

## Past Perfect

The relevance of the history of photography to contemporary artists

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Recently I was sitting with a group of photography teachers who were discussing the sharp drop in student enrollments at their university, and the necessity for cutting out several classes. One of the academics - the one with the biggest name as an art-photographer - was clear about the course of action.

"Obviously," he said, "eliminate classes in the history of photography. History is irrelevant." What *was* irrelevant, to him, was that the history of photography classes included the most students, which made it obvious that the decision was based less on efficiency and more on personal prejudice.

"History is irrelevant" is not a new prejudice. It has been heard throughout the past of practically every medium, including painting. It is a particularly stupid assertion that is voiced by either the truly ignorant or the pseudo-intellectual. And it is a particularly dangerous assertion at this point in the medium's development when the history of photography is beginning to be discussed, written about and taught with increasing frequency.

I would like to offer a few words of encouragement to those who a) are finding themselves intrigued by their medium's past b) are worried by the jibes of the "I hate history" crowd and c) do not consider themselves crassly ignorant, pompously academic in attitude, or excessively bigoted, which, of course, means every reader of these words.

1. An interest in the history of photography is a natural, inevitable, result of being a serious photographer. I have never met a really committed photographer of any stature who was not fascinated and fed by a knowledge of the medium's past. In addition, the important photographers are interested in anything and everything about the medium which impinges on their own love for picture-making with a camera. To the truly committed photographer *everything* is relevant and directly useful. This seems such an obvious fact that it can be something of a measure of a photographer's merit. Go to movies with photographers and hear how they relate the style, character, plot or whatever to their art; listen to them discuss the books they last read, recent events in their lives, newspaper stories, concerts attended, and so on. Whatever they do has a direct and immediately applicable relevance to their own passion. How much

more relevant, then, is the history of their own medium?

A natural corollary of being interested in any subject is for the mind to "spread out" and absorb the surrounding topics. True concentration on any subject vibrates the web-of-connectedness until the idea of irrelevancy becomes an absurd notion. Therefore, to say "History is irrelevant" is unnatural and deliberately perverse.

2. The critics of history might point to the field of art history (the history of painting) where there does, so often, seem to be an unbridgeable gulf between the practicing artist and the academic historian, with their mutual suspicion and dislike, and language and attitudes which have grown so far apart that they are deaf to each other's screams for recognition. Fortunately that stage has not been reached in photography. But we must face the fact that it is coming unless we can keep out the prejudices of the I-hate-history crowd. Up to this point in the medium's history, *all* the best photographic historians (including Beaumont Newhall, Van Deren Coke and Helmut Gernsheim) have also been practicing photographers. That is important. Photography aesthetics are rooted in process, and it is essential that the historian has an intimate relationship with the equipment, materials, chemicals and practical problems of the medium. The alternative is a dry, aloof and irrelevant history. That is often the result when "pure" art historians approach the history of photography.

A single example will suffice. I once heard a lecture by an art historian who examined several photo-albums of the 1860s in which were discovered a large proportion of prints of trees without leaves. The lecturer, in a detailed, scholarly paper, drew several conclusions from this fact such as: the photographer as romantic, brooding on death and destruction, the need for the young art to mimic motifs in etching and painting, etc. These observations may have been valid, or not, but the main point was missed. Anyone who knew about photography (and had read the 19 century literature) would have known that the cause of the leafless trees was rooted in process, not art. The simple fact is that the collodion process necessitated long exposures (commonly 20 seconds for a landscape), during which time the leaves of a summer tree blew in the wind and produced blurs on the plate. In those days, blurs were abhorred and so the photographer waited for winter when the production of a sharply detailed image was more practical.

The point is this: historians can become excessively academic and irrelevant, but that is not a condemnation of history itself.

3. It is not only true that all the best historians have been familiar with the practice of photography but also it is true that the best photographers have been among the medium's most important contributors to our knowledge of its history.

For example, we owe our recognition of Eugene Atget in large part to the efforts of Berenice Abbott. The astonishing early work of Jacques Henri Lartigue, the boy-wonder of photography, was brought to our attention by John Szarkowski (himself a practicing and published photographer). Ansel Adams performed this service for Timothy O'Sullivan. In 1937 when asked to contribute to the Museum of Modern Art's first major show of photography, Adams sent with his own work a collection of original prints by O'Sullivan, and a note which said: "A few of the photographs are extraordinary - as fine as anything I have ever seen. " O'Sullivan was practically unknown at that point in time, and might have long lain forgotten except for the enthusiasm of a photographer for the medium's history.

Photographers of the past have always been the medium's most energetic and successful "historians. " And now we are led to believe, by some pseudo-intellectuals, that all their efforts were "irrelevant. " What incredible arrogance!

4. Those who claim that history is irrelevant are condemning themselves, and their images, to be forever faddish, blindly following the latest trend and stylistic fashion in images. There can be no assurance without a deeply felt past; like a tree without roots there is always the risk that the next wind of change will destroy the art. This is the great fallacy of the age, that something is better because it is newer. As Dr. Aaron Scharf once wrote with beguiling passion:

*It is the vogue today to reject the past--as though one really can. The cheek of some people! And what narcissism! History can't teach ME anything! I project MY trivia onto history, thus it can only, must only, deal in trivia. So help me! History is nothing but a useless collection of facts, dates, and other irrelevancies! There you have 'modern' man, the quick-results man, the man of action with a Lilliputian mind.*

One of the curses of contemporary photography is that it only feeds on last week's output, emulating and elevating style over meaning, lauding banality over deeply held convictions. Photographers owe it to the medium, and to themselves, to escape this impasse by acknowledging and embracing the lessons of history. When it is understood from where you have come, it is with more confidence you know where you are going. Think of a boat on an uncharted sea out of sight of land. One way to be sure that you are not sailing in circles is to drop buoys over the edge. By looking back at these "pasts" you can plot a more forward-looking future.

The history of photography is relevant because the past illuminates the future.

5. The history of photography is not an objective list of names, dates, processes and other irrelevant facts. And if you hold this point of view then you have missed the whole purpose of history. History is a palpable, pertinent,

recognizable force for enriching the whole of life, not merely the aspect called photography. History is the story of men's dreams, their aspirations, their disillusionments, their cries of protest at being human, their challenges to fate in the face of defeat, and their shouts of joy in moments of victory over self and nature. History lives, and breathes life into minds dulled by "relevancy. " Through history we share the experiences of others who knew what it was like to struggle with a medium as recalcitrant as photography. History acknowledges their presence in our work today; through history the masters of the past talk to us of hope for the future.

That is what history means. And anyone who considers history irrelevant is a self-confessed, and self-destructive, fool.

6. To say "History is irrelevant" makes no more sense than to say "my birth and subsequent history to date are irrelevant. " Whether a photographer is aware of it or not the history of the medium determines, in a very real way, the appearance of every picture which he or she produces today. As in the law, ignorance is no excuse. There is not a photographer alive and working at this moment, no matter how indifferent to history, who is not profoundly affected as an inevitable result of the accumulated images of the past. These are every contemporary photographer's heritage, the collective memory of the medium, and there is no escape from history while still remaining human. All islands might seem isolated yet they are connected by the same seabed and washed by the same waves.

History is relevant by the very fact that it *is* our history.

7. The history of photography did not come to an abrupt end in 1900, or in 1950, or in any other years in the past. History includes whatever you are doing right now. And here is the final point: whatever images are being produced at this moment in time not only add to the medium's history but also the works of the past are being renewed by the best work of the present. Each new image subtly, but irrevocably, changes the past as it contributes to the future.

Every photographer is Janus, the two-headed Roman god, who could not look forward without looking back.

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