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# A Biographical Sketch of Robert Macpherson

Marjorie Munsterberg

*Famous and successful during the 1850's and early 1860's, the photographer Robert Macpherson had slipped into relative obscurity by the time of his death in 1872. By the twentieth century, historians could find only the barest outline of his professional career in the photographic literature. My study of a wider range of nineteenth-century material has uncovered his biography and, with it, evidence of his full participation in the Victorian artistic community.*

The biography of the great Scottish photographer Robert Macpherson demonstrates the dramatic revisions now being made in the history of nineteenth-century photography. One of the leading photographers in Rome during the 1850's and 1860's, Macpherson sold his work widely, especially to British and Americans. Yet by the time of his death in 1872, the *British Journal of Photography* found it appropriate to devote only one paragraph to his obituary. By the twentieth century, as thorough a researcher as Helmut Gernsheim could not find much more than one paragraph of biographical information, although he was very familiar with the work itself.<sup>1</sup> The many surviving pictures seemed nearly miraculous in their quality, examples of untutored artistic ability liberated by a mechanical medium.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the biography I outline here reveals just the opposite: how deeply Macpherson participated in both the Victorian artistic community and the development of the medium of photography. This new information also firmly locates the photographs within the richly developed tradition of Italian views.

Macpherson probably was born in 1811 in the Scottish county of Forfarshire.<sup>3</sup> A member of the clan Macpherson, he was the grandnephew of James Macpherson, the author of the forged epic *Ossian*, and he also may have been a close relative of the head of the clan.<sup>4</sup> Nothing has been established about his immediate family, although Mac-

pherson visited relatives in Scotland at various times between the 1840's and the 1860's. These may have included a sister; his eldest son spent six months in Edinburgh with "Aunt Tottie" in 1860.<sup>5</sup> Macpherson's first documented activity consists of study at Edinburgh University. Records there show him registered as a student of medicine between 1831 and 1835, taking Clinical Medicine, Practical Obstetrics, Anatomy, and Chemistry.<sup>6</sup> Although later sources describe him as a surgeon, there is no evidence from his own lifetime to suggest any such activity, and he did not complete the medical course at the University.<sup>7</sup> Macpherson did, however, begin painting in Scotland. In the mid-1850's, he described how, "when he resided in [Scotland], he used to get asphaltum for his oil pictures from Mr. Hill, Prince street [Edinburgh]."<sup>8</sup> He even may have studied at the Royal Scottish Academy, although there is no record of his attendance at the school.<sup>9</sup>

Plentiful biographical evidence appears only with Macpherson's arrival in Italy in about 1840. According to his obituary in the *British Journal of Photography*, he left Scotland "with the intention of proceeding to India as a surgeon, but the state of his health preventing this, he settled in Rome and adopted the more congenial profession of a painter." In the 1870's, a family friend offered an alternative explanation for his departure: the precipitous flight from a disappointment in love. She wondered only whether he

This project began with the biographical entry on Macpherson in the catalogue by Catherine Evans Inbusch and Marjorie Munsterberg for *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*, New York, 1982. That entry, like this article, depends upon the research carried out by Barbara Bryant, London, who discovered a wealth of material in British libraries and archives. I am deeply indebted to her work. Much of the biographical information given here was first presented by Marjorie Munsterberg at a symposium on 19th-century photography, Princeton University, February, 1983.

<sup>1</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, xix, December 6, 1872, 577, and Gernsheim, 282-83. Almost all of this information has turned out to be incorrect.

<sup>2</sup> Gernsheim, 282-83, is only one example of this attitude.

<sup>3</sup> Macpherson listed his county of origin as Forfarshire in the records of Edinburgh University. His great-grandson has a clear memory of Macpherson's daughter saying that he was from Inverness. Birth records have not been found in either place. The year itself may be incorrect, however,

since his death certificate lists his age as fifty-seven, placing his birth in 1814 or 1815. Unfortunately, none of the other records I have found, such as his marriage certificate, lists his date of birth.

<sup>4</sup> G. Macpherson, xiii, and *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M.O.W. Oliphant*, ed. Mrs. H. Coghill, Edinburgh and London, 1899, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Erskine, 340.

<sup>6</sup> Matriculation Album, Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library.

<sup>7</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, xix, December 6, 1872, 577, repeated by Gernsheim, 283.

<sup>8</sup> *Humphrey's Journal*, viii, April 15, 1857, 376, quoted from *Photographic Notes*.

<sup>9</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, xi, February 1, 1864, 50, mentions that he received his education there, but the Academy has no record that corroborates this suggestion.

had played the role of the villain or the victim.<sup>10</sup> A friend from Macpherson's years in Italy, on the other hand, assumed artistic motivations as the reason for his trip.<sup>11</sup> Even without an institutionalized program such as the French Prix de Rome, many British artists spent time in Italy, and an active artistic community flourished there. Macpherson immediately became a participant. In addition, he converted to Catholicism some time before 1847, so the move also may have had religious motivation.<sup>12</sup>

The fullest account of Macpherson in Rome appears in the memoirs of the American artist James Freeman. Eventually a close friend of both Macpherson and his wife, Freeman met him almost at once:

Returning to Rome in 1841, I found, among other students of painting who had arrived during my absence, a young Scotchman, Robert Macpherson by name, with whom I afterwards became intimately acquainted. He, like myself and many others who came to Rome with the intention of spending only a brief winter, remained here for the rest of his life. . . . Mac made his appearance among us wearing the costume of his clan. Even in Rome, which at that period struck strangers as being in a perpetual state of masquerade, his dress was a very unusual and novel one. But it became him admirably. His figure was of a good height; his limbs were well-formed, elastic, and graceful. He had abundant auburn hair, which he wore long. His eyes were blue, his features fine, and his complexion was fresh and clear; and apart from these personal attractions he was gifted with that rare endowment, the art of pleasing.

Naturally, such a captivating social manner had its rewards:

He had not long been in Rome before he numbered among his friends possessors of some of the noblest names in Britain — the Marquis of Northampton, the Duke of Hamilton, and the present Earl of Dudley. Being a Catholic, he also found entrance into the most exclusive Roman society, where neither wealth nor title could always procure an introduction.

His graces proved harmful to his artistic efforts, however:

He had intellect and a very decided artistic organization; but he was not partial to patient and unflagging exertion, and too often, when he should have been combating the difficulties of anatomy, perspective, and composition, he allowed his friends, for the sake of his agreeable companionship, to allure him off upon excursions to various parts of Italy, or to accompany them to their picnics,

dinners, suppers, and sight-seeing. They were ready enough to purchase the few unstudied pictures which he had time to put upon canvas, not because they found any particular merit in them, but because they had an affection for the genial young artist.<sup>13</sup>

The only painting by Macpherson that I have identified suggests more professional ambition and competence than Freeman's account allows. A large oil painting of the Roman Campagna (Fig. 1), signed "R.J. Macpherson" and titled "Roma 1842" in the lower left-hand corner, it fits comfortably within the British tradition of Italian views established in the eighteenth century by Richard Wilson. Like many of Wilson's works, Macpherson's painting describes the distinctive space and light of the Campagna within the format of a Claudian composition. A high foreground drops suddenly into a luminous, extensive expanse of flat land that stretches to the mountains on the horizon. The visual importance given to the sarcophagus and the figures in the foreground, however, seems more like works by J.M.W. Turner, the greatest nineteenth-century artist in this tradition, or those of colleagues such as Charles Eastlake. Given his personal commitment to Catholicism, Macpherson's choice of a priest blessing a boy as the foreground incident and an identifiably Christian rather than classical sarcophagus seems noteworthy. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of ancient, pagan Italy and the modern Catholic country provided increasing attraction for British travellers and a subject for many painters, among them Turner and Eastlake.<sup>14</sup>

Like many other young artists in Italy, Macpherson turned to incidental journalism and art dealing for a more reliable income than painting could provide. Apparently he contributed to *The Times*, *Daily News*, and *The Athenaeum* during these years, as well as providing news to others: "Well informed and actively observant of what was passing politically and socially in Rome, he was ever a ready and willing reference for many journalists and others of the scribbling vocation, who did not hesitate to pick his fertile brain for communications to the press."<sup>15</sup> He also ventured into the art market, where his most impressive discovery was *The Entombment* (National Gallery, London), now attributed to Michelangelo. Suspecting that a good painting lay beneath the dirty, dark surface of a large panel, Macpherson acquired the work for a trifle from a Roman picture dealer in 1846. Then he and two friends

set to work with brushes, warm water, soap, etc., making it tolerably clean. Every few minutes new beauties developed, especially in the beautiful figure of our Lord and the grand drawing. . . . [Macpherson] now invited

<sup>10</sup> Oliphant (as in n. 4), 58-59.

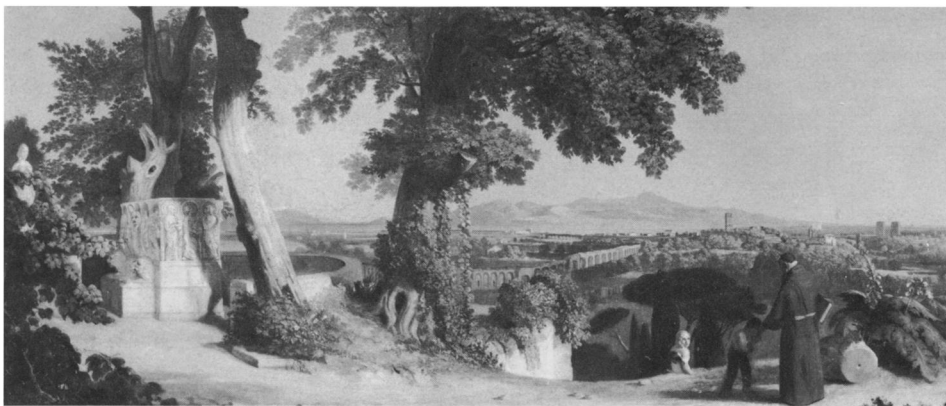
<sup>11</sup> Freeman, 201f.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning mentioned his conversion in a letter written November 23 and 24, 1847, quoted in Huxley, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Freeman, 201-03.

<sup>14</sup> One analysis of this change in attitude is in K. Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930*, London, 1980, esp. chaps. 8 and 9. A famous pair of paintings is Turner's *Modern Italy — the Pifferari* (Corporation Galleries, Glasgow) and *Ancient Italy — Ovid Banished from Rome* (private collection), both exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1838.

<sup>15</sup> Freeman, 208.



1 Robert Macpherson, *View of the Campagna*, oil painting, signed and dated, 1842. Location unknown (courtesy Fine Art Society Ltd., London)

Lord Compton to see it, who offered him four hundred pounds for it; also Lord Ward, who was in Rome at that time, offered a thousand pounds, but Mac would not part with it for that sum. . . . During the day [Peter] Cornelius and [Johann Friedrich] Overbeck . . . were passing and Mac called them in to see his picture. They were surprised to see a work of such importance, and believed it to be without doubt by Michel Angelo himself. . . . This opinion coming from such authorities of course delighted the owner; at the same time it made him think what steps should now be taken, knowing it would reach headquarters that a valuable work of Art had been found . . . and could not be taken out of Rome.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, representatives of the Papal government did arrive the next morning and placed their seals (indicating possible restriction of export) on the back of the painting. This moved Macpherson into action. After making the picture as dirty as it had been before, he nailed it up in an old packing case and, gaining the necessary papers from a careless and unsuspecting customs official, shipped the work out of Rome. He then "kept incognito for some time, during which the smuggling away of the painting with the seals on it was a topic of conversation. . . ." <sup>17</sup> Macpherson later called the work "Gerardine's Fortune" after his wife, and only sold it to the National Gallery in 1868 for £2,000 because of financial need.<sup>18</sup>

In 1847, Macpherson met and fell in love with his future wife, Gerardine Bate (ca. 1830-78). Geddie, as her friends called her, was the elder daughter of Henry and Louisa Bate and the niece of the British writer and art historian Anna Jameson. She was raised in part by her aunt; when her artist-father declared financial ruin in 1839, his wife's strong-willed and dominating sister took over Geddie and her education. Jameson described the situation to her close

friend, Ottilie von Goethe, Goethe's daughter:

The next letter I opened was from my sister Eliza, containing the evil news of Henry's complete *ruin* — complete for the present. What I most dread is that after giving up all he will not be able to meet his debts, which would be *dishonour*. . . . How far Henry's fate and imprudence may have injured others, I have yet to learn. You may think what a weight of anxiety is on my mind for my sisters. Prudence is truly not the greatest of virtues, but it is the guardian of our virtues. . . . Perhaps when I go to London I may be obliged to take Gerardine immediately.<sup>19</sup>

Jameson did become close to Geddie, whom she described to Ottilie von Goethe in 1842:

Her education takes up much of my day. . . . She is a charming child. . . . I do not think she will be a genius or very distinguished and famous, but she will be a happy being, and I will try to give her the means of independence. She will not be obliged to marry for money, like so many women of her condition. . . .<sup>20</sup>

In September, 1846, the two set out for Italy on a trip that was to provide Geddie with the benefits of the Grand Tour and her aunt with the pleasures as well as the assistance of her companionship. The journey proved a thrilling one for the sixteen-year-old "very shy and quite *English* child."<sup>21</sup> It began in Paris with the startling arrival of the newly, secretly married Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (the two women had been friends since 1844), with whom they proceeded to Italy. The sight of the Brownings profoundly impressed Geddie, who wrote of those months thirty years later: "The loves of the poets could not

<sup>16</sup> C. Burlison, *The Early Life of Clement Burlison Artist*, Durham, 1914, 92-94. Another version is in Freeman, 206-07. C. Gould, "Some Addenda to Michelangelo Studies," *Burlington Magazine*, xciii, 1951, 281-82. The archives of the National Gallery contain the correspondence between Sir William Boxall, its director at the time, and Mrs. Oliphant, who acted as Macpherson's representative. Apparently Macpherson originally asked £3,000 for the painting, but was refused.

<sup>17</sup> Burlison (as in n. 16), 95.

<sup>18</sup> G. Macpherson, xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Needler, 109.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Needler, 158.

have been put into more delightful reality before the eyes of [this] dazzled and enthusiastic beholder. . . ."<sup>22</sup> The Brownings settled in Pisa, but after a few more weeks together, Jameson and her charge continued on to Florence, where they stayed for over two months studying the art. They arrived in Rome, the last leg of their trip, by the end of January, 1847.

Anna Jameson immediately settled into the British colony there. They lived in the thick of it:

Our rooms were over Spithöver's shop, with little balconied windows looking out over all the amusing scenes in the Piazza, the sparkling of the great fountain, and the picturesque figures, models, and contadini, that group themselves upon the Spanish steps, so familiar to all visitors of Rome. We had a large old-fashioned drawing-room, hung with dim long mirrors, that gave a shadowy unreality to everything they reflected, and faded damask hangings, and an enormous, cavernous, deep-mouthed fireplace, with sulky martial figures in dim brass for the fire-dogs. . . . Here my aunt sat, always with a certain gentle dignity; for though she was not fond of being looked upon as a lion, she was far from being destitute of a sense of her well-won honours, and felt the social homage she received in her own house to be her due.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. Jameson held regular Sunday soirées, which had "not above twenty people, and I give them only tea, at the dispensing of which Gerardine officiates very prettily."<sup>24</sup> The visitors represented a wide range of people, not surprising given Mrs. Jameson's reputation: from artists such as John Gibson, Peter Cornelius, and Johann Friedrich Overbeck, to famous British expatriates such as Father Prout (Francis Sylvester O'Mahoney) and personal friends such as Ottilie von Goethe. As Geddie herself described it: "To the little personage at the tea-table everything was new, strange, and delightful, the very names intoxicating, the talk like that of the gods. And when all had left, the half-hour spent in discussing the talk and the talkers, with . . . explanation, comment, and suggestion! What half-hours ever passed so quickly as these?"<sup>25</sup>

Presumably it was at such a gathering that Geddie met Macpherson, who certainly would have known many of the guests. They fell in love at once, but the idea of a match seemed grotesquely unsuitable to Anna Jameson, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning explained to a friend:

When . . . we had [Mrs. Jameson and Gerardine] as our visitors here at Florence, a catastrophe had taken place — poor Geddie had [fallen] in love with a bad artist! an

unrefined gentleman! a Roman catholic! (converted from protestantism!) a poor man!! with a red beard!! what ever Geddie could mean by it was what Mrs. Jameson in her agony couldn't divine. 'The truth is,' she said to me, 'the dear child who never thought in her whole life before of love and marriage, had it put into her head at once by the sight of your and Browning's happiness. . . . [So] I agreed to 'speak to Geddie,' and I did my best. Only Geddie's reading was very different, of her lord's qualities. 'So good and generous! and handsome too! and likely to be a good artist *when he tries* (draws very well already!) . . . likely to *turn back again* from being a Roman Catholic — left off smoking just to please [Mrs. Jameson] and was very firm.' Geddie has made up her heart it is plain."<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, Barrett Browning's tone to Anna Jameson was entirely different:

With the most earnest sympathy I read what you wrote of dear Gerardine and yourself . . . [but] she *could not choose as you would choose for her* (— the thing is not possible —) and . . . she has a *right* to choose. . . . I certainly wish that she had waited, seen more men and had time to take measure of her own nature and the needs of it — but this is as vain a wish as any other — and if the man she has accepted now, loves her faithfully enough to make her his object for one year, it is an argument in his favour, seeing what men are — if he is worth just nothing, why absence and time will rot the straw-rope . . . don't you think so? I hope in the meantime that dear Gerardine will be thrown into society as much as possible, and thoroughly amused and excited from other quarters. My cruelty to her would consist in distracting her into inconstancy — if she holds fast . . . good . . . it is in her favour and his —. Remember there is a whole year — and that a year at Gerardine's age is a long time —<sup>27</sup>

The budding romance abruptly ended the planned two-year sojourn in Italy, and Mrs. Jameson left with Geddie in the fall of 1847. Evidently Macpherson continued to argue his case after their departure, since Jameson complained that "the journey is very painful. Mr. Macpherson has written me four long letters, which do not give me a high idea of his wisdom, and altogether he torments me. I pity him, but he does not make me admire or trust him. Perhaps it is too much to expect from any man that he should be in love and reasonable."<sup>28</sup> Although Gerardine's parents first declared her too young to marry, she soon got her way and plans were made for the following year. The

<sup>22</sup> G. Macpherson, 231.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>26</sup> Huxley, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, July 29, 1847, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library.

<sup>28</sup> Needler, 159.

uncertain political situation in Rome made that impossible, however, and the wedding was postponed until 1849. Macpherson still had difficulties, like other British artists there: "[He] has been nearly ruined by these Roman revolutions. . . . The last news we hear is that Gibson and many other artists, who remained until the last moment, had fled from Rome, and Mac would soon follow and come to England."<sup>29</sup> Even then, after two years, Jameson really did not accept the relationship, although Barrett Browning tried to calm her: "Some steadiness of attachment has been proved, has it not, and love is the sufficient means of a happy union — I am romantic enough to be persuaded."<sup>30</sup> Lady Byron, a close friend of Anna Jameson during the 1840's, also felt disappointment at the news of the impending marriage: "It would have made a better Romance if Macpherson had been blown up."<sup>31</sup>

Robert Macpherson and Gerardine Bate finally married on September 4, 1849, with one ceremony at a Catholic chapel and another at the parish church in Ealing, Middlesex, where Anna Jameson lived.<sup>32</sup> Lady Byron gave the couple a silver table service, while the tenth Duke of Hamilton, whom Macpherson had met in Italy, entertained them at his country seat.<sup>33</sup> After a few weeks in Scotland visiting Macpherson's relatives, the pair returned to Rome. By then even Anna Jameson seemed resigned:

I was against the union at first; but what seemed a sudden rash fancy on both sides became respectable . . . I am glad now that I yielded. . . . I hold to the right of every human being to work out their own salvation; and the old have a right to advise, but no right to prescribe an existence to, the young. So Geddie married the man whom she preferred from the first moment she saw him, and as yet they are enchanted with each other. . . . The present state of Italy makes me anxious, but he understands his position, the place, and the people, and I hope the best. . . .<sup>34</sup>

It was after Macpherson's marriage, according to Freeman, that

the battle of life was now to begin in earnest, for the young artist had no resources but those which his pencil might procure for him. . . . It was now that he saw his

mistake in having allowed opportunities so important for improvement to escape him. However, he made strong and laudable efforts to retrieve the misfortune. He launched boldly both into figure and landscape drawing; but, unfortunately, the mistake he had made in not mastering the rudimentary principles of his art rendered him unequal to success in it. He found it difficult to meet with purchasers for his pictures. . . .<sup>35</sup>

A growing family made the problem more acute. In 1850, Geddie converted to Catholicism, possibly motivated by the impending birth of a child rather than by religious conviction.<sup>36</sup> In any case, by June, 1851, Geddie had "a fine little boy and is well and happy. Her husband is as proud as a peacock."<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the child died suddenly in the winter of 1852-53, an event that devastated Macpherson.<sup>38</sup> A second boy was born in 1853, although not — said Elizabeth Barrett Browning — as beautiful as the first child.<sup>39</sup> Then a second child died in 1856, but another one also must have been born, since the Macphersons had two boys by 1857.<sup>40</sup> In all, four children survived: William, Francis, Ada (1862-1941), and Joseph.

Macpherson took up photography in 1851: "Photography has for the last twelve years been my occupation, which, casually commenced, I found so fascinating, that I remain a photographer to this day. . . ."<sup>41</sup> Whatever the spirit of his initial interest, Macpherson pursued mastery of the medium with determination. Thomas Sutton, the editor of *Photographic Notes* and a partner of Louis-Désiré Blanquart-Evrard, was with him at the time:

[In] 1851, . . . I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Mr. Macpherson, in Rome, and of witnessing, during three or four months of intimacy with him, the untiring perseverance with which he mastered, step by step, all the details of the albumen process upon glass in its original and most difficult form. These efforts were crowned with signal success, and I had the pleasure one evening of seeing his first perfect negative developed. It was a copy of a statue of Washington, modelled by the late Mr. Crawford, to be cast in bronze for one of the cities of the United States. . . . A learned monk of one of the Roman convents, the Padre Delaroveri, was the introducer of the process, and it ended in the good

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, August 11, 1849, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in C. Thomas, *Love and Work Enough. The Life of Anna Jameson*, Toronto, 1967, 210.

<sup>32</sup> Needler, 159, and marriage certificate, General Register Office, London.

<sup>33</sup> Freeman, 203.

<sup>34</sup> G. Macpherson, 262.

<sup>35</sup> Freeman, 203-04.

<sup>36</sup> Needless to say, this diminished the respect Anna Jameson had for Macpherson. Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, December 10, 1850, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library.

<sup>37</sup> Needler, 177.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, March 17, 1853, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library, as well as *Photographic Notes*, II, 1857, 164-65 (with the incorrect information that it was at this time that he began photography).

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, December 21, 1853, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, December 26, 1856 and March 27, 1857, The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College Library.

<sup>41</sup> "Introduction" in R. Macpherson, *Vatican Sculptures, Selected and Arranged in the Order in which They Are Found in the Galleries, Briefly Explained by Robert Macpherson*, London, 1863, n.p. A second edition appeared in 1873.

father getting reprimanded by his superior for the time he spent over photography, so he had to give it up. But Mr. [James] Anderson had been initiated into all his secrets, and he did immensely well by the sale of his small views of the ruins of the Eternal City. Friend Macpherson, however, was less fortunate, and had to fish out most of the details of the process as best he could.<sup>42</sup>

Freeman also remembered the adoption of this new profession as a perfectly conscious redirection:

Macpherson was quick to see in the new invention a chance of bettering his fortunes, and at once set to work to investigate its mysteries. He threw aside his pencils, which seemed to promise nothing but poverty and disappointment, and gave himself up wholly to photography. . . . His knowledge as a painter assisted him materially in choosing artistic effects in these interesting performances. His productions have obtained popularity both in Europe and America; and had he taken advantage of the tide, it might have floated him smoothly into a handsome fortune. But he was singularly wanting in that application to business which is so necessary in either trade or profession.<sup>43</sup>

Both Macpherson's technique and his business practices seem to have been established almost immediately. Albumen on glass remained his favorite form of negative, although in later years he did modify the process he had learned originally.<sup>44</sup> It possessed the great advantage of being light-sensitive when dry — unlike the more common collodion, which had to be exposed wet — but most photographers found albumen less sensitive to light than wet collodion and hard in its rendering of shadows. Macpherson, however, like other supporters of albumen, maintained that proper development of the negative made the exposure time competitive, and the toughness of the film surface greatly facilitated the handling of the negatives. In addition, albumen was cheap and always available.<sup>45</sup> He also used albumen as the most common solution for his printing paper, although salt prints appear as well, suggesting that he changed from the latter to the former only when it became commercially marketed in 1852. In this he would have followed the practice of the great majority of his contemporaries, especially those involved in the busi-

ness. He seems to have used various cameras and lenses, but most of his negatives are 12 x 16 inches (the prints often trimmed slightly) and the lenses often seem quite long. He described his exposures: "In the summer time, and for a distant view, about two minutes. Trees and such subjects usually took twenty minutes, and some interiors were exposed four hours." A few even demanded exposures of several days.<sup>46</sup>

By 1853, Macpherson's wife and (sometimes) his mother-in-law had charge of the developing and printing of his negatives.<sup>47</sup> They probably also mounted and stamped them. Typically, his pictures are mounted on large sheets of stiff, smooth paper, with a blindstamp in the lower middle of the mount and a number, corresponding to his inventory lists, penciled in its center. Macpherson used at least two blindstamps, one of which has "Robert Macpherson/Rome" printed in square type on two lines, and the other of which, the more common, has the same inscription set within an oval. By 1859, Macpherson's broadsheet listed 187 titles — indicating only approximately that number of negatives, since variant views sometimes appear with the same number — and by 1863, there were 305. He seems to have reached nearly 400. Although this was not a large offering by the standards of photographers such as Fratelli Alinari or Francis Frith, the number of prints that have appeared on the market today suggests that his sales must have been considerable. Macpherson also published his work at least once. Line engravings made by his wife after his photographs of sculptures in the Vatican appeared in book form in 1863.<sup>48</sup>

Macpherson almost immediately occupied a distinctive place in the active and competitive photographic market in Rome. The firms best known today — especially Fratelli Alinari and James Anderson — began in the 1850's and became great companies in the course of the 1860's. Others prominent at the time include Tommaso Cuccioni, Pietro Dovizielli, and Gioacchino Altobelli, as well as foreign amateurs such as Eugène Constant and Count Flachéron.<sup>49</sup> Macpherson (possibly like the almost forgotten Italian Dovizielli) stood somewhat apart from his competitors, earning respectful critical recognition in the international exhibitions while widely selling his work.<sup>50</sup> Evidently he resisted the trend of the 1860's toward commercialization, however, and perhaps as a consequence, his reputation declined. It is indicative that Macpherson (like Dovizielli) sold

<sup>42</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, xviii, April 28, 1871, 199-200.

<sup>43</sup> Freeman, 204-05.

<sup>44</sup> The original process is described by Sutton in *British Journal of Photography*, xviii, April 28, 1871, 200. Macpherson referred to modifications he made in the *British Journal of Photography*, ix, December 15, 1862, 469.

<sup>45</sup> For a defense of the albumen process by the photographer John Cramb, see *British Journal of Photography*, viii, May 15, 1861, 181-82; June 1, 1861, 204-05; June 15, 1861, 220-21. For later defenses, see the references in note 44 as well as *British Journal of Photography*, xviii, May 19, 1871, 231-32. Macpherson's only reservation came during Lent, when "he never met with his usual amount of success. He attributed this to the garbage of fish which the hens ate during Lent, and which affected the albumen.

. . ." (*British Journal of Photography*, ix, December 15, 1862, 469).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, as well as *The Photographic Journal*, viii, December 15, 1862, 184.

<sup>47</sup> Erskine, 301.

<sup>48</sup> R. Macpherson (as in n. 41).

<sup>49</sup> The most informative source about mid-19th-century Italian photography is P. Becchetti, *Fotografi e fotografia in Italia, 1839-1880*, Rome, 1978, and for Fratelli Alinari, F. Zevi, and W. Settimelli, *Gli Alinari: Fotografi a Firenze 1852-1920*, Florence, 1977.

<sup>50</sup> Subsequent research may modify these generalizations significantly. Macpherson also held something of an advantage in his nationality, since the British had an active photographic community as well as a tremendous number of tourists travelling to Italy.



directly to his customers from his shop in Rome. He was even more exceptional in selling only photographs at his studio; Dovizielli, for example, handled art supplies as well as prints. Most other photographers sold through established book and print dealers such as Spithöver in the Piazza di Spagna.<sup>51</sup> Macpherson also seems not to have followed the common practice of selling his negatives to another studio, since his photographs have not appeared marked by the blindstamp of another photographer.

In choice of subject, Macpherson followed the demands of his audience. The titles listed in his broadsheets resemble those of his competitors, and all of them followed the tradition established by centuries of topographical prints. Macpherson's distinctive quality lies in the intelligence and the artistic command with which he represented these familiar subjects. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he consistently demonstrated a pictorial control that makes the large size of his prints artistically justifiable. Typically, his photographs exhibit a constant awareness of the placement of the major points of interest within the frame of the picture. Unlike the work of a photographer such as Timothy O'Sullivan, however, Macpherson's photographs reveal less concern for the abstract, negative shapes created by blank sky and sharp silhouette than for the handsome, proportioned arrangement of the central monument or view within the field of the picture. Furthermore, his compositional instinct — like that of Edouard Baldus, for example — tends to place the major point of interest in the center of the picture. Thus, the three columns of the Temple of Jupiter in the northwest corner of the Roman Forum (Fig. 3) rise as impressive shapes against the sky, isolated from and yet set off by the solid phalanx of buildings beneath them. Even with as standard a subject as the view across the Forum to the Colosseum (Fig. 2), Macpherson presented the monuments with great respect for pictorial clarity and the pleasing distribution of shapes. His choice of vantage point becomes especially noticeable in the spaces between the columns of the Temple of Saturn. Each sliver has its own logic, its own distinctive balance of negative and positive shapes.

Macpherson's photographic style seems consistent with the point of view his pictures represent: that of the middle-class tourist seeking an evocation of Italy rather than that of the architect or historian. Repeatedly, one feels both his training as a painter and the pressure of his intended audience in the sacrifice of archaeological information for pictorial clarity. His view of the excavations of the Julian Basilica (Fig. 4), for example, beautifully organizes the

disparate visual elements of the scene, but its very seamlessness makes the separate planes and pieces hard to disentangle. Partly as the result of his position and partly the length of his lens, the picture leads the eye across its surface rather than through space. In his view of the Campagna (Fig. 5), on the other hand, the subject is the space and light of the landscape, with the ruins only an aspect of the famous countryside. As with his painting of the Campagna, the photograph exists within the tradition of the tourist picture. Neither a historian nor an archaeologist would be satisfied by such a vista.

People rarely appear in Macpherson's work. Unlike most of his competitors, he presents his subjects as grand, unapproachable monuments. Thus, his photograph of the tombs on the Via Appia (Fig. 6) contains neither elegant, top-hatted gentlemen resting from their study nor tourists prepared with picnic and guidebook. Instead, the lumpy broken shapes of the ruined tombs stretch across the picture, markers of the place as well as the pictorial field. In his view of the south side of the Arch of Constantine (Fig. 7) — the first photograph listed on his broadsheet — Macpherson again eliminated all figures, even the costumed Italians who so often contributed local color and picturesque detail to such pictures. Rather, he emphasized the solidity and massiveness of the historical monument. When people do appear, they usually mark scale: the tiny figure at the bottom of the Church of St. John Lateran (Fig. 8) provides the measure of the building.<sup>52</sup>

Macpherson's work was consistently well received by nineteenth-century critics. Special acclaim greeted a major exhibition that he staged in London in 1862.<sup>53</sup> The exhibit may have included nearly all his negatives; it numbered about five hundred works, including about 130 depicting sculptures in the Vatican. The review in *The Art Journal* was highly laudatory:

Year after year we are accustomed to see pictures from this inexhaustible source, with an attempt to poeticise the descriptions — an impossibility in ordinary hands. . . . One of the finest of these views is the Arch of Constantine, and on examining it you are struck with surprise at seeing so much you never saw before: you never suspected it had been so highly finished, and you never dreamt of his perfection of decay. . . . To the energy and ability of Mr. Macpherson all praise is due; the results of his labors cannot be surpassed.<sup>54</sup>

*The Athenaeum* emphasized the extent of his offerings: "A

<sup>51</sup> See the listing of photographers as well as the advertisements in F.S. Bonfigli, *The Artistical Dictionary; or Guide to the Studios in Rome*, Rome, 1858, 93, and a supplement in the back, n.p. A few photographs by Macpherson have the stamp of Spithöver on the mount, suggesting that perhaps initially he sold through an established route — just as the Fratelli Alinari did with Bardi at the start of their career.

<sup>52</sup> Almost every recent book about 19th-century photography includes a few photographs by Macpherson. A particularly full selection is found in W. Watson, *Images of Italy, Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, exh.

cat., Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Mass., 1980, Nos. 48-60.

<sup>53</sup> It opened during August in the rooms of the Architectural Photographic Association — to which Macpherson had sent works during the 1850's — at 9, Conduit Street, and in October, it moved to the Polytechnic Institute on Regent Street (*British Journal of Photography*, ix, October 1, 1862, 374). Macpherson evidently travelled to London during the showing (*British Journal of Photography*, ix, September 1, 1862, 323).

<sup>54</sup> *The Art Journal*, xxiv, 1862, 227.

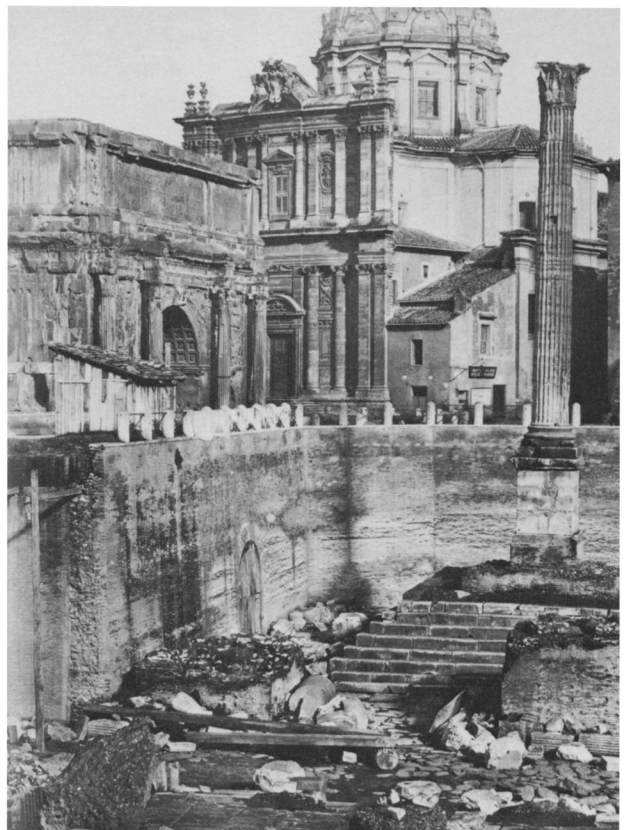




2 Robert Macpherson, *The Roman Forum* (No. 16), ca. 1852. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library



3 Robert Macpherson, *Temple of Jupiter, Roman Forum* (No. 8), ca. 1852. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library



4 Robert Macpherson, *Excavations, Julian Basilica, Rome* (No. 89), ca. 1855. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library



5 Robert Macpherson, *Aqueducts, Roman Campagna* (No. 102), ca. 1855. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library

magnificent series of the monuments of Rome is on view at No. 9, Conduit Street. They are photographed by Mr. Robert Macpherson, of that city; the subjects chosen with fine taste and the pictures executed with skill and delicacy. From this exhibition the collector may obtain everything he wants of Rome, from the Coliseum to a cameo."<sup>55</sup> The *British Journal of Photography* said simply: "Mr. Macpherson's name alone [is] sufficient guarantee for their artistic excellence."<sup>56</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries — Roger Fenton, Charles Nègre, and Edouard Baldus among them — Macpherson also worked to discover a commercially feasible method of reproducing photographs photomechanically.<sup>57</sup> Without such a technique the photographer was at the mercy of sometimes unreliable and always impermanent materials, as well as being bound to the painstaking process of printing the individual negative, one image at a time. Macpherson's process was a kind of photolithography, for which he received a patent from the Papal government in May, 1853. (In consequence of this recognition, Robert Browning wrote a friend, "Mac look[s] up in the world — and he grows his beard and hair six inches longer in consequence.")<sup>58</sup> He continued his interest: in 1855, Professor Ramsey described it to the British Association, and in 1857, Macpherson himself described it to the Photographic Society of Scotland. The photographer David Octavius Hill pronounced the examples Macpherson displayed during his talk charming and "had the specimens . . . [been] printed

by an experienced lithographic printer, he had no hesitation in saying they would have been the most perfect prints he had ever seen."<sup>59</sup> Although Macpherson apparently pulled five hundred impressions of the two pictures he exhibited there, none has yet come to light. The venture also must have proved a dead-end commercially for him, since he resorted to line engravings after his photographs for his guide to sculptures in the Vatican. On the other hand, his technique was praised in the *British Journal of Photography* as late as 1872, and subsequent inventors realized its commercial potential.<sup>60</sup>

The sense of a strong artistic identity runs through all of these activities, albeit combined with a pragmatic purpose. Like other contemporaries who came to photography after a conventional artistic training, Macpherson fought for photography as a fine art while he placed it low on the hierarchy. He described his position in the introduction to *Vatican Sculptures*: "I remain a photographer to this day, without any feeling that by so doing I have abandoned art, or have in any way forfeited my claim to the title of artist."<sup>61</sup> In the same spirit, he was the only photographer who called himself an "Artist photographer" in the edition of Bonfigli's *Artistical Dictionary; or Guide to the Studios in Rome* that came out in 1858. Interestingly, the revised edition of 1860 lists him as "Landscape painter photographer," perhaps because others had taken up "Artist photographer."<sup>62</sup> His method of selling and exhibiting, and his active support of the Photographic Society of Scotland, also sug-

<sup>55</sup> *The Athenaeum*, xxxvii, August 9, 1862, 181.

<sup>56</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, ix, August 15, 1862, 315.

<sup>57</sup> The most thorough study of the reproduction of photographs is E. Jusim, *Visual Communication and the Graphic Arts. Photographic Technologies in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1974.

<sup>58</sup> *British Journal of Photography*, ix, December 15, 1862, 465, and *Brownings to His American Friends: Letters between the Brownings, the Storys and James Russell Lowell, 1841-1890*, ed. G.R. Hudson, London,

1965, 276.

<sup>59</sup> *Humphrey's Journal*, viii, April 15, 1857, 377.

<sup>60</sup> G. Markham, M.D., "Macpherson's Process of Photolithography," *British Journal of Photography*, xix, December 13, 1872, 589-90, and J.M. Eder, *History of Photography*, trans. E. Epstein, New York, 1945, 611.

<sup>61</sup> R. Macpherson (as in n. 41), n.p.

<sup>62</sup> Bonfigli (as in n. 51), 1858, 93, and 1860, 107.



6 Robert Macpherson, *Tombs, Via Appia* (No. 84), ca. 1855. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library

gest a commitment to photography as an art. At the same time, however, it was this very consciousness of more traditional notions of art that led Macpherson to distinguish between the two in a letter from 1857. After thoughtful discussion of possible uses for photographic copies of paintings, engravings, and objects for the study of painters, he concluded: "[I] desire to finish these observations with one remark which is always a sufficient answer to those who speak of Photography as injuring Art — Photography cannot invent [and] it can therefore never injure art! —"<sup>63</sup>

Between the mid-1850's and mid-1860's, the Macphersons seem to have had a busy and successful life. For most of this time, they lived at 4, Via Strozzi, an "airy and convenient" place, furnished with various pieces of antique furniture Macpherson had picked up.<sup>64</sup> It also was close to his studio at 192, Via di Ripetta, and, after about 1861, 12, Vicolo d'Alibert, Via Babuino. Both addresses were in a neighborhood filled with other artists and photographers; the former even had a number of other artists in the same building.<sup>65</sup> Freeman described their residence:

No house in the Eternal City was more hospitable than that of the Macphersons, and in none could more distinguished people be met. . . . Nor did the painter lose his position in society by descending from a higher to an inferior grade of art. It was the *man* and the genial Gerardine, his accomplished wife, not his profession, which made his house so attractive to these distinguished people. All were sure to find there a kind welcome, sym-

pathy, amusement, and generous cheer.<sup>66</sup>

Mrs. Oliphant, a friend of Mrs. Jameson, gave a similar description: "A strange house it was, a continual coming and going of artists and patrons of artists; of Scottish visitors, of Italian great personages and priests, and more or less of all the English in Rome." According to her, only the presence of Geddie's mother proved a constant irritant:

Mrs. Bate, who, though entirely maintained by [Macpherson's] bounty, constantly encouraged Geddie in little rebellions against her husband and her love of gaiety and admiration. But Robert was no meek victim, and never hesitated to tell mamma his mind. There used to be a fierce row often in the house, from which he would stride forth plucking his red beard and sending forth fire and flame; but when he came back would have his hands full of offerings, even to the mother-in-law, and his face full of sunshine, as if it had never known a cloud.<sup>67</sup>

Anna Jameson visited them three times during these years: 1855, 1857-58, and then again in the winter of 1859. She also must have introduced people to the house and, in 1857, she brought work as well. For pleasure and money, Geddie etched the illustrations to the new edition of Mrs. Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art*, although her many responsibilities slowed the work considerably.<sup>68</sup> By this time, the reconciliation between the two seems to have been nearly complete. Jameson even "went with Gerardine (to

<sup>63</sup> Macpherson to C.G.H. Kinneir, April 16, 1857, Records of the Photographic Society of Scotland, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh (GD 356/17/67-8).

<sup>64</sup> Erskine, 303, and Freeman, 228.

<sup>65</sup> See Bonfigli (as in n. 51), 1858, for a listing of the painters: Bottini,

Stanislao, third floor; Jannacconi, third floor; and Lehman, Rudolph, also third floor.

<sup>66</sup> Freeman, 205.

<sup>67</sup> Oliphant (as in n. 4), 59-60.

<sup>68</sup> Erskine, 303, and G. Macpherson, 298.



7 Robert Macpherson, *Arch of Constantine, Rome* (No. 1), ca. 1852. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library

please her) to St. Peter's and heard the benediction given with very fine effect by the Pope" — a scene Macpherson photographed.<sup>69</sup>

By the mid- and late-1860's, however, things seem to have taken a downward turn. Macpherson's health may not have been good; there are various references to its decline already in the 1850's.<sup>70</sup> Although he continued to participate in photographic activities — he still was a member of the Photographic Society in 1864, for example — his name no longer appears in exhibition reviews and articles about the medium. A new broadsheet appeared in 1868, which included an acrimonious exchange of correspondence between Macpherson and the publisher John Murray (also published in *Photographic Notes*).<sup>71</sup> The letter perhaps suggests undue sensitivity in Macpherson's angry accusation of corruption in the compilation of Murray's guidebooks, but Macpherson always had been known for the heat of his temper. He must not have been doing well financially, however, since he sold "Gerardine's Fortune," *The Entombment*, in 1868 "at a price below its value — a price unfortunately soon swallowed up in the course of misfortunes which clouded his later life."<sup>72</sup> No indication has emerged of what these difficulties might have been.

Macpherson died on November 17, 1872, and was buried in the cemetery of S. Lorenzo in Rome. According to Mrs.

Oliphant, he left "his wife to struggle as she could through a sad entanglement of debts and distress, with two young children dependent on her."<sup>73</sup> Even the more sympathetic Freeman described great difficulty:

Mac left no provision for his wife and family. His social habits and generous hospitality consumed all he made by his profession; and his widow — always suffering more or less from ill health — was obliged, after his death, to turn to the only resource which remained to her for the maintenance of herself and her children. This was her literary talent, which fortunately had been well cultivated under the tuition of her aunt, Mrs. Jameson. Her struggles were known to few, for she never complained. She taught, wrote for newspapers and magazines, and was always outwardly bright and cheerful, preserving an almost complete silence regarding the straits which so often nearly closed up her rough way. Even to my wife and myself, who were among the most intimate and attached of her friends, she rarely spoke of her singularly trying position.<sup>74</sup>

Her last work was a biography of Mrs. Jameson, commissioned by the publishers Longman. She died on May 24, 1878, having not quite completed the proof corrections of

<sup>69</sup> Needler, 215, and Macpherson No. 104 ("Easter Benediction at St. Peter's"), ill. Watson (as in n. 52), No. 55.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, bad bouts of fever referred to during the 1850's in Needler, 202 (1855); 212 (1856); 217 (1857); as well as the failing of his eyes "at an early age" in G. Macpherson, xiv; and Erskine, "Macpherson was already in bad health [in 1857]," 301.

<sup>71</sup> *Photographic Notes*, xii, June 1, 1867, 172.

<sup>72</sup> G. Macpherson, xiv.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Freeman, 232.





8 Robert Macpherson, *Church of St. John Lateran, Rome* (No. 23), ca. 1852. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library

the book, and was buried next to her husband. She left two nearly independent boys — presumably in their early twenties — a girl aged fourteen, and a younger boy. The girl, Ada, grew up in various European countries, but ended living in the United States, where she died in 1941.<sup>75</sup> Nothing is known of her three brothers.

Apparently Macpherson's photographic business did not continue after his death. At least there is no mention of his wife managing the concern, and no evidence that anyone else did either. The contents and disposition of his estate remain unknown. It seems, then, that Macpherson was typical of mid-nineteenth-century photographers in another way as well: his brilliant reputation of the 1850's did not survive the 1860's. Photographer after photographer among those who came to prominence early in the 1850's — Roger Fenton, Henri Le Secq, Gustave Le Gray, and the Bisson frères are examples — did not build their substantial successes into a lifetime of achievement. Fenton and Le Secq voluntarily abandoned their photographic careers at the height of their fame, Le Gray had to leave France for personal reasons and left his reputation behind him (although he continued to photograph), while the Bisson frères seem to have been victims of the shift in taste away from the big albumen prints in which they specialized.<sup>76</sup> Macpherson's life may have had elements of all of these stories. Whatever the reason for the decline of his reputation, the photographs he produced remain among the very finest in the entire tradition of Italian view pictures.

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<sup>75</sup> Information courtesy of Macpherson's great-great-grandson, Robert W. Storm, Jr., who is currently working on a biography of the photographer.

<sup>76</sup> For Fenton, see: J. Hannavy, *Roger Fenton of Crimble Hall*, Boston, 1976, 95-98; for Le Secq: A. Jammes and E.P. Janis, *The Art of French Calotype*, Princeton, 1983, 206-10; for Le Gray: *ibid.*, 200-05; for Baldus:

P. Néagu and F. Heilbrun, "Baldus, paysages, architectures," *Photographies*, 1, spring 1983, 70-72; for Bisson frères: *After Daguerre: Masterworks of French Photography (1848-1900) from the Bibliothèque Nationale*, exh. cat., New York and Paris, cat. by B. Marbot, n.p. ("Bisson frères").