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Mass exposure: why museums are focusing on photography

Image-sharing social media has fuelled a boom in audiences for photography exhibitions

By Gareth Harris, Issue 256, April 2014

Last week, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art announced that it will launch the largest space for photography of any museum in the country in 2016 as part of a major expansion. The John and Lisa Pritzker Center for Photography will have more than 15,500 sq. ft of exhibition space dedicated to the medium. But will the crowds turn out to fill the galleries? If exhibitions at other museums are any sign, the answer is most likely yes.

“Almost 5,000 people daily are visiting the show of works here by Henri Cartier-Bresson,” says Bernard Blistène, the director of the Musée National d’Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This year’s blockbuster exhibition (until 9 June), featuring more than 500 images, drawings and films by the pioneering French photographer, reflects the growing popularity of photography shows. Blistène adds that a permanent gallery dedicated to photography is due to launch at the Centre Pompidou later this year.



The top photography exhibition in our attendance survey of 2013, “New Photography 2012” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, received a total of 394,592 visitors, 3,261 per day.

“Contemporary photography is popular, but we find 20th-century classics have an even bigger appeal,” says Damien Whitmore, director of public affairs and programming at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. Its most popular photography shows in the past ten years (paid entry) have been “The Art of Lee Miller” (2007-08; 78,946), “Diane Arbus: Revelations” (2005-06; 75,673) and “Queen Elizabeth II by Cecil Beaton” (2012; 67,630).

Social media, and the popularity of photo-sharing networks such as Instagram means that more people are tapping into the medium. “Everyone can easily make photographs now with their smartphones; it is all about the image,” says Judith Keller, the senior curator of photographs at the Los Angeles-based Getty Museum. This interest may account for the recent rise in attendance figures. “Photography is perhaps more accessible than other art forms. So many people now take photos on a daily basis; it is relevant to everyone’s life,” Whitmore says.

But some photography specialists wonder if museums are ready for the major changes sparked by the internet. Charlotte Cotton, the former head of the photography department at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, wrote last year in *Aperture* magazine that institutions are ill prepared for innovation, and struggle with the impact of digital image distribution and self-publishing online.

Institutions are slowly coming to terms with developments. In 2012, the Photographers' Gallery in London appointed a digital curator, Katrina Sluis, who has launched a schedule encompassing projects online and offline, which, she says, "respond to recent dramatic shifts in the digital image as it becomes increasingly screen-based and networked".

Combining contemporary presentations and historic displays may be a way to draw a range of audiences.

The Getty is currently showing "Past Tense", a retrospective of work by the leading Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto (until 8 June) in parallel with "A Royal Passion: Queen Victoria and Photography" (until 8 June). "It's proving to be a particularly popular combination," Keller says.