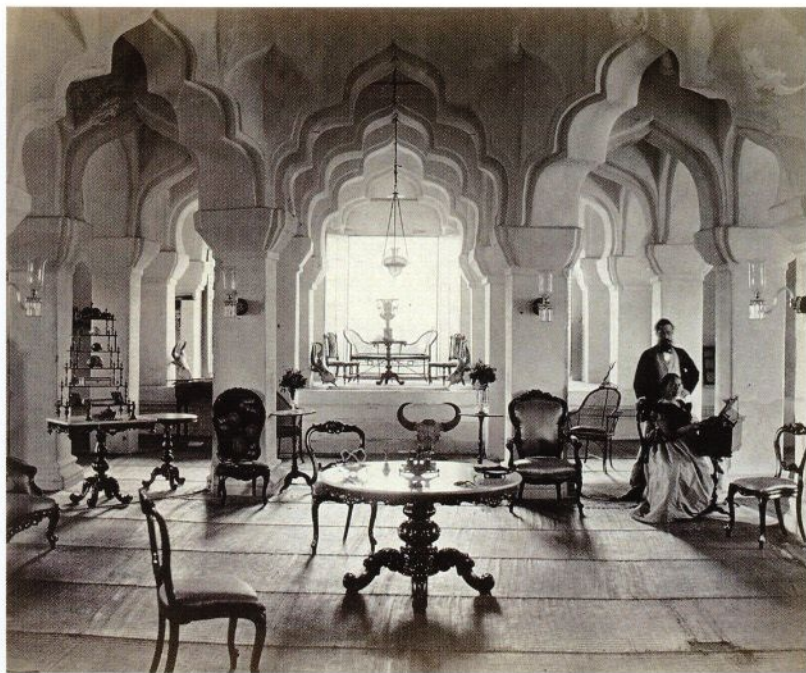


POINTS OF VIEW: CAPTURING THE 19TH CENTURY IN PHOTOGRAPHS



To every technology its age; to every age its consciousness. Such might have been the watchword of *Points of View*, the exhibition of nineteenth-century photographs at the British Library galleries earlier this year. Drawing on the library's collection of more than three hundred thousand images, the 250 works on display charted the genesis and rise of a medium that not only documented modernity, but also—the show seemed to intimate—was fundamental to its establishment.

In the gallery's protective low light some of these rarely seen pictures were like lustrous artifacts. A soft-toned 1854 Bisson Frères salted paper print depicting a pair of gorilla skulls. The anonymous 1859 three-by-three-inch *Photomicrograph of the Tongue of a Common Cricket*, as beguiling as any Surrealist riddle. Such a compendium of treasures might easily have been overwhelming. Instead this exhibition picked its way through a mass of material to shed light on how we, as a species, became photographic. To identify the moment or even the decade this happened would be misleading if not impossible. Rather, the curators chose to show how seamlessly photography fit in to the age of scientific and imperial expansion. Now the latest industrial feats could be celebrated using this novel technological process, while faraway lands or the mysteries of nature were suddenly brought within reach. Francis Frith's 1850s depictions of ancient Egypt and J. Albert's ca. 1866 picture of the *Bony Structure of the Cochlea of a Newborn Baby* show a medium so riveted to the thing it describes that the two somehow seem indivisible.

At times this empirical advantage inspired a crude, superficial positivism. Alphonse Bertillon's survey of criminal types and

Maurice Vidal Portman's pseudo-objective study of Andaman islanders sought, variously, to show how recidivism and primitivism could be photographically verified. At others, though, it inflected consciousness more precisely. Who today does not know how a horse's legs fold mid-gallop or what the surface of the moon looks like? Eadweard Muybridge's famous motion studies altered the very parameters of perception, and in their 1874 series *The Moon, Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite*, James Nasmyth and James Carpenter outlined the least lunar crater. Yet although striking, the latter images were fakes: photographs of carefully lit plaster models. To look at them now is to understand just how readily photographs—so innately persuasive—became the indispensable correlate of truth.

There remained one area, however, where photography could not so easily claim to be just another fact among facts. The show's seven decades of portraits exhibited a perceptible shift as people became more mindful of the

camera. Certainly those early subjects, caught in the 1840s by William Henry Fox Talbot or by his Scottish contemporaries David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, seem unaware of the lens. Their attention is directed not toward the camera, but somewhere else instead. Only later, once people had become accustomed to the fact that thanks to photography time was no longer merely fugitive, and that from now on the past, divided, would always threaten to reappear, did they start to learn the art of self-presentation. At first this happened in studios where headrests and knee-braces would keep them from moving during the necessarily long exposures. Soon enough, it was a more autonomous process—Lady Alice Mary Kerr's ca. 1865 *Portrait of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*, a masterpiece of chiaroscuro intensity, the sitter's eyes even now boring their way through the centuries.

One hundred fifty years later, with every Facebook pose an ultra-knowing amalgam of countless other poses, we have come to understand ourselves through photography. By revisiting the time when we first stepped into this hall of mirrors, *Points of View* lets us glimpse ourselves before we became who we are. **A**

—Jason Oddy

Points of View: Capturing the 19th Century in Photographs was presented at the PACCAR Gallery of the British Library, London, October 30, 2009–March 7, 2010.

Jason Oddy is a photographer and writer. He is currently writing a book titled *Notes from the Desert*, to be published by Grasset.

Edmund David Lyon, The interior of the Tuncum at Madurai, India, 1867–68.

Courtesy British Library Board