

FOREWORD

# A NEW HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

EDITED BY MICHEL FRIZOT

KÖNEMANN

# INTRODUCTION

## The age of light

Michel Frizot

At the very beginning of the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert, describing Bouvard's apartment, observes that on the chest of drawers, "flanking the looking-glass, were daguerreotypes portraying his friends". A little further on in the story Bouvard receives from the notary a letter informing him of the inheritance which will decide the destiny of the two accomplices. According to Flaubert, "it was January 20, 1839"; the notary's letter was dated January 14, 1839.<sup>1</sup>

It was precisely one week earlier, on January 7, that the French Academy of Sciences first became aware of a completely new process which was given the name of daguerreotype. Yet at that date not a single portrait had been produced by the process, which was not sensitive enough for this application. The presence of daguerreotypes in the bedroom of someone like Bouvard would be historically plausible only from the end of the 1840s. Although they were commoner at the time that Flaubert was writing his novel (1874), they would still be much more appropriate in a bourgeois home than in that of a minor civil servant.

Flaubert was by no means ignorant of photographic techniques (during his trip to Egypt in 1849–1851 he was accompanied by his friend Maxime Du Camp, who, equipped with his camera, produced numerous paper negatives there). For want, no doubt, of precise documentation Flaubert simply did not possess a particularly clear idea of the place of the daguerreotype in history, in the period during which his literary creation lived.

In some ways, undertaking a history of photography today is rather like being a writer: seeking out information, collecting images, and writing a kind of adventure story – the life of photographs – creating reality while avoiding historical blunders, putting images in their proper place, and relocating the world of people like Bouvard and Pécuchet around images.



GIACOMO CANEVA,  
(attributed),  
*Fisherman, Southern Italy*,  
from a paper negative,  
1850s,  
private collection.

### History and historiography

The difficulty of writing a history of photography derives in the first place from the supremacy of the model in the history of art, specifically in the history of painting, a model about which one does not always know what to expect, but already used – and by renowned figures – to justify its hierarchical value. This omnipresent reference point inevitably raises the difficult question of the relationship of photography to art, a debate which has raged from the mid-nineteenth century. Their relations were marked by rivalry, denunciation, and anathema, without any real respite and without any forum in which constructive discussion could take place.

Photographs, being monochrome images on paper, were from the outset perceived as graphical documents akin to drawings, lithographs, and

◀ ANONYMOUS AMATEUR,  
circa 1910,  
private collection.

1. G. Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 57 and pp. 62–63.





AYMARD DE BANVILLE,  
*Giza: Sphinx  
 and Pyramid  
 of Khephren,*  
 1863.

2. H. Damisch, "A partir de la photographie", preface to R. Krauss, *Le Photographique: Pour une théorie des écarts*, Paris, Macula, 1990, p. 10.

3. J. M. Eder, *Geschichte der Photographie*, Halle, Knapp, 3rd. ed., 1905; Eng. trans., *History of Photography*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1945; repr., New York, Dover, 1978.

4. *Photography 1839-1937: A Short Critical History*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1937, reissued as *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, New York, 1949.

5. R. Lécuyer, *Histoire de la photographie*, Paris, Baschet, 1945.

6. H. and A. Gernsheim, *The History of Photography, from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura to the Beginning of the Modern Era*, London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1955.

7. N. Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1984.

engravings, a categorization reinforced by the illustrative use made of them. But this put photography merely in the role of an artistic accessory, "the humble servant of the arts", as Baudelaire called it in his critique of the 1859 Salon. Fortunately, photographs remained on the sidelines, as much because of their method of production and usage as their significance as images. The history of photography may therefore be traced by assuming this difference, and recognizing that this process has an ontological significance. While the history of painting was an analysis of the variables of formal or iconographical codes, the history of photography has had to invent for itself reasons for existence which are not merely a vague way of capturing the world in images.

For while a photograph is certainly a document, and an historical one at that – in which the date and current peculiarities form, as it were, a water-mark – it is also a fragment of general history. For one hundred and fifty years, history

has been influenced – with increasing speed towards the present day – by photography, which "wishes to be present in history, and in official history just as much as in the most secret history, in collective history as much as that of the individual".<sup>2</sup> History from the point of view of photography is, in a manner of speaking, that kind of discursive way in which one introduces photographic documents, linking one to the next, explaining the inner variability of photographic images, while recognizing an evolutionary aspect to this material which allows us to make history. The very study of the history of painting is only possible thanks to photography. It would be inappropriate to try, on the other hand, to force photography into the strait-jacket of schemata devised for other arts (and which are sometimes contested or altered).

The difficulties of working out a structure suitable for this history of photography are all too obvious in previous studies – the presence of the model of the history of art, with its almost biological evolutionary periods of genesis, vocation, maturity, and decadence, the duality of the medium between craft techniques, and an art of communication connected with language. Until the 1930s, the notion of technical evolution prevailed.<sup>3</sup> The first attempt at bringing criteria together was that of Beaumont Newhall (on the occasion of an exhibition to commemorate the centenary of the invention of photography). He constructed a global view of images, their techniques, and the external influences which motivated them.<sup>4</sup> But the framework established by Newhall was applicable only to photographic categories regarded as artistic, or aspiring to be so. What is more, it confirmed the museum-type recognition of "photography-as-art". It fell to Raymond Lécuyer<sup>5</sup> to attempt, in 1945, to show the irrevocable link between technique and the meaning of images. The effect was to recognize that photography had achieved an immediate maturity, contemporary with its invention. Next, came the history of photography by A. and H. Gernsheim,<sup>6</sup> which restricted itself to the period 1839-1914 and included a rich documentary apparatus – partly due to Josef-Maria Eder. For a long time, this meant that writers in English on the subject maintained pole position. More recently, Naomi Rosenblum<sup>7</sup> attempted something which had become difficult – to present the development of photography from a single viewpoint, centered on the notion of constant technical progress and ending up with the omnipresent reference point of photojournalism, capturing the moment. The multi-authored book edited by André Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny<sup>8</sup> had the legitimate ambition of treating photography in



ates it to themselves in order to reveal it all the better. We have tried to break down this dichotomy between image and art in order to emphasize the variety of practice and intentional usages which underlie photographic production. It should not be forgotten that images have a destination which determines in advance their form, their size, and their quality, a destination which is often objective, and to which the historian must refer more openly: the archive, the artist's folder, the family album, the frame on the mantelpiece, the art book, the newspaper, the advertising hoarding, the cemetery. We have therefore considered that all photographs are subject to the action of "fields" – influences, affinities, reference points, social determinants, conventions of interpretation – not only to technological determinism. Most people use photography to obtain an image with someone or something in mind – a person, a use or function – an aim which may or may not be fulfilled. The history of photography can open itself up more widely only by considering private photographic practice as much as use by the media, the former being the real reflection of photographic reality even if it has not yet reached museums and galleries.

◀ MÉLANDRI,  
*Sarah Bernhardt*,  
1876,  
private collection.

history from the viewpoint of social evolution, but the project was marred by the restricted amount of space available.

From these too few general works, it emerges that photographic history cannot be a chronological continuum arbitrarily attached to the medium and its technique. It can result only from taking into account that which is peculiar to photography – its serial nature, its temporal quality, its viewpoint (in the sense of the place from where the view is taken), and the degree to which each image departs from what is regarded as the norm in a given period (what has been called "photographic").

## Photography

Not only the works quoted but numerous studies in specialist magazines<sup>9</sup> show how it is in photography itself that the methods and means by which it may be evaluated are to be found. By examining all forms of photography in its history innovations will become apparent to us.

Firstly, we need to define what we mean by "photography". Above all, it is an ensemble of highly disparate images which possess in common the fact that they were created by the action of light on a sensitive surface. For some, photography is an objective view of the world, a means of producing a record. For others, the vision is totally subjective, and the photographer an artist who reaches agreement with reality and appropri-

In consequence, photography will not be judged by what it "represents". In comparison with painting, which may be likened to an icon, photography reveals to us a sense of the fortuitous, the image-making possibilities of everything that occurs optically. It appears to us like the carrier of an epiphany-like message, modest but tenacious, anodyne but essential. After all, photography is really nothing more than a detector of photons, those particles which signal to our eyes the innumerable events of the universe.

▼ NAYA Studio,  
*Pigeon Shooting at the  
Hotel Excelsior, Venice Lido*,  
circa 1900.

8. *Histoire de la Photographie*, ed. André Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny, Paris, Bordas, 1986.

9. *Fotogeschichte* (from 1981), *History of Photography* (from 1977), *Photographies* (1983–1985), *Prestige de la photographie* (1977–1980), *La Recherche photographique* (1986–1997), *Études Photographiques* (from 1996).



JOSEPH BYRON,  
*Handball, Teachers' College, New York,*  
 1904,  
 Museum of the City of New York.



## Towards a history of photographs

The history of photography is sometimes attacked by critics who suspect it of perpetuating an aesthetic doctrine that seeks to subject the present to rules based on the model of the past.

For this reason, our aim is to undertake a history of photographs considered as working objects in their own time, over the century and a half since photography first made its appearance. This approach cannot be neatly summed up as a demonstration of an evolutionary sequence. It demands instead an archaeological approach to the subject, by identifying the strata and establishing a typology of the language of photography and the implications and interaction of these aspects at any given moment. It is a question of "accepting only to deal with a multitude of separate events", as Foucault put it.<sup>10</sup> This type of history does not consist simply of recognizing the sequence of stratified layers. Rather, it is the relationship between a certain number of circumstances which defines the archeological artifact which constitutes a photograph, those circumstances which brought it into being and which led to its burial – only to be "read" afresh when it has been brought to the surface again, which itself endows it with an unexpected new aura. A history of photographs is an examination of a combi-

nation of factors, the short-term reasons for the creation of the images and their eventual fate.

Since a historical study is always something of a gamble on what the very notion of history will be in the future, we have favored the content of the photographs rather than the actual history of photography. In this book each author defends what seems to us a valid historical point of view with regard to each defined subject, to the extent that the photographer and the spectator are placed face to face within their different historic perspectives. The integrity of the entire work, transcending obvious differences in the authors' viewpoints, lies in the choice of illustrations. These have been selected not on the basis of some theoretical aesthetic standpoint, but because, in our view, they best represent the wide variety of photographic images. The aim of the selection process is to show how the whole of society is actively or passively involved in, or through, photography. It remains to be seen how these "modes of being" operate within everyday life for photography spread with the rapidity first of engravings, then of portfolios, and finally of books, magazines, and printing in general. It is the end-product of these means of communication.

Wishing to consider photography as a broad, unsorted whole, we have been careful not to recreate obsolete categories. In order to justify

10. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York, Pantheon, 1972.

11. *Ibid.* p. 10.

their place in a corpus which some would like to be homogeneous, the definition of the various fields of photography has often been stretched to absurd limits: scientific photography, *reportage*, current affairs, fashion, advertising, art – categories which demonstrate a tacit lack of acceptance of these fields grafted onto the primary art form. By probing beneath these often simplistic categories, whose function is mainly one of professional convenience, we have sought out the essential inner core of photographic unity within which they all form part of “photography”, that broad, disparate ensemble which includes both artistic creation and routine work, which manifests itself in the photographic studio, the family album, the advertisement, the tourist view, the exotic image. All these are autonomous units with their own internal history, bound together more or less tightly and unfurling at varying speeds. For the historical development of these categories has taken place at different rates, running down “a gentle historical slope”,<sup>11</sup> so that the evolution of photography is marked by phases of sudden extinction, rapid spurts or disconcerting periods of stability.

Our final objective, beyond the necessary chronology of techniques and use, is firstly the history of functions – what was expected of the images under discussion – the history of optical science and of the spaces crossed (and invented) by photography. Then, the history of the meaning of photographs each time its function was renewed. Our aim, too, is to make some inroad into neglected sectors (social, popular, family, media photography), to ask why a photograph should



exist at all, knowing that we cannot avoid from the outset all pre-existing schemata. Getting out of a strictly historic narrative and the restrictions imposed by the *a priori* limitations of the field of photography is not an easy matter for participants in a multi-authored collection. If this work still carries, despite our best efforts, the marks of former categories, nevertheless it should be possibly to discover within it different criteria for reading, ways of access to another type of photography which had scarcely been given breathing-space, thus recreating the visual foundation of modern society, and stressing photography's role as one of the most visible indices of the quest for modernity.

G. BOURGEOIS STUDIO,  
*Raymond*,  
1906,  
private collection.

PIERRE DUBREUIL,  
*The Aviator*,  
circa 1929–1933.  
Museum voor Fotografie,  
Antwerp.

