Chapter 16
A New Leaf

Liz Lee
State University of New York at Fredonia, USA

ABSTRACT

The author and artist, Liz Lee discusses her latest digital image series, "A New Leaf Series", within the context of early photographic imaging and its connection to science and biology by investigating and connecting to the work of Thomas Wedgewood, William Henry Fox-Talbot, and the early pioneers of photographic technologies. Hippolyte Bayard's "Arrangement of Specimens" and Anna Atkins' "Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions" serve as early examples of the scientific fundamentals of photography; the technological advances of the medium still draw on the same subject matter to reveal the basic structure of conceptual and aesthetic investigation. The author discusses how contemporary electronic imaging has returned to its photographic origins through nature-related subject matter.

INTRODUCTION

The first photographic image, a Heliograph on pewter, *View from the Window at Le Gras,* was taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826. This documented fact has been, and still is, taught in every History of Photography course at every leading educational institution in the world. But now a modifier must be placed in front of that declarative statement: *Allegedly* the first photographic image, a Heliograph on pewter, *View from the Window at Le Gras,* was taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826. A deceptively simple, delicate, silver nitrate-coated piece of paper that displays a perfectly intact negative image of the "Quillan Leaf" (Figure 1) named after the Quillan Company Collection, in which the image is housed along with a small group of anonymous photogenic drawings as part of an album assembled by Henry Bright) could now claim this distinction. Previously attributed to Henry Fox-Talbot, the leaf image was believed to have been created in 1839, a period still considered the dawn of photography. However a recently discovered small inscription of a handwritten "W" in bottom corner of the leaf image questions the image creator; reassigning it from Fox-Talbot to, it is believed, Thomas Wedgewood, descendant in the long line of the

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Figure 1. Leaf, attributed to Thomas Wedgewood. Photogenic drawing, n.d. (© n.d., The Quillan Collection, Used with permission).

Wedgewood pottery manufacturers, who died in 1805 (Sotheby's 2008). The date of Wedgewood's death would place the creation of this photogenic drawing as early as 1802, some speculate even as far back as 1790 (Associated Press 2008). This revelation could reshape the history of photography. The first surviving mechanical means of reproduction, the art of capturing a shadow, is not an image of another manmade creation, a building in the view from a window, but a contact print of nature. A delicate, seemingly insignificant image of a poplar leaf that was never fixed to protect it from continual exposure so must forever be kept in the dark, now casts new light and transforms the history of image making. If the "Quillan Leaf" is attributed to Wedgewood it may cause Niepce's image to fade away into obscurity like so many unfixed photogenic drawings.

William J. Mitchell begins his well known text, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (1997), with a brief history lesson: that the origin of painting is uncertain, some Greeks claim it was discovered in Sicyon, while others in Corinth, but there is universal agreement that it began by outlining a man's shadow. A mythic tale told by Piney the Elder explains that a Corinthian maiden traced the shadow of her departing lover; his image forever captured by the work of her hand and painting is born. Mitchell continues:

William Henry Fox Talbot traces a scene at Lake Como with the help of a camera obscura. He begins to wonder 'if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably.' By 1839 he has perfected the art of chemically fixing a shadow. He announces to the Royal Society his invention of a way to record images permanently on specially treated paper 'by the agency of light alone, without the aid whatever from the artist's pencil.' Simultaneously, Daguerreotypes make their public appearance in France. The history painter Paul Delarouche exclaims, 'From this day on, painting is dead' (Mitchell 1997, p. 3).

I too have introduced my lecture on the History of Computer Art in my Digital Imaging classes at SUNY Fredonia with this same passage for the last ten years. In my introductory remarks I make sure to emphasize the developments of capturing and recording a life-like image to man's continual quest to reproduce his likeness. People are spellbound by the "mirror with a memory". (Marien 2002). It was man's ego and his continual search for fame and recognition that was the driving force behind most technological achievements. From Hershel and Fox-Talbot's competition with Daguerre and Niepce to win the patent for the first photographic process to Paul Delarouche's and Pablo Picasso's flamboyant declarations that the invention of photography was the death of painting ("I have discovered photography. Now