

The uniqueness of photograms

Photograms are as old as the world. When the apple was still green, a little leaf got stuck to its surface. The sun shone, the apple reddened, but not under the little leaf. And when Eve took the apple, which was pleasant to the eyes, she flicked off the little leaf, but she didn't notice that a beautiful pale shape of the little leaf was created there, on the peel of the apple. Neither did the serpent notice it. Nor did Adam. Nor the author of Genesis (otherwise he would have mentioned it, and he didn't).

Some $3761 + 1727 = 5488$ years later, a medical man called Schultze of Halle, took a pair of scissors, cut some letters out of a sheet of black paper, placed them on some flat surface covered with silver chloride, and exposed it to the sunlight. Silver chloride darkened where it was uncovered, and when he removed the letters, their shapes stayed clearly there, white on black. But he (a contemporary of Chardin) didn't consider it to be a work of art. Anyway, its life was short, the shapes of the letters darkened and vanished, he didn't know how to fix the image.

112 years later, in 1839 (years at the time moved slowly, nobody was in a hurry) an English philologist and archaeologist, William Henry Fox Talbot, laid a few pretty ferns and some other little objects on paper treated with silver chloride, and obtained their 'photogenic', negative, white on black, picture, which he knew how to fix (by immersing it in the boiling solution of kitchen salt in water). But he (a contemporary of Turner and Delacroix) didn't regard it as a work of art either. Later on, when dry sensitized paper was invented, hundreds or thousands of photographers must by sheer mistake have exposed a sheet or two to light at a moment when some objects of various shapes (including their own fingers) happened to throw their shadows on paper, and still they wouldn't consider any of those strange new white grey and black shapes as a work of art. Because a work of art is a curious thing. Curious, because the same object may be art and may not be art. Because a work of art isn't, it becomes. It is not enough to know how to manufacture it. There is, in the Platonic Heaven, no formula stating its precise nature. To be art, it has to be (1) recognised as art, and it has to be (2) introduced as art into our life.

It was probably Christian Schad in Geneva who, in 1919-1920, was the first to recognise as works of art some bits of 'spoiled' photographic paper he produced himself; and it was Man Ray who had the courage to proclaim that sort of thing to be art.