History, Methodology and Genres of Studio Photography

History
The earliest studio photography made use of painters lighting techniques to create photographic portraits. The primary source of light for painters was a large window or skylight facing north, usually above and to one side of the subject.

Monet’s studio, Giverny – now a gift shop.

‘Danae’ (Rembrandt, 1636) using lighting in a similar way to how photographers would later.

These techniques were adapted by early photographers from about the middle of the 19th century. A good example being...

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879): Born Julia Margaret Pattle in Calcutta, India; died in Kalutara, Sri Lanka Jan. 26, 1879; pioneering portrait photographer who applied principle of fine art to photography¹ Using available light in a studio in a similar way to a painter.

1865; portrait of Julia Jackson; Devotion, 1865

¹ Born Julia Margaret Pattle in Calcutta, India; died in Kalutara, Sri Lanka Jan. 26, 1879; pioneering portrait photographer who applied principle of fine art to photography; educated in Paris, and back in India, married Charles Hay Cameron, a wealthy tea estate owner; 1848 arrived in London with her husband and their six children; her brother-in-law, Thoby Prinsep, was part of an artistic circle in London that included the the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Pre-Raphaelite painters Millais, Rossetti and Holman Hunt; 1863 started to take pictures when one of her daughters presented her with a large wooden camera and all the necessary dark room equipment. She immediately changed the coal house at her Isle of Wight cottage into a darkroom and set to work, making portraits of her family and friends, and famous contemporaries such as Browning, Carlyle, Tennyson, Longfellow, Newman, Trollope, Taylor, Darwin, Herschel and Ellen Terry; 1874 produced Arthurian illustrations for Tennyson’s Idyls of the King, and other poems by Tennyson, Browning, Kingsley, and Shakespeare; also made classical allegories and figure studies of melancholy Pre-Raphaelite girls; 1875 returned with her husband to Ceylon, and the family tea plantation.
Photography’s major disadvantage compared to portrait painting at this time was that is was only possible to create black and white images.

Hand colouring was popular but never really looked convincing. However it lingered until well into the 1950s due to the cost of colour film and processing - and is sometimes used for stylistic reasons today (In fact you can do such things in Photoshop with old b/w shots).
Artificial lighting

Flash powder was the first means of artificially illuminating photography sufficiently brightly to freeze the action. However it was messy and not very safe so as electricity and the vacuum tungsten light became available this was gradually adopted for studio photography.

![Flash powder frame.](image)

Advances in camera lenses and the development of faster film speeds and better lighting meant that studio photography became easier to achieve. Glass plates were replaced by celluloid film in the 30s and the quality became better and better and the ISO increased progressively over the next 20 years. To give an idea of the ultimate quality of 35mm film remember that what you see filling a cinema screen is a projection of a 35mm frame. It is only now that digital cameras are achieving similar quality levels.

![Typical studio set up of the 40s, with large “hot lights” and cumbersome plate camera.](image)

Studio flashes became available in the 40s but were extremely expensive and dangerous (they could explode). By the 60s they were in common use in professional studios, but small time portrait photographers would of still been using tungsten lights (or hot lights).

It was until as late as the late 70s that flashes (sometimes called strobes) were affordable by the small studio.
In the last ten years digital studio photography has come of age. Although in some instances film is still used.

Methodology

The difference separating studio photography from all other types is that the photographer has to create EVERYTHING eventually appearing in front of the camera. Usually your starting point is an empty studio.

Even if you have a subject (person, object etc) what environment or context do you want to put them in? This will depend on what you want to communicate - it could be a simple background or a complex ‘set’.

You will need to learn to pre-visualise and create an environment for the shots - this usually means sketching studio plans. You may need to think about props, wardrobe, make up but most importantly light.

During this module I will help you with some of this but you will need to be creative and solve some of the above problems yourselves.

Genres

There is a range of genres within studio photography that we need to examine. These are:

- Advertising Illustration (eg food, product, corporate, architecture, film library etc)
- Still Life
- Portraiture
- Fashion (which is really a sub set of advertising)
- Fine Art

What they have in common is communication - this could be the style, power, function, merits and advantages - or the lifestyle it fits with.

For the portrait photographer it may be about glamorising the ordinary.

Or for the fine artist communicating a feeling, message or notion of beauty.

Paul Hazell
Example Commercial Genres (taken from ‘Studio Photography’ by John Child)

**Advertising Photography** (Or Advertising Illustration i.e. to illustrate a product)

Advertising illustration [photography] covers many photographic genres, the most often seen being still life (product) and fashion. The greatest commercial user of photography is the mass media. In newspapers and magazines the majority of images appearing are advertisements for one product or another. Photographic advertising illustration began when there was the capability to produce reproductions in large numbers. It has since become an effective tool of the advertising industry. The use of photography for advertising illustration started in the 1850s but was restricted to actual prints handed out to customers. Halftone printing processes saw the introduction of photographs for advertising during the 1880s. Black and white photographs were widely used by the 1920s and reliable colour reproduction became the dominant medium for advertising illustration from the 1950s.

During the 1970s and early 1980s advertising photography became synonymous with expensive high quality imagery and reproduction. This created the environment where the skills photographers applied to lighting their photographs were used in the production and lighting of TV commercials. Prior to this the inherited limitations of television technology had meant the approach to lighting was generally to turn on all the lights, flood the subject with sufficient light and keep contrast to a minimum. In advertising the primary purpose of the photographic image is to communicate information and attract attention. This is achieved by an image being used to support the headline and body copy or as the basis of the whole concept.

**Still life**

The first photograph taken using light sensitive emulsion was a still life of the view from Niepce’s Window (1826). This was due more to the length of the exposure (about eight hours in bright sunlight) than a creative decision to photograph something that didn't move. Early Photography copied the approach of painters to their subject matter. This led to most examples of photographic being centered on the stylized still life so popular with artists. The still life not only suited the long exposure times required by the film emulsions of the day but also provided a subject with which the photographer and the limited viewing public were familiar. Since then extensive use of still life has been used in advertising and commercial illustration. This can range from sophisticated photographs of perfume in expensive international magazines, visually and technically precise shots for the latest car brochure to product catalogues that turn up in your post. In its current commercial form, still life photography falls into two categories. Large and small. Small is called tabletop, but size is only limited by the size of the table. This could be anything from a watch to a can of beans a TV, to a sumptuous banquet. Large is everything else. Room sets, cars, right up to a Boeing 747.

**Portraiture (early and amateur)**

The first commercial use of photography was in the reproduction of portraits. Until photography became commercially viable painters had been the main source of portraiture. The process involved was long and painstaking for both the painter and the subject and the result was always only one picture. The photographic process was much shorter, almost immediate by the standards of the day. With the introduction of ‘Calotypes’ in 1840 the production of a negative enabled the photographer to print as many copies as the customer required. In the 1850s small portraits called ‘Ambrotypes’ were being produced with exposure times of between two and twenty seconds. These relatively short exposures made family
portraits easier to co-ordinate and photograph. Photography became the primary visual history for families. Photographic portraiture remained, however, the privilege of the affluent.

In 1854 the French photographer Disderi made a major technical advancement. His process of exposing multiple images onto one negative (similar to multiple image passport cameras) substantially reduced the cost of portrait photography. He was one of the first photographers to promote photographs to the level of consumer desirables. He began the business of photographing celebrities, producing large numbers of prints and selling them to the public as a purely profit-making exercise. The celebrity pin-up, family portrait, wedding or new baby photographs were no longer the domain of the wealthy. This affordability was the beginning of the photographic industry, as we know it today. By the 20th century photographic portraiture was available to everyone. The Kodak Camera released in 1888, followed by the Box Brownie in 1900, created a worldwide market for amateur photography. Although not photographed in a studio the average snapshot has as its dominant subject people. Millions of photographic portraits are now taken every day.

**Commercial portraiture**

Portraiture began to appear regularly in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, the forerunners of the pin-up and glamour magazines, after WW1. The content of the portrait was usually a celebrity of the time. The glamour portrait was to remain a benchmark until the 1960s when photographers such as Diane Arbus started to challenge the normal attitudes to portraiture with photographs of the less fortunate and society fringe dwellers. Between the wars, With the availability of high quality small format cameras, a genre known as ‘environmental portraiture’ became popular, with photographers such as Arnold Newman being one of the main exponents. The major difference between the two genres, studio and environmental, is, as the name implies, the subject is photographed in their environment (home, workplace, etc.) and not in a formalized studio situation. At a commercial level the local photographer, found in the main street of most towns and cities around the world, has enough skill and technology available to produce a more than acceptable image. However, the role of the commercial portrait photographer has been seriously challenged since the introduction of fully automatic cameras and the constantly developing digital technology. The great portrait photographers, amongst them Yousuf Karsh and Richard Avedon, command large fees, and limited prints of their work are sold at a comparative level to works of art. They and others have made photographic portraiture equal in stature to the painted images photography had tried to replace. The whole process has gone full circle leaving a legacy of thousands of practising portrait photographers.

**Fashion up to 1950**

The first halftone reproductions direct from a photograph were appearing on a regular basis by the 1880s in magazines such as *Les Modes* and *Vogue*. Until then a photograph was used as source material to create a woodcut or lithograph as part of the printing process. The images were rigid portraits. An inanimate person in a very structured environment. This was due not only to an Inherited approach to the painted portrait but also to the limits placed upon the photographer and subject by long exposures. The requirement of the image was to show the design and quality of the garment as clearly as the processes of the time allowed. This was the start of what is now one of the most lucrative and sophisticated genres of photographic illustration. From about 1911 the use of soft focus and romanticism changed the look of fashion images appearing in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. This was not a unique approach. The work of Julia Margaret Cameron had preceded this by over sixty years, but it was the first use at a commercial level in what we now call the mass media. It was not until the second decade of the 20th century that photographers
such as Edward Steichen took fashion photography away from so-called high fashion into the arena of 'style' with which it is associated today. As the attitude of women began to change in the 1920s so did the approach to how they were photographed. They were no longer objects on which to hang clothes but independent personalities who happened to be wearing clothes. Fashion photography of the 1930s and 1940s reflected the feelings and limitations of the time. Fashion and design were determined by the materials available leading to an austere but natural approach to fashion Imagery.

**Fashion since 1950**

Gradual change took place in the post-war 1950s. By the 1960s and 1970s gender equality and the use of colour with its ability to create mood and excitement began to dominate fashion images. Youth culture became fashion and fashion became youth culture. A controversial change came in the late 1980s when a strong sense of independence, non-gender specific sexuality, eroticism and voyeurism became a dominant theme in fashion magazines and magazines featuring fashion. A style developed with great success by Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin. The antithesis to this was the dream-like work of Sarah Moon where the image had a lyrical sense of imagination and unreal but desirable perfection. The garment was no longer the important object in the photograph. What wearing the garment could do for you was now the message. Throughout the development of fashion photography there was a distinction between advertising (design and quality) and editorial (lifestyle). The difference is now hard to distinguish. Fashion photography has reached the stage where lifestyle and image are so important that at times the design and quality of the clothes being worn by the model becomes obscure.

*And from Wikipedia...*

**Fine art photography**

Fine art photography sometimes simply called art photography, refers to photographs that are created to fulfill the creative vision of the artist. Fine art photography stands in contrast to commercial photography, the latter's main focus being to sell a product or service. In the 19th and 20th century, prints were usually done in limited editions to inflate their value to dealers, and collectors.

An artist doing fine art photography is creating photographs primarily to satisfy their own vision and creative intent. The final creative reason for a fine art photograph is the photograph itself. It is not a means to another end except perhaps to please those besides the photographer who behold it.


*Its Wikipedia so remember this is just an individual’s opinion and is therefore not definitive. Remember Fine Art photography is not restricted to studio photography - but would be restricted to that for this module and for task 02.*