

## Photographica, Issue 10: Soon to be 200 Years old!

Deadline: Dec 1, 2023

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Photographica, Issue 10 (April 2025): Soon to be 200 Years old!

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *Le Point de vue du Gras* is the oldest photograph in existence. Thanks to its rediscovery in Great Britain in the 1950s by a couple of collectors, Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, it was possible to date it to 1826-1827. The 200th anniversary of this invention will be celebrated in 2026-2027. This will not be a celebration of the inception of photography as a truly publicly available technology, which occurred more than a decade later, but of the "first" photograph – the earliest in any case – produced and preserved to date. There would be no point in attempting to examine the 200-year history of photography in this issue of *Photographica* – one issue of a journal would hardly be enough – instead, we would like to suggest two lines of inquiry for researchers on this occasion. The first is to challenge accounts about the origin and development of photography, and the second is to examine how photography has commemorated its anniversaries throughout history. This call will conclude with a third line of inquiry.

### Questioning stories of origins and technical progress

Benjamin begins his famous 1931 essay by evoking the blur that envelops the birth of photography. It was indeed surrounded by a thick fog for a long time and those beginnings have long been a matter of great debate, not just between Talbot and Daguerre, but also between different countries, depending on fundamental differences in conceptions of the medium. Investigations and counter-investigations of the medium's origins, nature, and role have been conducted since the 19th century. Research by Geoffrey Batchen found nearly twenty-four contenders for the invention, representing seven countries.

Is it time to take another look at the origins of photography? What else can be added to existing histories of the medium? Is the history of photography's origins limited to the pioneers of the medium?

"In this version of photographic history, Europe is the center, and the rest of the world becomes a mere periphery. By focusing on the first pictures that were inevitably made by Europeans, such a history forces us to reproduce the familiar narrative of Western domination and colonial dependence. But could it be that this story isn't quite so simple? Perhaps if we looked a little more closely, we might find that the periphery was already there, in the center?"

Considering Batchen's point of view, how can we rethink the origins of photography? In which directions and under which form(s)? In fact, when we examine current developments in global histories of photography – that is, history of photography outside Europe and the USA – or the history of women photographers, there is a need to rethink long-established analytical frameworks. Therefore, we welcome critical reexaminations of the "origins" of photography in this issue. What

should be taught and told about it today?

Photographic history has long been told as an internalist history of technical advances. The question we might ask ourselves today is how to consider or reconsider this type of technical narrative that was mostly abandoned during the 20th century (after the 1930s-1940s). For, as François Brunet wrote in 2001 about the technical transformations of the 19th century in terms of photographic processes, "the evolution of techniques thus played a definite role, even if uses were not mechanically modeled on an autonomous progress of the photographable". Was this technical history set aside too quickly? How can it shed light on the social, economic and aesthetic forces that shaped the history of the medium? The history of technical innovation is also the story of the imaginations and reactions provoked by these very techniques. The resistance or simply inertia that some photographers had in response to photographic progress should also be considered – such as those who remained loyal to old techniques, regardless of technological developments – as well as those who criticized or questioned the supposed advancement of photography.

Dates, anniversaries and commemorations

Unlike paintings, sculptures, and drawings, which have mythical origins, cinema and photography have dates of birth. These punctuations echo their (multiple) technical inventions, but also their often very public and spectacular introduction to wide audiences and to the world at large. Paris's World's Fair in 1889 was the occasion for a banquet celebrating photography's fiftieth anniversary. Two centenaries were celebrated in France in 1925 and 1939, and one in the United States in 1939. There were other commemorations: one of Daguerre's births in 1937, several attempts at celebrating the medium's birth in the 1970s but most importantly in 1989, when a series of major Paris exhibitions, *L'invention d'un regard* at the Musée d'Orsay and *The Invention of an Art* at the Center Pompidou, celebrated the medium's birth. In Germany, the Silber und Saltz exhibition also commemorated the advent of photography. All these events manifest some of the status and value vested in the medium by major museums and organizations and are an object of study in and of themselves.

The shape and form of the commemorations of the medium are also revealing. The centenary of 1925 seems to mark the beginning of photographic commemoration in the form of exhibitions, rather than just monuments (busts, statues) and other memorial sites (commemorative plaques, etc.). The monument to Niépce in Saint-Loup de Varenne, which exceeded anything previously built for any photographic pioneer, was dedicated on the centenary of his death in 1933.

How was photography's memory being established in relation to commemorations, not just in France and Britain but well outside Europe? Do these anniversaries play an important role in the construction and recognition of photography, or are they anecdotal in nature? Do they reveal the conceptions of photography that each era, place, and society has?

What if photography hadn't existed?

In the wake of Pierre Bayard's *What if the Beatles hadn't been born*, published in 2022, we would also like to consider counterfactual histories of photography. What if photography hadn't been invented? How would the medium have evolved if a given instrumental photographer had not been born or if a critical photographic technique (the celluloid film for instance) had not been invented? What if photography had been forgotten or radically unpopular?

A part of photography's history actually began in such negative contexts. Niépce presented his invention to the Royal Academy in 1827, yet it wasn't deemed mature enough. Similarly, Hippolyte Bayard's direct positives, which looked too much like traditional drawings to their mid-19th century spectators, did not find official supporters, this time out of more political factors. By reflecting upon what could have been, we will be able to consider the many people who have been erased from the medium's history, who may not have left a trace at all, or who may have left almost invisible imprints.

What if photography had not been of any interest to Western societies in the 1830s. What would have been the consequences? Where does this effort of the imagination take us? How many early patents and experiments around portable cameras, artificial lights, fast shutters, colour photographs, wide-angle lenses never translated into an actual transformation of photography? Part of the invention of photography amounts to heap of technological failures, forgotten prototypes and lost opportunities.

All these reflections ultimately lead to one critical question: Was photography bound to be invented?

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## SCHEDULE

Deadline for submissions: December 1st 2023

Proposals of no more than two pages should be sent to the following address: [redaction@photographica-revue.fr](mailto:redaction@photographica-revue.fr).

They will be anonymized and reviewed by the journal's editorial board.

Authors whose proposals are selected will be notified by the end of December 2023.

Articles of between 30,000 and 35,000 characters (including spaces and notes) should be sent in by June 1st 2024.

Publication in Photographica magazine (no 10): spring 2025.

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