



# Photography and Its Origins

Edited by Tanya Sheehan and  
Andrés Mario Zervigón

# PHOTOGRAPHY AND ITS ORIGINS

Recent decades have seen a flourishing interest in and speculation about the origins of photography. Spurred by rediscoveries of “first” photographs and proclamations of photography’s death in the digital age, scholars have been rethinking who and what invented the medium.

*Photography and Its Origins* reflects on this interest in photography’s beginnings by reframing it in critical and specifically historiographical terms. How and why do we write about the origins of the medium? Whom or what do we rely on to construct those narratives? What’s at stake in choosing to tell stories of photography’s genesis in one way or another? And what kind of work can those stories do?

Edited by Tanya Sheehan and Andrés Mario Zervigón, this collection of 16 original essays, illustrated with 32 color images, showcases prominent and emerging voices in the field of photography studies. Their research cuts across disciplines and methodologies, shedding new light on old questions about histories and their writing.

*Photography and Its Origins* will serve as a valuable resource for students and scholars in art history, visual and media studies, and the history of science and technology.

**Tanya Sheehan** is Associate Professor in the Department of Art at Colby College, where she teaches American art history and the history of photography. She is the author of *Doctored: The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011) and editor of *Photography, History, Difference* (2014).

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First published 2015  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Photography and its origins / edited by Tanya Sheehan and Andrés Mario Zervigón.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Sheehan, Tanya, 1976- editor. II. Zervigón, Andrés Mario, editor.

TR15.P479 2015

770—dc23

2014022345

ISBN: 978-0-415-72289-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-72290-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-74009-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book emerged in spring 2012, when we hosted a symposium as organizers of the Developing Room, a photography working group at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. The symposium showcased new research on the origins of photography and was made possible by funds from the Rutgers Office of Research and Economic Development and the Center for Cultural Analysis. Our invited speakers included Jordan Bear, Mirjam Brusius, Marcy Dinius, Terry Matilsky, Julia Munro, Anne McCauley, Stephen Pinson, Beth Saunders, and Shawn Michelle Smith. We thank the symposium participants for their contributions to the event.

We gratefully acknowledge Routledge editor Natalie Foster for her unwavering support of this project, and Sheni Kruger and Colin Morgan for ushering the book so expertly through the editorial and production process. Like any edited volume, *Photography and Its Origins* is indebted to the expertise and cooperative efforts of its many authors. We owe a special thanks to Dan Estabrook, whose artwork has inspired and enlivened our historiographical questions concerning photography's beginnings. A grant from Rutgers University made possible the color publication of Dan's art and the other illustrations in this volume.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Tanya Sheehan and Andrés Mario Zervigón*

On the first day of April 2012, a stunning headline greeted readers of I Photo Central's *E-Photo Newsletter*: "Discovery of 18th-Century Photography Hoard Found in Peekskill, NY Basement." According to the article by Matt Damsker, which he claimed was derived from an AP wire dispatch, "A major discovery that is bound to shake up the photographic world was revealed when a trove of photographs was found to be the earliest known." Reportedly dating to 1788, the photographs were considerably older than Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (ca. 1826; see [Figures 1.1–1.4](#)), which most modern accounts of photography dub "the first photograph." Newly recovered, Damsker explained, were "15 images of the same gentleman wearing a tricorne hat and pointing his index finger vigorously at the camera." The informed readers of I Photo Central, which calls itself "the ultimate source for photo collecting," would have known to query this detail: How could such images have been possible fifty years before photographic portraiture was deemed technically achievable? The comical tone of the report provided an answer, revealing that the website was treating its readership to an April fool's joke. Not only did Damsker refer to the pictures as "Earlytypes," but he also described them as rendered "on sanded shingles," apparently found "along with a written formula of one part silver nitrate, one part egg white (easy over), and an undecipherable sentence that reads like 'Bacon? Why should I order bacon now?'"<sup>1</sup>

This news item, replete with quips and puns, generated nothing more than convivial laughter on a day renowned for its hoax stories and practical jokes. And yet it reveals a deep investment in, we might even say an obsession with, precious objects around which to build stories about photography's beginnings. Those stories, moreover, have been charged with the potential not only to change what we know

about photography—that is, about what it can be and the work it can do—but also to shift our understanding of technological and social history, of ourselves and the world. I Photo Central was not alone in marshaling humor to reveal the seriousness with which we have sought out the medium’s origins. The *Guardian* had concocted a similar April Fool’s story in 1987 with the headline “Photo Find Alters History in a Flash,” proclaiming that an eighteenth-century photograph had been found in a cave in a Japan. While they do not attempt an answer, these media jokes point to a question that motivates this book: Why do we pursue photography’s origins stories with such zeal and, at times, desperation?

This question certainly applies to the fevered speculation, celebration, and reevaluation that surrounded an “actual” photographic artifact just a few years prior to the I Photo Central hoax. “A 200-year-old image of a leaf, which lay for years in an album, may be the world’s oldest photograph,” reported the UK newspaper *The Telegraph* on May 6, 2008.<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* printed a similar announcement on April 17, explaining that a “rust-brown image of a leaf on paper” had become the subject of “a high-profile detective story that could lead back to the earliest, murky years of the birth of photo technology and that could help fill in crucial historical blanks.”<sup>3</sup> At the center of that story was a photogenic drawing, or an early negative made by placing a leaf on light-sensitive paper, previously attributed to the British pioneer of photography William Henry Fox Talbot. But when Sotheby’s listed the print for sale in 2008, the American historian Larry Schaaf proposed in the auction catalogue that it could have been made by Thomas Wedgwood, another Englishman who experimented with making photographs in the 1790s. Wedgwood’s experiments with light-sensitive materials, and often with plant leaves, had been the subject of an 1802 essay by Sir Humphry Davy in the *Journals of the Royal Institution*, now described as the first published article on photography.<sup>4</sup> To the great disappointment and frustration of many collectors, curators, and historians, however, no physical examples of the experiments appeared to survive—that is, until 2008. And so the photo world became captivated by the idea that a faded print tucked into a nineteenth-century album could be the oldest extant photographic image, even if that idea ultimately proved to be as unverifiable as an April Fool’s tale.<sup>5</sup> Serious conjecture about the date and maker of the leaf print among experts on early photography led to its immediate removal from auction, and has motivated scientists and scholars to rethink the material basis for photography’s beginnings. While the J. Paul Getty Institute and the Metropolitan Museum of Art were conducting analyses of the print and others like it found in the same album, the fourth edition of Mary Warner Marien’s *Photography: A Cultural History* highlighted the object’s rediscovery within its opening chapter in a special section titled, “The First Photograph.”<sup>6</sup>

The last few decades have seen a reinvigorated and widespread fascination with “firsts” in the history of the medium—from the first aerial photograph, the first photographic self-portrait, and the first photograph posted on the World Wide Web, to the earliest photos taken in New York, Japan, the North Pole, and, frankly, anywhere.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, materials associated with the so-called

founding fathers of the medium—principally, Talbot, Niépce, and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre—have received renewed attention, often provoking heated debates, revisionist scholarship, and bidding wars among institutions in Europe and the United States. The Bodleian Libraries in Oxford, England, for instance, acquired Talbot’s personal archive in 2014 after successfully raising £2.2 million over two years, thus “preserving” for the British public objects and manuscripts related to his early photographic work, intellectual interests, and family life; the archive also contained what has been described as the first photograph made by a woman (Talbot’s wife, Constance). And all of this activity came on the heels of a major research project that mined Talbot’s manuscripts now held by the British Library, among them notebooks that documented his work in the natural sciences, optics, classical literature, Assyriology, as well as photography.<sup>8</sup>

Such preoccupations with the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* of photography’s origins raise important critical questions: How and why do we write about photography’s beginnings? Whom or what do we rely on to construct those narratives? What’s at stake in choosing to tell stories of photography’s genesis in one way or another? What kind of work can those stories do? The goal of this volume is not simply to introduce newly acquired facts about early photographs and photographers, although readers will certainly encounter such information in the following pages. Rather, our goal is to reframe discussions of photography’s origins in specifically historiographical terms.

*Photography and Its Origins* is the first multi-authored book to explore critical questions about photography’s beginnings since 1989, which marked 150 years since the public announcements of the medium’s invention made by François Arago (for Daguerre) in France and Talbot in Britain. Of the many efforts that the sesquicentennial generated, two led to influential collections of essays. Supported by the French Ministry of Culture, the first began as a colloquium held in Cerisy-la-Salle and resulted in *Les multiples inventions de la photographie* [The multiple inventions of photography]. The second, a symposium and exhibition hosted by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, produced *Photography: Discovery and Invention*.<sup>9</sup> As Weston Naef noted in his introduction to the Getty volume, particular conditions framed the critical investigation of photography’s beginnings in 1989. The “serious study of photographs as works of art and as cultural artifacts,” for instance, was then less than two decades old, and so there remained among scholars a commitment to analyzing “original” objects through art-historical methods and uncovering historical facts to support such analyses. One of the most significant critical gestures developed in 1989 was, as Naef put it, “to underscore the fact that photography has no single inventor or place of origin.” The essays in *Photography: Discovery and Invention* presented the medium as “the product of multiple interlocked discoveries” by reconsidering its assumed pioneers, its early collectors, and the patent processes that once governed it.<sup>10</sup> *Les multiples inventions de la photographie* also adopted this view, as signaled by the emphasis on multiplicity in its title, while interrogating the presumption of 1839 as the singular moment of photography’s birth. Its multidisciplinary collection of authors further asked why

historians of photography had concentrated on a limited number of inventors and, through them, on particular notions of the medium itself.

*Photography and Its Origins* seeks to build upon the celebrations and reflections of 1989 by identifying unanswered questions about the medium's beginnings and plotting new directions of inquiry that probe or reframe their construction. Contributors to this book look to early scientific experiments and pictorial traditions but also well beyond them—indeed, to the multitude of discourses that made early photographic practices possible. Significantly, their investigations into photography's invention call into question the preciousness of the "origin" more than ever before by attending to its contradictions, complications, and general messiness. The authors' case studies bring to mind Michel Foucault's reflections on the Nietzschean concept of genealogy, in which Foucault warns us against representing the uncritical pursuit of origins (*Ursprung*) as "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities." Such a pursuit "assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession." It is "directed to 'that which was already there,' the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature." Nietzsche as genealogist, however, "listens to history" and finds that there is "not a timeless and essential secret" behind things. Instead he discovers "the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms." "What is found at the historical beginning of things," Foucault concludes, "is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."<sup>11</sup> The contributors to *Photography and Its Origins* are sympathetic with this view insofar as they excavate the depths of history, not in search of inexorable truths but to lay bare their complex construction. Uncovering remarkable artifacts and historical accounts, they "cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning."<sup>12</sup>

In putting pressure on the concept of "origin" in histories of photography, this volume acknowledges and contributes to a number of recent developments in the field of photography studies. First, the last two decades have seen a renewed commitment to interrogating the photographic medium through an analysis of how its histories have been written. Among those leading that charge are Michel Frizot, Mary Warner Marien, and Anne McCauley, as well as several contributors to this volume—Geoffrey Batchen, François Brunet, and Douglas Nickel.<sup>13</sup> Their work challenges us to rethink the historical moments, places, contexts, discourses, and actors that both populate *and* remain absent from our stories about photography's beginnings. Second, *Photography and Its Origins* recognizes that the historiography of photography no longer belongs exclusively, or even chiefly, to the discipline of art history. It does so by deriving its contributors from a variety of North American, European, and Australasian institutions, their fields of study ranging from the history of science to literary studies and the fine arts. These authors share an impulse to understand photography in relation to seemingly non-photographic contexts, such as political happenings, scientific discourses, or practices in other media. Many of them additionally embrace the idea that the beginnings of photography must

be situated both within and beyond France, Britain, and the United States, their scholarship dovetailing with recent efforts to expand the geographical and cultural borders of photography studies. Finally, several chapters are predicated on the notion that photography's past can be understood only through its present and future. Their analyses work across historical periods, leading the reader to moments in time that might seem far removed from the much-commemorated year of 1839—in one case the eighteenth century, in another the late twentieth century.

To foster conversations among the sixteen authors in the volume, we organized the chapters into four thematic sections, each addressing a specific set of historiographical problems. Contributors to *Photography and Its Origins* who have led the study of photography's early history were asked to address a given theme by thinking about particular texts, images, and critical questions that led them to interrogate that history, and to reflect on the historiographical lessons that others can take away from their writing today. Authors who entered the field in the twenty-first century were asked to comment on the historiographical foundations of their work, and their strategies for uncovering new sources and conceptual frameworks to understand photography's origins.

The first thematic section, "Rethinking first photograph(er)s," critiques the labored efforts of historians, collectors, and curators to understand the so-called birth of the photographic medium through exemplary individuals and "original" objects, such as the now infamous leaf print discussed above. Emblematic of these efforts is Gail Buckland's *First Photographs* (1980), which offers an encyclopedic survey of "the first time things were captured by the camera." These initial pictures, Buckland explains, are worthy of study because they provide key models for reality, adding "something to the reservoir of 'truths' available to us." They have the ability not only to "jolt the imagination" with newly revealed "worlds of imagination," but also to serve as "reference points against which other photographs can be placed."<sup>14</sup> The perceived preciousness of the objects that Buckland catalogues was well understood by Nietzsche, moreover, who observed a tendency in History to associate the originary moment with perfection and solemnity, and thus with priority.

While *First Photographs* was concerned chiefly with questions of *who*, *what*, and *when*, the contributors to "Rethinking first photograph(er)s" ask *how*, *why*, and *for whom* individuals and objects have been designated "first" in photographic discourse. In her discussion of the historiographical treatment of Niépce's *View from a Window at Le Gras*, Jessica McDonald shows how the story of "the world's first photograph" has emerged over decades, shaped by individuals and institutions with particular investments in photography and its history. As McDonald argues, "we must expand our investigation of photography's beginnings by critically examining the historians who invented them, acknowledging their groundbreaking work while unraveling the stakes invested in each of their claims." Hans Rooseboom follows a similar path by asking how and why historians have deemed one inventor or another deserving of being named the "father" of

photography. Like McDonald, he stresses the agendas and biases that have given rise to narratives of the “first” photographers. Rooseboom specifically shows us how histories of photography have historically devalued Daguerre’s contributions to the medium. Stephen Pinson’s 2012 book on this artist-turned-inventor changed that situation, at the same time that it brought to light the relationship between Daguerre’s photographic work and his wide-reaching interests—in painting, printmaking, theater design, and much more.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on his methods in that study, Pinson concludes that stories of photography’s origins need to better account for the variety of visual practices undertaken by the medium’s inventors—or, in the case of Daguerre, the inventor’s dual investment in hand-made and mechanical image making.

As a twenty-first-century artist reflecting on photography’s history, Dan Estabrook poses new questions about “first” photographs by literally reinventing those images. He conjures an imaginary and self-consciously motivated origins story that makes visible its own claims, values, and preoccupations. Estabrook’s artwork, made with the earliest nineteenth-century photographic processes and materials, claims a place in established histories and thus challenges notions of photography’s beginnings as strictly a matter of the past. As Lyle Rexer demonstrates in *Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (2002), Estabrook is among many international artists who, in the digital age, are “deliberately re-engaging the physical facts of photography . . . and turning to the history of photography for metaphors, technical insight, and visual inspiration.”<sup>16</sup> The specificity of his work within this “old-process” movement rests with its focus on the historical contingency and inventiveness of origins stories.

The contributors to the second section, “Multiplying beginnings,” lay aside the notion of a monolithic origin for photography. In its place they propose a varied—and potentially endless—collection of discourses, media forms, and social circumstances that have made photography possible, often through messy interactions. These chapters take a cue from *Les multiples invention de la photographie* in challenging the singular importance of 1839 in photography’s historiography. They take that challenge a step further, however, either by selecting case studies from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries or by observing multiple moments when photography took on a new identity or purpose.

Geoffrey Batchen and Douglas Nickel debate how and why we search for the seeds of photography’s conception, in what some scholars have dubbed the medium’s pre-history. Batchen returns to his book, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1997), in which he critically surveyed efforts to imagine the photographic before its material invention and public announcement.<sup>17</sup> He then turns to the writings of French scholar Michel Frizot, who proposes a scientific origin for the photograph, and of Roland Barthes, who offers a complex meditation on the essence of photography in *Camera Lucida*. In response to their work, Batchen argues that we should embed photography’s origins within the political economy of capitalism and its processes of dissemination. Nickel puts Batchen’s *Burning with Desire* into dialogue with Peter Galassi’s *Before Photography: Painting*

and the *Invention of Photography* (1981).<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging their obvious differences in methodology, Nickel critiques these authors for embracing *Zeitgeist* explanations to account for photography's coming into being between 1790 and 1840. While one suggests a *Kunstwollen* ("will-to-form") that engendered a new, contingent kind of picture, the other invests in an ambient "desire" that informed the work of seemingly independent experimenters, whom Batchen calls "proto-photographers." Nickel explores the models of historical causation that lie beneath these approaches, and outlines an alternative way of thinking about photography's advent and early reception that is grounded in Romantic-era scientific discourse.

The multiplicity that Stephen Bann identifies in the early history of photography concerns its relationship to other artistic media. Bann tells us that phrases such as "From today painting is dead!" supposedly declared by French artist Paul Delaroche, contributed to an idea dominant in modern histories: namely, that photography was exceptional within and independent from a larger European visual culture. Drawing upon his extensive writing on the subject, Bann demonstrates that early European photography was fully embedded in the world of nineteenth-century reproductive print technologies. It should not, therefore, be approached as a wholly new or distinct medium or as the product of a single and fixed origin.

Finally, Heather Shannon and Marcy Dinius consider how different cultural groups in the United States sought to place multiple claims on the medium and its histories. Shannon's chapter explores the conversations among several originary moments: the introduction of the camera to the Hopi Indians of Arizona in 1872, white Americans' first photographs of the Snake Dance, and late-nineteenth-century efforts to trace the evolutionary development of photography itself. She argues that these moments reveal not only the antecedents of current photo-historical practices, and specifically their grounding in social evolutionary theory, but also their significant, politicized limitations. Dinius turns to African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass's writings on daguerreotypy to show how he incorporated photography's beginnings into arguments for a civic republicanism in the 1850s and 1860s. For Douglass, Dinius argues, narratives about the origins of photography became a medium through which to imagine another beginning—that of a new social and political order characterized by democracy, plurality, and empathy for others.

The authors in the third section, "Writing (trans)national histories," seek to account for national and/or transnational contexts in writing about early photography. Their case studies, selected from within and outside the West, interrogate the challenges and opportunities associated with framing the origins of photography in relation to ideas about national identity and difference. One of the key issues that these chapters address is the practice of framing the terms *local* and *global*, as well as *periphery* and *center*, as binary oppositions. Such framing has become common in histories of early photography practiced outside of France, Great Britain, and the United States. Boris Kossov, who in the 1970s wrote extensively on the origins of photography in Brazil, lamented that, because the experiments of French-born Hercules Florence in the Amazon basin "culminated in an isolated discovery," his

pre-Daguerreian form of photography “has not been yet been given due recognition.”<sup>19</sup> Situated by Western scholars at the apparent edges of modernity, nineteenth-century forms of photography in Asia, Africa, and Australia have likewise been compared to the “mainstream” practices of colonial powers, continuously losing the battle of priority waged on Western European terrain. This section’s authors bring to light these historiographical problems and through their case studies plot new ways of thinking about photography’s origins across geographical and national borders.

Two of the chapters in this section consider the interactions among examples of and writings on early photography in the West. Returning to ideas that inspired his book, *La naissance de l’idée de photographie* [The birth of the idea of photography] (2000), François Brunet looks at the widespread practice of pitting the European invention of photography against the formidable development of the medium in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Brunet takes American historian Robert Taft’s history, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889* (1938), as his primary case study, showing how histories of US photography concentrate on national success. Such narratives work to displace photography’s foundational contradictions and provide a model, more generally, for post-European and post-scientific accounts of photography’s development. Turning to the interactions between England and Italy, Beth Saunders examines *The Bertoloni Album*—a collection of photographs and documents sent by Talbot to the Italian botanist Antonio Bertoloni in 1839 and 1840. For Saunders, this album, which contains the first paper photographs made in Italy, serves as a key artifact for exploring the complex interlacing of national identity formation and the development of photography’s identity as a medium. By reassessing the album’s place within traditional narratives of photography’s origins, Saunders makes a case for writing transnational histories of early photography.

The remaining chapters in this section address the origins of photography in China and the African continent, respectively. The medium’s beginnings in East Asia and Africa are currently the subject of considerable research; yet, as both Yi Gu and Jürg Schneider demonstrate, publications on these regions of the world have only scratched the surface of what is to be known about their photo histories. Due to the unavailability of materials for scholarly research relative to studies of European or US photography, there has been a tendency among this work to foreground empirical data collection over critical questions. The essays by Gu and Schneider thus belong to a small but growing body of English-language scholarship on early non-Western photography that foregrounds historiographical intervention.<sup>21</sup> Yi Gu examines how the origin of Chinese photography can be defined partly across national boundaries and specifically in China’s photographic writings. She thus brings to light long neglected yet foundational works from China’s scientific literature and historical surveys. Observing a shift from an emphasis on the country’s absence from stories of photography’s origins to a painstaking search for indigenous inventions, Gu argues for writing histories that understand the photographic medium as a set of practices, exchanges, and ways of thinking. Schneider takes a

very different method, beginning not with the late 1830s and early 1840s but with the present moment, recalling the diachronic method adopted by Dan Estabrook. By posing questions about photography's origins in Africa from his contemporary vantage point, Schneider invites scholars to be concerned with more than unearthing references to the medium's first uses or appearances on the continent. He further reminds us that our inquiries into origins are inextricably tied to present intellectual, political, and sociocultural contexts.

The final thematic section, "Tracing scientific origins," focuses on the role of scientific knowledge, practices, and discourses in shaping understandings of photography's invention, both in the nineteenth century and today. Most canonical histories of photography have pressed heavily on eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century sciences to explain who and what was responsible for the medium's genesis. In his *Geschichte der Photographie* (1905), for instance, Austrian chemist Josef Maria Eder insisted that it was a German scientist, Johann Heinrich Schulze (1687–1744), who first invented photography by discovering the light sensitivity of silver nitrate in 1727.<sup>22</sup> He even wrote an entire book to assert this point, its title boldly referring to Schulze as "inventor of the first photographic procedure."<sup>23</sup> Since then Beaumont Newhall, former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has stressed the scientific interests of Talbot as key factors in his invention of the calotype; others have followed suit by presenting developments in chemistry and experiments on the physical properties of light as essential to the foundation of various photographic processes.<sup>24</sup> It was left to Peter Galassi and Geoffrey Batchen in the late twentieth century to ask why the scientific knowledge that made photography possible significantly pre-dated the medium's formal introduction to the world.<sup>25</sup>

Recent years have seen a flurry of new investigations into the scientific origins of photography. As demonstrated by the essays published here, these take a fresh look at the men of science who played a role in forging what we now call photography, and seek to reintegrate their ideas into the broader intellectual concerns of their time.<sup>26</sup> Their writing points to key scientific concepts, categories, and discourses as critical to the framing of the medium's beginnings. Jordan Bear, for instance, proposes that the work of British proto-photographer Humphry Davy challenges the criteria by which we judge early photographic procedures as successful. Unable to fix photographic images and render them stable physical objects, Davy demonstrated ephemeral, often subjective visual phenomena in his lectures. Bear locates Davy's efforts within the evidentiary culture of Romantic science, suggesting that histories of photography based solely upon extant artifacts obscure the beliefs and practices through which period audiences assessed the claims of men like Davy. Laura Saltz asks how two apparently contradictory conceptions of photography—as mechanical and natural—once coexisted. Saltz investigates the fluctuating meanings of these terms and their place within period discourses of art and science. Finally, Kelley Wilder asks why historians have taken some publications, such as Tiphaigne de la Roche's *Giphantie à Babylon* (1760), as premonitions of photographic invention, but not scientific treatises like Sir John