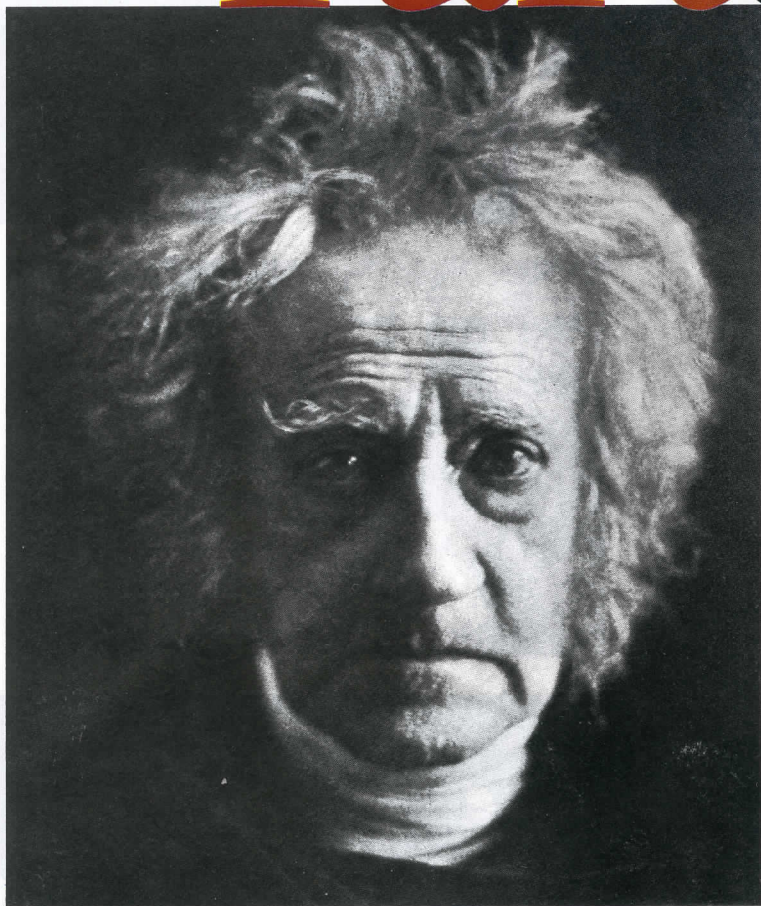


Part one

Essay by Russell Hart



Above: Julia Margaret Cameron's striking 1867 portrait of scientist and Talbot supporter Sir John Herschel, himself a photographic enthusiast who not only made important contributions to photo chemistry but also coined the terms negative, positive, and snapshot. Below: A panoramic view of Russian naval maneuvers by the last czarina, Alexandra.

Why, you might well ask, is a magazine like *American Photo* featuring the photographic talents of people who are famous for doing other things? Why does a singer or a socialite or a politician deserve to have his or her pictures published when so much fine work by professional photographers goes unnoticed? Aren't we rewarding the worst kind of dilettantism?

The answer is simply that photography is and always has been a medium in which many kinds of people—the celebrated certainly included—have found a way to express themselves. In recent years the professional photographer has become exalted, but it's worth keeping in mind that talented amateurs made photography what it is today.

Let's take the long view. Photography's first true amateur was the patrician Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, who in 1835 produced the first black-and-

white negative—a postage stamp-sized view of latticed windows at his estate, Lacock Abbey. Without Talbot, photography might not have the duplicability that makes it such a democratic art. And one of photography's first true artists was Julia Margaret Cameron, who deliberately blurred her portraits of 19th-century England's intelligentsia—the likes of Charles Darwin and Alfred Lord Tennyson—in an attempt to capture the spirit of her sitters. Without wealthy hobbyists like Cameron, the new medium's creative potential might have been obscured.

Indeed, for much of the 19th century, photography was by definition an amateur's activity. Though some set up portrait studios or accepted documentary commissions, the medium's professional possibilities had yet to bloom. The great majority of early enthusiasts pursued photography strictly for personal ends, as they do now. Amateurs in the truest sense of the word, they were following their hearts.

In many cases, they were also following their artistic vision. From



WITHOUT PASSIONATE (AND WEALTHY) AMATEURS, THERE MIGHT NOT BE AN ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

the beginning, photography's ablest practitioners have often come from other artistic fields. In particular, numerous 19th-century painters realized that photography could be a valuable handmaiden to their art. By lessening the need to work from life, it spared them the woe of changeable subjects—of people shifting in midpose or landscapes transformed by fleeting light. Inspired by the seminal work of Eadweard Muybridge, the American artist Thomas Eakins even shot his own motion studies, using them to create paintings much admired for their naturalness

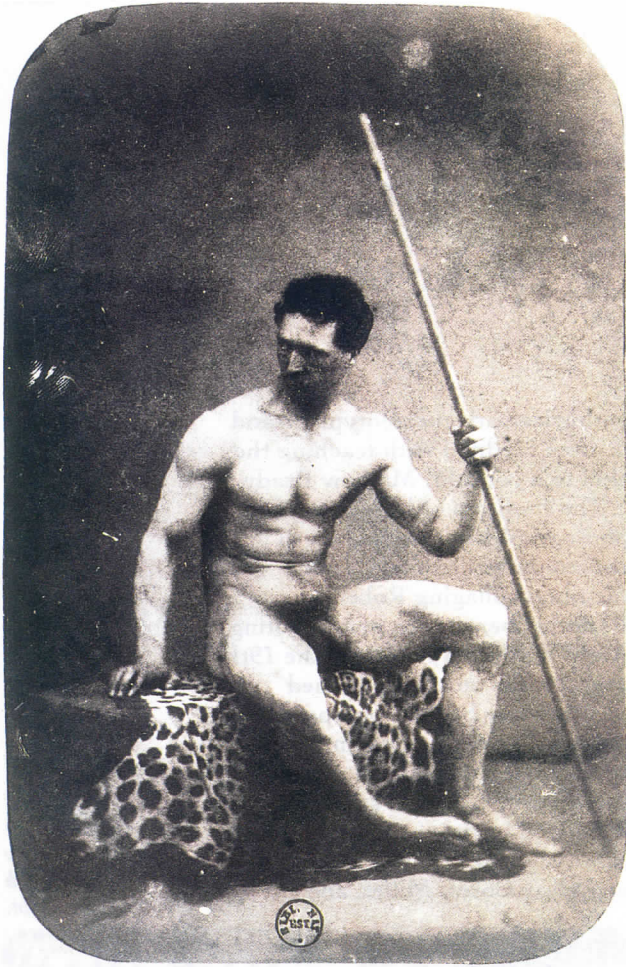
of gesture. Edgar Degas actually made drawings from Muybridge's now-famous horse photographs, and took his own photographs as a reference for his graceful studies of ballerinas—even showing the same dancer from a variety of perspectives in a single painting, just as a good photographer might “work” a subject. And in Degas's plein-air paintings, the subjects often seem abruptly cropped—as if first seen on a camera's groundglass. Even Samuel F.B. Morse, better known for his invention of the telegraph than his well-regarded paintings, was an

enthusiastic daguerreotypist—and is often credited with teaching the skill to a youthful Mathew Brady.

The tradition of borrowing from photography has carried on to contemporary painters, from the photocollaging Robert Rauschenberg to the snapshooting Andy Warhol. Yet even in the 19th century, the most enlightened painters saw beyond photography's practical value, recognizing its aesthetic legitimacy at a time when the art establishment summarily dismissed it. French artists were especially enthusiastic, their ranks including Corot, Millet, and the

Ernest Hemingway's grandstand view of a Spanish bullfight.

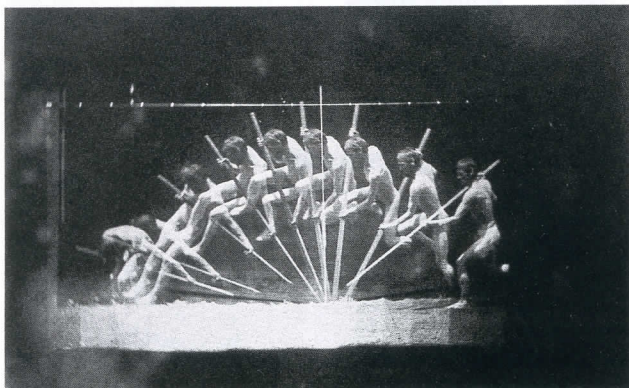




A nude by Delacroix, posed for a heroic painting.



Photography gave Eakins's paintings a naturalness of gesture.



Eakins made motion photos as studies for his paintings.

middle-aged Delacroix, who lamented that photography hadn't been available to him sooner. At the turn of the century, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard were avid amateurs, their photographs much in keeping with their paintings of quiet, luminous interiors. Vuillard used his folding Kodak to shoot time exposures of social gatherings, for which his guests had to hold especially still.

Many painters hung up their brushes altogether to pursue photography. Some were simply obscure "miniature" painters who realized that the future of commercial portraiture was in photography. But also among them were such early masters of the medium as the Englishman Roger Fenton and the Frenchman Gustave Le Gray, the latter an innovator who introduced such important techniques and technologies as combination printing and wet-plate negatives.

It wasn't just painters who pushed the frontiers of photography. Lewis Carroll took plenty of time off from his writing to pursue his Pre-Raphaelite passion for making pictures of friends' daughters (one of whom, Alice Liddell, was the model for the eponymous protagonist in his children's stories). Journalist Maxime Du Camp took camera and sensitized paper on an 1849 Middle Eastern sojourn with novelist Gustave Flaubert, during which he photographed the region's landmarks—and let Flaubert do the writing. The interest of writers in photography intensified in the 20th century, as magazines and books married text and pictures to tell important stories.

Musicians, too, have heard the siren song of photography, especially in the 20th century.

American Wynn Bullock trained in voice before committing himself to photography in midlife; Ansel Adams put aside a budding career as a concert pianist to pursue his black-and-white art, making music his hobby instead. And consider Kodachrome, the film at the heart of 20th-century amateur photography. It was invented in 1935 by two independently wealthy professional musicians and photographic enthusiasts, Leopold Mannes and Leopold Godowsky, who did much of their experimenting in apartment kitchens and bathrooms.

If truth be told, the rich have always had a leg up on other photographers. Money helps because it buys the needed time and materials. Talbot couldn't have pursued his experiments had not Lacock Abbey been a profitable estate; Julia Cameron wouldn't have had time for her photographic affair with England's elite had she not been the moneyed wife of a prominent jurist. For 19th-century amateurs, time was an especially valuable commodity because of the arduousness of photographic technique; that very arduousness helped give them a sense of artistic self-worth. Yet even after the advent of hand cameras and commercial materials and services, an amateur photographer like J.H. Lartigue could not have made his extraordinary document of the last gasp of French *fin de siècle* culture without the leisure time his station afforded. And on this side of the Atlantic, Lartigue's contemporary F. Holland Day could not have championed Pictorialism—with its implicit promise that anyone, from any walk of life, could be a photographic artist—had he not been a man of considerable means. All that said, determined amateurs

PAINTERS REALIZED THAT PHOTOGRAPHY COULD BE A VALUABLE HANDMAIDEN TO THEIR ART.

have often overcome a lack of means to follow their art. Harry Callahan is a prime example; after a 1941 camera club encounter with Ansel Adams, he quit his job to practice photography full time, bringing a true hobbyist's passion to his remarkable work.

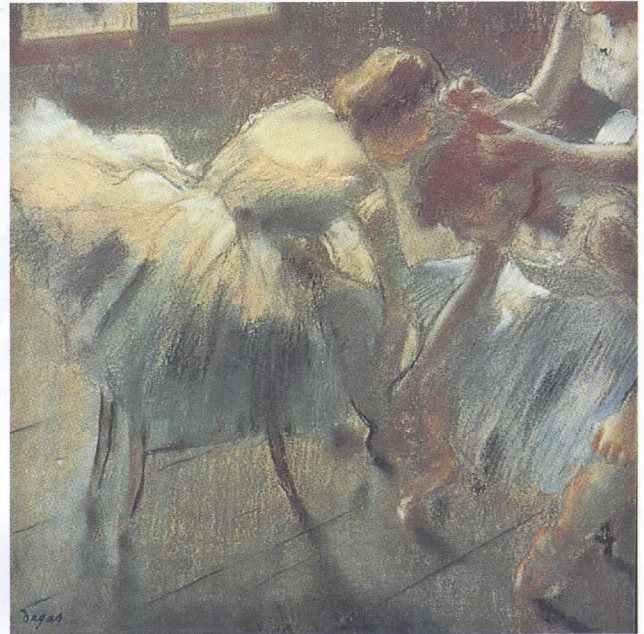
If being rich has always been an advantage for serious amateur photographers, being famous seems recently to have become one. Tipper Gore's insider photographs of the Clinton administration were published this year in *Newsweek* magazine; poet Allen Ginsberg has exhibited pictures of his Beat Generation comrades; musicians Graham Nash and Linda McCartney have shown their behind-the-scenes photos of the 1960s rock world. Director Tim Burton has displayed work every bit as quirky as his cinematic efforts. Kenny Rogers and Diane Keaton have had books of their photographs published. And some of these celebrated shooters have even caught the eye of serious collectors.

Such rapt attention may miff aspiring and underappreciated professionals, but it isn't just a

matter of name recognition. It may well be that the creative drive behind celebrity shooters' nonphotographic achievements makes them pursue their photography with more vigor than a typical amateur (or even than a professional for whom the medium is simply a way of making a living).

Or perhaps photography's appeal to the rich and famous—the wish to be behind the camera instead of in front of it, which is the more familiar place for many of the dedicated amateurs whose work appears on the following pages—is that it offers an antidote to the capriciousness of fame and fortune. In giving amateurs a fluid, responsive, lasting medium with which to record their lives and thoughts, it endows a sense of permanence. And in seeking that important satisfaction, celebrities are no different than the rest of us who love photography.

Contributing Editor Russell Hart, who covers photographic technology for American Photo, exhibits his own photographs regularly, but nonetheless retains his amateur status.



Degas's paintings are often photographic in their composition.



A low-light Degas photo study of a ballerina backstage.



Photography imitated art in Magritte's self-portrait.



Magritte's surrealism found its helpmate in photography.