

## Queen Victoria's Second Passion

Royal patronage of photography in the 19th century

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It was in the year of Queen Victoria's accession to the British throne, 1836, that L.J.M. Daguerre succeeded in making pictures by the first practicable and popular process of photography -the daguerreotype.

It was on the morning of the Queen's proposal to Prince Albert -15 October 1839 - that the first examples of daguerreotypes imported into England from France were presented to Victoria for her inspection. A little later in the day, at about half past twelve, the Queen received Albert alone in her sitting room. She showed Albert the specimens of daguerreotypes, nervously gaining time before she felt confident enough to ask: "I think you must be aware why I asked you to come. Could you forsake your country for me? It would make me *too happy* if you would consent to what I wish."

On this day, Victoria's two passions - Albert and photography - began to develop simultaneously.

Shortly after their marriage the Queen and Prince "expressing their highest admiration of this wonderful discovery" accepted some views of Paris, Rome and other continental cities from Antoine Claudet, pupil of Daguerre and first licensee of the process in England, the only country in the world where the daguerreotype was protected by a patent.

As yet it was not possible to make photographic portraits with the daguerreotype process due to the extremely long necessary exposures. But improvements were rapid, and in March 1841 the first public portrait studio in Europe was opened by ex-coal merchant/patent speculator Richard Beard on top of the Royal Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street, London. Claudet was in competition three months later on the roof of the Royal Adelaide Gallery, behind St. Martins-in-the-Field.

The earliest extant photograph of Prince Albert was taken on the 5 March 1842 - by a daguerreotypist at Brighton. The Queen entered in her diary of the following day: "Albert sat yesterday to a man who makes photographic likenesses." The man was William Constable of The Photographic Institution in Brighton. He "had the honour of

receiving several visits from Prince Albert during the stay of the Court at Brighton and His Royal Highness had several portraits taken."

Around this time, the Queen asked Alfred Chalon, Court painter, if he was worried that the new art of photography would ruin his profession of miniature painting. Chalon was confident that it would not. Replying in his heavily accented English he said: "Ah non, Madame; photographie can't flatte're." And flattery was Chalon's stock in trade; his portraits of the young Queen bear little resemblance to her real appearance. In his excessive zeal to please he made his sitters quite unrecognizable. But Chalon had misread the needs of his subjects, who, in a choice between flattery and believability demanded the seemingly magical reality of the daguerreotype. Also, daguerreotypes were cheaper. Miniature painters, in spite of Chalon's confidence, were hastened out of business by the daguerreotype, and they either became photographers themselves, or worked as colorists in portrait studios.

One such artist who switched sides and joined the swelling ranks of photographic portraitists was Henry Collen, miniature painter and drawing master to the Queen, who opened the first calotype studio in Somerset Street, London, in August 1841. The calotype was a paper/negative system that had been invented by W.H. Fox Talbot and introduced to the public in the same year as the daguerreotype. Collen's photographic miniatures were a compromise between the old art of miniature painting and the new art of photography - they were overpainted paper photographs. The earliest extant photograph of Queen Victoria was almost certainly taken by Collen in 1844 or 1845.

In spite of her enthusiasm for the new art, Queen Victoria was not always enamoured of the results. William Edward Kilburn was favored with a Royal sitting in 1847. The Queen wrote in her diary: "We both sat in the greenhouse (at Buckingham Palace) to Mr. Killburn [sic] for Daguerotypes [sic] which are not much improved to what they were originally... Mine was really very successful. Those of the children are unfortunately entire failures."

Children were notoriously difficult to photograph with the daguerreotype process due to the demand for a rigid pose during a long exposure time, commonly 30 seconds or longer. Kilburn repeated his efforts for the Royal family five years later. On this occasion, the children's portraits were successful but "Mine was unfortunately horrid", said the Queen. Her response was to scratch her face off the plate.

A large proportion of the earliest photographs of the Queen and Prince Albert were not taken by professionals, like Kilburn, but by Albert's librarian, Dr. E. Becker. It was Becker who probably initiated the Royal couple into the relatively simple technique of

the calotype. Becker was one of the finest of the early photographers and he found in Victoria and Albert willing and enthusiastic pupils. A private darkroom was built for their use at Windsor Castle, close to the Royal Apartments.

Albert's equerry, Capt. Dudley (later Lord) de Ros was also an enthusiastic amateur photographer.

By the early 1850s, the Queen and Prince Albert were said to be "well skilled and practised in the art of photography." *The Illustrated Magazine of Art* considered her Majesty and Prince Albert "well known to be no mean proficient in photography, as in other elegant pursuits."

When the Photographic Society of London was formed in 1853, the Queen became its patron. One of her first acts in this capacity was to visit the exhibition of approximately 1,500 examples of members' work, on 3 January 1854. She wrote:

*...at 10 we went up to London, well wrapped up in furs, and drove at once to Suffolk Street to visit the Photographic Exhibition, Sir C. Eastlake meeting us there. It was most interesting and there are three rooms full of the most beautiful specimens, some from France and Germany, and many by amateurs. Mr. Fenton, who belongs to the Society, explained everything and there were many beautiful photographs done by him. Profr Wheatstone, the inventor of the stereoscope, was also there. Some of the landscapes were exquisite and many admirable portraits. A set of photos of the animals at the Zoological Gardens by Don Juan, 2nd son of Don Carlos, are almost the finest of all the specimens...*

To give the new society, and the medium, every possible encouragement, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited its annual exhibition every year, frequently accompanied by several of their children in whom they wished to instill a similar interest.

In 1894 the Queen commanded that the Society should be known as The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, a name which it holds to this day.

The first exhibition of the Society was a particularly valuable event for its Secretary, Roger Fenton, who had been introduced to the Royal couple by Dr. Becker, a co-founder with Fenton of the Society.

Quickly, Fenton became a favorite photographer of the Queen's. By the end of the month he had already received Royal commissions. The famous series which he took of the Royal children, "The Seasons", was produced at Windsor Castle on 4 and 6 February, 1854. In March, also on Royal assignment, Fenton photographed the British

Navy at Spithead, including a classic picture of the "Victory at Harbour". In May, at Buckingham Palace, Fenton photographed the Queen in her Court dress, with and without Prince Albert. He had at least five Royal commissions in that same month. This photographic intimacy with the Royals made Fenton the ideal candidate when a particularly sensitive commission arose.

It was at the Queen's express wish that Fenton documented the Crimean war. His task was to counteract the horrendous stories of filth, disease and death that had been filed in *The Times* by William Howard Russell. Fenton was given Royal letters of introduction to ambassadors and governors along the route and to the commanders in the field. In consequence, Fenton was accorded every consideration and facility; in consequence, his photographs are a whitewash of a dirty war. Without the Queen's patronage it is doubtful if the subsequent mammoth publication, and the London one-man show, would have been possible.

The high esteem in which Fenton's work was held, and the importance attached to his propaganda mission through the reality of photography, can be gauged from the fact that he was commanded to Osborne for a Royal audience immediately on his return to England in July 1855. He was sick, and was given the unusual privilege of being allowed to lie down in the Royal presence. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert took about 20 of the Crimean photographs to Paris on their state visit in August and displayed them proudly to Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie.

A very different type of photograph took the Royal fancy when the Queen visited the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in June 1857. Here she saw one of the most ambitious art photographs of the 19th century: "The Two Ways of Life" by Oscar Rejlander, a Swedish painter turned photographer, who was living and working in Wolverhampton. His composition was the most elaborate production intended to compete with the accepted academic style of the period. It was created by printing on a single sheet of paper over 30 separate negatives; an additional sensation being the partly nude figures. Greatly impressed by this latest advance in High Art photography, the Queen bought the print, priced at 10 guineas, for Prince Albert. Although Albert the Good hardly needed a constant reminder of which way of life to take, the picture hung in his study at Windsor Castle until the accession of his son, Bertie, who became Edward VII.

An example of the Queen commissioning a series of photographs occurred on the occasion of the Prince of Wales' educational tour of the Middle East, in February 1862, only two months after Albert's death.

At the last possible moment one of the finest 19th century English landscape photographers, Francis Bedford, was commanded to accompany the Prince and his small, select group of travelling companions. Under enormous technical and logistical difficulties, Bedford succeeded in making over 200 large format glass negatives. 172 from this total were exhibited at the German Gallery, Bond Street, London, on his return, and also issued in 21 parts, each containing 8 or more prints. The cost of the entire series was 43 guineas - a handsome sum indeed, and many workmen would have been delighted if it was their annual income.

Many, many other photographers were commissioned by the Queen for specific assignments and not a few of them were given the special accolade of a Royal Warrant. In 1847 William Edward Kilburn was appointed "Photographist to Her Majesty and His Royal Highness Prince Albert" - the first of many photographers to receive this honour. Around 1848 Nicolaas Henneman, one time valet and assistant to Fox Talbot, was appointed "Her Majesty's photographer on paper"; in 1860 George Washington Wilson was appointed "Photographer Royal for Scotland." Other photographers frequently in demand by the Queen and Prince either for portraits or for photographic surveys of the royal residences were William Lake Price, Bambridge, Alexander Bassano, W. and D. Downey, Vernon Heath, J. E. Mayall, Horatio Nelson King, T. R. Williams, Hills and Saunders, and so on. Not only was Royal patronage a singular honor, but also the photographers often held warrants of appointment from the Lord Chamberlain, with authority to use the Royal Arms in association with their names and businesses.

In addition to commissioning photographers, the Royal couple were assiduous in the collecting of images.

At a meeting of the Photographic Society, Prince Albert revealed his commitment to the medium by suggesting the need for the Society to establish a permanent collection of important photographs. A committee was formed but, typically, no action was taken until 30 years later, when much irreplaceable material had already disappeared. The Royal couple, however, practised what they preached, and collected photographs with a passion. One of Queen Victoria's ladies-in-waiting, the Hon. Eleanor Stanley, wrote home on 24 November 1860: "I have been writing to all the fine ladies in London for their and their husbands photographs for the Queen. I believe the Queen could be bought and sold, for a photograph."

The Queen and her Consort obviously derived much pleasure from examining and arranging the photographs in their albums. Few days passed without Victoria sending for one volume or another, all of which were methodically catalogued with their contents arranged in systematic order. Photographs for these albums were commissioned,

bought at exhibition, exchanged with related royal families abroad, or simply requested. The Queen even had a standing order with her favorite photographers for one print of every picture they made.

On Victoria's death there was a massive house-cleaning under the direction of her son, now King Edward VII. Thousands of loose photographs which his parents had treasured were burnt, but even the remains will indicate the extent of the Royal passion for photography - over 100,000 photographs survived in 110 albums.

The Royal taste in photography was catholic, and the subjects include family portraits, likenesses of practically every Victorian with a claim to distinction, all European heads of state, reproductions and documents of paintings, engravings, sculptures, silver and other treasures of the Royal archives, memorials of Royal events such as christenings, confirmations, weddings and anniversaries, military campaigns, royal residences, prize bulls and pigs on the royal farms, servants who had worked for the Queen for a long period (including John Meakin "who has woven her Majesty's hose for 60 years"), visiting entertainers (including Gen. Tom Thumb's performance in 1846), and the Royal pets. "Nothing brutalises human beings more," she said "than cruelty to poor dumb animals, whose plaintive looks for help ought to melt the hardest heart." But this sentiment did not extend to poor wild animals, equally dumb, and many a stag shot by Prince Albert is proudly displayed in her albums. Every photograph for possible inclusion in the Royal albums has to pass through her hands for a close inspection.

The Queen not only commissioned and collected photographs but presented prints on every possible occasion. In particular, anniversaries were always commemorated with the giving of photographs. Queen Victoria secretly sent Francis Bedford back to Albert's home town of Coburg to photograph local views so that she could present the prints to her beloved Consort on his birthday. In 1878, on the "blessed anniversary" of Albert's death, Princess Beatrice received an enamel photograph of "our dear Mausoleum" - which must have been a real thrill for the 21 year old young lady. She was not the only disappointed recipient. Gladstone was annoyed to receive on his retirement what he called "a two-penny-half penny scrap" (pronounced 'tuppny-haypny', as a term of derision) whereas other Prime Ministers had received the Queen's portrait in oil or bronze. In fact, the recipient's status as regards the Queen could often be gauged by the presentation of the picture. For example, no fewer than 20 copies of the Princess Royal's 16th birthday photograph appear on one list in the Queen's handwriting in which she clearly states whether the recipients should have the photograph penny plain or two penny coloured, framed or unframed.

On Albert's death the Queen gave her ladies gold or drop-pearl pendants containing a

tiny photograph. She herself always wore a bracelet with an enamelled photograph of her husband and some locks of his hair. All the private apartments in every Royal residence were photographed and the contents catalogued immediately after his death. In this way a rapid visual comparison between the photograph and the room itself would ascertain if an object had been moved. Wherever the Queen slept, a portrait of Albert hung over the empty pillow beside her.

During Albert's life he was no less enthusiastic for photography than Victoria. When cataloguing of the collection of Raphael drawings began at Windsor in 1852, Prince Albert conceived the idea of illustrating the project with a complete set of photographic reproductions of the painter's entire artistic output. The majority of the photographs were commissioned by the Prince, others were obtained by asking owners of Raphael material to have the works photographed. This mammoth project occupied the Prince for the rest of his life; it was privately printed in 1876. It is still an important source of reference for Raphael scholars.

We have already mentioned Albert's suggestion to the Photographic Society that a permanent collection should be instigated. Another of his suggestions, which met with greater success due to the Prince's personal involvement, was that a committee should be formed to investigate the causes of fading in photographs, a major defect of the medium at the time. The Prince donated 50 pounds towards the expenses. A distinguished team of photographer/scientists was appointed and began experiments. Unfortunately, the report was not ready for ten years, long after Albert had died. Meanwhile, hearing in 1855 that a Frenchman, Blanquart-Evrard, was producing prints that did not fade, Albert dispatched Dr. Becker to Lille with instructions to buy the secret of the process, for the benefit of the photographic world. The Frenchman declined to reveal his technique. Shortly afterwards, the Prince heard that Thomas Sutton had also discovered a method of making permanent prints, and he was encouraged by Albert to open a commercial printing plant at St. Brelade's, Jersey. For reasons unknown, Blanquart-Evrard became Sutton's partner. Their advertisements boasted: "founded at the suggestion of, and patronized by, His Royal Highness, Prince Albert."

The Queen valued permanency in photography as much as Albert. She spent more than 1,200 pounds having her most treasured prints copied by the stable carbon process. As a measure of her concern, the average *annual* wage of a working man of the time was about 50 pounds.

She made every effort to interest her children in the enjoyable and instructive art of photography. She gave several of her children photographic outfits and arranged lessons for them from well-known photographers. Prince Alfred learned the technique

of photography before travelling to South Africa in 1860. In order that he should have access to further information during the voyage, the Queen commissioned Frederick York to accompany him. Prince Alfred became an enthusiastic photographer, undertaking all aspects of the messy wet-plate process himself. And "messy" is the appropriate word. Even the Queen's enthusiasm for photography was dampened when photographers dripped silver nitrate across the Royal marble and carpets. The only solvent for these black stains was the toxic potassium cyanide. In 1861, wet-plate workers were banned from the Royal dwellings.

Albert, the Prince of Wales, was also taught photography by William Ackland and Francis Bedford, and the latter accompanied Bertie on his educational tour of the Middle East, as already mentioned. The Prince made daily enquiries into Bedford's photographic progress and occasionally tried his hand at the focusing and making the exposure - after Bedford had prepared the plate. On his return, Bertie became the President of the Amateur Photographic Association.

Prince Leopold was said to be a better photographer than his brothers (although I have never seen examples of his work). Only Prince Arthur did not attempt photography, as far as we know.

By the 1880s the inconvenient, cumbersome and messy wet-plate process had given way to dry-plates and hand cameras - more suitable for the Royal ladies. Princesses Beatrice, Louise, Victoria, Maude, Princess Christian of Hesse and Princess Henry of Battenburg, were all accomplished amateur photographers. But undoubtedly the most successful and enthusiastic photographer in the Royal household from the late 1880s was Princess Alexandria, wife of Bertie. She made snapshots of practically every member of the Royal family, on all of their excursions. Her work was exhibited in 1897 side by side with the most celebrated photographers of the day (including H. P. Robinson, George Davison, Frederick H. Evans, J. Craig Annan, A. Horsley Hinton). Her pictures were published in *The Graphic* in August 1905 and in book form in 1908.

Queen Victoria herself remained an avid photographer and was often pictured holding a hand camera, although, like most people of "taste and refinement" loathed the rudeness and aggression of amateur snapshot pests.

Some time in the 1880s, Queen Victoria felt the need for a private photographer to service her needs, and appointed Alexander Henderson to the position. After Henderson's retirement due to ill-health, this position was occupied by a Mr. Cleave. Mountains of photographs continued to accumulate and - as *The Photographic News* remarked - it almost became necessary to create a new Court position, Comptroller of

Photographs.

New advances in photographic science were particularly rapid in the 1890s. The two most consequential were the introduction of X-rays and the cinematograph. Queen Victoria was touched by both. In 1897 a magazine reported that the Royal kitchens were using X-rays in order to detect "stray fragments of bone, elusive plum stones and so forth, that may find their way into the royal abdomen."

With more evidence, it is known that W. and D. Downey, well known photographers to the Queen, travelled to Balmoral, the Royal residence in Scotland, in 1896 in order to make the first moving pictures of Victoria, her children and her relations.

The Queen's enthusiasm for photography had spanned and accompanied its entire history to that date - from the very first daguerreotypes seen in England, through the calotype, wet-plate and permanent processes, into the era of the hand camera and snapshot and, at the end, motion pictures.

*1988.*