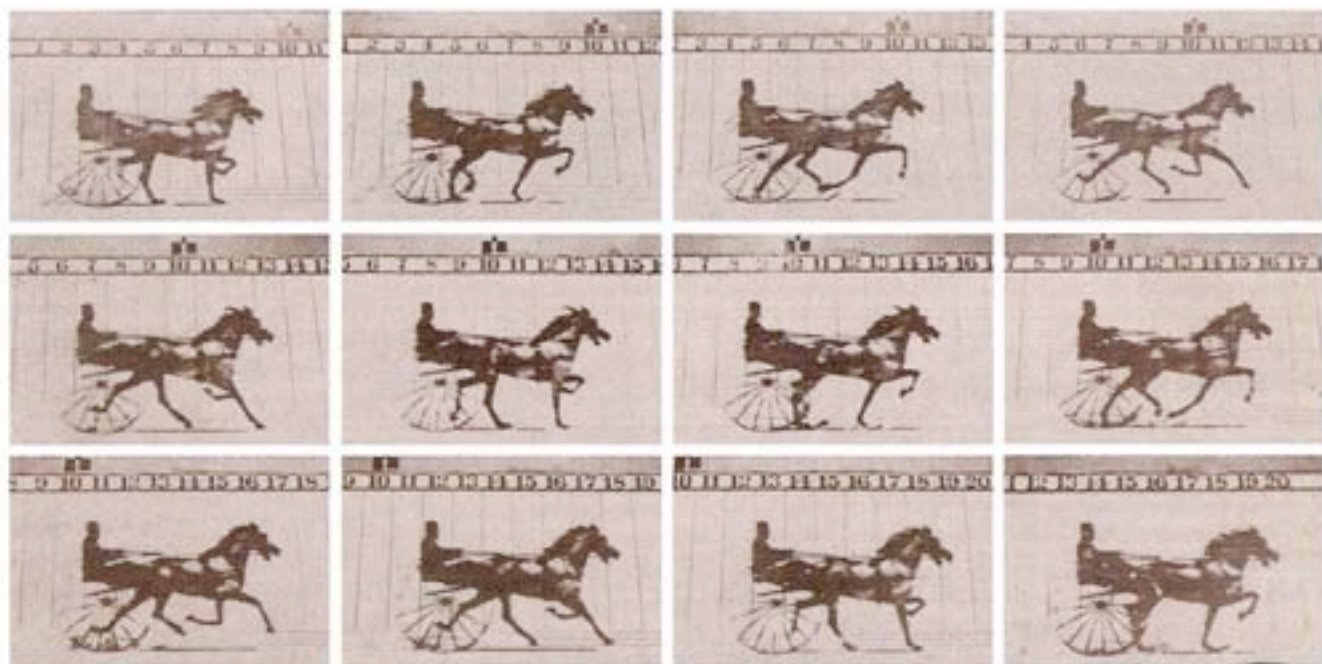


## INDELIBLE IMAGES



Muybridge's photographic sequence, the first to show motion in such detail, would "extend vision to a new realm," says biographer Soinit.

# Man of Action

*An eccentric photographer and a racehorse made history one day in 1878.  
The world would never look the same* — BY VICTORIA OLSEN

ON JUNE 15, 1878, members of the San Francisco press gathered at a racetrack in Palo Alto, California, to witness a historic event. Eadweard Muybridge, an eccentric Englishman and photographer who not long before had murdered his wife's lover, claimed to be able to photograph a horse running at full speed—a feat considered impossible with the era's balky cameras, which had wooden shutters and insensitive glass-plate negatives. The horse as well as the track belonged to Leland Stanford, the railroad tycoon, United States senator, former governor of California and, later, co-founder of the university that bears his name. The half-second run would not only revolutionize photography but would also set the stage for the next century's dominant art form, movies.

Stanford had initiated the collaboration with Muybridge six years earlier, and hanging over their photography experiments was a question with surprising repercussions: when a horse runs, do all four hooves leave the ground at

the same time? No photograph survives from their earliest efforts. On that June day Muybridge placed 12 box cameras 21 inches apart alongside the track. They were attached to tripwires and outfitted with metal, electric-operated shutters capable of opening and closing far faster than any before. Muybridge had also modified the emulsion on the glass-plate negatives, making them more reactive to light. The reporters watched Abe Edgington, a champion trotter, dash by, his legs a blur, and waited for Muybridge to develop the plates on the spot.

As advertised, he produced a series of photographs showing the horse virtually stride by stride. And flying in the face of conventional wisdom, Abe Edgington was at times definitely airborne. "There is a feeling of awe in the mind of the beholder," one reporter wrote of the pictures. Muybridge's astounding photographs were published in newspapers around the world. When Stanford showed the pictures to the French painter Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier, who special-

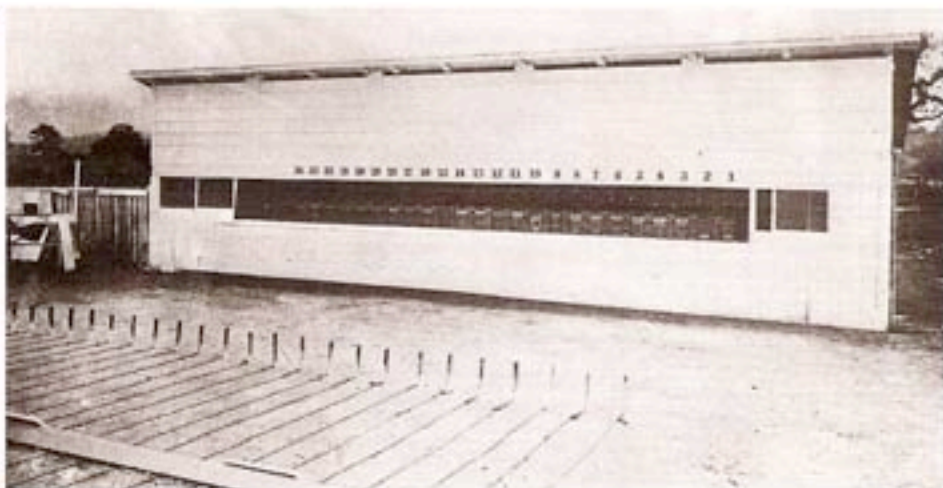
## Muybridge pursued the man to Calistoga and killed him.

ized in equestrian scenes, the artist realized that he'd been misrepresenting horses' gaits for decades. "Never again shall I touch a brush!" the painter vowed (though he would change his mind).

The impact of instantaneous photography, as the invention is called, is hard to overstate. The unlikely partnership of the American industrialist and the itinerant Englishman had documented a phenomenon too fast for the human eye to see. "It was a fundamental change in the nature of photography" that took "humanity across the threshold into a new world of knowledge and representation," Rebecca Solnit writes in her 2003 biography of Muybridge, *River of Shadows*

Since his stagecoach accident, Muybridge's behavior had become increasingly erratic. In 1874, he learned that his wife had been having an affair with a journalist named Harry Larkyns. After seeing a picture of his own son with an inscription suggesting that the boy might have been fathered by Larkyns, Muybridge pursued the man to Calistoga, California, where he shot and killed him. After a sensational trial, Muybridge was acquitted on the grounds that the homicide was justifiable. He decamped to Central America and reinvented himself yet again, as Eduardo Santiago Muybridge, before returning to San Francisco in 1876.

Following his success at the Palo Alto track, Muybridge



In his pioneering experiment, Muybridge (c. 1890) directed the horse to run down Stanford's Palo Alto track past 12 tripwired cameras.

MUYBRIDGE HAD BEGUN LIFE as Edward James Mugeridge in 1830 in Kingston-on-Thames, England. He and his two younger brothers moved to the United States in the 1850s. Edward settled in New York City before heading west, setting up as a bookseller in San Francisco and changing his name to Muybridge. In 1860, while traveling through Texas on his way to New York, his stagecoach hit a tree, and he received a serious head injury. He spent most of the following year undergoing medical treatment in New York and London, and he stayed on in England during the American Civil War. When he surfaced again in San Francisco, in 1867, he had become a photographer named Edward Muybridge who signed his work "Helios."

How he learned photography is a mystery. But, like the esteemed photographer Carleton Watkins, he traveled to Yosemite Valley and made dramatic pictures of its peaks and waterfalls, often from precarious angles. He hauled a wooden box camera, tripod, heavy glass plates, bottles of chemicals and a tent to use as a darkroom up and down mountains and onto precipices. He had become a respected landscape photographer when Stanford first approached him, in 1872, with the challenge of photographing motion.

in 1879 invented what he called a "zoopraxiscope," a device that projected sequential stop-action photographs onto a screen, creating an illusion of movement. That invention is the main source of the claim that Muybridge is the father of the motion picture. He took his device on the road, touring France and England to acclaim, and eventually went to work at the University of Pennsylvania. There, he photographed human and animal figures in a wide range of activities, publishing his studies in the 1887 book *Animal Locomotion*. His photographs of, among other things, elephants walking, women dancing and children climbing stairs would influence artists and scientists, opening their eyes to the mechanics of movement. Muybridge, who adopted the Anglo-Saxon spelling of his first name, died in Kingston-on-Thames in 1904 at age 73, leaving a modest estate of some 3,000 pounds. He was recognized for his technical achievements, but as Phillip Prodger argues in his 2003 biography of Muybridge, *Time Stands Still*, "he must be remembered not just as an inventor or technician but as an artist also." ○

Historian VICTORIA OLSEN is the author of the 2003 book *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron & Victorian Photography*.