

will pause only long enough to be spoon-fed factoids by educational wall texts. The rooms (dramatically lit with darkly painted walls) have been mostly far too crowded for any individual viewer to identify – and get enough of an uninterrupted view seriously to appreciate – the better works of art on display.

¹ After its London showing, the exhibition will be shown at the **Phillips Collection, Washington**, from 1st February to 14th May.

² Catalogue: *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris 1870–1910*. By Anna Gruetzner Robins and Richard Thomson. 232 pp. incl. 100 col. pls. + 50 b. & w. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2005), £35 (HB). ISBN 1-85437-634-9; £26.99 (PB). ISBN 1-85437-548-2 (PB).

Roger Fenton London

by ALEXANDRA MOSCHOVI

THE EXHIBITION *Roger Fenton: Photographs 1852–1860*, currently at **Tate Britain, London** (to 22nd January), where this reviewer saw it, is a welcome event, not only as a long-awaited monographic study of England's most celebrated mid-nineteenth-century landscape and architectural photographer, but also as the first show of historic photography at the Tate.¹ Concurrent with the ubiquitous enthusiasm for contemporary photography, there has been, in recent years, a gradual revival of interest in nineteenth-century photographs. As Douglas Crimp remarked, it was only when photography was elevated to the status of autonomous art that nineteenth-century photographs acquired a new currency as art objects in their own right, and prints from the Crimean War, Egypt or the Holy Land, long classified under topographical names, could echo anew the authorial voice of Roger Fenton, Francis Frith or Francis Bedford.²

A joint venture of three American institutions, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (in which venues the exhibition has already been shown), this retrospective brings together vintage prints from disparate photographic collections around the world, ranging from the obvious international collections of *photographica* to the archive of the Canadian Center for Architecture and the Royal Collection at Windsor. It is an attempt to outline Fenton's versatility and re-evaluate his authorship in the cultural as well as the commercial contexts of the period. Fenton was born into a family of wealthy industrialists outside Manchester. Having studied law and unsuccessfully attempted to launch a career as a painter, he turned to photography, which, having been included in the Great Exhibition of 1851, was attracting gathering interest in Britain. Overwhelmed by the examples of photographic method he saw at Crystal Palace, Fenton sought instruction in the wax-paper negative process at the Paris studio



68. *Orientalist group*, by Roger Fenton. 1858. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 25.5 by 26.3 cm. (Wilson Centre for Photography, London; exh. Tate Britain, London).

of the photographer Gustave Le Gray, setting off, only a few months later, on his first photographic expedition to Russia. Although he promoted the educational aspects of photography, and also worked tirelessly towards establishing photography as a high art (being a founding member of the Photographic Society of London and organising exhibitions in Britain and abroad), Fenton was equally keen to market his own work.³ It is telling that, in the face of objections from the members of the Photographic Society, a



69. *Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh*, by Roger Fenton. 1856. Salted paper print from glass negative, 33.2 by 26 cm. (Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, Bradford; exh. Tate Britain, London).

not-for-profit club, he approached the Photographic Association, primarily a commercial agency, in order to have his photographs showcased for sale. To add to his scanty earnings from fairly sporadic print sales, Fenton succeeded in receiving a commission to photograph the exhibits at the British Museum. And it was with commercial intent that he undertook the expedition, with a portable darkroom, to Balaclava in the spring of 1855. Capitalising on his royal connections (he was commissioned by Queen Victoria to take informal portraits of the royal family, while his photographs were regularly acquired for the queen's collection; Fig.69) and financially supported by Thomas Agnew, not only did he gain permission to photograph at the barracks of the allied armies in Sevastopol during the Crimean War, but he also gained access to all the leading military figures, whose dignified portraits, he mistakenly believed, would constitute a portfolio that would attract aristocratic buyers and therefore sell at a good price.

Fenton did not differentiate between the commercial and the aesthetic value of his work, and nor did he distinguish between the processes of 'taking' and 'making' photographs. He would unreservedly stage a photograph if the outcome were to convey the message in a more direct and, most importantly, visually pleasing way. In his Crimean photographs, for instance, he asked the senior officials to dress in their winter uniforms and overcoats even though they were being photographed in springtime. In the same vein, the series of photographs he took in 1858, orientalising in a manner similar to William Holman Hunt, constitutes make-believe scenes which emulated the pictorial

mannerism and narrative of genre painting, and also the tableaux-vivant photography of the period. *Orientalist group* (cat. no.62; Fig.68), which may be read as an *avant la lettre* postmodernist parody of the notion that a photograph has unassailable value as 'truth', depicts Fenton dressed in the Turkish costume of a pasha, being entertained by a musician (the painter Frank Dillon) and an exotic dancer (a professional model). The full-frame copy currently on display retains all the signs of artifice: the studio walls and the hanging drapery come into sight behind the props, and the wires that were used to keep the model's hands still during the exposure are discernible in the foreground. These were laboriously eliminated from the exhibition prints.

Combining traditional art-historical scholarship with modern contextual analysis, the curators of the present show and the contributors to the stunningly produced catalogue have endeavoured to present a comprehensive image of Fenton's decade-long career by drawing on the artistic as well as commercial aspects of his work.⁴ The exhibition begins with various self-portraits, followed by distinct sections, thematic as well as chronological. Unsurprisingly, Fenton's large-format landscapes, much praised by his contemporaries, dominate the display. From the Turnerian light in *Wharfe and pool, below the Strid* of 1854 (no.13) and his Whistlerian Thames view of *Westminster from Waterloo Bridge* of 1858 (no.60) to the epic representation of nature in *Glyn Lledr, from Pont-y-Pant* of 1857 (no.35), which followed the picturesque tradition of the Welsh Bettws School, Fenton's treatment of landscape was always a technical and compositional tour de force. 'No one can touch Fenton in landscape', wrote the journal of the Photographic Society. 'There is such an artistic feeling about the whole of these pictures . . . that cannot fail to strike the beholder as being something more than mere photographs'.⁵

The exhibition follows the traditional *mise-en-scène*, long devised for shows of nineteenth-century photography, of vintage salt and albumen prints presented in wooden frames against dark grey walls and reduced light that creates an eerie, chapel-like atmosphere. Cheerful graphics, assorted colour benches, and highly informative wall labels and lengthy captions nevertheless indicate that efforts have been made to address a wider, largely untrained, and most probably younger, public than the usual audience of photography scholars, students and collectors.

At Tate Britain, the exhibition is also complemented by a separate display entitled *Roger Fenton and the Crimean War*, drawn from the collection of the Wilson Centre for Photography, London. Accompanied by detailed captions and maps, this rather low-key display provides the much-needed historical and social context of the series, that both the current exhibition and catalogue understate. By bringing together the eleven-panel panorama of the plateau of Sevastopol – an impressive achievement, given the technical

limitations of the wet-collodion method – with exhibition and commercially published prints of the series, the display also shows Fenton's conscious use of different media, an aspect not fully addressed in the main show. Here the emphasis is ultimately on the aesthetic value of existing vintage prints. This quality is not without relevance for a contemporary audience, for Fenton's work brings together different genres, themes, formats and audiences, in a manner which strongly chimes with the current all-inclusive profile of photography.

¹ Catalogue: *All the Mighty World: The Photographs of Roger Fenton, 1852–1860*. Edited by Gordon Baldwin, Malcolm Daniel and Sarah Greenough, with contributions by Richard Pare, Pam Roberts and Roger Taylor. 304 pp. incl. 96 col. pls. + 208 b. & w. ills. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004), £40. ISBN 1-58839-128-0.

² See D. Crimp: *On the Museum's Ruins*, London 1993, pp.73–74.

³ Fenton's open-ended definition of the art of photography was manifest in his drafting of the 'Proposal for the Formation of a Photographical Society' in which he explicitly stated that such a society should 'include among its members men of all ranks of life' and that 'while men of eminence, from their fortune, social position, or scientific reputation, are welcomed, no photographer of respectability in his particular sphere of life be rejected', stressing that the annual subscription should be kept small 'in order that none may be excluded by the narrowness of their means'; R. Fenton: 'Proposal for the Formation of a Photographical Society' (1852), quoted in Baldwin, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.214.

⁴ When, in the early 1860s, with the proliferation of photographic studios and the popularisation of carte-de-visite portraiture, photography, by his standards, was vulgarised, Fenton sold his equipment and one thousand published and unpublished negatives and returned to practising law.

⁵ Quoted by M. Daniel: "'On Nature's Invitation Do I Come": Roger Fenton's Landscapes', in Baldwin, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.41.

Black Victorians

Manchester and Birmingham

by JULIAN TREUHERZ

National Museums Liverpool

WHILE THE EXHIBITION *Black Victorians*, at Manchester Art Gallery (to 6th January), then at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (28th January to 2nd April), certainly responds to current political concerns about inclusiveness, the question has to be asked: is it social history or art? Its premise is that, despite the historical evidence of a considerable black population in Victorian Britain, images of black people from this period are rare, and the show aims to reveal this hitherto invisible presence. We are presented with over one hundred works, all of which show black people, black being defined, for the purposes of this exhibition, as of African or Afro-Caribbean descent.

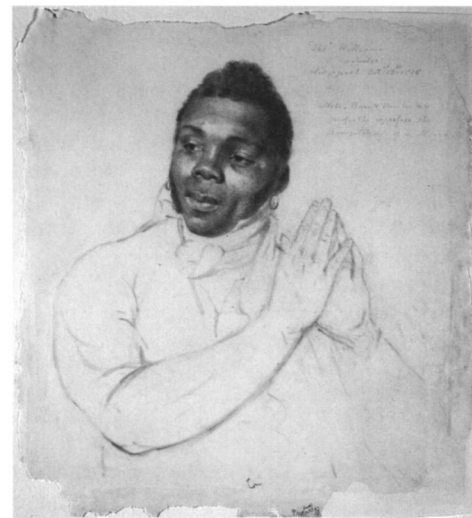
Jan Marsh, who has researched and selected the exhibition and edited the catalogue,¹ has



70. *A meeting of connoisseurs*, by John Bourne. 1807. Watercolour on paper, 41.3 by 55.5 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; exh. Manchester Art Gallery).

cast her net wider than one might at first expect, for there is an irritating contradiction between the title of the show, *Black Victorians*, and its subtitle, *Black People in British Art 1800–1900*. Marsh disarmingly admits to this but gives no explanation. Some fascinating examples fall into the period before 1837 and one can see why Marsh wanted to include them. John Bourne's humorous group of connoisseurs appraising a muscular black male model of 1807 (cat. no.19; Fig.70) has a curious frisson, and John Simpson's theatrical *The captive slave* (no.88), in which the slave, his eyes raised to heaven like a Baroque saint, embodies the noble pathos that appealed to the Abolitionists. In contrast, a modest chalk drawing made in Liverpool in 1815 by John Downman of a black sailor (no.40; Fig.71) has a quality rarely seen in this exhibition; it expresses the humanity of direct, sensitive observation, a meeting of artist and sitter on equal terms. But why call them Victorian?

The selection extends beyond the bounds of fine art to encompass 'visual culture'. Thus we see not only Royal Academy subject paintings, portraits and views of abroad, but also illustrations to ethnographic and topographical books, photographs, advertisements



71. *Thomas Williams, a sailor*, by John Downman. 1815. Black chalk and stump on paper, 31.5 by 28.5 cm. (Tate, London; exh. Manchester Art Gallery).