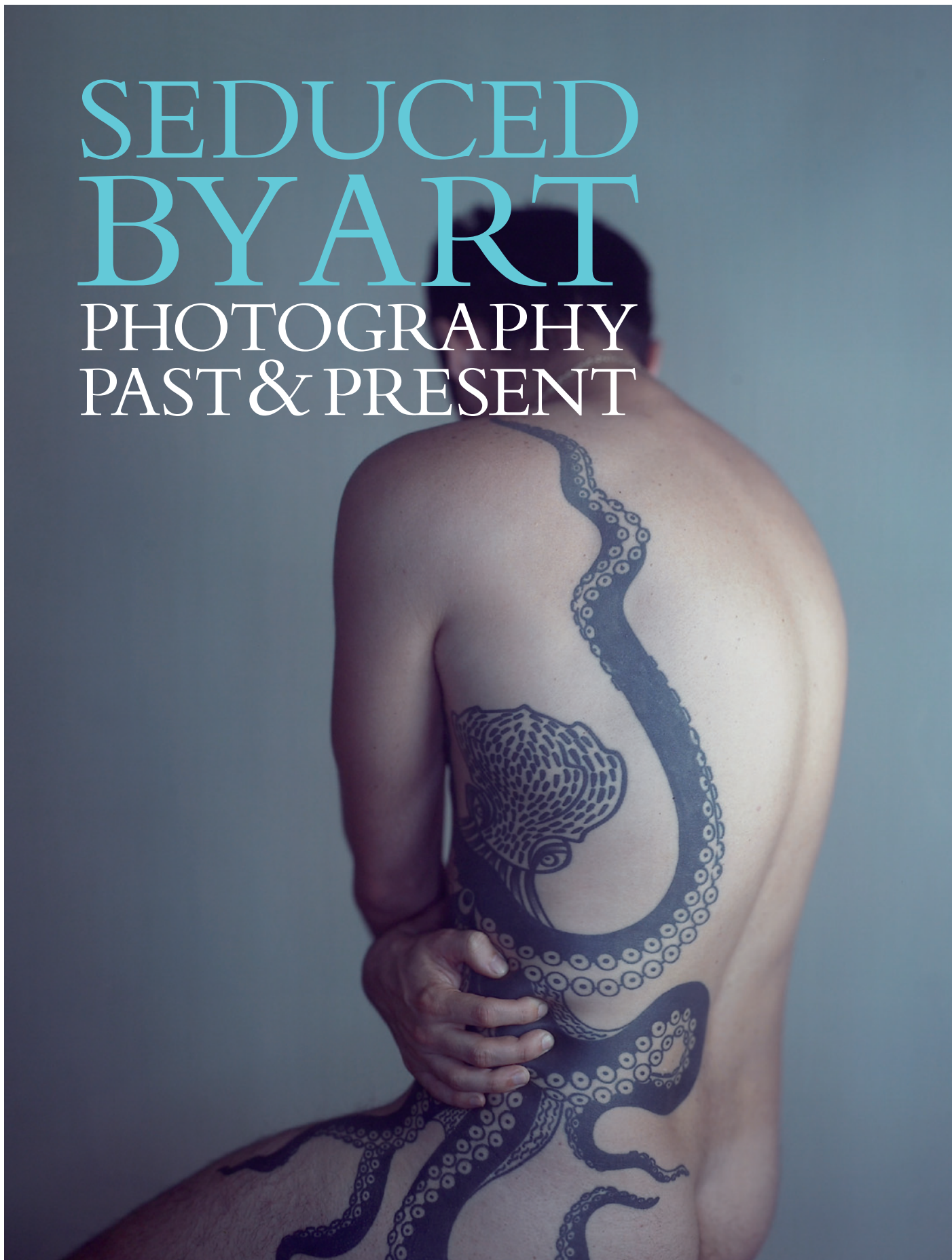


SEDUCED BY ART

PHOTOGRAPHY
PAST & PRESENT



THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

An introduction for teachers and students

INTRODUCTION

Today photography is celebrated as an art form in its own right. Far from eclipsing fine art, it has nourished its development. Yet echoing through the decades since 1839, the same questions are asked: can photography be taken as seriously as fine art? Does it merit the same attention and analysis?

Seduced by Art is a first in many respects: it is the first National Gallery exhibition to explore photography. It is also the first show to look at the relationship between contemporary photography, the early pioneering photographers, and the Old Masters. The fundamental premise of this exhibition is that the art of the past inspired the early pioneering photographers, and that both continue to stimulate present-day photography.

London, as one of the great art cities, increasingly celebrates photography. The Victoria and Albert Museum's photography department produces regular shows and displays. The Royal Academy now extends its invitation for entries to the Summer Exhibition to photographers, and the academy's show *Degas and the Ballet: Picturing Movement* made connections between the parallel worlds of 19th-century art and photography. *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* at Tate Britain explores how artists such as John Everett Millais (1829–1896) were almost competing with photography in their forensic examination of the natural world. The current art market reflects this widespread interest and admiration; major photographic works are now selling for over 2 million pounds.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ART OF THE PAST

It was small wonder that the great early pioneer photographers would look to the great art of the past, subliminally or otherwise. In this show, the artistic agenda as well as technical approaches of both pioneer and contemporary photographers are compared with past art in four major themes:

- Portraiture
- Figure studies
- Still life
- Landscape

Pioneer Photographers

Louis Daguerre (1787–1851)

Louis Daguerre introduced the first practicable photographic process, the daguerreotype, in Paris in 1839. He had developed this process from the work of his late collaborator, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce.

Each daguerreotype was unique, as it was made directly without an intervening negative. The daguerreotype produced a detailed photographic image as a fine layer of mercury silver particles on the polished surface of a silver plated sheet of copper.

The process was a huge commercial success, dominating the first years of early photography. Within three years of Daguerre's initial publication, daguerreotype portraits were being produced across the major cities of Europe.

William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877)

Some five years before Daguerre went public with the daguerreotype, the British inventor Fox Talbot was making good progress with his version of photography at Lacock Abbey, his Wiltshire home. Talbot immediately responded to Daguerre's announcement in 1839 by exhibiting his photographs at the Royal Institution in London. His method, which drew inspiration from earlier pioneers such as John Herschel (1792–1871) and Thomas Wedgwood (1771–1805), introduced the concept of a negative from which positive prints could be made. He called this photogenic drawing.

Talbot is credited with exploring the artistic potential of the camera as well as influencing the early development of commercial photography in Britain. Talbot's use of the negative and positive eventually became the basis for almost all 19th- and 20th-century photography. Whereas, the daguerreotype died out as a commercial process 30 years after its invention.

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815 –1879)

'My whole soul had endeavoured to do its duty ... in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man'

Julia Margaret Cameron's words reflect the passion she consistently brought to her work. She was 48 years old when her daughter's gift of a camera in 1863 transformed her life. By the end of her extraordinary 15-year career she was recognised as one of the first artists to understand the potential of photography as an art form in its own right.

Many of her photographs featured children, but she was also widely known for her pictures of celebrities, such as the Poet Laureate Alfred (later Lord) Tennyson. Her studies were frequently head-and-shoulders portraits with simple, composed light and dark tones, stopping short of sharp focus.

Cameron was constantly inspired by a wide variety of the Old Masters – allusions to them abound in her work.



Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879)

Light and Love, 1865

Albumen print

Wilson Centre for Photography

Victorian critics of the day constantly compared Cameron's photographs to the Old Masters. One wrote that the subtle outlines of her forms corresponded to 'the method of drawing employed by the great Italian artists ... resembling a sketch by Correggio'.

Correggio (active 1494; died 1534)

Madonna of the Basket, about 1524

Oil on wood

© The National Gallery, London.

The subject unusually shows the Virgin dressing the Christ Child, whose outstretched arms foreshadow his Crucifixion. Saint Joseph is busy with his carpentry in the background.

Does Cameron's photograph suggest that she was inspired by artists of the past such as Correggio? If so, what do you think she took from his work?

Which composition do you find most successful? Which image are you most drawn to? (These could be different answers.) Can you give your reasons?

Which image most expresses the sanctity and spirituality implicit in the subject?

EXPRESSION AND MEMORY: PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS

For centuries a painted or sculpted portrait was the only way to record a face, be it a king, a hero, a socialite or celebrity. The invention of photography in 1839 changed all this, giving many aspiring photographers the opportunity to earn a good living recording the middle class in formal studio portraits.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in common with many others, was entranced by the new photographic portraits. She preferred them to a fine art portrait 'not in respect (or disrespect) of Art, but for Love's sake' she wrote, describing her feeling that the photograph was a closer description of the features of a loved one. The first time she saw a

daguerreotype she described it as 'like engravings – only exquisite and delicate beyond the work of a graver'.

It is strange to reflect that prior to photography by far the majority would never have possessed an image of a loved one. A painted portrait was of course a hugely time consuming, and consequently expensive process – inevitably a privilege for the rich. The affordability of the daguerreotype made portraits available to a much wider group. The art critic P. G. Hamerton wrote in 1860: 'A poor soldier's wife can now get a more authentic miniature of her husband for one shilling, than a rich lady could have procured a century ago for a hundred pounds'.



Martin Parr (Born 1952)
Signs of the Times, England, 1991

C-type print

Martin Parr / Magnum Photos / Rocket Gallery

© Martin Parr / Magnum Photos.

Parr was working as a stills photographer on the BBC documentary 'Signs of the Times' (1991) when this photograph was taken. After positioning his sitters, he deliberately delayed the shot in order to capture their growing unease and awkwardness.



Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788)
Mr and Mrs Andrews, about 1750

Oil on canvas

© The National Gallery, London

Gainsborough's famous portrait, with its beautifully observed Suffolk landscape, celebrates the aspirations of the Georgian land-owning class.

What do the images reveal about the time in which they were created?
How are they similar/different?

What do you notice about the composition of each image? How does this affect your interpretation of the subjects' lives and future aspirations?

THE DIVINE IDEAL? PHOTOGRAPHING THE BODY

The history of art has been dominated by both sculptures and paintings of the male and female nude. With the advent of photography, it was inevitable that the exploration of ways to depict the nude would continue – from academic studies to pornography.

The nude has always been contentious. Today, the issue has grown more complex with power relations, feminism and the viewer's own psychosexual response. Alison Smith writes in her study of the nude in Victorian art: 'We have inherited from the Victorians two opposing but by no means mutually exclusive ways of perceiving the nude, broadly termed ... the aesthetic and the moral'.

Photographic nudes were on the market within a few years of photography's invention. At first, they were sold as expensive daguerreotypes and presented in decorative casings. Mass-produced paper prints followed.

In reaction to the proliferation of photographic nudes, the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 ruled that intentionally obscene printed matter was liable to destruction. Despite the threat of punishment, business boomed. Today these works are part of the art market, fetching high prices as examples of antique work.



Richard Learoyd (Born 1966)

Man with Octopus Tattoo II, 2011

Unique Ilfochrome photograph

© Richard Learoyd, courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

The octopus tattoo appears to entwine itself around the body of a man, like the serpents in the Laocoön group.

Learoyd uses an ancient device, the camera obscura, which traditionally is a box with a tiny hole and in later versions had a lens in one side. Learoyd, however, uses his entire studio as a camera obscura. Light from outside passes through the lens and the scene outside is reproduced on the inside of the room, only upside-down and laterally reversed.



James Anderson (?)

The Laocoön Group, 1855–65

Gold-toned albumen print

Wilson Centre for Photography

To avenge the blind priest Laocoön for foretelling Troy's doom, the gods send sea serpents to kill him and his sons.

This famous sculpture from the Vatican, dug up in 1506, was and remains an essential in any classical education; Anderson's Victorian photograph made it even more widely known.

How do you think Learoyd might be connected to the art of the past?

The antique Laocoön describes a murderous act. Is this expressed in the work? Might a contemporary photograph of a violent scene be more shocking? Why?

STUDIES OF TIME AND BEAUTY: STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Although ostensibly still life is a collection of inanimate objects assembled to demonstrate an artist's skill, throughout the history of art the still life has often been rich with meaning, containing symbols of war, religion, sex and death. Contemporary photographers continue to explore and reinvigorate the genre.

Dutch 17th-century art is arguably the richest for still life. Artists such as Balthasar van der Ast (1593/94–1657) specialised in the genre, concentrating their astonishing virtuoso skills on the depiction of flowers and insects.



Sam Taylor-Wood (Born 1967)

Still Life, 2001

35mm film/DVD; 3 minutes 44 seconds

Uziyel Collection

© The Artist, courtesy White Cube

This time-based piece traces the decomposition of fruit over several weeks, compressing it into a few minutes. Using modern technology, Taylor-Wood is drawing on the age-old traditions of still life and 'memento mori' (remember you must die).

Such works can provide a seductive illusion, celebrating the beauty and opulence of the natural world and appealing to all our senses: sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing.

But flowers wilt and insects die. Likewise our lives are transient and ephemeral. These phases of life are a part of the vanitas tradition, where beauty is but a passing thing and death is always closing in. Vanitas means emptiness in Latin and expresses the transitory and meaningless nature of material existence.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610)

The Supper at Emmaus, 1601

Oil and tempera on canvas

© The National Gallery, London.

After the Crucifixion, two of the disciples are joined by a stranger on the road to Emmaus, who they persuade to dine with them. In this early masterpiece, Caravaggio depicts the dramatic moment the disciples recognise the risen Christ as he blesses the bread (Luke 24: 13–32). The realism of the symbolic still life on the table has been an inspiration for generations of artists.

Caravaggio's still life demonstrates his consummate skill at describing the external world. Are you more drawn to his painterly version of reality or to Taylor-Wood's work recording reality? Give reasons for your answer.

Taylor-Wood's work might be seen as contemplation on the brevity of human existence. Do you feel aware of this when you see this work? Why might this be the case?

WILD POETRY: SEASCAPES AND LANDSCAPES

In 1868, the French critic Ernest Chesneau called landscape painting 'a place of asylum, apart from the devouring activity, the continuous fever of the city'. In today's fast-paced world, a contemporary photographer of landscape might agree.

In Western art, landscape played an increasingly important role from the 16th century onwards. But it was not until after the industrial revolution, that the natural world became more revered and celebrated; the painting of landscape came to be seen as an important genre in its

own right. Landscapes could be seen as a way of contemplating the beauty of the natural world, reflecting the spiritual in man's nature.

The rise in the importance of landscape painting coincided with the invention of the camera; from the outset photographers were wrestling with many of the same issues as the painters. Both paintings and photographs of landscape in the 19th century reflected a desire to escape the rigours of modern life and the increasingly industrial world.



Gustave Le Gray (1820–1884)
The Great Wave, Sète (La Grande Vague, Sète),
about 1856–59
Gold-toned albumen print
Gregg Wilson, Wilson Centre for Photography

Although Gray captures transitory effects, his process was anything but instantaneous. The comparatively slow shutter speeds available to him at the time made it impossible to create this scene in one shot. Instead, he innovatively combined three: he added the clouds from a different negative and the immediate foreground from another.



Peder Balke (1804–1887)
The Tempest, about 1862
Oil on wood
© The National Gallery, London.
Presented by Danny and Gry Katz, 2010

In this small painting, no larger than an envelope, Peder Balke captures the eye of a storm in his native Norway. He communicates nature at its most violent; two boats are in danger of being overwhelmed by the giant waves which have been painted at speed and with incredible freedom. The limited palette of white, grey and black tones is both arresting and reminiscent of a photographic plate.

At the time Gray was criticised for compromising photography's truthfulness for commercial ends. What do you think?

Both Gray and Balke sought to create the effect of spontaneity. Which of them was most successful?

This guide is given out free to teachers and full-time students with an exhibition ticket.
It can also be downloaded from the National Gallery website.

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National Gallery, London, 31 October 2012–20 January 2013
CaixaForum Barcelona, 21 February–19 May 2013
CaixaForum Madrid, 19 June–15 September 2013