

# A Re-evaluation of Photograms by Moholy-Nagy

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## ABSTRACT

László Moholy-Nagy was a major figure at the Bauhaus and an innovator in countless fields. He worked with kinetic art, painting, sculpture, photography, film, and design. It has been stated that perhaps his most important contribution to twentieth century art are his photograms. Although cameraless photography had existed since early investigations into light-sensitive materials, Moholy took the process in new creative directions and produced photograms from 1922 through the end of his life in 1946. The preparation of the exhibition Moholy-Nagy: Future Present, co-organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and opening there in October 2016, provided an excellent opportunity to have an in-depth look at this particular body of work.

Photograms, a name coined by Moholy in 1925, consist in directly exposing sheets of light-sensitive photographic materials, usually paper, to a light source. By placing objects on the surface of the paper during exposure, the shadow of these objects is registered. The resulting image is a negative, where the areas of the paper that have received no light remain white while those that have been exposed exhibit tones ranging from gray to black, in proportion to the amount of light received. Photograms are one-of-a-kind unique images, but Moholy re-photographed, reprinted, and enlarged them multiple times for exhibition and publication; the problem of the “original” does not seem to have bothered him. He also sometimes enhanced the prints by incising lines or applying media. Moholy did not often date his work; it is thought that many of the dates that exist on the prints were added later, by the artist, based on his memory, or even by third parties. A catalogue raisonné of Moholy’s photograms, published in 2009, suggested that the dates do not always appear plausible. Thus, the chronology in the raisonné was determined with a combination of several factors, including subjective visual characteristics of paper type (such as their paper finish, tone, and weight), subjects, and publishing dates.

The goal of our project was to utilize the characterization protocols developed by Paul Messier, and, applied to selected prints from the Museum of Modern Art’s Thomas Walther Collection, to test whether original photograms and their subsequent versions could be identified, thereby providing a deeper understanding of Moholy’s working practice. Approximately 250 photograms from collections in Europe and the United States were examined; sheet dimensions and thickness, base color, surface gloss and texture were recorded. The analysis of the data and the results of this investigation will be presented. We will also explore the effectiveness of paper characterization and how it can contribute to and enhance historical research when applied to a particular body of work by one artist.