
Text by Laura Gasparini**I THE COLORS WITHOUT NAME: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW UP TO ROBERTO ALFANO'S EXPERIMENTS.**

The image gradually takes shape in the darkness of a large room that, for the occasion, has been transformed into a photographic laboratory. First, the outlines appear, almost like a drawing; then, the areas of light and shadow, and finally, the details. This is how the photographic image emerges, taking its final form thanks to the skilled manipulation of the author, who exposes or underexposes certain parts of the image to achieve the desired contrast, carefully controls the development process, refines the tonal values, and finally fixes it with sodium thiosulfate. It is an image, a drawing created with photosensitive materials, that evokes both the magic of photography and the power of imagination. The aesthetics of photography are expressed not only through the mechanical instruments—such as the camera and optics—but also through the different types of photographic paper and the expert craftsmanship of the photographer.

Henry Fox Talbot presented the invention of the negative/positive photographic process in 1841 at the Royal Society in London. Talbot had previously used the camera lucida, a device equipped with a prism that projects a scene onto a sheet of paper, allowing the user to trace it with a pencil. In this case, the syntax depended on the artist's hand—whether more or less skilled—and the texture of the paper surface. He later experimented with the same reproduction method using the *Camera Obscura*.

In 1844, reflecting on the images produced by the pinhole camera or the optics of the camera obscura, Talbot wrote in *Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art* (1844): "[...]this led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of the images produced by nature's painting, which the camera's lens projects onto paper at its focal point: enchanted images, creations of an instant, destined to disappear just as quickly."

Talbot emphasized the importance of form, contour, and the defining lines of an image. What this new reproduction technique could not yet do, however, was accurately reproduce color. With photography, Talbot demonstrated that photographic images were a perfect imprint of reality, created not by an artist's hand but directly by nature's own pencil. This idea led him to produce the first-ever photobook, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46), featuring 24 photographic plates accompanied by his commentary. What is extraordinary, at least in the writer's view, is how Talbot had already, by 1841, identified and described key aesthetic values of the photographic process— not just the richness of detail, the precise contours of subjects, and the clarity of form, but also the ability 'to manipulate and control' the actions of developing and fixing chemicals to achieve different tonal effects. These tones translated the colors of nature into black and white.

To fully grasp the significance of Talbot's discovery—or rather, his invention—particularly in terms of the aesthetics of his photographic process on paper, we must take a step back in time. At the end of the 18th century, drawing became a speculative activity, a fundamental tool for knowledge, and it was enriched with new techniques. Not only the mark itself but also the paper—specifically, the uncoated white paper (unlike today's industrially bleached paper)—became a key element in the grammar and syntax of artistic language.

This aesthetic would later characterize photography on paper. The blank sheet, thanks to its format, was crucial in defining the boundaries of figuration and, later, of the photographic image.

Talbot also analyzed the role of light and how its intensity affected the aesthetic outcome of an image: "An image, stripped of the ideas that accompany it and considered only in its essential nature, is nothing more than a sequence or variation of brighter lights projected onto one area of paper, and deeper shadows on another. Now, light, where it is present, can exert an action, and this, under certain conditions, is sufficient to cause changes in material bodies [...] on the paper. In that case, there must surely be some effect bearing a general resemblance to the cause that produced it, so that the varied scene of light and shadow could leave behind its image or imprint, more intense or weaker in different areas of the paper depending on the strength or weakness of the light that acted there."

The "effect" is the element in which different tonal values suggest a sensation or thought, even when using only a roughly sketched drawing, as seen in certain paintings. The technique of *effect* was a widely appreciated aesthetic concept in both French and English culture.

Success depended on the ability to focus attention on the subject, often reinforced by drawing and detail. In academic settings, the technique of effect was also linked to that of the sketch and the *ébauche* (preliminary study), both of which could be easily achieved using Talbot's process. The matte-surfaced paper, sensitized with a silver nitrate solution and then exposed to sunlight, produced images with more or less intense reddish-brown tones. To modify this tonality, chemical toning processes were applied, such as gold or selenium toning, which resulted in a brown-purple coloration. The tonal richness was influenced by numerous variables: the paper sizing, different dilutions in fixing and washing, and the length of exposure and toning time. Poor fixing, whether due to insufficient duration or the use of exhausted hyposulfite, tended to cause fading and a mauve coloration—a hue highly appreciated in the fashion world during the Victorian era. Photographs fixed with potassium bromide, on the other hand, developed a yellowish tone in the highlights and whites. Other photographic prints displayed slate-gray tones in the shadows, grays, and blacks, while in the lighter areas, they turned gray-green or yellow-brown.

Regarding these new, unnamed color palettes, Talbot foresaw new expressive possibilities and stated: "I remember that many people, when photogenic drawing was first discussed, claimed that it was almost an affront to art, a mechanical process replacing talent and experience. [...] By simply varying the fixing process, one can impart almost any tone to the image, warm or cool, and achieve either a bright or dark effect [...]. All of this falls under the artist's ability to *combine and control* [...], and if, in the course of these experiments, he *volens volens* should inadvertently become a chemist or an optician, I am sure that this alliance between science and art would prove beneficial to the advancement of both."

Through experimentation, an artistic syntax emerges, from Talbot to Hill and Adamson, reaching French artists and photographers such as Charles Nègre, Gustave Le Gray, and Henri Le Secq, who significantly contributed to refining photographic techniques and aesthetics. These experiments also gave rise to *off-camera* photography, which flourished in Europe through Surrealism and beyond.

After World War I, photography changed, exploring new paths that focused on the aesthetic quality of photosensitive materials while rejecting optical realism. Christian Schad, Man Ray, and László Moholy-Nagy were among the first to create abstract images in the darkroom: *shadographs* (1920), *rayographs* (1921), *photograms* (1922), and solarizations—these last ones resulting from technical accidents in the darkroom, where images were exposed to light before being fixed. Such experiments had already been practiced by Christian Schad in the Dadaist context as early as 1918.

Photography thus abandoned technological apparatus (camera, enlarger, optics, etc.), as well as the theme of objective *vision*, moving closer to a 'painterly approach' that freed the artist's imagination and sensitivity. This was not merely a rejection of rapidly advancing technology but an effort to liberate the artist's *inner vision* through light, movement, and inner impulse, capturing it on photographic paper. Photography was not just an extension of vision but also of the artist's inner-world.

Within the Bauhaus movement, Moholy-Nagy demonstrated through his photograms that gesture and light were fundamental elements in compositions achieved using photographic materials—distinct from Man Ray's approach, which involved three-dimensional objects.

These works pointed to a 'new vision', unexplored paths of research that, in Italy, were pursued by Luigi Veronesi and Bruno Di Bello, following Nino Migliori's linguistic experiments in photographic coding (such as his *Ossidazioni* and *Piogrammi* from 1948).

More recently, young artists such as Angelo Candiano in *Situazioni* (2002-2017) and *Semiosi*, Silvio Wolf in *Horizon* (2006), and Fabio Sandri in *Interno Ulteriore* (2016) have explored the chromatic possibilities of film and photographic paper, using photosensitive material to "precipitate" (in the artist's words) our experiences and perceptions into 'unnamed colors' characteristic of photographic paper.

One artist who has delved into the materiality of photography and grasped its aesthetic allure is Alison Rossiter. After years behind the camera, she abandoned it, fascinated by the study of 19th-century photographic papers from the MoMA collections in New York.

Recognizing the potential of that aesthetic and language, she began acquiring expired photographic paper, experimenting with its tones and nuances, inspired by American Abstract Expressionism, where pure color emerges through form rather than, for example, the brushstroke. In her experiments, Rossiter (2020) explored oxidation effects, varying light exposures, and different fixing times. Time itself becomes the creator of these images, she asserts, revealing its presence through the allure of unnamed colors.

Among the many experimental approaches to photosensitive materials, an essential contribution is Picasso's *light painting* experiments from 1949. These are extraordinary and fascinating examples of how the artist used light. In a dark room, Picasso created thirty light drawings using a small lamp, while his friend, photographer Gjon Mili, captured them with his camera. What is striking is not only the experimental technique but also the freedom of movement expressed in space—a spontaneous act, unconstrained by aesthetic rules, tools, or technical limitations. These drawings, made with light and in space, have come down to us thanks to photosensitive materials, recorded by the camera, and later made visible to a wider audience.

Roberto Alfano's research, presented in the exhibition *A MATTER OF LIGHT: Studio sulla materia luminosa* (Vol. 1), draws from many of these aesthetic inspirations, developing new experiments with photosensitive material that open up unexplored creative paths.

After all, in photography, as Walter Benjamin clearly states: "The decisive element in photography remains the photographer's relationship with their technique."

A technique refined through experimentation, subverted processes, and even errors—ultimately leading to a unique and unmistakable form of artistic expression.

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SPAZIOC21

Via Emilia San Pietro 21 - 42121 Reggio Emilia

Public Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 10 AM - 1 PM and 3 PM - 6 PM

For information and appointments:

Sandra Varisco +39 347 4613074 - info@spazioc21.com

spazioc21.com



[spazioc21](https://www.instagram.com/spazioc21)

[alfanone](https://www.instagram.com/alfanone)

