

# A True History of Photography



Arroyo Seco, NM 1959.

by Malcolm Collier  
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## **The Magicians**

The first photographers were magicians and alchemists. They performed their public activities under black cloths, hiding their actions from mystified subjects before retreating into the darkness of secret rooms to which only the initiated were allowed to enter. Here, like the alchemists of old, they performed often dangerous chemical operations to produce miraculous images. In contrast to the older alchemists, however, they sought to turn precious metals into base materials!



Clark Perkins Hawley (my great great grandfather) and family, Upstate New York, c1880. My great grandmother, Mary Francis Hawley, is seated second from the left in front. Photographer unknown.

Portraits usually required visits to special locations - studios with impressive equipment and rich backdrops, which complimented and enhanced the magical activities of the photographers. No wonder the people in early portraits gaze out at us today with a distinctly different air - they were in awe of the magic before them!

The idea that this look was the product of holding still for long exposures is a myth promulgated by the photographers themselves to obscure the details of their magic.

Later practitioners of this form of photography went even further, developing new techniques and incantations - some of them were so adept at their magic that even the natural world looked on in awe. Ansel Adams photographs are not so much the product of special technical processes and personal vision as they are accurate reflections of the response of the mountains to his magical incantations: "Sky 9, rock 7, trees 4!" "F64!" Even the rocks look amazed!

## The Supplicants

The arrival of the waist level reflex camera changed the relationship of photographer to subject. Palms open and forward, with head bowed, the photographer was now a supplicant - "please let me have a photograph?"

Prime tools were the Graflex and later the twin lens reflex, especially the Rollie, both the trusted tools of photographers like Dorothea Lange and my father, John Collier Jr. These cameras were slow, often with relatively wide angle lenses, requiring a close and special relationship between subject and photographers. The human subjects of this approach stand tall against the sky, confident in their charity to the itinerant and mendicant photographers who bowed before them.



Rolleicord portrait at cattle roundup, Vicos, Peru, 1955.  
Photograph by John Collier Jr.



2 1/4 x 3 1/4 Graflex. My first camera, age 10,  
used for the cover photograph. It still works.

In contrast to the magicians and alchemists, these practitioners were much simpler folk in the darkroom. Printing still involved a degree of magical waving of hands beneath the enlarger and sometimes the later application of secret, often poisonous solutions but negative development was now a more standardized ritual, no longer was each negative cherished separately, instead most were developed en mass, with accompanying prayers that at least some image would emerge. These photographers were humble pharmacists rather than alchemists.

## The Hunters

The arrival of on camera flash for 4x5 cameras and the development of 35 mm equipment created a dramatic change in relationship between subject and photographer - no longer either magician nor supplicant, the photographer was now a hunter, weapon raised to eye and face hidden behind the barrel of the lens gun.

There were several types of these hunters. The press photographers, armed with Speed Graphics, ambushed their subjects at close range, stunning them with the sudden glare of their flash guns. Weegee made a career of this approach.

In contrast, the early 35mm photographers, with Leicas and the first 35 mm SLR's, were more like ancient hunters with bow and arrow. They had to sneak up close, if possible becoming one with their subjects, like hunters disguised with deer skins and antlers to enter the herds. Carter Bresson, Robert Frank, W. Eugene Smith, and many others were examples of this species.



Deborah Barndt, cousin, visual sociologist and photographer, making photograph at family event. All the subject of the camera sees is the lens and camera, no person really.

Rondal Partridge, making photograph. c1966. Photographer unknown.



Later, as long zoom lenses were developed for 35mm cameras, large and impressively similar to assault rifles, the increased range diminished the need to closely approach the subject and photographers could now fire away at great distance, their relationship to subject no longer crucial to a capture. Modern paparazzi, heirs to the press photographers, exemplify this approach today but many others practice it.

Like their mendicant predecessors, these hunters were less concerned with alchemy. Indeed many turned the chemical process over to specialized darkroom taxidermists who labored in obscurity while the hunters collected the fame. Those hunters that did their own chemical work still traded some secret phrases - "9% sodium sulfate!" "Rodinol 1:100!" but they were not lords of the dark like the earlier alchemists.

The subject of camera was 40 feet away.

## Digital Dawn

The shift to digital imaging is recent enough that its impact is still evolving. The magicians and alchemists continue to fade away and the mendicant photographers are long gone.

But many digital cameras - especially the DSLRs, still promote the role of hunter. While the older hunters worked with costly ammunition that limited their catch, the new digital hunters are armed with automatic weapons that collect images of their game by the thousands.

Meanwhile, high end digital cameras and digital software have spawned complex choices of settings and "development" processes every bit as esoteric, although less poisonous, as any by used the earlier magicians and alchemists.





But the most visible aspect of the digital era is the behavior of ordinary people as they hold the camera up and away from the face with both hands to compose on the camera's LCD screen.

**Now the photographer must pray to the great spirit  
for an image!!**

(With apologies to Edward Curtis)