

PRESS RELEASE

IMAGES OF ITALY. PLACES OF LONGING IN EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY

23 FEBRUARY TO 3 SEPTEMBER 2023

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Press preview: Wednesday, 22 February 2023, 11 am

Frankfurt am Main, 2 February 2023. Gondoliers on the Grand Canal, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the antiquities of Rome: Numerous photographs by Giorgio Sommer, the Alinari brothers, Carlo Naya, and Robert Macpherson, among others, shaped the image of Italy as a place of longing. From 23 February to 3 September 2023, the Städel Museum is presenting a selection of early photographs of Italy. The exhibition unites altogether ninety major photos of the years 1850 to 1880 from the museum's own collection, taking visitors on a photographic tour along the best-known routes with stops in Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome, and Naples.

People have been dreaming their way to Italy for generations: the Mediterranean climate, multifaceted natural environment, and wealth of culture and art treasures have long since made the country a favourite travel destination. When the development of the railway system led to a boom in tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century, photography studios opened in the vicinity of the most popular sights. Even before the invention of the picture postcard, the photographic views on sale there were a prized souvenir for travellers, and also sold internationally by mail order. Johann David Passavant, then director of the Städel, began purchasing photos for the museum's collection as far back as the 1850s. From these prints, both the art-interested public and students of the affiliated art academy were able to get an idea of southern Europe and its artistic and natural treasures. This brought distant countries closer while, simultaneously, the motifs in circulation determined what was considered worth seeing. To this day, the sceneries captured in photographs at that time continue to have an impact.

Philipp Demandt, director of the Städel Museum, on the exhibition: "Images of Italy' invites visitors along on a photographic journey: from Milan, Venice, and Florence to Rome and Naples. At the same time, the show offers insights into the history of the Städel Museum's photography collection. Johann David Passavant, the museum's director at the time, recognized the possibility of providing unlimited access to

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artworks and cultural treasures with the help of the photography medium early on—thus upholding our founder Johann Friedrich Städel’s guiding principle in splendid manner.”

The beginnings of the photography collection

With reproductions of artworks, photography also created new possibilities for the developing discipline of art history. It was in the 1850s that Johann David Passavant (1787–1861), then director of the Städel’sches Kunstinstitut, acquired the first photographs for the museum. Amassed from a range of different sources, the prints convey the wealth of motifs and forms distinguishing a cultural region appreciated at the time as one of Europe’s most important. In the German art-historical perception, Italy and its art were outstanding and exemplary. Photographic views of them accordingly account for a large proportion of the Städel Museum’s photography holdings. They served visitors and students alike as study objects and a means of exploring proportions, light conditions, and perspectives.

“The exhibition retraces the unique history of the development of photography in nineteenth-century Italy. The first section looks at how the medium entered the Städel Museum in the form of collection items and took on ever greater importance in connection with the emerging tourist industry. From there the show proceeds to images of Italy’s most important destinations, thus presenting a comprehensive—and singularly striking—stocktaking of its cultural landscape in the period in question. The sights of those days still attract the photographic eye today. The views are often the same ones we travel to now,” comments exhibition curator **Kristina Lemke**.

A tour of Italy in pictures

After crossing the Alps, the classical route of a trip to Italy for purposes of education and enjoyment took travellers through the North to Milan, Genoa, and Venice, onwards from there to Florence and Rome, and finally to Naples and Pompeii. Starting in the 1850s, photographers recorded the main architectural and natural attractions in pictures. In terms of visual language, the photographs exhibit a close similarity to paintings, drawings, and prints. To lend images an idyllic mood, the photographers chose their vantage points with care, waited for a time of day that would produce a finely gradated play of light and shade, and integrated models to enliven their compositions. Many of them, such as Pompeo Pozzi (1817–1880), Gioacchino Altobelli (1814–1878), and Enrico Van Lint (1808–1884) had initially trained as artists. The rapidly growing photography trade also offered numerous emigrants a source of income: Robert Macpherson (1814–1872), Eugène Constant (active in Rome 1848–1852), Jakob August Lorent (1813–1884), Alfred August Noack (1833–1895), and Giorgio Sommer (1834–1914), for example, came to Italy

from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. The widely circulating motifs shaped the travel canon.

The photographic views popular back then convey an image of Italy as a timeless place of longing. Only to an extent can they be understood as mirrors of reality. The region was shaped above all by a national unification movement that got underway after 1815: the Risorgimento, which—punctuated by frequent military disputes—would only end in 1870 with the capture of Rome. Yet the political conflicts did little to discourage the development of tourism and photography taking place in the same decades.

Photographers and motifs—a selection

To this day, the Leaning Tower of Pisa is one of the most photographed sights in Italy. In the 1850s, the trained sculptor **Enrico Van Lint** (Pisa 1808–1884) repeatedly photographed the tower and the other buildings on the Cathedral Square from different perspectives. Under good light conditions, the exposure times ranged between 20 seconds and 7 minutes, on overcast days between 8 and 18 minutes. Dating from around 1855, the view by Van Lint on display in the show is one of the oldest objects in the Städel Museum's photography collection.

Alfred Noack (Dresden 1833–Genoa 1895) completed artistic training in Dresden before emigrating to Italy in the late 1850s. After four years in Rome, he opened a photo studio in Genoa that served him as a base for explorations of the Ligurian Riviera. Here he captured the Sestri Levante section of the coast, a popular holiday destination, in photos he composed in painting-like manner. By reducing the depth of field after the manner of traditional landscape painting, Noack was able to create suggestive atmospheric images.

In 1856, the photographer Georg Sommer (1834–Naples 1914) moved to Italy and, under the name **Giorgio Sommer**, became one of Naples's most successful entrepreneurs. The exhibition presents, among others, his views of the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II* (ca. 1868–1873) in Milan, the island of Capri, and a spectacular series of shots capturing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in April 1872. Sommer photographed the rare natural spectacle at half-hour intervals from a boat lying at anchor a safe distance away in the Gulf of Naples. The *Leipzig Illustrierte Zeitung* featured woodcut reproductions of these images that can be regarded as forerunners of the later emerging field of photojournalism.

Carlo Naya (Tronzano Vercellese 1816–Venice 1882) advanced to become the most prominent chronicler of Venice in the second half of the nineteenth century. At first sight, his photo of a gondola against the backdrop of the *Library of Saint Mark*,

Campanile, and Doge's Palace (ca. 1875) looks like a snapshot, but nothing about it is spontaneous. Over the course of his long career, Naya captured nearly every one of Venice's architectural landmarks, among them the so-called Bridge of Sighs. In the nineteenth century, the famous sight was one of the world's most photographed bridges. Countless photographers have set up their camera on the same spot. The resulting view of the bridge has etched itself in the collective visual memory and is still encountered in the social media today as the ideal angle for holiday pics.

Carlo Ponti (Sagno 1823–Venice 1893) produced views of popular architectural sights in Venice. Among the photos by Ponti on display in the exhibition is one of the *Ca' d'Oro* (ca. 1870–1880) providing information about the edifice in two languages on the back. With this souvenir, the photographer catered not only to tourists, but also to persons interested or specializing in the history of art and culture. In the image, the building's rich decoration—with colonnades, tracery, and reliefs—is distinct down to the tiniest detail.

Leopoldo Alinari, who had trained as an engraver, went into business for himself as a photographer in 1852. Two years later he founded a studio with his brothers Romualdo and Giuseppe. In addition to portraits, the **Fratelli Alinari** offered views of the city's famous monuments. In 1859, they came to international fame with reproductions of drawings by Raphael. From that time forward, photographic reproductions of artworks, for example from the Uffizi, were a permanent feature of the family company's product range—and likewise among the Städel'sches Kunstinstitut's purchases.

The exhibition also presents the remarkable photographic composition entitled *Rome: Fishermen on the Tiber near the Castel Sant'Angelo* (ca. 1860) by **Gioacchino Altobelli** (Terni 1814–Rome 1878), who had previously been active as a history and portrait painter. Altobelli was one of Rome's most successful photographers. The Ponte Sant'Angelo with its Baroque sculptures by Gian Lorenzo Bernini divides the pictorial field about halfway between top and bottom, leaving plenty of space for the reflections of St Peter's Basilica and the Castel Sant'Angelo in the smooth surface of the Tiber. The photographer was judicious in his choice of staffage in the foreground: the figures serve to point the viewer's gaze to the main monuments.

Meticulous calculations of the light were necessary to capture the plasticity of sculptures in the best way possible. That is because, depending on the surface structure, various reflections might appear, and they were to be avoided. In the case of Michelangelo's figure of *Moses* from the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome, **Adolphe Braun** (Besançon 1811–Dornach 1877) concentrated on the upper body. To conceal

the niche behind the sculpture, the photographer applied an asphalt solution to the negative. He moreover retraced certain details—for example the prophet's left eye and the tip of his beard—with grey ink to heighten the contrasts.

In the shot of the *Pantheon* (ca. 1870) by the **Fratelli D'Alessandri**, the building still boasts a feature today no longer extant—the bell towers by the great Roman Baroque artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Thanks to the angle of view, the photograph captures not only the temple façade with its rectangular outline, but also the domed rotunda. At the same time it portrays the urban setting, complete with cafés, shops, and pedestrians, creating a suspenseful contrast between the permanence of the structure and the fugacity of the moment.

For nineteenth-century travellers to Rome, an excursion to the surrounding region was a must. In Tivoli, the great waterfall in the park of the Villa Gregoriana had already been attracting artists since the eighteenth century. They usually concentrated on staging the spectacular natural scenery in interplay with the remains of ancient culture. In *Tivoli: Waterfall* (ca. 1860–1865), **Robert Macpherson** (Edinburgh 1814–Rome 1872)—a surgeon by training—focussed solely on the plunging water and the bright reflections off the mist it causes. The oval shape heightens the image's poetic effect and draws all the more attention to the motif.

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Curator: Dr. Kristina Lemke (Head of the Photography Collection, Städel Museum)

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Information: www.staedelmuseum.de

Visitor services and guided tours: +49(0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Tickets: Tickets can be booked online at shop.staedelmuseum.de/en. Tue–Fri, Sat, Sun and public holidays: 16€, reduced 14€, free admission for children under 12; groups of 10 or more (non-concession adults): 14€ per person, however 16€ per person on weekends. All groups are required to book their visit in advance by contacting us at +49(0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de.

Catalogue: An exhibition catalogue is available. Edited by Kristina Lemke, with a foreword by Philipp Demandt and an essay by Ulrich Pohlmann, In German, 120 pages, 19.90 EUR.

Digital Collection: Works in the exhibition are available for viewing at no charge in the Digital Collection.

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