

OSCAR REJLANDER

ARTIST PHOTOGRAPHER

Oscar Gustaf Rejlander was born October 19, 1813, in Stockholm, Sweden, and emigrated to England in 1839, working as a painter before turning to photography in 1852. He holds an important place in the history of photography, primarily because of the groundbreaking way he applied the technique of “combination printing,” in which parts of multiple negatives are exposed separately and then printed to form a single picture. He received both praise and criticism for his epic combination print *Two Ways of Life* (1857), which expanded the limits of what a photograph could depict and how it could be constructed.

In the early 1860s Rejlander moved to London and continued to work as a portrait photographer while experimenting with photographic techniques. He was equally innovative, however, as a “reenactor,” often re-creating scenes witnessed on the streets outside his studio with a sympathy and wry humor that appealed to viewers. By the time of his death in 1875 Rejlander was a highly respected and admired member of the British photographic community, but the career of the artist later referred to as “the father of art photography” has never been fully explored until now. This exhibition examines the remarkable range of Rejlander’s photographs, paintings, drawings, and prints, demonstrating, as he put it, that “the mind of the artist, and not the nature of his materials, makes his production a work of art.”



OSCAR AND MARY

Rejlander met his future wife, Mary Bull, sometime in the 1850s. She was briefly employed as an actress in London, and perhaps as early as 1855 appeared as a model in his photographs. After they married in 1862, she worked alongside him in his London photography studios, taking on tasks ranging from preparing glass-plate negatives and making albumen silver prints to helping him pose sitters. Both Oscar and Mary were active in front of the camera as well. He made a number of self-portraits, and she appeared frequently in his photographs as a sitter or an actor.

ART STUDIES

Today, the debate about photography's status as an art may be obsolete, but in nineteenth-century Britain the arts community was passionately divided over Rejlander's chosen medium. He strongly advocated the view that photography was an independent art, which brought him praise as well as criticism throughout his career. He also believed, along with many others, that a photograph could help artists by providing a closely observed image so that they need not seek out live models. To prove that artists could use photography to enhance their own practice, Rejlander created figure studies in a range of poses and costumes, often employing the techniques of combination printing as well as photographic enlargements and reductions. Relying on many sources as well as his own imagination, he produced close-ups of hands, feet, drapery, and even fleeting facial expressions to provide artists with visual references. Indeed, he may have been the first to make photographs for this purpose.

EARLY WORKS AND THE TURN TO PHOTOGRAPHY

We may never know why Rejlander decided at the age of twenty-six to move to England. Perhaps he was searching for economic opportunities, but an unhappy home life or enforced military service may also have influenced his decision to emigrate. After arriving in England in 1839, Rejlander worked for more than a decade as a painter and printmaker, mainly as a copyist and portraitist. His membership in Freemasonry (he was initiated into the fraternal organization in Sweden in 1838) provided a network for building his career. His portraits include likenesses of some of the most influential people in the towns of Lincoln and Wolverhampton in the English Midlands, where he lived until 1862.

During a visit to Rome in 1852, Rejlander was intrigued by photographs of ancient sculpture, to which he later attributed his interest in photography. In 1853 he traveled to London for lessons in both paper and wet-plate collodion processes, which he took in a single afternoon from Nicolaas Henneman (1813–1898). Henneman had worked as an assistant to William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), the inventor of the salted paper process. Rejlander soon began experimenting with what was known as “double printing” or “combination printing,” a technique for making a photograph by combining two or more negatives to produce a single image.

SACRED AND PROFANE

Paintings strongly influenced Rejlander's choice of subjects, leading him not only to imitate the styles of artists but also to re-create the figures found in their compositions. He frequently photographed actors or models posing as a "Madonna," a "Devotee," a "Disciple," or specific Christian figures such as John the Baptist. He may have intended these studies, as well as others showing figures in classical robes, for artists to consult.

Photographic nude studies, which were controversial at the time, formed a significant part of Rejlander's practice. Some were intended for his project *Two Ways of Life* (on view in this gallery), while others reflect the centuries-old artistic tradition of portraying the human (usually female) body. Some of Rejlander's nudes represent abstract ideas, as in *Sacred Love and Hope*, while others, such as *Ariadne*, depict mythological figures. Although many painters were reluctant to disclose their reliance on photography, several collected Rejlander's photographs, including George Frederic Watts (1817–1904) and Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904).

PORTRAITS

Portraiture, particularly of members of the higher ranks of London society, constituted Rejlander's main professional activity and livelihood. Art critics and clients alike admired his skill with lighting as well as the seemingly natural and spontaneous expressions he was able to capture. Rejlander photographed some of the most important figures of the day, including the scientist Charles Darwin, known for his theory of evolution, and poets Alfred Tennyson and Henry Taylor. Rejlander guided the first photographic efforts of the writer and mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (known as Lewis Carroll), the creator of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as well as the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.



Rejlander approached portrait subjects like a theater director, as relayed in an account by Cuthbert Bede in *Photographic Pleasures*. He quoted the orders Rejlander gave in the studio, even transcribing his Swedish accent. Sitters were not to think that they were in the "leetle rum by demself," but to pretend they were "on the stage of de theatre."

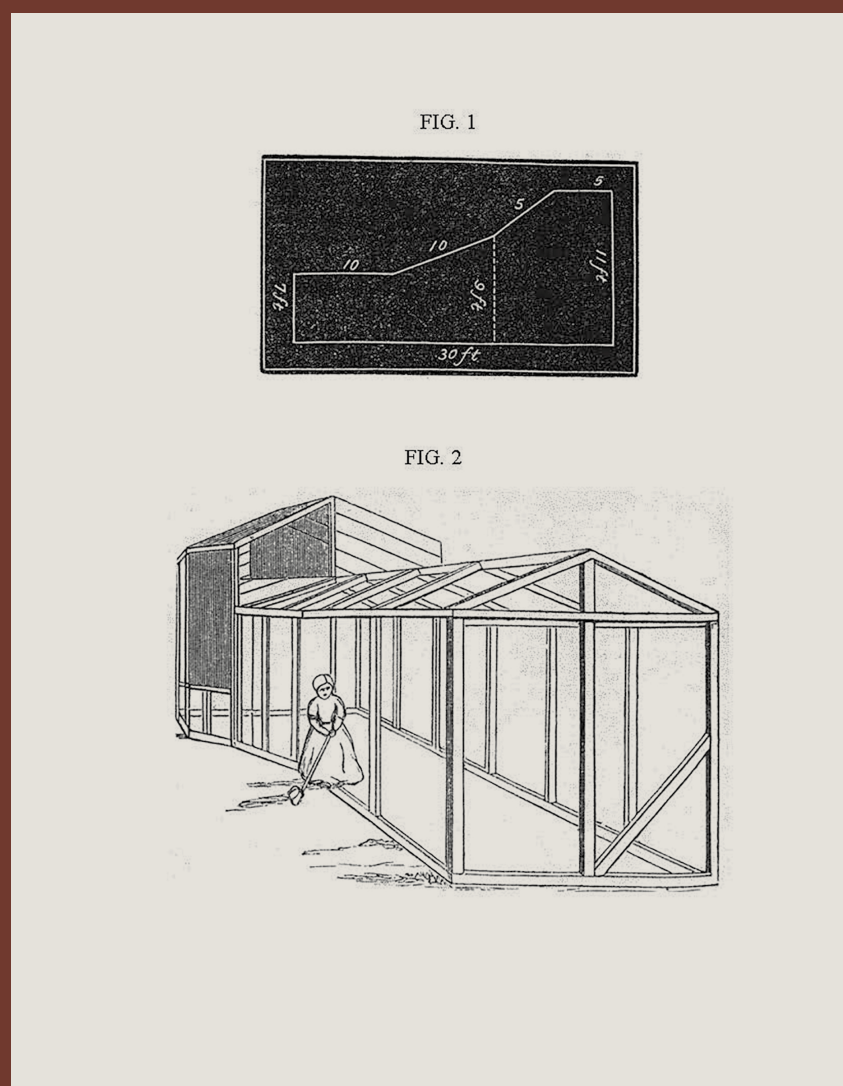
"To secure a pleasing Portrait is everything," from Cuthbert Bede, *Photographic Pleasures: Popularly Portrayed with Pen and Pencil* (1855), plate XI, p. 38. Image: National Gallery of Canada

REJLANDER'S "TUNNEL STUDIO"

In 1862 Rejlander moved to north London where, alongside his wife, Mary, he operated two studios at different addresses. In 1863 he constructed a unique iron, wood, and glass "Tunnel Studio," which he described in an article in the *Photographic News*: the sitter, positioned in the open, light-filled part of the studio, would look into the darker part of the room where the camera and operator were situated, nearly invisible. The pupils of the sitter's eyes thus expanded, allowing for "more depth and expression," as a writer observed in the *Photographic News*.

Rejlander encouraged spontaneous activity and observation in the adaptable space of his studio. He preferred that sitters move slightly during exposure and was himself constantly

in motion. "When he had a sitter, or model, before him," Alfred H. Wall reported in the *Photographic News*, "he would practice most dexterously all the arts of a clever actor—would himself express the feelings he desired to inspire in his subject, avoiding everything calculated to convey the idea of a piece of mere business."



"Mr. O. G. Rejlander's Glass Room, &c.,"
from the *British Journal of Photography*,
March 2, 1863, p. 96. Image: National
Gallery of Canada

EVERYDAY LIFE

From the beginning of his career as a photographer, Rejlander was keenly interested in depicting the activities of ordinary people, particularly the middle and lower classes of society. Audiences were delighted by these often humorous scenes in exhibitions at the London Photographic Society, which he joined in 1856. Though he was not a native speaker of English, Rejlander sometimes included verbal jokes—such as puns or double entendres—and snippets from old sayings and songs in his titles. It was through his domestic images, including the labor involved in household chores, that he illustrated the tenderness of familial relationships. Though staged, these scenes have an immediacy that seems almost documentary. His depictions of everyday life were praised for clever storytelling rendered entirely through visual means, but they were also criticized by some for featuring characters deemed vulgar.

STREET LIFE

Rejlander believed that a photographer should look for his subject matter “in his daily life.” More than any other photographer of his time, he was interested in portraying the working class in London, particularly children. He often used models and props to re-create in his studio scenes he had witnessed in the streets, from young boys who swept up dirt and debris in exchange for tips, to street vendors such as “flower girls” who offered bouquets for sale to passersby. Rejlander’s close and sympathetic observation of poverty can be seen in such images as *Night in Town* (known also as *Poor Jo*), depicting a boy in ragged clothes taking refuge in a doorway. The subjects for many of his photographs thus began in scenes outside the studio that were reenacted inside it. Like a modern street photographer, Rejlander chose his compositions and subjects based on what he saw and heard, realizing the final images in the studio.

EXPRESSIONS

Rejlander had a deep understanding of the power of expression and gesture when represented through the arts of painting and photography. It is known that he collaborated with a group of traveling performers called Lady Wharton's Pose Plastique Troupe, and his association with the theater greatly influenced the direction of his work. Several of his photographs investigate the subject of human expression and show models using gestures and poses to convey such emotional states as grief, resignation, and bad temper. His ability to elicit and depict emotion brought him to the attention of Charles Darwin, who reproduced many of Rejlander's photographs in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872.



REJLANDER'S PHOTOGRAPHIC ART: "MAKING THOUGHT VISIBLE"

When Rejlander's photographs were shown outside England, they were sometimes exhibited anonymously, considered "the productions of an amateur," his friend Alfred H. Wall recalled. The photographer laughingly responded to this judgment: "When I compare what I have done with what I think I ought to do, and some day hope I shall do, I think of myself as only an amateur, after all—that is to say, a beginner." His artistic ambition, which reached beyond the medium of photography, was vast in scope: "I regard art as a means of making thought visible. If I can make a thought visible in a picture which people can understand, and be moved by it to laughter or tears, it is a work of art whether I produce it by the aid of the camera or of the pencil. It is the mind of the artist, and not the nature of his materials, which makes his production a work of art." When he died in 1875, Rejlander left behind a prolific body of work that continues to speak to us, just as it spoke to contemporary audiences. His photographs, though made a century and a half ago, are both meticulously of their time and timeless, presaging the achievements of the photographic medium through to the digital age.

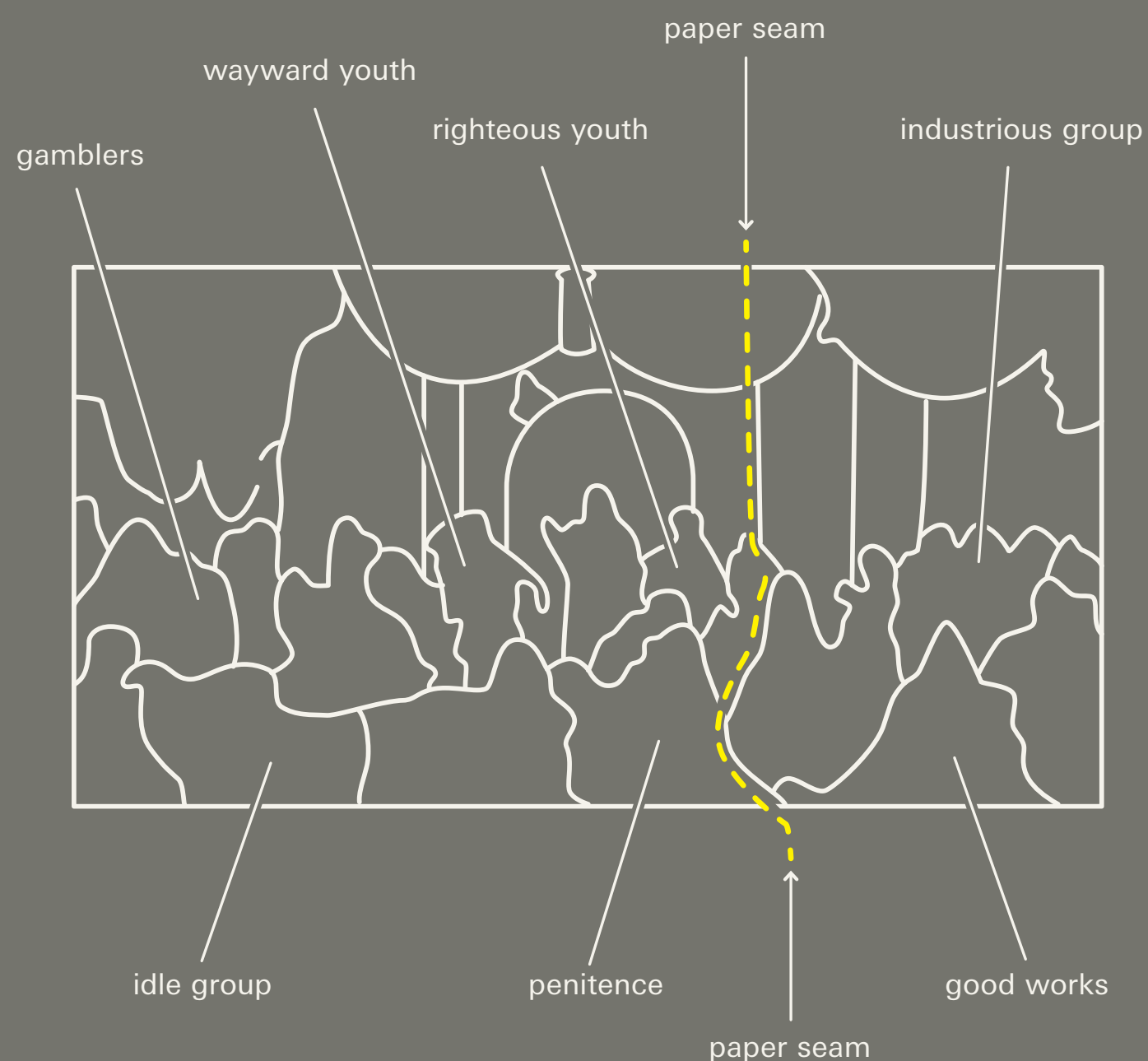
TWO WAYS OF LIFE

Rejlander's epic photograph *Two Ways of Life, or Hope in Repentance*, was first shown to the public in 1857 at the *Art Treasures of Great Britain* exhibition in Manchester, where it attracted immediate attention. Its reception was controversial and divisive. Professional photographers admired it as a technical marvel, while some amateurs scoffed at its artificiality. Some viewers considered the depiction of nude figures immoral. The work was a favorite of Prince Albert, who may have worked with Rejlander on its overall conception. He and Queen Victoria purchased three versions for their art collection. Rejlander made at least nine variants of the work, two of which are shown here.

PICTURING VICE AND VIRTUE

In the center of *Two Ways of Life*, an older man stands between two younger men. The youth to the right turns toward a life of virtue—work, study, and religion. To the left, a second young man is tempted by the call of desire, gambling, and idleness. Key figures in this scene of vice and virtue are identified in the diagram at right.

Using the wet-plate collodion process, Rejlander prepared at least thirty-two glass negatives over a period of three days. He coated each glass plate with a syrupy substance called collodion, dipped it into a solution of silver salts to make it light sensitive, then loaded it into the camera. He exposed parts of the negatives separately to form a single picture, using the technique of combination printing on a scale never attempted before. The size of the composition required two pieces of paper, joined together carefully to mask the seam.



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