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The 30 Most Important Digital Cameras of All Time

From the first prototype of 1975 to Sony's Cyber-shot RX1 of 2012, here's a chronicle of photography's inevitable march to digital

BY DAN RICHARDS, WITH REPORTING BY AIMEE BALDRIDGE ON OCTOBER 22, 2013 33

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Digital photography has proven to be one of the most world-changing technological breakthroughs of the late 20th century. But the quest to capture and transmit images via electrons began nearly two centuries ago. Just a few years after Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce produced the first fixed photographic image in 1826 or 1827, another invention—long-distance digital telecommunication—arrived. And not long after Samuel F.B. Morse and Alfred Vail developed a viable electric telegraph and a binary code for conveying messages, inventors began to explore sending and recording images via dots and dashes.

Piece by piece, the technologies that would make digital imaging possible fell into place. By 1860, you could send a kind of fax; in the early the 20th century, news organizations could transmit pictures as dot arrays. By mid-20th-century, videotape recording and the digital computer added other critical pieces; solid-state electronics and the microchip would shrink them to manageable size. By the 80s, "still video" cameras captured analog images via a semiconductor array invented at Bell Labs in 1969: the charge-coupled device, or CCD. Which brings us to the first of these, the most important digital cameras of all time—up until now, of course.

1975 Kodak digital camera prototype



By Sandro Bisaro + MORE PHOTOS



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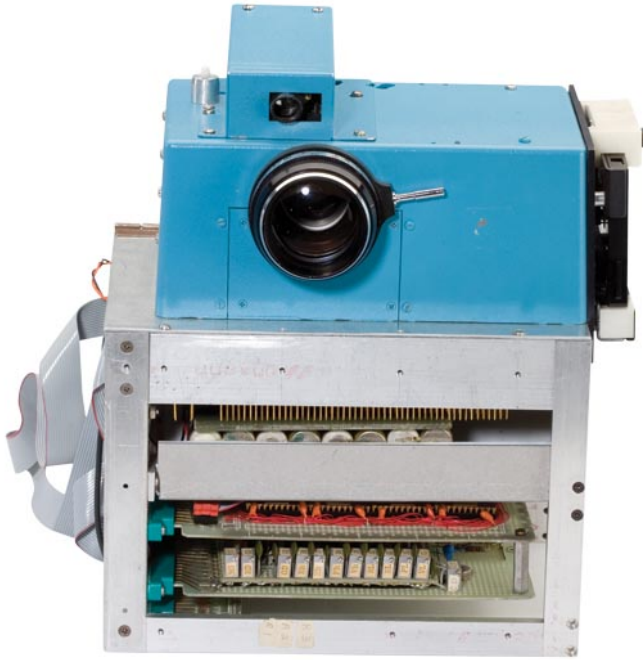
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Courtesy of the George Eastman House

Kodak engineer Steven Sasson started with "a white piece of paper" when, at age 25, he got the assignment to come up with an application for CCDs. He decided on a camera with no moving parts, recording in a digital format. Sasson and his team spent a year cobbling together this 8-pound device, built around a new Fairchild Semiconductor 100x100-pixel sensor. It took the first digital image, in black and white, in December 1975.

(The George Eastman House Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, NY, provided this photo and other photos of cameras in its collection.)

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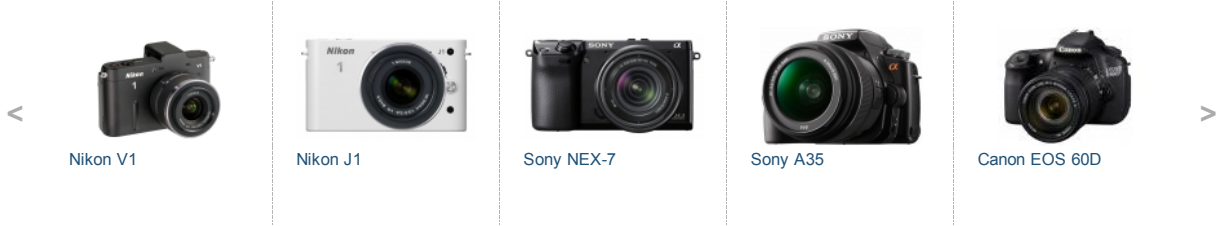
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