

P13. A Crowd of Hopes and Winged Lies

Photography Seeks to Become a "Fine Art"

WC 3522

For many of its early years, photography was almost universally praised for its objectivity and capacity to record fine detail. However, as the 19th Century progressed and wet collodion and later, gelatin plates and film became commonplace, many photographers grew bored with the restrictions the technology seemed to impose, wanting to venture — so it seemed — into the creative high-ground claimed by painters. This led to a plethora of new techniques for producing an image which in some way or another, looked more like paintings and those who adopted this view and used the techniques are generally called the *Pictorialists*.

Making Photographs More "Artistic"

One of the most common features of the works of Pictorialist photographers was the use of *soft focus* — not to be confused with *out of focus* — in which gauze or



a sheet of glass smeared with Vaseline was placed in front of the lens during picture taking. They also used special filters which, for example, emphasised cloud formations, and a variety of arcane and exotic printing techniques, most of which by now have long gone out of fashion.

Robert Demachy (attrib.) "Mother and Child on the Dunes", Gum print, c1900, Brittany France.

These included:

Gum bichromate: In this process, a heavy watercolour paper is coated with a mixture of gum (usually Gum Arabic) and Potassium or Ammonium dichromate (previously called bichromate) and the artists' pigment of choice. When dry, the paper is exposed under the negative to ultra-violet light, usually in the form of sunlight, and necessarily for a long time because the potassium or ammonium dichromate is not particularly light sensitive. However, where the ultraviolet light does affect it, that is, in the shadows of the image, the gum is hardened by the dichromate so that when washed in clean water, the highlights wash away and the shadows, now permanently trapped in the hardened gum, remain to make up the image. The process usually required several repetitions, each image varnished

between repetitions to protect it. Some photographers took advantage of this to use different coloured pigments and so obtain a coloured photograph.



Henry Dixon: Male lion lying in the Zoo, Carbon print, c.1901

The carbon process: although this process evolved into varieties of colour printing, including the dye transfer process and more recently, into Cibachrome, it was initially a monochrome process based on lamp black which, as in the gum bichromate process above, was mixed with potassium or ammonium dichromate but, in this case, in a gelatin base — the dichromate when exposed to ultraviolet light also hardens gelatin. A fine tissue was then impregnated with this mixture and allowed to dry in the dark. After exposure, the image was washed and the tissue carrying the

image imbedded with in was then attached to a quality paper backing. Although invented as a means of making early photographs more permanent by Alphonse

Poitevin in 1855, this process was patented in 1864 by Sir Joseph Wilson Swan, the inventor of bromide paper and of the electric light bulb.



*Charles Walton
Rocks laneway, c. 1935
Bromoil, Australia²*

Bromoil: This was an immensely popular process around the "turn of the century" but as these two Australian images show, enjoyed a

¹ Catalogue for *Dargate Auction Galleries Llc*, Fine Arts Auction April 28th, 29th & 30th, 2006
http://www.dargate.com/249_auction/249_images/249books.htm

² From *eye4photography*, <http://image.sl.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/photoshow.pl?doc=photo2005/a745;seq=12> © State Library of New South Wales 2007

dedicated following among photographers until quite recently. Bromoil depended on the ability of water to repel oil. A print was first made on bromide paper. This was preferably a fairly low contrast print or, alternatively, the print could be taken from the developer before it was fully developed. It was then fixed in a non-hardening fixing bath of 25% hypo. A special copper bleach was then used to remove the silver in the image, leaving a very weak, soft brown residual. Most importantly, the bleach hardens the exposed areas of the print in proportion to the amount of silver removed. The print is then fixed again, washed and dried. The second stage of the bromoil involves first thoroughly soaking the print, and then using a brush, a stiff lithographic ink is applied to the surface. Only those areas which had been hardened (and therefore remained dry after the last soaking) absorb the oil-based ink, the areas which were the highlights repulsing the ink as it was brushed over them.

Bromoil transfer: This is really a second stage bromoil — the inked print is

placed on a sheet of paper and the two passed through an etching press where much of the ink is transferred to the new paper. The big advantages of this is that you can make many copies and you can choose the kind of paper on which the transfer will be printed.



*Mallard, Henri, 1884-1967³.
Break-o-day, railway siding
1939. bromoil transfer, Australia*

Platinum Prints: Not all of the attempts by photographers to be more "artistic" relied upon

replacing the image on a print with some kind of ink or pigment. Until the precious metal became too expensive in the late Edwardian era, *platinum printing* was very popular. This relied upon the sensitivity of some iron salts, such as iron oxalate, to ultraviolet light which reduces it to metallic iron which in turn reacts with platinum salts to produce a deposit of metallic platinum. The iron is then removed, leaving only the very stable platinum to make up the image.

³ From the Digital Collections of the National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an5770738>



*Peter Henry Emerson
Rowing Home the School-
Stuff, 1886, Platinum print⁴*

Platinum printing was patented in 1873 by Englishman, William Willis⁵, although the light sensitivity of platinum, particularly in the presence of

iron oxalate, had been known for a long time. First described by Ferdinand Gehlen in 1830, the light sensitivity of platinum salts was also investigated by — among others— both Sir John Herschel and Robert Hunt in England, while in France, the Duc de Luynes had described gold and platinum printing to the French Photographic Society in 1859. However, it was William Willis who eventually brought the process to a refined and practicable position in the repertoire of photographers and being the first to market papers specially prepared for the process. Later, other metals in the platinum group, such as *palladium* were recruited into photography.

Photographers have continued to mourn the loss of platinum papers. The beauty of a platinum print with its deep rich blacks and extraordinarily long tonal range is without equal. Foremost among the greatest names in platinum printing were Peter Henry Emerson, Clarence White, and Frederick Evans of whom we will hear more later....

*Edward Weston -
Portrait of Photographer John Hagemeyer
Palladium print
1921, USA.⁶*



⁴ Illustration to BBC notice about a major exhibition of the work of Peter Henry Emerson at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television in Bradford, England, 2007 -

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/06/in_pictures_peter_henry_emerson_/html/1.stm

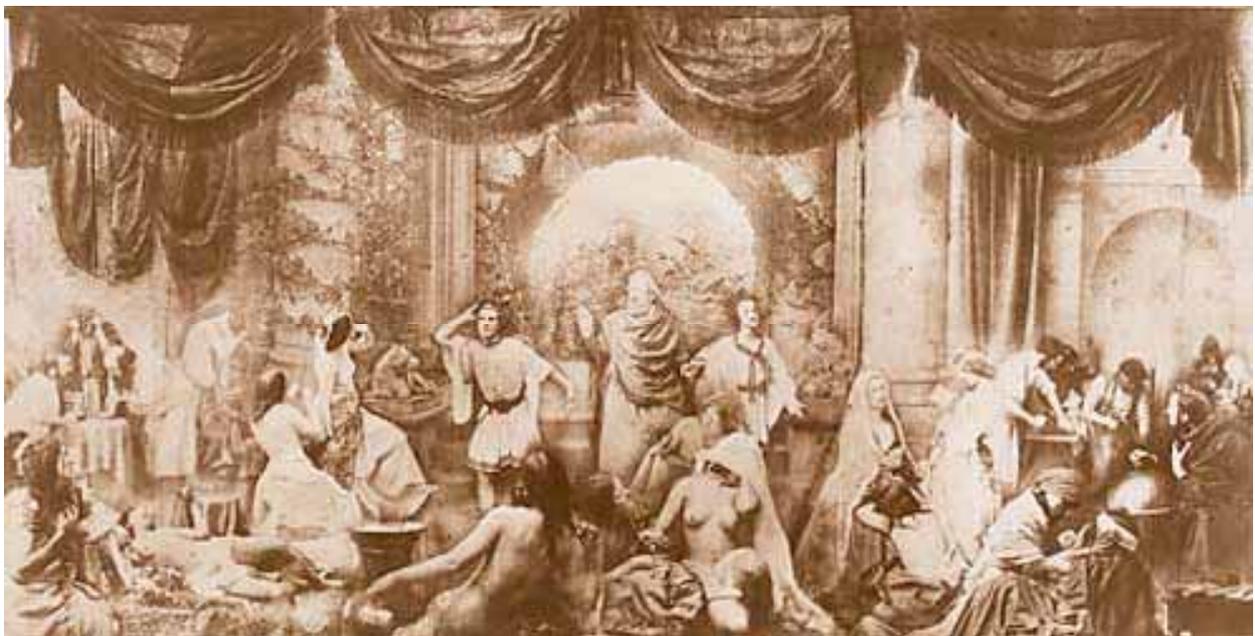
⁵ Hafey, J. & Shillea, T.: *The Platinum Print and the History of the Platinum Process*, www.kimeia.com/pdf/history.pdf

⁶ *In Praise of Pictorialism: Early Pictorial Photography*, <http://www.iphotocentral.com/showcase/detail.php/93/1/0/14/11818>

Toning: Toning was, and still is, a popular after-treatment of photographic prints and is used to alter the colour and composition of the image. Although primarily aesthetic in purpose, toning also can make prints much more resistant to fading. Selenium, sulphide and to a lesser extent, gold toning are all used, although *gold toning* has always been less popular not only because of the cost but also because its blue-black tones make a photograph appear too cold⁷. *Selenium* also enhances the blacks but the tone is not as cold as that of gold. *Sulphide* toning has always been perhaps the most popular, producing the well-known sepia tone, but it is also the most effective for archival purposes. Less archival, but producing a wide range of tones from a rich black through reds and purples is *copper* toning. *Blue* tones can be produced using a toning bath which contains potassium ferricyanide, sulfuric acid and ferric ammonium citrate. The result is not always a subtle colour, the Prussian blue approaching that of blue prints or, with skilful manipulation, the more delicate *cyanotypes* of Sir John Herschel.

These and many other techniques, including scratching marks and lines on the negative or abrading the print, were all used by the Pictorialists in the closing years of the 19th Century as part of their campaign to make photography into a fine art. Most of the techniques also continued to be used throughout much of the 20th Century although those who did tended to be specialist fans of a particular technique than the average run of serious photographers.

Three Great Pictorialists



Gustav Rejlander: The Two Ways of Life, combination print, 1857

Gustav Rejlander (1817 – 1875) became famous for combination printing, that is, combining parts of different negatives to produce one picture. His most famous

⁷ I once was privileged to see an exhibition of Frank Hurley's photographs taken in Antarctica where the gold toning worked wonderfully in favour of the images of ice and ice-bergs.

picture, *The Two Ways of Life*, showed a sage guiding two young men towards manhood: one looks to the profligate life, the other to industry, good works and family. This picture, huge for its time — it measured 30x16" — was the result of combining 30 different negatives, each of a model dressed and playing the part required for the allegory. Shown in Manchester in 1857, *The Two Ways of Life* caused a scandal, not because some of the figures were nude (Victorians were accustomed to nudity in paintings) but because such nakedness was shown in a photograph!⁸

Henry Peach Robinson (1830–1901) was one of the leading figures in the Pictorialist movement of whom we will hear more a little later. He had been trained as a painter and is remembered as one of the inventors of *photo montage* although, in his time, this was called *combination printing*. It is important to remember that this technique was often used to compensate for the limitations of the photographic technology of the time — for example, in landscape photography, the emulsion usually could not properly expose both ground and sky so separate negatives would be exposed and later combined in the printing. We were still doing this in the 1960s... probably every serious amateur photographer had a small collection of "cloud negatives" which could be spliced into the final photograph.



*Henry Peach Robinson:
Figures in Landscape
Albumen Print from two
or more negatives,
c. 1880⁹*

Despite his advocacy of this process, Robinson was also warned others, perhaps less skilful than he, about the danger inherent in the practise:

It is true that combination printing, allowing, as it does, much greater liberty to the photographer, and much greater facilities for representing the truth of nature, also admits, from these very facts, of a wide latitude for abuse; but the photographer must accept the conditions at his own peril. If he find that he is not sufficiently advanced in his knowledge of art, and has not sufficient reverence for nature, to allow him to make use of these liberties,

⁸ <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/rejlande.htm>

⁹ www.photographymuseum.com/phofictionsmontages...

let him put on his fetters again, and confine himself to one plate. It is certain (and this I will put in italics, to impress it more strongly on the memory) that a photograph produced by combination printing must be deeply studied in every particular, so that no shall be discovered by the closest scrutiny. No two things must occur in one picture that cannot happen in nature at the same time.

Giorgio Sommer (1834-1914): *The Tarantella*
Albumen print c.1880



tramp (the *lazzarone*) behind them, they are gazing away from the action of the dance¹⁰.

This combination print is included in the American Museum of Photography's *Photographic Fictions* exhibition as an example of what happens when, in Robinson's words, there is a *departure from the truth of nature*.

While there are a number of faults in this combination print, the most glaring error is that the two children in the foreground are badly out of proportion and, like the



Julia Margaret Cameron:

As perhaps the most famous woman photographer of her time — probably of the entire 19th Century — this middle-aged lady living on the Isle of Wight has the best established place in our history books.

Julia Margaret Cameron: Annie, My First success,
January 1864

In 1863, when she was 48 years old, Mrs Cameron was given a camera by her newly-married daughter with the words: *It may amuse you, Mother, to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater.*

Those words and the camera — as Mrs Cameron recalled in an article she wrote in 1874 for the Chicago-based *Photo*

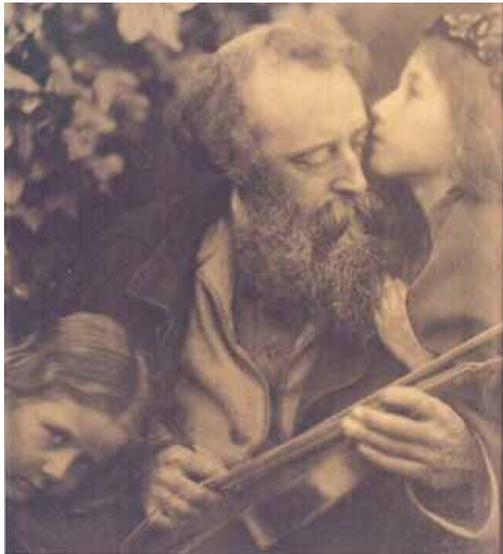
*Beacon*¹¹ — launched a passionate photographic career which would end only

¹⁰ www.photography-museum.com/phofictionsmontages...

with her death in 1879 at the age of 68. From the moment she first tried her new camera, Cameron was obsessed, working "*fruitlessly, but not hopelessly*" as she said,

.....*A crowd of hopes
That sought to sow themselves like winged lies
Born out of everything I heard and saw
Fluttered about my senses and my soul.*

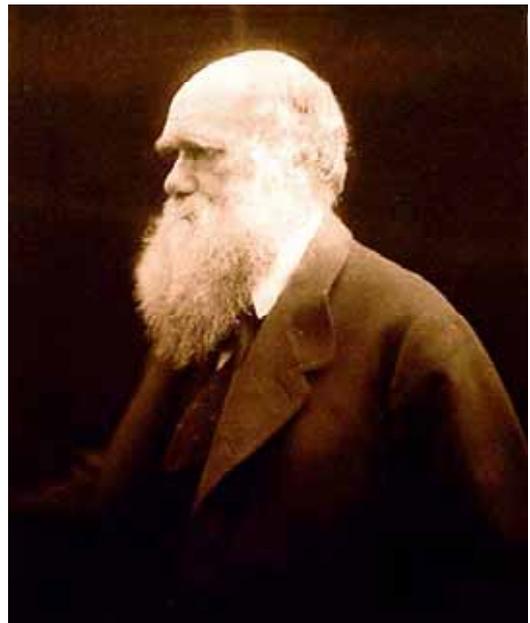
Although Julia Margaret Cameron has often been criticised on technical grounds,



her photographs contain a freshness and a sincerity usually not achieved by her contemporaries. She used her family and friends — many of whom were illustrious men of their times, such as Charles Darwin and Sir John Herschel — as her subjects, sometimes in straight and telling portraits, but often also in those allegorical *genre* pictures so favoured by the Victorians. In the 20 years Mrs Cameron was active, she took over 3000 large format wet collodion negatives.

*Julia Margaret Cameron:
Whisper the Muse, 1865*

Although genre photographs like *Whisper the Muse* of 1865 do not appeal much to the modern taste, Cameron's portraits leave us impressed by their integrity and their sense of intimacy, perhaps because Cameron did not use a head rest, even though her exposures often had to be as long as 5 minutes. This allowed her sitters to relax and behave more naturally. She also habitually moved in very close to the subject, using a long lens, thus focussing the viewer's attention firmly on the features and not on extraneous, if decorative background then in fashion. Her portrait of Sir John Herschel is perhaps the best-known but another, no less interesting is that of Charles Darwin. Of this portrait, Darwin himself once wrote: *I like this Photograph very much better than any other which has been taken of me.*



*Julia Margaret Cameron: Charles Darwin
Albumen print, 11.25 x 9.5 inches, 1868*

¹¹ reprinted as *The Annals of My Glass House*, in Newhall, B: (ed) - *Photography: Essays & Images – Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, Museum of Modern art, NY, 1980, Pp.135-139.



However, I think my favourite of all the Julia Margaret Cameron portraits I have seen is *The Mountain Nymph, Sweet Liberty*.

Julia Margaret Cameron: The Mountain Nymph, Sweet Liberty - 1866

This rather haunting portrait is of Cyllene Margaret Wilson who was adopted as a girl by Mrs Cameron. The title is taken from Milton's *Allegro*:

*Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe,
And in thy right hand lead with thee
The Mountain Nymph, Sweet Liberty.*

Promoting the Art and Science of Photography

By 1880, photography was not only a thriving industry, churning out the millions of CDVs, Cabinets and stereographs we have already mentioned, but it was also the hobby of the masses. This "popularisation" of photography was in no small degree due to the influence of the Royal Photographic Society which, in its turn, was promoted by the Great Exhibition of 1851. As a result of the public interest engendered by the Exhibition, an exhibition was held on 22nd December in the following year at the Royal Society of Arts, in London, at which more than 700 photographs were displayed. One of the photographers whose work was on



exhibition was Roger Fenton who later would become famous for photographing the Crimean War. However, it was Fenton who took the opportunity while at the 1852 Photographic Soirée to propose the foundation of a photographic society.

*An outing of the Oxford
Photographic Society c1890*

Along with photographs by Fenton were those by *inter alia* Delamotte, DuCamp and most significantly, Fox Talbot. Talbot, it should be remembered, held the patent on the Calotype process and had proved quite litigious when it came to policing it. However, after long negotiations, he agreed to grant a licence to members of a photographic society provided they did not make photographs by way of trade. So, with the troublesome Henry Fox Talbot cooperating, on 20 January 1853 a public meeting was held at the Royal Art Society and it was agreed to form a *Photographic Society*, the aims of which would be:

*...the promotion of the Art and Science of Photography, by the interchange of thought and experience among Photographers, and it is hoped that this object may, to some considerable extent, be effected by the periodical meetings of the Society.*¹²



Roger Fenton: Scene from Balaclava, Crimean War.

Although Fox Talbot was invited to become the first President of the newly-formed society, he declined and the honour went to Sir Charles Eastlake who, at that time was the President of the Royal Academy. Assisting him was Roger Fenton as the first Secretary. Six months later, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert

agreed to become Patrons and by the end of its first year, the new Society had 370 members. In 1894, Queen Victoria granted the title of "Royal" so thereafter it has been known as the *Royal Photographic Society* or more commonly, the *RPS*.

In his on-line history of photography, Robert Leggat¹³ draws attention to the conflict between art and science inherent in the published aims of the RPS when they refer to *...the promotion of the Art and Science of Photography*. Photography was a complex and technical process and this, along with its reputation for objectivity, encouraged many to consider it more appropriately a science than an art. On the other hand, many of its practitioners were artists, often — as we have seen with David O Hill in Scotland — taking up photography to assist them with their painting or, in Scott Archer's case, his sculpture.

Those interested in Photography for Arts sake tended to be overshadowed for many of the early years while the scientific aspects of photography were

¹² This was published in the first edition of the new Society's *Journal* on 3rd March 1853. Four thousand copies were printed every month.

¹³ http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/royal_ph.htm. Much of the above has been taken from Leggat's article, *The Origins of the Royal Photographic Society*.

emphasised in the proceedings of the Society. So, for example, when the photographic chemist, Sir William Abney became President in 1856, he proclaimed in his inaugural address that:

"One of the main objects, I should say the main object of the Society, must be to encourage the scientific aspect of photography..... stick to science though the art critics denounce.." ¹⁴

However, by the 1880s the number of photographers interested in the artistic side of photography had grown and become more vocal. A little later, in *The Photographic News* of 19th August 1892, the much-respected Vice-President of the Society, Henry Peach



Robinson expressed the views of many when he wrote:

"If photography is ever to take up its proper position as an art it must detach itself from science and live a separate existence."

The picture, reproduced from Amateur Photographer, shows the Salon's exhibition hall in 1902

Robinson resigned from the Society and took many other influential photographers with him. Then, in May 1892, he founded *The Linked Ring* which, in Leggat's words, was

.....a brotherhood consisting of a group of photographers based in London, pledged to enhance photography as a fine art. Famous members of this brotherhood (which was by invitation only - one could not apply for it) included Frank Sutcliffe, Frederick Evans, Paul Martin, and Alfred Stieglitz. ¹⁵

This brotherhood was

a means of bringing together those who are interested in the development of the highest form of Art of which Photography is capable.

When *The Linked Ring* staged its first exhibition in November 1893, it chose to call it a *Salon*, probably better to associate it with painterly shows. This became an important annual event, hanging the work of photographers from abroad as well as

¹⁴ Quoted in Leggat, R: *The Linked Ring*, at http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/linked_r.htm.

¹⁵ Ibid.

from Great Britain. *The Linked Ring* also published *Photograms of the Year*, a book which famously kept photographers around the world in touch with contemporary trends and developments in photography as an art-form.

This international inclusiveness was not to last: by 1908, more than 60% of the pictures on exhibition at the *Salon* were from America; annoyed, the members, most of whom were British, amended the rules for the 1909 Salon which in turn led to the resignation of several of the most influential American members, including Stieglitz and White. This was a chain reaction, *The Linked Ring* fell into confusion and disbanded. In 1910, the *London Salon* — which is still going strong — took its place with a new exhibition.

Photography for Its Own Sake

While Henry Peach Robinson was calling for Photography for Arts' Sake, others were calling for Photography for its own sake. Foremost among these was Dr Peter Henry Emerson who, in 1889 when Pictorialism was at its high, published a book called *Naturalistic Photography for Students of Art*. In this, he argued that photography need not — indeed, should not — attempt to emulate other arts because it was an art in its own right and should be practised accordingly. Emerson suggested there was no need for the complicated treatments his contemporary photographers were inflicting upon their photographs, that instead of resorting to combination printing or techniques such as bromoil and soft focus, all they had to do was look in their viewfinder and make a picture of what they saw therein. A students, he said, should



..try to produce one picture of his own...which shall show the author has something to say and knows how to say it; that is something to have accomplished...¹⁶

Peter Henry Emerson. The Clay Mill from "Pictures of East Anglian Life", 1888.¹⁷

¹⁶ Robert Leggat: *Naturalistic Photography*, at <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/naturali.htm>

¹⁷ www.document.no/2006/10/