

SIGHTS_{of} WONDER

STUDENT CURATOR TALKS

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Extra! Extra! How the Victorians reported and consumed Bedford's photographs of the royal tour

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Hello, my name is Victoria 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 will introduce you to two objects in the exhibition that help us consider how people back in Britain engaged via the print media with the royal tour and Francis Bedford's photographs. In particular, I will discuss how the *Illustrated London News* and the *Punch* magazine shaped an image of the tour and referenced Bedford's work.

In the nineteenth century, steam printing allowed newspapers to re-volutio-nise news publishing. With the technological advancement of telegraphs and railways, information

travelled fast, allowing newspapers to be printed and sold rapidly. As a result, people in Victorian Britain were able to consume current affairs much more quickly, and in more detail, over the duration of days than it had been possible for previous generations.

Similar as today, Victorians were particularly attentive to news relating to the royal family. Newspapers provided an outlet summarising the daily activities of the royal family, presented in chronological order.

Contemporary with the royal tour to the Middle East was the major attraction; the International Exhibition of 1862. The exhibition was attended by around six million visitors, in which the Egyptian Court featured modern and ancient items.

All these factors would have heightened public interest in the tour itself.

Introducing our first object, the *Illustrated London News* [or 'ILN'], features striking wood engravings. The engravings were published in a special section of the paper, concerning the engagements of the Prince of Wales' Royal



Figure 1 - *The Illustrated London News*, London, 10 May 1862
Newspaper, open at p. 466. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

Tour. The images visible here relate to the first stop of the royal tour, Egypt, and were made by George Leighton who accompanied the royal party.

The first engraving depicts the reception of the prince in Cairo by Said Pacha, the Viceroy of Egypt. The image relates to another image in *Sights of Wonder*, Jemima Blackburn's watercolour of the excavation at Thebes: the Viceroy is also visible in watercolour, as he authorised the excavation. In both circumstances, the images record diplomatic engagements of the prince during the tour, highlighting his position as the throne successor and the responsibilities of his role.

The second *ILN* print, below, illustrates the prince inspecting photographic negatives taken by Bedford, with the Temple of Isis in the background.

Notably, the print shows not only the large field-camera but also includes on the right-hand side the same photo booth as visible in Bedford's photo of the Great Court of the Temple of Horus. -- visible in the exhibition--

Both of these illustrations show a different perspective of the prince's tour, contrasting with Bedford's images and extending our knowledge of the photographic production.



Figure 2 - *The Illustrated London News*, London, 10 May 1862
Newspaper, open at p. 466. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

The third *ILN* graphic depicts a very familiar scene to the photograph displayed in the exhibition. In the engraving, we see the royal party departing to visit the pyramids. The composition of the print with the pyramids depicted on the left side and the similar arrangement of the group suggests that it was inspired directly by Bedford's photograph. Other prints subsequently presented in the *ILN* show a remarkable similarity with the composition and details of Bedford's photos, but in reverse as a result of the printing process.

This suggests that the negatives of the photographs were used to orientate the engravings. Readers of the *ILN* therefore were aware of or already 'consuming' Bedford's images before the opening of Bedford's photographic exhibition in London, held later that year.

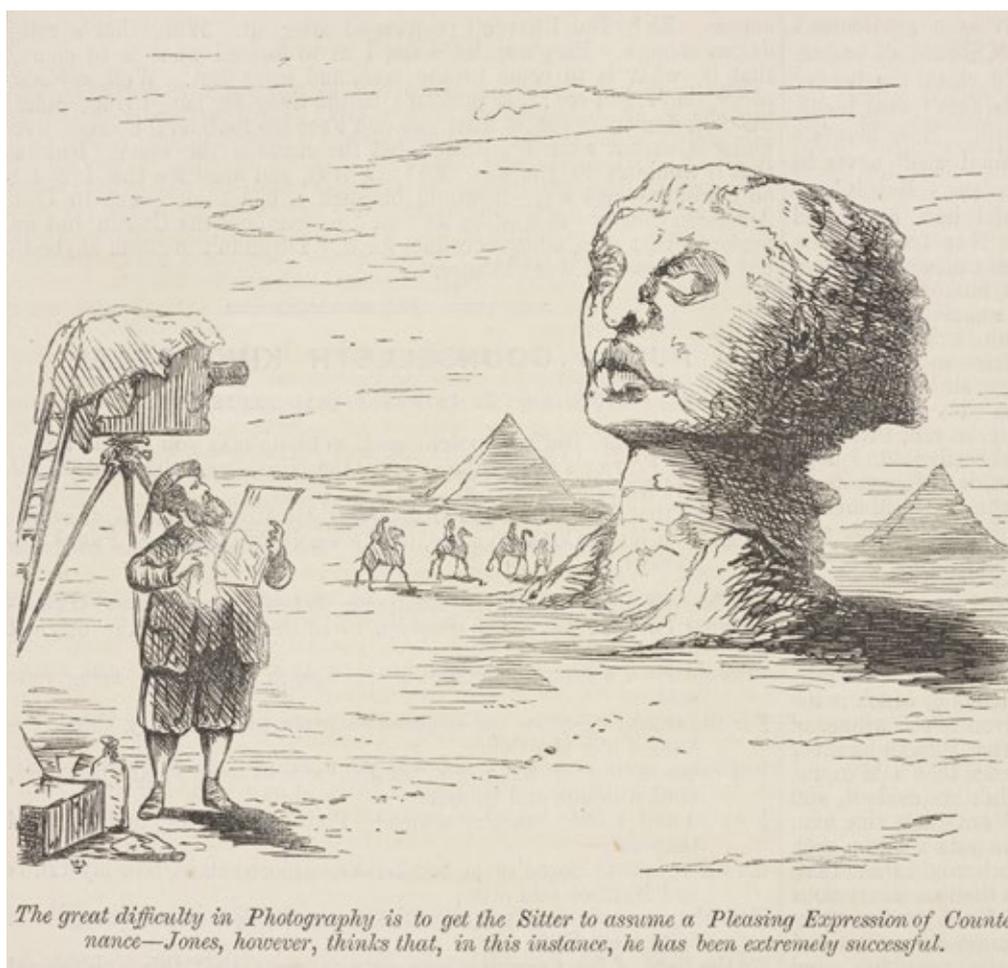
Many publications reviewed Bedford's exhibition, including *The British Journal of Photography*, which praised his photographs as 'admirable'. The images of the Holy Land won much attention, as they provided evidence for the existence of the places mentioned in the Bible. The photography of the *Mount of Olives*, in particular, was mentioned in countless reviews, evidence that these images were of specific interest to the Victorian visitor.



Figure 3 - *The Illustrated London News*, London, 10 May 1862
Newspaper, open at p. 467. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

Nevertheless, the photographs also met with some criticism, such as a comment in the *ILN* which suggested that Bedford was more successful in capturing immobile objects, such as architecture and landscape.

This comment was picked up by a cartoon in the satirical publication *Punch*, showing Bedford, dressed in renaissance-inspired attire and equipped with an oversized camera, attempting to photograph the Sphinx. The comment below mentions that the difficulty of photography is to get the sitter to 'assume a pleasing expression of countenance'. Therefore, the cartoon mocks Bedford for being successful only in capturing the immovable Sphinx. Perhaps there is also a knowing reference to Bedford's photograph of the prince's party in front of the pyramids, in which several camels moved during the long exposure time, and were consequently recorded as out of focus.



In conclusion, these two sources give us an idea about how the tour was reported, and provide some insight into the consumption and reception of Bedford's photographs in Britain. People wanted to stay up to date with the current engagements of the royal family and were generally intensely interested in ancient Egyptian culture. This interest led to the commercial success of the exhibition of Bedford's tour photographs, which were collected and utilised by artists such as Alma-Tadema, who is featured in *Sights of Wonder*.

Thank you for listening. If you like to find out more about *Sights of Wonder*, please listen to our next audio talk 'Photography vs. Painting'.