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Historical Role of the Amateur in the imaging industry

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I'd like to offer context and 1) locate the idea of amateur in history and in culture, and 2) notice that the amateur enjoyed special status at turn of 19th to 20th century. (This is the amateur as an artist and a hobbyist. In fact, the amateur as artist in early 20th century set standards that the professionals used and still do.) And 3) see that now is a time again for the amateur.

First principle: The idea of the amateur is linked to leisure. The word "amateur" doesn't appear much until the 19th century. Only with free time can one cultivate an art or activity for the pure love of it, for unsullied enjoyment, instead of a pursuit for gain. The amateur's activity was an opportunity at first for only noble men and women: Folks uncompromised by financial purpose. But with an industrial revolution – and a new technology of electricity and leisure in the late 19th century (manifest in the radio, phonograph, motion pictures, photography) a middle class found time for amateur activity. The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, the formation of the Amateur Athletic Union, the Amateur Golf Association, all are concomitant with the late 19th century accomplishments of Hertz, Tesla, Edison, and Eastman.

Step Back 50 Years

Photography had been invented and later announced in 1839 by William Henry Fox Talbot, a nobleman amateur, and by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, an outright opportunist and entrepreneur. Essentially a practice for professionals in its early days, photography was too complex a process and too cumbersome a technology for facile use. That changed some with dry plate processing in the 1870s and changed for good with George Eastman's introduction in 1888 of film rolled in a tiny \$25 box, holding the promise of 100 exposures that cost \$10 to develop. You shipped the box to Rochester, NY, and Eastman's new Kodak Company printed your pictures, reloaded your box and sent it back to you. Soon with the introduction of the Brownie Camera in 1900, the tables had turned. The camera was a loss leader; it now cost \$1. A new culture had developed. "You press the button, we do the rest." Photography was then owned by the amateur – by women and children. The Society of American Photographers in New York City crowed in its magazine, that photography had become a culture "unhampered by trade interest." Quoted in *Between Amateur and Esthete* by Paul Sternberger (pg. 112) Unstructured, unhampered, unmotivated by economics; free of the pressure of profit, the amateur was

able to experiment and assert the dignified position of art for art's sake. Unconcerned with public – or marketplace – acceptance, the amateur could cultivate aesthetic motives and experiment beyond what a commercial market would tolerate.

The professional photographers, meantime, decried Kodak as a “soulless corporation” for degrading the medium to the banality of the snapshot (Amateur and Esthete page 116). While the snapshot was good for just folks, more high-minded amateurs seceded – that's their word for it – seceded from the professional and semi-pro camera clubs, to establish a photo succession that would advance the language of art. In Britain and Buffalo, in Vienna and New York City, the secessionists declared themselves a new kind of worker – the worker in the field of art. The most famous of these clubs was led by Alfred Stieglitz, based in New York City and attracting new artists from all over the country. He ran a tight ship, published the magazine called Camera Work and established a gallery called 291. His members were men and women such as Alvin Langdon Coburn, Edward Steichen and Gertrude Kasebier. But just let one of them stray – establish a professional studio or even a school – and they were summarily ostracized. Even workers as reputable as Edward Steichen, Clarence White and Gertrude Kasabier.

Indeed, Stieglitz' group was a cultural elite. The secession boldly tested the rules of composition. They pushed the edges of exposure; they invented radical new ways of printing, and worked their way into color through a variety of dyes. If the public protested that they had gone too far, these artists, who called themselves Pictorialists, used the public rejection as proof that they had transcended the accepted realms of expression. (A &E pg. 122-3)

But for all their experiments and bravado, the Pictorialists kept an anchor in the codes and practices of the past, incorporating into their work the composition and connotative values of academic paintings. Thus, while they experimented, they kept just within the bounds of accepted meanings. As a result, their imaging strategies – the strategies built by impassioned and empowered amateurs – became the basis for the professional practice of the next generations – incorporated by Kodak into the company's instructions on how to make the successful photo and constitute the Beautiful Picture. Thus the photo industry became the 4th largest industry in the country, just after steel, chemicals, and the automobile. In 1975, the top leisure activities were listening to music, fishing, camping, and then photography. The evaluative criteria for the successful photo was then and still is supported by Kodak and other imaging concerns, such as the popular press, camera clubs and salons, photo magazines, night school classes and workshops – wedding photos and portrait photo businesses.

The amateur was a novice, a beginner, a dabbler, unskilled, a hobbyist. Professionals by mid-century set the terms. They established the standards – for a time. By late-century, the times changed

again. The amateur found new respect using new technologies to break the mold. In other fields, too, amateur astronomers charted stray asteroids and exploding space launches; amateur ornithologists located and monitored migrating populations; and now open source research thrives with amateur input, and bloggers – for better or worse – receive new respect. The Olympics has made peace with professional demons; and even art now imitates the amateur, so that the mistakes of the snapshotter and of home videos have become the language of skill and truth. Imperfect and unprofessional imaging rings a public register of emotional and even intellectual authenticity – low light, a long take, no script, and hand held camerawork rings true (143).

Way back in 1989, Demi Moore and Bruce Willis made a film about feeding their baby – Bruce behind the camera – and it was presented during the Academy Awards, uniting different classes and audiences, leveling privilege and prestige to a now common denominator – feeding the baby – something understood by all. The accidental composition of the nervous zoom and jittery camera makes poetry out of slang. While exciting in its nervous values, the style of the amateur also renders the comfort of the ordinary – Advertisers use amateur work: Sony, Wal-Mart, Nike, Toyota, L’Oreal, Cingular, Nestles, American Express, Chevy, Frito-Lay.

Andrew Keen, internet entrepreneur has written a screed called The Cult of the Amateur published this year. “The web 2.0 revolution has peddled the promise of bringing more truth to more people – more depth of information, more global perspective, more unbiased opinion from dispassionate observers. But this is all a smokescreen. What the web 2.0 revolution is really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis; shrill opinion rather than considered judgment...Finding and nurturing true talent in the sea of the amateur may be the real challenge in today’s web 2.0 world.” (pg. 30)

Let’s talk about that during our discussion.