Newhall: The History of Photography: From 1830 to the Present Day

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It comes as something of a shock to realize that the basic outlines of Beaumont Newhall’s pioneering history of photography were first sketched nearly half a century ago. Since then, of course, Newhall has revised and expanded the text of his famous Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog several times. The recently released fifth edition of _The History of Photography_ is certainly the most comprehensive as well as the most handsome version he has produced to date. For the moment, at least, it has no significant competition in English as an introduction to the medium’s development from the era of the camera obscura to the Polaroid Land camera, from Daguerre to William Eggleston. Despite its many obvious virtues, however, Newhall’s history cannot today be considered ideal or definitive. During the last decade or so, several scholars and critics—Alan Sekula, Sally Stein, Victor Burgin, and Tod Papageorge, to name only a few—have begun to question many of the assumptions underlying Newhall’s historiography, and their investigations have brought into view some of the weaknesses and limitations of his approach. They have posed provocative questions about the medium’s aesthetics and its social uses and effects that Newhall does not answer but that will have to be addressed in future histories.

The strengths of _The History of Photography_ have always been apparent. Newhall’s narrative is highly detailed but engagingly written. He offers succinct and often vivid accounts of the careers of nearly every major photographer. The often arcane technical processes are described with unfailing lucidity, but Newhall is also attentive to the aesthetic views and theoretical concerns that have informed the production of many diverse bodies of work. The illustrations are abundant and well chosen.

In nearly every respect, the new version is even stronger than earlier editions. In its 300 pages—about 100 pages longer than the fourth edition published in 1984—Newhall has added interesting new material (though, curiously, he drops some important sections covering light metering and the scientific uses of photography that he included in the fourth edition). He describes the development of photomechanical techniques more completely, and he has added a paragraph or two about the cliché-verre process used by Corot and other artists in the nineteenth century. His account of both technical and artistic developments now also extends through the decade of the 1970s, and this means that the work of major contemporaries such as Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand is discussed, albeit briefly.

Even when little new information has been added, moreover, a number of small changes in the book’s organization clarify Newhall’s presentation at several points. For example, he is certainly right to discuss the photographs of Adam-Salomon, primarily distinguished by their rather ostentatious “Rembrandt lighting,” in the context of work by other nineteenth-century portraitists rather than in the company of images by more serious artists such as Rejlander or Julia Cameron as he did in the last edition. More arguable, perhaps, is his decision to shift his summary account of Atget from the chapter on documentary to one devoted to early exponents of “straight” art photography such as Steichen. Certainly, Atget’s own conception of his enterprise remained tied to the notion of documentary, but Newhall’s brief comparison of Atget’s oeuvre with that of the far less well-known Heinrich Zille, who photographed many of the same sorts of subjects Atget did, persuasively supports his new reading of the great French photographer’s achievement.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the new edition is the dramatic improvement in the scope and quality of its photographic illustrations. Several major figures—most notably Hine, Kertész, and Man Ray—are now better represented by images covering the major phases of their careers. In addition, examples by important but less celebrated moderns such as Paul Outerbridge, Imogen Cunningham, and Brett Weston have been included for the first time. The black-and-white images are sharper and more tonally detailed, and no less than a dozen new color reproductions chart the emergence of color photography as a significant creative medium.

Most of these changes augment the book’s value for scholars and beginning students of photography alike, and it is likely that for the foreseeable future, _The History of Photography_ will be the standard textbook in college-level courses. For this reason alone, some of the problematic aspects of Newhall’s basic approach to his topic must be underscored. Very generally speaking, one might call his approach “technological” because he tends to explain the ways in which photography has developed and been used, as a medium for both art and communication, as a function of changes in the technical capabilities of photographic apparatus: cameras, developing procedures, and the like. He therefore attributes the ex-
plosive growth of the portrait industry in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, to the discovery and diffusion of more light-sensitive emulsions and faster lenses that allowed exposure times to be cut to a fraction of their former duration. Similarly, he explains the rise of photojournalism in terms of the development of faster shutters, more portable cameras, and, somewhat later, flash devices. Even the self-consciously artistic photographs made by Robert Demachy and other Pictorialists are discussed in terms of the possibilities opened up by the gum-bichromate and other similar processes.

The problem with such accounts is that they provide at best some of the necessary, but hardly the sufficient conditions for the phenomena in question. It is certainly unlikely that the news photographers gathered in Lakehurst, New Jersey, one night in 1937 to cover the arrival of the dirigible “Hindenburg” would have taken the many famous images of the fiery explosion that destroyed it in seconds without the lightweight new cameras they carried. It is no less true, however, that these photojournalists would not have been there at all if a particular photographic institution—the picture press—did not exist. One might also, for example, attribute the burgeoning demand for portraits in the 1840s and 1850s at least in part to vaguely perceived anxieties about the future of the nuclear family, or explain the portrait studies of Africans or Asians as an oblique reflection of Western imperialist ambitions. Newhall, of course, does not entirely ignore this nexus of financial, psychological, and ideological factors, but he gives them far less weight than they deserve.

The scope of The History of Photography also remains too narrow. Aside from some brief comments, Newhall focuses almost exclusively on Western Europe and the United States. Admittedly, most of the important photographic processes as well as the medium’s best-known artistic achievements were created in these countries. Nevertheless, recent research has demonstrated that lively photographic cultures also flourished in Eastern and Southern Europe, and in Asia as well as in parts of South America, most notably Brazil. Future photographic histories will have to take developments in these countries into account or they will risk falling—as Newhall ultimately does—into an unfortunate occidentocentric provincialism.

Finally, Newhall’s history is in large measure shaped by his interest in photography primarily as a vehicle for artistic expression, that is, to the way in which photographers “express inner significance through outward form.” As Christopher Phillips has recently observed, this bias has been present since the book’s first edition and the consequences have been varied and far-reaching. Such a perspective has undoubtedly contributed to photography’s stature as a medium worthy of serious critical attention as well as support for museum photograph collections. New and often illuminating standards of connoisseurship have been built on this premise; without it, a market for art photographs would certainly never have developed. If the benefits of a commitment to photography as an art have been considerable, however, a history of the medium dominated by such a perspective poses at least two different sorts of problems. First, some uses of photography—for scientific research, land surveying, social control, or family rituals, to choose only a few at random—are largely excluded from consideration, while fashion and advertising photography, though not entirely ignored, are accorded far too little attention, even though their impact on the culture of the past 150 years has arguably been greater than all the art photographs ever made. One returns once again to a criticism made earlier: Newhall’s vantage is too limited, certainly more limited than that which future historians of photography will adopt.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Newhall’s bias risks distorting our understanding of the achievement of many photographers, especially those who photographed in the nineteenth century. Consideration of the photographs taken by Brady and his team during the Civil War as art ultimately runs aground on an important fact that Newhall is well aware of: these images were made with no aesthetic intentions in mind. To a lesser extent, this is true of many who photographed in the American West and in the streets of Paris prior to Haussmann’s renewal project. In the absence of conclusive documentary evidence, the attribution of expressive intentions to these men misrepresents the way in which they conceived of their work, and it diverts attention from the manifold purposes their images served. In short, imposing a concern with art on photographers of the past can falsify the historical record. This critical mistake must be avoided if the history of photography is ever to become a vital discipline.