

The Great Pyramid and the Sphinx, Francis Frith

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Francis Frith
English, Egypt, 1858
Albumen silver print
15 9/16 x 19 5/16 in.
84.XM.633.12

When Francis Frith made this photograph, the sphinx at Giza was buried almost to its neck in desert sand. He may or may not have been aware that beneath that sand lay the 150-foot-long body of a lion. Frith perfectly centered the Great Pyramid and the Great Sphinx in the composition, including a few figures in the foreground to provide a sense of scale.



The pyramids and sphinx at Giza, widely published now, were an astounding site to any viewer in the 1800s. Shortly after the development of photography, people began to dream about the landscape, architecture, and people of far-away places—all of which seemed exotic and romantic. All along the Nile, Frith made 16-by-20-inch mammoth-plate images, which he subsequently compiled and sold in enormous leather-bound albums.

About the Artist

Francis Frith (British, 1822–1898)

Before turning his attention to photography around 1850, Francis Frith was apprenticed to a cutlery firm and worked as a wholesale grocer. With a partner he opened the Frith and Hayward photography studio in Liverpool. In 1856 Frith made an extended trip to Egypt, traveling up the Nile from Cairo to Abu Simbel. He photographed along the entire way, equipped with one stereoscopic camera and two large-format cameras (one that made 8-by-10-inch negatives, and another that made 16-by-20-inch negatives).

The success of these images financed Frith's next trip to Palestine, Syria, and Egypt in late 1857. He published images from these trips between 1858 and 1860. In the summer of 1859, Frith returned to Egypt, traveling up the Nile to the Fifth Cataract—farther than any earlier photographer had gone. He returned to Britain and opened his own firm in Reigate, Surrey, near London, to publish his images as well as the work of other photographers. Frith and Company operated until 1971.

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Questions for Teaching

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (This image depicts two structures partially buried in the sand. There are people in the middle ground who appear tiny compared to the massive structures. The people are positioned in front of a long structure, which spans nearly the entire length of the frame. This structure has the head of a man perched on top of a long flat body, some of which remains buried beneath the sand. Behind the first structure is a pyramid, almost centered within the frame. Even from further back in space, the pyramid towers above the structure and people in front. Both structures are made from blocks of stone, as the mortar and seams between the blocks are evident. The structures also appear ancient; over time, the weather conditions have worn away at their surfaces. The image is signed and dated in the bottom left-hand corner.)

Before images such as this, many people had never seen the Great Pyramid or Sphinx. How do you imagine a nineteenth-century viewer would have reacted to seeing this image for the first time? (Viewers in the 1800s must have been amazed with these ancient sites. The exotic structures were totally different than anything they had seen before, and their scale alone must have deeply impressed viewers.) What effect might images like this have on people's desire to see the real thing? (After the introduction of photographs such as these, Europeans became entranced with the idea of the ancient near East, and tourism to locations like Egypt became far more popular.)

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (Perhaps the most obvious formal element here is the *form* of the pyramid; its diagonal *lines* move the viewer's eye through the composition and up to the zenith of the pyramid. The pyramid, positioned in the center of the frame, also adds a sense of *balance* to the composition, as it draws your eye up and away from the head of the sphinx. *Proportion* is extremely important in this composition because it is the contrast between the tiny human figures that indicates the massiveness of the two man-made structures. Without the human figures, it would be very difficult to gauge the size of the structures. There is also a sense of *pattern* in this composition, in the positioning of the blocks that create the sphinx and pyramid. It is especially apparent when compared with the random scattering of sand and stones throughout the image.)

