

## History of Photography: the inside-out approach

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I have always liked the following story which I first heard from photographer Eddie Adams.

A prominent churchman, on dying, approached the Pearly Gates. St. Peter checked off his name and directed him to his new address in Heaven. He was to walk down the street a few blocks, wait for a No. 2 bus, alight at a certain intersection, and walk into the most depressed, derelict section of the city. His cold water one-room apartment was in a run-down tenement at the top of five flights of stairs. As he was receiving these instructions, another arrival approached Peter. He was a shabby, disreputable individual. He was asked his name. Peter consulted his list and immediately became deferential. A chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce was quickly summoned and the seedy fellow was whisked away to a palatial villa overlooking a private beach.

The bishop was a little disconcerted. He returned to Peter and said: "Look, I don't want to appear ungrateful, but, as you know, I have followed the Church's teaching all my life, obeyed its commandments, respected its rituals, and have gained some position in the faith. Yet I receive a slum dwelling in Heaven and that other fellow, who looks dissolute and rather, well, sinful, he receives a palace..." "Ah," said Peter, "that's easily explained. He's a photographer and we don't get many of them up here."

The historian of photography feels similarly and undeservedly privileged. There are not many around of any commitment. I do not tell the story and make this statement merely to amuse and possibly offend. In any discussion on the history of photography it is essential to bear in mind the paucity of talent and skill in this area of the medium. This fact has important and far-reaching ramifications. And one of the most important is this: *Nobody teaches the history of photography because the history of photography is not known.*

The map of the medium to date includes vast areas which are boldly labeled terra incognita. A few pioneers, notably W. Jerome Harrison at the end of the last century, and Beaumont Newhall in the 20 century, have exhaustingly plotted a few rivers, located a few mountains and even pointed to a few wild inhabitants. It is a beginning. It is *not* the history of photography.

But we act as if it was. I do not think this assertion needs justification. We need only look at publications which offer "surveys" of photo-history to see that, almost without exception, they follow the B.N. trail, like tourists crossing the Donner Pass in their heated automobiles.

The medium needs fewer historians who are hanging onto Newhall's coattails and more individualistic pioneers with his willingness to travel alone. There is one problem with this ideal - it requires an immense amount of tedious work, painstakingly compiling data in the privacy of a study or in the basements of museums and libraries. In an age of increasing passivity and demand for instant-gratification this notion seems difficult to accept, or apply. Everyone wants the glamor of drawing conclusions, constructing systems, reaching subjective responses. When based on insufficient data the results are not only inaccurate but potentially disruptive, like a sign post turned the wrong way.

A good example was a paper given by a historian at a major conference a few years ago. On the basis of viewing two 19th century albums the historian had deduced that an unusual number of landscape photographs were exposed during the winter when the trees were bare. The speaker then jumped to the thesis: the trees were leafless because the dead-looking branches were expressions of the romantic spirit. An impressive number of side-by-side slides of Romantic paintings and 19th century topographical photographs showing the prevalence of dead/winter trees were impressive and, to most no doubt, highly convincing. The lecture "proved" that early landscape photographers relied on the iconography of Romantic painters and were influenced by them. The paper was intelligent, well-argued and seemingly convincing.

But, if the historian had read any 19th century photographic journals, a large number of articles by the photographers themselves would have provided a different reason: the exposure times for the wet-plate were rather long (commonly 20 seconds for landscapes) and during this time the breeze tended to blow the leaves which were depicted as blurs. As blurs were taboo, the photographer waited until winter when the trees were leafless. In this case the appearance of the image was rooted (no pun intended) in process, not art-historical notions or aesthetics. This reason for winter landscapes was never offered to the audience and I can only presume the reason was that the historian had not read the literature. Leaping to conclusions is more fun than crawling through information. The history of photography needs what I call an inside-out approach rather than an outside-in view. Before we can deduce the spirit of the past, we must be willing to compile the hard facts. Otherwise the structure will collapse like, I am tempted to add, a tree without a root system.

It is abundantly clear that our knowledge of the medium's past is shockingly inadequate. We do not have any guides to the plethora of processes available to the 19th century photographer, to the interplay of personalities, to the critical ideas, to the structure of the societies, to the cultural uses of photography, to the photographers' financial structure, to the public's response to the medium, to the contents of a typical darkroom, to the problems of privacy in the absence of copyright laws, to the way photographs were distributed, and so on, endlessly. In fact, we know damn all about nothing. We do not even know the names of the photographers who were most respected by their peers, let alone their biographies or images.

As an experiment - and not one intended to be conclusive - I took a journal from the 19th century (it happened to be a recent arrival on interlibrary loan), and totted up the number of times the names of photographers were mentioned through one year's issues. In 1868 the most frequently referred to photographers in this particular journal were: Carey Lea (59 mentions), W. H. Davies (32), Adam-Salomon (31), V. Blanchard (20), J. R. Johnson (18), W. Woodbury (18), J. T. Taylor (17), A. Claudet (16), A. W. Simpson (16), T. Ross (15). The clear "winner," with almost double the mentions of the closest rival is Carey Lea, a name which is probably unfamiliar to practically all photo-historians. Not a single person in this list has been featured in a monograph and only three of the photographers are even mentioned in Beaumont Newhall's textbook. This list becomes a little more meaningful when it is realized that Oscar Rejlander, H. P. Robinson, Nadar and many others who are featured in Beaumont Newhall's history do not even make the "top ten." I understand the problems associated with such a comparison but I think it illustrates the idea that we cannot have a history of photography when so many, undoubtedly important, names are unknown. But who is researching individual biographies in an urgent, systematic manner?

At the present, photo-historians and critics are guessing at the picture on a jigsaw puzzle when 99% of the pieces are missing. This is foolish at best; when it is performed under the guise of "truth" it is unconscionably destructive, because the lie is propagated by a succession of later, equally lazy, speakers and writers until it has distorted our understanding of the whole history of the medium, and that includes our ability to evaluate the merit of contemporary work.

I am very well aware, and angry at the fact, that I have believed so many lies in the past. (I am not talking about factual inaccuracies -although that too - but about the generalized sense of "that-

feeling-is-uncomfortable” when presented with information and ideas. It is the opposite of the moment of clarity during reading a novel when suddenly a passage screams "yes, yes, yes!." In an attempt to find more pieces of the puzzle I have been systematically reading, page by page, 19th century photographic journals in chronological order from the first issue to around 1910 - then I start on another periodical. I have been seriously engaged in this reading project for since the late 1960s. What astonishes me is that the concerns and interests of the 19th century photographer were very different from the concerns and interests that the historians have led us to expect. In this context only one example can be given. Rarely did a week go by without an obituary of a photographer who died as a result of his profession, whether by poisoning (cyanide was a common fixing agent) or explosion (collodion is a mixture of explosive guncotton in a mixture of alcohol and highly inflammable ether). It is no wonder that a major concern of the 19th century photographer was the danger in the darkroom, and that the number of articles on health hazards and antidotes to poisonings were frequently and prominently featured in every journal throughout the 19th century.

What worries me is that the inside-out approach leads to such a vastly different "feel" of history than is provided by outside-in historians. I recognize the value of both methods but they should be smoothly meshing and not causing such nerve-wracking crashes.

Ideally, once a great deal more information has been compiled, the photo-historian of the future will be able to take a holistic view of the medium, watching the ever-widening ripples spreading into the culture and society. But we are not at that stage. We need specialists, biographers, process enthusiasts, compilers of indices, data collectors in every area. One day the medium can accommodate the high-flyers who want to take a birds-eye view and see the whole pattern, drawing parallels interrelationships and complex patterns. They will be the true geniuses; at the moment the antics of the theorists are absurd attempts at drawing attention to themselves, rather than to history. We, and history, can safely ignore them. Our role is to be the unknown workers who shape the stones from which, one day, the cathedral will be constructed.

I was asked to write about teaching the history of photography and it might seem I have neglected to deal with the issue of education. I do not think so. Because we are ignorant of the history of photography we are at liberty to teach anything under the rubric that something-is-better-than-nothing. If a personal hard-won approach to photo-history has not been formulated then Beaumont Newhall's book provides a ready, convenient and accurate alternative. So use it - with the warning that the skeleton looks nothing like the person. There is no doubt that it is a work of pioneering genius. But for the sake of accuracy, in every college and university catalogue, in every schedule of classes, in every opening statement by the teacher to his/her class, I would recommend the changing of just one word.

Instead of the history of photography, each of us will offer a history of photography - at least for the foreseeable future.

1980

Postscript:

*The words above were written more than 25 years ago. Since then thousands of photo-majors have graduated from colleges and universities; there has been an explosion of photographic galleries and museum collections; auction prices for vintage photographs have risen stratospherically; over 3,000 photographic book titles are published annually; more people in the arts than ever before claim an interest in the medium. With all this interest and activity in the medium, it would be reasonable to assume that our knowledge of the history of photography has kept apace and has grown exponentially.*

*The assumption would be false.*

*Then, the state of photographic history was sad; today, it is tragic. There are now far fewer, serious committed historians in the field today than in the past; universities are closing down photo-history courses and specializations; the remaining ones are being taught by agenda-driven critics rather than art/photography historians; not one of the major photographic periodicals publish regular on original historical research; no viable alternative photographic history texts have been published since the 1970s; ignorance of history among young photographers is rampant - they are the first generation of "illiterates" in the history of the medium.*

*In an atmosphere of superficiality, self-indulgence and willful relegation of the past to irrelevancy, the medium's future looks bleak.*

*The hope is that photographers, one day, will recognize the simple truth that they, like Janus, cannot look forward without looking back.*

2007