

The Big Bang of Photography

Transport yourself into those times when we had no cameras. Can you visualize a scene wherein images could only be imprinted in the mind? How would these be passed on to the generations to come? How would they know, how their forefathers looked like or the events that changed history, without pictorial records? Information was relayed by word of mouth, written word or illustrations. Much later, the fortunate few hired artists and painters to have their self-portraits, engraved or painted.

Photography is so omnipresent today, that it is hard to imagine living in a world without it. At first, photography may have been considered as a technological curiosity. But it soon became evident that photography was a distinct method to capture a moment of reality, removed from the very scene in which it was framed and also preserved much in the similar way as a painting or an engraving. Thus, the new quintessential form of visual communication emerged.

Interestingly, photography has come a long way in its relatively short history. In almost 200 years, the camera evolved from a plain box that took blurry photographs, to a technologically advanced device equipped with minicomputers, like today's DSLRs and smartphones.

Let's take a walk through the history sheets, on the origin of photography.

Flashback

Did you know that the concept of photography has been around since the 5th century B C E? Mozi, a Chinese philosopher apparently recorded the creation of an image from light rays passing through a small hole into a dark room. He interestingly called this darkened room as a 'collecting place' or even better, the 'locked treasure room.'

But it was not until the development of 'Camera Obscura' in 11th century by an Iraqi scientist, Abu Ali Al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham, that the art of photography was born. Not that this camera recorded the images, since it just projected them onto another surface, which also was upside down and they had to be traced to create exact drawings of real objects, but this is where the journey began.

Camera Evolution

Come 1826, the first photograph depicting the view from an upstairs window at Niépce's estate, in the Burgundy region of France came out. Taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, this is the earliest known surviving photograph made using a camera. Niépce could be presumably, the first inventor of photography. From there, experimentations have gone through many generations of photographic technologies.

By 1839, Daguerreotypes, the first practical photographic process by Niepce's partner Louis Daguerre, used copper plates and provided a relatively inexpensive and accurate way of representing scenes and faces which had to be drawn or painted by hand previously.

With time, calotypes in 1840 and emulsion plates in 1850s emerged as the progressive designs. Not to forget the significant strides made in 1847 for improving the methods by which an image could be focused. This was using a new design of bellows camera by Sergei Lvovich Levitsky. His innovation had a major impact on camera design, a legacy that can still be seen today in the design of certain models.

During 1870's, photography took another huge leap with the invention of dry plates made of gelatine, which could be stored instead of being made each time, giving

photographers much more freedom in taking images.

The Big Bang

Then came 1888, the year of the birth of photographic films. Photography saw a sea change with the invention of films and dry gel on paper, pioneered by George Eastman. When his first camera, 'Kodak' hit the market, it went with a slogan, "You press the button, we do the rest!" The market wanted more and this led to his next models, Brownie and Brownie 2, in early 1900's. Did you know that these were named after a popular cartoon of those times?

It was a matter of time before the 35 mm films became affordable and the 35 mm cameras became popular in the 1940s. So much so that, even Sir Henri Cartier-Bresson used the small 35 mm to frame images of life as they happened in front of him, instead of staged portraits. His style of capturing 'The Decisive Moments' shaped the face of photography forever. Photojournalists then adopted this style to capture the horrors of war during World War II. And so, goes the brief History of Photography from 1800s to 1940s.

(To be continued)

Hema Narayanan
EFIP, AFIAP, cMoI, QPSA



Hema Narayanan EFIP, AFIAP, cMoI, QPSA is an is a professional photographer and a published writer. Her work across varied photography genres and travels have been published in many newspapers, magazines, journals and stock. She is the founder of the company 'Wider Angles' and under this banner, she is a photography mentor, tour expedition lead and commercial photographer. Hema is a panellist on juries, a speaker at forums and cherishes teaching young shutterbugs at an International school.

She is an avid traveller, ardent music lover and reads more from the book of life. Hema is a post graduate engineer by education and an artist by passion. After quitting her IT career, she also graduated from the New York Institute of Photography in 2015. She has won several awards and accolades in photography. Her website is www.hemanarayanan.com



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