Historical Background

On August 19, 1839, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre announced that he had invented the photographic process, the daguerreotype. News of the invention of photography quickly spread, capturing the imagination and curiosity of many people all over the world.

From its beginning, photography has played an important role in society. Photographers took their cameras to the battlefields, and finally brought the brutal reality of war directly into the homes of many who would otherwise never witness it. After the Civil War, “spirit photographers” offered customers a chance to see their loved ones again in the form of a ghost or spirit in a photograph, a tradition that continues today as some people believe the camera can sometimes see what the human eye cannot.

Photographs have also been extensively used for documentary purposes and as propaganda, making a deep impact on the public.

Photographic technology has changed over the years from glass plate negatives to film to digital format, but the reasons why people take pictures has not changed. Photographers have always had a specific intent in mind when taking images. Photographs should always be looked at while thinking about the historical context in which they were taken in, rather than to be used to only supplement text.

FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS:

- Prints & Photographs Collection
- Popular Photographic Print Processes
- Invention & Photography (exhibit)
- Does the camera ever lie?

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- 3-D Civil War Photos Presentation (presentation created by the Civil War Preservation Trust & The Center for Civil War Photography, contains a link to request a free pair of 3-D glasses to view the presentation)
- History of Photography Interactive Timeline (presentation created by National Geographic)

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS:

The Library of Congress offers numerous collections of photographs that cover all different time periods, places, and events. Researching the history of photography can offer students a powerful insight into people, thoughts, and events of the past.

The source set begins in 1840 and ends in 2008. It focuses on the history of photography and contains photographs, advertisements, and cartoons that illustrate the technological changes of photography over the years and explores how photography was used for different purposes (i.e. documentary, “spirit photography,” motion studies, propaganda, and fine art).

Have students choose a source from the set or one from the Library of Congress Web site. Have students research the historical context of the image by searching the Library of Congress Web site, the library, or the Internet. Who is the photographer or artist? Why is the image important in history? Why is the image important in the history of photography? What does the image tell you about the time period that other sources do not? Discuss the images as a class, and then put the images in chronological order.
La daguerréotypomanie [1840]

Occupational group portrait of four shoemakers, one full-length, standing, other three seated, holding shoes and shoemaking equipment [between 1840 and 1860]

Nadar / A. Humbert; relief Marchand-deaux. [1863?]

Stull's patent stereoscope and self-angling camera, for producing statuary and life-like pictures [c. 1855]

The artist's van [1855]

Ft. Sanders, Knoxville, Tenn., showing salient assaulted by Long-streets forces, Novr. 29th 1863
“Spirit” photograph, supposedly taken during a seance, actually a double exposure or composite of superimposed cut-outs, showing woman, half-length, with head-and-shoulders portraits of men and women around her head [c.1901]

The zoopraxiscope--Horse galloping [c.1893]
Also see the article, Eadweard Muybridge: Little Girl in Motion, for information on Muybridge's motion studies with a camera.

Vanishing race - Navaho (The North American Indian; v.01) [1904]
Leo, 48 inches high, 8 years old. Picks up bobbins at 15 cents a day in Elk Cotton Mills. He said, "No, I don't help me sister or mother, just myself." Location: Fayetteville, Tennessee. [1910]

[Three-quarter left rear view of glider in flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina] [1911]

Make That Summer Trip With A Kodak [1911]

Tipy Dagestana [between 1905 and 1915]

Peter Rabbit Comic Strip [October 8, 1922]

German Camera for Aircraft
This woman worker at the Vultee-Nashville is shown making final adjustments in the wheel well of an inner wing before the installation of the landing gear, Nashville, Tenn. This is one of the numerous assembly operations in connection with the mass production of Vultee "Vengeance" dive bombers [1943]

Photographs, second annual exhibition, Sioux City Camera Club [1936-1939]

Wounded servicemen arriving from Vietnam at Andrews Air Force Base [1968]

Civil rights march on Washington, D.C. [1963]

Natchez Trace Parkway, Mississippi [2008]
Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is November 10, 2010.


Fallis, S. W., photographer. “[“Spirit” photograph, supposedly taken during a seance, actually a double exposure or composite of superimposed cut-outs, showing woman, half-length, with head-and-shoulders portraits of men and women around her head]/ by John K. Hallowell, Chicago, Ill.; S.W. Falls, photographer, Chicago.” Photograph. c. 1901. From Library of Congress: Miscellaneous Items in High Demand. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91732576/.


CITATIONS, cont.


Palmer, Alfred T., photographer. “This woman worker at the Vultee-Nashville is shown making final adjustments in the wheel well of an inner wing before the installation of the landing gear, Nashville, Tenn. This [is] one of the numerous assembly operations in connection with the mass production of Vultee “Vengeance” dive bombers.” Photograph. February 1943. From Library of Congress: Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992001209/PP/.
