

Passages

Photographs from the Collection



Philadelphia Museum of Art
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Hold the paper up to the light

(some rays pass right through)

Expose yourself out there for a minute

(some rays pass right through)

Talking Heads, "Paper," 1979,
from the album *Fear of Music*

This exhibition presents certain aspects of photographs and photographic history that can be characterized by the word “passage”—a word that, like photography itself, has multiple and even contradictory meanings. A passage of text in a book or a passage of music functions as a fragment of a larger work. All photographs are likewise excerpts from some larger view, and the photographic negative—that serves in this sense as the original “passage”—often undergoes a further process of selection, called cropping, when the negative is used to make positive prints. A passage can also suggest a connection or transition that seems the opposite of cropping and fragmentation, as in an underground passageway or a passage overseas. Photographs relate equally to this second meaning of the word, because they are created by recording the steady passage of light across a light-sensitive surface of film or paper. In addition, with their apparently straightforward connection to the flow of real events, photographs frequently are used to transport us to places and moments we could not otherwise see for ourselves.

This ability to simulate connections, however, is offset by a third aspect of photographs that in turn evokes another association with “passage”: disappearance and loss. At the instant the picture is taken, the present moment becomes part of the past, an event whose image has been fixed for endless contemplation, but which can never be relived. Every photograph pays tribute to time’s passing, and is thus a memento mori of sorts, a reminder of our mortality. Indeed, the moment of death is the ultimate instance of disappearance, and it is frequently described as a passage or journey to another realm.

The existence of three such diverse connotations within a single word gives “passage” an exceptionally expressive potential within our language. Photographs function like elements of language because they communicate elements of a shared reality, and like a suggestive phrase, they have the ability to lend reality a poetic form. However, like language, photographs are also susceptible to conflicting interpretations. For this reason, photographic images are frequently accompanied by clarifications of all sorts, intended to prevent them from being “misunderstood” or “taken out of context.” We see them supplemented by titles or captions, compiled in albums, reprinted alongside news stories, and framed for museum exhibitions. All of these explanatory or presentational devices may be understood as further commentary on the initial passage, the photograph that is taken from a single point of view but is open to many others.

Scientific inquiry, commemoration, travel and tourism, and street scenes are the subjects covered in this installation. These four areas have helped define the character of photography in fundamental ways. Early photographers displayed keen scientific abilities, for instance, and an enthusiasm for technical experiment still prevails among many people working in the medium. From the beginning, photographs have also served as remembrances, whether of individuals or of decaying and abandoned architectural monuments. Travel photography was born in part out of such commemorative impulses, as can be seen in the many images of nineteenth-century travels to lands of biblical or classical significance, such as Egypt, Greece, Palestine, or Asia Minor. At the same time, these ventures formed part of a burgeoning tourist industry that has since grown to terrific proportions, providing one of the principal incentives for picture-taking today. This modern phenomenon, together with the equally modern condition of sprawling cities and depopulated countrysides, has made street scenes one of the most widespread, compelling, and accessible photographic subjects since the end of the nineteenth century.

The historical developments that have created these areas of photographic interest—the expanded roles of science, the advent of mass tourism, and so forth—have not been only positive or beneficial. The same spirit of rational inquiry that blossomed during the Age of Enlightenment guided Europeans and North Americans on a course of commercial and military expansion that brought massive destruction and suffering to a great part of the world; underpinning much of nineteenth and early twentieth-century photography is a prejudicial mix of science, touristic prurience, and colonial condescension. We might also consider the relationship between passersby in the streets of any large city to people seeking shelter at points of passage such as alleyways, sidewalks, or train stations. In life, as in language, many kinds of “passage” confront one another, from the lightly chosen to the chronic and burdensome.

The medium of photography invites these sorts of comparisons and juxtapositions because it has so many different uses and applications, and because in all of its guises it bears reference to external realities. Each photograph can give only a partial view; however, the accumulation of fragmentary images may prompt insights into a larger picture. To give just one example, the photo of a stopped watch by Shomei Tomatsu (born 1930) and the image of a speeding bullet’s arrested movement by Harold Edgerton (1903–1990) share a

formal grace and the suggestion of ephemerality transfixed—yet the moments in question are very different. For Edgerton, the fleeting instant was a subject for scientific experimentation, the results of which helped improve United States bombing capabilities during World War II; Tomatsu, on the other hand, memorializes the traumatic effects of such scientific precision, which culminated in the atomic bomb blasts that ended the war.



Shomei Tomatsu, *Time Stopped at 11:02, 1945 Nagasaki*, 1961. Purchased with funds contributed by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

The visual and conceptual movement between one image to the next, and back again, counts among the most important forms of passage that this exhibition invites each viewer to contemplate. To say this is to emphasize that these photographs have been selected primarily for their resonances within this particular installation, whether or not they were created, displayed, or reproduced for similar reasons. By no means do the works here belong to a single or common history, let alone a history of art. Indeed, art exhibitions are just one of many venues in which photographs function quite brilliantly. The special value of treating photographs as art, however, is that we are invited to consider the questions such images raise, rather than simply the ones they might answer.

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Cover: Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Provincial Highway near Essen*, 1929.
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