

**Anthony Hamber, Photography and the 1851 Great Exhibition
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pp., ISBN 9781584563716 (hardcover)**

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REVIEWS

Anthony Hamber, *Photography and the 1851 Great Exhibition* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press and V&A Publishing, 2018), 394 pp., ISBN 9781584563716 (hardcover)

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The front flap of the dust jacket declares that Anthony Hamber's book is the result of more than twenty years of research. Resources include the archive of the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition of 1851, the correspondence of photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–77), and a variety of print and archival sources. The author also consulted the *Reports by the Juries*, the source of the photographic images (154 in total) reproduced in the book. The result is an impressive work of scholarship with beautiful visuals that will appeal to anyone interested in early photography.

Hamber asserts that the text is “the first comprehensive study of the diverse role and impact of photography at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London” (xiii). The text is divided into six chapters, beginning with “The State of Photography in 1851” and ending with “Aftermath and Legacy,” and this reviewer would be remiss not to mention the substantial appendices comprising six sections in approximately two hundred pages. The book also has a select bibliography, index, and detailed floor plans of the Great Exhibition tucked inside a pocket at the back of the book.

While numerous studies have explored the variety of artifacts and raw materials displayed at the Great Exhibition, from decorative fabrics and wallpapers to life-size marble sculptures, the significance of the exhibited collection of photographs has received scant scholarly

attention, until now. In the opening chapter, Hamber identifies a fundamental research question: “to what extent did the photographs and photographic equipment exhibits in the Crystal Palace represent the best contemporary images and photographic technology produced by amateur and professional photographers and their commercial suppliers of equipment?” (1). Hamber prefaces his question by explaining that most of the exhibited photographs were sourced from three countries: Britain, France, and the United States. We also learn that “the display of photographic equipment and accessories was limited in scale, scope and geographic distribution” (1). With so few countries represented, more information about how photography developed in other countries around the world would have been welcome. Hamber notes that “many European industrialised countries” hosted exhibitions prior to 1851 and “some such exhibitions would have had photographs and photographic equipment on display,” but only a few of these events are discussed. Although the international context for such photographic displays goes largely unexplored, Hamber provides an enlightening analysis of “the criteria and mechanisms for selecting” the photographs for exhibitors’ displays at the Great Exhibition (23). It is a fascinating account that is fleshed out with historical quotes from photography journals, committee proceedings, newspapers, jury reports, and the Exhibition’s official catalogue. Ultimately, Hamber concludes: “Few involved in organising, exhibiting or visiting the Great Exhibition could have had a comprehensive grasp of the contemporary global state of photography” (31).

For readers interested in pursuing historical inquiry into early photography, Hamber provides several useful methods. For example, he describes the use of contemporary metropolitan and provincial auction records to identify early amateur photographers. He also explains how census information reveals the impact of photography on the number of people who listed themselves as “daguerreotypists” and related photographic occupations. Hamber’s research approach reveals several directions for further investigation. For instance, he conjectures that visitors to London during the Great Exhibition’s run would have

sought out the opportunity to have their photographic portraits taken (78).

My own professional interests concern exhibition programs, so I enjoyed poring over the chapter on exhibiting photographs and photographic equipment in the Crystal Palace. Hamber helps us understand how photographic displays were selected, classified, and laid out. Further, he describes what visitors to the Great Exhibition would have seen if they were interested in looking at photographs and photographic equipment. To summarize the overall display, Hamber makes a key point: “the photographs on display were largely dwarfed in size and eye-catching nature by the sheer number and variety of exhibits” (43). Given that the displays “were not gathered in a single, coherent display” (43), one wonders what impact this potentially confusing arrangement had on the public’s impression and understanding of the various images.

The problem of interpreting photographs at the Great Exhibition was no doubt exacerbated by the “patchy and sporadic” descriptions contained in one of the more popular guides, George Routledge’s *A Guide to the Great Exhibition* (36). Hamber explains that the precise content of the signage and labelling for the photographs “might never be fully established,” and he therefore formulates questions that deserve consideration: “Did exhibitors give information about the subject matter of their photographs, perhaps in the form of their own catalogues? Did they add technical details, such as equipment, processes and camera exposure?” (35). Hamber leaves the reader with the impression that he would have pursued these and other unanswered questions relentlessly if there was any hope that relevant historical sources were extant.

In keeping with his penchant for raising questions and issues that merit further research, Hamber offers an intriguing idea, in the final chapter, to summarize the Great Exhibition’s impact: “Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Exhibition was the least tangible – through the channel of oral history. Of the millions of visitors who came to Hyde Park in the summer and early autumn of 1851, all would have taken away experiences and observations that were passed down by word of

mouth to several generations. Establishing the scale and scope of accounts in unpublished letters and diaries remains problematic, and it is certain that many have been lost to those studying the Exhibition” (170). It is a captivating thought with which to conclude the book. One hopes that researchers will eventually track down some unpublished accounts of how people experienced photographs at the Great Exhibition and in other mid-Victorian displays.

Hamber’s splendid book may be regarded for generations as *the* authoritative account of photography at the 1851 Great Exhibition. Scholars of photographic history will want to add this title to their libraries, and anyone interested in the study of photography will delight in its compelling text and beautiful images (the interior view of the north transept of the Crystal Palace, on page 83, is a personal favourite). The book was published to accompany the 2018 opening of the V&A Photography Centre, which started collecting photographs in 1852 and has since amassed a world-class collection of more than 800,000. Reading this book will undoubtedly inspire many photography enthusiasts to visit the Photography Centre, in London, to learn more about the international history of photography, from its earliest pioneers to modern photographers.

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