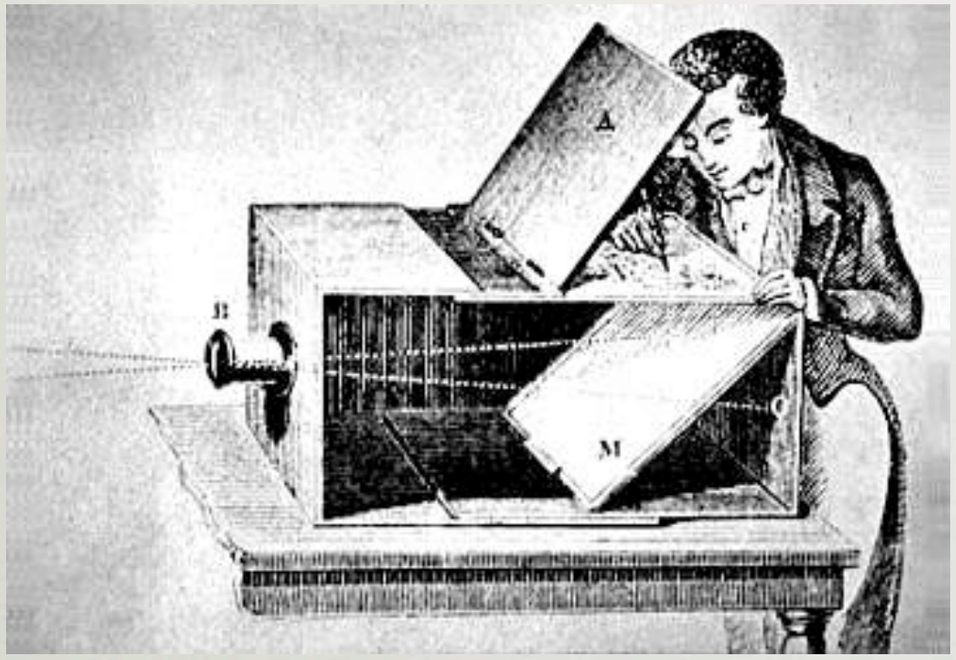
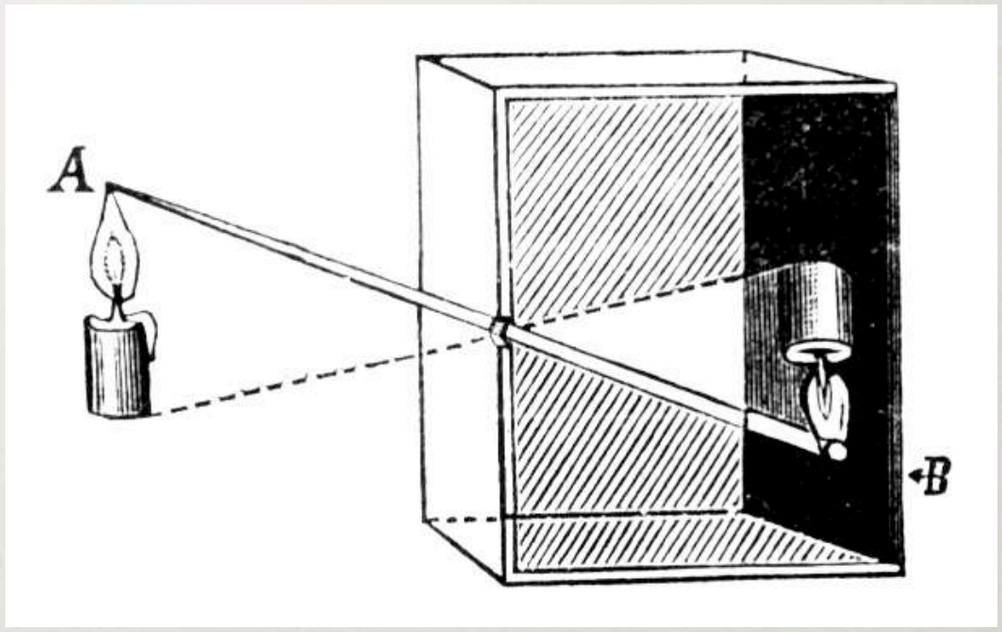
A brief History of Photography

Before Photography

Since the Renaissance, artists had been using the *camera obsura* to project an image in a dark box that they could trace and then paint. The camera obscura sometimes had a lens at one end, like a camera--but nothing to record the image chemically.

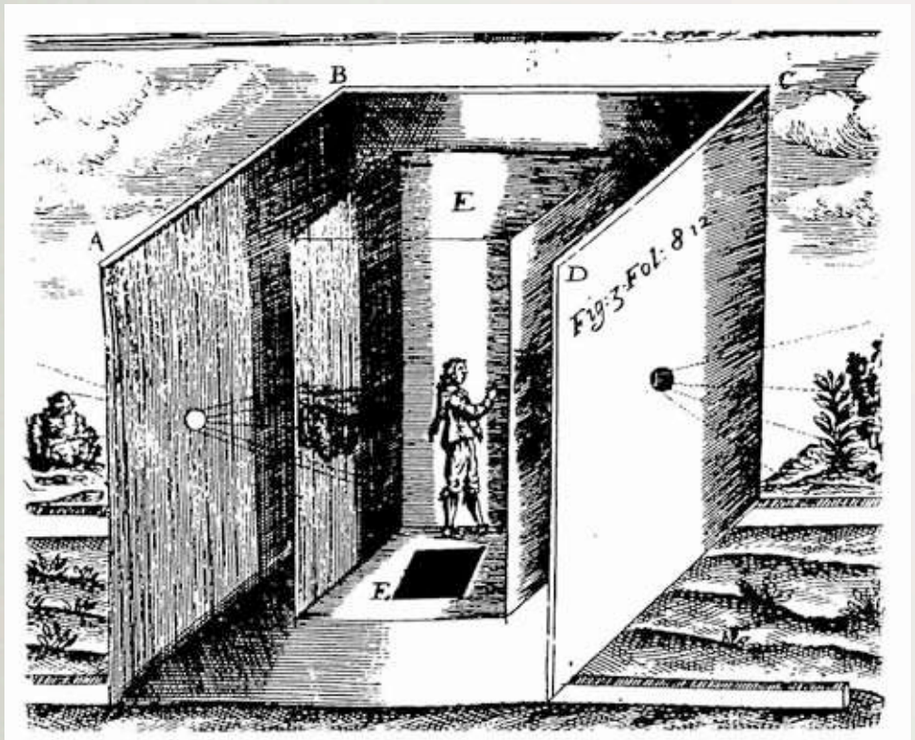


A "portable" camera obscura used for drawing images from reality. Notice that like a modern SLR, a mirror reflects the image up to the viewer at a 45 degree angle.

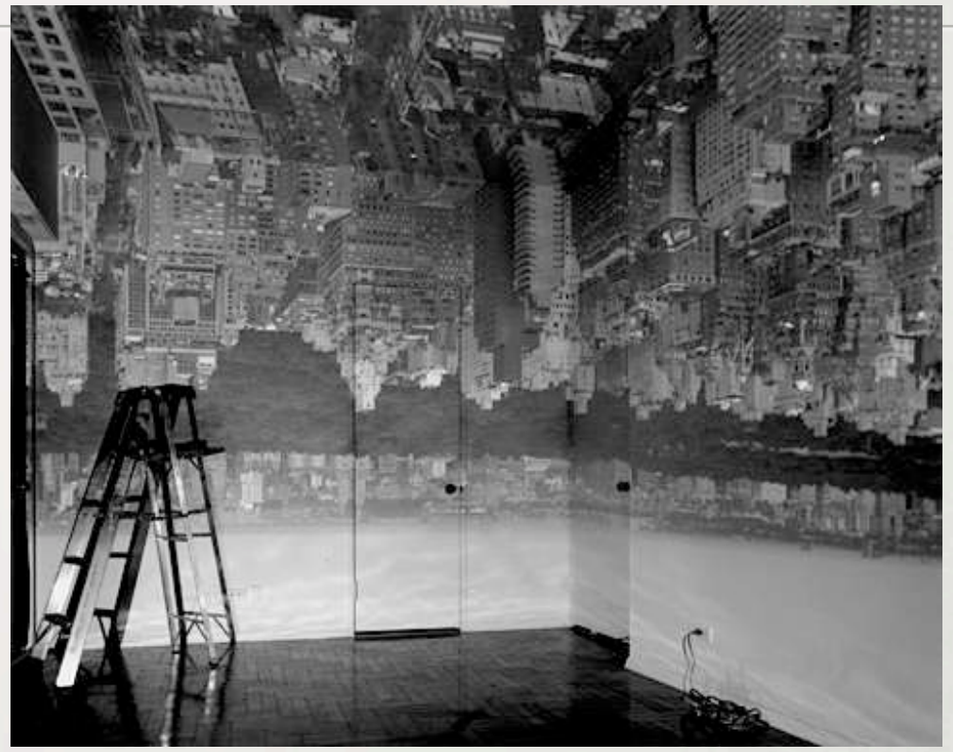


What a camera obscura "sees"- even without a lens! The image is naturally flipped (it is in the back of your eye, too--our brain corrects it.) Put film at the back and you have a "pinhole camera")

Camera Obscura



A camera obscura room



Since 1991, Boston photographer Abelardo Morrell has been making and photographing camera obscuras by blacking out all but a hole in one window. The projected image you see is what is outside the window (upside down, of course!)

Abelardo Morell

Article on Morell's work plus a video on how to turn a room into a camera obscura from the May 2011 issue of National Geographic Magazine:

http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/05/camera-obscura/oneill-text

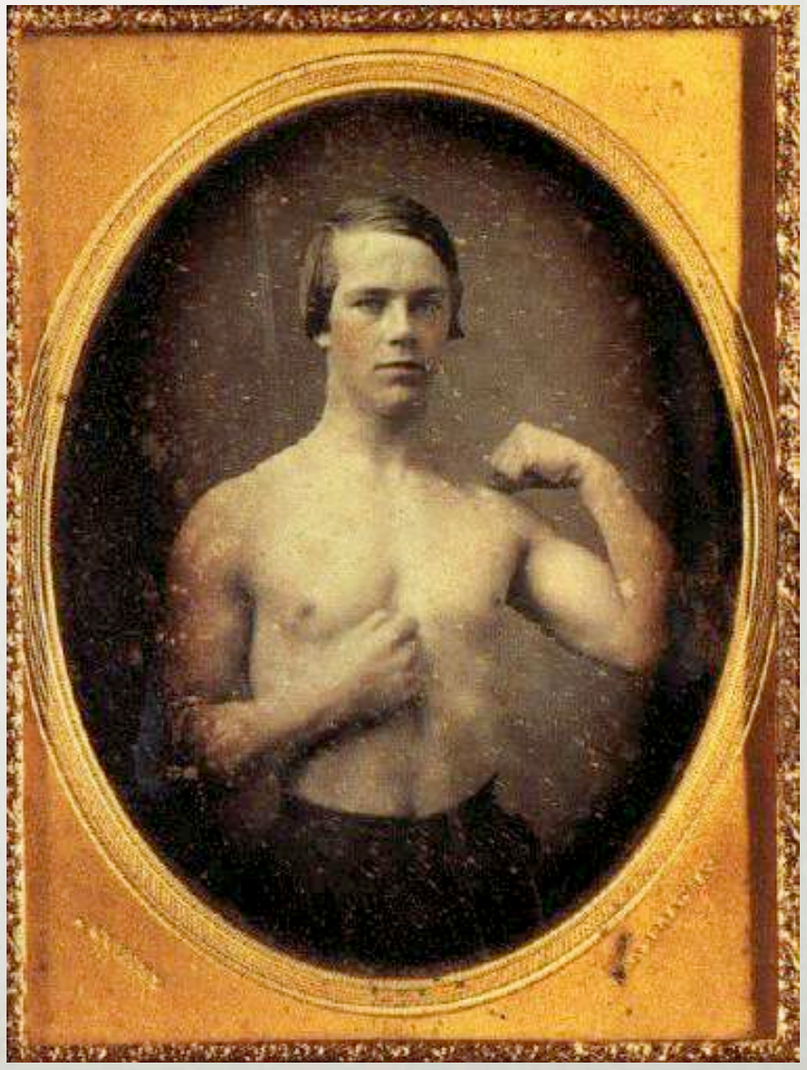
The Daguerreotype

In 1839 Louis Daguerre introduced the first practical photographic process--a copper plate coated with silver and a light-sensitive chemical (iodine or later bromine). It was developed in mercury after exposure. The images were like mirrors, but the emulsion smudged off easily--so daguerreotypes were displayed in frames behind glass. Unlike today's photographic images, there was no *negative*-- so the image could not be reproduced.

The first daguerreotype, by Daguerre, 1837.

The Daguerreotype

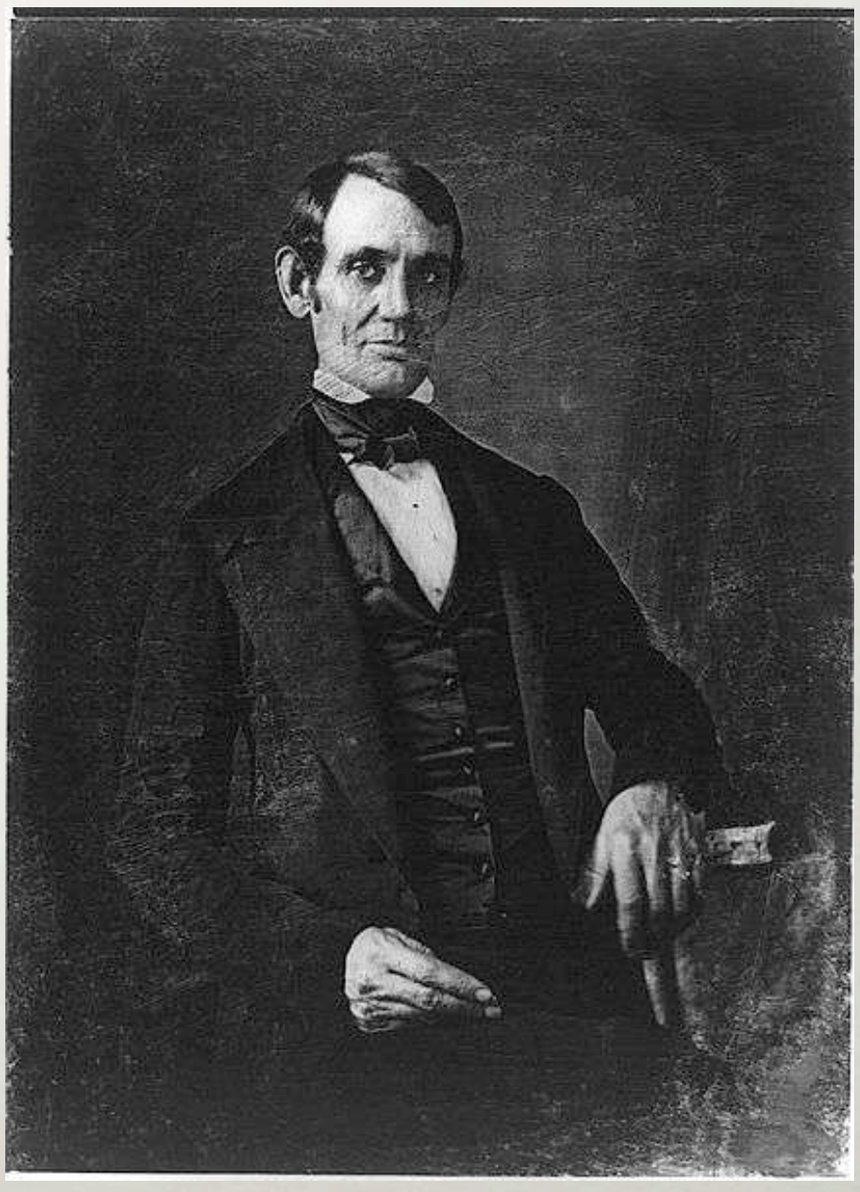
Elaborate frames were used to house the daguerreotype, which was considered a precious, treasured object in the home.



Early Portraiture

The chemicals were so slow to expose that the sitter had to sit very still for the long exposures - as long as one minute!

Daniel Webster, (founder of Webster's Dictionary)



Young Abraham Lincoln

The First Negatives

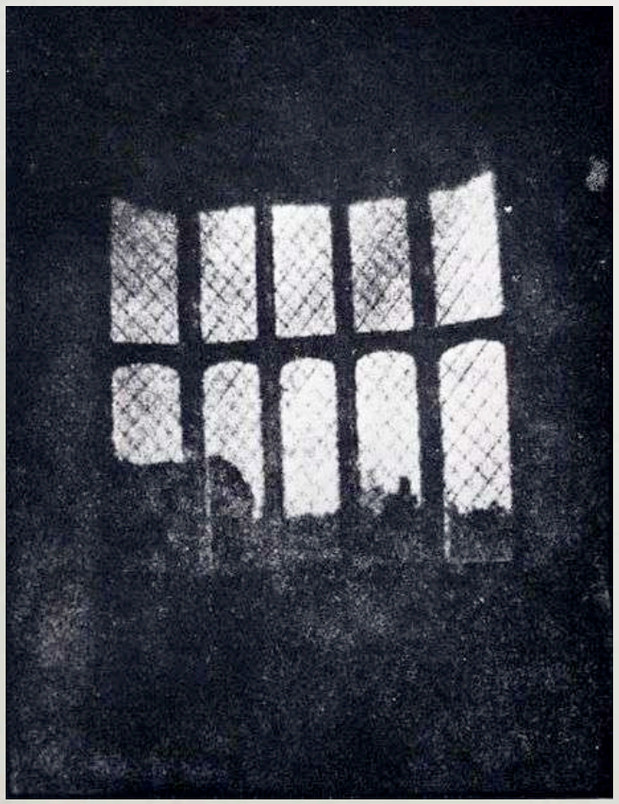
In England, Henry Fox Talbot developed the *calotype*--a photographic image fixed on a glass plate. This "negative" could be printed and reproduced.

Nicolaas Henneman, Asleep 1844-45

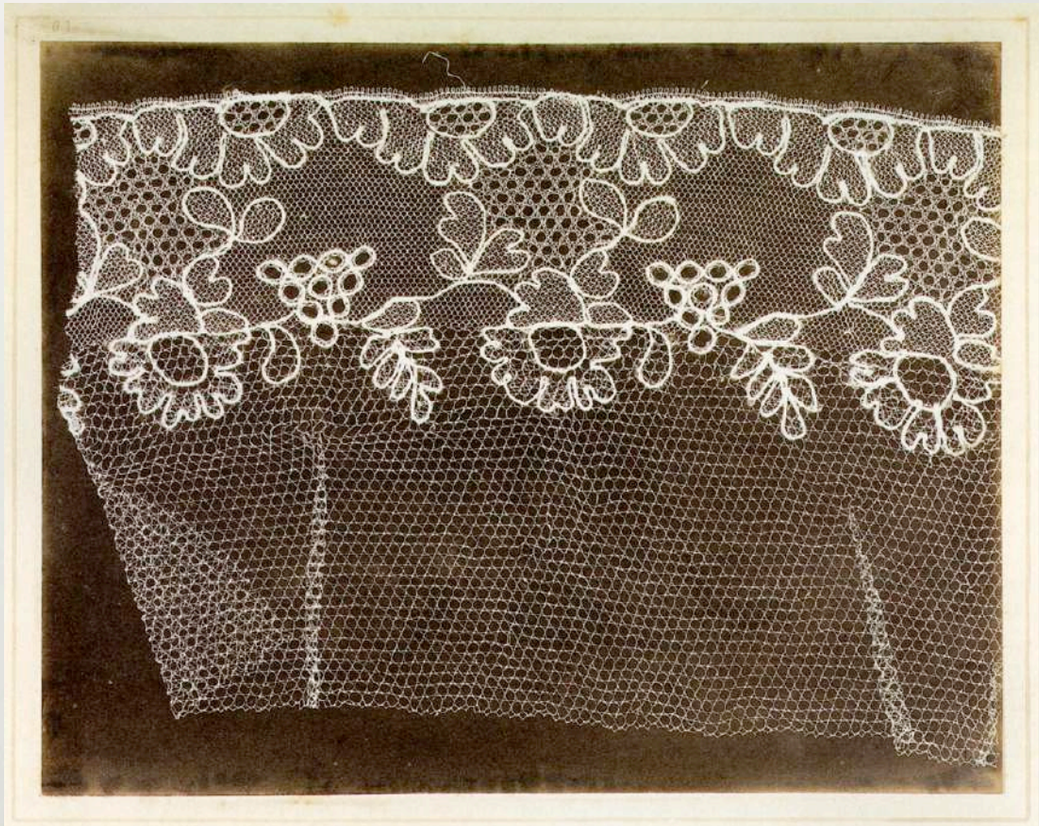
Ships at Low Tide, 1844

The First Negatives

To make a print, paper was sensitized by hand with a photo (light) sensitive "salt." Talbot's invention and publication, *The Pencil of Nature* in 1844, was the start of all the modern photographic processes.



Latticed Window in Lacock Abbey
by William Henry Fox Talbot, 1845
(a print from the first known negative!)

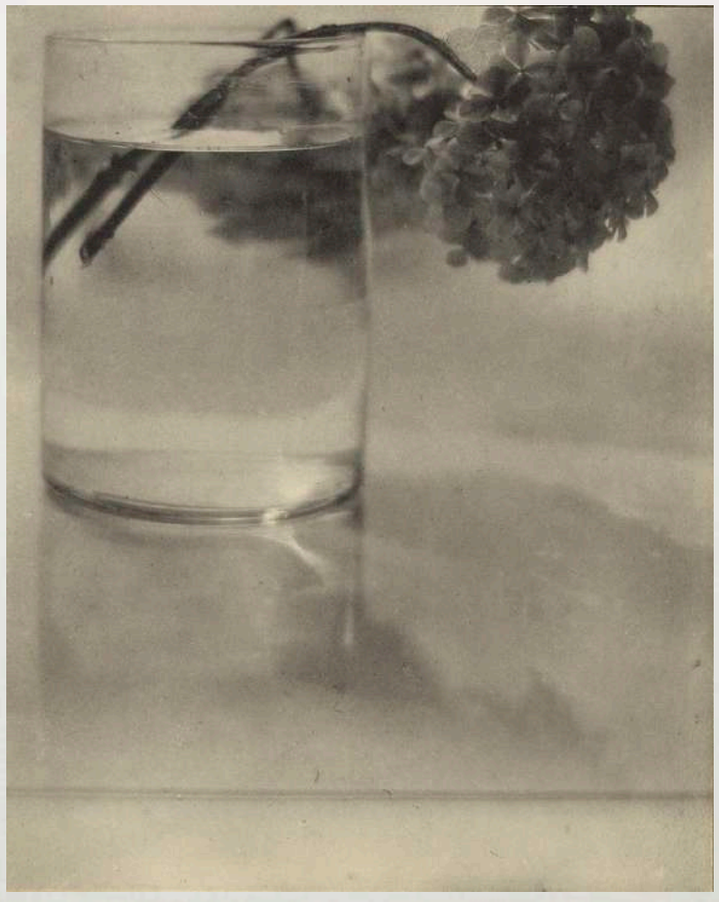


Lace a photogenic drawing (photogram)
by William Henry Fox Talbot, 1845

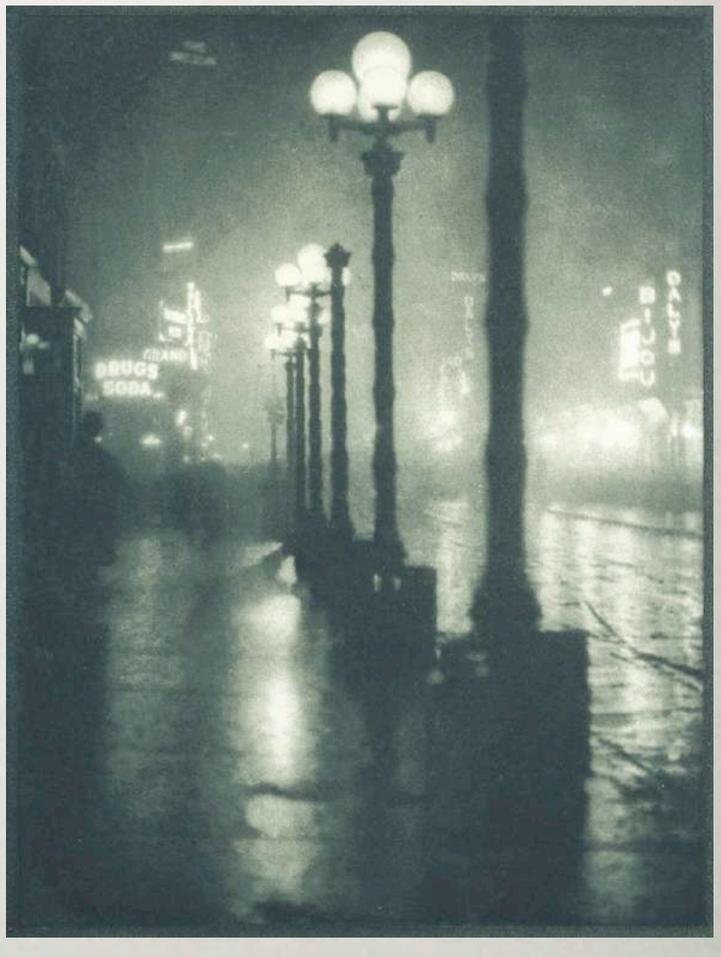
Pictorialism

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the dominate style in photography was "pictorialism," which imitated fine art at the time. The nostalgic, romantic effect of a soft lens and staged scenes made photography look like painting. Artists hand painted emulsions on paper.

The Onion Field by George Davidson, 1889



Still Life by Baron Adolf de Meyer, 1907



Broadway at Night by Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1910

Pictorialism

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) was a pictorial photographer, inspired by 15th century painting. Her scenes were dramatic but mysterious. She was not a commercial photographer or a scientist--she was an artist. She aimed to “ennoble” photography by “combining the real and the ideal.” The Illustrated London News countered, describing her portraits as "the nearest approach to art, or rather the most bold and successful applications of the principles of fine-art to photography."

Rosebud Garden of Girls by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1868

The Kiss of Peace (GG Watts and Children) by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1867

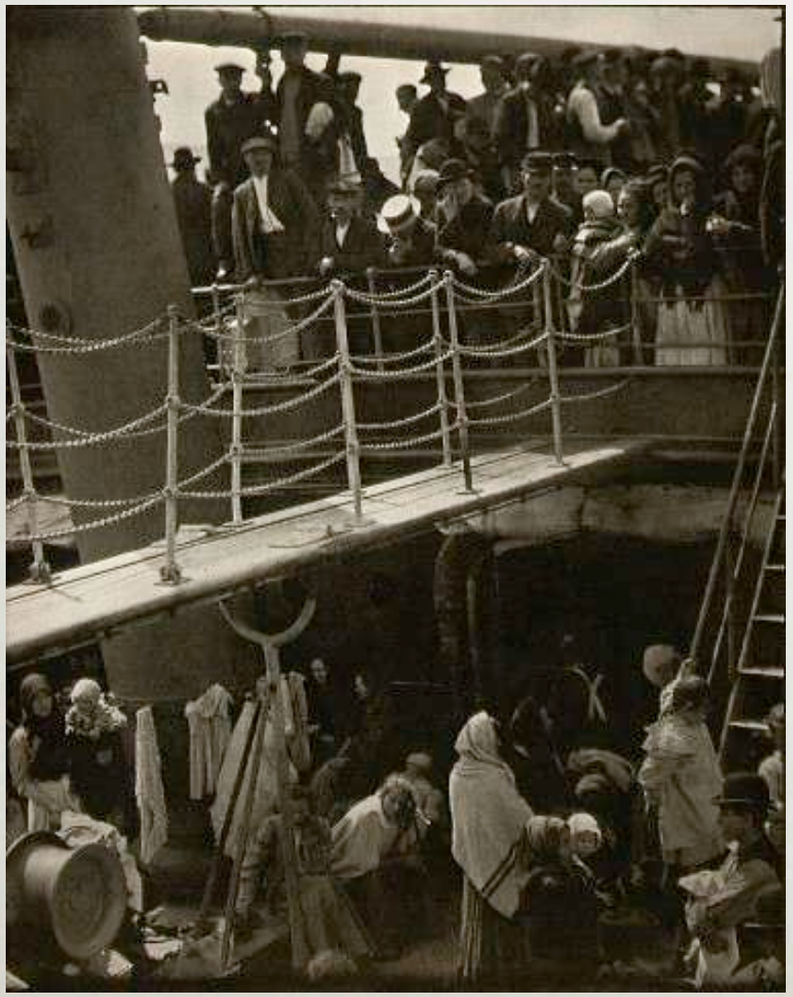
Photo Manipulation (Before Photoshop)

Because of the limited dynamic range of the collodion (wet-plate) process in the mid- to late - 1800's, photographers would combine two exposures to make one good one. This was called *combination printing*. Later, some photographers rebelled against this "unnaturalistic photography," advocating "straight photography" that reproduced what we see.

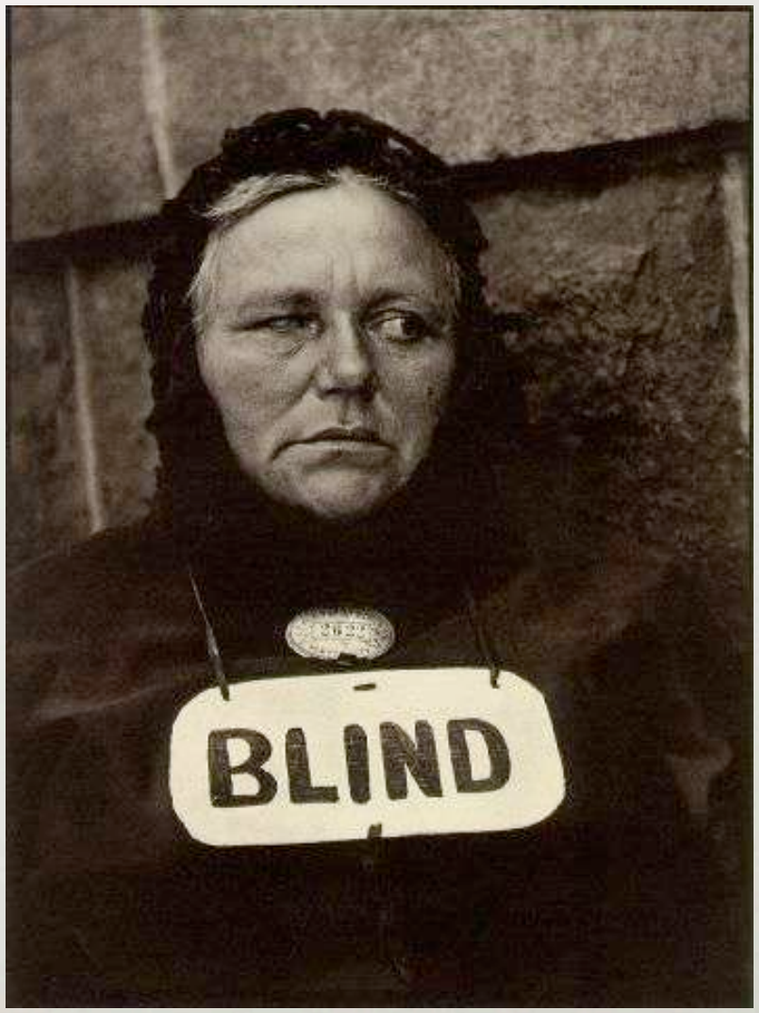
Figures in Landscape by Henry Peach Robinson, 1880

Straight Photography

In the early 1900's, photographers wanted to define photography as it's own art form--not imitate painting. They promoted real (not staged) scenes in natural light reproduced as they saw them--without manipulation. They discovered social value in documenting what they saw.



The Steerage by Alfred Steiglitz, 1907

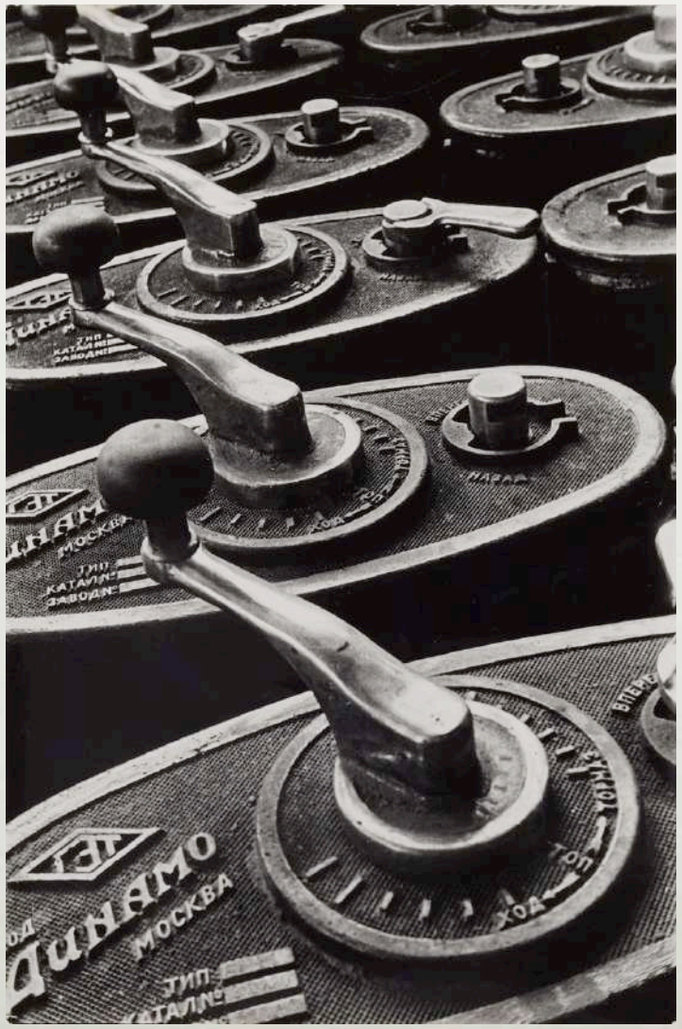


Blind by Paul Strand, 1916

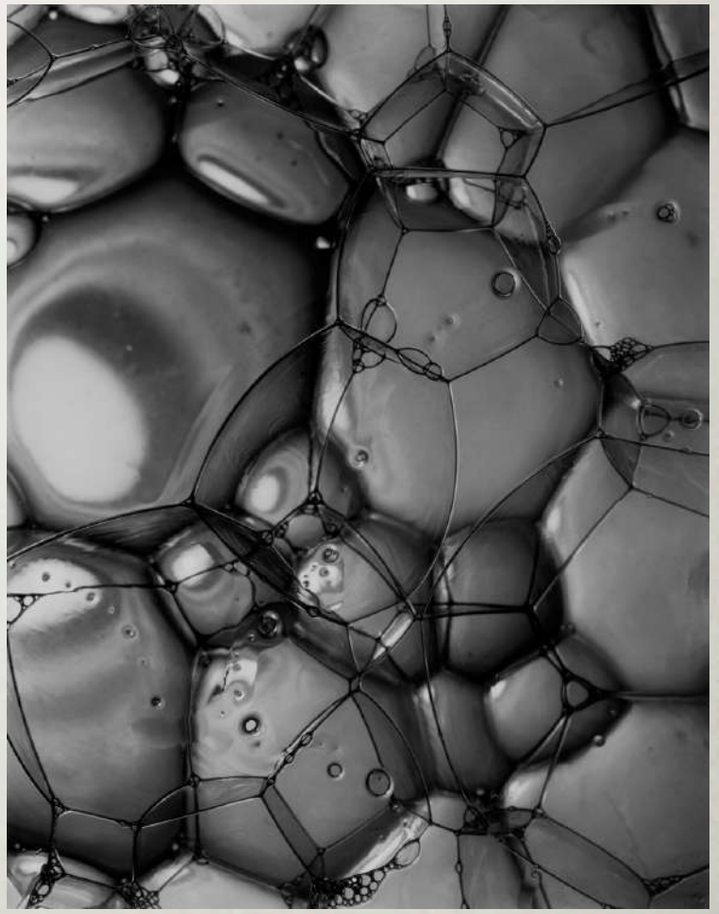
Modernism

Modernist photographers embraced the new medium with dynamic, abstract compositions and modern subjects, like cities and industry. They also paid scientific attention to details, patterns and textures, both natural and manmade. The creative compositions, sharp focus and bold contrast promoted black and white photography--not painting, as Pictorialism had done.

Ford Plant by Charles Sheeler, 1927



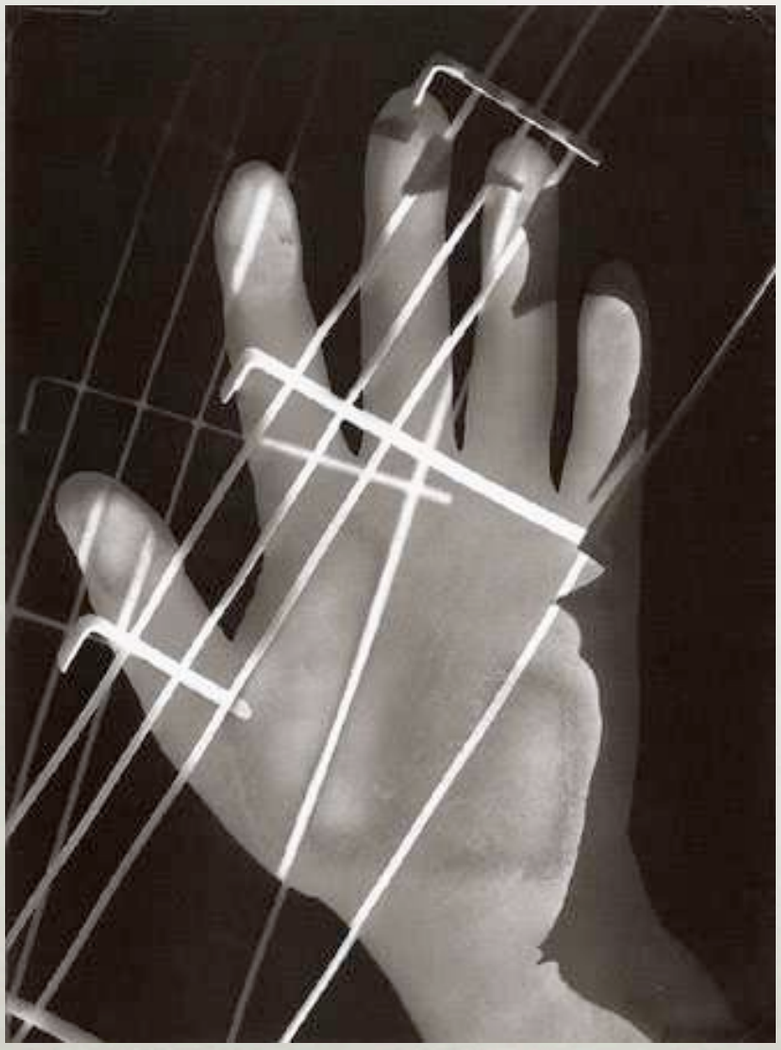
Tramway Handles by Boris Ignatovich, 1930's



Soap Bubbles by Bernice Abbott, 1945-6

Modernist Techniques

Experimentation in the darkroom enabled photographers to go beyond what they saw. Photograms used objects placed directly on paper. Solarizing a print (exposing it to light) during development amplified and reversed lines, shapes and contrast. These techniques celebrated this new, modern art form and the mechanical, chemical nature of photography.

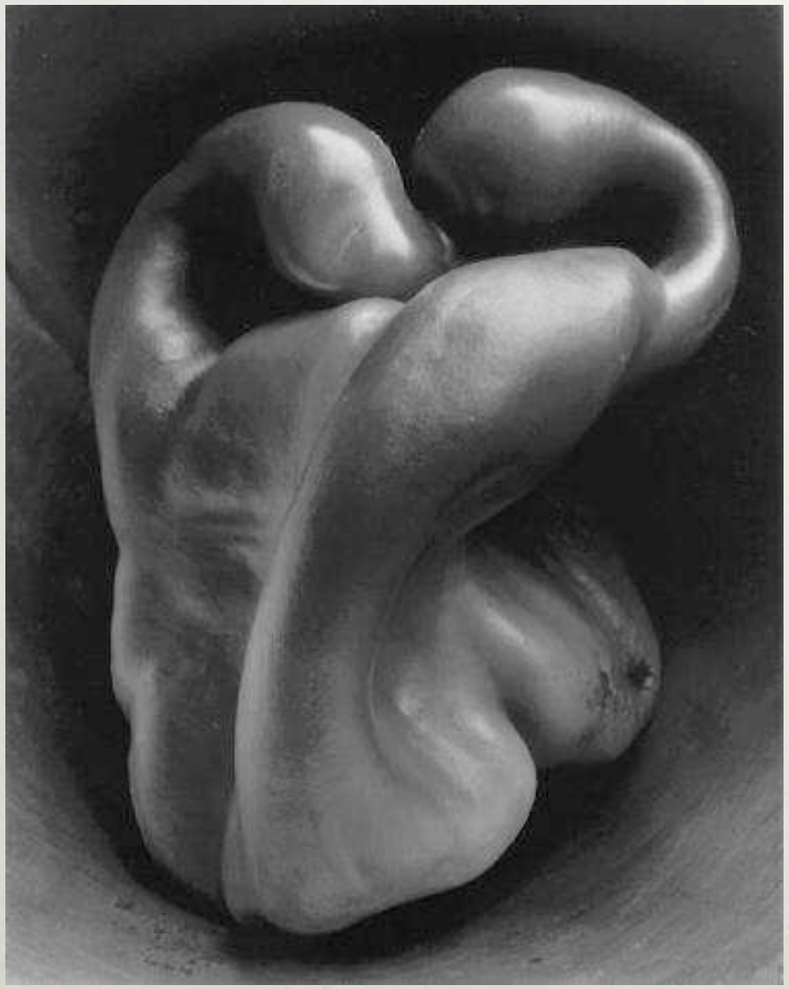


Hand Photogram by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1925

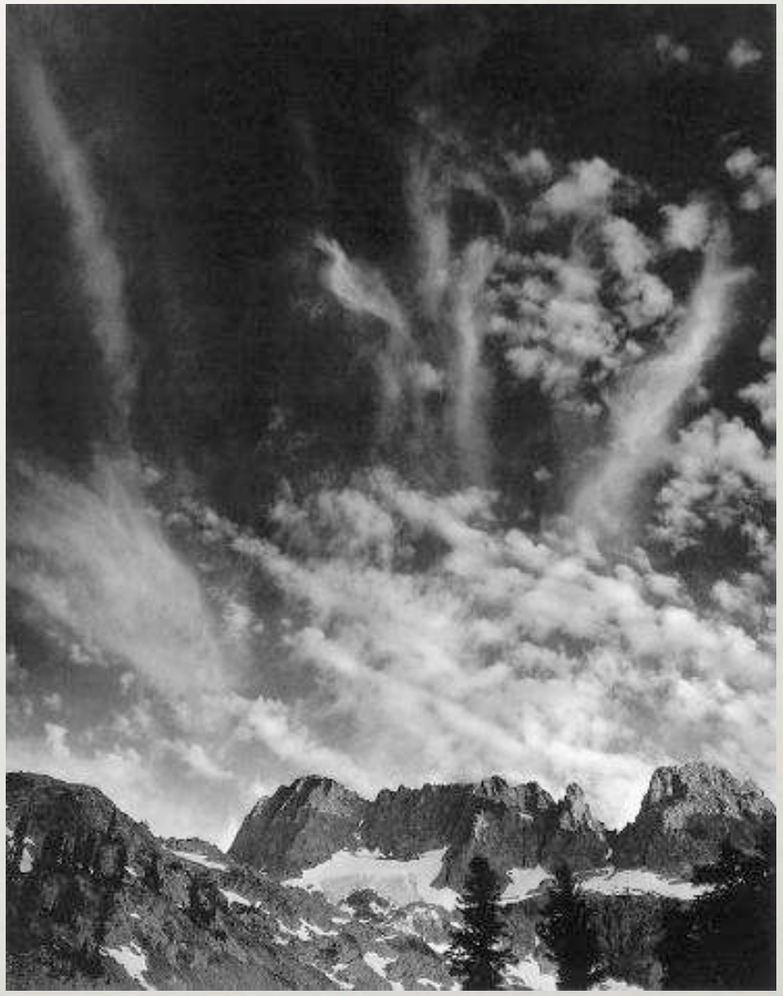
Lee Miller by Man Ray, 1930

Previsualization

In the 1930's, photographers began predicting what kind of print a photo would make before shooting it. Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Immogene Cunningham formed *f/64*, a group named after the small aperture that achieved great depth. Ansel Adams invented the *zone system*, a method of controlling tones, from light to dark, from the taking of the image to the final print.



Bell Pepper No. 30 by Edward Weston, 1930

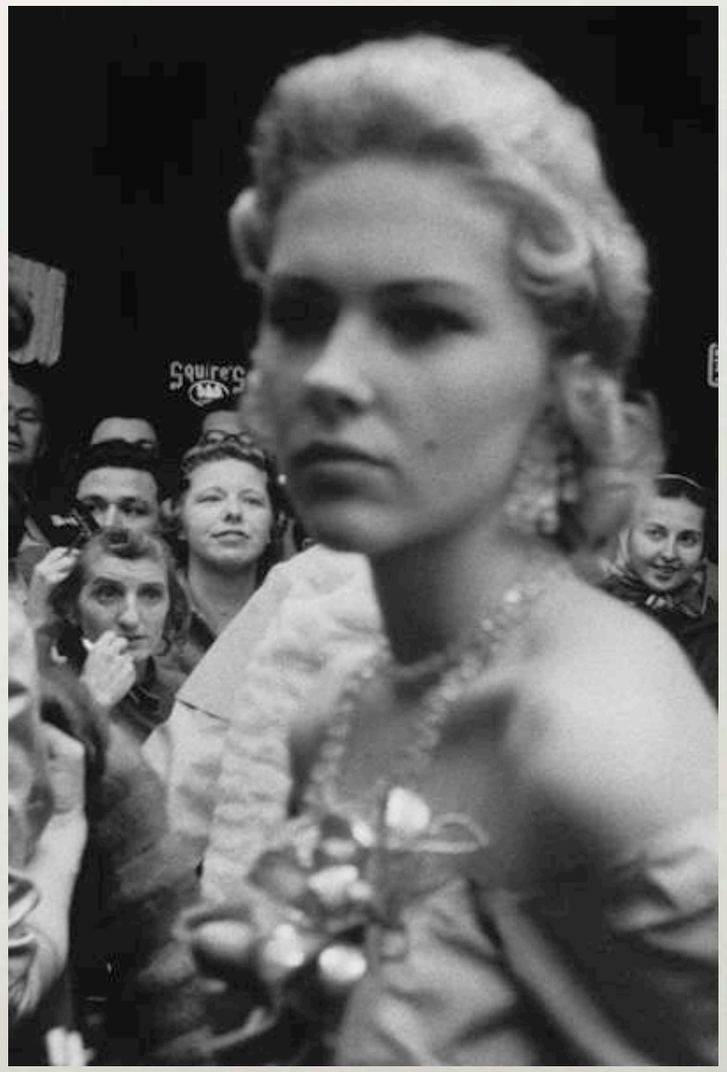


Minarets, Evening Clouds, California by Ansel Adams, 1937

Society and Snapshots

In the 1950's and '60's, photographers used small cameras to capture moments in everyday life. Photographers like Robert Frank and Diane Arbus wanted to show the nonconformity or abnormality in America. Photography no longer strove to be perfect or pretty.

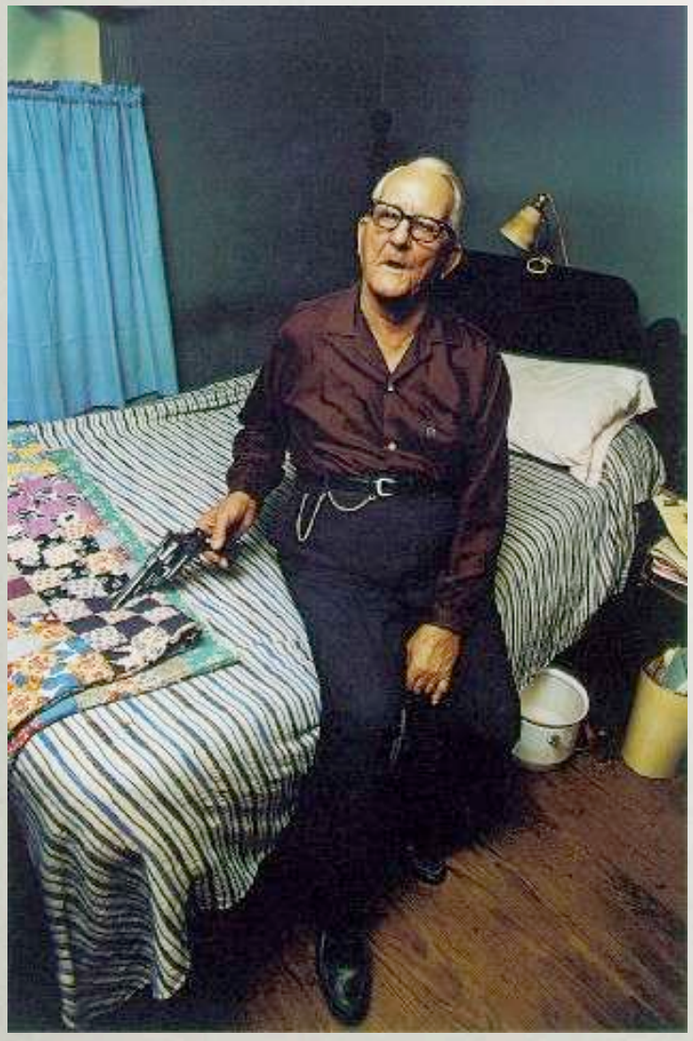
Boy with a Toy Hand Grenade, Central Park, New York City by Diane Arbus, 1962



Movie Premiere, Hollywood by Robert Frank, 1955

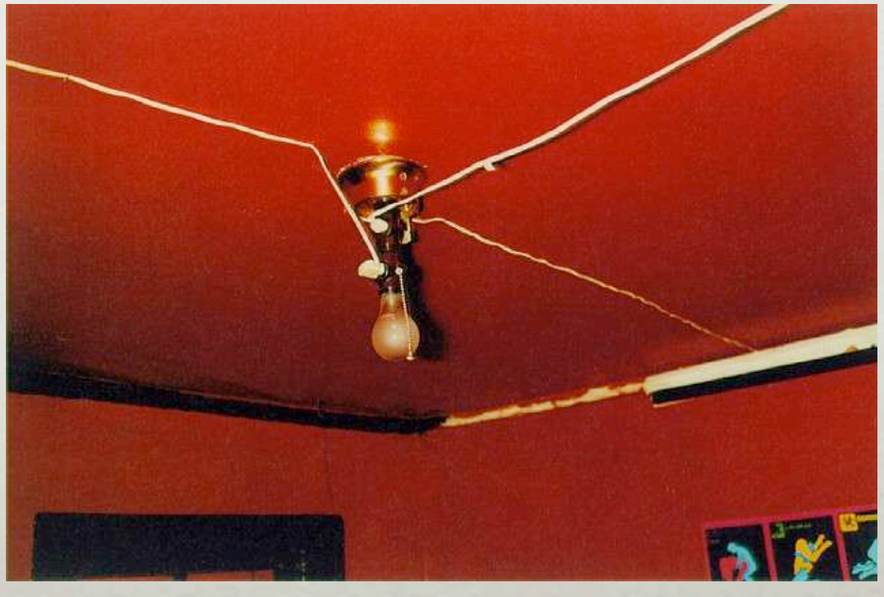
Color

Before the 1970's, black and white photography was cheaper and easier to develop for amateur, and preferred by the fine artist. Then, color films got better, color photo labs sprung up in every town and fine artists began using color.



Morton, Mississippi by William Eggleston, 1969-70

Memphis, Tennessee by William Eggleston, 1971



Glenwood, Mississippi by William Eggleston, 1973

Postmodernism

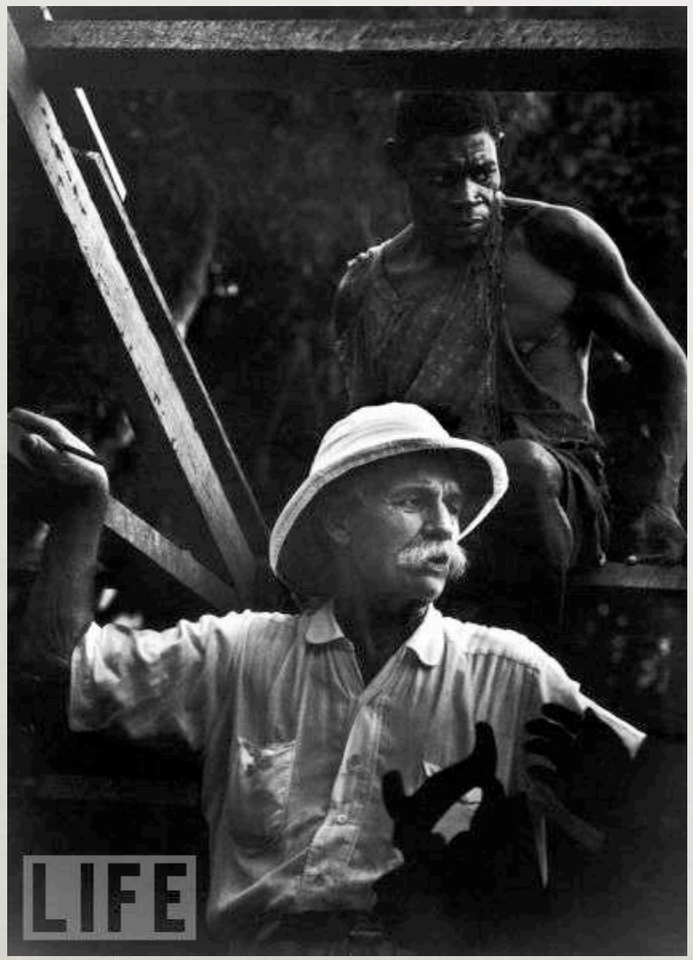
By the 1970's, photography was considered an important art form. Artistic ideas met popular culture in photography, which was also (as it is today), a prime medium for advertising and journalism. *Postmodernists* stole (or *appropriated)* from the vast library of images and words we were already familiar with to think about society and our own identities.

Untitled Film Still #34 by Cindy Sherman, 1979

Untitled (we don't need another hero) by Barbara Kruger, 1987

Digital Solutions, Digital problems

Fakery has always been a problem for photography. We are familiar with various hoax photographs of UFO's or the sasquatch. But photographs, when they were less easily manipulated, were admissible in court, as evidence. Now, it's so easy to manipulate your photographs, one of the strengths of the art form is now in question: does a photograph represent reality? Or, just our take on reality? Can we ever trust a photograph?

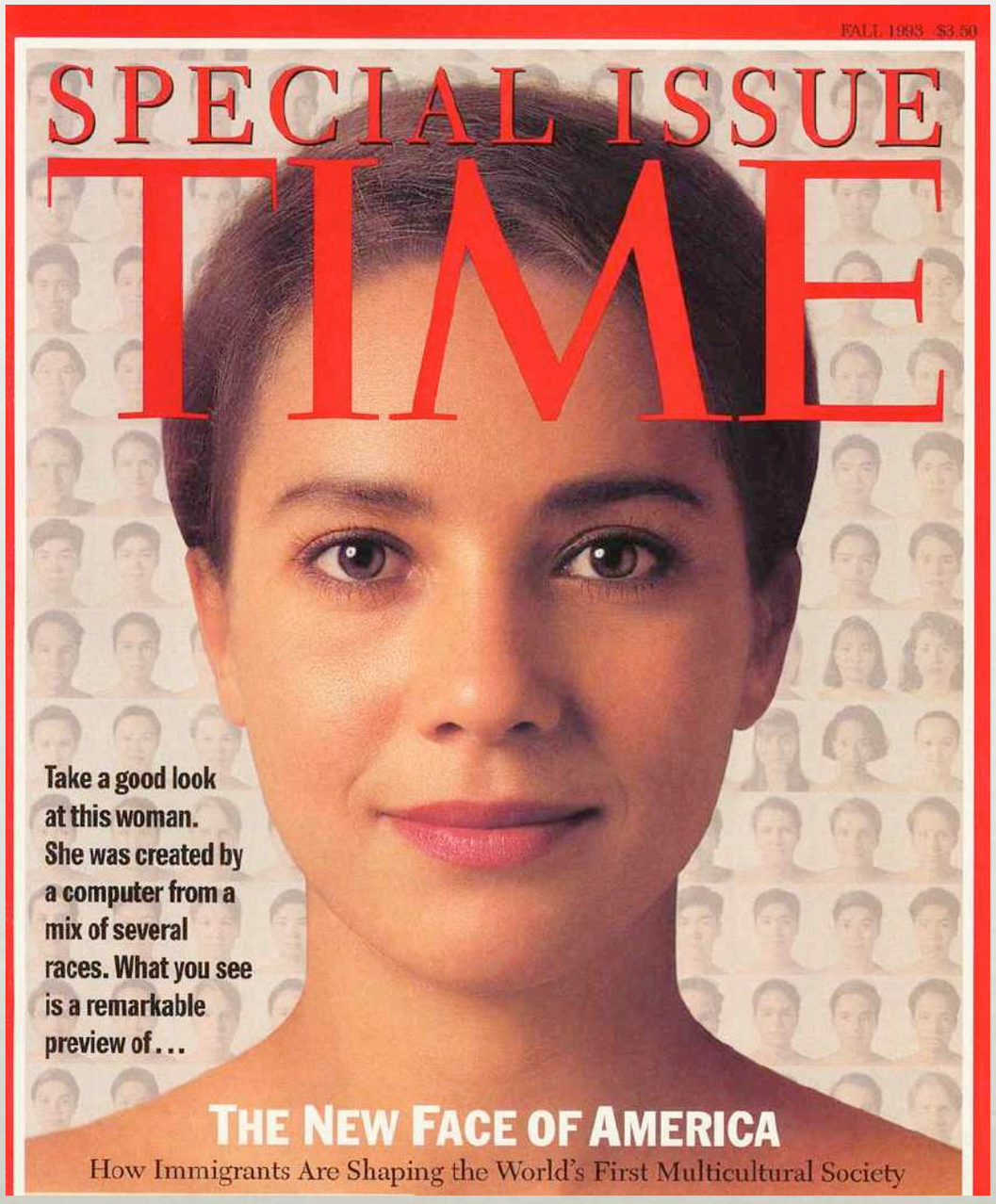


Dr. Albert Schweitzer in French Equitorial Africa, (published with the article A Man of Mercy) by W. Eugene Smith, 1954

Loch Ness Monster, Robert Kenneth William, 1934

Digital Realities

Playing with our perception of reality is a strong component of photography. Digital photography is now instantaneous and can be used to imagine new realities.



Cover of Time Magazine, 1993