

## STEPHEN JAKUBOWICZ

# True portraiture: David Roberts's *The Holy Land* and Francis Frith's 'Photographic prints of Egyptian antiquities'

In 1846, illustrator and explorer David Roberts finally succeeded in publishing *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia* in two series of three-volume sets, completing his six-volume lithographic work displaying illustrations made during his expedition to present-day Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.<sup>1</sup> The culmination of two years' exploration undertaken during 1838 and 1839, Roberts's project was so ambitious that he had experienced trouble in finding a lithographer willing to convert his illustrations into reproducible prints. However, he was finally able to secure the assistance of lithographer Louis Haghe, who, with the help of his assistants, printed the illustrator's nearly 250 images, using approximately 500 lithographic stones collectively weighing about 16 tonnes.<sup>2</sup>

Haghe, who had been appointed (along with his business partner William Day) 'lithographer to the queen', took advantage of the briefly fashionable style of tinted lithography in his reproduction of Roberts's works, hand-colouring the prints following the application of usually two or three base tones to reflect the delicacy and spontaneity of Roberts's original watercolour illustrations.<sup>3</sup> Roberts's project was immensely successful, listing around 630 notables, including such luminaries as the archbishop of Canterbury, the prime minister and the queen, among its advance subscribers.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, unparalleled in their comprehensiveness and scope, Roberts's lithographs gave

# EGYPT & NUBIA.

FROM DRAWINGS MADE ON THE SPOTS BY

**David Roberts R.A.**

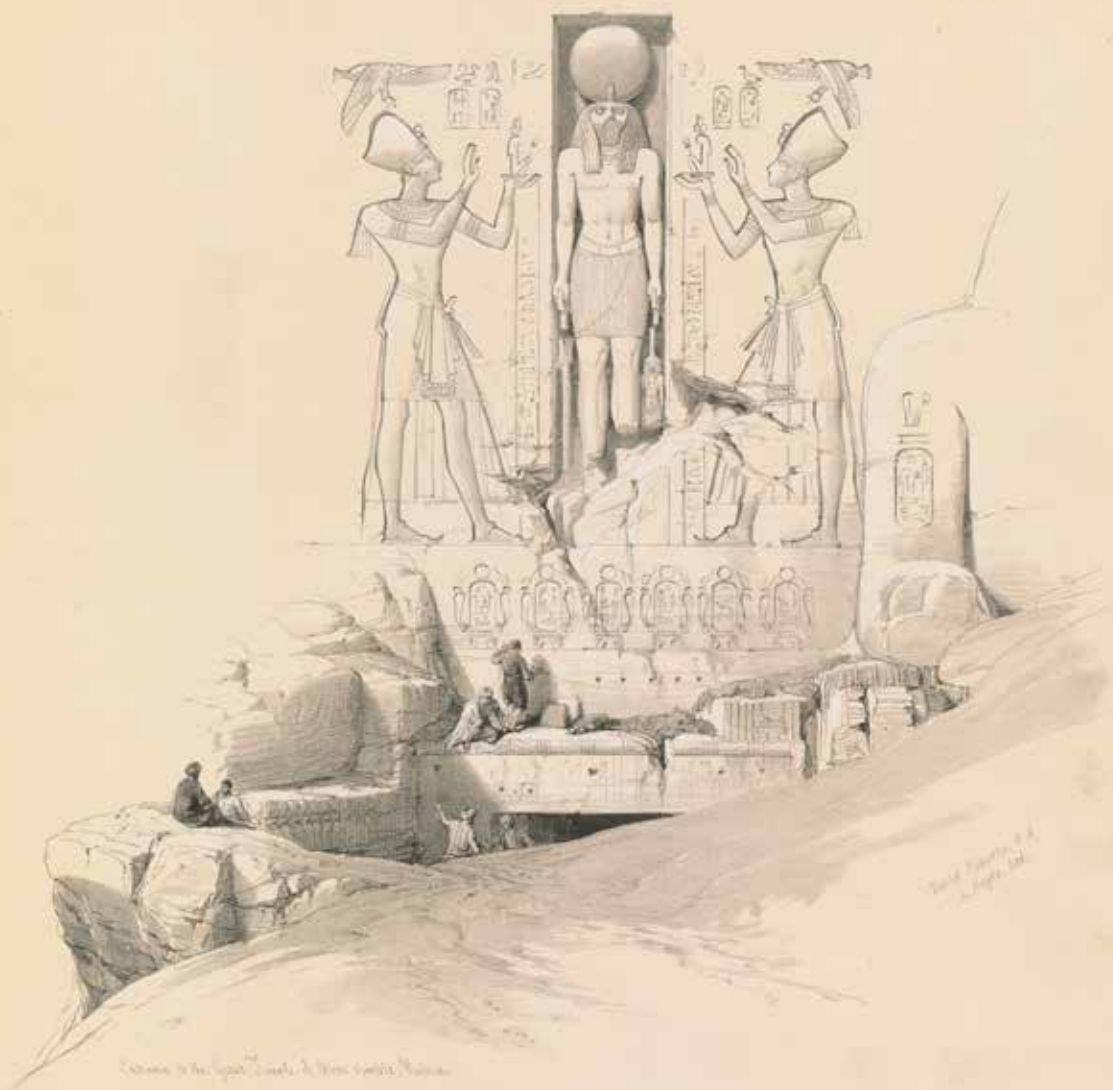
WITH HISTORICAL DESCRIPTIONS BY

**WILLIAM BECKETTON, ESQ.**

LITHOGRAPHED BY

**LOUIS HAGEK.**

VOL. I.



*Queen in the Great Temple of Isis, Karnak, Thebes.*

LONDON: P. S. KNOX, 15, THE AGON SQUARE, STRAND.

SOLE DEPOT IN AUSTRIA TO BE HAD OF

WIDMANN.

the British public an unprecedented insight into the previously undocumented landscapes, monuments and people of the Near East.<sup>5</sup>

About seven years after Roberts completed his publication of *The Holy Land*, successful businessman turned photographer Francis Frith published an album of 77 collodion wet-plate photographic views of Egypt and Palestine which together constituted *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*. The collodion process, which involved coating a glass plate with a collodion emulsion combined with pyrogallic acid, was invented in the early 1850s. Its development gave early landscape photographers the ability to more quickly develop sharper, sturdier and more predictable results in the field than could be achieved with the calotype. By mechanising the photographic method, the collodion process revolutionised landscape photography, turning the scenic view into an item of consumption and its production into a viable business venture.<sup>6</sup> Frith took full advantage of these commercial capabilities, utilising the collodion process to create, at the peak of his venture, a photographic album interweaving archaeological and ethnographic details with textual inventions to offer the reader a narrative accompanied by evocative and novel photographic views of all the major monuments of the ancient Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

The collodion process was not without its drawbacks, however: not only did the harsh desert climate make transporting the portable darkroom, needed for the process to be successful, a challenge; the heat also often caused the collodion to boil over, fizzing onto the glass negative and its surroundings.<sup>8</sup> Despite these shortcomings, by blending fact and fiction to meet the Victorian public's demand for photographic views, Frith's album both solidified his reputation as the first mass producer of photographs in England and demonstrated the superiority of photography over lithography as a means of documenting and representing locales outside the reach of the British public.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps due to its widespread use and ready access, until recently photography has continued to be perceived as a comparatively superior means of documenting the world. The photograph is seen as a more honest way of recording our reality due to a belief in its ability to frame the subject in a more immediate manner than that of other art forms. John Berger, for instance, argues that while the work of art is valuable because it exists as a singular entity, the photograph is an infinitely reproducible artefact that acts as a document of a moment being captured.<sup>10</sup> More recent analyses have begun to challenge this view of photography, presenting it instead as a practice as much informed by its context and usage as other forms of media.

In his study on the part that photography played in expanding and legitimising the colonial project, for instance, critic James Ryan identifies



'Approach of the Simoom, Desert of Gizeh', lithograph by Louis Haghe from drawings by David Roberts, from David Roberts, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia ...*, vol. 3, 1842–49, p. [43]. Rare Books Collection, RARESEF 915.69 R54

the integral role of illustrators and photographers like Roberts and Frith in familiarising the British public with scenes of the Orient. Ryan suggests that in documenting their subjects they served an educative purpose in informing the anglophone reader about the locales and history of the Near East.<sup>11</sup> Since the artistic and documentarian endeavours of both illustrators and photographers could be co-opted to an educative purpose, Ryan writes, it is incorrect to consider the photographic view and the artistic landscape as separate categories. This is especially so considering that European landscape photographers of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s borrowed from artistic convention to promote photography as a superior, objective record of what was being perceived while sharing a common imperative with artists in presenting the imperialist perspective as a natural way of seeing.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the role that lithography and photography played in strengthening the British colonial project is well established. Historian Edward Said, for instance, identifies how such technologies were co-opted towards the purpose of consolidating the status of the Near East as Europe's cultural contestant and contrasting image, presenting the Middle East as an originary culture existing just outside the apprehensive and comprehensive capabilities of European consciousness.<sup>13</sup> In this article I intend to redirect attention to the didactic elements of Roberts's and Frith's practices to explore how discourses

surrounding their contemporary usage challenged what is now a well-established divide between illustration and photography. By examining State Library Victoria's holdings of Roberts's *The Holy Land* alongside an album of Frith's photographs, I will investigate how photographs and lithographs were co-opted for their didactic function, being displayed alongside each other to help construct an educative narrative to raise the moral and social standards of Victoria's budding colony. In describing how these items were put to similar uses during the Library's early history, I hope to subsequently demonstrate how the associations and definitions surrounding Roberts's illustrations and Frith's photographs are informed as much by the means with which they were produced as by their cultural and historical context. This is a comparison warranted by Roberts's and Frith's status as commercial rivals, with each competing for the attention of the public.<sup>14</sup>

Along with a complete set of Roberts's *Egypt and Nubia* and *The Holy Land* acquired in the late 1850s,<sup>15</sup> the Library holds a number of incomplete sets of photographs by Frith acquired through various means. This article will focus specifically on an incomplete, disbanded album by Frith of 44 photographic prints similar to those that appeared in *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*, many of which are of views and monuments similarly depicted by Roberts.<sup>16</sup> Curiously, the cover of this album is inscribed with a statement informing the reader that the photographs were 'presented to the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library by Edward Thompson Esquire'. This dedication was most likely written on behalf of Edward Maunde Thompson, principal librarian of the British Museum, London, between 1888 and 1909,<sup>17</sup> indicating that the donation itself was likely the result of an ongoing correspondence between the trustees of what is now known as the National Gallery of Victoria and the British Museum, with the former requesting 'the purchase of pictures and works of art for the gallery'.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from establishing the Palaeographical Society in 1873 with fellow British Museum librarian Edward Augustus Bond and subsequently co-publishing two series of manuscript facsimiles presenting a range of ancient manuscripts and inscriptions to assist students in the study of palaeography, Thompson encouraged expeditions to sites in Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Ephesus, Carchemish and Egypt in order that new items could be added to the British Museum's collections.<sup>19</sup> Thompson's donation of Frith's photographic prints to the Library, along with his activities as principal librarian, not only indicates an interest in the study of ancient texts and sites but also alludes to his awareness of the ability of rapidly improving technologies like facsimile and photography to document and disseminate items of archaeological

significance to the anglophone populace. Indeed, the trustees' correspondence with the British Museum highlights the eagerness of the newly established Public Library, Museums and Gallery to reflect this practice in their own collection policy by disseminating items, and depictions of items, previously inaccessible to the Victorian public.

The trustees realised that through establishing a closely associated group of institutions based on the South Kensington model – a concept of museum design which emphasised the importance of drawing links between primary sources and reproductions, depictions and commentaries that would otherwise be isolated from each other – they could foster a sympathy between the branches of science, literature and art to create an educative experience for the library visitor that advanced 'the general interests of learning' and, subsequently, the 'elevation of the public taste'.<sup>20</sup> Lithographs, photographs and other reproductions were therefore central to the trustees' mission, existing in consonance with one another to form a didactic narrative alongside other texts and objects for the ultimate purpose of morally and educatively influencing Victoria's early colony.

This was a collection philosophy in turn inspired by John Ruskin's belief in the moralising ability of aesthetic practice, an influence brought to the Board of Trustees by critic and board member James Smith, who advocated for the collection of works according to their potential to educate, record the history of, and subsequently raise the moral standards of, Victoria's colony.<sup>21</sup> Like Ruskin, Smith believed that artistic practice should be directed towards a moralising imperative, following established rules of composition and form to convey the subject in a realistic and evocative manner, and recommended that the Public Library, Museums and Gallery follow these guidelines in building their collection.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it is well known that while Ruskin had exacting standards as to what constituted a work of art, he also recognised the power that emerging technologies could have on exerting a moral influence on society.<sup>23</sup> In his work on architecture, for instance, Ruskin implored British 'amateur photographers' to begin documenting the churches and abbeys of England, since 'while a photograph of landscape is merely an amusing toy, one of early architecture is a precious historical document', contributing to the compilation of a detailed historical architectural record.<sup>24</sup>

Frith, however, attempted to go a step further, distinguishing his photographs from the work of others by imbuing his images with a documentarian and artistic aura. Critic Carol Armstrong, for instance, identifies the documentarian value of Frith's work, arguing that he distinguished himself from competitors by presenting his photographic album as a text that asserted



'Thebes' [The colossal statues of Amunoph III], lithograph by Louis Haghe from drawings by David Roberts, from David Roberts, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia ...*, vol. 1, 1842–49, p. [24]. Rare Books Collection, RARESEF 915.69 R54

its status as a piece of evidence documenting his travels to Egypt and the Near East.<sup>25</sup> Critic Douglas Nickel, however, cautions against reading Frith's photographs from a strictly documentarian perspective. Instead, he identifies how Frith presented his images in such a way that the photograph appeared to be a transparent window onto the phenomenal world being framed, mediating the experience of photographic viewing while making it seem like no mediation was taking place. In doing this, Frith attempted to present his photographs as superior to other forms of artistic representation, since they could convey the photographer's individuality while operating as pieces of documentary evidence, existing simultaneously as works of art and records of the landscape.<sup>26</sup>

By identifying a Ruskinian aesthetic of *res ipsa loquitur* – 'the thing speaks for itself' – in Frith's photography, a mode of representation itself informed by the Romantic Transcendentalist belief 'in a direct connection between the Daylight Truths of external reality and the sympathetic soul of the photograph's viewer', Nickel highlights how Frith's supposedly objective photographic records betray a belief in the potential of photography to exert an incontrovertible and beneficent moral influence on its audience.<sup>27</sup> Despite Frith's attempt to elevate his photographs to the status of works



'The statues of Memnon in the plain of Thebes' (detail), photograph by Francis Frith, from collection 'Photographic prints of Egyptian antiquities', 1857. Pictures Collection, H89.152/2

of art, Thompson's donation of the incomplete set of Frith's photographic prints directly to the Library, rather than to the Gallery or Museums, may be explained by the prevailing attitude that continued to regard photography as an inferior art form. While Frith's images were believed to lack the expression of personality that Ruskin thought defined a work of art, they were recognised for their ability to document and convey depictions of Egypt and the Near East, meaning the Library would have been seen as the ideal location for them to be circulated as tools that could moralise, educate and influence Victoria's colony.

Meanwhile, in *Modern Painters* Ruskin commended David Roberts for being the only 'architectural draughtsman of note' among the members of the British Royal Academy of Arts, complimenting the artist for developing sketches of Egyptian monuments which accurately conveyed their architectural lines, shapes of shadow and artificial colour.<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, however, Ruskin castigated Roberts for his overly attentive style, critiquing him for failing to attempt to portray his subjects in an artistic manner. According to Ruskin, although Roberts's lithographs were valuable as statements of fact, they lacked any indication of artistic spontaneity and presented their subjects in an overly staid manner, eschewing the 'real hues and shades of sky and earth' for a



garish and artificial colour scheme.<sup>29</sup> Roberts's apparently excessive attention to detail and reliance on a palette that risked subordinating his sketches from works of art to mere representations of what he was attempting to convey were likely the results both of his training as a scene painter, a profession that assisted in the development of his abilities as an artist,<sup>30</sup> and of the technological shortcomings of lithography in the mid 19th century.

Admittedly, Ruskin revised his evaluation of Roberts in his autobiography, writing that Roberts's studies of Egypt and the Holy Land were among the first made by a British painter neither to exhibit his own skill nor to profit from his subjects but 'to give true portraiture of scenes of historical and religious interest', acknowledging the artist for having taught him how to portray light and shade while remaining attentive to the smallest details.<sup>31</sup> Ruskin would likely, therefore, have been willing to convey the didactic qualities of Roberts's work to the public, especially considering his ethos regarding the moralising function of art. Regrettably, however, it is impossible to conclusively establish such a link to the Library's holdings of *The Holy Land*. Regardless, considering their later correspondence with Thompson, Ruskin and the British Museum, the trustees no doubt welcomed the acquisition of such significant works as Roberts's monumental six volumes for the Library's collection.

A closer look at depictions of the same or similar subjects by Roberts and Frith throws into relief some of the advantages and drawbacks of each medium. Consider, for instance, Roberts's depiction of the Colossi of Memnon alongside Frith's later photograph of the same subject. In his illustration, Roberts portrays the colossi as massive figures that dwarf everything around them. The illustrator seems to encourage the viewer to apprehend the statues, contrasted starkly against miniscule human figures and a seemingly uninterrupted barren landscape, as the final remnants of an ancient and advanced culture. Frith's photograph may appear somewhat disappointing by comparison: its narrow and low angle subordinates the colossi to the human perspective, making them seem perhaps smaller than expected. While Roberts, through the versatile medium of watercolour illustration, exaggerates the size of the colossi to instil a sense of wonderment in the viewer, Frith is hindered by the shortcomings of early photographic technology, which make the image appear flattened and awkward. This was likely the result of the inability of the collodion process to accurately convey the scale of the subject, since it could not capture the fine gradations of light that trick the human eye into perceiving depth in a photographic image.

It could be argued, meanwhile, that Roberts's illustrations are fabrications designed to elicit certain emotions in the viewer and to deceive them into



Top left: 'Head of the great sphinx and pyramids of Gizeh' (detail), lithograph by Louis Haghe from drawings by David Roberts, from David Roberts, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia ...*, vol. 1, 1842–49, p. [33]. Rare Books Collection, RARESEF 915.69 R54

Top right: 'Sphinx and pyramid of Gizeh', photograph by Francis Frith, from collection 'Photographic prints of Egyptian antiquities', 1857. Pictures Collection, H89.152/14

Above: 'The great fallen Colossus and Osiride Pillars, the Memnorial', photograph by Francis Frith, from collection 'Photographic prints of Egyptian antiquities', 1857, Pictures Collection, H89.152/35

believing that the colossi are larger than in reality. Despite the shortcomings of the technology he was using, Frith's depictions are more realistic, as they convey the scale and details of the statues in a documentarian manner. A similar comparison can be made of Roberts's and Frith's respective depictions of the Great Sphinx of Giza: in his side view of the sphinx, Roberts emphasises its scale and features by depicting it alongside human figures dwarfed by its sheer scale. Additionally, the Great Pyramid of Giza stands in subordination to the sphinx's head, emphasising the sphinx's status as an enduring testament to ancient Egyptian civilisation. Again, Frith's photograph of the same subject may seem underwhelming by comparison. Although it serves as an important record today, the photograph is taken from a low angle, which flattens the perspective of the image, obscuring the sphinx's face, making it difficult to discern any remarkable details in the figure. Once more, this was perhaps due to the shortcomings of the technology to which Frith had access. In the introduction to *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*, he directly addressed these shortcomings, lamenting how 'a photographer only knows ... the difficulty of getting a view satisfactorily into the camera' and speculating about 'what pictures we would make, if we could command our points of view!'<sup>32</sup>

Frith's attempt to promote photography as a medium that could function as both a documentarian record and a work of art therefore succeeded to the extent that his depictions of Egypt were recognised for their educative value and are today seen as important objects of historical value, having been displayed in a recent iteration of State Library Victoria's *World of the Book* exhibition. The popularity of photography as a means of documenting the landscape also resulted from great technological advances that improved its accessibility and ease of use, meaning that by the late 19th century photography had become well established as the primary means by which tourists could record details of their journeys to distant landscapes and locales.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, English photographer Francis Bedford's photographs of the 1862 royal tour to the Near East – an area which at that time was 'just sufficiently unknown and different' to warrant his presence alongside Frith, French writer and photographer Maxime Du Camp and career photographers James Robertson and Felice Beato – helped to popularise photography as an accessible medium which could document the view in an ostensibly truthful and objective way.<sup>34</sup>

The exhibiting of Frith's photographs alongside Roberts's lithographs highlights how – although each item may hold particular value due to the choices made by the artist – viewing the items together gives the contemporary viewer an invaluable insight into the ideologies, motivations and prejudices

that informed their production and creates a broader narrative from which analyses can be made of their era. The viewer can, in Walter Benjamin's words, search Frith's pre-industrial photograph for a 'tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has ... seared the subject' while admiring the artistic qualities of Roberts's lithograph and draw their own conclusions as to the motivations that informed the production of each item.<sup>35</sup>

Victoria's State Library provides a unique and invaluable environment in which to do this, due to the diversity of its holdings, demonstrating how it continues to be influenced even today by Ruskin's writings concerning the social function of art. Specifically, the Library's collection and galleries reflect Ruskin's recognition of how different media could be put to similar functions when displayed alongside one another, converging to collaboratively contribute to the educative and moral elevation of society. In this context, the practices' convergent potential to be co-opted to similar ends takes precedence over the superior ability of either lithography or photography to convey the subject.

Regrettably, changes in the structure of the Library's hierarchy along with funding cuts towards the end of the 19th century meant that it became the Library's responsibility to collect photographs and works that were not judged to possess adequate artistic merit to be acquired by the Gallery but that were seen as enriching Victoria's moral standards, while the role of the newly founded Gallery was to collect works considered to possess artistic value. This decision further consolidated the divide between the documentarian status of the photograph and the aesthetic status of the artwork, curtailing the potential for comparisons to be made between contrasting collection items.<sup>36</sup>

Fortunately, however, the trustees' desire to create an institution that would allow ready use of its collections for the benefit of all continues today, for both physical and digital formats, a philosophy reflected in technologies like the recently redesigned online catalogue and in the Library's permanent exhibitions. Both sites enable continued easy access to the vast array of items that constitute the Library's collection, providing the opportunity to draw analytical links between the items themselves and the contexts in which they appear, meaning that some, like Roberts's lithographs and Frith's photographs, can once again rub shoulders, albeit in a modified environment. By allowing items in the Library's collection to be viewed and utilised within a broader contextual narrative, the trustees' vision of harnessing the educative potential of emerging technologies to influence and educate society can continue in a similar form today, informing and enriching the Library's role and function for generations to come.