

Photography has become more accessible than ever, but this accessibility has blurred the line between casual image making and intentional art. True photography is shaped by vision, composition, and careful choices, and it remains a disciplined craft that communicates emotion, tells a story, and preserves cultural significance.

By: Vanessa M. Coakley

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When photography first started in the 1800s, it was not seen as an art form but a scientific tool used to document the world. It was used to accurately record the world around them. Inventors like Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, who created the first photograph in 1826, and Louis Daguerre, who introduced the daguerreotype (the first practical photographic process) in 1839. These men focused on capturing reality as precisely as possible. Their goal was not expression or art but rather the accurate documentation of the world.

As time went on, people began to realize it could be more than just a way to record what was in front of them. Photographers discovered that they could shape reality through framing, lighting, timing, and composition. They were no longer just coping with the world but interacting with it. Photography slowly became an art medium just like any other that requires skill, practice, and refinement.

Over the years, photography has changed from a mechanical process to the creative process that it is today. Photography can communicate emotion, tell stories, and reflect a photographer's vision and perspective. Those early photographers showed that photography is not just simply clicking a button. It involves vision and thoughtful decisions, just like painting or sculpting does.

With the rapid growth of modern technology, photography slowly evolved into an art medium. The development of modern technology has accelerated and transformed the way images are created, shared, and understood. The shift from film to digital and from mirror to mirrorless has changed the way the world is seen today. Even having a small camera in their back pocket has changed everything.

Photography is seen everywhere all day long, from social media to pictures in offices and households. Society is desensitized by how many images are out there and how none of them have a true intention. There is so much noise, it is hard to see what has true vision and intention.

Just about everything since 1839 has been photographed, or so it seems. There is a flood of images, ideas, perspectives, and agendas. With an overwhelming number of images constantly

surrounding people, it has become difficult to recognize what has true vision and artistic intent.

Thesis: Photography has become more accessible than ever, but this accessibility has blurred the line between casual image making and intentional art. True photography is shaped by vision, composition, and careful choices, and it remains a disciplined craft that communicates emotion, tells a story, and preserves cultural significance.

Susan Sontag, in her book "On Photography" (Sontag & RosettaBooks, LLC, 1973), compares Plato's cave analogy to photography in everyday life. Plato's cave analogy explains that people are either ignorant or have knowledge. Plato's analogy explained that there are people who have lived their whole lives staring at a cave wall. Their whole reality is made up of shadows dancing on the walls. They spend their whole lives trying to make sense of these shadows. One of them finally stumbles out of the cave and sees that the shadows dancing are merely things moving in front of a fire at the mouth of the cave. The person returns to everyone looking at the shadows on the wall and tells them what he found out and what they are missing out on. Yet none of them believe this. They are so stuck believing only what they have seen their whole lives that they cannot believe anything else. No matter how hard the person tries to make them understand, they will not.

This idea of making a still representation of reality, "the shadows," connects closely to how photography is seen in everyday life. Sontag compares the shadows to photography, resembling how people are living their lives through pictures and photographs. People no longer experience the world, but live through photos of it. Both the shadows and pictures remove depth, context, and the full experience of the world. Because photography is widely accessible, it has pushed many people deeper into Plato's "cave". These people are no longer experiencing the world but just watching it through images.

Most of these images are just casual, lacking intent and vision. Just as the prisoners in the cave came to accept the shadows as reality, many people now accept photographs as their full picture of reality. Like the shadows were only flat reflections of something happening outside the cave, a photograph can only capture a small bit of a much larger picture. The sounds, the movement, the emotion, and the atmosphere of a moment cannot fully exist in a frame. Yet people often treat the

image as if it were the whole experience.

In the way photography can become like the shadows on the cave wall, a snapshot version of reality that people begin to rely on instead of stepping outside and experiencing the world.

It is not all a bad thing that anyone can create photos; it is just that many people do not know why they are even taking them. This becomes even clearer when photos are compared with how they were taken once and how they are taken today. If people were honest, many would admit they take pictures that are never looked at again. If people go back and look through older printed pictures, they show this difference clearly. Each one was of a moment someone knew they wanted to remember.

Because people used to take photos on disposable cameras and Polaroids, there were no redos. Each photo of great-grandparents, vacations, family Christmases, and unforgettable events was something that they knew they wanted to freeze in a picture forever. Their vision was in the memory, not if it had good lighting, but in the moment of living on. They took them knowing that that exact moment was the one they wanted to capture. Each one was meaningful. But nowadays, with the convenience of photography, future generations will have so many pictures that they will not mean as much, because many are not meaningful.

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.” Jean Baudrillard. (Simulacra and Simulation Quotes, n.d.) This is really true when it comes to casual image making. So in a world that takes so many pictures and lives through them, how is real vision determined? Authentic artistic vision is revealed through intentional choices such as composition, lighting, and timing. Things that go beyond simply capturing a moment.

Modern technology has made photography accessible, allowing anyone to take, share, and edit images instantly. This accessibility has improved the process of photography; however, it has also contributed to a culture that lives through images and has become numb to true artistic vision. People often fail to slow down and truly see what is in front of them.

As photography has become widely accessible to everyone, it has become very difficult to distinguish between intentional artistic works and casual image-making. Every day, millions of photos are uploaded to social media, making it harder for society to truly value individual images.

Modern technology's accessibility is not entirely bad. It has improved the process of photography, making it possible to instantly upload, see, and control the vision, lighting, and composition. However, the downside is that society often seeks constant stimulation, images, and becomes numb to true vision. People forget to stop, slow down, and look with their heart, not just their eyes. This is why it is hard for people to see true vision. Because those who are numb to art often struggle to appreciate it.

“In an age of relentless speed, our eyes have learned to skim rather than see. Images flash past us in seconds, captions replace contemplation, and meaning is compressed into bite-sized reactions.

We scroll, like, and move on. Yet art, true art, has never been designed for haste. It asks something quietly radical of us: time.” Amara Desai

There must be a willingness to slow down and see. There is something that makes a viewer look twice at a picture, something beautiful, compelling, whether it is the lighting in the photo or the colors. Even in a numb culture, vision can still be appreciated; some will miss it with all the noise around them, but some will see it. Those who see it are usually other creatives, artists, or people who have learned to slow down to see what most miss. A student at Harvard Graduate School of Education (2006) said, “I used to not pay attention to detail and the mood of the artwork or music. I would look at the artwork superficially, only paying attention to what was right in front of my face, such as the color. I never delved deeper into what the artist was trying to get across”. (Tishman et al., 2007). The problem is whether the viewers will look twice, notice the vision, and stop listening to the outside noise.

Accessibility has blurred the line between art and casual image-making. When everyone can make images instantly, artistic intent becomes harder to distinguish. Every day, there are millions of photos uploaded to social media and seen by others. This has made it almost impossible for society to value photos when there are so many. “Photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.” Susan Sontag. (Sontag & RosettaBooks, LLC, 1973)

People often feel an obligation to capture moments not because it's an actual, meaningful moment or even beautiful, but because of a fear of missing out if they do not have “proof” that they did or saw something. When people visit places like the Grand Canyon, millions of people take photos of the same view, not because they have a vision or feel something about the view, but because it is convenient. The difference between simply taking a photo and creating one lies in intentional composition and aesthetic vision.

Matt Hardy says it like this: “Beauty can be seen in all things; seeing and composing the beauty is what separates the snapshot from the photograph.”(Encyclopedia Britannica et al., n.d.).

Composition is still a skill, and like any other skill, it can be learned. It may come easier to some than others, but the person who practices the skill will be better at it, even if they did not have natural talent to begin with.

What is the difference between casual image making and photography? The difference between taking photos and making art? Stanley Leary explains it well: “Some are casual snapshots that

preserve a personal memory, while others are carefully crafted to convey a message or evoke an emotion.” The difference is what is carefully created and whether it makes the viewer feel something. Going back to The Oxford Language Dictionary definition of vision: “the ability to think about or plan the future with great imagination and intelligence.”(Tpm, 2023) Everybody has the ability to think, plan, use their imagination, and be intelligent, but the real question is whether these skills are actually being used when a photo is taken.

For example, many people cook meals for themselves every day, but they are not considered chefs. They make food for themselves and maybe their friends, but nobody is paying for it or critiquing the skill behind it. If someone were to call themselves a chef just because they cook every day, the question would be, what qualifies them? What skills do they have? Can they work with the tools that chefs use daily? Most people would not call themselves chefs because they do not have the skill yet, or they do not know how to use the flavors or the tools.

The same idea applies to photography. Just because someone takes pictures every day and maybe even shares them, that does not make them a photographer. To be considered a photographer, you would have to understand the tools, how lighting works, and how composition comes together.

This is not saying someone cannot take a great picture with a phone or without knowing these things, just as one can make a delicious meal without being a chef. However, in order to call oneself a photographer, one requires discipline, practice, experience, creativity, and knowledge.

The counter side would say that photography is often seen as just capturing what is already there,

but when accessibility is brought, it can actually expand creativity more deeply. “Accessibility in photography falls firmly within the scope of ethical considerations, playing a crucial role in democratizing this powerful medium.”(Rent a Photo Studio, 2023). This means that more people can take part in it and influence what is created. This leads to all people being able to be creative. Not only in terms of what is being photographed, but also who is being photographed. “This can lead to more diverse representation, not just as photographic subjects, but also as photographers and creative contributors.”(Rent a Photo Studio, 2023)

Technology plays a big role in this by making photography more accessible to all, allowing more people to create and share their perspectives. Through this accessibility, photography has become more than just a simple picture. When accessibility is prioritized, creativity actually grows instead of being limited.

Although this idea of accessibility sounds like it's been great, great accessibility does not replace the need for artistic discipline. Some argue that accessibility strengthens photography by allowing more voices and creativity. This argument can be agreed with in some ways, but at the same time, society is now flooded with millions of photos a day, making it hard to determine which ones have vision, intent, and craftsmanship. Where is the line drawn between an artist's intent and just casual image making?

Ansel Adams says, “A photograph is shaped by the photographer’s intention and decisions, not simply by pointing a camera at a scene.”(Rafael, 2024) As a viewer of a photo, it is hard to know whether an image is just a casual photo or created with an intentional artistic purpose. However,

a viewer can sense when something feels fake or off, and they can also feel when something is real and artistic. When a true masterpiece is seen, it was created with intention.

“Although photography generates works that can be called art – it requires subjectivity, it can lie, it gives aesthetic pleasure – photography is not, to begin with, an art form at all. Like language, it is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made.”*Susan Sontag* (Sontag & RosettaBooks; LLC, 1973). As Susan explains, art is made, learned, and it can also lie. Art recreates an artistic vision. So, without vision, the viewers will not feel or even see anything that makes it art.

It can also be argued that accessibility does enhance creativity. Yes, anyone can take a picture now because of smartphones. However, most people just take random pictures or even use filters. Just having the ability to take a photo does not automatically mean they are being creative. Creativity comes from trying new things, thinking about how a picture looks, and experimenting, not just pressing a button on their phone. The mere ability to take pictures does not automatically mean it was made with creativity.

Ansel Adams also said, “I have often thought that if photography were difficult in the true sense of the term - meaning that the creation of a simple photograph would entail as much time and effort as the production of a good watercolor or etching - there would be a vast improvement in total output. The sheer ease with which we can produce a superficial image often leads to creative disaster.” (*Ansel Adams Quotes*, n.d.)

Accessibility does not negate the distinction between casual image and intentional art. Just because anyone can take a photo does not make it art. Artistic value depends on intention, interpretation, and execution.

Photography preserves lasting cultural and artistic significance. Photography has shaped the world throughout major and minor protests and nations. It has shaped the way people perceive the world. Photos like *The Flag Raising on Iwo Jima* (1945), *Migrant Mother* (1936), *9/11 Falling Man* (2001), and the first image of a black hole (2019) are just a few images that have changed the way the world perceives events. (go to the photos section at the end of the paper to find those photos I referenced)(Team & Team, 2026). These images are ones that make viewers stop and look twice, and have very deep emotions. So much so that these pictures are written in history. Each one has a purpose and stands for something bigger than the actual photo. These photographs were taken by a photographer with the vision, understanding of the tool they were using, and who worked hard to capture these exact moments in time.

It is interesting to think that many of these images were taken long ago and will remain significant far into the future. The photographer's work will continue to produce emotion, and the vision captured in these images will last over time.

A definition of “photography” from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is: “the art or process of producing images by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface (such as film or an optical sensor)” (“Photography,” 2026b). The definition for “photographer” in the same dictionary is “one who practices photography.” (“Photographer,” 2026). These two

definitions are basically the same, no matter which dictionary is used. There is nothing wrong with these definitions, but they do not truly capture photography as the artistic and vision-filled craft it truly is for those who devote their lives to it. For the people who do not just click a button but see the vision.

Photography has only been around for 200 years, and these definitions have not changed since. Photography is much more than these definitions suggest. Photography has changed so much in the past 200 years that it requires a deeper definition for those whose lives are devoted to growing in this art.

Throughout the years, photography has been a means of capturing historical events and everyday life all over the world. It is a way of documenting the world. It has allowed people to witness glimpses of war, other cultures, and sometimes to be misled by images.

Photography plays a big role in history, journals, memory, and identity. As is known, photography began by simply recording the world and later became the expressive art medium it has the potential to be today. Throughout history, different people have used photography for different reasons, from science to expression. Every photo taken is a moment frozen in time. A memory to look back on or an identity captured by the photographer. Without many moments frozen in time, people would not know what Europe looked like during World War II, or even the famine in Ethiopia (1980s) (Omer, 2024), two events that were documented through photography, allowing the world to truly see what was happening. Without photographs of these two events, U.S. civilians would not have known the true scale of the tragedy that was happening

in Europe. For Ethiopia, the photos helped others perceive the harshness of the suffering and the urgent need for food. For Ethiopia, people started to help and send food. Without photos of these two events, things might have gone differently.

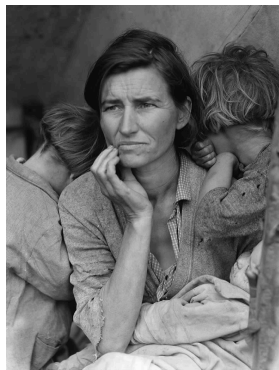
What sets photography apart from casual image making? The Oxford Language Dictionary defines vision as “the ability to think about or plan the future with great imagination and intelligence.”(Tpm, 2023) Photography is the ability to be creative with a plan, using certain lighting angles, lines, and shapes to express something that can only be captured with those angles, lines, and shapes, creating something only the photographer saw before the picture was taken. It is the ability to draw outside the lines because new lines can be made, understanding that the lines are only guardrails and can be broken.

Photography is not just about capturing what is in front of someone or in front of the camera, but about how it is seen and why it is photographed. As photography has become more accessible, the line between casual image making and intentional art has become blurred. However, that does not mean the difference is gone.

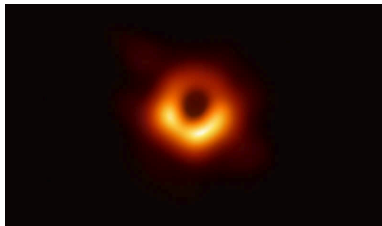
True photography still requires vision, discipline, and intentional choices, and using tools. In a world numb and filled with constant images, it has become harder to see what holds real meaning. But this vision is what makes true photography stand out. It is the photography created with purpose and thought that continues to communicate emotions, tell stories, and preserve moments that matter.

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