

Art History Newsletter

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'The Art of Photography'

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Writing in *Le Monde des livres*, Michel Guerrin recently [panned](#) the new 620-page survey *L'Art de la photographie*, edited by André Gunthert and Michel Poivert. The editors [respond](#):

Michel Guerrin has published ... a methodical assassination of *L'Art de la photographie*. Everything gets it. From the “chilling” price to the deceitful cover. “Grand masters” are absent, while “failures,” “apprentices,” and “dozens of obscure names make the cut.” The texts ... form an incoherent whole, barely tied together by a “Marxist atmosphere.” The article ends with this cry ... “the authors put forth their analyses but have they looked at the images? Consider the great Eugène Atget and his work in Paris — why was it singled out for glory, the editors ask themselves, at a time when ‘every city in the world had embarked on a campaign of patrimonial documentation’? The answer is simple: because he was better than the others.”

Art-history researchers, university professors and museum curators, the eleven writers who co-authored this text are not strangers. Meeting for more than a dozen years at the Société française de photographie, they have worked patiently to advance scholarship ... *L'Art de la photographie* offers the first grand synthesis of this long and unparalleled collaboration ...

Over the past quarter-century, [this field] has undergone an unprecedented expansion ... Essential discoveries, hundreds of archives and unknown collections have been brought to light, profoundly changing the way we understand the medium’s historical role ... magnificent exhibitions have accompanied this revolution in knowledge, stunning the public at large ... Specialists the world over have observed with interest if not envy France’s productivity, which has been regularly documented in publications — including three major histories of photography and as many research journals in a little over twenty years. What developed country could pretend to boast such a track record?

It’s not clear that readers of *Le Monde* have been informed of this glorious effervescence with all the objectivity that one might hope for. For a long time now, rather than rejoice in these happy events, Michel Guerrin has growled, stamped and fulminated ... Some will say that we accord too much importance to the moods of a journalist. But can we observe without concern the arbitrary treatment of our specialty in the columns of the chief cultural outlet in France? ... despite its quirks, this book is nonetheless the best history of photography published to date.

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