Photography at MoMA

The Museum of Modern Art draws upon the exceptional depth of its collection to tell a new history of photography in the three-volume series Photography at MoMA. Since the inception of photography, figures of prominence have moved beyond art and technical innovation, making the medium accessible to the general population. MoMA’s holdings, as well as its curatorial expertise and educational work, take on these roles and more. This volume explores the ways in which the modern medium of photography and its key innovations—color printing, the digital capture of images, and the rise of digital photography—have shaped the course of art history. The book contains an essay by one of photography’s innovators, the curator of the exhibition. It introduces early photographers such as William Henry Fox Talbot, Julia Margaret Cameron, Nadar, and Carleton Watkins; the modernist revolution in photography; and the revolutionary work of contemporary photographers. It also includes reproductions of early photographs, including images by Carleton Watkins, Edward Steichen, and Paul Strand.

Roxana Marcoci is Senior Curator in the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Shelley Rice is Arts Professor at New York University, with a joint appointment between the Photography and Imaging Department and the Department of Art History.

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Cover: Charles Thurston Thompson British, 1816–1868 English Mirror, c. 1730, from Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Forest. 1853 Albumen silver print 9⅛ × 6⅛ in (23.1 × 15.6 cm) Acquired through the generosity of Jon L. Stryker, 2014 376 pp.; 402 color reproductions Published by The Museum of Modern Art 11 West 53 Street New York, NY 10019 www.moma.org Printed in Spain PDF released for review purposes only. Not for publication or wide distribution.
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The Pencil of Nature: Great Britain

Robert Adamson
Anna Atkins
Julia Margaret Cameron
Lewis Carroll
Charles Clifford
Alfred Capel Cure
Francis Edmond Currey
Hugh Welch Diamond
Roger Fenton
Clémentina, Lady Hawarden
David Octavius Hill
Fallon Horne
Robert Howlett
Calvert Richard Jones
James Mudd
William Henry Fox Talbot
Charles Thronton Thompson
Benjamin Brecknell Turner
Unknown photographer
Entirely Modern: Early British Photography

Geoffrey Batchen

Emerging within a confluence of industrial capitalism and Romantic sensibilities, photography began as the very archetype of modernity, automatically generating new forms of representation and public relations. Its converts included not only the celebrated practitioners. Together, they revealed the extraordinary diversity of themes, motivations, and aesthetic choices adopted by nineteenth-century photographers—and with them, the complex nature of modernity itself.

This diversity is evident even in the work of a single photographer. The renowned William Henry Fox Talbot invented both photographic drawing and the later calotype process, thus providing the technical platform from which was derived all subsequent paper-based processes, including daguerreotype. The pictures presented here were made during this same period.1 Making no attempt to be comprehensive, this selection instead offers an instructive cross section of images by a variety of practitioners. Together, they reveal the extraordinary diversity of themes, motivations, and aesthetic choices adopted by nineteenth-century photographers—and with them, the complex nature of modernity itself.

Photographs from Paper Negatives, Impressed by Light: British Early British Photography

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An adherence to convention connotes order and rationality, two qualities important to the establishment of photographic pictures as truthful, even scientific, documents. To that end, the English botanist Anna Atkins carefully placed her fern specimens in the center of her cyanotype paper before exposing it to light. The result was the generation of stark white-on-blue images that captured the look of the engravings and nature prints already familiar in her field. Atkins began making cyanotype impressions of British seaweed and algae in 1843, by the 1850s she was collaborating with her friend Anne Dixon to produce albums of British and foreign ferns. A specimen of Phyllognathia Phlogopteris, or narrow beech fern (plate 14), represented the kind of abnormal variant of the species that fascinated Victorian collectors, while the Pteris Bulliformis from Jamaica (plate 15) offered a glimpse of the greater British Empire.

Talbot had adopted a repeated frontality to remove the taint of subjectivity from his own photographic documents; this approach was employed by many subsequent photographers. Roger Fenton, for example, created thousands of salt prints from collodium glass negatives for the British Museum in about 1858, including several pictures of moa bones (plate 23). Fenton and his assistants hung a temporary backdrop behind these remnants of an extinct flightless bird from New Zealand in order to isolate their details, a decision that today makes them almost surreal (especially the two detached and partially reconstructed legs that stand upright on their own). The same tropes—deacid frontality, isolation, repetition—are seen again in Charles Clifford’s photograph of a suit of Spanish armor (plate 36). James Mudd’s side view of the engine for the West Midland Railway (a shiny symbol of the Industrial Revolution (plate 38)), and Francis Edmond Currey’s portrait of the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, an iron steam-driven ship that, at the time of its launching, was the largest vessel in the world (plate 39), both shot outdoors, cheerfully break the photograph are centered in its rectangular frame, the camera, its ability to photograph almost anything, provides a means of dislocation and penetration—like a clumsy piece of documentation; seeing the five in one of the five life-size, side-by-side views of the Great Eastern, one can almost imagine that this kind of photography is a way of getting beyond that frame to catch a glimpse of the magical act of photographing, an act taking place behind us and before us, more than 160 years ago. Here, in the temporal and spatial convolutions of this particular ocular experience, we are made to confront the modernity of photography in all of its fascinating complexity.
William Henry Fox Talbot
British, 1800–1877

1. The Open Door, Before May 1844
Salted paper print
5 ⅝ × 7 ⅜ in. (14.3 × 19.5 cm)
Acquired through the generosity of Jon L. Snyder and purchase, 2008

Calvert Richard Jones
British, 1800–1877

2. The Fruit Sellers, 1845
Salted paper print
6 ⅞ × 9 ⅞ in. (17.2 × 21.2 cm)
Gift of Anne Ehrenkranz in honor of John Szarkowski, 1992

Likely collaboration with
William Henry Fox Talbot
British, 1800–1877
One of the Towers of Orleans Cathedral, as Seen from the Opposite Tower. June 21, 1843
Salted paper print
Image: 6 x 5¼ in. (15 x 13 cm) (angled corners)
Acquired through the generosity of Jon L. Stryker, 2007

Lace. 1845
Salted paper print (photogram)
Image: 6½ x 8¾ in. (16.5 x 22.3 cm)
Acquired through the generosity of Dr. Stefan Steine, 1992

Articles of Glass. Before June 1844
Salted paper print
5¼ x 3½ in. (33.3 x 81 cm)
Purchase, 2008
Early Photography in France

Olympe Aguado de las Marismas
François Aubert
Charles Aubry
Édouard-Denis Baldus
Auguste Belloc
Bruno Frères
Adolphe Braun
Étienne Carjat
Eugène Corbière
André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri
Guillaume-Benjamin-Armand Duchenne de Boulogne
Herman Heid
Alphonse La Blanche
Gustave Le Gray
Henri Le Secq
Charles Marville
Nadar
Charles Nègre
Henri-Victor Regnault
Louis-Rémy Robert
Louis Rousseau
Adolphe Tassie
Adrien Tournachon
Unknown photographers
Auguste Vacquerie
Julien Vallou de Villeneuve
“The Black Clothing of Things”: French Photography under the Second Empire

Quentin Bajac

“Now, today, at the Hôtel Drouot, the first sale of photographs...” The Goncourt brothers wrote in their journal on June 4, 1857. At the time, Édouard-Denis Baldus had just completed documenting the construction of the new Louvre with photographs, a commission of the Ministère d’État that he had occupied since 1855 (plate 51). In fall, Gustave Le Gray would photograph, also as an official commission, army maneuvers at the Camp de Châlons (plate 57). He would shortly thereafter add to his signature the mention “photographer of the Emperor.” Photography in France in the mid-nineteenth century was in full swing, and the Goncourts, a bit disillusioned, were witnessing the inexorable advance of this new mechanical and modern image—a resolutely black modernity, like coal smoke, the bourgeois frock coat, or the silver salts of photographic prints.

The rise of photography on paper in France took place during the Second Empire, the period initiated by a coup d’état and the reign of Napoleon III. It was in 1857 with the regime’s collapse after the war with Prussia, an episode brought to a close by the tragic events of the Paris Commune (pp. 77-79). Almost all of the images in this chapter were made in France during these two decades. Over the course of those twenty years, photography on paper experienced considerable growth, bolstered by national public authorities around the emperor and his government, in a manner French centralism uniquely allows. This flourishing happened in the context of the 1850s, marked in particular by many restrictions on public freedoms and the press. It was also the context of the 1850s, marked in particular by many restrictions on public freedoms and the press. It was also the context of the consolidation of the country. The Emperor. “Photography in France in the mid-nineteenth century was in full swing, and the Goncourts, a bit disillusioned, were witnessing the inexorable advance of this new mechanical and modern image—a resolutely black modernity, like coal smoke, the bourgeois frock coat, or the silver salts of photographic prints.”

The regime’s consolidation appears in many of the group portraits, which, reminiscent of those of the Aguado brothers, amateur photographers trained by Regnault, is illustrated by the close ties that several members of the entourage of the imperial family maintained with members of the Société Française de Photographie, created in 1854. More than anyone else, the Aguado brothers, amateur photographers trained by Le Gray, embody this proximity: related to the emperor’s family and a regular at gatherings in the studio of the Château de Compiègne, Olympe Aguado in particular left behind a group of portraits, which, reminiscent of group scenes (plate 60), sometimes feature members of the imperial court.

A number of new private patrons used photography for documentary and promotional ends, extending the activity of Napoleon III and his government. Enthusiasm for the photographic object seems to have been greatest in the railroad sector, which by then was attracting considerable private capital. Baldus, for instance, worked for the railways twice, first in 1855 for the Chemin de Fer du Nord, financed by the banker James de Rothschild, then in 1860-61 for the Compagnie Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée. His “PLM album” promoting the line, combining old and recent images, picturesque landscapes (plate 47), and views of historic monuments and industrial works, conveniently illustrates the transformations of France in the 1850s and the contradictions inherent therein: a division between interest in its historic heritage and exaltation of the nascent modernity. A romantic sensibility in deeds and words, the political and economic ambition of the first half of the 1850s, notably in the strong presence of Gothic religious architecture (plates 49, 50)—gradually faded away in favor of a new focus on symbols of industrial progress. Baldus is a good example of this, having on the one hand documented the necessary safeguarding of a heritage in peril via the archives Althorpianum in 1851, and ten years later celebrated the grandeur of the railroad, a tool of progress and civilization—often with very similar landscape views. Some photographs even prefigure the remarkable development in France under the Second Empire. Supported by new investors interested in the medium and its potential for development, a number of photographers opened first at the Luxembourg on boulevards. To advertise his newly opened studio on the rue Saint-Lazare, Nadar, in partnership with his younger brother, scandalized by the famous photographer Adrien Tournachon with photographs in which the mimes Charles Debureau, a leading actor of the period, in character as Pierrot, simultaneously emblematized the various possibilities (plate 66), thereby demonstrating not only the expressive possibilities of the new medium but also the talent of the new cameronian. The following year, in 1857, the series of photographs opened first at the Luxembourg on boulevards. In Paris. Although supported financially by the Pereire brothers, bankers close to Napoleon III, the Nadar studio became a gathering place for the Parisian artistic and intellectual bohemia, often hostile to the empire, in

see Antoine Compagnon, Habits de photographie, 1839–1859 (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1994).

see Nadar’s memoirs in this scheme.

see Antoine Compagnon, Habits de photographie, 1839–1859 (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1994).


see Joséphine Becker, Olympe Aguado in particular left behind a group of portraits, which, reminiscent of group scenes (plate 60), sometimes feature members of the imperial court.

see Maria Morris Hambourg, Nadar, Photography (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995).


Bonapartist and anti-exiled Mexican monarchist and protégé of Empress images from a sitting in 1860, José Manuel Hidalgo, an simulating a bourgeois or aristocratic interior. In two armchair, plants) and accessories (books, newspapers) the largest in Paris in the early 1860s. Patented in 1854, his produced by the studio of André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, spheres of power, and a very different aesthetic in the work to the most trivial realism.

Nadar, starting in the early 1860s, became less interested in his studio work and turned to other experiments, notably photography using artificial light. Ever attentive to ensuring good publicity for his projects, he chose as fields of experimentation two strongly evocative and mysterious places: first, the subterranean Paris of the catacombs (plate 23); then, in a second series, of the sewers, creating photographs that reveal, in his own words, “the mysteries of the deepest, the secret caverns.”

Nègre confronted another technical limitation, that of instantaneousness, in his use of an ordinary hand-netted knitted fabric made of Jersey after the coup d’état of 1851, the empire’s principal opponent saw the new technology as a means to battle boredom, break through the isolation, and begin, slowly, to be considered as an art form, fulfilling its aspirations for the medium.

Nègre’s training as a painter was hardly exceptional: Le Secq, Le Gray, Roger Fenton, and Nègre were students in the workshops of either the painters Paul Delaroche or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (or both) before turning to photography. These pioneers of photography on paper, born for the most part in the 1820s, were called “painters Buccaneers” or “painters rebels” by Nadar (both meaning failed painters).2425 Maryvonne was a “painter-engraver” before becoming a photographer. Valentin de Vaux and Auguste Belfloc also received artistic training; Nadar and Cast, as mentioned, were caricaturists. Even a photographer like François-Hubert, who moved to Mexico in the 1850s and was known for the most part for his series of documentary photographs made around the execution of Emperor Maximilian (plate 71), trained with the monocles painter Hippolyte Flandrin at the École des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and exhibited at the Salon in 1851 before emigrating.

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Louis-Rémy Robert
French, 1811–1882

40 Untitled (Sèvres porcelain manufactory).
c. 1852
Salted paper print
5 ⅞ × 4 ⅜ in. (15.1 × 11 cm)
Suzanne Winsberg Collection.
Gift of Suzanne Winsberg, 2009

41 Untitled (Sèvres porcelain manufactory).
c. 1852
Waxed-paper negative
9 ⅛ × 6 ⅞ in. (23.2 × 17.7 cm)
Suzanne Winsberg Collection.
Gift of Suzanne Winsberg, 2009

Henri-Victor Regnault
French, 1810–1878

42 Untitled (Ladder [L’Échelle]. Sèvres porcelain manufactory) from the album Études photographiques. 1853
Salted paper print
11 ⅛ × 8 ⅛ in. (28.4 × 20.6 cm)
Acquired through the generosity of the Nina and Michael Zadek Charitable Trust, 1995

43 Untitled (Sèvres porcelain manufactory). c. 1852
Salted paper print
6 ⅞ × 5 ⅝ in. (17.8 × 14 cm)
Suzanne Winsberg Collection.
Gift of Suzanne Winsberg, 2009
Gustave Le Gray
French, 1820–1884

The Great Wave, Sète (La Grande Vague, Sète). 1856
Albumen silver print
13¼ × 16¼ in. (33.6 × 41.3 cm)
Gift of Paul F. Walter, 1989

The Tugboat (Le Vapeur). 1857
Albumen silver print
12⅞ × 16⅝ in. (32.6 × 42.1 cm)
Acquired through the generosity of Robert B. Menschel, Jo Carole Lauder, and Roxann Taylor in honor of Richard E. Salomon, 2014
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