PHOTOGRAPHY TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

Explore the national collection of the art of photography at the home of creativity
Key Stage 4–5: Photography, Art & Design

Dog Balancing on Two Chairs, Lady Clementina Hawarden; 1861 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Introduction

The photographs collection at the V&A spans the history of the art of photography. The Photographs gallery, Room 100 (Level 3), displays artworks from 1839 to the present day. The displays change annually, and feature influential photographers historic and contemporary. In addition, Room 38a (Level 1), houses temporary photographic displays that complement exhibitions at the Museum.

The first photographic prints were made in the 1820s, but long processing times meant that the medium was not commercially successful. In the 1830s, faster chemicals led to the growing popularity of photography. In England, William Henry Fox Talbot invented the paper negative or calotype that could be reproduced; in France, Louis Daguerre developed the daguerreotype that produced a unique, positive image on a silver-coated copper plate.

The term 'photograph' was first used in 1839 by John Herschel when describing the process of drawing with light. Since the 1850s, a number of photographic processes have developed which offer photographers an opportunity to experiment with the artistic and technological aspects of the medium. Other photographic processes represented in the collection include autochromes, C-type, collodion, collotypes, cyanotypes, dye destruction, dye transfer, gelatin-silver, photograms, photogravures and Polaroids.

Pre-visit activities

Looking

Look online for work by these photographers, who are all represented in the V&A’s collection: Lady Clementina Hawarden, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Alfred Stieglitz, Diane Arbus and Irving Penn. What are the hallmarks of their style? Create a series of photographs in homage to one of these photographers.

Selecting

Find photographs in the V&A’s collection online. Select photographs of different genres, for example, portraiture, landscape or abstraction. Create an adjustable viewfinder from two L-shaped pieces of card. Use the viewfinder to alter the crop of the photographs. Create new narratives or analyse detail. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/

Process

Explore the Photographic Processes webpage. Compare and contrast different methods, their possibilities and limitations. http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/p/photographic-processes

The Museum visit

Introduce keywords such as frame, exposure, aperture, viewpoint, process, time, crop and depth of field to discuss how photography differs from other image-making processes such as painting and drawing.

Download the accompanying student activity sheets and explore the following themes.

Remind students that taking photographs is permitted but the use of flash is not.

Document

Photography has often been considered the medium that never lies, but it has been subverted by photographers to challenge what we believe as truth. Eugène Atget documented ‘Old Paris’ before its rapid modernisation, while Julia Margaret Cameron and Cindy Sherman use role play and costume to explore the representation of women in society.

Processes

Camera-less photography covers a range of photographic processes. Photograms are created by placing objects directly onto photo-sensitive paper and exposing them to light. Anna Atkins, Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy all worked in this way and their work is well represented in the collection. Contemporary camera-less photographers represented in the collection include Elaine Duigenan, Pierre Cordier, Susan Derges and Garry Fabian Miller.

Context

Unlimited reproduction and the digital sharing of images allows for re-appropriation of meaning and context. Therese Frare’s photograph of a dying AIDS activist was used in a Bennetton marketing campaign. Robert Brownjohn used photography to inspire layout, design and typography. Adolphe Braun used his photographs of flowers to design patterns for interiors and furnishings.

Follow-up activities/find out more

• Use sun sensitive paper to create photograms. Use string or found objects to create silhouettes without the need for equipment or a darkroom.
• Use a combination of personal and found photographs. Create a 3D landscape, pop-up book or sculptural form.
• Visit the Photography hub page on the V&A website to find out more: http://www.vam.ac.uk/photography