

DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

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Media Advisory

FIRST SEEN: PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE WORLD'S PEOPLES, 1840-1880
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The Dahesh Museum of Art is pleased to be the first venue to mount this extraordinary exhibition of early photographs organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The invention of photography had a tremendous impact on 19th-century artists, illustrators, writers, scientists, and early filmmakers. As part of this Museum's mission to explore all facets of the art world in the 19th century, *First Seen* offers visitors the opportunity to share in the excitement of seeing what 19th-century citizens learned of the world through the new medium of photography, and to imagine the impact that the wide dissemination of such images had upon the visual culture of the time.

From the moment an image could be fixed on paper, photographers and adventurers sought to capture and record both the familiar and exotic aspects of their world. Although landscape, antiquities, architecture and objects of all description came before the lens, the innate human fascination with other people, whether from different continents or different social groups, fueled a passion for photographs of people. Western societies, struggling with issues of personal and national identity, were fascinated with the physical differences that defined people. As explorers set out to fill in the blank spaces on maps, others compiled a human geography of ethnic and tribal types; social classes, occupations and castes; the criminal, the ill, the picturesque. The lens recorded their faces, postures, clothing, accessories, tools and implements.

The exhibition *First Seen* offers an extraordinary survey of nineteenth-century images, many of them unique, made in roughly the first four decades following the invention of photography. Comprised of nearly 250 photographs, produced by gifted amateurs and commissioned professionals, by visiting and indigenous photographers, the exhibition highlights the first-known photographs of peoples and races, classes and ranks on nearly every continent. It is a map of the human world in the middle of the nineteenth century in all its dazzling variety and complexity.

The earliest pictures in the exhibition are daguerreotypes. These include a Jules Itier photograph of a group of Ceylonese standing by the shore in Ceylon, and a photograph of an aborigine in the South Pacific by an unidentified daguerreotypist. Both are the earliest photographic images of people in the region. A Native American warrior had his photograph

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made in Washington D.C.; on opposing leaves in a velvet-lined ambrotype case, he's shown first in his own ceremonial regalia and then in the ceremonial regalia of Washington—a frock coat and tie. Not only portraits of this man at a particular moment, the images may also be seen to carry a whole history of acculturation and cultural resistance that would play out over the next century. The Scottish team Hill and Adamson photographed the fisher folk of Newhaven in 1844, perhaps the earliest project to document a community and a way of life. The exhibition includes extremely rare salted paper prints from paper negatives made by Ernest Benecke in Egypt. His photographs of Nubian slaves and children and Bedouin tribesmen are the earliest photographs of the different peoples living along the Nile. Roger Fenton accompanied the British military campaign in the Crimea and photographed the people he encountered—the combatants, military allies and camp workers. Felix Beato sailed with the first American expeditionary force to Korea. The exhibition includes work from an album of beautiful, classically composed photographs that were the first glimpse the West had of Korean soldiers and ministers. When the Czar consolidated Russia's hold on Central Asia, an unknown photographer made pictures of his newest subjects in present-day Kazakhstan. The photographs are bound in a sumptuous album, sealed with the Romanov crest.

Photographers observed not only the obvious physical differences between white Europeans and the peoples of Asia, Africa, Australia and the Americas; they also carefully recorded the social gradations within groups. At almost the same time that an unidentified photographer recorded the Czar's new Asian subjects, R. Fhedorovetz, who styled himself photographer to the Emperor of All Russia, documented the different ethnic and social types in Odessa—a Jewish schoolboy, a Cossack, an elderly Slavic rag picker. His project prefigures that of August Sander's attempt to record *The Face of Our Time* in Germany in the 1930s. Photographers active in Japan, India and other parts of Asia carefully recorded the status of their sitters, while photographers in Europe turned their cameras on elements of their own social structure: the picturesque vagabond, the privileged innocence of childhood, the secular and the religious, the intellectual and the working man.

The mix of curiosity and scientific study can be seen in the early efforts at anthropological study by amateurs such as William Ellis, a physician who made three visits to Malagasy in the mid-1850s and carefully photographed inhabitants in profile and front view to graphically represent characteristic skull shapes. There are so many firsts in this exhibition that it seems repetitive to mention that his are the first photographs of people in the region. Scientific curiosity was not only directed outward from the Euro-American center. In England, Zabe made photographic portraits of asylum inmates with careful notation of their illness and symptoms; he also photographed criminals and measured their features to arrive at an index of criminality.

Although in many cases the photographs in this exhibition are the "first portraits" of people from a region or group, this exhibition is not a monotonous rank of head-and-shoulder mug

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shots. The peoples of Europe, North and South America, China and the South Pacific, as well as the Middle East and Africa, are represented at work, in their environments, in their homes and in their celebrations. Organized by geographic groups, the 250 intimate photographs reveal the common threads of human societies and human curiosity. The specificity of photography counters the catalogue of human characteristics with the distinctly unique and individual aspects of each sitter.

Drawn largely from the Wilson Centre for Photography, Ltd. in London, the exhibition is co-curated by Karen Sinsheimer and Kathleen Stewart Howe, and is accompanied by a major publication with an essay by Ms. Howe. After it closes in New York the exhibition will travel to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

EXHIBITION PARTNERS:



GRGICH HILLS



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