

SIGHTS_{of} WONDER

STUDENT CURATOR TALKS

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

In the Shade of Temples

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Hello, my name is Grace 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. In this talk I would like to share some observations of my favourite photograph in our show.

This image is titled 'Acropolis and Temple of Jupiter Olympus' [also known as the Olympieion, in Athens]. It was taken by Francis Bedford on 31 May 1862. The photograph is an albumen print mounted on card. While it is not a particularly large photograph, measuring about 22 cm by 30 cm, the incredible detail and depth of focus makes for a fascinating composition.

Here we see a group at the base of the Temple of Jupiter (the Greek god Zeus). In the second century AD, this structure was reputed to be the largest in Greece. In the background is the Parthenon atop the Acropolis. The Temple of Jupiter was designed by four architects and dedicated to



Francis Bedford (1815-1894), *Acropolis and Temple of Jupiter Olympus [Olympieion]*
Athens, Greece, 31 May 1862. Albumen print, 220 x 294 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

the leader of the Olympian gods. While construction began in the sixth century BC, the temple was not completed until about six hundred years later. It stood in all its glory for only one hundred years before it was destroyed during the sack of Athens in 267 AD. The temple's limestone and marble were quarried for various building projects throughout the following centuries, reducing the structure to ruins. The temple originally had 104 fluted columns, each at seventeen metres high. Today, fifteen columns remain standing.

Look closely at the people in this image. Among the group you will see two men smoking a long hookah pipe – one in the centre of the group and another at the far right. Hookah pipes were used to smoke cannabis, tobacco, or opium and became popularized among Britons living in the Middle East during the nineteenth century. The time of day is unclear. This is due to the photographic technology of the time. Bedford had to overexpose the image to capture details of the figures and ruins, effectively bleaching the sky.

The Prince of Wales and his party visited Greece towards the end of their tour. They stayed in Athens for only three

days. According to the prince's journal, the group visited this site on 29 May, which the prince described as another 'intensely hot' day. While we might expect to see the royal party in Bedford's photo, the sitters are in fact all unknown. Bedford had returned two days after the royal visit to take his photograph, on 31 May. The date is scratched into the negative at the bottom left corner.

This is interesting as we might then ask why this particular group is depicted rather than the royal party. Bedford took group images of the prince and his entourage elsewhere on the tour and some of these photographs are included in the exhibition. It seems odd that Bedford chose to photograph unknown people in this image if the prince had indeed visited the site two days before.

There are two possible reasons for this that I would like to explore. First, we might assume that Bedford chose to include these people simply because they give us a sense of scale of the ruins. The Temple of Jupiter is arguably the focal point of the image as it stands alone, the highest structure in the composition. The columns are surrounded by negative space, making it easy for us to see this building apart from all other elements in the image. This repetition of vertical forms is echoed throughout the composition. We see two single columns in the middle ground and again in the Parthenon in the far background. Then we notice the detail of the temple itself. Bedford captured so much detail that individual segments of each column can be distinguished.

It is only after the viewer has taken in the beauty of the temple that the figures become apparent. The sitters are tiny in comparison. The columns tower above the group. By including people, Bedford could show how large everything was. These clues would have helped viewers back in Britain understand the space. This image would have helped Victorians understand the magnitude of classical architecture. If people are this small beside the temple, we can assume that the Parthenon, seeming small in the background, is just as large and impressive.

The use of people for size comparison is a fairly safe interpretation. Bedford specialised in landscape

photography and knew how to communicate beauty and scale in compositions. However, there might be more nuanced reasons for including unidentified sitters in this photograph. Look closely and see men are dressed in European hats and waistcoats. One wears a tunic. They lounge in chairs and even a table has been brought out. They intend to stay a while. By excluding the Prince or any member of the Royal Party, we might interpret this as an 'authentic' representation of the ruins at Athens. Victorian viewers could see how these ancient structures looked in relationship to contemporary societies. Bedford was hired to document the Royal Tour, yet without its members, this image has a different historical significance. The focus is not on the Prince but instead the architecture and people of Athens.

This image is a clear example of Bedford's talent as a photographer. The Temple of Jupiter is crisp against a beautiful landscape. The people seated comfortably invite us into a scene where viewers can engage in casual conversation and spend their day in leisure. Francis Bedford had an eye for interesting scenes and, like all photographs in this exhibition, provided fascinating elements to appreciate if one spends time looking closely. As the *British Journal of Photography* lauded Bedford, 'the task has been executed in a highly creditable manner, for those who are acquainted with Mr. Bedford know that he would do it well, or not at all ...'.¹

I hope you have enjoyed this talk. If you would like to learn more about how the royal tour was represented in Victorian news and print media, please listen to the following audio talk, 'Extra! Extra! How the Victorian reported and consumed Bedford's photographs of the royal tour'.

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.