

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



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P.I.

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ADVANCE FACT SHEET

EXHIBITION: BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY: PAINTING AND THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

DATES: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
May 9 - July 5, 1981

SPONSOR: This exhibition has been organized with the aid of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts

DIRECTOR: Peter Galassi, Associate Curator in the Museum's Department of Photography

CONTENTS: This exhibition proposes that the invention of photography was not simply a scientific or technical achievement, but a product of artistic tradition as well. To support this proposition, the exhibition includes approximately 40 paintings and drawings, made in the half-century before the invention of photography was announced in 1839. It also includes a comparable number of early photographs.

The paintings and drawings, mostly landscapes and views of architecture, are by such painters as Constable and Corot and by some of their talented but less well-known contemporaries. The works represent the emergence of a fundamentally modern artistic outlook that had begun to value individual, contingent perceptions of the world over publicly sanctioned expressions of universal truths. With this outlook came a new sense of pictorial syntax, in which a picture was conceived not as a deliberately composed whole but as a telling fragment of a continuous and variable visual field. Mr. Galassi contends that the medium of photography, which can select but not compose, was born of this crucial transformation in artistic value and pictorial strategy. The photographic section of the exhibition represents the considerable artistic capital that the best early photographers made of the new strategy, which painters had long been inventing and photographers could not avoid.

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With one exception, the paintings and drawings are borrowed from European collections. They represent an important aspect of the development of modern art, which only recently has received serious study. Most of the works have never been seen before in the United States. The photographs, drawn from the Museum's Collection and other public and private collections, present the work of outstanding early photographers, such as Roger Fenton, Henri Le Secq, and Timothy O'Sullivan.

PUBLICATION:

Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography by Peter Galassi, Associate Curator in the Department of Photography, contains an introductory essay and 80 single-page plates of works in the exhibition, eight of them in color. The 156-page book will also contain a catalogue entry for each work, and an extensive bibliography. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, the book will be distributed by The New York Graphic Society, and will be available in the Museum stores in May. Clothbound, \$22.50; paperbound, \$12.50.

PRESS PREVIEW:

Wednesday, May 6, 1981, 10:00 A.M. - 1:00 P.M.

PUBLIC OPENING:

Saturday, May 9, 1981

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For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director (212) 956-2648, or Sharon Zane, Associate Director, 956-7295, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019
