

Rethinking Photography's Place in the Digital Age

by Photographer Raymond Klass



Despite being invented a relatively short time ago, just about 190 years, photography has certainly had a colorful history – pun intended. It began as the invention of scientists, tinkers, and the brave few who experimented with dangerous chemicals to develop a process for capturing the world through a lens. For nearly the first 80 years after photography's invention, the concept of the "snap-shot" didn't exist – photographs were taken with large cameras that were hardly portable, and used processes that didn't lend themselves to the masses. Though today we think nothing of leaving the house with our point-and-shoot, this was about the farthest thing from the process of making an image in the late 1800s.

It wasn't until Eastman Kodak targeted the masses with cameras like the Kodak and later on, the Brownie, that image making was put into the hands of ordinary people. From there, the history of photography exploded with inventions like 35mm film, the compact camera, color negative and color slide film, and only recently – the affordable digital camera. Though development of digital cameras can be traced back to the late 1960s, it wasn't until the early 2000s that these cameras adequately met the needs of the consumer market.

Though the history of the camera is quite interesting, what interests me most, are the changes we can see in photographers through time. A photographer in the early 1800s needed to be a jack of all trades – they were responsible for creating the film they would use, taking the image, developing the plate, and possibly making prints if the process they were using involved printing. Compare that to an early 1900s photographer, and you'll certainly see the difference in the skill and dedication needed to successfully record an image. An image-maker who used the original Kodak camera (that predates the popular Brownie by 12 years), which came pre-loaded with 100 exposures and then was sent back to the factory for processing and re-loading, only needed to point and shoot at a subject with adequate lighting.

The photographer of the late 1900s could purchase a "disposable" camera at almost any tourist location or store, and without worrying about focus, exposure, or chemicals, could simply drop the entire camera off at a nearby lab and have prints within the hour. Of course, today our cameras digitize the world around us, provide us with instant feedback and some – like my iPhone, can even email the image or upload it to the world wide web within a matter of seconds.



During the last 2 centuries, the essential skills of the photographer have shifted from that of a chemist and engineer, to the same basic skills required to use your average TV remote – aiming and pushing a button. The still image has become commonplace – a transparent technology that we now assume is included in our everyday devices – like the cellular phone. This has essentially made every person the world-over, a capable photographer.

Many may argue that the adaptation of digital technology to photography, and the development of newer cameras with nearly perfect exposure have sucked the art right out picture creation. This in fact couldn't be further from the truth – photography was never about "how hard" you needed to work, or what skills you needed to learn. Art has never been defined by the difficulty of creation, but rather the process of translating one's vision into some medium is by definition art in and of itself – whether it occurs with the simple click of a digital shutter, or through hours of tedious darkroom work.

I hear a lot of photographers today complaining about how saturated the image market is – how "amateurs" are only taking good pictures because of the equipment they own. As if the camera, lens, or process were the cornerstone of their vision. Rather, I think that these new technologies need to be seen as enablers – allowing more people than every to express themselves through art – to share their vision with the world.



Technology in an ideal world should be nearly transparent, and this is the story of the evolution of photography. We no longer think twice about snapping photographs of friends and family at gatherings, or taking our camera along to a scenic overlook – rather it's more commonly assumed that pictures will be taken, and prints or digital files will be shared. The modern camera has defined the modern photographer as almost any individual – and it's has enabled them to express their vision whether at a family gathering, or atop the world's tallest peak.

The surprise in all of this is that there are certain photographers – who once fought to have photography recognized as a legitimate form of art, who now denounce the photography of the masses as unworthy or uninformed. I urge you to remember that art occurs at the time of creation – whether there was forethought or not, whether the process takes a second or a lifetime, and whether the skills required are those possessed by the few or the many. To be a successful artist simply implies creating work that speaks to your personal vision – the technology you use to create it is irrelevant.

Over the last 2 centuries, the technology of photography and the skills required to capture an image have changed dramatically, but the goal of the photographer hasn't. Each and every person regardless of whether they quickly snap a picture, or take hours to setup the shot, is an artist in the process of expressing their unique view. As the technology of photography continues to evolve, know that you are the only one of your kind out there, and what makes you special is your individual perspective. The ability to communicate this is what makes you a successful artist.

