

Arts

The beautiful and the functional

Photography | The Rijksmuseum's fine collection

yields some exciting discoveries. By Liz Jobey

In the first gallery of the Rijksmuseum's new exhibition, *New Realities. Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, Charlotte Asser, the daughter of the Dutch amateur photographer Eduard Isaac Asser, looks out from an 1842 daguerreotype as if casting a watchful eye on the future of her father's latest hobby. Asser, a successful Amsterdam lawyer, must have taken up photography almost as soon as Daguerre's new process had been announced in January 1839. He kept up with photography's technical developments, and later made prints using both paper and glass negatives. A century and a half later, his descendants would donate more than 200 of his photographs to the national collection at the Rijksmuseum.

Like Fox Talbot, the other (English) inventor of photography, Asser experimented with various genres – a view from his house on the Singel appears later in the show – but as his great-granddaughter Saskia Asser points out in her catalogue essay, when it came to the future, Fox Talbot's prediction was correct: "One of the most important applications of the new process," he wrote in 1841, "and most likely to prove generally interesting, is, undoubtedly, the taking of portraits."

The wall of daguerreotypes is one of the early successes of the show. Notoriously difficult to exhibit because the light needs to catch the silvered plate at just the right angle to see anything at all, here they are displayed in a series of small, carefully lit wooden boxes, like individual "theatres", which not only makes them easy to see but emphasises their intimacy.

But there is a more spectacular wall display before this one. In the cavernous black space that serves as the entrance to the show, one wall is covered with a huge grid of prints in varying shades of duck-egg blue, each with a small tracery of white at its centre. These are copies of cyanotypes (prints made by placing an object on light-sensitive paper and exposing it to strong sunlight), taken from the British pioneer Anna Atkins's *Photographs of British Algae* (1843-53), widely recognised as the first photographic book, which the museum purchased earlier this year for €450,000.

However beautiful, Atkins's studies had a practical purpose. They were made to help marine botanists identify the different specimens of algae. And they introduce a show which unequivocally puts application before art. Each of the six galleries is labelled in human-height capitals along the walls: portraits,

Functional Photography, Around the World, High/low, Snapshots – the divisions are didactic, and the curators' intentions are clear. "No matter how much 19th-century photographs are now appreciated for their intrinsic aesthetic and pictorial qualities," Hans Rooseboom, one of the two curators, writes, "virtually every photograph we know from this century was produced for a practical purpose and served a specific function."

Photography, he points out, was welcomed by scientists, astronomers, architects, botanists, criminal investigators, doctors, archaeologists, geographers, the military, historians, manufacturers, advertisers . . . "Only a small minority would strive to make art."

Yet some of the most functional 19th-century photographs are also some of the finest. Poring over lunar photographs, Muybridge's locomotion studies,



records of archaeological sites, police photographs, advertisements, illustrations of medical conditions and skin diseases (some helpfully hand-coloured in angry shades of red), you are constantly engaged in the assimilation of facts, but also in recognising the photographer's artistic and technical skill. It is in the pristine clarity to Édouard Baldus's photographs of the construction of the new Louvre, or in Charles Marville's records of the demolition that made way for Hausmann's boulevards, and in the photographs recording the progress of public works made for the Dutch society of civil engineers.

Although many of these photographs would have originally been bound into books and albums, sometimes the curators have decided to display them as individual images. A book of micrographs of paper fibres – everything from cigarette papers to Japanese art



paper – is shown as a grid of abstract images and to 21st-century eyes looks more like a work of contemporary art. Other images have been shown to be unique, such as Gustave Le Gray's "Panorama of the Temple Remains of Baalbek" (1860, a magisterial print made from two large waxed paper negatives pasted together, which has to be one of the greatest finds here).

It is shown in the "around the world" gallery, where the legacy of trade links established during the Dutch Golden Age is clear. The Dutch East India Company established a trading post on the island of Deshima, in Nagasaki Bay, and in 1862 Antoon F Bauduin, would become the first Dutch photographer to work in Japan, which at that point had been a closed country for over two centuries. Bauduin's portraits of Japanese men – two of the prints mysteriously damaged by fire – include three farmers resting with their harvest of vegetables, and a samurai in full battle dress.

One of the downsides of the decision to classify by function is that when you finally reach the gallery dedicated to photography made principally as art, the examples are a bit thin on the ground. The outstanding picture here is a female seated nude attributed to Eugène Durieu, who was commissioned by Delacroix – much as John Deakin would be commissioned by Francis Bacon a century later – to supply photographs of subjects from which he could paint. The young woman is seated, the lower part of her body hidden by heavy folds of striped fabric, her face turned away from the camera in what might be a deliberate pose or a very modern-looking casual boredom.

'Almost every photograph was produced for practical purposes . . . Only a small minority aimed to make art'



Clockwise from main: George Hendrik Breitner's 'Marie Jordan, Nude seen from Behind' (c1889); Antoon F Bauduin's 'Portrait of a Samurai, Japan' (c1862-72); seaweed study from Anna Atkins's 'Photographs of British Algae' (1843-53); Eduard Isaac Asser's 'Portrait of Charlotte Asser' (c1842)

The last gallery is dedicated to snapshots and marks a lightening of mood. Liberated from the tripod and long exposure times, amateurs joined camera clubs, snapping each other in silly poses. Students turned up at the door of the Leiden photographer Israël David Kiek, whose name would become the Dutch word for snapshot (*kiekje*). The street photographs of the Dutch painter George Hendrik Breitner are as dynamic in a way as William Klein's 1950s photographs of New York. His pedestrians loom into the foreground and threaten to walk right out of the frame. By contrast, Breitner's small photographs of his naked fiancée, Marie Jordan, are as intimate and tender as a photograph can be, bridging the gap between Ingres and Degas, the Polaroid and the iPhone.

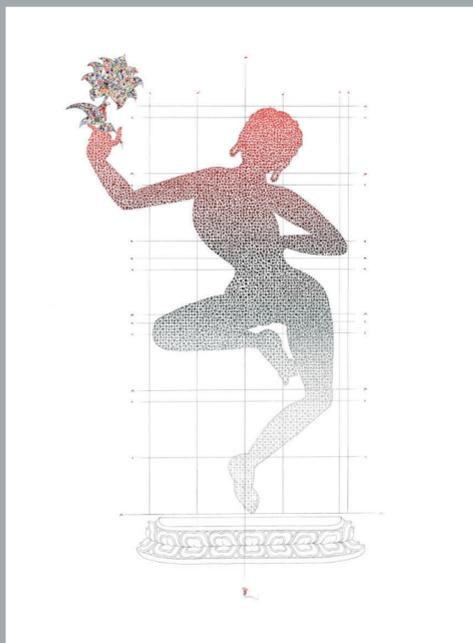
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Reviews

OPERA

Otello

Royal Opera House, London
★★★★☆

It is 40 years since Plácido Domingo gave London the first glimpse of his *Otello* at the Queen's silver jubilee gala. A generation of hopeful successors has come and gone in the role since then, but none has caused the stir of the latest, Jonas Kaufmann.

In so far as any event on the opera stage can cause waves, this was it. People had come far and wide to see Kaufmann's first *Otello*. They were met by much fine singing, a questionable new production of Verdi's opera, and Kaufmann himself already probing the deep recesses of the title role.

In purely vocal terms, he is not yet of Domingo's stature. The German tenor's sound is wonderfully burnished and romantic, but he does not have Domingo's lava flow of tone, let alone the volcanic force of a Jon Vickers. Kaufmann's *Otello* is conceived on a human scale and that is what gives him individuality. Almost the only prop on the stage is a mirror in which *Otello* sees his inner devil. Kaufmann peers tentatively at his reflection and goes on to reveal a character crumbling to dust within. Self-aware, sensitively sung, this is *Otello* less as tragic hero than fragile human being, and movingly so.

It is to the credit of the director, Keith Warner, that he has worked with Kaufmann to create such a many-layered portrayal. For the rest, his production is an empty, abstract affair, set in a black box of mostly Stygian gloom. When it does venture a bold, scenic gesture, it is generally one to be regretted. The Venetian ambassador is heralded by a gigantic plaster lion and

ludicrous white frilly costumes (for the men). *Otello*'s death scene is lit up like a shop window.

The cast, though, is first-rate. Marco Vratogna makes a superbly sardonic, trenchantly sung Iago from hell. Maria Agresta sings Desdemona with a clear, bright, true Italian soprano. Drawing heated playing from the Royal Opera orchestra, Antonio Pappano conducts with immense power, though not the drive that some of his predecessors have unleashed. In the Royal Opera annals this will go down not as a great *Otello*, but certainly a rewarding one.

Richard Fairman

To July 15, roh.org.uk

THEATRE

Terror

Lyric Hammersmith, London
★★★★☆

The title, given the current climate, is disturbing. But Ferdinand von Schirach's play (translated from German by David Tushingham) is a reflective affair: terror, horror and spur-of-the-moment action considered in the sombre, wood-panelled surrounds of a German court of law. And at a time when social media tends to facilitate a rush to judgment, the play, a mix of courtroom drama and moral philosophy, demands a serious level of scrutiny and engagement by asking you, the audience, to give the final verdict.

On trial is a German military pilot (Ashley Zhangazha), who was scrambled to deal with a terrorist incident: a hijacked aircraft that appeared to be heading for a football stadium packed full of fans. Expressly against orders, he shot it down, thus killing all 164 people on board, but

potentially saving a further 70,000 lives by doing so. Is he guilty or not guilty of murder?

The counsels for the prosecution (Emma Fielding) and defence (Forbes Masson) speak for and against him, and testimony from witnesses complicates the issue. The arguments seem to point towards a not-guilty verdict, but then we hear from the widow (Shanaya Rafaat) of a man on the plane, who reads out a text from her husband revealing the passengers' attempts to break into the cockpit and overpower the hijacker.

Other unanswerable conundrums are discussed – chief among them, the bewildering revelation that no one in authority ordered the evacuation of the stadium. The piece wrangles with principle versus individual conscience, the "lesser evil", the importance of law, the limits to law and the impossibility of weighing one human life against another. The lawyers cite philosophers who have famously wrestled with

ethical dilemmas, such as Kant, Philippa Foot (who introduced the "trolley problem") and Judith Thomson.

Some of the arguments, particularly one analogy drawn by the prosecutor, are a little thin and over the whole play hovers another unsettling moral issue: is it acceptable to make a drama out of such a distressing scenario? It's certainly a nagging question. However, the play offers a serious and sympathetic examination of some of the immense, even impossible, choices presented by new and horrific threats. It draws on the legacy of drama as a forum in which to consider terrible human dilemmas. Sean Holmes' quiet, dignified staging is also anything but sensationalist and, by asking the audience to pronounce, it forces us all to examine our instincts and priorities. The day I saw it, the verdict was 62 per cent Not Guilty.

Sarah Hemming

To July 15, lyric.co.uk



Tanya Moodie as the judge in 'Terror'
Alastair Muir