

LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS

*100 Pictures from the Collection of
The Museum of Modern Art*

BY JOHN SZARKOWSKI

Distributed by New York Graphic Society Ltd., Greenwich, Connecticut

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART · NEW YORK



INTRODUCTION

This is a picture book, and its first purpose is to provide the material for simple delectation. Beyond this it hopes to show something of the character and intent of the Museum's photography Collections, and to suggest some of the ways in which the study of photography touches the broader issues of modern art and modern sensibility.

The book is not a history, although it involves historical concerns, nor does it attempt a systematic critical view. It is, more modestly, a visual interim report—though a highly foreshortened one—on the results of more than forty years of collecting photographs at The Museum of Modern Art.

The first and distinguishing function of an art museum is that of collecting and preserving works that are, in its judgment, particularly fine, or particularly instructive in reference to the evolution of art. If preserved, these works can be exhibited, reproduced, studied, interpreted, re-evaluated, enjoyed, and—perhaps most important—borrowed from, by younger artists.

Works that are worth collecting are often identified by a broad and time-honored consensus. Etchings, for example, have long been understood to be collectible art objects; Picasso the printmaker is thus the heir and beneficiary of Rembrandt, commercially as well as artistically. Photographs, on the other hand, although often admired, have seldom been seriously collected. As a result, the work of Alfred Stieglitz is less fully preserved, and less well-known, than that of Rembrandt, done three centuries earlier.

Since its invention, photography has been the world's ubiquitous picture-making system. It has in the process effected a profound transformation of our knowledge and opinions concerning the structure and meaning of visual experience. Nevertheless, the medium has received little serious study. The commonplaceness of photography, and the radical differences between it and the traditional arts, has made it a refractory problem for theorists, and one that has not submitted with grace to the traditional intellectual apparatus of art historical study. For an art museum, even today, to make a serious commitment to the art of photography requires some imagination, and the willingness to accept some intellectual risks. In 1929, when the acquisition of a painting by Cézanne was still considered adventurous, the proposition that photography deserved serious critical study would have been simply unintelligible to the leaders of most art museums.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who became the founding Director of The Museum of Modern Art in that year, believed that the visual arts were so intimately interdependent that one medium could not be properly studied in isolation. It was his conception that a genuinely modern museum must pay serious attention to architecture, film, industrial design, and photography, as well as to painting,

sculpture, drawing, and traditional prints. He is reported to have once said that his chief interest was in contemporary things before they became respectable. As a matter of record, the twenty-third work to enter the Museum Collection, in April, 1930, was a photograph. Lehmbruck: Head of a Man, by Walker Evans.

In 1937 the Museum opened the historic survey exhibition *Photography 1839-1937*, directed by Beaumont Newhall. The exhibition provided the foundation on which Newhall's seminal *History of Photography* was based; it also marked the effective beginning of a systematic and coherent commitment to photography by the Museum. The Department of Photography was officially established as an independent curatorial function in 1940. Following Beaumont Newhall, those staff members who have directed the Museum's photography program have been Nancy Newhall, Willard Morgan, Edward Steichen, and the writer.

The one hundred photographs reproduced in this book represent less than one per cent of the Museum's photographic holdings. This selection is thus a small sample of a tiny part of photography's achievement. In considering what the character of this sample should be, I had first to answer this question: Should it concentrate on the medium's heroic figures, representing each by a selection of works that would suggest in rough outline the scope of his unique contribution, or should the selection be broadly inclusive, and attempt to describe photography from a somewhat more liberal and exploratory perspective? I have elected to attempt the latter. The Museum's photography Collection has not been conceived as an enclave of immutable masterpieces, but rather as a tool that might contribute to a fuller understanding of the medium's achievements and potentials. Photography has learned about its own nature not only from its great masters, but also from the simple and radical works of photographers of modest aspiration and small renown. These photographers have contributed not only out of their talent, but by virtue of their numbers, their industry, and their occasional good luck. Their work also deserves, and repays, study.

It was therefore decided that no photographer be represented here by more than one work, regardless of the importance of his contribution, or the richness of the Museum's holding of his work.

It might be added that it is somehow unsatisfactory to sum up in half a dozen prints the meaning of the life's work of an Atget or a Stieglitz or a Weston. Although such a selection might represent the basic visual ideas that were explored throughout a lifetime, the process of abstracting to so economical a core seems inimical to the spirit of photography, which is generous and fecund, and which delights in the inexhaustibly various guises in which a single idea will reveal itself. To properly sketch out the work of one of photography's greatest figures requires not six or ten pictures, but a hundred.

Any student of the subject will have his own considerable list of distinguished photographers whose work is not included here. Where these men and women are represented in the Collection, they have been omitted with genuine regret. The

nineteenth-century portion of the Collection, especially, has been most brutally abridged. The possibility of excluding entirely work before 1900 was considered, and rejected. The focus of the Museum's concern is of course on the art of the twentieth century; in photography, however, no arbitrary date can be set to represent the beginning of a modern era. On the contrary, many of the most innovative workers of the past generation have found inspiration and precedent by leaping backwards, beyond the time of their immediate predecessors, to a more distant photographic past. As a rule, photography has not developed in a disciplined and linear manner, but has rather grown like an untended garden, making full use of the principles of random selection, laissez-faire, participatory democracy, and ignorance. Thus, several generations of photographic thought have existed simultaneously, with little real knowledge of each other. (It is not unlikely that Jacques Lartigue, in his early teens, and Eugène Atget, in his fifties, saw each other photographing in the Bois de Boulogne, in the years before the First World War.)

Unrepresented here are those photographers whose most important work has been in color—a complex and largely distinct issue that requires and deserves separate consideration. Recent scientifically oriented photography was for similar reasons finally and regretfully passed over. For the author, the most painful omissions were of those splendid pictures that were left out because it was necessary to move on to a new decade, and to a different genus and species.

Finally, it must be assumed that some unforgivable omissions are invisible to me, and are the result not of a conscious ordering of priorities, but of ignorance. Although the Museum has always sought to maintain an international perspective, it is true that the Department of Photography, at least, knows the work of the United States much better than that of the rest of the world. This is due in part to the fact that few foreign museums have systematically collected, studied, exhibited, and published the photography of their own countries. Happily, this situation has recently shown some signs of changing. In this context one might speculate that the vitality of American photography in recent decades, like that of American painting, has been in some measure caused by the availability, through seriously considered exhibitions and publications, of the decisive work of a living tradition.

It would require pages merely to list the names of all those who have contributed significantly to the growth of the Museum's photography Collection, and those who have helped would surely prefer that those pages be reserved for pictures. Acknowledgment must be, for the most part, generic. First I would like to thank the photographers themselves, who have recognized the seriousness of the Museum's commitment to their medium, and have responded as collaborators in a common cause. This cooperation has often included the gift of prints, on those frequent occasions when the Department's appetite has been larger than

its pocketbook, but perhaps even more important has been the willingness of serious photographers to keep the Department abreast of their work, generally with little prospect of material advantage.

The counsel and support of the Department's Trustee Committee have been no less vital. The Committee has with conviction and constancy represented the claims of the photography program to the Museum Board, and to the larger outside world. Its Chairmen of many years, David H. McAlpin, James Thrall Soby, and Henry Allen Moe, deserve especially grateful thanks. Many members of the Committee have in addition made generous contributions to the Collection, both in the form of prints from their own collections, and through purchase funds for new acquisitions. Many other donors, only a few of whose names are acknowledged in the credit lines of the pictures reproduced here, have contributed to making the Museum's photography Collection the irreplaceable cultural resource that it has, print by print, become.

Finally, acknowledgment must be made of the contribution of the many staff members of the Department during the past generation, whose ideas have helped shape the Collection, and whose day to day work has preserved it and made it available to a broad audience. I am confident that each of these has considered himself enriched and rewarded by intimate contact with what is surely one of the richest and most puzzling of all the arts.

Collectors of Roman coins or Impressionist paintings know the satisfaction and the despair that come with the realization that their tasks might, at least in theory, be finally completed, with each crucial specimen of a finished series nestled securely in its round niche of plush, or hung on its own proper and permanent wall. The collecting of photographs is a different and riskier sort of search, filled with mysteries and contradictions and unexpected adventures. Even photography's eternal verities are provisional, and its future is as unpredictable as that of any other living species. Nineteenth-century masters are still being discovered—artists of exceptional talent who are destined to remain as faceless as the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet. Meanwhile young photographers dispute fiercely the direction of their art's future, offering their best works as evidence of the correctness of their own intuitive understandings of its past.

It can be said with certainty only that photography has remained for a century and a quarter one of the most radical, instructive, disruptive, influential, problematic, and astonishing phenomena of the modern epoch. It has in addition been the chosen vehicle of major artists as divergent in their perspectives as Alfred Stieglitz and Eugène Atget.

The future of this beautiful, universally practiced, little-known art will be determined by young and unborn photographers, who will decide how best to build on their rich and ambiguous tradition. A small part of that tradition is reproduced on the following pages.

LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS

WILLIAM SHEW
American [?], active 1840-1903

[Mother and Daughter] 1845-1850
Daguerreotype, sixth-plate, 3 1/8 x 2 5/8
Gift of Ludwig Glaeser

When Daguerre announced his great invention to the public in the summer of 1839, he explained how it worked but not really what it was for. The process was obviously a miracle of the age of science, and like any miracle it was self-justifying. Painters did say that it would be a great aid to art, and physicists said it would be a great aid to science, but the important thing, on which everyone agreed, was that it was astonishing. Pictures of exquisite perfection had been formed directly by the forces of nature.

What the daguerreotype was in fact used for was recording the faces of millions of people. Of the countless thousands of daguerreotypes that survive, not one in a hundred shows a building or a waterfall or a street scene; the rest is an endless parade of ancestors. Most of these people were, outside their own family circles, nearly as anonymous when alive as their portraits are now. Nevertheless it is interesting to consider the fact that after Daguerre every man's family acquired a visual past: a tangible link with the history of the species. It is unfortunate that the picture opposite has been lost to its rightful heirs. Who would not feel better for having two women as handsome, strong, and proud as these in his past?

An original daguerreotype is a small picture, generally smaller than the palm of one's hand, and exists on a surface of highly polished silver. The image, though infinitely detailed and subtle, is elusive. The picture should be looked at with its case not fully opened, preferably in private and by lamplight, as one would approach a secret.



DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL

British, 1802-1870

ROBERT ADAMSON

British, 1821-1848

[D. O. Hill and W. B. Johnstone] c. 1845

Calotype, 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$

Gift of Edward Steichen

David Octavius Hill was a properly trained painter, a member in good standing of the British art establishment, who understood how Van Dyke and Gainsborough had done it, or at least how the academy thought they had done it. Hill took up photography (with the assistance of the young chemist Robert Adamson) as a sketching medium, in order to produce likenesses of 470 Scottish clerics, which he would incorporate in a monstrous historical painting commemorating the founding of the Free Church of Scotland. When the painting was finally finished in 1866, twenty-three years after the first photographs were made, it established Hill as one of the first artists to have converted good photography into bad painting.

Happily, Hill (or Adamson, or both) came to love and use photography for its own sake, and by some unknown combination of their talents they made some of the finest photographic portraits that the medium has thus far managed.

They used a technique called calotypy, which had been developed by William Henry Fox Talbot during the same years in which Daguerre was perfecting his process. Talbot's technique was a two-step system: The picture exposed in the camera formed a negative image (black for white, and vice versa) on a transparent paper base; this negative image was then used as a filter through which a second piece of sensitized paper was exposed to the light, thus reversing the tonal values. Each daguerreotype was unique, but the calotype negative, like the etcher's plate, could be used to produce an indefinite number of prints, limited only by the degree to which the photographer overestimated his market. The calotype image was diffused slightly by the texture of the paper through which it was printed and consequently was less sharply detailed than the daguerreotype. But what Hill had learned from the great dead painters allowed him to compose his pictures broadly and simply, and turn the limitations of the system to his advantage.

In the picture opposite, the man on the left is Hill himself, who in fact appears—a handsome and distinguished figure—in a good number of the Hill and Adamson pictures. Adamson, obviously the junior partner, does not appear in many.



WILLIAM ENGLAND
British, died 1896

Niagara Suspension Bridge. 1859
Albumen print, 9½ x 11½

In 1851 the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer made a radical improvement on the principle of the calotype, by learning how to fix the light-sensitive silver salt to glass rather than paper. These glass negatives could, like the calotype, yield an indefinite number of prints, and they could record detail virtually as fine as that of the daguerreotype. This meant that pictures containing enormous amounts of precise information could be produced in quantity, and photography entered the world of publishing.

During its first generation, photography recorded scores of the great works and legendary places that formerly had been known to the outside world only through the interpretations of a few scholars and travelers. The objectivity and accuracy of these photographs were so implicitly—and naïvely—trusted that they were regarded virtually as surrogates for the subjects themselves. Very rapidly, the world was made a small and familiar place.

One of the most peripatetic of early photographers was William England, who between the mid-fifties and mid-sixties made pictures in most of the countries of Europe and in the United States. England's pictures were sold by the thousands, not because they were art but because they were filled with new and exciting information.

The picture reproduced here reflects almost perfectly the chief interests of mid-nineteenth-century photography: On a single plate England has given us a scenic wonder, a group portrait, a triumph of modern engineering, a railroad train, and (if one looks closely) a horse and buggy. He has included everything of the most favored subject matter of the period except an ancient architectural monument—generally unavailable to photographers working in this country.



CARLETON E. WATKINS
American, 1829-1916

Arbutus Menziesii Pursh. 1861 [?]
Albumen print, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$

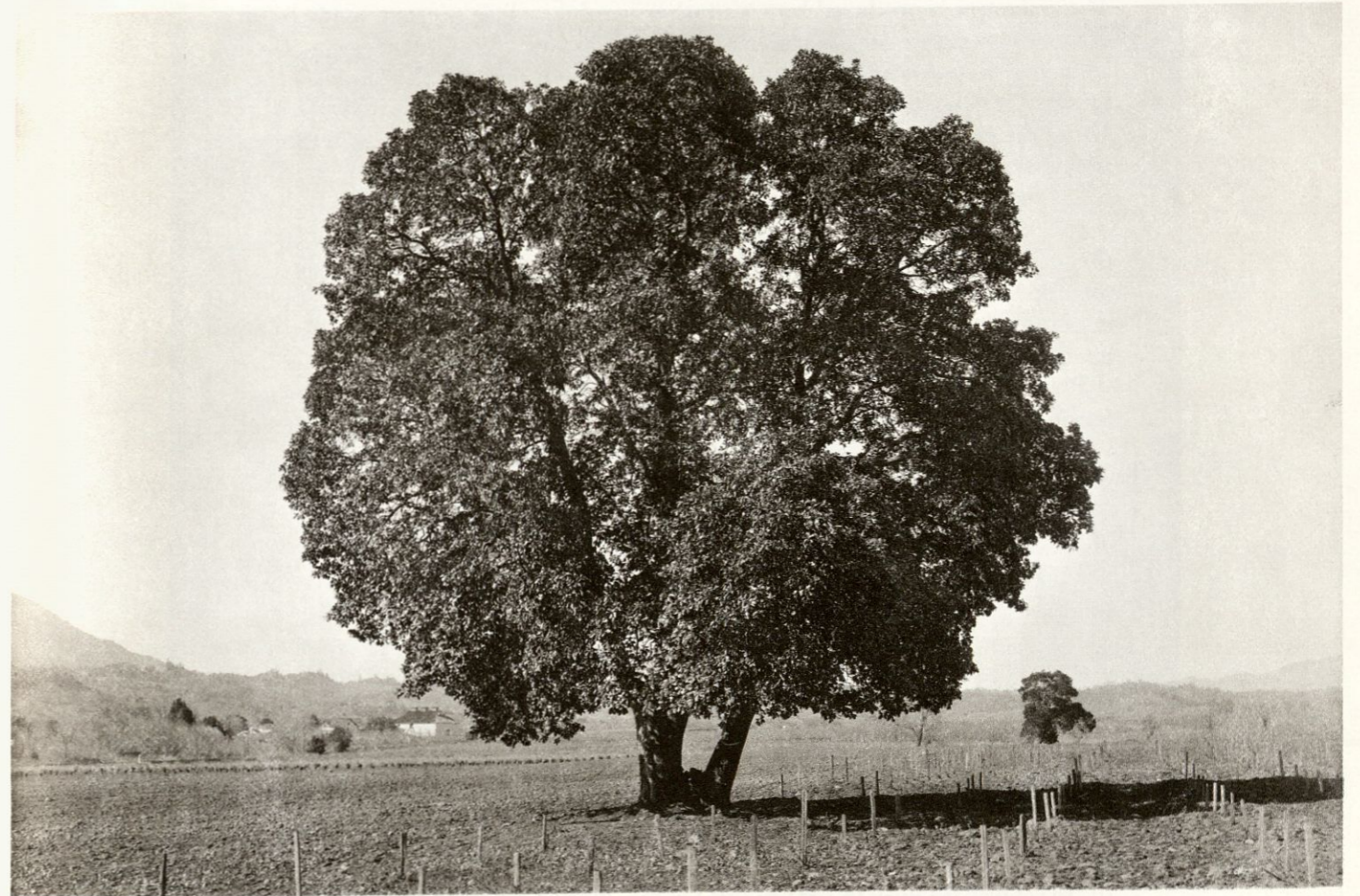
It is self-evident that a truly radical invention is one that nobody knows how to use. In 1839 there were no photographers, only experimenters; ten years later every town of even modest pretensions had at least one daguerreotype gallery. This army of photographers had come from the ranks of a hundred trades and crafts, most of which were not even remotely related to the science or the art of photography.

Carleton E. Watkins was a clerk in a San Francisco department store when he was hired in 1854 by the daguerreotypist R. H. Vance to tend his gallery in San José, whose operator had unexpectedly quit. It was expected that Watkins would serve as little more than temporary caretaker, but within a week he had learned the rudiments of the craft and was kept on. Fourteen years later he was awarded the first prize for photographic landscapes at the Paris International Exposition. He remained an active photographer for half a century. In 1906, while he was negotiating for the sale of his life's work to Stanford University, his studio and collection were destroyed by the fire that followed the San Francisco earthquake.

Most ambitious photographers of the time moved freely from one promising subject to another, but Watkins did not travel far from California, where he spent summer after summer photographing Yosemite and the great trees of the Mariposa Grove on glass plates ranging in size up to 18 x 22 inches. On his early trips into Yosemite, a twelve-mule train was required to carry Watkins's equipment.

Watkins was a student of his subjects. He entitled the picture reproduced here by the tree's proper botanical name, rather than simply calling it "Strawberry Tree." His surviving work provides a historic and scientific document of his time and place, a record that is clear, precise, detailed, and coherent.

His photograph of the strawberry tree is as simple as a Japanese flag, and as rich as a dictionary.



Photographer unknown

[Untitled] No date
Ambrotype, sixth-plate, 2¾ x 3¼

The ambrotype reproduced here is a rather scrifulous little picture made by an unknown photographer of an unknown subject in an unidentified country. Even assigning an approximate date to the picture is problematic: Although the costumes offer rather little specific data, they would suggest a date of about 1870 to 1875; the picture was made, however, by the ambrotype process, a technique that is thought to have been generally obsolete by about 1863.

In other words, the picture is one of the many thousands of unpedigreed photographs that still survive of the enormously greater number that were made during the middle of the nineteenth century. There is nothing to distinguish it as remarkable, except the visual character of the image itself. In these terms it might be called a very early snapshot, made several years at least before the first hand cameras made their appearance.

Pure photography is a system of picture-making that describes more or less faithfully what might be seen through a rectangular frame from a particular vantage point at a given moment. The attempt to produce coherent and useful pictures within the limitations imposed by these uncompromising rules produced a new kind of image, which in traditional terms often seemed casual, if not chaotic. The ambrotype reproduced here is an excellent example. The picture's composition—or what would at the time have been regarded as its lack of composition—is characteristic of the kind of image structure that resulted when photographers left their studios to work with subject matter that could not easily be posed. The seemingly arbitrary cropping of figures by the picture edge, the unexpected shapes created by overlapping forms, the asymmetrical and centrifugal patterning, the juxtaposition of busy and empty masses—these qualities constitute a visual definition of what is meant, in large part, by the phrase “photographic seeing.”

If the picture suggests the work of Edgar Degas, it is perhaps less because of its obvious iconographic relationship to paintings such as *Carriage at the Races* (c. 1872) than because of the fact that Degas, himself an amateur photographer, was deeply interested in picture structure that was conceived visually rather than sculpturally or choreographically: structure in which the relationship of figure and frame was less centrally important than the relationship of figure to ground and frame. This is, perhaps coincidentally, the essence of the design problem in photography.



NADAR
[Gaspard Félix Tournachon]
French, 1820-1910

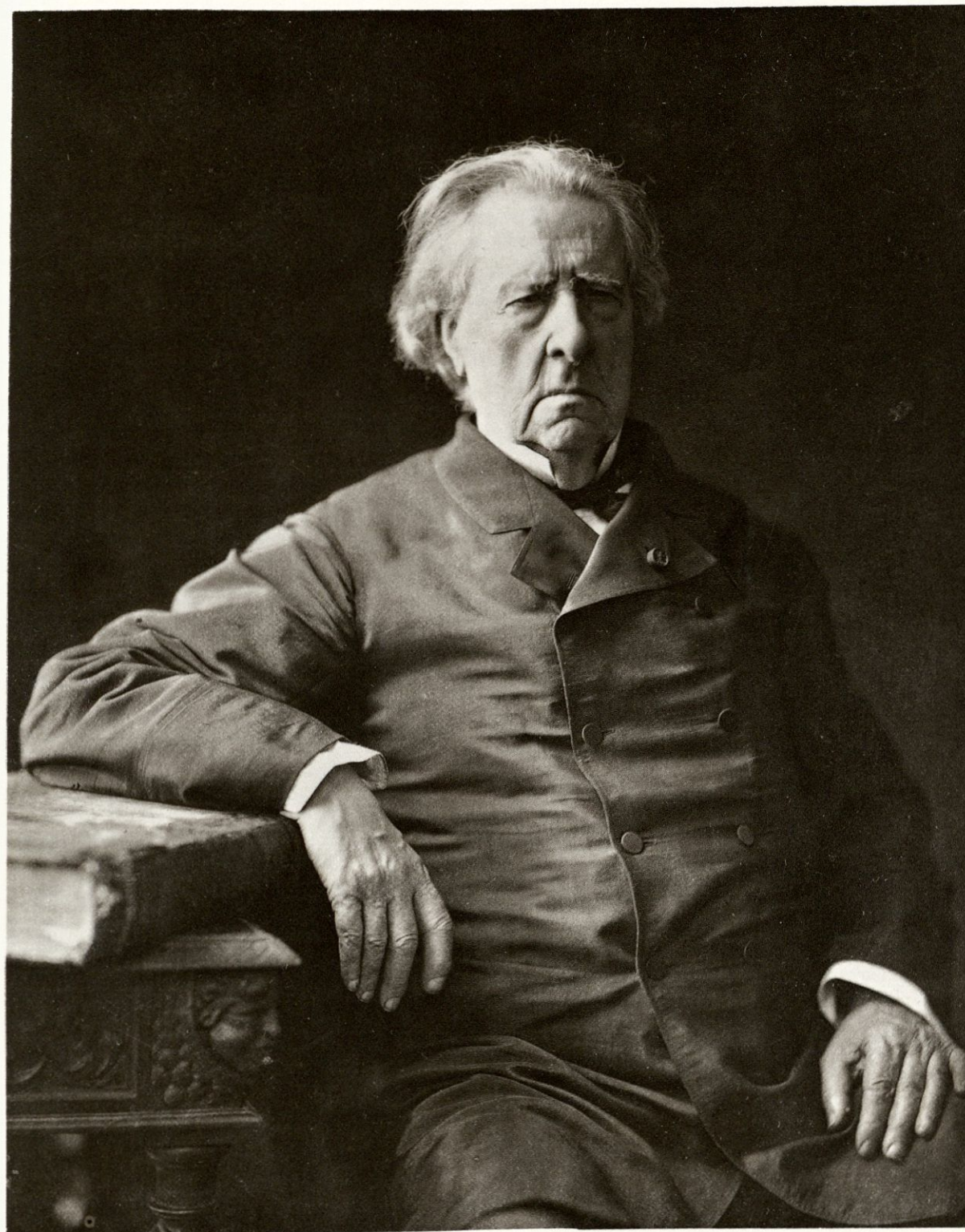
Baron Isidore Taylor. c. 1865
From *Galerie contemporaine. 1876-1884*
Woodburytype, 9½ x 7½

Nadar was a writer, a caricaturist, a balloonist, a part-time political activist, a photographer, and a friend of the painters, writers, and intellectuals in Paris during the time of Napoleon III. He is remembered as a photographer, for the portraits that he made of his great contemporaries.

It was only proper that Nadar should have considered painters his friends, since he learned so much and borrowed so freely from their traditions. He did this with great understanding and skill; the hand and coat front of Baron Taylor, opposite, might have been admired by Ingres himself. On the other hand, no painter would have recorded Taylor's magnificently dyspeptic face with the unremitting truthfulness of Nadar's photograph. Nadar understood that the fidelity of photography was a mixed blessing, and preferred not to make portraits of women, since the results were "too true to nature to please the sitters, even the most beautiful."

The Museum's print of the Taylor portrait is a woodburytype, a kind of print in which the image is formed by ink that has been transferred from a lead intaglio plate. Unlike modern systems of photomechanical reproduction, the woodburytype did not use a halftone screen, and thus achieved a truly continuous scale of gray values. The process produced prints of great beauty and exceptional permanence, and was practical for making editions of several hundred prints from a single plate. Unhappily, the technique was abandoned after the introduction of the halftone reproduction in the late nineteenth century.

In 1874, when Nadar's best work as a photographer was behind him, he earned a footnote in the art history texts by lending (or perhaps renting) his studio to a group of dissident painters for an independent exhibition. The show was generally conceded to be a failure. Renoir, one of the group, said, "The only thing we got out of it was the label 'Impressionism,' a name I loathe."



ALEXANDER GARDNER
American, 1821-1882

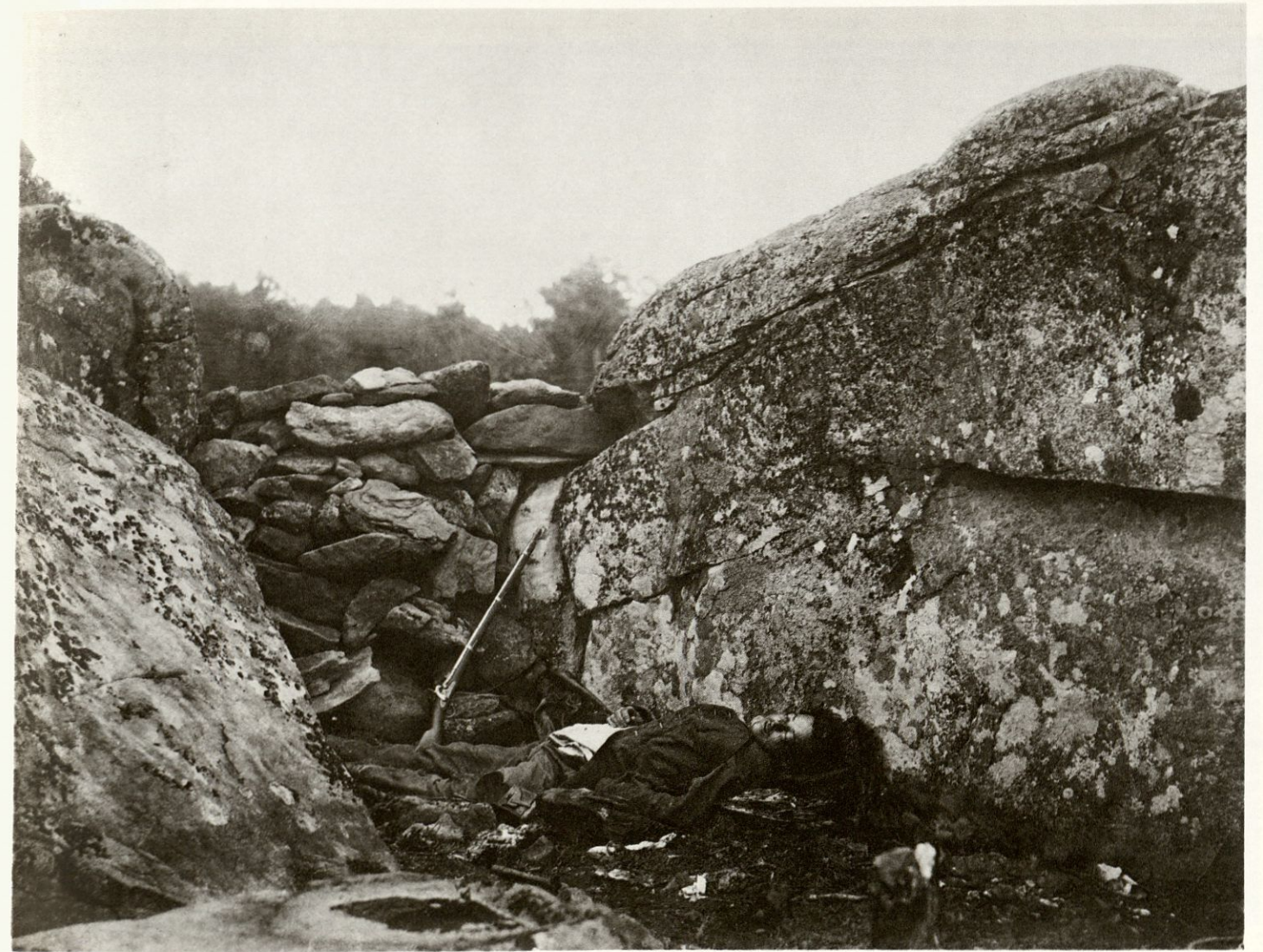
Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg. July, 1863
Plate 41 from *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War, 1862-1865*
Albumen print, 7¾ x 8⅞
Gift of David H. McAlpin

The American Civil War, among its various distinctions, was the first war to be massively described by photography. Until relatively recent years, the authorship of this enormous document was generally attributed to Mathew Brady, whose name stood, like *Homer*, as a generic label for the product of many men's work. Brady did conceive first and most ambitiously the role that photography could play in recording the conflict; he was also the man who gambled and lost a considerable fortune in the pursuit of his splendid idea. Nevertheless, most of the photographs were actually made by others, whether members of his staff, or disaffected former members of his staff, or independent operators who may or may not have been inspired by his example.

One of those who left Brady was the Scottish-American Alexander Gardner. According to tradition, Gardner left Brady in protest over the fact that his photographers received neither individual credit nor profit for their own pictures. In any event, Gardner took several of Brady's best men with him and went into business for himself. After the War Gardner published the best of his group's pictures in the classic two-volume work *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*. Most of the negatives had been made by other photographers, who were punctiliously credited on the picture mounts. Alex Gardner was also credited on the mount of every picture as the maker of the positive, meaning the print. The term positive was doubtless more impressive.

Among the pictures that Gardner made himself is the one reproduced here. Like many Civil War photographs, it showed that the dead of both sides looked very much the same. The pictures of earlier wars had not made this clear.

A generation later Stephen Crane studied the photographs of the War, and perhaps pondered their reticence and ambiguity. In *The Red Badge of Courage* the youth sometimes sees the War as though he were a camera: "His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there."



GEORGE N. BARNARD
American, 1819-1902

Scene of General McPherson's Death. 1864 or 1865
From *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign. 1866*
Albumen print, 10 x 14 1/8

The photographers of the Civil War could not describe the quick and volatile action of battle. The photographic technique of the time—the wet-plate process—required that the photographer coat his glass plate in a portable darkroom, then expose it in his waiting camera, and develop it before the coating had dried. Under these conditions photography was a conceptual art; the content of the picture was determined minutes before the exposure was made.

Many of the best of the Civil War photographs must be read as the fossils of earlier events: The caissons with their mud-encrusted wheels, the dead on the field, the empty landscapes, all speak of deeds already past. Such a picture is not so much a document as a talisman or relic—like a piece of the True Cross.

George Barnard worked during the War as official photographer for the Union Army's Division of Mississippi. Most of his work was probably routine—the copying of maps and documents and similar necessary but unexciting jobs—but when the opportunity presented itself he photographed the larger perspectives of the War. Beginning in 1864, he traveled with Sherman's army. It would seem that he followed the campaign well behind the battlefield. Some of his pictures were in fact made after the War had ended, and all are composed carefully and deliberately, by a photographer who did not fear for his life. The spirit of the pictures is retrospective and contemplative.

This picture describes the place where General McPherson fell. Its naïveté persuades us that it is true: He fell at the edge of this oak wood; the horse's skull was the shot on the ground brought him down. For General McPherson, this was the place where the issue was met.



JULIA MARGARET CAMERON
British, 1815-1879

Madonna with Children. c. 1866
Albumen print, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$
Gift of Shirley C. Burden

Julia Margaret Cameron was a largely talented, highly intelligent, free-spirited, eccentric, financially comfortable Englishwoman who took up photography as a personal adventure, as she might have taken up philanthropy or rose culture. It is said that she was the plain sister in a family of beauties, but that her charm and intelligence made her the most formidable of the six daughters. She and her husband—a high British civil servant—counted among their friends many of the creative heroes of early Victorian England, and Cameron's best-known and most praised works are the portraits that she did of these men. She took them one by one into her studio, a converted chicken coop, where they sat and suffered under the hot skylight until she got them exactly right. Tennyson, Darwin, Carlyle, G. F. Watts, Longfellow, Herschel, and many others suffered her uncompromising attentions, and sometimes later compared among themselves the degree of their suffering. She, on the other hand, said: "When I have such men before my camera, my whole soul has endeavored to do my duty towards them, in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner, as well as the features of the outer man."

Most of her work, however, was done between the holiday visits of these great men, when she made photographs that concerned beauty, King Arthur, myth, the poetry of Tennyson, and the painting of Raphael, as she understood it. For models she used her friends and maids and their friends and children, and converted them by act of will into Biblical heroines, Renaissance cherubs, and Arthurian maidens.

These pictures by Cameron have been something of an embarrassment to her most sympathetic critics during the past generation, a period when photography has seemed ill-adapted to the functions of fiction. Nevertheless, the picture opposite—admittedly one of the less insistently anecdotal of her allegorical works—seems today a splendid picture: strongly constructed, well described, and, more important, strangely moving. The three models are very beautiful, and if the central figure was in fact a teen-aged virgin, she became, for the minutes during which this picture was made, a most persuasive *donna*.

