

Contemporary Street Photography: Capturing the Street Life Differently

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Abstract

Contemporary street photography has emerged as a dynamic and vibrant genre in the world of photography. This research paper explores the evolution, characteristics, and significance of contemporary street photography. The research will focus on the techniques, and challenges faced by contemporary street photographers, as well as the influence of technological advancements. The paper will throw light on the ethical considerations surrounding street photography and its role in socio-cultural life. Through a comprehensive analysis of influential photographers and their works, this paper aims to shed light on the contemporary street photography movement and its contribution to the wider field of photography. By examining the evolution, techniques, themes, and impact of contemporary street photography, this research paper provides an in-depth understanding of the genre's contributions to the visual arts and its ability to reflect the complexities of modern urban environments. Street photography enriches the visual arts by offering diverse perspectives, stimulating creativity, and fostering greater empathy and understanding among people from different backgrounds and walks of life. It continues to evolve as an expressive genre, pushing boundaries and challenging conventions while remaining rooted in the raw, unfiltered realities of the streets. It underscores the importance of contemporary street photography in documenting social, cultural, and political narratives while emphasizing the need for ethical practices and respect for the subjects involved.

Keywords: Photography, photographer, street photography, street photographer, contemporary, experimental, colour, black & white, documentary, documentation, digital, mobile, ethics,

INTRODUCTION

History of street photography

Street photography captures everyday life in public spaces, focusing on people, architecture, and the street life found in urban or rural environments. The life which we generally see in street photographs are captured with a candid approach, capturing moments without the subjects' awareness. The most important aim of street photography is to document the soul & spirit of society and culture as it unfolds in the streets.



Joseph Nicephore Niepce who is also considered as the inventor of camera collaborated with Louis Daguerre for the betterment of the camera and by 1838 the first ever street photograph was captured by Louis Daguerre in Paris of man getting his shoe polished by the shoe shine boy. Since then, there was no turning back and cameras evolved decade by decade and improved with every passing year.

Eugène Atget, started his career as a photographer in 1890s and his entry into the field of photography coincided with a series of developments in the field of photography. He started his studio with a sign board "Documents pour artistes" (Documents for artists) which provided the artists with images of monuments, animals, landscape as references for the reproduction of the paintings. Later by 1900s his interest took a diversion as he established himself as a specialist in pictures of Paris Street. Mostly he

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documented deserted streets stairways, street life, and windows which were published in *La Revolution Surrealiste*. "To take a photograph is to align the head, the eye and the heart. It's a way of life"- Henri Cartier-Bresson. Almost all the street photographers around the globe have studied the street photographs clicked by Henri Cartier-Bresson. As per his quote he aligned his head, eyes and heart while capturing a moment. He discovered Leica while he was in Ivory Coast and since began his lifelong passion towards photography. In 1933, he exhibited his works for the very first time at Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Later along with Robert Capa, George Rodger, David 'Chim' Seymour and William Vandivert founded Magnum Photos.



Street photography continued to evolve, with photographers like Robert Frank, William Klein, and Garry Winogrand pushing boundaries with their raw, gritty portrayals of urban life in cities like New York. Frank's book "The Americans" is a seminal work in the genre. Meanwhile Raghu Rai shared his work in the world of street photography in India. Impressed by his work Henri Cartier-Bresson invited Raghu Rai to join Magnum Photos.

Street photography has remained a vibrant and evolving genre, with new generations of photographers bringing fresh perspectives and techniques. Artists like Joel Meyerowitz, Daido Moriyama, and Vivian Maier have played an important role in contributing their art to the genre in recent decades.

Street photography has reflected societal changes, cultural shifts, and technological advancements. Today, it continues to thrive as contemporary photographers around the world capture the pulse of urban life with their cameras, documenting the beauty, chaos, and humanity found in the streets.

Literature Review:

Naomi Rosenblum - A world history of photography

David Hopkins – After Modern Art

John Hadley - Street Photography Ethics {Ethical Theory and Moral Practice (2022) 25:529–540}

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Emergence of contemporary street photography

Traditional approaches in photography typically refer to conventional techniques and styles that have been practiced for a long time. Contemporary street photography has advanced in both style and approach, largely influenced by techniques & technology, socio-cultural shifts, and development in the society. Some of the key factors contributing to the emergence of contemporary street photography are as follows

- **Digital Photography:** The advent of digital photography revolutionized the field, departing from traditional film-based processes. Digital cameras provides access for instant image review, manipulation, and sharing, challenging the slower and more deliberate methods of film photography. With the development in the technology the widespread adoption of digital cameras has played a vital role in the world of photography. It became more accessible to a broader audience and it arose a curiosity amongst the users. Digital technology became a platform for photographers to shoot more freely without any limitations with respect to film and experimenting with illusionistic styles and techniques by using exposure triangle & modes in DSLR & mirrorless cameras.
- **Mobile Photography:** Smartphones became a major part of our lives and the acceptance on a large scale made it easier to all to go for a trial-and-error based shoot. Smartphones are equipped with high-quality cameras these

days and with time it has been noticed more cameras are installed for different purpose for the better quality of images as per the genre. When it comes to street photography mobiles have become convenient because of its size. It is lighter in weight and portable to carry anywhere anytime compared to DSLR or mirrorless. Also it has been noticed people generally don't get uncomfortable as they are not sure whether they are being captured or are they part of the photograph. Mobile based street photography questions the traditional notions of equipment and technique, encouraging spontaneous and casual image-making. Vineet Vohra is one of the Indian photographers who started his career with mobile based street photography is now considered as one of the eminent street photographers in India.

- **Social Media and Online Platforms:** Social media like Instagram, Pinterest, Behance and dedicated photography websites like Magnum Photos, 500px etc have provided street photographers with new platforms to share their work and connect with audiences worldwide. Social media has also initiated in the formation of online communities where photographers can exchange ideas, provide feedback, and gain inspiration from each other's work.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Contemporary street photography includes a wide range of perspectives, covering the diversity of the human experience in food & beverages, caste & religion, modes of transportation, fashion & lifestyle etc. Meanwhile photographers from various backgrounds, cultures, and identities contribute to the genre, offering unique insights into their communities and surroundings. In the present scenario which is easily accessible to other photographers and viewers around the globe in online platforms.
- **Experimental Approaches:** Contemporary street photographers often push the boundaries of traditional street photography by experimenting with new techniques like motion blur, light painting, equipment like RGB lights, gimble and visual styles. The contemporary photographers these days uses unconventional compositions to make it look like an abstract image rather than following the rules of composition and getting the regular photographs. Contemporary photographers embraces creativity and innovation.
- **Ethical Considerations:** One of the major concepts of ethical approach is to maintain the right to privacy of a citizen. The consent of the subject (human being) is must in the street photography and contemporary street photographers are more aware and mindful of ethical considerations when capturing candid moments in public spaces. Many photographers strive to maintain a respectful and responsible approach, seeking the permission of the person when necessary and considering the impact of their work on the subjects and communities they photograph.
- **Documentary and Storytelling:** Street photography has always been rooted in documenting everyday life, contemporary practitioners often use the genre as a means of storytelling and socio-cultural commentary. Photographers through their images throw light on social, political & cultural issues, highlighting the marginalized communities, and challenging the stereotypes and preconceptions. Traditional documentary photographers aimed for objectivity and truth-telling, contemporary practitioners actively engage in more subjective and interpretive approaches. This reflects a growing awareness of the complexities of representation and the power dynamics inherent in documentary & street practice.
- **Experimental & Conceptual Photography:** Contemporary photographers often explore unconventional methods and materials to create unique images. This might include alternative printing processes, like cyanotype or platinum-palladium printing, or experimental camera techniques such as light painting or long exposures. Departing from purely representational imagery, conceptual photography prioritizes ideas and concepts over aesthetic or technical concerns. Photographers may use symbolism, metaphor, or abstraction to convey their message, challenging viewers to think critically about the image.
- **Fine Art Photography:** Contemporary fine art photographers often blur the boundaries between photography and other visual arts, incorporating elements of sculpture, painting, performance, and installation into their practice. This departure from traditional photographic mediums expands the possibilities for artistic expression.
- **Digital Manipulation and Compositing:** With digital editing tools like Photoshop, photographers can manipulate and composite

images in ways that were previously impossible. This departure from traditional darkroom techniques has sparked debates about authenticity and ethics in photography.

Overall, contemporary street photography continues to evolve and adapt to the changing landscape of the modern world, reflecting the complexities and nuances of urban life while pushing the boundaries of artistic expression

Influence of artistic movements

Artistic movements have had a significant influence on street photography, shaping both the style and content of the genre. Here are several key movements and their impact on street photography:

- **Surrealism:** Surrealist artists sought to unlock the creative potential of the unconscious mind, often through dreamlike imagery and unexpected juxtapositions. Street photographers influenced by Surrealism might capture bizarre or fantastical scenes in urban environments, playing with reality and inviting viewers to question their perceptions.
- **Modernism:** Modernist movements like Cubism and Futurism emphasized fragmentation, abstraction, and dynamism. Street photographers influenced by these movements might experiment with unusual angles, cropping, and framing to convey the energy and complexity of urban life.
- **New Objectivity:** Also known as Neue Sachlichkeit, this movement emerged in Germany in the 1920s as a response to the chaos and disillusionment of the post-World War I era. New Objectivity photographers aimed for a clear-eyed, unsentimental portrayal of reality. Street photographers influenced by this movement might adopt a straightforward, documentary style, focusing on the mundane details of everyday life with precision and clarity.
- **Postmodernism:** Postmodernism rejected the idea of a single, universal truth, embracing instead the multiplicity of perspectives and the fluidity of meaning. Street photographers influenced by Postmodernism might play with irony, pastiche, and cultural references, challenging viewers to question assumptions about identity, power, and representation.
- **Street Art and Graffiti:** Street art movements, including graffiti, stencil art, and guerrilla installations, have influenced street photographers by introducing elements of urban culture and subversion into their work. Street photographers might document these ephemeral forms of expression, capturing the vibrancy and creativity of the streets.

At the end the influence of artistic movements on street photography is multifaceted, shaping both the form and content of the genre and reflecting the broader cultural, social, and artistic currents of their time.

Techniques and Approaches

Contemporary street photography encompasses a wide range of techniques and approaches, often reflecting the photographer's style, vision, and the unique character of the urban environment they're capturing. Here are some common techniques and approaches:

- **Observational Photography:** To do any kind of art form observation is crucial. With regular practice the power of observation becomes a part of an artist's life. Through observation capturing everyday scenes and moments is done naturally, without intervention or manipulation. It requires keen observation and anticipation to anticipate interesting compositions and interactions.
- **Candid Portraits:** Candid photography captures the true feelings of the subject and the place. Street photographers often capture candid portraits of people in public spaces, aiming to convey the essence of their subjects' personalities and emotions. Sometimes it interferes the personal space of the subject and sometimes the subject gladly accepts the fact that they have been captured, resulting in authentic and unposed images.
- **Use of Light and Shadow:** Light and shadow play a crucial role in street photography, creating contrast, depth, and mood. Photographers often seek out interesting lighting conditions, such as harsh sunlight, long shadows, or dramatic artificial lighting, to add visual interest to their images. This brings the attention of the viewer towards the whole drama present in the photograph captured. In this genre viewers can relate or get connected to photographs more easily.
- **Composition:** Composition is key in street photography, as photographers must quickly frame their shots amidst the chaos of the streets. Compositions such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, frame within frame, rule of odd, rule of simplicity, rule of negative space, cropping and symmetry are commonly used to create visually compelling images. A photographer who practices regularly remembers these compositions sub conscious. While drifting the streets generally a street photographer doesn't have to think about the composition before capturing the moment instead the whole process is done without giving to much of time as a moment passed is gone forever.

- **Decisive Moment:** Coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson, the decisive moment refers to capturing a fleeting moment that summarizes the heart of a scene or story. Street photographers rely on timing and intuition to anticipate and capture these decisive moments. Vineet Vohra a contemporary street photographer from India has keen eyes for such moments as it can be seen in his photographs, where he finds the subject and connects them with the neighbouring object or even subject at times.



- **Layering and Depth:** Street scenes are often rich in layers and depth, with multiple elements interacting within the frame. Photographers use techniques such as foreground-background relationships, overlapping subjects, and depth of field control to create visually dynamic compositions. Dimpy Bhalotia also a contemporary street photographer from India and founder of Light Wanderers & Pure Street Photography uses the same techniques in most of her photographs, the perspective are visually so strong that one cannot take their eyes away from the photographs.
- **Color vs. Black and White:** Some street photographers prefer to work in color, utilizing vibrant hues and tones to convey the energy and atmosphere of the streets. Others opt for black and white photography, focusing on contrast, texture, and form to evoke a timeless and documentary feel. Prashant Godbole is one of the eminent street photographers from India who likes to capture street photographs in both colour and black & white. Regardless of the concept of the colour, his photographs touch the heart of the viewers. Colours or monochrome just add the depth in his images.



- **Subject Interaction:** Engaging with subjects can lead to more intimate and authentic photographs. Some photographers prefer to interact with their subjects, asking for permission before taking their photo, while others choose to remain invisible, capturing candid moments from a distance.

The magic is in the tricks and tactics one uses while capturing the moment. The true colours of street photography lie in the freedom of space and time provided to a photographer which allow the photographers to explore and interpret the world around them with a unique signature added to their photographs.

As a photographer one can develop and improve the skills to achieve the best captures in street photography by following simple steps:

1. **Observe and anticipate:** Observation plays a vital role in capturing street photography. Develop a habit of giving close attention to your surroundings and anticipate interesting moments before they happen. This requires a keen eye for detail and an understanding of human behaviour. With regular practice both can be developed for better photography.
2. **Be patient:** If one has patience once can win the battle. A true photographer will wait for the right moment to reveal itself. Patience is the key in street photography, as the artist often have to wait for the perfect convergence of elements available at that very moment.
3. **Move with the scene:** Strolling down the street an artist can see vivid, vibrant subjects. The whole scenario is so dynamic and changing with every step taken. In this situation a photographer should be flexible enough to find the best angles and perspectives. As an individual one can, be shy or hesitant but it would rather be better to change the position or walk along with the subjects to get the shot you want as a street photographer.
4. **Shoot from the hip:** Experiment with shooting from waist level or without looking through the viewfinder. This can help you capture more candid shots without drawing attention to yourself. Daido Moriyama who is popular for his street photography used to capture the photographs not exactly from the hip but he is truly experimental as he rarely used to check his viewfinder before capturing the picture. Instead, he uses vague framing keeping his camera away from his eyes yet keeping his subject inside the frame.
5. **Use a fast/slow shutter speed:** Shutter speed helps to balance the light without any doubt but more importantly it is used to either provide

motion or to provide stillness to the moving subject. It will always be suggested to play with shutter speed according to the requirement of the composition and the purpose.

6. **Keep your gear minimal:** Generally, the saying goes “the more the merrier,” but in street photography, it would rather be preferred “the less the merrier,” as mobility is key. The trend was started with Digital camera and in present scenario the mirrorless cameras have taken the spot. Mirrorless camera along with lens which is easy to carry would be a better combo for street photography and it allows you to move freely and respond to the moments & scenes.
7. **Interact with your subjects:** Interacting with subjects sometimes ruins the true emotions of the photograph as the subject subconsciously become cautious but at times interacting with subjects can lead to more genuine and expressive moments. For a safer side and for ethical consideration it would be better if a photographer can be respectful towards people’s privacy and comfort levels.
8. **Experiment with composition:** Street photographers believes in their intuition and they are keen observants. Along with it as a photographer specially when it comes to street a photographer should pay attention to the compositions like framing, leading lines, and the rule of thirds, pattern & texture, negative space, simplicity to name a few to enhance the visual impact of the images.
9. **Embrace imperfection & Practice regularly:** To get every shot perfect is impossible initially instead of complaining it would be suggested to learn from the mistakes made. Embrace the imperfections in street photography. Likewise street photography requires dedicated practice. Better be master of a single trade than to be a jack of all trade. To do so one should carry his/her camera wherever the photographer is traveling and develop a habit of shooting regularly to refine the techniques and compositions. This will bring a uniqueness or signature in the photographs.

Street photographers around the globe gets captures the moments that are raw, honest, and full of emotion. Exploring one’s own potential and developing the skills required including the camera functions, modes & compositions will bring magic in your art and stay curious, let your intuition be your guide.

Conclusion:

Contemporary street photography is an evolving genre which in the present scenario revolves around

the modern urban life and lifestyles. It includes a wide range of styles & fashion, techniques & technology, framing & compositions. One of the main aspects of contemporary street photography is to capture the true colours of society, diversity, culture, and human interaction in public. Photographers implement their own signature or uniqueness in the photographs which creates a perspective on the viewers and it reflects the complex nature of contemporary life. Advancements in technology, availability of high-end cameras in smartphones, the entry of mirrorless cameras have provided street photographers to experiment more and cameras being compaq, a photographer carries light and feels free during the documentation of the street life. Parallely, contemporary street photography continues to respect the privacy & consent of the people to maintain the ethical considerations. A photographer who respects the rights of the people will always tackle the situation wisely with the sensible concern. In the end as conclusion, contemporary street photography is a powerful medium for capturing the genuine essence of urban life in the 21st century. It reflects the vibrancy, diversity, and complexity of modern society while also raising important questions about privacy, consent, and the ethics of representation.

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