

Since the age of twelve, I have been taking photographs, and until now, I have not truly questioned or looked into how photography has changed art and the culture surrounding it. Not only am I interested in the history of photography, but also in the history of the image and how it has changed over the years due to technological advancements. First of all we must define, “What is an image?” John Berger, an English art critic, painter and writer, accurately describes it as “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved” (9). Essentially, an image is a reproduction of reality that an individual sees. As technology progressed in the mid 1800s, soon came the invention of the first camera and alongside it, theoretical questions surrounding the connotations of “the image.” I am interested in the overarching question “How did the invention of photography change the viewer’s relationship to the image?” With other questions to accompany it like “How does a reproduction change an “original” image,” “What is the difference between a photo and a drawing or painting,” and “How do photographers use the photograph to persuade the viewer?” Along with John Berger, Susan Sontag, an American writer and filmmaker, professor, literary icon, and political activist, and more, will aid my investigation into answering these questions (“Susan Sontag”). By applying this theory to artists like Ansel Adams, Sherrie Levine, and others, we see the real application of how the image has changed. The invention of photography has changed so much about the world of images, including the relationship the viewer has with the image, which has changed from being highly selective and available to only the rich, with very expensive collections of paintings, to being available to the general public in the form of newspapers, magazines, and the Internet.

The advancement of technology in the mid 18th century, starting with the camera, made the image change drastically. Before an actual photograph could be produced, there was the camera obscura, which is a device that projects the image of the scene outside, through a pinhole, onto a viewing surface. The image would appear upside-down and could be used to trace the image (History of Photography). In 1826, inventor Nicéphore Niépce took the first photograph known to man. The image shows the view from an upstairs window at Niépce’s estate, *Le Gras*, in the Burgundy region of France. The photograph looks more like an abstract painting than anything else. Niépce printed his photograph by coating a piece of paper with silver chloride (History of Photography). Other later methods include daguerreotypes¹, calotypes², and dry plates³, all of which still required a skilled individual. Like painting, at first photography was only available to the wealthy, inventors, and mechanics and Berger



¹ The first practical photographic method invented by Louis Daguerre and Niépce in 1836. The process included coating a copper plate with silver, then treating it with iodine vapor to make it sensitive to light. (History of Photography)

² An early photographic process introduced in 1841 by William Henry Fox Talbot, using paper coated with silver iodide. (History of Photography)

³ Invented by Richard Leach Maddox in 1871 this process involved exposing silver bromide held in a layer of gelatin. (History of Photography)

says that, “taking photographs had no clear social use. It was only with its industrialization that photography came into its own art” (8). With cameras becoming easier and cheaper to operate, individuals started to take photography as an art form. It was not until 1888 when George Eastman sold the first Kodak “Brownie” camera, which used Kodak roll film to capture the image. This camera was very basic and sold at a low cost, which appealed to the masses. With these consumer cameras comes the idea of the ‘snapshot,’ which has no artistic intent, but still captures a memorable image that has meaning to the photographer. In addition to the advancement of photography the printing press also improved greatly in the mid 1800s. In 1843, Richard M. Hoe, of the United States, invented the first steam powered rotary printing press, which allowed people to print millions of copies of a page in one day, and could later print photographs in addition to text and images. More recently, with the creation of the Internet, images have become one of the most important parts of our lives. They give us information, hold memories, and can illustrate things that words cannot describe. Both of these inventions gave a broader range to the distribution of photographs to the public. With this invention of photography how did the viewer’s relationship change to the image, which once only consisted of paintings and drawings?

Photography has completely changed the world of images for the better. It has broadened the audience from being only accessible to the rich to being open to the masses. Not only did photography change the convenience of images but also “changed the way men saw. The visible came to mean something different to them” (Berger, 18). Sontag describes the effect of photography well. She writes, “The subsequent industrialization of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images” (7). Sontag sees photography as a way to share experiences with everyone through images, which I agree with. Especially after the invention of the ‘snapshot,’ a photograph became a way to document our lives and share them with others, in addition to being an art form.

Starting in the Renaissance, perspective in art started to focus on the single spectator. This single spectator could only be in one place at a time. The viewer’s perception of an image depends on his or her own way of seeing, whereas painting has never had the number of possible subjects as photography has. Berger argues that another major impact of the camera was that it destroyed the uniqueness of painted images.

A reproduction of a painting or drawing might not change the visual aspects of an image, but it does change the meaning surrounding the piece itself. Berger argues that when an image is reproduced or separated from the location it was meant for, like a museum, its meaning changes:

When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings (19).

The uniqueness is unaffected because the original piece will always be more impressive than a reproduction on a computer screen. However, he is right in some sense, when he says that the camera allowed the painting to travel to “spectator rather than the spectator to the painting” (Berger, 20). Is this necessarily a bad thing? The quality of a painting being able to travel to the viewer is an advantage, which opens doors to many people who would not have been able to see these paintings. With this reproduction come some negative aspects like questions of authenticity. In the current world of art, artists, like myself, worry about authenticity more than anything else.

When going back to the idea that an image is just a reproduction of reality, Ludwig Feuerbach observes that the present age “prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being” (Sontag, 153). Sherrie Levine is an artist who is challenging this authenticity, digging in to what it actually means. One of Levine’s most famous pieces is titled *Sherrie Levine after Walker Evans*, which is a series of famous Walker Evans photographs that Levine photographed directly from an exhibition catalogue and redisplayed in a gallery. The photographs not only show an act of appropriation, but also the meaning in the original Evans’ photographs are made current. Many other artists use appropriation to take from older photographs, drawings, or paintings and make it their own. So if photographs and drawings/paintings are both considered images, what is the difference?

Ultimately, I believe that a photograph can be very similar or very different to a painting or drawing; it just depends on the individual’s approach to photography. Berger describes the difference between these two mediums well: “The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper” (10). Both art forms, painting and photography, have an end result, the image, which shows the way the artist perceives his/her world. However, the difference between the two is that paintings and drawings are an interpretation of the world, while photographed images are not as much as an interpretation, but rather a, “miniature of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (Sontag, 4).

An art form that has made a rise after the invention of the camera is photorealism, which is a type of painting that is based on creating an image that looks like a photograph. If a photorealistic painting looks identical to a photograph, what is the point? Why not just take a photograph instead? Is the viewer supposed to be in awe of the realistic qualities of the painting? Or maybe, the way the painter thinks of it is that the camera cannot see the same way the eye can. With the rise of photography as a commonality, I can see photorealism becoming more and more popular among painters. The only quality that these photorealistic pieces lack is that they are not a “miniature of reality,” as Sontag describes it (4). These pieces of art are just representations of reality painted with photographic qualities. If artists like Richard Estes (who painted *Telephone Booths*, which is seen to the right), Robert Cottingham, and Ralph Goings convince the viewer that the painting is a photograph, how else do artists use the image to persuade the viewer?



Artists use subject matter, unique techniques, and occasionally accompanying text to influence the viewer. Usually the three techniques will happen in a specific order. First the artist picks the subject, and then decides on the techniques he will use. Finally, he can decide whether or not he wants to add text to aid the viewer in deciphering the meaning. However, text can add meaning that is unclear and can reduce the liminal experience for the viewer, in other words the spectator is unable to form their own opinions. Sontag describes the first two steps a photographer takes, “In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects” (6). Sontag is explaining that the techniques and choices a photographer makes when taking pictures can be reflected in the subject. For example, if the subject is a model, the model will act much

differently in an indoor studio than outdoors in a forest. But of course, models were not the only subjects to be photographed. Ansel Adams is one of the earliest influential photographers who used the beautiful American landscapes as his subjects. Essentially, his photographs saved the national parks by displaying the pure beauty to people nationwide (History: Ansel). His sublime compositions showed the true beauty of nature and convinced the people of America that national parks were worth saving. Seeing how such a large impact Adams' photography had shows how important the image is in society today.

Photography has completely reinvented the image, while also holding onto some of the same qualities as painting or drawing. The image changed, but techniques in creating it still were present, like composition, depth, subject choice, and contrast. For one, the relationship the viewer has with an image has changed. Photography has become a part of our society used to document our lives. Painting or drawing could never have done the amount of documentation that photography has. With a painting taking several hours to finish and a photograph taking a fraction of a second, the possibility of subjects is limitless. The image has also moved from being strictly available to the rich to being open to almost anyone. The advancements in technology specifically helped with making this possible. Not only can an image hold pathos and memories, but also can have political or socially charged meanings. It is no wonder that the image has become such an important part of our everyday lives.

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