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BOOK WORLD

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A new history shows that photography was an instant obsession with a profound impact

IN A FLASH, THE WORLD CHANGED

BIOGRAPHY

A brilliant and combative immigrant who shaped U.S. foreign policy. **cs**

BIOGRAPHY

Amelia Earhart had the ambition. Her husband had the PR skills. **cs**

BY MICHAEL PATRICK BRADY

The prevalence of photography in contemporary life has inspired a lot of griping about the supposedly unprecedented narcissism of our social-media-driven culture. We are continually encouraged to live in the moment instead of through our cameras, scolded for our pursuit of a flattering selfie or an aesthetic backdrop that will draw eyes — and engagement — to our photos and ourselves. ¶ But this obsession is nothing new. From nearly the first moment it became possible to capture an image from life and freeze it for posterity, people have gone to extraordinary lengths to produce arresting, inspiring and, yes, self-aggrandizing photographs. ¶ In “Flashes of Brilliance: The Genius of Early Photography and How It Transformed Art, Science, and History,” Anika Burgess takes us back to the 19th century to showcase the artists and innovators who developed this revolutionary technology and the profound cultural changes that followed.

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A contact sheet from Carl Stormer's secret buttonhole camera, which captured people on the streets of Oslo in the 1890s. In “Flashes of Brilliance,” Anika Burgess highlights the innovation and risk-taking of photography's early decades.

CARL STORMER/NORWEGIAN MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

NONFICTION

A new way to see the world, and ourselves

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM C1

It's an elegantly written history that speaks to an immutable human desire "to pursue knowledge, to create something beautiful, to record a moment in time." It's also a lot of fun, as Burgess makes ample space for the eccentric and adventurous spirits who played a role in the uncertain decades between 1839 and 1910. "These innovations were sometimes misguided, occasionally obsessive, periodically dangerous, and perpetually fascinating," she writes.

When Louis Daguerre's process for capturing a positive image on a silver-coated copper plate was first revealed on Jan. 7, 1839, the reaction was effusive and immediate; "miraculous," was the verdict of scientist Sir John Herschel. The public was soon captivated — by the end of the year, an engraving by the French artist Théodore Maurisset depicted a huge, frenzied crowd lining up to pose for their very own one-of-a-kind "daguerreotype."

Little more than a decade later, Frederick Archer's "wet collodion" process supplanted Daguerre's method, offering superior sharpness and the ability to produce shareable paper prints from a glass-plate negative. The downside was that photographers had just 15 minutes to expose and develop their image before the wet plate dried out. This meant toting hundreds of pounds of equipment — including volatile chemicals, a darkroom tent and fragile glass plates — to wherever they hoped to snap a scene.

The investment of time and resources required to pursue photography in this era meant it was accessible mostly to those Susan Sontag once called "the clever, the wealthy, and the obsessed." Their exploits, in Burgess's telling, were often more picaresque than picturesque. From poisonous chemical baths to exploding flash powders, these pioneers risked life and limb every time they opened their shutters. Daguerreotypists "were exposed to toxic mercury and iodine vapors every time they made an image," Burgess writes, and volatile flash powders "blew up houses and factories, shattered windows, and destroyed equipment." In 1889, a flash powder advertised as "the most powerful light under the sun" was the cause of multiple fatal explosions in Philadelphia.

Despite these dangers, early photographers were eager to push the envelope. Burgess recounts the death-defying adventures of famous shutterbugs like Louis Boutan, who pioneered underwater photography, and the French artist Nadar, who soared over Paris in a series of increasingly large (and hard to control) hot air balloons in his quest to capture a perfect bird's-eye view of the city. In 1863, Nadar took to the air in a 196-foot craft named *Le Géant* that carried a two-story basket containing "a printing press, darkroom, galley kitchen, triple-decker bunk beds for twelve, a toilet and, perhaps most crucially, a wine store." On its second trip, the balloon was caught in a strong gale, grounded and dragged for 25 miles before finally coming to a stop just shy of a moving locomotive. Remarkably, all of its passengers lived.

While these artists-cum-daredevils sought to use new technology to change how we see the world around us, Burgess is clear that the most profound change was in how we see ourselves. As photographs became more accessible — and more commercialized — they introduced "notions about celebrity culture, self-imaging, authenticity, ownership, and representation that are deeply resonant today." Burgess's account of the 1860s craze for "cartes de visite," wallet-size portraits traded among friends and collected in albums, sounds like a primitive form of social media. Burgess quotes from a periodical edited by Charles Dickens that described the appeal of the fad in surprisingly recognizable terms, marveling at the excitement of "distributing yourself among your friends, and letting them see you in your favorite attitude, and with your favorite expression. And then you get into those wonderful books which everybody possesses, and strangers see you there in good society, and ask who that very striking-looking person is?"

Burgess wisely eschews a dry, chronological structure in favor of a more thematic approach that allows her to focus on the era's most impressive feats and to deftly relate the challenges of the past with those of the present. Through painstaking research and her obvious love of the medium, Burgess succeeds in reminding us how special this "small miracle of chemistry, optics, and light" really is. She allows us to see it with fresh eyes and to recognize that, whenever we agonize over finding just the right angle or get caught endlessly scrolling through galleries, we are taking part in a rich and decidedly human tradition.

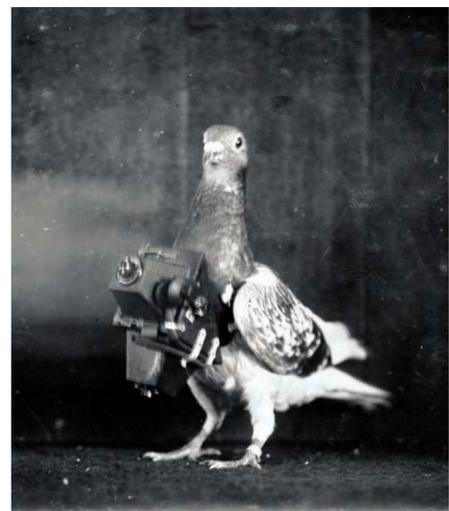
Michael Patrick Brady is a book critic whose work has appeared in the *Boston Globe* and the *Wall Street Journal*.



CARNAVALET-HISTORY OF PARIS MUSEUM



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Le Géant*, a huge hot air balloon used for aerial photography by the French artist Nadar, ascends in Brussels, September 1864. Julius Neubronner sent pigeons aloft with cameras in early-20th-century Germany. Louis Boutan, a pioneer of underwater photography, second from left.



FLASHES OF BRILLIANCE
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