

# SIGHTS<sub>of</sub> WONDER

STUDENT CURATOR TALKS

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

### Photography vs Painting

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Hi, my name is Zuzanna, and I am one of the student curators of the Barber Institute's online exhibition *Sights of Wonder*. Today I will be talking about the complex relationship between photography and painting as represented in the exhibition. Both these media to varying extents can be creatively manipulated by the creator, to depict people or landscapes, in ways that influence our understanding of these subjects. A photographer can choose a specific angle, include or exclude elements in the frame, or stage elements of a photo, which might appear to be completely natural. A painter, meanwhile, has unlimited freedom to present their impression of a scene, which might be considered as a more suggestive, personal image than a photograph. In *Sights of Wonder*, Jemima Blackburn's watercolour *The Prince of Wales in Thebes* raises the question of how accurate is the scene, and how much of it is the artist's imagination?

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Image 1:

Jemima Blackburn, *The Prince of Wales in Thebes*



Jemima Blackburn (1823-1909), *The Prince of Wales at Thebes, 18 March 1862*, Thebes, Egypt, 18 March 1862  
Watercolour on paper, 227 x 288 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

The watercolour was made while Blackburn briefly accompanied the royal party in Egypt during March 1862. She portrayed the prince in the middle of a diplomatic engagement – he is receiving gifts from the Viceroy of Egypt, Said Pasha. While she was present during this occasion, we cannot be sure if her depiction is totally accurate. As a painter, she had the option of manipulating elements like composition, grouping of figures and specific details to make the painting more aesthetically pleasing to look at. As we can see looking at the watercolour, the prince is conveniently standing in the middle of the group, a clear indication of his status. He is surrounded by diplomats, attendants, excavation workers and animals arranged in an almost perfect semi-circle. Included by Blackburn in the far distance are two monumental sculptures – the Colossi of Memnon – a famous sight and tourist attraction. However, it is not possible to see the Colossi from the place where the prince was attending the excavation. Blackburn has used her own artistic license to enhance the watercolour with an appealing detail, placing the scene in what she thought was a more ‘Egyptian-looking’ landscape.

It is evident that Blackburn altered elements of her painting to enhance its appeal. This alteration would not have been as easy for a photograph. In the mid-Victorian era, when photography was still in early days of its development, such precise alterations would have required a lot of skill from the photographer, and ‘pasting’ the Colossi into the photo would have been almost impossible. Today, manipulating photographs is so easily done that almost anyone with a computer can do it in their own home through editing programs such as Photoshop, or even by adding filters and photo enhancers via Instagram. However, for a 19th century photographer such manipulation would have required hours of meticulous cutting and pasting, of the already developed photograph. The painting medium gave the artist more freedom to create an image in the way she wanted to see it and, and as we will see, this can have more profound effects than just presenting a subjective, or enhanced portrayal of a scene.

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Image 2:

Francis Bedford, *Jerusalem - From Mount of Olives*



Francis Bedford (1815-1894), *Jerusalem, From Mount of Olives*

Jerusalem, Israel/ Palestine, March-April 1862, Albumen print, 227 x 291 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

The photograph *Jerusalem - From Mount of Olives* was taken by Bedford on the first day of the party's arrival in Jerusalem. Taken from a hill covered in olive trees, the view opens out to include the rooftops of Jerusalem in the distance, with the Dome of the Rock clearly visible on the right. Bedford photographed famous views and landmarks which would have been recognised by fellow photographers and enthusiasts of the region. We might wonder, however, if this particular view would have been readily identified as Jerusalem by someone less knowledgeable. The Dome of the Rock, tiny in the distance, is the only real indication of place, as the background blurs and merges into different tones of grey. The landscape is hilly, and the dark shrubs are pulling our attention away from the horizon. It could be argued this is not the most representative shot of Jerusalem, nor of the 'East' as the Victorian public would have imagined it.

At the time of the prince's tour, an aesthetic trend called 'Orientalism' was in full swing. This term was used to describe the fascination of Europeans with the art and cultures of the Middle and Near East, especially Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Syria, and other Arab countries. People in Europe were drawn to, what for them, seemed different and exciting, however it often led to the creation and propagation of misconceptions about Arab cultures, wrongly portraying them as exotic, wild and primitive. When we see Bedford's black and white photograph, the stark landscape escapes that trend, showing a barren, monotone dessert with a few shrubs and no artfully placed figures, not an overly aestheticised, stereotypical Middle East. Was this image underwhelming for the Victorian viewer? Or did they appreciate the different take on the Middle East that this new technology allowed? Whilst answers to these questions remain open, we can however compare Bedford's photograph to a painting of the exact same location and from almost the same time.



### Image 3:

## Edward Lear's View of Jerusalem - Painting



Edward Lear (1812-1888), *Jerusalem Looking North West*, Jerusalem, signed and dated 1859. Oil on canvas, 47 x 75.5 cm. Daniel Katz Gallery, London.

The painting by Edward Lear is his impression of the same view that Bedford photographed just three years later. The image is quite different - most obviously, the painting is in colour. The view of Jerusalem is much clearer than in the photograph, as it seems to be closer within the frame. The Dome of the Rock can be recognised in the painting, as well as the photograph. Lear also includes a fragment of the mountain from which the view is supposed to be seen, with a goat in the front, and more animals and shepherds in the distance. The painting creates a romanticised image of Palestine and Jerusalem - the animals, shepherds and the greenery suggest an idyllic landscape, a peacefulness of a far away, 'simpler' life. Lear's painting poses a stark contrast to Bedford's photograph. The colours and details of the painting lend itself to a more suggestive reading of the scene, than Bedford's black and white photograph. Would this painting visually appeal more to the Victorians than the photograph? Its aesthetic value is undeniable, however photography as a still fairly new medium presented itself as an exciting opportunity through which to see a snap of 'reality', made at the actual place, on the spot.

Paintings and photographs of the Middle East presented different opportunities for capturing images. Blackburn's *The Prince of Wales in Thebes*, and Lear's *Jerusalem Looking North West*, show the ways in which an artist could enhance a real view or moment, and alter it to convey their particular vision. Such images were not intended to be completely accurate and were always subjective. Photographs on the other hand, even though they could to some degree also be manipulated, offered views that contrasted with the romantic aestheticism of these paintings. Bedford's view of Jerusalem indeed offers a challenge to the widespread mystification of the Middle East. The view is no longer enhanced or staged, but shows a starker reality than that which the Victorian viewer might have expected.

Thank you so much for tuning in, this is all from our student curators team, we hope you enjoyed the talks and the exhibition!