

The History and Importance of the Camera

In 1560, Giovanni Battista Della Porta, an adventurous Italian artist, was experimenting with new ways by which to aid his drawing. He hired a group of actors to perform outside his studio, invited a number of guests, and proceeded to show a “film” of the actors’ routine to his astonished audience. The venture ended in failure; the viewers fled in panic and Della Porta ended up in court on charges of sorcery. But della Porta’s slideshow marked the beginning of worldwide recognition for the device then known as the *camera obscura*.

Today, the camera is the epitome of utility. Without it, advertisements and logos would not have their attractive flair. There would be no “photo finishes” in sports circles; newspapers and magazines would be dull and uninteresting. In the legal world, there would be no means of quickly identifying and pinpointing criminals. The television world would not exist.


The camera has changed the way modern society functions, but, unknown to many, it is not modern at all. In fact, it has a history that stretches back nearly 2500 years.

The principle of the camera had been known since ancient times; it was endorsed by Aristotle (ca. 300 B.C.) and Hassan ibn Hassan (also known as Ibn al Haitam, ca. 900 A.D.), an Arabian scholar, who described it in theory in his writings. The term *camera obscura* is Latin, meaning “dark room,” in reference to the dark box which was fitted with a lens at one end.

The first actual cameras did not seem to appear until the early to mid-Renaissance years, when DaVinci and his counterparts sparked public interest in the sciences. DaVinci himself studied and enthused the camera in his work; in fact, many sources credit him with its invention. Other unofficial researchers attribute the honor to Roger Bacon (ca. 1300), though few modern scholars acknowledge this as fact.

Whatever the truth concerning the camera’s inventor, it is certain that around the same time of Della Porta’s interesting episode, Gerolomo Cardaño (1501-1576), was introducing the first camera lenses. These were simple glass discs placed in the pinhole of the camera; according to popular tradition, they bore such a resemblance to the common brown *lentil* that their name originated consequently. By the late 16th century, lenses had developed so that brightness and clarity of images was much improved.

Most scholars agree that the inventor of the camera as we know it today was Joseph-Nicephore Niepce,



a retired officer of the French army. His first permanent photograph, that of the pear tree in his yard, was taken in 1827. Another camera aficionado of this era was George Eastmann, who produced the “Kodak” camera in 1888.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, cameras, film, and a new innovation...the motion picture...underwent significant changes. Photographs went from black-and-white to color. Cameras became smaller, more compact, making it easier for photographers to carry the device with them.

Today, cameras have reached stages of development that would have been mind-boggling to their early enthusiasts. But why have they become so important to us as a society?

The first reason that comes to mind is the influence of the camera on the media. With the advent of the personal computer, and of digital technology, we now have the ability to quickly download, view, and share images otherwise inaccessible. News, sports, and entertainment have all been revolutionized by the camera. Television, the method of transferring images by electricity, was, until just recently, the most popular invention of all time.

In legal circles, the camera is indispensable. Photographs of wanted criminals can be swiftly made available to public. Crime scenes can be easily and effectively analyzed; documentation can be made of vital evidence. Before the camera, most of this was painstakingly done by hand.

The question arises, “Has the camera really improved our society?” We could live without the advertisements, the billboards, the immorality that the camera has introduced. But could national security operate without the use of surveillance cameras? Could our newscasters be as efficient? Could our military be as capable without its photographers? The question of ‘improvement’ answers itself.