

The Vintage Eye

By Jane Boyer

“While there is perhaps a province in which the photograph can tell us nothing more than what we see with our own eyes, there is another in which it proves to us how little our eyes permit us to see”

Dorothea Lange



Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004)
Derrière la gare Saint-Lazare (Behind the Saint-Lazare railway station), Paris, 1932
 Photo courtesy of Christie's Images, 2011
 * Recently sold at Christie's in Paris for £1.78m

There is currency in glimpsing the past, even if that past was just a moment ago. Photography is a time capsule, recording ambient surroundings, personal expressions, interactions, and emotions. It catches the transience of living. It brings history to life. Because we fascinate ourselves, photography fascinates us. For anyone interested in the things that make us a product of our time, photography is the art form to engage. When Louis Daguerre announced the Daguerreotype, a positive silver image on a copper plate, to the world in 1839, it marked the beginning of photography. In London, Henry Fox Talbot was making similar discoveries using sensitised paper as a negative, his 'photogenic drawing' became the basis for photography as we know it, that is, until our digital revolution. The process of capturing negative images for exposure onto sensitised paper has gone through many permutations and has been a costly, smelly, messy business employing dangerous chemicals, expensive metals such as platinum, silver and copper and an unending search for absolute darkness and running water – all in an endeavour to still a fleeting moment of rapturous beauty.

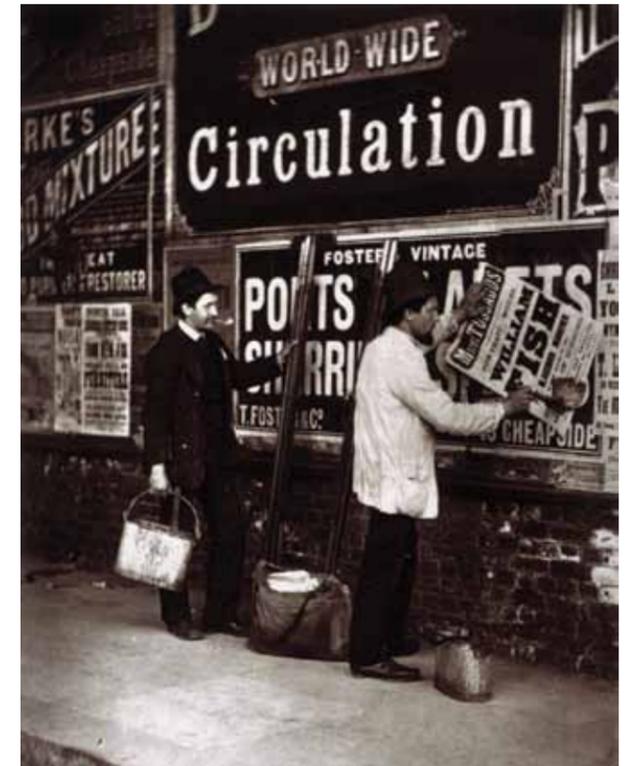
Black and white photography has been the mainstay of photography because of its stability and relative ease of production, requiring little more than strong light. 20th century American photographer Edward Weston never used an enlarger, preferring a bare light bulb to make contact prints by placing his 8x10 inch glass plate negative directly

onto photographic paper. The clarity in these prints is stunning. The gelatine silver print, which accounts for most of the black and white photographic production we've seen, replaced the late 19th century albumen print. Though faded, many of these 19th century images are still in circulation. The luscious platinum print, once reserved for only very well to-do photographers, has resurged in popularity with both photographers and collectors because of its profound stability and tonal range. Platinum metals are more stable than gold, making platinum prints the most archival. It's estimated a platinum print can last up to 1,000 years. It's still expensive, but very desirable. Colour photography has a history of its own, and has been a persistent century-long headache for manufacturers trying to stabilise the colour dyes. Only recently has technology achieved an archival rating of 100 years. The most common colour process is the chromogenic or C-type print.

“Photography has always been the most democratic of mediums”

But it takes more than technical concerns to determine value and desirability. Rarity, who made the print and when, contemporary popularity, condition – all are factors. For most collectors a vintage print is paramount. A vintage print is one made at or about the same time as the negative, generally accepted to be within five years of the negative date. It's

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79)
Circe, 1865
 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



John Thompson (1837-1921)
Street Advertising: Street Life in London, 1877-1878
 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

recognised as being the period of the photographer's clearest vision of the subject. Many photographers now give two dates to their prints, the negative date and the print date because it has become such an issue with collectors. The difficulty with vintage prints is a photographer may have only made one or two copies of an image, often with little care in its storage, so later prints or modern prints, those made after the five-year period, or even posthumous prints are the only prints available. The number of variables involved with valuing photography makes collecting it a fascinating pursuit for an enquiring mind and passionate heart.

I asked Philippe Garner, head of the photography department at Christie's of London, what market activities have fuelled the interest in photography. "There has been a steady, incremental growth of the market for rare, fine and historic photographs over the past 40 years. We have also seen a steep rise in market interest through the last decade

in post-war and contemporary photographs. The commitment of numerous major international museums to this field has been key to this phenomenon, as has the emergence of photography as a medium of choice for many independent, contemporary image makers. This week at Christie's in New York a photograph by Andreas Gursky from 1999 made just over \$4.3m in our auction of post-war and contemporary art. A few prices at these levels have had an enormous impact in the way the medium is perceived." Charlie Fellowes of Edel Assanti Gallery in London, says: "Photography has always been the most democratic of mediums. The advancement in technologies surrounding the practice have only reinforced this. Anyone on the planet who has a mobile telephone can now lay claim to being a photographer. Arguably the proliferation of these technologies has actually seen the market supporting more traditional techniques expand. Vintage silver and platinum prints, daguerreotypes, and pinhole

photography have all been shown in recent exhibitions in contemporary art galleries in London," continues Fellowes.

Interest in photography as a field of collecting only started in the 1970s. This means there are still surprises to come – for example, the 2007 find of Vivian Maier, a reclusive Chicago nanny who exposed some 100,000 negatives and made 3,000 prints in virtual obscurity. An exhibition of her work will be at Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York, 15 December to 28 January.

In this uncertain global economic climate, the art market in general has proven resilient. "Perhaps there is even a basis for suggesting that in such a climate a work of art, in whatever medium, is regarded as having a perennial intrinsic value that makes it an all the more attractive alternative to conventional securities," says Philippe Garner. Charlie Fellowes agrees: "Interest in the medium has never been greater: the Tate now has a full-time

photography curator, every month new galleries are mounting photographic exhibitions, and it is one of the few markets that has not faltered throughout the recession." Photography as a field is wide open. "There are truly committed collectors at every level and for every kind of photographic image. The intensity of passion is no lesser in the lower price ranges than at the most expensive peak of the market," continues Garner. But is there more interest in one genre over another? What do collectors collect? "It is in the very nature of the medium that every photograph has a subject. Many collectors are subject led, others fascinated by the intrinsic mystery of the medium itself. There is no need to put photographs in pigeon holes. Ultimately, this is disrespectful to the individuality of the photographers. I am wary of the categorisation of certain photographs as 'fine art'... I prefer to ask myself simply whether a photographer has a point of view and is capable of touching my emotions, sometimes more like a poet than a painter," says Garner. However, Garner admits the label 'artist'

brings a greater premium at market. He says: "But here we are in danger of being seduced by the mechanisms of the market-makers rather than trusting our eye and our heart." The blend of vision

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and passion is what makes art the language it is after all, tempting us to feel there is something of the gods in artists.

Photojournalism has been a major source of photographic output since the early days of the medium. The Mexican-American War of 1846-48 was the first war to be photographed. Margaret

Bourke-White, known to the Life staff as 'Maggie the Indestructible' was the first female war photographer and a trailblazer in the field. She was described by Sean Callahan as "The woman who had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean, strafed by the Luftwaffe, stranded on an Arctic island, bombarded in Moscow, and pulled out of the Chesapeake when her chopper crashed," in *The Last Days of a Legend*, a Bullfinch Press promotional essay for the book, *Margaret-Bourke White*. You can find this essay online. For a first-hand look at photojournalism, *The Market's* Becky Hunter interviews Don McCullin on page 90, one of the most distinguished photojournalists of our time.

Fashion photography has also had a huge impact on the development of photography as a form of communication. Where would we be without greats Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and the current maestro of fashion, Steven Meisel who has photographed every cover of *Italian Vogue* for the past 20 years. To find out more about this magical,

mysterious medium here are a few resources:

Galleries:

- Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York
- Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
- Edelman Assanti, London

Museums:

- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Photographic Fairs:

- AIPAD (Association of International Photography Dealers), Park Avenue Amory, New York, 29 March-1 April, 2012
- Paris Photo, Grand Palais, Paris, 10-13 November, 2011

Photographic Journals, print and online:

- *Aperture*, iconic photographic print magazine published four times a year
- *Burn*, an online journal of emerging talent by Magnum photographer, David Allen Harvey
- *1,000 Words Photography*, winner of the 2010 Photography Blog of the Year by Art Media Contacts and ranked number three in the Top 25 UK Arts and Culture Blogs. [m](#)



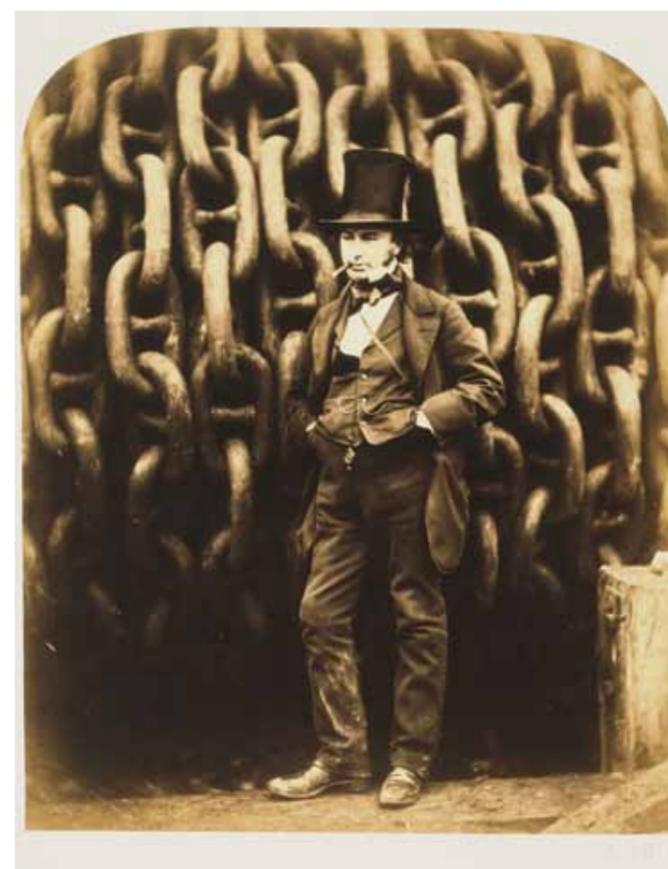
Noemie Goudal (b. 1984)
Warren, 2011
©the artist, courtesy Edelman Assanti Gallery



Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902)
Outer Prakaram, (or corridor) on the North side of the Temple of the god of Sundaresh, 1858
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Andreas Gursky (b. 1955)
Rhein II, 1999
Photo courtesy of Christie's Images, 2011



Robert Howlett (1830-58)
Isambard Kingdom Brunel and the Launching Chains of 'The Great Eastern', 1857
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