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# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

## NEW YORK

11 WEST 53rd STREET  
TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900  
CABLES: MODERNART, NEW-YORK

SARAH NEWMAYER, PUBLICITY DIRECTOR

September 3, 1941.

TO Art Editors  
City Editors  
Photography Editors

Dear Sirs:

You are invited to come or send a representative to a

PRESS PREVIEW  
on Tuesday, September 9, 1941  
from 2 to 6 P.M.

of two exhibitions

D. O. HILL: Portrait Photographs 1843-1848

and

THE WOODEN HOUSE IN AMERICA: An Exhibition of Domestic  
Architecture

at The Museum of Modern Art  
11 West 53 St., New York.

Both these exhibitions will open to the public Wednesday, September 10,  
and will be on view for approximately one month.

• For further information will you please telephone me at Circle 5-8900.

Sincerely yours,

  
Sarah Newmeyer  
Publicity Director

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK  
TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART SHOWS WORK OF EARLY PHOTOGRAPHER

Forty photographs, chiefly portraits and all of them nearly a century old, compose the exhibition David Octavius Hill: Portrait Photographs 1843-1848 which opens to the public at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, Wednesday, September 10, to remain on view through October 19. These photographs, the earliest of which were made only four years after the invention of photography, are remarkable documents of camera work, taking a place in the history of photography comparable to that of the Gutenberg Bible in the history of typography.

But it is for their artistic quality rather than for their archaeological significance that these forty prints, chosen from the collection of Heinrich Schwarz of Buffalo, New York, are exhibited. They represent perhaps the first use of photography as a medium of artistic expression, and form a part of its rich tradition. This is the first of a series of exhibitions outlining the esthetic development of photography which the Museum will hold from time to time. The exhibition has been assembled and installed by Beaumont Newhall, Curator of the Museum's Department of Photography.

David Octavius Hill, a painter of Edinburgh, Scotland, was born in Perth in 1802 and died in Edinburgh in 1870. He was a founder of the Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. In 1843 he received a commission to paint a group portrait of the five hundred odd clergymen and laymen who gathered in Edinburgh in that year to found the United Free Church of Scotland. To assist him in painting this colossal group picture, Hill, who had previously experimented with photography, turned to the new medium as a quick and efficient way of taking notes on the physical features of his multitude of sitters. He enlisted the aid of Robert Adamson who, until his death in 1848, continued to assist Hill in his photographic

work. In fact, his name is always associated with Hill's in the photographs they made between 1843 and 1848. Adamson, a brilliant young chemist, was apparently responsible for the laboratory work. Hill himself posed the sitters.

The process they used was calotypy: a sheet of light-sensitized paper instead of a plate or film negative exposed in the camera, then developed and fixed. From this negative, prints could be made on similarly sensitized paper. The resultant photographs were sometimes called Talbotypes as the paper-negative process was invented in 1841 by William Henry Fox Talbot of Lacock Abbey, England. The cheapest box camera today is finer than the camera Hill used and our ordinary roll film is more than 100,000 times more sensitive than his home-made paper negatives.

During the five years between 1843 and 1848 Hill and Adamson, together, made hundreds of negatives not only of personalities prominent in the United Free Church of Scotland, but of humble fisherfolk, of Edinburgh architecture and the landscape of the surrounding country. Photography became more than a means toward the realization of painting. It became an end in itself. After Adamson's premature death in 1848--he was only twenty-seven years old--Hill continued to photograph, still relying on technical assistance.

In a note on the exhibition Mr. Newhall writes:

"Two basic characteristics of calotypy are evident in the work of Hill. The light sensitivity of the material was so weak that exposures, even in the bright sunlight, lasted two or three minutes. It was not possible to photograph action: all the pictures are posed. It was essential to place the sitter in a pose which could be held for the long interval of three minutes. Hill did this skilfully so that the sitters do not seem strained. Large objects, characteristic of their professions serve, literally, as props. The second characteristic of the calotype process was its lack of absolute sharpness. The negative was on paper, which was waxed to make it as transparent as possible. But it still retained its texture and the fibrous structure of the paper negative was reproduced on the print together with its silver image.

"These two characteristics undoubtedly appeared to Hill as drawbacks. That he owned a Petzral lens, the sharpest cutting objective of his day, would prove that he wanted sharp images. Among his pictures there are attempts to stop simple action--as the hands of a fishwife opening oysters. Yet perhaps the apparent drawbacks of his medium were beneficial. That personal relationship between sitter and artist so essential to portraiture was mandatory; an uncooperative sitter completely spoiled the picture. The lack of sharpness produced a pleasant elimination of details and a broadening of effect without loss of structure, which photographers in later years tried by various other less functional ways to attain.

"It has often been remarked that Hill's success was due to the rugged features of his sitters who happened to

be 'photogenic.' Even a superficial study of his work, however, shows a great variety of physical types from the smooth faces of children to the scored countenances of octogenarians. The intensity found in some of the portraits is not that of a passive record. By lighting, by pose, by sensing the most revealing attitude and, somehow, persuading the sitter to maintain with absolute rigidity this apparently momentary attitude, Hill produced results which have not often been equalled in the near century that has passed since he took his photographs."

Hill's work was forgotten after his death in 1870 and not until 1897 was notice taken of it when the London Camera Club held a retrospective show. This was followed in Hamburg by a show in the Kunsthalle. His work was introduced to America by the Photo-Secession in 1905, and Alfred Stieglitz published in the periodical Camera Work three superb photogravures made directly from the original negatives by Craig Annan, whose father was a friend of Hill. These photogravures and the ones published in Camera Work for 1911, are the finest posthumous expression of Hill's work. In the exhibition opening at the Museum of Modern Art Wednesday an original print is placed beside an Annan gravure so that the visitor can compare Hill's work with the later interpretation.