



# Capturing the moment

From its inception in the early nineteenth century, photography has changed the way we look at the world. Christie's expert Yuka Yamaji talks to **Diana Bentley** about the enduring power and collectability of the photographic image.

We see them every day. They inform, engage and enlighten us, as well as providing mementos of our nearest and dearest. Photographs may be a relatively new phenomenon, but their importance to our everyday lives guarantees them a central place in our culture. Not surprisingly, photography has also become an important area of collecting. And according to the experts, far from being a daunting field of study, it is highly accessible, both artistically and financially, making it ideal for those looking to start a new collection.

It may be hard for us now to imagine a world without photographs, yet just over 150 years ago people were genuinely astonished by this revolutionary form of representation, which revealed the world to them as never before. 'The history of photography is quite young,' comments Yuka Yamaji, a photography specialist at Christie's London. 'The first practical photographic processes were invented in the mid-nineteenth century by the Frenchman Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre and the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, who were working at roughly the same time on different techniques to capture the photographic image.'



(From left) Ansel Adams, 'Tetons and the Snake River', 1942, sold for £24,034; Edward Weston, 'Nude', 1934, sold for £16,730; Robert Mapplethorpe, 'Calla Lily', 1987, sold for £30,042



The combination of scientific investigation and steely determination was decisive; in 1839, Daguerre's discovery of fixing the camera image was formally announced and a patent for his 'daguerreotype' process was sold to the French Government. 'Others, such as Thomas Wedgwood and Daguerre's former partner, Joseph Nicéphore Niepce, experimented with recording the camera image before 1839, though that year is generally seen as the starting point of the medium,' comments Yamaji. However, this was somewhat different from what we now know as photography. 'The daguerreotype wasn't on paper, but on metal. It was a direct positive process, so each piece was unique and couldn't be duplicated.' The procedure was arduous, but daguerreotypes soon became immensely popular, especially in the USA, where a craze for portraits and landscapes took hold.

However, the restrictions of the daguerreotype process ensured that it only lasted until the 1850s. Several other variations followed, but across the channel others were developing a process that would prove more practical and durable. 'What we think of as photography now was invented in 1841 in England by Fox Talbot, who developed the first successful negative/positive process on paper, enabling multiple prints to be made,' explains Yamaji. Other improvements were made to the photographic process: colour photography was invented in the 1860s, and in 1891 George Eastman introduced the celluloid roll film.

The great excitement generated by these innovations was matched by the newfound ability to record history in the making. The evolution of photography coincided with the rapid progress of the middle classes, the age of empire and burgeoning global trade. All could be recorded by this fascinating new medium. But photography offered something more; as well as being a means of recording history, it was also a medium in which the creative photographer could produce works that delighted the eye.

### An evolving market

As an area of collecting, Yamaji says, photography is relatively young, dating back only some 30 years or so. But for collectors, it is refreshingly free of restraint. 'There's a wide range of subjects, so there's no particular field or type of photo on which collectors must focus,' says Yamaji. She urges people looking to build a collection to think about what they most want to collect. 'It's important to decide early so you know where you're going. Ambitious collectors acquire works over a wide range of subjects, but unless you have deep pockets, you can't cover the full gamut of the medium.'

Nevertheless, the possibilities for building a collection are endless. 'You can collect whatever you like,' says Yamaji. 'Images of hands, fashion, travel, street scenes. If you're keen on portraits, you can concentrate on photographs of artists or film stars. If you're a sports buff, you can buy photos of old Olympic Games. Collecting tends to be very personal and can tie in with your passion, hobby or profession.' Architects can collect photos of buildings. Eye surgeons can collect photos of eyes. You can collect the works of a particular photographer, like Man Ray or Robert Mapplethorpe, or collect photos from a particular time, place or artistic movement – like surrealist photos. People also collect albums of early travel photos, photographic books or cased images like daguerreotypes. 'It's completely up to the individual,' comments Yamaji. 'The image is the most important thing.'

The field has also been enlivened by some fascinating finds. In 2003, in the King Street rooms of Christie's London, some important daguerreotypes by Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey were sold, creating a sensation. 'Girault de Prangey was virtually unknown before the sale,' recalls Yamaji. 'The most famous nineteenth century photographer was Gustave Le Gray. But Girault de Prangey knocked him off the top spot and became an acknowledged master of



(Right) Helmut Newton, 'Nude on balcony', 1975, sold for £5258; (below) George Hoyningen-Heune, 'Divers, Horst and model', 1930, sold for £5377



the time.' A French artist and an historian of Islamic architecture, Girault de Prangey began experimenting with Daguerre's invention in 1841. In 1842, he began an extensive tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East, and returned with around 1000 daguerreotypes. His work was never shown in his lifetime, he never married and he had no children. In 1892, he died and his

## A SCENE OF ANCIENT ATHENS FROM 1842 WAS SOLD FOR £565,250

work was discovered by a local count, who had acquired his villa and found the plates which had been taken during his travels in 1842–44.

The two Christie's sales, held in May 2003, offered 175 of Girault de Prangey's daguerreotypes, ranging in estimates from £1200 to £90,000. The combined total fetched around £4.6 million. 'Girault de Prangey's work is historically very important, as many of his photographs are the earliest

known images of the subjects depicted – like parts of Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria and Jerusalem,' explains Yamaji. Highlights of the sales included arresting images of Tivoli and the Villa Adriana surrounded by Cyprus trees taken in 1842 and the Ramesseum at Thebes taken in 1844. A scene of ancient Athens from 1842, 'The Remains of the Temple of Olympian Zeus', was bought by a private collector for an astonishing £565,250 – a new world record for a single photograph at auction.

Girault de Prangey has now taken his rightful place among the early greats of photography, such as Fox Talbot, the inventor of the calotype process, and Gustave le Gray, who held the previous world record for a photograph sold at auction. The next 150 years produced innumerable photographers whose work is keenly sought after today. In the Victorian era, there is Julia Margaret Cameron, renowned for her portraits of friends and contemporaries like Charles Darwin and Alfred Tennyson, the English combat photographer Roger Fenton, known for his powerful pictures of the Crimean War, and the American Matthew Brady, who produced some memorable images of the American Civil War. The early twentieth century produced Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Alvin Langton Coburn, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Man Ray, August Sander, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. The post-war era saw the emergence of Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, while in the modern era we have seen William Eggleston, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, the Bechers, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff become favourites with collectors.

Despite the relative newness of photography collecting, there are some notable enthusiasts. Sir Elton John has been rated as one of the top 25 collectors in the world. 'Sir Elton's collection includes everything from vintage twentieth century modernist works to leading, cutting-edge contemporary images,' says Yamaji. 'He began collecting in 1991, and his collection of over 4000 photographs is known for its quality, range and depth.' It includes still lifes, portraits and fashion photography. A sale of over 100 photographs from his collection was held by Christie's in October 2004 in New York. The best-selling work was Robert Mapplethorpe's 'Vase with White Tulips' from 1988, which sold for £46,732.

Other renowned collectors include Michael Wilson, the producer of the James Bond films, who collects nineteenth and twentieth century works, and film producer Sir David Puttnam, some of whose works were recently sold

by Christie's, including a Roger Fenton photograph of Yorkshire from the mid-1850s, which fetched £5736, and an Edward Weston nude from 1934, which sold for £16,730.

### Building your collection

So where should would-be collectors of photography start, and what should they be looking for? 'You should do your homework before you begin, especially if you're going to collect as an investment,' Yamaji advises. 'With photographers who work in a certain style or who are celebrated for certain subjects, their more sought-after images – and the ones that will maintain their value – are the ones that are characteristic of their work as a whole. Collectors should learn about photographers; they need to know something of their style.' Collectors who collect by period normally don't cross over between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she says. 'Some collectors buy valuable nineteenth century historical material – for example, the earliest surviving image of a particular subject. If it is, one is more forgiving about its condition. But with twentieth century, and certainly with contemporary photographs, collectors are looking for works that are in excellent condition.'

Items which form an important part of the history of photography attract their share of enthusiasts too. In May 2004, the Christie's sale was led by an important daguerreotype called 'Section of Clematis', which was taken in 1840 by Andreas Ritter von Ettingshausen, a

professor from Vienna. 'It was beautifully presented in the artist's own frame and fetched £139,650,' reports Yamaji.

At auction, the known provenance of works will be in the sale catalogues, and condition reports are available on request. Both deserve serious consideration. Nevertheless, collectors may have a hard time deciding what they are looking at or reading, so the advice of experts is particularly useful. What should you look for in a nineteenth century work, for example? Should a photograph be signed? 'A work could be a modern print made from an older negative,' cautions Yamaji. 'In general, vintage works are considered to be prints made at or near the time the photograph was taken. But vintage prints are considered more desirable, and hence more valuable. However, there are many wonderful printed later works available on the market, made either by the photographer or under his or her supervision. These examples are generally more accessible in value than vintage examples and often much easier to locate.'

Contemporary photographers generally control the number of prints made from a negative by editioning their work, explains Yamaji, 'so collectors know what they are buying. You may, for instance, buy from an edition of ten photos, but only five may exist, as photographers generally print as orders are received. Once the edition is sold out, it's over, and you'll need to go to the secondary market to acquire a print from sold out editions.' Many photographers' work has increased in value, and there are new collectors constantly entering the market.

Still, Yamaji stresses, photography is a very accessible medium for new collectors, and doing your homework and getting to know the history of photography is invariably a fascinating task. But ultimately, she says, nothing beats seeing the prints themselves: 'There's a huge difference between seeing the reproduced image on the page and seeing the originals. Visit as many exhibitions and auctions as you can. Trust your instincts and let the image speak to you.' □



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