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Snapshots

Photographs have rooted themselves in our public cultures even as traditional paintings have long been. We have looked with admiration at the black and white landscapes of Ansel Adams, his control of pictorial tones reminding us of the control of tones in a piano composition. We are pleased to have Matthew Brady's Civil War photograph of Abraham Lincoln, 6'4" tall beneath his stove-pipe hat, towering over the generals standing by him. Of later American war photographs—World War II, the Vietnam war, and now the Middle Eastern wars—how many millions of us carry chambers of horrors in our memories! How far more welcome are the color photographs of the Earth from the Apollo spacecraft, as aesthetic an experience to me as almost anything a painter has created.

I make exceptions of a few paintings, among the Michelangelo's of God creating Adam, which open mouthed crowds view in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Equally memorable, to me at least, is Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, depicting the Earth and the heavens as mysteries in motion. At the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, I have stood hypnotized before that painting for hours. But how many of us owe our first exposure to *The Starry Night*—inadequate as that experience was—to a *photograph* of it viewed elsewhere, in a book or on a poster!

However, I wish to extol something privately dearer to almost all of us than the classics of photography and art—the simple, unpretentious snapshot. Now, the first decade of the twenty-first century, is the appropriate time to extol it as the digital camera replaces the roll film one.

Who knows what alterations and tricks digital photographs will be subjected to as more and more people learn to manipulate them readily through computer programs such as Photoshop? Different physical settings provided. Hairdos altered. Legs and thighs slimmed. Scowls wrenched into smiles. Divorced spouses, and black sheep, excised from family portraits.

Billions of simple snapshots of our parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, childhood friends, schoolmates remain in albums, or tied up in stiff brown security portfolios. If we are lucky, someone has written in pencil on their backs: “Mother with school friends.” Or “Father and Grandfather Heller in Central Park.” Or “Greatgrandfather Henry and Greatgrandmother Martha at New York World’s Fair (1940).” Or “Philip on a pony in St. Mary’s Park.” Once I sat down on a sofa with my mother, successively opened each portfolio she treasured, and got her to identify people so that I could make the desired notations. Many of her identifications reawakened memories, and she told me many a story that week.

How many snapshots are stranded as relatives and friends die off! Ultimately the questions arise: “Who are these people?” and “What are we to do with many of these photographs?” Ideally there would be a museum about each of us, with a curator to identify every artifact and photograph and supply commentary. Or a book that would serve the same purpose. But who would read those books after a while? So ultimately the snapshots are thrown away with the rubbish, since no one now remembers or cares.

But for the grandparents and parents of many of us, the snapshots, most of them made with inexpensive Kodak box cameras or more versatile Kodak folding cameras meant far more than Brady’s Civil War photographs or Adams’ landscapes—if indeed they knew of either of these photographers. Let us be grateful for America’s snapshots, even more than for the art photographs now celebrated in museums.

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