled details by subordinating them to structure. They produced compositions that usually relied on the same underlying structures found in most nineteenth-century paintings until the dominance of the Impressionists in the 1880s. Normally, the most important part of the subject matter was centered in the frame. Pictorial lighting, also borrowed from painting, often was sharp and clearly directed, as in Alfred Stieglitz's *Paula* (Figure 11-6).

The pictorialist photograph was usually soft in focus, centrally weighted, and carefully balanced symmetrically. By relying on the



**FIGURE 11-6**

**Alfred Stieglitz, *Sunrays, Paula*. 1889.** Stieglitz photographed Paula in such a way as to suggest the composition of a painting, framing her in darkness while bathing her in window light.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-DIG-ds-00183]

early- and mid-nineteenth-century paintings, pictorialist photographers often evoked emotions that bordered on the sentimental. Indeed, one of the complaints modern commentators have about the development of pictorialism is that it was emotionally shallow.

Rarely criticized for sentimentalism, Alfred Stieglitz was, in his early work, a master of the pictorial style. His *Paula*, done in 1889, places his subject at the center in the act of writing. The top and bottom of the scene are printed in deep black. The light, streaking through the venetian blind and creating lovely strip patterns, centers on Paula. Her profile is strong against the dark background partly because Stieglitz removed, during the printing process, one of the strips that would have fallen on her lower face. The strong vertical lines of the window frames reinforce the verticality of the candle and echo the back of the chair.

A specifically photographic touch is present in the illustrations on the wall: photographs arranged symmetrically in a triangle (use a magnifying glass). Two prints of the same lake-skyscape are on each side of a woman in a white dress and hat. The same photograph of this woman is on the writing table in an oval frame. Is it Paula? The light in the room echoes the light in the oval portrait. The three hearts in the

arrangement of photographs are balanced; one heart touches the portrait of a young man. We wonder if Paula is writing to him. The cage on the wall has dominant vertical lines, crossing the light lines cast by the venetian blind. Stieglitz may be suggesting that Paula, despite the open window, may be in a cage of her own. Stieglitz has kept

283

most of the photograph in sharp focus because most of the details have something to tell us. If this were a painting of the early nineteenth century—for example, one by Delaroche—we would expect much the same style. We see Paula in a dramatic moment, with dramatic light, and with an implied narrative suggested by the artifacts surrounding her. It is up to the viewer to decide what, if anything, the drama implies.

### **PERCEPTION KEY Pictorialism and Sentimentality**

1. Pictorialists are often condemned for their sentimentality. What is sentimentality? Is it a positive or negative quality in a photograph?
2. Is *Paula* sentimental? What is its subject matter and what is its content?
3. To what extent is sentimentality present in the work of Cameron or Carjat? Which photographs in this chapter could be considered sentimental?

Both paintings and photographs, of course, can be sentimental in subject matter. The severest critics of such works complain about their ***sentimentality***: the falsifying of feelings by demanding responses that are superficial or easy to come by. Sentimentality is usually an

oversimplification of complex emotional issues. It also tends to be mawkish and self-indulgent. The case of photography is special because we are accustomed to the harshness of the camera. Thus, when the pictorialist finds tenderness, romance, and beauty in everyday occurrences, we become suspicious. We may be more tolerant of painting doing those things, but in fact we should be wary of any such emotional "coloration" in any medium if it is not restricted to the subject matter.

The pictorialist approach, when not guilty of sentimentalism, has great strengths. The use of lighting that selectively emphasizes the most important features of the subject matter often helps in creating meaning. Borrowing from the formal structures of painting also may help clarify subject matter. Structural harmony of the kind we generally look for in representational painting is possible in photography. Although it is not limited to the pictorialist approach, it is clearly fundamental to that approach.

## **Straight Photography**

In his later work, beginning around 1905, Alfred Stieglitz pioneered the movement of [\*straight photography\*](#), a reaction against pictorialism. The [\*f/64 Group\*](#), working in the 1930s, and a second school, the [\*Documentarists\*](#), continue the tradition. Straight photographers took the position that, as Aaron Siskind said in the 1950s, "Pictorialism is a kind of dead end making everything look beautiful." The straight photographer wanted things to look essentially as they do, even if they are ugly.

Straight photography aimed toward excellence in photographic techniques, independent of painting. Susan Sontag summarizes: "For

a brief time—say, from Stieglitz through the reign of Weston—it appeared that a solid point of view had been erected with which to evaluate photographs: impeccable lighting, skill of composition, clarity of subject, precision of focus, perfection of print quality."<sup>2</sup> Some of these qualities are shared by pictorialists, but new principles of composition—not

284

derived from painting—and new attitudes toward subject matter helped straight photography reveal the world straight, as it really is.

### ***The f/64 Group***

The name of the group derives from the small aperture, *f/64*, which ensures that the foreground, middle ground, and background will all be in sharp focus. The group declared its principles through manifestos and shows by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and others. It continued the reaction against pictorialism, adding the kind of nonsentimental subject matter that interested the later Stieglitz. Edward Weston, whose early work was in the soft-focus school, developed a special interest in formal organizations. He is famous for his nudes and his portraits of vegetables, such as artichokes, eggplants, and green peppers. His nudes rarely show the face, not because of modesty but because the question of the identity of the model can distract us from contemplating the formal relationships of the human body.

Weston's *Nude* (Figure 11-7) shows many characteristics of work by the *f/64* Group. The figure is isolated and presented for its own sake, the sand being equivalent to a photographer's backdrop. The figure is

presented not as a portrait of a given woman but rather as a formal study. Weston wanted us to see the relationship between legs and torso, to respond to the rhythms of line in the extended body, and to appreciate the counterpoint of the round, dark head against the long, light linearity of the body. Weston enjoys some notoriety for his studies of peppers, because his approach to vegetables was similar to his approach to nudes. We are to appreciate the sensual curve, the counterpoints of line, the reflectivity of skin, the harmonious proportions of parts.

**FIGURE 11-7**

**Edward Weston, *Nude*. 1936.** Weston's approach to photography was to make everything as sharp as possible and to make the finest print possible. He was aware he was making photographs as works of art.

©2017 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo: ©Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation/Art Resource, NY

285

**FIGURE 11-8**

**Ansel Adams. *Church, Taos Pueblo*, 1941.**

Source: National Archives Catalog

Weston demanded objectivity in his photographs. "I do not wish to impose my personality upon nature (any of life's manifestations), but without prejudice or falsification to become identified with nature, to know things in their very essence, so that what I record is not an interpretation—my ideas of what nature should be—but a revelation."<sup>3</sup> One of Weston's ideals was to capitalize on the capacity of the camera to be objective and impersonal, an ideal that the pictorialists usually rejected.

The work of Ansel Adams establishes another ideal of the f/64 Group:

the fine print. Even some of the best early photographers were relatively casual in the act of printing their negatives. Adams spent a great deal of energy and skill in producing the finest print the negative would permit, sometimes spending days to print one photograph. He developed a special system (the Zone System) to measure tonalities in specific regions of the negative so as to control the final print, keeping careful records so that he could duplicate the print at a later time. In even the best of reproductions, it is difficult to point to the qualities of tonal gradation that constitute the fine print. Only the original can yield the beauties that gradations of silver or platinum can produce. His photograph of the church at the Taos Pueblo (Figure 11-8) reveals the character of the southwest adobe architecture while at the same time making us feel the gritty texture of the surfaces of the walls. He has found a moment when the desert light has illuminated the interior and vertical spaces while bathing the walls in a relieving shade. Like Timothy O'Sullivan before him, Adams has made every effort to give us a convincing sense of place, and to some extent a sense of time as well.

286

## **The Documentarists**

Time is critical to the Documentarist, who portrays a world that is disappearing so quickly we cannot see it go. Henri Cartier-Bresson used the phrase "the decisive moment" to define that crucial interaction of shapes and spaces, formed by people and things, that tells him when to snap his shutter. Not all his photographs are decisive; they do not all catch the action at its most intense point. But those that do are pure Cartier-Bresson.

Many Documentarists agree with Stieglitz's description of the effect of shapes on his own feelings. Few contemporary Documentarists, however, who are often journalists like Cartier-Bresson, can compose the way Stieglitz could. But the best develop an instinct—usually nurtured by years of visual education—for the powerful statement, as one can see in Eddie Adams's *Execution in Saigon* ([Figure 2-2](#)).

Eugène Atget spent much of his time photographing in Paris in the early morning, when no one would bother him. He must have been in love with Paris and its surroundings because he photographed for many years, starting in the late 1800s and continuing to his death in 1927. Generally there are no people in his views of Paris, although he did an early series on some street traders, such as organ grinders, peddlers, and even prostitutes. His photographs of important Parisian monuments, such as his view of the Petit Trianon ([Figure 11-9](#)), are distinctive for their subtle drama. Most commercial photographs of this building ignore the dramatic reflection in the pond, and none of them permit the intense saturation of dark tones in the surrounding trees and in the water reflection. The more one ponders this photograph, the more

**FIGURE 11-9**

**Eugène Atget, *Trianon, Paris*. 1923–1924.** Atget was rediscovered in the 1960s when it became clear he was not just making record photographs but finding ways of intensifying the visual elements to make a statement about how we see.

©The Museum of Modern Art/Scala/Art Resource, NY

287

**FIGURE 11-10**

**Paul Strand, *Wall Street, New York*, 1916.** Paul Strand photographed New York in the early part of the century, but moved on to photograph churches in Mexico, where he moved during the Depression. He

photographed in small villages in Maine and in Italy. Later, he also made films. *Wall Street, New York* was published in *Camera Work*, no. 48, October 1916, plate I.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-97529]

one feels a sense of dramatic uncertainty and perhaps even urgency. The many ways in which Atget balances and contrasts the visual elements at the same time make the experience of the image intense. Atget's work did not refer to painting: It created its own photographic reference. We see a photograph, not just a thing photographed.

Paul Strand (Figure 11-10) takes a somewhat different approach from Atget, although he worked in the same tradition at approximately the same time. He used a view camera on a tripod and roamed the streets of New York early in the morning, just as Atget did. But unlike Atget, Strand photographed people as well as buildings, and the content of his photographs was, while artful, less abstract. Yet, like Atget, he looked for strong formal ingredients, as in his remarkable 1915 portrait of workers walking uphill on Wall Street during an economic boom. The building, the Morgan Trust, with its huge dark recessed panels, dwarfs the men and women marching past toward work. The Morgan Trust was a symbol of solidity and reliability, and while Strand could hardly have expected the outcome years later in 1929, all that solidity crumbled in the nation's most devastating Great Depression. The country, whose economy depended on Wall Street, was thrown into unemployment and general poverty for more than ten years. Strand's photograph contrasts the tiny upright people with the sharp diagonal of their shadows on the sidewalk, matched by the diagonal light molding of the building. Above them the powerful upright stone verticals and black panels seem, in retrospect, almost sinister. Strand began documenting people going to work in the financial district, but history now sees him as having documented their progress toward



unemployment as a result of the excesses of Wall Street financiers.

288

**FIGURE 11-11**

**Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Behind the Gare St. Lazare*. 1932.** This photograph illustrates Bresson's theories of the "decisive moment." This photograph was made possible in part by the small, handheld Leica camera that permitted Bresson to shoot instantly, without having to set up a large camera on a tripod.

©Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Unlike Atget and Paul Strand, who used large cameras, Cartier-Bresson used the 35-mm Leica and specialized in photographing people. He preset his camera in order to work fast and instinctively. His *Behind the Gare St. Lazare* (Figure 11-11) is a perfect example of his aim to capture an image at the "decisive moment." The figure leaping from the wooden ladder has not quite touched the water, while his reflection awaits him. The entire image is a tissue of reflection, with the spikes of the fence reflecting the angles of the fallen ladder. The circles in the foreground are repeated in the wheelbarrow's reflection and the white circles in the poster. Moreover, the figure in the white poster appears to be a dancer leaping in imitation of the man to the right. The focus of the entire image is somewhat soft because Cartier-Bresson preset his camera so that he could take the shot instantly without adjusting the aperture. The formal relationship of elements in a photograph such as this can produce various kinds of significance or apparent lack of significance. The best Documentarists

289

**FIGURE 11-12**

**Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*. 1936.** This is one of the most poignant records of the Great Depression in which millions moved across the nation looking for work. Lange did a number of photographs of this family in a very short time.

search for the strongest coherency of elements while also searching for the decisive moment. That moment is the split-second peak of intensity, and it is defined especially with reference to light, spatial relationships, and expression.

Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans were Documentarists who took part in a federal program to give work to photographers during the Depression of the 1930s. Both created careful formal organizations. Lange (Figure 11-12) stresses centrality and balance by placing the children's heads next to the mother's face, which is all the more compelling because the children's faces do not compete for our attention. The mother's arm leads upward to her face, emphasizing the other triangularities of the photograph. Within ten minutes, Lange took four other photographs of this woman and her children, but none could achieve the power of this photograph. Lange caught the exact moment when the children's faces turned and the mother's anxiety came forth with utter clarity, although the lens mercifully softens its focus on her face, while leaving

290

her shabby clothes in sharp focus. This softness helps humanize our relationship with the woman. Lange gives us an unforgettable image that brutally and yet sympathetically imparts a deeper understanding of what the Depression was for many.

Berenice Abbott, aiming at a career in sculpture and art, left Ohio State after two semesters and went to Paris. She became an assistant to the photographer Man Ray and began using a camera, thus finding her calling. She became noted in Paris for her photographs of

distinguished artists and writers, such as James Joyce. Man Ray introduced her to the work of Eugene Atget, whom she photographed, and when he died she gathered as many of his negatives as she could and returned to the United States to publish a book of his work. Her experience in New York in the 1930s led her to produce her own photographs, studies of New York City that have become legendary. Like other good photographers in the Great Depression, she was supported by a federal grant.

The subjects of *Blossom Restaurant*, one of her most powerful photographs (Figure 11-13), are the Blossom Restaurant and Jimmy's Barber Shop, which were both in the basement of the Boston Hotel at 103–105 Bowery. The Bowery in lower Manhattan was then a refuge for the down and out. The Boston Hotel, a flophouse, rented rooms for 30 cents a night. Meals at the restaurant were 15 cents or 30 cents. The image is alive with strong contrast and a brilliant sense of busyness, indicating what Abbott interpreted as the extraordinary vigor of the city despite the pain of the Depression.

Walker Evans's photograph (Figure 11-14) shows us a view of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the off-center white cross reminds us of what has become of the message of Christ. The vertical lines are accentuated in the cemetery stones and repeated in

**FIGURE 11-13**

**Berenice Abbott, *Blossom Restaurant*. October 24, 1935.**

©The Museum of the City of New York/Art Resource, NY

291

**FIGURE 11-14**

**Walker Evans, *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*. 1935.** Evans, like Lange, was

part of the Works Progress Administration photographic project during the Great Depression. His subject was the nation itself.

©Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

the telephone lines, the porch posts, and finally the steel-mill smokestacks. The aspirations of the dominating verticals, however, are dampened by the strong horizontals, which, because of the low angle of the shot, tend to merge from the cross to the roofs. Evans equalizes focus, which helps compress the space so that we see the cemetery on top of the living space, which is immediately adjacent to the steel mills where some of the people who live in the tenements work and where some of those now in the cemetery died. This compression of space suggests the closeness of life, work, and death. We see a special kind of sadness in this steel town—and others like it—that we may never have seen before. Evans caught the right moment for the light, which intensifies the white cross, and he aligned the verticals and horizontals for their best effect.

## **PERCEPTION KEY The Documentary Photographers**

1. Are any of these documentary photographs sentimental?
2. Some critics assert that these photographers have made interesting social documents, but not works of art. What arguments might support their views? What arguments might contest their views?
3. Contemporary photographers and critics often highly value the work of Atget because it is “liberated” from the influence of painting. What does it mean to say that his work is more photographic than it is painterly?

4. What is the subject matter of each photograph? What is the content of each photograph? Is the “**RAILOWSKY**” poster in Figure 11-11 a pun?

292

**FIGURE 11-15**

**Bruce Davidson, *Opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 1969. Gelatin-silver print.**

**Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of the Hundredth Anniversary Committee, 1974.** Bruce Davidson has caught a moment of what seems to be fun at the museum. Is the hand in the upper frame wittily waving goodbye to the woman who steps toward the photographer? Do the visitors to the museum seem interested in the art? Is this photograph ironic?

©Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

## The Modern Eye

Photography has gone in so many directions that classifications tend to be misleading. The snapshot style, however, has become somewhat identifiable, a kind of rebellion against the earlier movements, especially the pictorial. Janet Malcolm claims, “Photography went modernist not, as has been supposed, when it began to imitate modern abstract art but when it began to study snapshots.”<sup>4</sup> No school of photography established a snapshot canon. It seems to be a product of amateurs, a kind of folk photography. The snapshot appears primitive, spontaneous, and accidental. But the snapshot may not be unplanned and accidental, as is evidenced, for instance, in the powerful work of Bruce Davidson and Nan Goldin.

Bruce Davidson respected the work of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson enough to concentrate on what he thought photography did best: describe the human scene faithfully. Like Cartier-Bresson, Davidson took advantage of a small camera—in the

case of *Opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Figure 11-15), to produce a square image. Davidson has a long history of association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and particularly of photographing visitors and curators. *Opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* is a fine example of the snapshot aesthetic: The photograph appears to be totally unplanned and apparently unrefined. As in so many snapshots, the head of the primary figure—the woman in white—is cut off. A hand that seems random and incoherent appears above the shiny steel construction. The construction itself is unidentified and it is impossible to know whether it is a work of art or part of the air conditioning. The very fact that the viewer may be confounded by what is shown seems to be part of the point of the photograph. Yet, when we examine the photograph carefully, studying the forms and the figures, some of whom hold cocktails, we begin to see how Davidson wanted us to respond to the image. For one thing, he has chosen a powerful contrast between the striking steel construction and the people who are nearby. The woman in white seems amused at the fact that she needs to duck to get past it, while the men who stay behind are totally unidentifiable and in the dark. All we really see of them is their

293

**FIGURE 11-16**

**Nan Goldin, *Bruce in His Red Car*. 1981.** Goldin adopted the snapshot style early on. She constantly photographed those around her, often marginalized people and junkies. She regarded them as her family.

©Nan Goldin

hands. The frame is broken into segments, each of which seems a photographic statement in itself. Together they have the snapshot virtue of apparent incoherence while the reality is that the action is

totally coherent. What Davidson achieves here is what all good photographers want to achieve: We are forced to look at the photograph as an object in itself, and not just as the record of an event. This photograph is made revelatory by virtue of its formal qualities.

At age eleven Nan Goldin suffered the trauma of her older sister's suicide, eventually turning to drugs and leaving home. But a teacher gave her a way of getting herself together with the gift of a camera, which she responded to immediately. Influenced by films of Andy Warhol and Federico Fellini, in Boston she lived among a group of drag queens and photographed them out of respect for their way of life. "My desire was to show them as a third gender, as another sexual option, a gender option. And to show them with a lot of respect and love, to kind of glorify them because I really admire people who can recreate themselves and manifest their fantasies publicly. I think it's brave."<sup>5</sup> Many of her photographs of the LGBT community are in her best-known book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Unfortunately, she lost many of her early subjects to overdose. Some of her later work has been in fashion photography and in studying family life. Her snapshot style seems effortless, but she makes her images intense and direct, if not simple and casual.

Nan Goldin's *Bruce in His Red Car* (Figure 11-16) shows a man in his blazing red car, fumbling with the key to the steering wheel lock. It is not clear whether he is worried about having his car stolen or if he is stealing it. The prominent dice hanging from the rearview mirror "spell" boxcars, an ironic comment. Is this a sociological statement or a simple record of an event? How is one to interpret the photographer's comment on Bruce and his car?

## FIGURE 11-17

Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man smoking)*. 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27¼ × 27¼ inches. Museum of Modern Art.

©Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

*Untitled (Man smoking)* (Figure 11-17) is the second image (of twenty) in Carrie Mae Weems's famous project, *The Kitchen Table* (1990). Like her contemporary, Cindy Sherman, this project positions the photographer as the protagonist in a series of images that contains an implied narrative, a portrait of the artist discovering who she is in relation to her man, her child, her friends, and herself. Each image is a self-portrait taken from the same angle, including the kitchen table on and around which much of the life of a woman is lived.

The situation in *Untitled (Man smoking)* is filled with anticipation. The look on the woman's eyes, implying concern, becomes the visual center of the image. The room is filled with sexual tension and a search for emotional understanding between the man and woman. The images in the book are accompanied by fourteen text panels. The panel nearest to *Untitled (Man smoking)* includes the line "Together they were falling for that ole black magic." The visual details, playing cards—the man's hand shows two hearts—the snacks, the whisky, and the almost empty glasses, imply that they have been playing a game. But the expression in the eyes of the woman suggests that she wonders if the game is over. The parallel angles of the arms, hands both covering their mouths, as well as the repetition of curves in the bowl, glasses, and chairs intensify the visual field and create a powerful sense of unity.



The poster of Malcolm X on the wall implies that the man and woman are socially conscious of the movement toward black power. The entire Kitchen Table project has become a significant statement in contemporary feminism while at the same time becoming a landmark in photographic art.

Like Nan Goldin, Tina Barney photographs people she knows, people she is related to, and people who are similar to her in their social milieu. Whereas Goldin photographs those in the LGBT community, Barney photographs the wealthy and the entitled both locally in Long Island and New York and in her overseas communities in Europe.

295

Because she prints her photographs in large size, four feet by five feet, she employs a view camera with an 8 × 10 inch negative. This means she uses a tripod and often "stages" the set and suggests how her subject should pose. The result is sometimes static, but at the same time her process gives her exceptional detail and full control over lighting and produces rich color. The Art Institute of Chicago has said, "Barney was thus one of the first photographers to present color work on a grand scale that rivaled most twentieth-century paintings." Many modern photographers have moved to producing very large photographs to satisfy the needs of museums as well as collectors.

Barney's extensive body of work indicates that she is essentially a portraitist who welcomes unplanned events, such as people deciding to be part of a photograph at the last minute. She says she takes "a lot of pictures and when I am shooting, I almost go into a trance. It happens so fast that not until afterwards can I see whether all of the elements coalesce. It's like magic."

*The Europeans: The Hands* (Figure 11-18) may or may not be social commentary. Its title, however, seems to help us begin a search for visual similarities and differences. For one thing, the huge painting behind the man and boy features a hand grasping the breast of what may be a potential lover (or rape victim). The right hand on the Oceanic wood sculpture to the left seems to be over its heart, while the left hand is missing altogether. The sex of the sculpture may seem ambiguous, while the gender of the other figures is explicit. The crossed arms of the man and boy imply a sense of security, perhaps withholdingness. The facial expressions of the man and boy may be interpreted in any of a number of ways.

Unlike a photograph taken in the snapshot style, this photograph is intentional. The richness of the environment, the steel and glass table, the chairs, the circular light overhead—as well as the figures—are placed to have an effect.

**FIGURE 11-18**

*The Europeans: The Hands*. 2002. Chromogenic print, 48 × 60 inches. Tina Barney, like many contemporary photographers, began with what she knew. She said, "I don't feel it's social commentary because I am not judging them; it's all instinct. For me, it's a great visual feast."

Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

296

## **FOCUS ON Digital Photography**

Traditional photography is very much about cameras, lenses, and shutter speeds, all of which control what the photographer is likely to capture. Ansel Adams was important for his contributions about how to produce a fine-art print, establishing a system that aimed to get the best image out of a negative. Today most fine-art photography is the

result of digital cameras and digital, chromogenic prints. Because digital images can be altered almost infinitely, fine-art photographers have largely abandoned the principles of printing only what the camera sees. In some cases a single image can be the product of dozens of photographs, all layered together to produce an image that might be impossible in real life. Even in the cases in which we see a single image, the photographer can easily alter the contrast and colors of the original so as to produce an artistically effective print. The result of all this is to free photographers from the limitations of the equipment while permitting them to make prints large enough to compete directly with paintings, as in the case of Figure 11-19, Cindy Sherman's eight-foot-high portrait.

**FIGURE 11-19**

**Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #466*. 2008.** Cindy Sherman uses herself to create her images. She chooses interesting locations and changes her makeup to alter her appearance and create a mystery about her.

Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

Cindy Sherman is one of the few American photographers to have had a one-woman show at the prestigious Whitney Museum in New York City. Her work has annoyed, confounded, and alarmed many people both ignorant and well informed about photography as an art. Some of Sherman's work is condemned because it seems designed to horrify the audience with images of garbage, offal, vomit, and body parts. For many years she photographed herself in various costumes, with makeup and guises that showed her almost limitless capacity to interpret her personality. Those color photographs often had a snapshot quality and probably were most interesting when seen as a group rather than individually.

*Untitled #466* is one of a series of imagined wealthy and privileged

modern women. Sherman poses herself as if she were in a painting. The background, the Cloisters in New York City, was photographed separately and the two images were layered together. The contrast between the religious echoes of the Cloisters and the sumptuous secular blue caftan, richly decorated, with Sherman's dangling gold earrings and gold rings is designed to inform us about the significance of the image. Because this is such a large photograph, eight feet high, we can see every detail. The reveal of the cheap plastic sandal and the low-quality stocking implies that the surface is not entirely to be trusted. Sherman has subtly transformed the apparent subject matter and has produced a form-content that, like much contemporary photography, is the result of very careful staging.

One of China's emerging photographers, Wang Qingsong (Figure 11-20), uses all the resources of digital manipulation and collage to make statements that are often subversive and ironic.

**FIGURE 11-20**

**Wang Qingsong, *Can I Cooperate with You?* 2000.** Wang Qingsong has been influenced by standard commercial advertising and propaganda, but he turns it on its ear by adding subversive touches.

Courtesy of Wang Qingsong

*Can I Cooperate with You?* is a testament to foreign influences in modern China. We see the two most familiar

297

American emblems of McDonald's and Coca-Cola, but we also see a European in a rickshaw pedaled by a Chinese man. Two figures are half-size, observing the action, and the swarm of people around the rickshaw seem involved in acclimating themselves to change. The figure on the left holds a tiny Chinese flag as if trying to preserve

traditional Chinese values. The style, with the seamless backdrop, is obviously a comment on popular advertising. He has said, "The countless contradictions I see around me and the ever-present crisis of modernization are what determine my photographic work."

Color is also part of the subject matter, as it is in Bill Gekas's *Plums* (Figure 11-21), and can be appreciated somewhat the way one appreciates the color of a painting.

**FIGURE 11-21**

**Bill Gekas, *Plums*. 2012. Digital print.** Gekas produces a setting with careful control of the colors and lighting and emulates the old master paintings that inspire him.

©Bill Gekas

Bill Gekas, a photographer from Melbourne, Australia, is a businessman who sometimes accepted commissions for photographic portraits. When he began photographing his five-year-old daughter in poses and in settings that emulated the Flemish and Dutch masters of the seventeenth century, he drew attention from around the world. By drawing on the visual techniques of the old masters, he was able to expand the role of modern photography.

Gregory Crewdson sets up his photographic subject matter in a manner reminiscent of preparation for a feature film. At times, he needs cranes, lights, and as many as thirty assistants to get the effect he wants. He spends months on a single image. The photograph in Figure 11-22 alludes to the drowning of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Crewdson's Ophelia has left her slippers on the stairs and has apparently entered the water on purpose, as did Shakespeare's Ophelia. To get this effect, Crewdson appears to have flooded an ordinary living room, positioned the artificial lights, and captured the sunlight all at the same time.

Ophelia's eyes are open, her expression calm, and the colors of the scene are carefully balanced. The level of drama in the photograph is intense, yet the reclined, passive figure of Ophelia lends an almost peaceful quality to the image.

**FIGURE 11-22**

**Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*. 2001.** Like many contemporary art photographers, Crewdson sometimes spends days or weeks assembling the material for his work. His use of multiple light sources helps give his work an unsettling quality.

Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

298

## **PERCEPTION KEY The Modern Eye**

1. Compare the photographic values of Bruce Davidson's *Opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* with those of Carrie Weems's *Untitled (Man smoking)*. In which are the gradations of tone from light to dark more carefully modulated? In which is the selectivity of the framing more consciously and apparently artistic? In which is the subject matter more obviously transformed by the photographic image? In which is the form more fully revealed?
2. Examine the photographs by Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Bruce Davidson. What are the characteristics of the best snapshot photographs? What have these three images got in common? What are their differences? How do we react to them in comparison with the carefully staged work of portraitist Tina Barney? Which do you prefer?
3. Which digital photograph more transforms its subject matter by the use of color? What is the ultimate effect of that

transformation on the viewer?

4. Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson both build sets to make their photographs. Given that the sets are artificial, and to an extent their subject matter is artificial, can their work be said to be truly representational? What distinguishes their work from that of a Documentarist like Ansel Adams or Berenice Abbott?
5. Photocopy any of the color photographs to produce a black-and-white image. What has been lost in the reproduction? Why is color important to those photographs?
6. Look at some of your own photographs. What school of photography do you belong in? Which photographer is closest to your style?

## Summary

The capacity of photography to record reality faithfully is both a virtue and a fault. It makes many viewers of photographs concerned only with what is presented (the subject matter) and leaves them unaware of the way the subject matter has been represented (the form).

Because of its fidelity of presentation, photography seems to some to have no transformation of subject matter. This did not bother early photographers, who were delighted at the ease with which they could present their subject matter. The pictorialists, on the other hand, relied on nineteenth-century representational painting to guide them in their approach to form. Their carefully composed images are still valued by many photographers. But the reaction of the straight photographers, who wished to shake off any dependence on painting and disdained sentimental subject matter, began a revolution that emphasized the

special qualities of the medium: especially the tonal range of the silver or platinum print (and now color print), the impersonality of the sharply defined object (and consequent lack of sentimentality), spatial compression, and selective framing. The revolution has not stopped there but has pushed on into unexpected areas, such as the exploration of the snapshot and the rejection of the technical standards of the straight photographers. Many contemporary photographers are searching for new ways of photographic seeing based on the capacity of digital cameras and computers to transform and manipulate images. They are more intent on altering rather than recording reality. This is a very interesting prospect.

<sup>1</sup>Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1955), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>*The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, ed. Nancy Newhall, 2 vols. (New York: Aperture, 1966), vol. 2, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup>Janet Malcolm, *Diana and Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetics of Photography* (Boston: David Godine, 1980), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Westfall, "Interview with Nan Goldin," *BOMB Magazine* 37, Fall 1991.