

## PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE ROYAL COLLECTION

Transcript of the illustrated talk *PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE ROYAL COLLECTION* by Alessandro Nasini (Curator of Photographs, Royal Collection Trust)

Access the talk here: <https://sightsof wonder.barber.org.uk/discover-more/>

Hello. My name is Alessandro Nasini, I am Curator of Photographs at the Royal Collection Trust.

During this talk, I would like to introduce you to the Photograph Collection, which is part of The Royal Collection, one of the largest and most important art collections in the world. It is held in trust by Her Majesty The Queen for her successors and the Nation.

It can be enjoyed by visiting various royal residences, through our exhibitions and extensive loan programme, as well as virtually, through our website: [www.rct.uk](http://www.rct.uk)

The Photograph Collection contains around half a million items, dating from the early 1840s all the way through to the present day. It mostly consists of paper-based material, as one would expect, but we also have a considerable and important collection of original negatives, dating from the 1850s to the mid-20th century, as well as small pockets of other material, such as moving pictures, and some photographic equipment.

The photograph collection is mostly housed at Windsor Castle, specifically in the Round Tower, a building which we share with the Royal Archives.

The collection started to take form, in its present state, during the late 1960s-early 1970s, when the growing interest in the history of photography prompted the gathering together of photographs that were previously located in various royal residences and locations, including the Royal Archives, the Royal Library and the Print Room. Its first dedicated Curator was appointed in 1974.

The origins of the collection itself, however, date back to almost the very birth of photography, which is traditionally considered the 7th January 1839, when the photographic process developed by Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre, known as the daguerreotype process, was publicly announced at the French Academy of Sciences in Paris.

The earliest item in the photograph collection is this daguerreotype of Prince Albert. It is the only surviving daguerreotype of a small series taken in Brighton in March 1842 by William Constable, owner of one of the first photographic studios in Britain.

It is perhaps not a coincidence the fact that the earliest surviving item in the collection is an image of Prince Albert. The Prince, in fact, took an interest in the new medium almost immediately following the announcement of its invention.

In April 1840, both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, then in the second month of their marriage, had the opportunity to examine examples of daguerreotypes imported from the continent. The couple also purchased some of these daguerreotypes but, unfortunately, they are not part of the collection anymore.

In the same year, 1840, archival sources report that the royal couple were shown photogenic drawings made by Henry Fox Talbot through some female relations of his: one of whom was the queen's Lady of the Bedchamber, and one a Lady in Waiting.

Henry Fox Talbot was a British scientist who invented another early photographic process called 'Calotype'. This process, which Fox Talbot had developed independently from Daguerre in the 1830s, had the advantage of producing a paper negative in the camera, from which countless positive copies could be produced. This is the basic operating principle for traditional photography until the advent of digital photography in the 1980s.

The daguerreotype, on the other hand, is a unique object in which the photographic image is formed on a silver surface over a copper plate.

Of course, both processes would have produced monochrome photographs. However, it was also possible to add colour by hand to either type of photograph, in particular for portraits, often making a daguerreotype, as in this example, more closely resemble a painted miniature.

In March 1842, only after about three weeks since he had his own portrait taken by William Constable, Prince Albert attended a private demonstration of

Richard Beard's photographic process in his studio in London. A newspaper article from the time reported that the prince took 'much interest in the method of taking portraits and in the various processes the picture undergoes'. It also reported that a portrait of the Duke of Sutherland attracted the attention of the prince, who decided to acquire it. And it is probably the daguerreotype displayed here.

Prince Albert's ambition was, quoting from his biography by Sir Theodore Martin, to become a patron of 'artists [seen as] men of learning and science'. Prince Albert soon realised that photography combined two of his main interests: science and technology on one hand and the arts on the other.

He saw photography as both an art form in its own right and as a scientific instrument to record and disseminate information, including, but certainly not limited to, other works of art.

Becoming President of the Royal Society of Arts from 1843 gave the prince the opportunity to champion his belief in the application of photography for art, science and industry. His continuous support for the new medium found fertile ground in the artistic and scientific communities of the time and at the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which Prince Albert played a major role as co-organiser, around 700 photographs were displayed within two of the thirty categories into which the exhibition had been divided.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert lent items from their own collection to be displayed at the exhibition, such as this daguerreotype of the famous Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, taken by William Kilburn in 1848.

The Great Exhibition was an enormous success overall, but it also represented the beginning of a new and exciting era for photography. This was also aided by a new invention developed by Frederick Scott Archer and made public in 1851: the wet collodion process.

This method used a sheet of transparent glass as the support for a photo-sensitive layer which would record an image through a camera with exceptional clarity. The added advantage was that it could be used as a negative to create countless positive prints, similarly to a calotype, but it could also be processed as a unique positive, called ambrotype, somewhat similar to a daguerreotype.

In December 1852, London hosted the first large-scale exhibition of photographs in Britain. Around 800 photographs were on display, many of which had been produced with the wet collodion process.

Less than a month later, on 20th January 1853, The Photographic Society was formally constituted, with Sir Charles Eastlake, President of the Royal Academy, as its elected president and Roger Fenton as its secretary.

Interestingly, both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert decided to become Patrons of the institution only a few months later, but the institution became known as The Royal Photographic Society only in 1894. It is, of course, still active today. Her Majesty The Queen was Patron between 1952 and 2019, when she passed the baton to Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge.

A founding member of the Photographic Society and a member of its council was Dr Ernst Becker, librarian to Prince Albert and an assistant tutor to the young princes from 1850. Becker played an important role as he represented an informal but direct channel of communication between the Society and the Royal Family.

From the early 1850s, in fact, both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert began to show greater enthusiasm for acquiring and commissioning photography. The Privy Purse accounts reveal that, from 1853 onwards, there was systematic expenditure on photography, increasing annually, and eventually reaching its peak in the years 1857-58.

Dr Becker, as an enthusiastic amateur photographer himself, introduced the practice of photography to the Royal Family and also acted on their behalf to purchase cameras, lenses, chemicals and all the necessary equipment. A darkroom was also fitted out at Windsor in 1855.

Under Becker's tutorship, most of the royal children were taught how to take photographs. We know from some correspondence that Prince Albert himself learnt the rudiments of photography through Becker, but no photographs by him seem to have survived in the collection.

However, we do still have photographs produced by some of the children, such as this one by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII).

Or this one taken by Prince Alfred (later Duke of Edinburgh), who seems to have been the most proficient and talented photographer amongst his siblings.

The direct link with the Photographic Society meant that the royal couple could commission privately the leading photographers of the time, such as Roger Fenton, William Kilburn or Leonida Caldesi, to take portraits of themselves and of their growing family as well as commissioning special projects. For example,

Queen Victoria secretly commissioned Francis Bedford to visit Coburg in the summer of 1857 to photograph places associated with Prince Albert's childhood.

The resulting album was gifted by the queen to Prince Albert on his birthday later that year. The reaction from the prince was such that Queen Victoria commissioned from Bedford a similar set of photographs of Gotha, which she gifted to her husband the following year.

Gifting photographs to each other, as well as other works of art, became a frequent practice amongst members of the Royal Family at occasions such as birthdays, Christmas or anniversaries, but the exchange of photographs also started to become a formal gift during state occasions, a tradition which continues to the present day.

This beautifully bound album, for example, was presented to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as a memento of their State Visit to France in 1855.

The photographs are by Édouard Baldus, the leading architectural photographer in France at the time.

The production, exchange and collecting of photographs, in particular portraits, however, became a sort of universal craze towards the end of the 1850s, following the introduction of a new photographic format, called *carte-de-visite*.

These small photographs pasted on a bit of card similar in size to a modern business card, were fairly cheap to produce, meaning that photography could now be afforded by a very large cross-section of the public. This encouraged families to collect and exchange photographs to create family albums. Soon, however, as well as exchanging and collecting photographs of family members, many people also started collecting portraits of statesmen, actors, artists and other public personalities of the time. The royal couple, and Queen Victoria in particular, were not immune to this fashion - the queen actually contributed enormously to its popularity when she gave permission to a society photographer, called John Mayall, to release in 1860, the photographs he had taken of the Royal Family.

This was the first time that a British subject could see and own a photographic likeness of their monarch. Until this moment, photographs of members of the Royal Family had only been seen and distributed within their immediate circles. The queen's image was in fact until then only known through older art forms, such as painting or sculpture, and from reproductions of works through lithographs and other printing processes.

Interestingly, though, the queen chose to appear to her people in photographs not as the reigning monarch, but as an upper-middle-class woman, wife and mother.

It has been claimed that within two years, over 3 million *cartes-de-visite* of Queen Victoria had been sold. It has also been reported that, following Prince Albert's death in December 1861, no less than 70,000 *cartes-de-visite* of the prince were sold in just one week.

Following the early death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria entered a long period of mourning. Photography, however, seemed to have given the queen some comfort during her deep grief.

Photography, as a medium, was indeed perfectly adapted to documenting, recollecting and memorialising.

William Bambridge, a trusted Windsor-based photographer who was in all but name 'the Queen's photographer' and *de facto* 'keeper' of the photograph collection between 1854 and the late 1870s, was commissioned with the delicate task of taking post-mortem photographs of Prince Albert.

Bambridge also completed a series of photographs of the Prince's rooms, which Queen Victoria had ordered to be kept exactly as they had been during his lifetime.

Bambridge also took many portraits of the queen during her early mourning period, such as this one.

However, some of the most touching photographs taken during this period are those taken by the queen's son, Prince Alfred.

Prince Albert died at a moment when the commercial side of photography was prevailing against the gentlemanly, artistic side. This triggered a conflict of interests that set art against commerce, idealism against profit. The shifting of photography into a business activity led the vast majority of professional photographers to be considered tradesmen rather than artists.

Prince Albert's relationship with Photography can be explored more in depth through a wide-ranging collection of material, made recently available online through this website ([albert.rct.uk](http://albert.rct.uk)), launched to help illuminate our understanding of Prince Albert's life and legacy.

After the death of her husband, Queen Victoria continued to commission and collect photographs and populate albums which had been started by Prince Albert and those they took pleasure in compiling together, such as the series called 'Portraits of Royal Children'. This series, started in the 1840s, would eventually consist of 44 albums by the late 1890s.

The queen also acquired some works which we would today consider 'fine art photographs', such as a group of portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron, probably acquired in the same spirit and artistic interest that would have inspired her late husband to make such purchases himself.

The queen's personal interests in photography, however, seemed to have been more oriented towards the use of the medium as a recording and documenting tool, starting with her own family, pets and residences, but also as a way to maintain a sort of direct and almost immediate contact with current affairs, including conflicts involving British troops in various regions of the world.

Or events, much closer to home, such as the Hartley Pit disaster, which saw the death of over 200 men, after being trapped in a coal mine for days following a collapse of some machinery into the mine shaft in January 1862.

The queen followed the event very closely, as shown by this set of photographs by Downey documenting the tragic series of events. The queen was so moved by the disaster that, as well as supporting a relief fund to help the affected families, she also personally wrote letters of condolence to the men's widows, having become a widow herself only some weeks earlier.

The photograph collection also clearly shows that Queen Victoria was fascinated by people: she often commissioned or acquired portraits of people she had personally met, or might have heard of, creating in the process a vast and incredibly varied personal portrait gallery.

It is probably with this interest in the use of photography as a documenting tool that Francis Bedford was asked to accompany the Prince of Wales during his 4-month educational tour of the Middle East in 1862.

The extended tour had been carefully planned by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria in 1861 and the queen was adamant that the tour should go ahead despite the death of her husband in December 1861. The 20-year-old prince would visit Egypt, the Holy Land, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece.

Most of these regions were at the time part of the Ottoman Empire and the tour, apart from providing the prince with the opportunity to learn more about

ancient cultures, history and religions, would also offer him the chance to meet a series of rulers, statesmen and notable figures, so that he could practise his diplomatic skills, seen as an essential part of his training as heir to the throne.

The prince was accompanied by a small party of trusted men, hand-picked by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. These included, as one would expect, a few members of the household, such as Major General Robert Bruce, Governor to the Prince of Wales, but also, surprisingly, a photographer.

This was indeed the first time that a photographer had been asked to officially join a royal tour, but it is however not a surprise that Prince Albert and Queen Victoria chose Francis Bedford. His work had been personally known to the royal couple from at least the early 1850s, when his lithographs as well as his early photographic material connected with the 1851 Great Exhibition started circulating in the artistic community.

One of the outcomes of the Great Exhibition had been the institution in 1853 of the Department of Practical Art, which included a museum. Initially, this was housed at Marlborough House, a royal residence near St James's Palace. This had been made possible thanks to Prince Albert's close involvement with the Great Exhibition and his interest in the dissemination of art, of which photography would play a crucial part from the 1850s.

Bedford was commissioned to take photographs of the objects housed in the museum and the resulting album is still in the Royal Collection today.

Bedford, of course, as well as being one of the leading photographers of the time, had also fulfilled private commissions for the queen in 1857 and 1858. Consequently, Bedford was somebody the Royal Family could trust on a personal level.

Such trust couldn't have been put in better hands, as the body of work produced by Bedford during the 1862 royal tour, represents one of the treasures of 19th century photography. Bedford's artistic merits and exceptional technical abilities were recognised by his contemporaries, who also acknowledged the extremely challenging conditions Bedford must have encountered while using the wet collodion process.

Bedford's photographs from the tour, as well as confirming his reputation as one of the leading photographers of the time, also helped shape the Victorian understanding of the Middle East. So much so that the *British Journal of Photography*, following the exhibition in London of 172 of the 200-or-so photographs taken by Bedford during the tour, described it as 'perhaps the most

important photographic exhibition that has hitherto been placed in front of the public’.

The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, remained interested in photography for the rest of his life, often collecting photographs during his travels.

Such interest was also shared by his wife, Princess Alexandra, who even became an amateur photographer soon after the introduction of the first point-and-shoot cameras at the end of the 1880s. Such cameras, pre-loaded with roll-film, would produce small round images, such as this one.

The advent of the snapshot, as well as revolutionising the social use of photography with its quick exposures and ease of use, also meant that for the very first time truly informal photographs of the Royal Family could be produced, as members of the Royal Family themselves were the photographers.

This aspect of the collection is particularly relevant with the collection of albums compiled by Princess Victoria, one of the daughters of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, many of which survive in the Royal Collection.

Queen Mary, wife of King George V, also enjoyed taking photographs as a young woman, but one of the most important elements of her legacy that we can find in the Photograph Collection is a series of 33 large albums she compiled between the 1880s and 1952.

These contain private photographs of herself and of members of her family, but also photographs of places she had visited and of her many engagements, both private and public, in Britain and abroad. It’s a mix of amateur and professional photographs, as well as news photographs and even postcards. She carefully captioned everything in her own hand, almost as a sort of visual journal, perhaps with posterity in her mind.

Her husband, King George V, had a different approach to photography and collecting. For example, it is thanks to his interest in exploration, that the Royal Collection has beautiful sets of photographs documenting the early exploration of the Antarctic, such as those presented to the king by Hebert Ponting, relating to the ill-fated *Terra Nova* expedition of 1910–12, led by Captain Scott.

Or the series relating to the 1921 exploration of Mount Everest by George Mallory and his team.

Photography, of course, continued to be commissioned and acquired by following reigning monarchs and members of their families. For example, it is

through the collection of King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth, as well as that of Her Majesty The Queen and her family that many of the great names of 20th century photography are represented in the collection today, such as Cecil Beaton, Dorothy Wilding, Patrick Lichfield, Lord Snowdon, Ansel Adams, Norman Parkinson, Yousuf Karsh, Bert Hardy, David Bailey and Annie Leibovitz, just to name a few.

To make sense of such a large collection, it would perhaps be helpful to group the material within three main categories:

Photographs commissioned or acquired directly by members of the Royal Family, such as, for example, photographs of the wounded men from the Crimean War, whom Queen Victoria had personally met.

Photographs presented to members of the Royal Family, such as the photographs by Baldus presented in 1855 to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as memento of her State Visit to France, which I mentioned earlier, or this photograph which is part of an album presented in 1949 to Princess Elizabeth by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, following the opening of the Waterloo River Entrance Lock in Liverpool.

The third and final group is represented by photographs taken by members of the Royal Family, such as this portrait of Her Majesty The Queen as a child, taken by her father.

The Photograph collection, as one can imagine, is therefore quite an eclectic collection of material but, as a whole, it can be seen as a reflection of the personal interests and tastes of the various monarchs and members of their families all the way from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to the present day with Her Majesty The Queen and members of her family.

The Photograph Collection, of course, continues to expand in the present days, as photography remains as relevant as it was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and I am sure it will remain so for generations to come.

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