

**John Raeburn.** *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 398 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03084-0.



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Is photography art? Artists, photographers, curators, scholars, and hobbyists have debated this question since the medium was created in the early nineteenth century. While most people today agree that photography is an accepted form of art, there are certain genres like documentary, photojournalism, and advertising where this debate has never fully been settled. The deliberation continues to evolve as technological advancements in digital cameras make it easier for the average person instantly to create, manipulate, and print sophisticated images that can rival the work of experienced professionals. In addition, the World Wide Web has provided hobbyists and professionals alike an easily accessible outlet to disseminate their images to large audiences.

This digital revolution is a new phenomenon. But current advances in photographic technology, together with an increased number of outlets for viewing photographs, have led to something that is not so new—a more democratic enterprise in which hobbyists and professionals alike create artful photography.

In his book *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, John Raeburn traces an earlier—and similarly democratizing—revolution in American photography. Through meticulous original research and analysis of existing work, Raeburn, a professor of American Studies and English at the University of Iowa, explores a broad range of photography projects during this decade in a way that illustrates how significant cultural and artistic developments interacted to make the 1930s "the most vigorous and creative decade in American photography's history" (p. xiii).

When most people think of the 1930s photography, images of the Great Depression like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* or Arthur Rothstein's *Dust Storm* quickly come to mind. Raeburn wisely broadens the focus to include projects, exhibits, and artists popular at the time but not as well known today. As he indicates, scholars like James Curtis, Cara Finnegan, William Stott, and Alan Trachtenberg (among others) have successfully critiqued the photographic contributions of the Farm Security Administration and the role of

the documentary movement. Other authors like Naomi Rosenblum and Beaumont Newhall have created more encompassing historical surveys of photography and elaborate on other significant photography projects during this era, but do so in a vacuum. Until now no one has ever looked at the major photographic and cultural influences of the 1930s as a collective whole. Raeburn finds a unique niche in between these existing bodies of work by exploring how, taken together, they established photography as an accepted popular art form in both traditional art circles and among the general public.

Raeburn's detailed analysis focuses on four main mutually reinforcing developments—new venues for displaying pictures, pedagogical efforts to educate viewers, a vast and more informed audience, and a growing number of gifted photographers creating innovative work (p. 3). In terms of new venues, Raeburn discusses pivotal exhibits at Harvard, the Weyhe Gallery, the de Young Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, Rockefeller Center, and the San Francisco World's Fair, just to name a few. These exhibits, along with the publication of many new photography periodicals such as *U.S. Camera Magazine*, *Popular Photography*, *Life*, and *Look*, not only created new outlets for displaying pictures, but also helped educate the public about this growing and evolving medium. In addition, as Raeburn points out, fashion magazines like *Vanity Fair* published so many definitive portraits by Edward Steichen that the magazine boasted he was "acknowledged to be the finest camera artist in the world" (p. 63).

In discussing the reinforcing nature of these new venues and the educational opportunities they provided, Raeburn furthers his analysis by noting the innovative work of the decade's leading photographers and photography organizations. He includes detailed critiques of Edward Steichen's celebrity photographs, Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York, 1935-39* (1939), Edward Weston's landscapes of the West, and Ansel

Adams's contribution both as a photographer and organizer of A Pageant of Photography at the 1940 San Francisco World's Fair. Raeburn's critiques illustrate how these photographers and other collective projects such as the Farm Security Administration, California's Group f.64, the Photo League, and the Harlem project contributed to the dynamic nature of photography's cultural standing in the 1930s.

While Raeburn's work is significant to our understanding of the cultural impact of the photographic movement during this era, it does have a few limitations. First, the book includes only twenty-four images, all of which are at the end of the text. In a book about a pivotal time when photographs eclipsed the power of the written word to communicate important social and cultural issues to a mass audience, it seems necessary to include not only more photographs but to weave them throughout the text. Ironically, Raeburn quotes reviews of the 1938 publication *Land of the Free*, a compilation of words by poet Archibald MacLeish and pictures from the Farm Security Administration that indicates "the pictures are the thing" and "speak for themselves" (p. 176). To his credit, Raeburn describes images in great detail to help paint a picture for his readers, but it is easy to get lost in the detail without the visual reference.

Second, although this is a look at the cultural history of 1930s photography in America, Raeburn does not acknowledge the influence of the European reportage movement and its influence on American picture magazines such as *Life* and *Look*. Aside from the discussion of the French photographer Eugene Atget, who is best known for his documentary photographs of Paris, the reader is left with the impression that straight photography and the documentary movement that followed were strictly an American creation. Picture magazines in Germany like *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* (MIP) and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (BIZ) were using documentary images in

the photo essay format in the late 1920s, before *Life* and *Look* were first published.

Third, there is no mention of the Associated Press wire photograph. While newspaper photographs at the time may not have been included in the discussion of artful photography, they still influenced how the masses viewed and understood images. The fact that people all across the country could look at the same images almost instantaneously (like the Hindenburg disaster in 1937) no doubt affected their perception of photography in general. Raeburn could have acknowledged this point in his chapter "The Nation's Newsstands."

Finally, while Raeburn has an undeniable command of the English language, his academic style is challenging to read. In a book that illustrates how photography emerged as a more populous and democratic art form, it seems ironic that the average photography enthusiast would lose sight of Raeburn's valuable work because of his erudite choice of words.

These limitations do not detract from the significant contribution this book makes to our understanding of the rebirth photography experienced during the 1930s. Like photography in this era, *A Staggering Revolution* will create a renaissance in how scholars and students think about how photography rose as democratic form in art. Raeburn's insights regarding photography's revolution in the 1930s can also shed light on the current revolution in digital media. Similar to the 1930s, new venues for disseminating work (think online) are still emerging, allowing for new and innovative projects created by amateurs and professionals alike to reach the masses. How will this impact photography, our culture, and our understanding of contemporary visual communication? Understanding the past is a good place to start.

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