

Images of Italy

National Library of Scotland
Leabharlann Nàiseanta na h-Alba

16 May to 2 November 2024

National Library of Scotland

THE RUSKIN Lancaster University
MUSEUM & RESEARCH CENTRE

“The most marvellous invention of the nineteenth century”.

John Ruskin, 1846

The daguerreotype was the first publicly announced photographic process in 1839. A highly detailed image is created directly onto a sheet of copper, plated with a thin coat of silver, without the use of a negative. The metal plate is light-sensitised using iodine and then transferred to the camera. The plate is developed using hot mercury until an image appears.

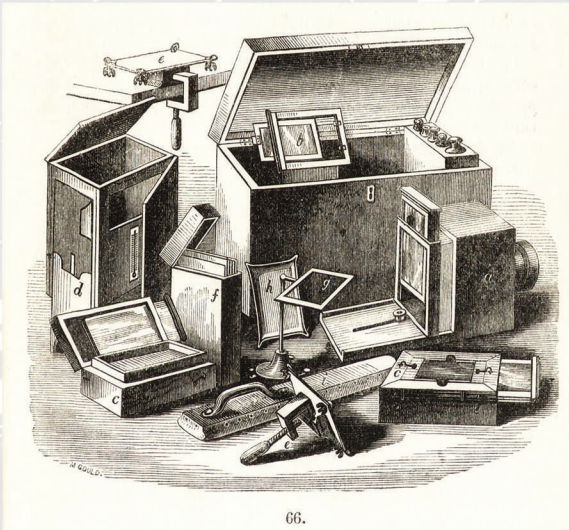


Fig. 66. Illustration of Daguerreotype Apparatus from 'A Manual of Photography', 1853, Robert Hunt. Public Domain

“to achieve anything like success or eminence in it required the chemical knowledge of a Faraday, the optical knowledge of a Herschel, the artistic talent of a Reynolds or Rembrandt, and the indomitable pluck and energy of a Hannibal...”

Antoine Claudet, one of the earliest commercial photographers.

“It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself; every chip of stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about proportions...”

John Ruskin, letter to his father, 1845



'Pisa. The Cathedral and leaning tower', ca. 1846, John Ruskin, John Hobbs and Le Cavalier Iller. © The Ruskin, Lancaster University

The Italian peninsula has for centuries been an important destination for travellers. Ruskin first visited Italy in 1833 when tourism was booming with the coming of the railways and steamships. There was also a market for guidebooks and lavishly illustrated books about Italy.

Ruskin experimented with what he called “the beautiful effects the daguerreotype can seize”. He used photography to record the fine detail of buildings then under threat from redevelopment and poor quality conservation. They also acted as study aids for his paintings and informed the illustrations in his publications, most notably 'The Stones of Venice' (1851-1853).

The development of hand held cameras in the 1880s offered new opportunities to photographers. Along with the earliest surviving photographs of Italy by Scots, the display includes James Craig Annan's photogravures of Venice and Lombardy from the 1890s. These show the possibilities of hand held cameras to record street scenes and everyday life in Italy.

“The artist who designs a picture, only reproduces more or less consciously forms which he has observed and stored in the recesses of his mind, and it is the great good fortune of the hand-camerist, alive and sensitive to the beautiful, to be able at once to secure in all its completeness the image which is but a memory to his brother of the pencil.”

James Craig Annan, 1896



The white friars from 'Venice and Lombardy', 1896, James Craig Annan. © National Library of Scotland

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This display explores how visual representations of Italy developed – from 15th-century woodcuts to 19th-century photography. Items from the Library's collections document the rise in travel abroad through books, travel guides and diaries. It highlights how book illustrators and photographers saw Italy, and how their work provided an impression of the country for British and European audiences.

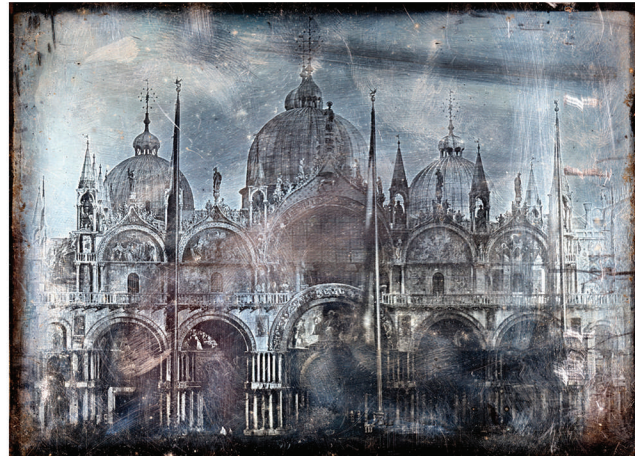
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The invention of photography in the 19th century provided a new technology to record Italy. The display includes examples of photography from the Library's collections and three daguerreotypes on loan from The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection at Lancaster University. The artist and art critic, John Ruskin's daguerreotypes spanned the period 1845 to 1856. They document buildings and places encountered during his European travels. Ruskin's 125 daguerreotypes at Lancaster University are amongst the most important surviving sets of early photographs in the world. The Ruskin's Director, Professor Sandra Kemp, explores Ruskin's work as part of the National Library of Scotland's events programme: nls.uk/whats-on.

The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection was purchased by Lancaster University in 2019, with generous support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and others, including the Art Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries and John R. Murray Charitable Trust. While The Ruskin is closed for major refurbishment, this is one of a series of international loan exhibitions of works from The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection.

NATIONAL HERITAGE MEMORIAL FUND **FNL Art Fund**
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The Ruskin and National Library of Scotland wish to thank these funders for their support in the acquisition of works in the 'Images of Italy' exhibition.



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“a daguerreotype of Florence – *all the town* – all – Venetian blinds & tiles and all – & even so many fig trees – and more clothes hung out upon them which I love...”

John Ruskin, letter to Henry Acland, ca. 1847

How do you choose what to put in a photo?

Do you... focus on a picturesque landmark?

Or capture a sense of the place?

1 'Venice. St. Mark's and the clock tower from the south', 1850, John Ruskin and John Hobbs;

2 'Venice. St. Mark's. Principal façade. South-west portico. Angled view', ca. 1850-1852, John Ruskin and John Hobbs;

3 'Venice. St Mark's. Principal façade', 1852, John Ruskin and John Hobbs. © The Ruskin, Lancaster University;

4 'South portico of St. Marks' from 'Examples of Architecture', 1851, John Ruskin. © National Library of Scotland

5 'Colosseum, Rome', ca. 1848, James Calder Macphail. © National Library of Scotland

6 'Florence. Panorama from the south', ca. 1846, John Ruskin and Le Cavalier Iller. © The Ruskin, Lancaster University

7 Albumen print showing the town Civitavecchia (in Lazio) from *Italian Studies, Rome*, ca. 1857, Robert Macpherson. © National Library of Scotland