

Spanish Photography, past, present, and future: Carmelo Vega de la Rosa

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This article is a carefully curated scholarly engagement with Carmelo Vega de la Rosa, a pioneer in the study of photography in Spain. It charted the growth of this subject in Spain. Vega de la Rosa also revealed key guidelines for the successful study of photography and its place in modern academia. This discussion signalled challenges for this field of study as well as unique advantages that it has with regard to helping us understand the periphery and its place in discourse on modern society.

El presente es un acercamiento académico a Carmelo Vega de la Rosa, un pionero en el estudio de la fotografía en España. El texto ha trazado el crecimiento de este campo en España. Vega de la Rosa ha revelado pautas claves para un estudio exitoso de la fotografía y su lugar en la academia actual. Este diálogo crítico señaló desafíos para este campo de estudio y algunas de las ventajas únicas y tiene con respecto a nuestra comprensión de la periferia y su relación con el discurso sobre la sociedad actual.

Originally from Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife, Carmelo Vega de la Rosa is a key scholar to our understanding the study of photography in Spain. Vega de la Rosa is one of Spain's visual studies pioneers. His area of expertise is photography and tourism in the Canary Islands. Manuales Arte Cátedra published his most recent book *Fotografía en España (1839-2015): historia, tendencias, estéticas* in 2018, making him a key reference point on the history of photography in Spain. In this critical encounter he describes the rise of the study of photography in Spain and essential insights he has learned as photography researcher.

My career as a historian of photography in Spain began in the 1980s when I started studying photography in earnest. I emphasize the fact that I study the history of photography because I think when it comes to research clarity is key because it shows your stance and direction. As a university student at the Universidad de La Laguna (Tenerife) I studied art history and at that time I had no idea I would specialize in photography. I was very

interested in contemporary art, especially photography, but at that time there was nowhere in Spain where you could specialize in the history of photography.

What is true is that at that time photography was beginning to make a gradual entrance at different universities here. However, it was entering fields such as fine arts or journalism. In art history and history in general, photography was still uncharted territory. Nothing had really been done in these areas and its possibilities as an object of study (and not just a means of illustration) had been largely ignored.

I was fortunate enough to have studied history of art under the film scholar Fernando Gabriel Martín. Years later he became an important professor of the history of film. When I was his student, he taught a course on that topic. It was a short course, but it helped me to understand some of the key points of studying images and to go beyond the traditional artistic genres on which we tend to focus. When I finished my BA degree in 1984, he was the professor who directed my *Memoria de Licenciatura*, which is an extensive research-based thesis. In it, I intended to study the history of photography in the Canary Islands from its origins until the beginning of the 20th century. Instead of looking at photography from a technical standpoint, I decided to study photography from a cultural and historical perspective. I wanted to analyse how photography influenced culture and society in the Canary Islands and identify who the key photographers were here at that time.

With that in mind, it was very important for me to discover and identify the names of the photographers and their works since most of them were still unpublished and unreferenced (or sometimes mistakenly referenced). For example, before that project, there were only a few known Canary Islander photographers. In many of those cases, their names were known but not much more. I decided that it was going to be necessary to expand on this information and fill in all the gaps. Methodologically speaking, my first academic project was simple. I was attempting to measure what I could discover about these photographers through sources such as the press, find their material, and place these photographers and their work in a historical and cultural context. However, the project proved to be more complicated and complex because of all the difficulties to access the limited archives and collections that were available at that time. Tracking down all the necessary sources was a key component of my research activities. That first project was what really began my journey as a local historian of photography in the Canary Islands.

Years later, I would use my research from my *Memoria de Licenciatura* to restructure, expand, and rewrite my findings in order to publish them after I had given more depth to my findings and widened the reach of my analysis. The experience I gained after having been a researcher for over a decade enabled me to achieve this. That work became a two-volume series. The first one was published in 1995 and the other in 1997. Both were entitled *La isla mirada* and helped me to create a narrative based on local history. My approach on the study of the history of photography has been quite important in Spain.

The fact that there was no one to show me the ropes regarding to how to write the history of photography was horrible when I first started writing. Like others who began writing the history of photography at that time, we were facing the fact of having to undertake a project without any previous models or bases upon which to construct. We had to start from zero and creating the necessary framework was foreign to us. We were highly motivated, but we did not have anything: there were no institutions to house us, no specific funds for our projects, nor support mechanisms for our work at first. In the end, it all worked out, but it required a lot of effort and a lot of intuition.

The lack of methodologies was one of the huge challenges that we faced when it came to the history of photography in Spain. There was no exact formula that explained how carry out our work. There were very few references to use in that sense. Some of the pioneering texts such as Aaron Scharf's *Art and Photography*, and Juan Antonio Ramírez's *Medios de masa e historia del arte* were super useful. If Scharf helped me to understand how to apply principles from art history to the study of photography, Ramírez helped me to open up art history towards areas historians had not explored. Hence, both books were very helpful in constructing my bases. I think that what I do now has a solid base in art history, but that it also tries to push the boundaries of conventional art history. This is because, to me, art history tends to be a restrictive corset that does not allow you to work the entire complex range of photography. Rosalind Krauss has a book that I recommend to my students often because it helps to explain this situation. It is entitled *Los espacios discursivos de la fotografía*. In it, she questions the indiscriminate usage of art history terms in the study of photography and the explanation of photographic images. I think she is right to raise these questions and, as an art historian, I think that she is the correct person to be raising them. We could conclude that the history of photography can belong within the general frame of art history, but there are certain aspects of its history that need another "inside" explanation

in order to be studied in all its complexity. Although, in my opinion, what would be ideal would be an art history that was truly capable of releasing itself from the shackles that keep it from incorporating all the cultural and artistic complexities photography has.

The growth in social and artistic interest for photography over the past two decades has helped to advance the studies on the history of photography. This interest has fomented more institutional support, although there is still an enormous lack of knowledge concerning photography as a historical phenomenon. Still, this element will change with time because there is still a generation of students who have studied art history who have taken the history of photography as part of their courses. This generates new synergies that will continue to change the panorama. Here at the Universidad de La Laguna although we are on the geographical edge of Europe and are a relatively small university, there has been strong institutional support concerning the study of the history of film and the history of photography. This has enabled their growth and consolidation as an academic discipline. We have even reached the point in which the subject of the history of photography is now one of the required courses our art history students must take. This is so that they can better understand and appreciate the cultural and artistic significance that photography has in society.

My interest in the history of photography began at a time when photography was still in its pre-digital phase when photography required you to know how to develop film and work in a darkroom laboratory. I practiced amateur photography while I was a student, and I have tried to include my creative tendencies in my art interests. That direct contact with photography helped me to know the medium and its history. I think that you need to “know what photography smells like” and that affirmation is a bit of a claim to our remembrance of (though not necessarily nostalgic) a time when photography, now free from its chemical origins, no longer has any certain smells associated with it. Digitalization has brought important changes to photography. For that reason, I continue to show my students how to develop film in a darkroom so that they can experience the surprise and the emotion of that magic moment when they see an image appear on the film as they develop it. The process has an unforgettable magic to it. Those experiences help art history students acquire a depth in the material practices of photography that goes beyond the image’s surface because they help you to know the technical processes that are involved in the creative work. That said, I find a purely technical approach to photography quite boring. There must be a balance between technical and theoretical knowledge; and aesthetic and

historical knowledge that allows you comprehend the true order of things, the real reason behind a work, project, or artistic tendency. That is the view that really attracts me.

Regarding the sources for my research, I must mention that I live on one of the edges of Europe has limitations and accepting the distance between yourself and the centers of power is a challenge that you must constantly overcome. However, while it is true that I live and work in the Canary Islands, I can also be in Madrid or Barcelona in two or three hours if I want. I can also be anywhere I want at any time thanks to the internet. This relatively recent change is transforming the way in which we conduct research. The wonderful thing about working in the Canary Islands is the fact that from the end of the 18th century we have been able to enjoy an important and varied press that has given use a wealth of information regarding these islands and the issues that surround them. Those materials have been crucial for the study of photography here. There are important milestones in photography's general and universal history. For example, Charles Piazzzi Smyth, a Scottish astronomer and academic, wrote one of the first books to incorporate photographic illustrations. His book, *Teneriffe, an astronomer's experiment: or Specialities of a residence above the clouds*, documents his journey to Tenerife and his scientific expedition to the Teide mountain where he went to study the heavens through his powerful telescope. The fact that his book contains twenty original stereoscopic photographs that illustrate the journey formed a new turn in the use of photography in the explanation of scientific discovery. Piazzzi Smyth's book stands alongside William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* and Anna Atkin's *Photographs of British Algae* in its importance and it has direct links to the Canary Islands.

Another example worth mentioning is that in 1841 a newspaper called *El Daguerreotipo* began to be published in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Though it was a politically focused newspaper, we should not ignore the fact that it appeared before the newspapers by the same name in Madrid and Mexico City. It suggests that the Canary Islands had its pulse on the role of the visual in society from an early point in history. However, very little of this know widely known outside of the Canary Islands. What happened to Hercules Florence in the 1800s in Brazil is present in our own reality: because we are so far away, there are many things that are not known about our activities and us.

Sometimes in Latin America, the number of foreign photographers and travellers that take photos and then show them in their countries exerts and strong influence on the

photographic production of the local photographers and this happens in the Canary Islands too. There is a colonial and imperialistic Eurocentric gaze that begins to condition the way in which we see the world from around the 19th century. Add to that the fact that photography was supposed to be the modern and effective instrument that was to give use the skills to be able to reread what we had learned from the world up to that point. The gaze of the north on the south has constructed two opposite views really. These views imply a relationship between the public, the economic, and the cultural realms in the world. That relationship presumed a type of supposition regarding how we see what is familiar and what we perceive as foreign. It conditions what we deem to be interesting and what should be seen and appreciated by the local population that supposedly has not lived those experiences.

We need to underline the powerful foreign influence, especially that of the Germans, the French and the British, in the Canary Islands context. These are both locational and economic interests. You must remember that for many years the Canary Islands was an obligatory layover during transatlantic journeys, a destination for merchants, and finally (from the end of the 19th century) a tourist destination. Today our islands continue to promote themselves as a strategic point between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The transatlantic nature and relationship between the Canary Islands and the American Continent has always been very strong, and from the 16th century, we have seen strong commercial and cultural ties between the two locations. It was, in the end, the final stopover in travel between Europe and the Americas by boat and that brought important waves of immigration in both directions. As happens in most places of transit or destination, the role of the outsiders, or the foreigners, (and in this case the foreign photographers) becomes a fundamental influence. Those external influences occurred all throughout Spain and it predetermined what Northern Europe thought about what we were to expect of our country: exoticism, difference, other landscapes and cuisines, foreign customs, and so forth. All these influences shape the way that local photographers begin to see themselves and they begin to adapt what they say to what the travellers expect to find when they come here.

You can see this among the landscape photographers here as they underline *costumbrista* elements when the tourists begin to arrive in the Canary Islands in large numbers towards the end of the 19th century. All these photographs become postcards and their influence gains power through this means. These images begin to define how tourists see the islands.

This entire process is very easy to see and document here, but it is not unique either. It occurred almost wherever Europeans chose as their travel destinations. These foreign gazes and colonial travel practices promote a discourse that focuses on the bizarre, the exotic, and the unusual. They are concepts that help us to understand the photography from that period.

While I was studying, it was necessary for me to supplement my lack of physical teachers and historiographical models with other sources that would help me to advance my work. In this sense, Dr Lee Fontanella's research was key to me. At that time, he was a professor at the University of Texas. His PhD thesis explored the visual and the cultural in Spain and he wrote about literature and photography. A chapter from his PhD became the book *La fotografía en España hasta 1900* that he published in 1981. It became key to the creation of the history of photography in Spain. While his was not the first book in Spain on this subject, it added important insights regarding history and methodology for those of us who were trying to research in these areas at that time. It really provided key direction as to where we could take our field. On the other hand, his vision was different from what we had seen in Spain up to that time, which focused on local stories as a way of speaking about Spanish photography. Fontanella's book had certain gaps in its knowledge and theoretical positions that were questionable, but it also posed methods for working the material and ideas that withstood scrutiny well. We needed those tools at that time, so his work was very important to the creation of my own work at that time. Marie Loup Sougez's book *Historia de la fotografía* that also came out in 1981 was also key because it helped me to understand the history of photography then. She, along with Isabel Ortega (who worked at the Departamento de Estampas y Fotografías in the Biblioteca Nacional de España), provided me with the essential bibliography that I needed to start my research and provided me with access to important photographic archives.

Just as important as those influences that I just mentioned were my other young colleagues who were also writing about photography in the 1980s. Bernardo Riego was one of those individuals. His book on the history of photography in Cantabria really helped me. Later, we went on to create the *Aula de Fotografía de la Universidad de La Laguna*. Some researchers, like Ricardo González in Valladolid, María Josep Mulet in the Balearic Islands, came from art history like myself, and this helped me to have sounding boards for my ideas, worries and doubts that affected our research. My contact with Joan Fontcuberta, Marta

Gili and Jorge Ribalta also provided important references points that have helped me to understand contemporary photography.

After I presented my *Memoria de Licenciatura* on the history of photography in the Canary Islands, I then began to prepare to write my PhD thesis. In it, I was writing a study on the aesthetics of photography during the 19th century. The Ministerio de Educación en España had given me a scholarship in order to focus on my postgraduate research project for four years. This gave me the time I needed to bring myself up to speed in terms of methodology, research, and write. The project took me to London (The British Library), Paris (Bibliothèque National) and Madrid and Barcelona. These archives afforded me a level of bibliography that fully enriched my thesis and gave me an important base upon which to write. Today, most of the material I was consulting is available via the internet. Even so, working so directly with these projects was important. There was also a fetish-like pleasure in being able to touch see and smell those books that were important milestones in the history of photography. I remember the first time I ever read *The Pencil of Nature* by Fox Talbot in the British Library. I was so moved by being able to study the original photographs in that book that I decided not to look at any other books that day.

Anecdotes aside, those research trips afforded me important and privileged access to work in my field that allowed me to do things that had not been done before. It allowed me to determine the definitive role that direct contact with sources has on the writing of history and the relationship between texts and images. My PhD taught me that theory and historical knowledge are not everything. You must have a method for putting it all together as a part of your work.

My most recent book, *Fotografía en España (1839-2015). Historia, tendencias, estéticas* has enabled me to put into practice many of my methodologies that life and experience have taught me when I have sought to identify photographers; know the motivations of their work; understand their decisions, techniques, and aesthetics; identify their predominant tendencies; and reveal the reasons behind those decisions, their shifting, challenges, and their development over time. These questions and other similar ones allow you to get close to the essence, to the "spirit of the season" that generated the ideas and personal and collective concerns behind each piece of art and within each image.

I think that it is important to understand the historical context of each photographic phenomena. We need to know the perspective that generated it at that moment in time, not our moment in time (though that moment in time can work as a contrasting element that allows us to value the changes) but it is not an excluding or concluding piece of criteria. As historians, we should not invent, transform, nor distort facts or circumstances. That perspective can only be reached by getting to know what happened at the time in which the event you are studying was occurring. Writing history is not easy and you must always have your methodology in mind. When I was writing *Fotografía en España* I was interested in how to design and formulate the important contexts that gave way to the development of photography in Spain at different points in history. I acknowledge that my book leaves out certain aspects, dates, names, and debates related to the subject. I did not leave these out because they are not interesting, but rather because they simply did not fit within the parameters of the project.

I see photography theory as an instrument that enriches photography's meaning and helps us to understand images. However, I do not use it when I write. I teach it, but I do not use it in my research because it is not a central element to historical research. In other words, theory can help you to acquire certain depth when you read an image, but you do not need that specific type of depth when you are writing a photograph's history. They are simply two different fields. For example, it can be interesting to read *La camera lucida* by Roland Barthes, but his work does not help me to construct the history of photography except as a contextual reference or unless I am writing a history of the theory of photography.

On the other hand, you must be very careful with "liberal approaches" towards the history of photography that can come from other fields. You always need to apply approaches that have academic rigor. This rigor demands that you do not speculate about what you would have liked to have happened or give something a value that it did not have at that moment in history. However, that does not mean that you cannot make contemporary claims on events relating to the past. However, in that case, such a reading would demand a contextualization that enables us to situate the author and his work in its real and appropriate context and you need to recover those past values with your present research.

Many of those "careless readings" of history are due in part to the fact that photography has become very familiar to everyone and quotidian in its nature and usage. Everyone thinks that they know photography. Nonetheless, there is something very dangerous in the

banalization of its history because that banalization brings with it a degree of disinformation and the reproduction of poor or incorrect information. To avoid that, it is key that you follow a methodology at every step of your research.

Something characteristic of the study of photography in Spain is that much of its history is local and focuses on very specific places: a certain region, province, or city for example. These geographically hyper-focused histories have been the dominating trend in recent decades here, but they have not been the trend globally. There are some interesting dialectics in those phenomena. On the one hand, these local histories enable a sort of microscopic vision that offers you minute details of certain events; but on the other hand, these narratives tend to lose their ability to find their space within the larger context of history. In my article "A Model-less Model. Re-thinking the History of Photography in Spain", that I published in the journal *PhotoResearcher* I used a metaphor to explain the situation. I describe it as individuals suffering from near-sightedness and far-sightedness. In our case, our mission as historians is to strike a balance between all the levels so that we can speak of the local and couch that discourse appropriately within a global vision. This is what I have tried to do as I have written about photography in Spain. I have attempted to include the canonical names and the names of photographers who were lesser known or anonymous. That is not an easy balance to strike because there is an element of subjectivity when you decide who you will include and who you will not include. In this sense, you must establish a certain distance with what you research and what you want to speak about objectively, even when it means writing about things that might not necessarily interest you but that you know are relevant to the topic. That is a part of establishing rigor in your research.

From a historical point of view, France, Great Britain, and the United States are hegemonic countries when it comes to the writing of the history of photography. Spain, on the other hand, has more of a subsidiary and peripheral role. I think that if we understand this position, we can turn it into a strong critical view that enables us to see history from a different angle and allows an approach that reveals something different than what hegemony currently has. In my case, I work from a peripheral region of a peripheral European country and I think that the peripheral can offer you a new and unique perspective. This does not mean that we should forget about the important discoveries made in hegemonic countries, because they too have been important in the advancement of the field. When Walter Benjamin began to write about photography in the 1920s, he was doing something 100%

new and original because his work was an absolute pioneer in the field: before his work, there was nothing. Therefore, his text is strongly based on what we might now describe as intuition. This was what occurred in the first attempts to write this history of photography. The problem with this was that many of these histories fell in the same, and somewhat obsolete, patterns of writing about photography and ended up repeating the same ideas, cultural ideologies, politics, and economic factors that motivated those photographers from the 19th century, a context that was completely different from our present situation. If you review the important narratives on the history of photography, you might find yourself asking a few important questions. Where are the examples of photography from Spain or other non-dominant countries? Was there no photography in these locations? Of course, there was. What has happened is that the countries who have written the first histories of photography often project the idea that the photography that was occurring in those countries was of an inferior quality. This gives the countries writing the histories the appearance that they are the centers of production, that they invent and promote the innovations, and that the other nations simply receive those benefits. Now we can see the flaws in those early models for writing history.

We need to be true to the facts and to review the criteria that we employ as we interpret photography. It is a task that can be done from the borders, from the margins, bringing to the foreground some of the questions that I have been discussing here, and from those spaces that were once hegemonic. My comments made from a small African island are a plea to adjust approaches that are no longer valid. As is often the case, this history of photography needs renewal in order to progress and face its present challenges, to propose new sources and new models that enable us to discover new ways to understand the images we encounter.

Though we have done a lot of work in the field of the history of photography here in Spain, I think that there is much here still to do, and we are doing it. We need to go back to the historical narratives that were written in the 1980s and understand their gaps and learn from their weaknesses. Years ago, while referring to the history of photography in Spain, Marie-Loup Sougez wrote that there were still many areas to be covered and I strongly believe that this still holds true. We have the obligation to continue trying to cover those areas. We should not forget that what was written was done on a weaker base than what we have today. We need to continue to research using solid bases, to recover what was lost and to correct our errors. We must combat disinformation (or the excess of information without

academic rigor) that can lead to confusion. I am confident that we need to work to rewrite our history of photography in some cases. We need to update information using our new technologies and tools that we now use to understand data. We also need to be sure that our archives are current and taken care of, especially their catalogues because they must contain all the right information if we are to interpret the archives correctly. We have made many important strides in this area, but there is still more to do.

Our work to revise, update, and fill in some of the gaps in our history of photography in Spain must be done with the responsibility and outlook that we have had in recent times. We are now going through a period of history that we have not been able to appreciate. How are these radical changes that have come with the introduction of digital photography affecting the old paradigms that were invented with analogue photography and we have been using for over a century and a half? We hardly seem to notice those changes. Technology has changed radically, but for the most part we continue thinking and acting as if we were still in analogue times. There is a certain contradiction in our continued usage of conventional supports to present digital images. In recent years, we have new ways to taking photographs, but we tend to show them in the same ways as the past, though we have seen some new ways of showing digital photographs. These changes have modified how we behave with regard to photography and how we understand it. I think that the history of photography will need to address this social and aesthetic revolution in our field of study. Where is photography going? I am not sure we can respond to this question precisely because of all the technological changes that are occurring. It is as if you were to ask a daguerreotypist in 1850 where he or she thought that the future of photography might lay, I am sure that person would not have known how to respond back then because they were experiencing changes that were as radical as ours. The changes were so radical that it meant that soon the daguerreotype would soon be replaced and disappear. We continue speaking about photography and images, but their processes have changed drastically. Nonetheless, I think the era in which we live is thrilling. We are witnessing a process of drastic change in photography. We need to be aware of that, understand it and attend to it. Any answer to the question of where the future of photography might lay will not even be close to the real future of photography. In thirty years, what we now view as a crucial and uncertain crisis will be considered anecdotal. The important thing is that photography will still be there, probably in a different form, and the history of photography will still be charting its evolution.

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