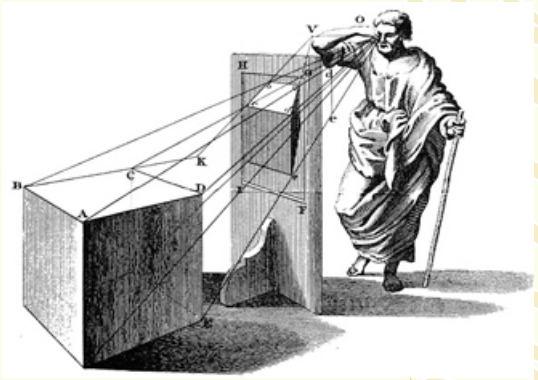
P. GALASSI – BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography was not a bastard left by science on the doorstep of art, but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition.
Peter Galassi

… **L**eon Battista Alberti published *On Painting* in 1435, a perspective picture has been defined as a plane intersecting the pyramid of vision. At the apex of the pyramid is the eye. The pyramid's base is the perimeter of the picture. The picture is the projection upon the intersecting plane of everything that lies within the scope of the pyramid, extending to infinity. The various ingenious objections notwithstanding, Alberti's definition provides that if perfectly produced and viewed with one eye from the apex of the imaginary pyramid, a perspective picture will be like a window through which its subject is seen.



Given this definition, any perspective picture is implicitly the product of three fundamental choices.
(1) The artist must choose *the arrangement of the subject* or (what amounts to the same thing) choose the moment at which to represent an existing subject;
(2) he must choose *the point of view*;
(3) he must choose the scope of the view or, in other words, establish *the edges of the picture*.

These three choices determine the basic composition of the picture.

All possible functions of these three interdependent choices lie between two extreme, limiting cases. In one, the point of view and the frame — the visual pyramid — are established first, creating a measured stage. The *Ideal Townscape* of Piero's [della Francesca] circle presents just such a stage, on which the buildings are arranged for maximum visibility, and where the position and size of potential figures are easily determined by reference to the preexisting grid. The grid is the key to the reciprocal relationship of two and three dimensions and allows the painter to compose from the former into the latter.

Paolo Uccello - A Hunt, c. 1460. Panel, 65 x 165 cm.
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England

Thus Uccello, in his *Hunt* (c. 1460), deployed the men, animals, and trees simultaneously on the surface of the picture and in space, so that there is no gap or obstruction in either. In the opposite conception of the perspective system, the world is accepted first as an uninterrupted field of potential pictures. From his chosen point of view, the artist scans this field with the pyramid of vision, forming his picture by choosing where and when to stop.

De Witte's and Saenredam's pictures are obviously closer to this conception. So too is Degas's *The Racing Field* (c. 1877-80) where point of view and frame rob the figures and animals of their physical integrity, compressing them into an unfamiliar pattern.

Edgar Degas - The Racing Field: Amateur Jockeys near a Carriage, c. 1877-8 - Oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm - Musee du Louvre, Paris

Degas of course composed his picture as carefully as Uccello, but his intuitive procedure was different. Uccello conceived of the visual pyramid as a static, neutral container, within which he organized the elements of his picture. In Degas's work the visual pyramid plays an active, decisive role. We attribute the obstructions to the painter's viewpoint and the asymmetry to the frame, which excludes as well as includes. Where Uccello's painting seems comprehensive, Degas's seems fragmentary, concentrating in a single visual aspect the vital spirit of the entire scene.

Uccello worked from pieces to a whole: he synthesized. Degas worked from a whole to an aspect: he analyzed.

These polar conceptions of perspective have a historical sense. Gradually, over a period of centuries, Uccello's procedure of logical construction gave way to Degas's strategy of selective description. In theory, there must have been a point at which pictorial experiment, diverging from the Renaissance norm, reached a critical stage, a sufficient density, to form a new norm. However, since artistic tradition develops along multiple fronts at different rates, and because the art ist's procedure is rarely his subject, this point is difficult to locate.

It is not easy to name a date when the world expanded beyond the control of the studio artist, who then unhinged the visual pyramid, wielding it at large in pursuit of his subject. Nevertheless, the invention of photography poses precisely this historical question. For **the photographer**, try as he might, **could not follow Uccello's procedure. The camera was a tool of perfect perspective, but the photographer was powerless to compose his picture.**

He could only, in the popular phrase, *take it*. Even in the studio the photographer began not with the comfortable plane of his picture but with the intractably three-dimensional stuff of the world.

Noting formal characteristics — obstructions and croppings — that readily arise from this unavoidable condition of photography, many art historians tacitly attribute to the invention of the medium the function of a crucial watershed. They explain, for example, some new features of Degas's art in terms of the disruptive influence of photography, ignoring the long tradition from which his artistic procedure is derived.

In fact it is not Degas's work that needs explaining but the invention of photography.

Simply on a practical basis, photography would have been unsuited to the Renaissance art of composition. Uccello might have used the camera to make studies of bits and pieces for his pictures; but it is likely that such studies would have displeased him, as they did a much later artist, Edward Hopper: *"I once got a little camera to use for details of architecture and so forth but the photo was always so different from the perspective the eye gives, I gave it up."*

The Renaissance system of perspective harnessed vision as a rational basis of picture-making.

Initially, however, perspective was conceived only as a tool for the construction of three dimensions out of two. Not until much later was this conception replaced — as the common, intuitive standard — by its opposite: the derivation of a frankly flat picture from a given three-dimensional world.

Photography, which is capable of serving only the latter artistic sense, was born of this fundamental transformation in pictorial strategy. The invention of photography must then coincide with or succeed the accumulation of pictorial experiment that marks the critical period of transformation from the normative procedure of Uccello's era to that of Degas's.

The present study is designed to explore this proposition. Its paintings and drawings, from the decades before and after 1800, are chosen to mark the emergence of a new norm of pictorial coherence that made photography conceivable. Although these pictures share with the art of their time a spirit of change, and although they were made by artists of many European countries, they do not belong to the mainstream of art. With few exceptions they are landscapes, and most are modest sketches, hardly intended for exhibition. For these very reasons, however, they are perhaps a more reliable guide to the intuitive norm of authentic representation, unburdened by the responsibilities of public art. These paintings and drawings show that this norm was under drastic revision. They display a new family of pictorial types as yet largely unapplauded and only rarely turned to full artistic advantage, but representative of a significant strain of artistic practice that adopted the analytic function of perspective as its sole tool, discarding the synthetic option as inappropriate to its aims.
The photographs here represent the artistic capital that some early photographers made of this strategy, which painters had long been inventing and which photographers could not avoid.

The preceding argument attempts to abstract from the history of post-Renaissance painting, to isolate for the purpose of clarity, a single thread of development. To this end it employs the rhetorical fiction of the painter's intuitive strategy or procedure. The hypothetical principles of synthesis and analysis are not meant to describe the painter's actual method (for, literally, all paintings are composed) but to call attention to fundamental changes in the conventions of representation. A comparable sense of these changes may be had by ignoring the artist in favor of the viewer. The latter has no place in Uccello's picture, but he is a virtual participant in Degas's.
Erratic, even incoherent, by Uccello's orderly standard, Degas's picture is nevertheless consistent with the conditions of perspective, to which the spectator intuitively responds. From a precise and nearby position, the viewer's knowing eye translates the apparently arbitrary, fragmented forms into the whole space of the picture, and beyond.
A long tradition of pictorial experiment separates Degas's picture from Uccello's.
In the seventeenth century, for example, painters often introduced prominent foregrounds that, a century before, would have been considered bizarre and inappropriate, even if accurate in perspective. In Jacob van Ruisdael's *Bentheim Castle* (c. 1670), for instance, the near boulders, insignificant in themselves, are as large in the picture as the intrinsically more important castle.

Jacob van Ruisdael: Bentheim Castle, c. 1670.
Oil on canvas, 68 x 63,5 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The viewer intuitively comprehends this discrepancy, acknowledging it as a function of his proximity to the foreground.
In judging the picture's space the viewer is also guided by a series of gentle diagonals, which form an unbroken pictorial path between the boulders and the castle. This link is, like Piero's pavement, a two-dimensional measure of a continuous three-dimensional space. …

Piero della Francesca: Ideal City c. 1480 - Tempera on panel - 67,7 x 239,4 cm
National Gallery of Marche - Urbino

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