

Thru the Lens, Camera Obscura to Smartphone

Dear Friends of Photographic History

The City of Waterloo Museum has recently opened a special exhibition that provides an exciting overview of the History of Photography.



The talented curators have assembled a number of historical cameras and visual displays that recall the colourful development of photography from the camera obscura and the first photographic images, through the rise of Kodak who made photography universally accessible, to the latest technical marvels of Digital Imaging Technology.



Open Your Eyes!

There has been a fundamental change in visual communication as cellphones and tablets have almost totally replaced the camera which depicted our lives for almost 200 years.



Compare the technical perfection of the famous Leica with the function of a wooden travellers view camera and watch videos that take you into the darkrooms of the golden era of photography.



Daguerreotypes, tintypes, aerial photos, local historical, news and archival images are on display.

The City of Waterloo Museum is located in Conestoga Mall (550 King Street North).

Museum hours are

Tuesday – Friday: 9:30am – 4:00pm

For more information visit:

www.waterloo.ca/museum

Thank you to all the generous photographers and collectors in our city who lent their precious collection pieces to this exhibit.

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More Exhibition pictures:



Studio Camera ca.1920 from Waterloo Region Museum.



Daguerreotype camera built by Giroux 1839 (Replica by John Durst - Waterloo.)



We have some exciting artifacts of previous ages



The first photograph of the world ca 1826 by Niecephore Niepce . Collection of the University of Austin.



The show takes you right into the world of digital photography.



You can even try some cameras!

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WATERLOO CHRONICLE

Getting the picture

Pauline Finch

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The City of Waterloo Museum's latest exhibit, Thru the Lens, explores the rich history of photography.

Did you know the very first cameras, from around 1,000 CE, were just boxes with pinhole-sized openings to let light in?

They could briefly capture an upside-down image in real time, but had no film or negative to preserve it.

Today, modern cameras are technological wonders that people use to digitally capture more images a day than the entire population of earth. Most don't use film either, and their photographs live mostly in the surreal medium of cyberspace.

So what happened during the millennium in between? Have we come full circle back to photographic simplicity? How will the venerable art of "drawing with light" fare in the 21st century?

To help answer these questions about the world's most-pursued hobby, the City of Waterloo Museum created Thru the Lens: Camera Obscura to Smartphone, which runs to Sept. 30.

The innovative one-room display self-guides visitors of all ages through highlights from the colorful panorama of photographic history; its many experiments, trends, applications and obsessions. Each numbered station offers the option of picking up just key points, or stopping for minutes at a stretch to reflect on a wealth of fascinating detail.

Located behind a single glass door in a narrow opening just off the food court in Conestoga Mall, the City of Waterloo Museum (founded in 2009) is one of those urban treasures that's all too easily missed.

Once found, however, it brings visitors back time and time again to immerse themselves in unique exhibits that connect local and regional history with world-changing events and developments.

Thru the Lens is a vivid example of what can be achieved when a small but mighty space is put in the hands of co-curators Jinni Hartman and Karen VandenBrink.

They collaborated with resource specialist and retired Wilfrid Laurier University professor Wilhelm Nassau, who brought his decades of hands-on photography and research skills to the project.

"Willy is such a delight to work with," Hartman said. "He has such a passion for the subject ... you can't help getting infected by it."

More than 50 vintage and antique cameras, ranging from a cabinet-sized studio portrait model of the early 1900s to miniaturized "spy" cameras of the 1960s, are on display. Many are from Nassau's personal collection, while a number of wooden historic reproductions are hand-built works of art by his former WLU teaching colleague, John Durst.

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Others have been loaned by Ryerson University, the Region of Waterloo Museum and several local collectors.

Many changes and innovations in photographic equipment were motivated by business, artistic and scientific interests, sometimes working together, sometimes independently.

Once light-sensitive chemicals were discovered during the mid-19th century and could be stabilized, single images were transferred permanently to materials such as tin. Further experimentation led to glass negatives; this was a game changer, as they could be used to create multiple copies of the same picture.

Despite numerous refinements within just a few decades, however, early photography and picture-making processes involved heavy, bulky, time-consuming and often dangerous materials.

Today, when anyone can click a smartphone button and have an instant stored photo, people are often astonished at how many priceless historical images were taken of major and everyday events during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

A major obsession visitors will notice at each station of Thru the Lens is that it seems to be all about size. Throughout the history of practical photography, or roughly the last 150 years, society wanted smaller and smaller cameras to produce bigger and bigger images.

Nassau, who has seen and done it all in both still and moving pictures ever since he got his first camera more than 80 years ago, wonders if the sheer volume of images taken in our social media world has devalued photography.

“I think we take too many pictures; we record everything mindlessly,” he reflected, while giving a tour of the exhibit. “It doesn’t cost anything, so we don’t have to think about it... that’s a shame.”

It’s a much different world than when he took a simple box camera to the zoo in his native Austria and had only eight frames on each roll of film. Every

week he’d spend his entire allowance to buy one new film roll and leave the other for developing. “So I tried to learn something with every photo I took; I couldn’t afford to waste a picture.”

Visitors will find there’s much more to Thru the Lens than reading and observing. There’s a very touchable display of try-out cameras and even a modern version of the early pinhole box or “camera obscura” to try out. Just try pointing it through the glass door and watch folks in the food court walk by ... on the ceiling. Get the picture?

The City of Waterloo Museum is open Tuesday to Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free.

