

Light, Perception, and Photography

Timeline

5 th Century BCE	Chinese philosopher Mo Ti recorded the creation of a device in which the light rays of an illuminated object pass through a pinhole into a darkened room and result in an inverted but otherwise exact image of the object. He referred to this device as a "locked treasure room."	1849	David Brewster invented the lenticular stereoscope (device for viewing a pair of separate images, one for each eye), and a binocular camera, leading to a craze for stereoscopic photography.
4 th Century BCE	In Greece, Aristotle described viewing the crescent shape of a partially eclipsed sun projected on the ground through the leaves of a tree, thereby describing the optical principle of a pinhole camera.	1861–65	The American Civil War was the first conflict to be thoroughly photographed. The thousands of photographs made of the Civil War brought images of the realities of modern warfare to the general public.
10 th Century CE	Arabian scholar Ibn al-Haytham Alhazen provided early analysis of various optical phenomena through his observations that an image was sharply defined when the aperture through which it was projected was small, and that the image became diffused as the hole was enlarged to admit more light.	1860s	Photography became a significant tool for the United States government and railroad companies in the efforts of survey teams to document relatively unknown parts of the continent. For the first time, landscape documentation emerged as a viable livelihood for a small group of American photographers.
1490	Leonardo da Vinci provided clear descriptions of the camera obscura (Latin for "darkened room") in his notebooks. Camera obscuras had become familiar to scientists, magicians, and artists during the Renaissance as many descriptions of the device are found from this period.	1872	Eadweard Muybridge was commissioned by former California Governor Leland Stanford to photograph his horse trotting. Refining the use of shutters to record actions during the split-second when the shutters were open, Muybridge's studies in motion throughout the 1870s—of horses galloping on a track and of men vaulting over poles—are considered the precursor to the invention of motion pictures.
1839	Multiple inventions were made public that laid the groundwork for photography. In France, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre unveiled detailed, unique, and lasting images on sheets of silver-plated copper; these images contained such accuracy that they were called "a mirror with a memory." The process came to be called "daguerreotype." In England, William Henry Fox Talbot presented calotypes. These were images on paper created from a negative made by covering paper with a silver salt solution and exposing it to sunlight. (The term "calotype" is from the Latin phrase that means "beautiful impression.")	1880s	In Europe and the United States, groups of photographers established societies that were devoted to promoting photography as fine art. Known as Pictorialists, they created highly expressive images. The subject matter of their photographs often drew from mythology and literature and their photographic techniques included soft focus imagery, atmospheric lighting, and printing on textured paper. In addition to creating groups, these photographers utilized exhibition spaces and published magazines to increase the awareness of photography's artistic potential.
1844	Talbot published the first of six installments of his book <i>The Pencil of Nature</i> .		

- 1888 George Eastman Kodak introduced the hand-held Kodak camera and marketed it in the United States. The first camera designed for recreational purposes, it provided a relatively inexpensive way to take pictures. Amateur photography flourished in the following decades as thousands of people began taking snapshots of the world around them.
- 1925 A small, light, and fast camera called the Leica allowed photographers to capture the activity of street life with greater accuracy and imagination.
- 1925 László Moholy-Nagy published *Painting Photography Film*, which advocated for the camera as a modern graphic tool and the creative use of new visual media—such as photography and film—within the global and mechanical modern world.
- 1932 In California, a group of photographers who shared a common photographic style based on precise images of natural forms and found objects created a group called f/64. The name referred to the smallest aperture (“f-stop”) setting on a large format camera and the one which allows a great depth of field. These photographers advocated for a realist aesthetic with sharp focus images and utilized contact printing on glossy paper.
- 1935 During the Great Depression, the Farm Security Administration of the U.S. government commissioned eleven photographers to travel throughout the country and document the conditions faced by farmers who suffered through drought and economic depression. Pictures by photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Walker Evans have become enduring images of this period.
- 1936 The cover of the first issue of *Life* magazine features a photograph of Fort Peck Dam by Margaret Bourke-White, whose career included images ranging from industrial photography to portraits of world leaders.
- 1955 Edward Steichen’s landmark exhibition *The Family of Man*, highlighting the universality of human experience through over 500 photographs, opened at MoMA and subsequently toured the world for eight years.
- 1962 John Szarkowski succeeded Edward Steichen as curator of photography at MoMA. His 1966 exhibition *The Photographer’s Eye* (and publication by the same name) showcased the range of photography through its history.
- 1976 Los Angeles residents Marjorie and Leonard Vernon began to collect photography.
- 2008 LACMA acquired the Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection of photography.

About the Vernon Collection

In 1976, when Los Angeles residents Marjorie and Leonard Vernon began to collect photography, it was not widely collected by major museums or fine art collectors. The Vernons built a collection of some 3,600 photographs spanning the entire history of photography through careful research of photographers and of the medium and through their understanding of the centrality of photography in modern visual culture. Championing photography as a significant part of human expression, the Vernons fostered a community of photography enthusiasts and generously shared their home and their knowledge of photography with this expanding circle. In 2008 the Vernon collection of photography became part of the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, thereby allowing the museum to present the history of photography alongside the museum’s larger encyclopedic collection of art from many cultures and time periods.

Sources

Britt Salvesen, *See The Light—Photography, Perception, Cognition: The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection* and Naomi Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*. Third Edition.

Credits

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