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# Through women's eyes

## Julia Margaret Cameron, Margaret Bourke-White and the mark they left on the History of Photography



The invention of photography marked an era. Up until the beginning of the nineteenth century painting had been the only way of reproducing an image. This new technique unsettled and divided public opinion: some believed it would replace drawing, others feared it, even considering it immoral, while others hailed it as the greatest invention of the century. Certainly, photography in the early days was very different from the photography we know today. Daguerreotypes required very long exposure times and were heavy silver-plated copper plates on which the image appeared as a shadow. They were also known as "mirrors with a memory" and were unique pieces that couldn't be reproduced. Many people were devoted to experimentation and research and within a few decades the technique was considerably improved. Research was oriented to-

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wards achieving greater photosensitivity in order to reduce times, producing more than just one copy with good definition, and creating photographs suitable for printing on paper. The development of techniques expanded the possibilities of the medium and, in the second half of the century, photographers began to explore new creative opportunities. When Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) received her first photographic device as a gift from her daughter in 1863, her family hoped she would find new inspiration and interests after going through a difficult period, and this was

precisely what happened. Soon she was exploring all the different opportunities the device could offer and because she approached photography as an amateur, she was able to break away from the accepted standards of the era and develop a personal style. Her portraits were deliberately out of focus, blurred, esoteric, and it was precisely this vagueness that filled them with charm and allure, exciting great interest particularly among the pre-Raphaelite painters; for the first time, there was talk of "the art of photography". Cameron had thus achieved her intention: in a diary of the period she wrote, "My first aspiration is to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art." In 1865 she exhibited a series of photographs to the public at the South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria & Albert Museum) in London and ob-

tained permission to use some of the rooms in the museum as a photographic studio, qualifying her perhaps as the first "artist in residence".

### **Margaret Bourke-White, the first war reporter**

Research to improve photographic techniques continued ceaselessly, focussing on two main goals: reduce exposure times to a minimum, so that instant shots could be taken, and reduce the size of the equipment, making it portable. In 1925 Leitz began selling a highly innovative product: Leica, a small device with a 35 mm film. This camera was incredibly successful and became the symbol of modern photojournalism, which was becoming better established during this period. Newspapers began to publish photographs daily without this weighing heavily on publishing costs. In the

thirties, periodicals created exclusively for the purpose of displaying photographs were published: the magazine "Life", established in the United States in 1936, was the most famous. The first cover of this magazine, which marked a turning point in the world of women's photography, was in fact assigned to a woman: Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971). This was the beginning of a long collaboration that led Bourke-White to create exceptional news reports. During World War II she provided exclusive coverage of the conflict on the Russian front. Bourke-White felt as if she had been entrusted with a mission: photography could shake up the conscience of readers and change the fate of the world. Thanks to her courage and determination, she was the first war correspondent in history and opened this profession up to other women. ■

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