PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ART

BOOK REVIEW

Shutter Release, September 2005

Between Amateur & Aesthete:
The Legitimization of Photography as Art in America, 1880-1900
Paul Spencer Sternberger
University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque; 2001

Hindsight can be misleading, in that historical outcomes may appear to have been inevitable. Yet to participants in the struggles of their day, finales are anything but certain. The emergence of photography as an art form over a century ago is a case in point. Photography was initially seen as a mechanical and chemical recording process. The transition to art was not smooth, direct or quietly evolutionary within the rarefied world of art and its critics. Rather, the acceptance of photography as art in the United States occurred only after passionate and splintered efforts by leading photographers. Intellectual grandstanding, bitter politics and appeals to nationalism were invoked. Sternberger has exhaustively researched and methodically explained this fractured history, providing a unified account and perspective that helps explain photographic conventions to this day.

I hesitated before buying this book when I first saw it at the National Gallery of Art sales shop. The word "Aesthete" in the title was a red flag possibly indicating a jargon too abstract. A closer look, however, showed that Sternberger had little choice because the intellectual battles for and against photography as art were expressed in this way, sometimes even more finely nuanced and subtle, other times outright spirited. Sternberger manages to convey what happened in no uncertain terms while providing a sense of the mood and vernacular of the times.

In the era of the Civil War, photography was considered a craft similar to printing, a reproductive routine nevertheless requiring specialized skills and equipment. In 1865 a well-known expeditionary photographer, John Moran, publicly suggested that photography could be a form of art. He posited that the essence of art is the stimulation of an emotional response by the viewer, ". . .and that we may claim for photography the ability to create imagery which call forth ideas and sentiments of the beautiful." Moran suggested standards of art by which photography could be tested, "its ability to imitate, present truth and communicate beauty." Within this broad definition, other observers stipulated narrower standards, such as that a photograph had to provide "value added" over faithful reproduction, to be considered art.

Moran's ideas were slow to catch on. The prevailing attitude was that photographic technology was too inflexible to illustrate more than a mirror image. The painter William Hart commented, "The imitative faculty. . .is an important element in the artist, but one that is of small value compared to the creative faculty." Certain flourishes could be added to a photograph of scenery, but these were of minor effect compared to the broad scope for freewheeling creativity available to the painter of landscapes. At the time, landscapes were seen as the epitome of fine art, and became the object of the debate. Comparisons raged between landscape photography and painting, with the latter considered far more beauteous. Photographs were black-and-white or otherwise monochromatic; color photography would not be introduced until 1907.

Strategies for the Acceptance of Photography as Art

By the early 1880s, a growing number of photographers had come to consider and publicly call themselves artists, but the majority of photographers and most fine art painters disagreed. At this point, a commercial photographer and editor of photographic journals, Edward L. Wilson, helped lead a movement to legitimize photography as art through the popular media. (Wilson proclaimed, "Rather would I die, than to give up my faith in the ability of photography to produce works of art." Such were the passion and oratory of the times.) In parallel, three distinct strategies emerged in 1880-1900:

(1) Composition as Art

Argument was made and strongly pursued that the very act of composing a photograph was essentially art. Even "mirror images" did not exist on their own; in reality, every image had to be framed and assigned boundaries by the photographer. Such professional composition led to aesthetically pleasing and stimulating images. Landscapes, for example, were composed not at random but to draw out the harmonies and balance inherent in nature.

(2) Pictorialism and Naturalistic Photography

Some photographers used technical means to make their photographs resemble paintings or prints, efforts that Sternberger describes as "antiphotographic." In pictorialism, effects such as soft focus and enhanced light and shade were intended to evoke emotional responses such as sentiment and association. Naturalistic Photography involved manipulating the tonal range of reproduction to achieve print-like qualities (which, it was claimed, illustrated a purer essence of nature).

(3) Legitimizing Organizations and Institutions

By the turn of the century, proponents of photography as art had established photographic societies and academies that had come to be accepted as the leading organizations in the field. Earlier, commercial photographers who generally did not consider photography as art had pitted themselves against amateur photographers who embraced the new trend. Commercial photographers from the previous generation felt

threatened. In time, however, serious photographers of either status found their career prospects brighter through association with a professional organization that favored the concept of photography as art. Moreover, such organizations sponsored and came to control the periodic exhibitions or "salons" where leading photographers would display their works.

The issue had also been expressed in terms of nationalism. Photography had been accepted as art in Britain. Americans of similar opinion were for a brief period labeled unpatriotic by peers with a view that supposedly superior American technology applied to photography should not be diverted or misconstrued as art.

Alfred Steiglitz

Alfred Steiglitz played an important role, understated and largely behind the scenes, in the acceptance of photography as art. Steiglitz's excellent works made subtle use of some of the techniques of pictorialist photography, but were not presented as such. Steiglitz quietly classified his photography as art, but did not publicly pursue the theme. He was able to establish a number of exclusive photographic societies and institutions that promoted photography as art. It appears his aim was gradual legitimization of photography as art through progressive practice and control of institutions, while avoiding public debate. Moreover, Steiglitz criticized movements of photography that were too obviously imitating painting. Ultimately these tacks, focused on mainstream acceptance, were successful.

Sternberger offers some 50 illustrations to accompany a narrative that can be quite intense. His research is documented in more than 40 pages of research notes.   Indeed, that Sternberger has preserved the intricate arguments of the era while organizing and analyzing the history in a compact and illuminating way is a major achievement and contribution to the field. Undoubtedly serious reading, his book is a must for anyone keenly interested in the history of photography.

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