

SIGHTS_{of} WONDER

STUDENT CURATOR TALKS

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

A Quick Snap?

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Hello, my name is Madeleine and I am one of the ten University of Birmingham MA Art History and Curating student curators for the online exhibition, Sights of Wonder, in partnership with the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and the Royal Collection Trust. By looking today at three images from our exhibition, I hope to explain some of the main challenges faced by Francis Bedford while he was photographing the royal tour in 1862. These are: the equipment he used; the exposure time required for his camera; and the environment in which he had to work.

With our smartphones and digital cameras today, the capacity to take photographs is always right at our fingertips. However, for Bedford and other aspiring photographers like him, the camera was a new invention that required skill, precision, specific knowledge and delicacy to achieve the finished product.

The first camera produced for commercial manufacture was designed in 1839 but the precise method used by Bedford to

produce his photographs had only been invented in the 1850s, just 10 years before he embarked on the tour.

This method was called the 'wet collodion process' and used glass plates, roughly the size of a small window pane, prepared in a darkroom. In the 'Discover More' section of the online exhibition, you can watch a short film that explains more about this process. The plates would be coated with the collodion chemical solution before being quickly placed in the camera and exposed before it could dry. Collodion is a mixture of gun cotton, ether and alcohol and has a syrupy consistency. It was a very fiddly process but when mastered, as with Bedford's photographs, the images produced were sharp and captured the intricate detail of real scenes.

Image 1 - Equipment

Portion of the Propylon of the Temple from the Great Court [Temple of Horus, Edfu]



Francis Bedford (1815-1894), *Portion of the Propylon of the Temple from the Great Court [Temple of Horus, Edfu]*
Edfu, Egypt, 14 March 1862, Albumen print, 238 x 291 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

This leads us to our first image which provides a rare glimpse of Bedford's photographic equipment. Taken near the beginning of the tour in Egypt, Bedford has captured a portion of the Temple of Horus at Edfu. The quality of detail can clearly be seen here. The Egyptian hieroglyphs that decorate the walls are crisp and clear, as are the architectural elements of this building. If you look through the central archway, the camera has even captured those more distant buildings in sharp focus.

For me, the most interesting element in this picture is on the right of the image, and it is made more so by it being the only time it is captured in the series. On the right-hand side of the composition, in the shade of the columns, stands a rectangular-shaped box. Unfamiliar to us today, this was Bedford's portable dark room where he prepared the glass plates with the collodion solution. This tent accompanied him everywhere on the tour. Inside, Bedford could quickly prepare the plates away from the light and develop the negatives afterwards too. You can just imagine the dark and hot conditions in the tent, made all the more stifling by the intricate processes Bedford was performing.

Within this darkroom, Bedford might also have etched his name into the negatives. His signature on each image suggests how Bedford viewed himself and his artistic relationship to the photographs. They were not just straightforward documentary photographs, but aesthetic art objects concerned with composition and the visual effects of light and shade.

Image 2 - Exposure Time

The Prince of Wales and Group at the Pyramids, Giza, Egypt



Francis Bedford (1815-1894), *The Prince of Wales and group at the Pyramids, Giza, Egypt*
Giza, Egypt, 5 March 1862. Albumen print, 206 x 279 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

Managing the equipment was only the start of Bedford's challenges.

Once the glass plate had been prepared in the darkroom tent, it was time to take the picture itself! This next photograph captures the problems presented by the lengthy exposure time needed to produce an image. It shows the royal party sitting atop camels in front of the Pyramids at Giza in Egypt.

Depending on the amount of light, Bedford would have to calculate how long to expose the glass plate for in order for the wet collodion chemicals to react with the light and produce an image. The technology would mean that it would be no longer than 10 seconds, a significant improvement on previous camera equipment. This meant that, once in position, Bedford's subjects needed to pose and remain in position for that exposure period. Every figure you see clearly in this photograph succeeded in listening to Bedford's instructions, and this is true for figures in

all other photographs in the exhibition. The photographic process meant that Bedford had to carefully compose his images before committing to picturing a scene. But while it was relatively easy to make people stand still, animals were a different story.

We can see a blurred camel and its rider just right-of-centre of the group. This blurriness suggests that the rider could not get the camel to stand still for long enough.

In contrast, notice how clear the figure to the left of the blur is. This is the prince, and the relative clarity of his figure next to the 'blurry camel' suggests that Bedford was, for obvious reasons, concentrating the focus on him, even if at the expense of the rest of the group.

Image 3 - Environment

Mosque of St Sophia from Hippodrome [Hagia Sophia]



Francis Bedford (1815-1894) *Mosque of St Sophia from the Hippodrome [Hagia Sophia]*
Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey, 22 May 1862. Albumen print, 230 x 290 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

This final image provides us with some of the environmental challenges Bedford encountered when photographing key sites. It shows the Mosque of St Sophia in Istanbul, otherwise known as the Hagia Sophia. It was a building important to both Christians and Muslims. Commissioned by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I between 532 and 537 AD as a church, it was later converted to a mosque in 1453.

Despite the mosque's religious importance, Bedford's image seems to compromise its prominence within a cramped composition. The density of the surrounding area meant that he was unable to capture an image of the entire mosque without also including the more tumbledown modern buildings in the foreground. Consequently, much of the composition was taken up by buildings of little or no religious and architectural significance.

However the resulting image, with its contrasts between the dark and ramshackle with the light and religious, suggests that while the composition may have been initially affected by necessity, the finished product is testament to Bedford's artistic intuition.

The image is all the more compelling to the modern viewer by the fact that this intrusion of everyday life was unusual for photographs in the collection, most of which focus exclusively on important sites and buildings.

This serves as a wider point to consider the difficulties of photographing in diverse land and cityscapes. To capture the perfect image of an important site within a crowded urban setting, Bedford sometimes even climbed on to the roofs of surrounding buildings for a clearer view. This was no mean feat. The camera itself would have been heavy, on top of which he had to transport the darkroom equipment and the delicate glass plates too, with no help from a photographic assistant.

We think that Bedford carried with him at least 200 glass plates throughout the tour as well as the highly flammable pre-mixed collodion bottles. This transportation of both heavy and fragile materials must surely have been another challenge that Bedford had to overcome. In particular, the

combination of sand and wind in many of the places visited must have made it very difficult to prevent grit from sticking to the collodion chemicals on the glass plates and ruining the images.

When considering all of these challenges together, the quality of these three images really help us to appreciate Bedford's skill as a photographer. Each photograph has been carefully composed to create a scene rich in detail and aesthetic appeal. It is no wonder that when the collection was first exhibited in England after the tour, it was described as 'perhaps the most important photographic exhibition [that had] hitherto been placed before the public.'¹ Despite the challenges posited by the equipment, exposure time and environment, Bedford produced a highly skilled series.

¹ 'Exhibition: H.R.H. Prince of Wales's Tour in the East, Photographically Recorded by Francis Bedford', *The British Photographic Journal*, 1 Aug 1862, 288.