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# 'Mechanism' Made Visible: Process and Perception in Henry Peach Robinson's Composite Photographs

Emily Talbot

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This article analyses Henry Peach Robinson's method of making composite photographs in the context of widespread belief that the photographer's 'mechanism' was perceptible in the appearance of his prints. By examining Robinson's preparatory and darkroom procedures, as well as the photographer's extensive writing about his photographic practice, I suggest that composite photographs invited viewers to pay attention to process, and to take it into account in their evaluation of an image. This attitude challenged key tenets of academic art theory – the paradigm for nascent concepts of art in photography – by refusing to subordinate manual labour to that of the mind. While many nineteenth-century critics rejected Robinson's approach, the debates engendered by composite techniques reveal a persistent fascination with making that advanced photographic practice as a marker of artistic value.

**Keywords:** Alfred H. Wall (1828–1906), Henry Peach Robinson (1830–1901), composite photography, composition photography, combination printing, mechanism, criticism, art theory, critical reception, photographic discourse, labour

- 1 – Several critics remarked on the use of platinum as a notable development in the 1887 exhibition. See, for example, 'Photographic Notes', *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*, 8 (1 November 1887), 359.
- 2 – The lines 'This Carol they began that hour, / How that a Life was but a Flower / In Spring time', a condensed version of a song that appeared in act v, scene iii of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, was published in exhibition catalogues and advertisements for *Carolling* both before and after the Photographic Society of Great Britain Exhibition. See no. 617 in *Catalogue of the Fifty-Fifth Annual Exhibition of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society* (6–10 September 1887); no. 2255 in the *Official Catalogue of the Fine Arts Section, International Exhibition, Glasgow* (1888); and an advertisement for the sale of 'Photographs by H.P. Robinson' in *The International Annual of Anthony's Photographic Bulletin*, 2 (1889), 22.
- 3 – A description of the exhibition space, including the frame and presentation of *Carolling*, is provided in [W. Jerome Harrison], 'The Big Photo Show in London', *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (2 December 1887), 597.

In November 1887, the English photographer Henry Peach Robinson presented *Carolling*, his most recent 'subject picture', at the Photographic Society of London exhibition at Pall Mall Gallery (figure 1). Printed in platinum, a new medium prized for its delicate tonalities and material stability, the substantial 34 cm × 65 cm print depicted a carefully crafted rural scene in which two young women stroll across an English meadow, engaged in conversation or song, while sheep graze contentedly in the background.<sup>1</sup> Robinson articulated his composition with a gentle zig-zag pattern that guides the viewer's visual path through the image. From the clump of stones and shrubs in the upper right corner, one looks left to the pair of female figures at middle ground, then back to the right via the flock of sheep behind them. Their forms may be traced deeper into the image towards trees and misty mountains in the background, each element conveying the unfolding of the landscape. Robinson's artistic ambitions for *Carolling* were underscored by the verse of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* that accompanied the entry in the exhibition catalogue,<sup>2</sup> connecting the photograph to painterly and literary traditions, and by displaying the print in a gilded oak frame that stood out handsomely against the maroon fabric and ornamental moulding of the gallery walls.<sup>3</sup>

Officially, *Carolling* was a great success. The Photographic Society awarded Robinson a medal and honoured the print with prime placement on the central wall of the exhibition. Reviewers declared the photograph to be the sensation of the season, and *Carolling* continued to garner attention when it was displayed at venues



Figure 1. Henry Peach Robinson, *Carolling*, platinum print, 1887. George Eastman Museum, Rochester, 1981.1861.0008.

in the UK and abroad over the next few years.<sup>4</sup> Yet this seemingly innocuous picture was deeply divisive at the time of the Photographic Society exhibition, engendering debates about the visibility of Robinson's technical procedures that had dogged the photographer throughout his career. Critics writing for both the photographic and generalist presses pointed to evidence that Robinson had printed his photograph from more than one negative. The *London Times* described *Carolling* as superficially proficient, but claimed that a 'closer inspection' revealed problems of perspective and lighting in various portions of the picture that diminished its 'artistic value'.<sup>5</sup> A writer for the *Builder* speculated that the print had been 'touched upon' with watercolour and was not 'pure photographic work'.<sup>6</sup> The most extensive and damning critique appeared in the *Amateur Photographer*, a journal founded in 1884 to address the artistic and technical interests of non-commercial photographers. Suggesting that *Carolling's* advantageous location on the gallery wall had too easily persuaded viewers of its merits, the anonymous reviewer subjected Robinson's photograph to an 'examination' that itemised its incongruities one by one. The shadows cast by the women were clearly longer than those of the sheep, the writer explained, while the illumination on the animals was inconsistent with the appearance of the sky. More disconcerting still was the discrepancy between the two halves of the picture, as the sheep and plant life on the left-hand side of the picture appeared softer than those on the right. Although Robinson had clearly intended to construct a unified composition, the process of combining images from different sources inevitably undermined this goal. '[W]ere the devices absolutely indiscernible and unsuspected, very little exception could be taken to the method', the critic asserted, '[b]ut as these puzzles never are carried out without detection, they can hardly be regarded as in the right direction for artistic work'. Citing the Latin axiom *ars est celare artem* – it is true art to conceal art – the reviewer concluded by condemning Robinson's misunderstanding of the pictorial enterprise: '[h]ere, the art is to conceal, not art, but mechanism, and the point that does violence to artistic feeling is that the attempt is never wholly successful'.<sup>7</sup> For this journalist, Robinson's failure to suppress his process revealed the 'art' of composite printing to be little more than manual assembly.

4 – *Carolling* received subsequent medals at exhibitions in Calcutta, Richmond, Birmingham, and Gloucester, where it was awarded an 'extra silver medal' for being the most notable picture in the exhibition. See 'Notes', *Photographic News* (13 April 1888), 232; 'Photographic Exhibition at Gloucester', *Photographic News* (20 April 1888), 241–42; Valentine Blanchard, 'Notes Taken at the Richmond Photographic Exhibition', *Photographic News* (18 January 1889), 34; and 'The Awards at the Birmingham Exhibition', *Photographic News* (8 March 1889), 145.

5 – 'Opinion of the London Daily Press on the Photographic Exhibition. [The Times.]', *British Journal of Photography* (7 October 1887), 634.

6 – 'Opinion of the London Press on the Photographic Society's Exhibition [The Builder.]', *British Journal of Photography* (28 October 1887), 685. The assertion that a photographer had retouched his photograph was inflammatory, and Robinson felt it necessary to refute the claim in the journal's next issue. See H. P. Robinson, 'Carolling', *British Journal of Photography* (4 November 1887), 702–03. The following year, hand-coloured photographs were not admitted in the exhibition. See 'The Exhibition of the Photographic Society of Great Britain', *Photographic News* (20 July 1888), 449.

7 – 'Notes on Art at the Exhibition of the Photographic Society of Great Britain', *Amateur Photographer* (18 November 1887), 246–47 (original emphasis).

8 – H. P. Robinson, 'Combination Printing', *Amateur Photographer* (25 November 1887), 256.

9 – Art photography emerged as a distinct category of photographic practice in the late 1850s and early 1860s, and a number of writers for the photographic presses offered definitions of the scope and expectations for such work. In 1861, for example, photographer Cornelius Jabez Hughes characterised the qualities of 'Art-Photography' as distinct from 'Mechanical Photography' on the basis of the photographer's intent to 'infuse his mind' into his pictures by way of 'arranging, modifying, or otherwise disposing them, so that they may appear in a more appropriate or beautiful manner than they would have been without such interference'. See Cornelius Jabez Hughes, 'Art-Photography: Its Scope and Characteristics', *Photographic News* (4 January 1861), 3; and Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 2006, esp. ch. 3.

10 – Thomas Puttfarcken offers a concise overview of this binary as it relates to the foundation of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in France in the mid-seventeenth century. Supporters of the Académie sought to elevate painting to a liberal art by aligning it with intellect, creativity, and invention, and distancing the medium from its historical associations with handcraft. Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2000, 229–30.

11 – Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse III*, as quoted in B. A. C. van Brakel-Saunders, 'Reynolds' Theory of Learning Processes', in *Academies of Art between Renaissance and Romanticism*, ed. Anton W. A. Boschloo, Elwin J. Hendrikse, Laetitia C. Smit, and Gert Jan van der Sman, The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij 1989, 466.

12 – Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse IV*, as quoted in *Sir Joshua Reynolds: Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark, London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art 1975, 57.

13 – William Lake Price, 'On Composition and Chiar-Oscuro – VIII', *Photographic News* (5 April 1860), 368.

14 – A. H. W. [Alfred H. Wall], 'Photographic Exhibitions and Art Progress', *Photographic News* (19 October 1860), 293. In another article from the same volume of the *Photographic News*, an author named Charles Martel underscored this division, stating '[w]e employ the term "mechanical" in opposition to the "artistic"', and writing regretfully, '[i]t must be admitted that in most of our photographic productions, the mechanical element predominates over the artistic'. Charles Martel, 'Colour in its Relation to Photography', *Photographic News* (17 August 1860), 181.

Robinson, never one to let criticism go unanswered, responded to the *Amateur Photographer's* charges in the journal's next number. Protesting the writer's assumption that he printed from multiple negatives in order to deceive, Robinson argued that his technique need not disrupt the artistic achievement of the photograph. '[W]hatever may be the practice of other photographers', Robinson replied, 'the attempt to conceal the fact that some of my pictures are produced by this method has never been my intention; so far otherwise, indeed, is this the case that I take very little care to hide what you call the mechanism when it does not interfere with the effect of the picture'.<sup>8</sup>

If critics were distracted by his technique, Robinson continued, they had only themselves to blame. Writers for the photographic press – usually practitioners themselves – tended to interpret photographs as the 'result[s] of a process', rather than seeing them as pictures. Accordingly, they analysed his images precisely for mechanism, identifying the 'joins' between negatives, and assessing the technical accuracy of his lighting and perspective. So deeply ingrained was this approach, Robinson wrote ruefully, that viewers saw evidence of composite printing even when it was not there, confidently pointing to the outlines between negatives in photographs made whole from a single plate.

This exchange between critic and photographer – one of many that Robinson engaged in over the course of his forty-year career – offers insights into the tensions between the production and interpretation of 'art photography' in the late nineteenth century that stemmed from its means of making.<sup>9</sup> While the *Amateur Photographer* critic insisted that Robinson's aggregate process disrupted the artistic effect of his pictures, Robinson turned the tables on this logic, arguing that critics rendered his mechanism a distraction by searching for it in the first place.

The use of the term 'mechanism' in this context was anything but neutral. By alleging the insubordinate role of Robinson's technique, the *Amateur Photographer* critic invoked a longstanding binary between manual and intellectual labour that formed the basis of academic theory in painting, and which had recently entered the lexicon of photographers who sought a framework for articulating the pictorial qualities of their images.<sup>10</sup> In England, the artistic opposition between hand and mind was codified by Sir Joshua Reynolds, first president of the Royal Academy, in the fifteen *Discourses* he presented to the institution's members and students between 1769 and 1790. In these lectures, Reynolds differentiated the artist from a 'mere mechanick' on the basis of the creative and intellectual aspects of his or her work.<sup>11</sup> As Reynolds wrote in his fourth *Discourse*, '[t]he value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected our profession becomes either a liberal art, or a mechanical trade'.<sup>12</sup>

Critics of photography appropriated Reynolds's hierarchy by employing the term mechanism (and its adjectival form, mechanical) to refer to the technical means by which a picture was produced, or to characterise the utilitarian qualities of the image, contrasting these aspects with the ideals of creative invention. In the photographic context, 'mechanical' processes did not necessarily involve the hand, but they denoted the material means by which the picture was produced and thus enabled continuity with the academic paradigm. Take, for example, William Lake Price's 1860 call for fellow photographers to study the pictorial qualities of great masterworks in order to 'raise the practice of photography above the mere mechanism of successful manipulation'.<sup>13</sup> Or the complaint registered by the leading advocate for art photography, Alfred H. Wall, that the recent proliferation of photography exhibitions had spawned a new breed of critic he termed 'critical mechanics', who 'discours[e] learnedly about baths, processes and tones, sharpness, clearness, and distortion, spots, stains, markings, exposure and other manipulatory details, but utterly ignor[e] the existence of artistic ability, and the higher qualities of pictorial beauty, sacrificing intellectual worth to the minor details of experimental science or the petty little tricks of successful mechanism'.<sup>14</sup> This distinction

between the photograph's physical means of production and the intangible values of pictorial art held in the rhetoric of art photography through the end of the century, such that Scottish photographer David Clark could assert in 1888 that it was the photographer's eye and mind – rather than his or her technical aptitude alone – which enabled a practitioner to distinguish between the 'merely mechanical' and 'intellectual' aspects of the art.<sup>15</sup>

In their elucidations of the term mechanical as it was used to describe nineteenth-century photographs, both Joel Snyder and Steve Edwards have shown that the word derived its meaning from associations with manual labour, and only later came to characterise the operations of a machine.<sup>16</sup> To describe a photograph as mechanical in the nineteenth century implied the absence of creative invention by aligning the image with copying by hand. As Snyder points out, this conception of photography undergirds much early theorisation of the medium, as when Lady Elizabeth Eastlake asserted in 1857 that 'for all that requires mere manual correctness, and mere manual slavery, without any employment of the artistic feeling, [photography] is the proper and therefore the perfect medium'.<sup>17</sup> Even sympathetic assessments of photography's artistic potential drew upon this analogy. Writing in 1860, an author for the *Photographic News* described the medium's place among the fine arts as being that of a 'mechanical copyist of artistic designs'.<sup>18</sup>

When used to describe composite photographs, usually referred to as 'composition photography' in the nineteenth century, or 'combination printing' by Robinson himself, terms like mechanism and mechanical recalled their etymological origins because the technique of combining multiple negatives on the same sheet of paper involved literal hand work – trimming, joining, measuring, and retouching – that was seen to assert itself in the perception of the print.<sup>19</sup> Robinson proposed a radical rethinking of the relationship between making and meaning when he retorted in the *Amateur Photographer*: 'I take very little care to hide *what you call the mechanism* when it does not interfere with the effect of the picture'.<sup>20</sup> By sanctioning an easy co-existence between mechanism and artistic effect, Robinson pointed to the limitations of the critic's interpretation, challenging the accepted divisions between the manual and intellectual processes of art. To be clear, Robinson was not questioning the validity of the term mechanism in general; after all, it was a concept he employed himself with some frequency.<sup>21</sup> Rather, by insinuating that mechanism did not necessarily characterise his own process, Robinson asserted the artistic potential of combination printing, whether the evidence was visible or not.

As the critical reception of *Carolling* and other composite photographs suggest, a complicated dynamic was at play. Awareness of Robinson's techniques – whether signalled by the prints themselves or conveyed by the photographer's writing about his procedures – invited viewers to pay attention to process, and to take it into account in their evaluation of an image. This approach challenged key tenets of academic art theory – the paradigm for nascent concepts of art in photography – by refusing to subordinate the physical processes of art-making to those of the mind. As has been well documented, composite methods remained conceptually controversial throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, even while the prints themselves were widely exhibited and admired.<sup>22</sup>

This article contextualises the critical responses to Robinson's *Carolling* within broad debates about the conditions of art in photography in the second half of the nineteenth century. By analysing early theorisation of composition photography in the 1860s, and its legacy in the 1880s, I demonstrate that composite techniques generated longstanding and consistent concerns about the status of the photographer's labour as a marker of artistic value. In his photographs, as well as his extensive writing about photography, Robinson advanced the notion that practice itself bears meaning. While many nineteenth-century critics rejected this position, the debates engendered by Robinson's methods prompted questions about the

15 – David R. Clark, MA, 'Composition as Applied to Photography', *British Journal of Photography* (27 January 1888), 56. Thomas Runciman made a similar point in 1893, asserting that 'the mechanical must be helped by the artistic, if there is to be anything but a botch, pictorially'. Thomas Runciman, 'The Artist as Photographer', *Art Journal*, 55 (1893), 116.

16 – Joel Snyder, 'Res Ipsa Loquitur', in *Things That Talk*, ed. Lorraine Daston, New York: Zone Books 2004, 198–204; and Edwards, *Making of English Photography*, 132–36. See also Laura Saltz, 'Natural/Mechanical: Keywords in the Conception of Early Photography', in *Photography and Its Origins*, ed. Tanya Sheehan and Andrés Mario Zervignón, New York: Routledge 2015, 195.

17 – Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, 'Photography', *London Quarterly Review* (April 1857), quoted in Snyder, 'Res Ipsa Loquitur', 213.

18 – 'On the Position Occupied by Photography Among the Fine Arts', *Photographic News* (22 June 1860), 85.

19 – Robinson expressed a preference for the term 'combination printing' over 'composition photography' in 'On Printing from Several Negatives', *Photographic News* (30 September 1864), 471.

20 – Robinson, 'Combination Printing', 256 (emphasis added).

21 – See, for example, Robinson's advice to fellow photographers to 'keep the mechanism of the art out of sight' by placing the joins between negatives in unobtrusive places. H. P. Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers*, London: Piper and Carter 1869, 96.

22 – For Robinson's biography and the critical reception of his photographs, see Margaret Harker, *Henry Peach Robinson: Master of Photographic Art 1830–1901*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1988; and David Lawrence Coleman, 'Pleasant Fictions: Henry Peach Robinson's Composition Photography', PhD thesis, University of Texas 2005.

efficacy of the academic model inherited from painting, shaping the conceptualisation of art photography in the nineteenth century and beyond.

#### *Origins in 1860*

Henry Peach Robinson began exhibiting composite photographs in the late 1850s, but it was not until 1860, the year in which he submitted *A Holiday in the Wood* to the annual Photographic Society exhibition in London, that critics began paying particular attention to the photographer's technique (figure 2). Produced from seven separate negatives on a single 45 cm × 57 cm sheet, *A Holiday in the Wood* was Robinson's most ambitious combination print to date. The image depicted a spirited group of children picnicking in the forest near Kenilworth Castle, employing a dynamic compositional pyramid to enliven and organise the scene. At the apex Robinson positioned a standing girl waving her bonnet in a gesture of unencumbered glee, while children of varying ages gather around her in clusters of two or three, weaving flowers into crowns or animatedly observing each other. To connote relative distance and command of his printing process, Robinson varied the size and degree of exposure of the figural groupings and dispersed them across the pictorial surface.

While critics admired the charm of Robinson's theme and the ambition of his design, reviews focused squarely on the photographer's procedures. *A Holiday in the Wood* was introduced in terms of its composite process, and writers reviewed current debates about the technique before describing the image itself. A journalist for the *Photographic News* drew attention to the photograph's 'mechanical' flaws, such as the abrupt juxtaposition between a foreground figure's cheek and the dark drapery of the skirt behind her, and the over-exposure of the background foliage, which did not convey an appropriate recession of depth. In a similar vein, the writer for the *British Journal of Photography* indicated that the two little girls approaching at far right appeared too close to the foreground given their relative size, and advised Robinson that they should be 'thrown further back' in future impressions. These faults would be disturbing if photographed as such, the *Photographic News*

Figure 2 Henry Peach Robinson, *A Holiday in the Wood*, albumen silver print, 1860. George Eastman Museum, Rochester, Gift of Alden Scott Boyer, 1970.0192.0001.



author acknowledged, but the effect was exacerbated 'when the junction is a mechanical one', and the photographer had manually synthesised his scene.<sup>23</sup>

When *A Holiday in the Wood* was exhibited at venues including the Crystal Palace Exhibition and the Belgian Industrial Exhibition over the next few years, negative associations with Robinson's procedures only increased in intensity. Critics described the print as a series of patched-together pieces that revealed the outlines left behind by the photographer's 'scissors'.<sup>24</sup> Robinson had done his best to combine separate studies into a pleasing whole, the reviewer for the *London Times* acknowledged patronisingly, but the effect of the photograph was quite the opposite. '[N]othing more entirely fails in all the true conditions of picture-making', the author insisted, reassuring readers that this 'unwise encroachment' of photography into the domain of painting only reinforced the boundary between the two media.<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis on Robinson's pictorial process followed a series of contentious debates about composite photography that flooded the photographic press in the spring and summer of 1860. The tempest was triggered by Robinson himself, when, at the invitation of the Photographic Society of Scotland, he delivered a paper detailing his methods that was published in the *British Journal of Photography* in April. 'On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives' described Robinson's process of constructing his photographs, as well as the preparatory procedures that he employed in advance of making a print. Rather than seeking an appropriate setting in nature, Robinson chose to build one in his backyard, covering a piece of turf with wildflowers to simulate a hill, and constructing a mountain spring by directing the wastewater from his printing apparatus into a hole at the foot of the garden. With this set-up he was able to stage any number of scenes, the photographer explained, revealing that recent photographs such as *Lavinia, Nearing Home*, and *Here They Come!* shared the same foreground. All it took was 'the assistance of a spade and a little ingenuity'.<sup>26</sup>

Printing his pictures involved an equally hands-on series of steps. To compose a photograph from more than one source, Robinson made a print from one negative, cut out the unwanted figures or background elements, and then pasted these back over the original plate.<sup>27</sup> When exposing the now masked-over negative for a second time, only the desired elements of the image would appear on paper. To add a new background or additional figures to the print, the opposite procedure was adopted. Robinson pasted over the areas that corresponded to images he had already printed, and then exposed the second plate on his initial sheet of paper. To ensure proper alignment of each new addition, he ran a needle through the print and matched it with the corresponding negative, shining a candle beneath the printing frame to make the outlines between negatives easier to see. He advised his audience to pick inconspicuous places to situate the seams, or, if printing a figure's head from one negative and its body from another, to 'shade off' the joins by allowing them to fall discretely over one other. The 'mechanical difficulties' were not insurmountable, he assured fellow photographers, urging them not to 'discard art' by avoiding this method of working.<sup>28</sup>

Responses to Robinson's disclosure were swift and appalled. Michael Hannaford, a council member of the South London Photographic Society, condemned Robinson's employment of fictitious sets, claiming that his photographs had not been 'legitimately obtained'.<sup>29</sup> Other authors expressed concern that cut-and-paste was successfully masquerading as art. In a faux-editorial that appeared in the *British Journal of Photography* in June, penned by 'Penelope Ann Spriggins' (although actually authored by professional art critic Alfred Wall<sup>30</sup>), Robinson's procedure was equated with the domestic handcraft of sewing a patchwork quilt. Writing in a Cockney dialect for comedic effect, Spriggins declared enthusiastically that if joining 'pieces from the rag-bag' was all it took to make photographic art, she would gladly make her way to London to collect next year's prize herself.<sup>31</sup>

23 – 'The Holiday in the Woods', *Photographic News* (30 November 1860), 366–67; and 'Photographic Contributions to Art', *British Journal of Photography* (1 December 1860), 346.

24 – 'Report of the Jury, Belgium Industrial Exhibition, 1861' and 'Crystal Palace Exhibition 1862', *British Journal of Photography* (6 June 1862). Both of these reviews are included in a scrapbook of press clippings in the collection of the National Media Museum, Bradford, UK.

25 – *Times* (18 January 1861) in the Robinson scrapbook, National Media Museum, Bradford, UK.

26 – Henry P. Robinson, 'On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives', *British Journal of Photography* (2 April 1860), 94.

27 – On the basis of glass plate negatives related to *A Holiday in the Wood* in the Royal Photographic Society Collection, it seems that Robinson also used ink or paint to mask out his negatives.

28 – Robinson, 'On Printing Photographic Pictures', 95.

29 – Michael Hannaford, 'Letter to the Editor' in 'Photographic Gossip', *British Journal of Photography* (1 May 1860), 40. David Coleman identifies Hannaford as a Photographic Society council member. Coleman, 'Pleasant Fictions', 54n26.

30 – Alfred Wall published under a number of pseudonyms, including R. A. Seymour, Aud Lens, Paul, Pry, and Dogberry. See Edwards, *Making of English Photography*, 112 and 322n163.

31 – Spriggins wrote: 'Now all I says is this ere, let that there Photographic Society of Scotland as they calls it offer a prize for the best piece of patchwork and I'm the *hartist* that will sho my work for it and then let 'em jest pay my railway carriage and find me a nights lodging and bored, which it must be fit for a eyely respectable female mind you and see if I don't reed em a paper which will "give them some information on the method I employ in producing" patchwork quilts from a whole lots of little bits, thats all'. Penelope Ann Spriggins, 'Letter to the Editor: Mrs. Spriggins on Patchwork', *British Journal of Photography* (1 June 1860), 172.

32 – Wall's eclectic professional background included miniature painting, acting, photography, and writing art criticism, plays, and a novel. Edwards, *Making of English Photography*, 5, 95, and 112–13. For further biographical details, see H. S. W[ard], 'The Death of Mr. A.H. Wall', *British Journal of Photography* (29 June 1906), 512–13.

33 – Alfred H. Wall, "'Composition' versus 'Patchwork'", *British Journal of Photography* (15 June 1860), 176; and Alfred H. Wall, "'Composition' versus 'Patchwork'", *British Journal of Photography* (2 July 1860), 190–91.

34 – *Ibid.*, 176.

35 – Edwards, *Making of English Photography*, 124.

36 – Joshua Reynolds in William Lake Price, 'On Composition and Chiar-Oscuro', *Photographic News* (17 February 1860), 281.

37 – Brakel-Saunders, 'Reynolds' Theory', 468.

38 – Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse XI*, in *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. Wark, 201.

39 – See particularly *Discourse IV*, *VIII*, and *XI*, in *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. Wark.

40 – William Lake Price, 'On Composition and Chiar-Oscuro – X', *Photographic News* (20 April 1860), 391 (original emphases).

Writing under his own name later that month, Wall offered a more serious and sustained critique of combination printing that elaborated upon the positions expressed by Hannaford and Spriggins.<sup>32</sup> In two consecutive articles entitled "Composition" versus "Patchwork", Wall argued that Robinson's process of 'composition printing' was irreconcilable with the values of art and photography.<sup>33</sup> Composite photographs never convincingly transformed a bank into a mountain or a print-washing machine into a river, bringing the medium into 'disrepute' by revealing deception at the heart of the process. Moreover, by substituting 'scissors and paste-pot' for the imperceptible outline between forms found in the natural world, Robinson rejected the inherent pictorial unity that resulted from seizing an image in a single shot. This quality belonged to photography alone and elevated it above all other artistic media. To produce truthful and genuinely cohesive images, the only acceptable instruments for the art-photographer were a good enlarger and a lens with a wide-angle view.<sup>34</sup>

Not coincidentally, the particular values that Wall used to criticise composite photographs – namely truthfulness and unity – were the very ones he and fellow photographers were currently harnessing to align photography with art. In his insightful study of photographic discourse in England in the mid-nineteenth century, Steve Edwards establishes that the early 1860s was a crucial period in the conceptualisation of art photography, as writers for the photographic press turned to academic art theory as a model for their own medium.<sup>35</sup> Edwards identifies William Lake Price's fifteen-part series 'On Composition and Chiar-oscuro' as the point of origin for this approach. In these texts, Lake Price – an artist and photographer himself – provided a history of pictorial art in Europe by analysing the compositional devices of great masterworks such as Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (Musée du Louvre, 1818–19) and Domenichino's *The Last Communion of St. Jerome* (Vatican Museums, 1611–14), articulating their achievements with principles drawn from the *Discourses* of Joshua Reynolds.

'On Composition and Chiar-oscuro' opened with a quote from the seventh *Discourse*, in which Reynolds asserted that 'practice, though essential to perfection, can never attain that to which it aims, unless it works under the direction of principle'.<sup>36</sup> This understanding of art, in which the physical materialisation of the image was subordinate to its intellectual organisation, formed the basis of what has been described as Reynolds's 'evolutionary' model of artistic development.<sup>37</sup> Art students learned by copying – first images, then ideas. As the novice artist mastered each level of training, he or she would proceed to the next, shedding the mechanical limitations of the previous stage by replacing them with deeper, more abstract understanding and intuition. As Reynolds explained in his eleventh *Discourse*, '[i]t is by this [comprehensive faculty], and this alone, that the mechanical power is ennobled, and raised much above its natural rank. And it appears to me, that with propriety it acquires this character, as an instance of that superiority with which mind predominates over matter, by contracting into one whole what nature has made multifarious'.<sup>38</sup> Art was located precisely in the capacity to express a whole, Reynolds believed, because pictorial composition engaged the mental faculties of the picture's maker and its viewer.<sup>39</sup>

For photographers to ally their practice with Reynolds's notion of a pictorial whole, they were advised to subordinate extraneous details to the organising logic of compositional unity. '[A]ll pictorial representations should be so designed that by the *unity* and *simplicity* of their lines [...] the spectator may *at once* appreciate the intention of the artist', Lake Price wrote in his tenth article. 'True art in painting does *not* consist [...] in the working or touching-up of some infinitesimal portion of a subject to microscopic minuteness', he continued, and nor should it in photography: 'mere mechanical elaboration is not the object to which the efforts of the producer should be directed in either case'.<sup>40</sup>

Reynolds's conception of art as wholeness remained central to artistic theory and criticism throughout the nineteenth century. Caroline Arsiccott has shown that

famed naturalist John Ruskin retained Reynolds's basic framework in his influential book *Modern Painters* (1843), even while he reconceived of the function of details in communicating the subject's 'general idea'.<sup>41</sup> This deft reformulation of academic theory is evident in the fifth chapter of *Modern Painters*, in which Ruskin asserted that '[g]eneralisation is unity, not destruction of parts, and composition is not annihilation, but arrangement of materials. The breadth which unites the truths of nature with her harmonies is meritorious and beautiful, but the breadth which annihilates those truths by the million is not painting nature, but painting over her'.<sup>42</sup> In the naturalist conception of pictorial composition, unity and breadth need not be achieved at the expense of truthful representation.

Ruskin's philosophy of art offered an appealing model for critics like Alfred Wall, who utilised the idea of nature's implicit cohesion as a bridge between intellectual traditions derived from the Academy and moral values associated with the unaltered representation of the natural world.<sup>43</sup> By emphasising compositional unity, photographers could – in theory – distinguish their images from unthinking, inartistic reproduction without compromising the medium's cherished relationship with truth. Between the early 1860s and the late 1880s, pictorial composition was positioned as the primary goal of photographic art, as indicated by the ubiquity of articles with titles like 'Composition in Photographic Pictures', 'Hints on the Nature of Pictorial Beauty and the Principles of Composition', and 'On the Composition of the Pictorial', which appeared in major photographic journals over the next three decades.<sup>44</sup> The language of these texts remained so steady that even into the 1890s critics continued to cite Reynolds and Ruskin to corroborate photographic art as a process of pictorial unity. This was achieved, as a writer for the *Photographic Quarterly* stressed in 1891, by 'hid[ing] the means by which the effect is produced'.<sup>45</sup> Artistic compositions could not reveal their seams.

#### *Against 'Cruel Cutting' and 'Ugly Outlines'*

Although Robinson employed combination printing to enable pictorial composition, the knowledge that his picture was constructed from disparate parts made it impossible for viewers to see his images as unified. Instead, Wall and like-minded theorists asserted a dichotomy between nature and composite photography, employing the latter as a foil for the legitimately cohesive photograph printed from a single plate. In one particularly illuminating example of this approach, the photographer Cornelius Jabez Hughes explained to members of the South London Photographic Society that photography's highest value was its capacity to preserve the photographer's thoughts 'whole' – even painters were forced to work in piecemeal. This oneness of conception and production was photography's 'natural mode', which Hughes contrasted with the arbitrary and thoughtless assemblage of 'composition-photography'. While the ineffectual composite photographer aimlessly snapped a river one day and a castle or perhaps some distant hills the next, later fitting the pieces together by hand 'like a child does its toy puzzle', the art photographer – a real man – 'shall uncover [his] lens, and with one effort seize nature with all her native charms, her local and general hues, her natural *chiar-oscuro*, just as she now is, and as she never will be again'.<sup>46</sup>

Hughes defended what he termed 'Art-Photography' by preserving the hierarchy of labour upon which academic art was based. By this logic, composite methods threatened the accepted dynamic by replacing 'artistic skill' with mere 'mechanical ingenuity', thereby rendering the artist-photographer subservient to his printer. For Hughes, this most basic misinterpretation of art was signalled by the very name 'composition-photography', which implied a troubling equivalence between the artist's idea and the physical construction of the picture. To strengthen the intellectual claims of art photography, he de-emphasised the role of the material processes that brought such images into being. 'We have an abundance of mechanical ability', Hughes wrote emphatically, 'it is the artistic we want to cultivate [...].

41 – Caroline H. Arscott, 'Modern Life Subjects in British Painting 1840–60', PhD thesis, University of Leeds 1987, 17–18.

42 – John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 3rd edn, New York: John Wiley 1848, 194.

43 – Alfred Wall connects Ruskin's conception of 'unity in variety' to photography in 'Practical Art Hints: The Dangers and Difficulties in what is called "Composition Photography"', *British Journal of Photography* (9 February 1866), 62.

44 – J. Wells Champney, 'Composition in Photographic Pictures', *Photographic News* (21 January 1887), 44–46; W. H. Davies, 'Hints on the Nature of Pictorial Beauty and the Principles of Composition', *British Journal of Photography* (1 January 1862), 3–4; and Norman Macbeth, R.S.A., 'On the Composition of the Pictorial', *British Journal of Photography* (4 March 1887), 136–38.

45 – J. Andrews, 'Composition', *Photographic Quarterly*, 2:8 (July 1891), 321–26.

46 – Hughes, 'Art-Photography', 3–4.

47 – Ibid (original emphasis).

Of two given pictures, equal in merit and design, that one is the best which is secured by the *fewest* negatives; for he is the higher artist who produces the greatest results with the smallest means'.<sup>47</sup>

The inclusion of critiques of combination printing within broader discourses of art photography had important consequences for the evaluation of images. Even when Hughes and Wall were disparaging composite processes, their diatribes elevated the relative weight of making within the interpretation of art photography. This approach gained traction and expanded in implication over the course of little more than a year, such that by early 1861 methods of production could be harnessed to explain not only the appearance but also the moral value of the photograph. As recently as 1859, Wall had expressed a more or less neutral position on combination printing, encouraging photographers to print from multiple negatives to avoid the appearance of a 'white paper sky', and advising them to apply a little wool to the joins to reduce the appearance of 'hard horizon lines'. These darkroom manoeuvres were justified, Wall explained, because they improved the effect of the picture and offset the technical challenges of capturing an artistic composition in a single shot.<sup>48</sup>

48 – A. H. Wall, 'Photography as One of the Fine Arts', *Photographic News* (30 December 1859), 195.

In the wake of Robinson's 'On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives', however, Wall began to change course. He termed combination printing 'cruel cutting', and claimed that the technique substituted 'the hardest, sharpest, and ugliest of outlines for that exquisitely softened and melting boundary which we only meet with in nature and in photographs'. At the same time, Wall suggested that a photograph's visual surface was not necessarily a reliable source of meaning. '[T]he more artfully concealed the more mischievous the result', Wall explained, 'because the thing is then more likely to be looked upon by the uninitiated as genuine, when the art itself suffers'. Calling on artists to be held accountable for their procedures, Wall proclaimed that a photographer who prints from multiple negatives 'sins against his conscience'.<sup>49</sup> Even if the practitioner could disguise his composite process, this by no means justified its use. Truth was the most important value in Wall's theory of art photography, and he sought to preserve it in both the representation and physical production of the photograph.

49 – Wall, "Composition" versus "Patchwork", 176.

By the end of 1860, Wall extended his argument to its logical conclusion by situating the pictorial surface as a secondary factor in the definition of art. For a talk at the South London Photographic Society, Wall argued that the process of stitching together a photographic composition – and the piecemeal appearance that resulted – was a material symptom of a much more significant artistic problem. '[E]ven when the highest mechanical success has been attained, and no cruel lines cut up the affair into mere patchwork, there are yet other considerations of far higher importance to the real pictorial value and high character of such productions', Wall wrote. He then returned to the matter of printing a sky from one negative and a landscape from another to explain that even if a photographer could join the two negatives imperceptibly, these mismatched pairings were 'erroneous in principle' and 'repugnant to the distinctive recognition of truth'.<sup>50</sup> In the wake of combination printing and the visible and invisible threats it posed to a picture's value, legitimate art photography could only be established and secured through the photographer's process.

50 – Alfred H. Wall, 'Hints on "Keeping" – In Composition Photography', *Photographic News* (28 December 1860), 412.

### *Making Composite Photographs: 'A Reversal of the Order of Things'*

While Alfred Wall was primarily concerned with the ideological implications of combination printing, he could be swayed by the language that a photographer used to describe his process. Robinson's 'On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives' was particularly objectionable to Wall because it portrayed the photographer as little more than a mechanical labourer, distancing photography even further from the principles of art. Wall preferred the writing



Figure 3 Oscar Rejlander, *The Two Ways of Life*, carbon print after an albumen original, 1857 (printed 1920s). National Media Museum / Science & Society Picture Library, London, 2003-5001\_33\_93731.

of Oscar Rejlander, Robinson's former teacher and the photographer made famous by his astonishing 1857 print *The Two Ways of Life*. Constructed from over thirty separate negatives on two joined sheets of paper, *The Two Ways of Life* depicted two young men choosing between paths of virtue and vice, represented by figural groups denoting wisdom, industriousness, and married life, as well as complicity, gambling, and violence (figure 3). *The Two Ways of Life* caused a sensation when it was exhibited at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition and elsewhere in the UK in the late 1850s; viewers expressed disbelief that photography could be manipulated to produce such a complex composition, while less receptive critics questioned the suitability of the camera for constructing allegorical scenes.<sup>51</sup>

Rejlander was invited to describe his remarkable process of 'photographic composition' at a meeting of the Photographic Society of London in 1858, and Wall excerpted portions of this paper in 1860 to draw a comparison with Robinson. When Rejlander explained the process of constructing *The Two Ways of Life*, Wall noted approvingly, he employed abstract and distinctly artistic terminology to characterise the act of printing, relegating the mechanical aspects of picture-making to their proper place. He ordered the rays of the sun to 'do his bidding' and directed 'pencils of light' to smooth and unite discrete elements of the composition, shrouding his practice in poetics to align it with the imaginative work of the artist. So obtuse was his explanation, however, that at least one member of the audience demanded clarification, obliging Rejlander to detail the prosaic aspects of his process, such as wrinkling black velvet around his negatives to mask the joins, timing the exposure of each figure to produce perspectival recession, and choosing albumen paper over salted varieties to prevent slippage during printing.<sup>52</sup> Abstract language might appeal to the theorist, but many photographers found it useless.

The growing frustration of photographers with the 'art principles' promoted by journalists impelled the *Photographic News* to take a new approach. In 1868, the journal invited Robinson to author a weekly series of articles to translate pictorial

51 – 'The Photographic Exhibition', *The Art-Journal*, 20 (1 April 1858), 121. The composition of *The Two Ways of Life* was modelled on Raphael's *School of Athens* (Apostolic Palace, Vatican City, 1509–11), with individual poses inspired by Titian, Michelangelo, and Poussin. For a discussion of the production, iconography, and critical reception of the photograph, see Stephanie Spencer, *O.G. Rejlander: Photography as Art*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press 1985, 96–103; and Edgar Yoxall Jones, *Father of Art Photography: O.G. Rejlander 1813–1875*, Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd 1973, 7 and 16–24.

52 – Oscar Rejlander, 'On Photographic Composition', *British Journal of Photography [Liverpool and Manchester Photographic Journal]* (15 April 1858), 92–98.

53 – A number of photographers expressed frustration with the impracticality of photographic journalism. One anonymous author, signing himself 'a Photographer's Assistant', complained in the *Photographic News* that despite the attention given to 'art principles' of late, the matter had not been 'treated in a style sufficiently clear and comprehensive to meet the requirements of photographers'. See 'Jottings for 1865. – No. 4. By a Photographer's Assistant. Photography versus Fine Art', *Photographic News* (14 July 1865), 326. In the text introducing Robinson's series, the editor explained the impetus behind the series: 'Some years ago a very excellent series of papers on composition and chiaroscuro [sic], by Mr. Lake Price, appeared in these pages. Admirable, so far as they went, we have since discovered that, for many photographers, they scarcely went far enough, lacking something of the photographic application necessary to give lessons their full value to photographic students'. [H. P. Robinson], 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro [sic] for Photographers. Introductory Remarks', *Photographic News* (24 January 1868), 41.

54 – H. P. Robinson, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers. Chapter I', *Photographic News* (31 January 1868), 53.

55 – H. P. Robinson, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers. Chapter IX', *Photographic News* (27 March 1868), 150; and H. P. Robinson, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers. Chapter IV', *Photographic News* (21 February 1868), 89.

56 – H. P. Robinson, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers. Chapter VIII', *Photographic News* (20 March 1868), 137.

57 – See [H.P. Robinson], 'Pictorial Effect in Photography. Introductory Remarks', 40, for several definitions of pictorial effect.

58 – See, for example, Robinson's assertion in 1865 that '[g]enius in a great measure consists in a desire for work, whatever rhapsodists may say to the contrary'. After describing the photographic practice of one of his students, who took the trouble to make changes to the landscape when it was necessary for pictorial effect, he reiterated, '[i]t is by these means – labour added to knowledge – that good work, in painting, sculpture, or photography, is produced'. H. P. Robinson, 'On the Selection of a Subject, and Its Management', *Photographic News* (11 August 1865), 378–79.

59 – H. P. Robinson, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography; Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers. Chapter XII', *Photographic News* (17 April 1868), 186.

60 – Henry Peach Robinson, 'Autobiographical Sketches, Ch. VI', *The Practical Photographer* (December 1897), 356–57.

61 – Henry Peach Robinson, 'Autobiographical Sketches, Ch. VII', *The Practical Photographer* (February 1898), 30.

62 – 'Holiday in the Woods', 367.

notions of composition and chiaroscuro into the practice of making photographs.<sup>53</sup> Robinson's series, 'Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Lessons in Composition and Chiaroscuro [sic] for Photographers', was published between January and November 1868, and while the texts professed academic values, Robinson prioritised matters of construction – what he termed the 'skeleton' of the photograph, rather than its 'soul'.<sup>54</sup> Each chapter offered practical strategies for emulating the compositional devices found in paintings. To produce a picturesque view of a château, Robinson suggested situating the camera at an oblique angle and moving 'forty or fifty yards' down the road if necessary. Employing a 'point of dark' in the foreground, such as a group of figures or a rock, would improve contrast and balance while establishing gradations of depth.<sup>55</sup> If nature did not provide these elements organically, photographers were free to make an adjustment here or there, adding figures if this would improve the distribution of forms, or removing 'obtrusive boughs' when they compromised the artistic design.<sup>56</sup> In Robinson's interpretation of art photography, pictorial effect was dependent on the physical arrangement of the scene, and relied upon the photographer's effort rather than his or her intrinsic 'genius'.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout these articles, as in other writings, Robinson underscored that the photographer's investment of time and labour brought visible and invisible value to his or her work.<sup>58</sup> By studying the landscape for several days in advance of taking any pictures, photographers would develop knowledge about their subjects, influencing when the picture was taken, and how it was constructed in the darkroom. This extra effort differentiated the artist's practice from that of the ordinary photographer. As Robinson explained in his twelfth instalment, without the photographer's intervention in the process of picture-making, photography was reduced to 'mere servile copying of nature, without even the slightest reference to the aspect under which nature is seen'.<sup>59</sup>

In his own work, Robinson adhered closely to these principles. Trained as a painter and illustrator before he took up the camera, Robinson integrated aspects of the artist's practice into that of the photographer. He planned his compositions through pencil sketches, working them up into full-scale preparatory drawings like the one produced for *Carolling* (figure 4). Before taking any photographs, he collected costumes and props, selected and trained his models, and built the foreground set for the subject in the backyard of his Leamington home. Robinson described these procedures at length in a series of autobiographical articles he published in the *Practical Photographer* at the end of the century. To make *A Holiday in the Wood*, Robinson photographed the figural groups during the 'only two fine days' in April, then had to wait over four months before the weather was sufficiently sunny to photograph the woods at Kenilworth.<sup>60</sup> In the meantime, he produced a collage of the picture that determined the placement of the human subjects using photographs, while approximating the landscape background and other details in pencil and watercolour (figure 5). The final print required special paper to accommodate the size of Robinson's design, and each image took several days to produce (spoiling many examples along the way). Rather than using registration marks, which would have greatly simplified his work, Robinson fitted each negative by hand, resulting in a unique print every time.<sup>61</sup>

Robinson's defenders, of which there were many, frequently emphasised the amount of time and effort that the photographer spent in producing his prints to draw attention to the value of labour that might not be perceptible in the photographs themselves. A writer for the *Photographic News* claimed that *A Holiday in the Wood* had been in the 'hatching' stage for three years while the photographer designed and planted a background specifically for the scene. This titbit was offered as a moral lesson for 'impatient' photographers, reminding them of the personal rewards of work for its own sake.<sup>62</sup>

Other writers positioned Robinson's investment of time and labour as the source of his artistic achievement. Profiling Robinson for a series of articles on



Figure 4. Henry Peach Robinson, preparatory drawing for *Carolling*, pencil on paper, ca. 1887. Royal Photographic Society / Science & Society Picture Library, London, RPS 38.



Figure 5. Henry Peach Robinson, study for *A Holiday in the Wood*, albumen silver print with applied graphite and watercolour, 1860. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 964.0661.0009.

distinguished photographers in 1869, a writer for the *Philadelphia Photographer* linked the creative aspects of Robinson's art to his material practice. 'Mr. Robinson's vindications of the pictorial power of the art have chiefly taken a practical form', the journalist reported. '[A]iming to meet the painter on his own ground, he has selected and combined the materials presented by nature, so as to exercise something of the creative power in producing a pictorial composition'. The author related that Robinson produced just one art photograph a year, to which he gave the 'devotion of months of thought and much labour, without any view to publication or profit'. Given that Robinson could not charge an amount of money that would make his outlay of time worthwhile, it was clear that his was an artistic rather than commercial undertaking, one which 'could not fail to advance the art'.<sup>63</sup>

For less sympathetic critics, however, Robinson's efforts were unnecessary and frankly misplaced. A writer for the *Daily Telegraph* expressed bafflement that Robinson would go to such lengths in service of a mere photograph. 'Almost as much trouble must have been expended on the building up of this scene, on the bringing together of all its constituent parts, on the drilling of its actors, on the subordination of its accessories, and on the careful eliminating of all petty "accidents," as a practised draughtsman would have found in placing the whole group on paper and canvas', the reviewer wrote with incredulity. 'There is something absurd in all this preparation for a mechanical and instantaneous operation. It is anti-climax – a reversal of the order of things'.<sup>64</sup>

This conception of composite photography as wasted time informed Alfred Wall's critiques as well. In a particularly vitriolic description of Robinson's procedures published in 1868, Wall repeatedly underscored the ways that Robinson's technique did not make good use of the photographer's time. The 'mechanical system' of masking out and printing in was both 'inefficient' and 'tedious', whether Robinson carried out the work himself or simply supervised a printer. Expressing relief that Oscar Rejlander seemed to have relinquished combination printing of late, Wall speculated that the artist must have found that 'his time and talent can be, and ought to be, more worthily occupied'.<sup>65</sup> Combination printing was inherently paradoxical in Wall's assessment; despite its pretensions to facilitate composition, 'printings of this kind never do combine properly, at an awful cost in valuable time and misdirected effort'.<sup>66</sup>

To illustrate this point, Wall referred to the print that Robinson exhibited at the Photographic Society that year, a now-lost photograph of a female figure in a landscape entitled *Returning Home*. In observations that anticipate the *Amateur Photographer* review of *Carolling* twenty years later, Wall insinuated that *Returning Home* was only installed in the 'post of honour' because Robinson had been in charge of the hanging committee. He then proceeded to list the errors that resulted from the photographer's process. The foreground 'point of dark' was formulaic and artificial, while the female figure's neatly arranged clothing indicated she had been photographed in the studio, rather than outdoors. There was no natural explanation for the abrupt juxtaposition of light and shade on the subject's face, and the sky seemed to have been painted using 'cut-out papers, a brush, and some black-lead', a style that, as Wall witheringly pronounced, 'once used to be very popular with young ladies'. The photograph had some positive pictorial qualities, Wall admitted, but these evidenced 'very ordinary dexterity' rather than intellect.<sup>67</sup> He compared *Returning Home* with a similar theme entitled *Rest*, taken by a photographer named Robert Slingsby.<sup>68</sup> According to Wall, Slingsby offered a completely different impression of his subject; while Robinson sought effect 'by all sorts of undisguisable artificial dodges and mechanical contrivances', Slingsby 'aim[ed] at the same end, by using more legitimate means, and trusting to fidelity of representation, and an eye for nature's real beauties'. 'In short', Wall concluded, 'Mr. Slingsby used nature with an artist's eye, while Mr. Robinson merely endeavoured to put mechanism and ingenuity in the place of nature, as something which he considered much finer and more "artistic"'.<sup>69</sup>

Given that Wall based his terms for the difference between Robinson's and Slingsby's photographs on the latter's more truthful and 'naturalistic' approach, it must have given Robinson some pleasure to expose these distinctions as baseless when he published

63 – Excerpts of this article were reprinted in 'Mr. Robinson and His Method of Working', *Photographic News* (3 September 1869), 429. Similar opinions were expressed earlier in the decade, such as when a critic for the *Photographic News* suggested that Robinson should have charged more for his print. See 'The Photographic Exhibition', *Photographic News* (18 January 1861), 25–26.

64 – 'The International Exhibition. British Photographic Department', *Photographic News* (25 July 1862), 356.

65 – A. H. Wall, 'The Late Conduit-Street Photographic Exhibition', *Illustrated Photographer*, 1 (27 November 1868), 513–14. Five years earlier, the editor of *Photographic Notes*, Thomas Sutton, had criticised Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life* on similar terms, writing: '[t]he true artist who has mastered the mechanical difficulties of his profession, and takes a high view of its intellectual dignity, will never attempt to build up pictures by photography; in fact, to an accomplished artist, the method would be much too slow, troublesome, and ridiculous'. *Photographic Notes* (15 January 1863), quoted in Jones, *Father of Art Photography*, 24.

66 – Wall, 'Late Conduit-Street Photographic Exhibition', 556.

67 – *Ibid.*, 515.

68 – For a short biography of Robert Slingsby, see Michael Pritchard, 'Slingsby, Robert (d. 1895)', in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, ed. John Hannavy, vol. 2, New York: Routledge 2008, 1271–72. A description of Slingsby's work and studio practice can be found in H. Baden Pritchard, 'At Home. Mr. Robert Slingsby at Lincoln', *Photographic News* (9 July 1880), 326–28.

69 – Wall, 'Late Conduit-Street Photographic Exhibition', 525 (original emphasis).



Figure 6. After Robert Slingsby, *Rest*, wood engraving, 1869. Published in Henry Peach Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers*, London: Piper & Carter 1869. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 85-B5148.

*Pictorial Effect in Photography* as a book in 1869. Inserting a paragraph admiring Slingsby's *Rest* and an engraved reproduction of the photograph into a chapter entitled 'Truth in Landscape Photography', Robinson announced that *Rest* 'could only have been produced by combination printing, a process which is attracting more attention daily from those earnest photographers who desire to give a more distinct art character to their work, and who do not care how much trouble they take to attain their end' (figure 6).<sup>70</sup> Claiming Slingsby's technique to be analogous with his own, Robinson reasserted the artistic possibilities of composite procedures by emphasising a link between the photographer's time and trouble, and the inherent value of the resulting photograph. Time wasted or time well spent? Interpretations of composition photography pivoted on this distinction, but they were complicated by the difficulty in knowing for certain how a print was made.

### Misinterpretations

In drawing attention to the fact that Slingsby's *Rest* was made from multiple negatives, Robinson asserted the authority of the photographer over that of the critic when it came to identifying and interpreting technical procedures. Although most writers for the photographic presses were practising photographers themselves, handwork and other manipulations to a photographic negative could be exceptionally challenging to parse, given that

70 – Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, 52. By 1869, it seems to have been common knowledge that Slingsby printed his photographs from multiple negatives. At the Photographic Society display that year – widely acknowledged to include more examples of combination printing than any previous exhibition – Slingsby was positioned as the inheritor of the legacy established by Rejlander and Robinson. His photographs were complimented for their charm and artistic skill, even while critics rehearsed their usual responses to composite photographs by pointing to technical flaws in the images and offering the photographer advice for future printings. See 'The Photographic Exhibition', *Photographic News* (3 December 1869), 578.

most of the visual evidence remained on the negative, immaterial, and often imperceptible in the print itself.

Robinson seems to have relished calling out critics when he felt they had misread his work, and he made a point to do so on a number of occasions. He made misinterpretations the theme of a letter written to introduce a retrospective of his work, which was organised by the London Camera Club in the fall of 1889. In this text, read aloud by photographer George Davison at the exhibition opening and published in the *Photographic News* the following week, Robinson drew connections between the reception of his work in the 1860s and more recent photographs like *Carolling*. Then and now, critics obstinately read his pictures for process, and they often got it wrong. Although Alfred Wall was not named explicitly, Robinson made several cracks about 'overknowing' critics in this text, and he quoted one of Wall's reviews in its entirety to show how little the writer knew about his subject. In the 1866 article, Wall characterised Robinson's 1863 photograph *Autumn* as an 'impossible view', arguing that it depicted the four figures on the left from four distinct points of view, resulting in four incompatible horizon lines (figure 7). In fact, Robinson wrote with palpable satisfaction, the figural group had been taken on a single plate in one operation.<sup>71</sup>

Although he dismissed the controversy over *Carolling*, claiming that reviewers' errors of interpretation were 'easily demonstrable', Robinson demurred in actually explaining them. Yet by consulting the extant glass plate negatives for *Carolling* in the Royal Photographic Society Collection, it seems that the *Amateur Photographer* critic may not have been entirely off base. These two masked-over plates indicate that the print was produced from four separate images, two of which were joined to form a single plate. One negative supplied the foreground stone and grass (location unknown); a second was employed for the two female figures (figure 8); and two additional negatives were united to construct the middle ground of the image (figure 9).<sup>72</sup> Robinson camouflaged the seam between parts by situating it behind the two

71 – H. P. Robinson, 'Mr. H. P. Robinson's Photographs at the Camera Club', *Photographic News* (11 October 1889), 658–60. Wall's original review was published as A.H.W. [Alfred H. Wall], 'Practical Art-Hints: Elementary Perspective as Applied to Photographs', *British Journal of Photography* (9 March 1866), 116.

72 – One can only speculate about the sky, because no negative remains; it is possible that Robinson simulated clouds in watercolour, as suggested by the critic for the *Builder*. See earlier note 6.



Figure 7. Henry Peach Robinson, *Autumn*, albumen print, 1863. Royal Photographic Society / Science & Society Picture Library, London, 2003-5001\_2\_20670.



Figure 8. Henry Peach Robinson, figure negative for *Carolling*, two glass plate negatives with ink and paper additions, ca. 1887. Royal Photographic Society / Science & Society Picture Library, London, XRG284.



Figure 9. Henry Peach Robinson, landscape negative for *Carolling*, two glass plate negatives with ink and paper additions, ca. 1887. Royal Photographic Society / Science & Society Picture Library, London, XRG284/3.

73 – ‘The Exhibition at Aston Hall’, *Birmingham Daily Post* (28 May 1861), in the Robinson scrapbook, National Media Museum, Bradford, UK.

74 – In a transcript of the proceedings of the South London Photographic Society, Cornelius Jabez Hughes cites Gustave Le Gray's seascape photographs as evidence that ‘the hope of obtaining natural skies is by no means so desperate’. Shortly thereafter, a photographer named Fry pointed out that ‘it was now universally admitted by those who knew anything of it that in [Le Gray's] picture there was very little of the photograph’, by which he meant the print had been touched up or printed from more than one negative. ‘Proceedings of Societies: South London Photographic Society’, *Photographic News* (28 December 1860), 414–15.

75 – Wall, “Composition” versus “Patchwork”, 191.

76 – The editor of the *British Journal of Photography* referred to Wall's misreading of Rejlander's photograph as evidence that combination printing did not implicitly detract from the artistic achievement of the image: ‘[I]t is absolutely necessary that by the use of paste and scissors, artistic excellence should be destroyed? Surely not, for even our worthy censor admits its existence in an eminent degree in some of Rejlander's charming productions, especially in that beautiful one, *The Head of John the Baptist in the Charger* [...] need we say this was produced without preliminary decapitation, and therefore we fear that the obnoxious paste and scissors played an important part in the manipulation, yet there is no hardness of outline to offend the eye’. *British Journal of Photography* (2 July 1860), 187. It is not clear whether *John the Baptist* was itself a composite print, but Rejlander seems at least to have intended the image to comprise part of a larger composition depicting Salome carrying the head of the decapitated saint. Spencer, *O.G. Rejlander*, 105.

Figure 10. Oscar Rejlander, *Head of St. John the Baptist in a Charger*, albumen silver print, ca. 1858. George Eastman Museum, Rochester, 1981.1791.0003.

women, although the absence of a visible join did not dissuade the eager critic from identifying discrepancies in lighting and focus between the left and right halves of the image.

Misinterpretations could go the other way as well. At least one writer had absolutely no idea that *A Holiday in the Wood* was constructed from multiple negatives. In a review published in the *Birmingham Post* in 1861, the author complimented the ‘expressiveness’ of the children frolicking in the foreground, and credited the picture's ‘natural attitude’ to the fact that it was taken ‘complete’ using just one camera and lens.<sup>73</sup> Even experienced critics like Alfred Wall and Jabez Hughes could be fooled by prints they believed to be ‘natural’.<sup>74</sup> In “Composition” versus “Patchwork”, Wall concluded his diatribe against Robinson with an homage to Oscar Rejlander's photograph *Head of St. John the Baptist in a Charger*, describing it – in contrast to Robinson's piecemeal process – as ‘one of the most beautiful art productions of photography’ he had ever seen (figure 10).<sup>75</sup> The critic seemed unaware, the *British Journal of Photography* gleefully reported, that Rejlander's photograph of the beheaded saint must have been fabricated from more than one negative.<sup>76</sup>

The potential embarrassment caused by misinterpreting composite procedures suggests that methods of making took on increased importance in the perception of photographs during the second half of the nineteenth century. As photographers and their critics sought ways to distinguish unthinking reproduction from the intellectual work of legitimate art, the authenticity of an artist's process helped to establish the moral value of his or her work at a moment when the visual surface of a picture was not always a reliable source of meaning. It was in fact this illegibility and ambiguity of photographs that encouraged critics to marshal material evidence to back up their responses. Alfred Wall exemplified this approach when he described the experience of interpreting Robinson's composite prints: ‘I [...] find hard, inelegant outlines, an absence of refinement in their execution, no very studious arrangement of light and shade [...] and] a neglect of the rules of composition’, the critic wrote in 1860.

[B]efore I read [Robinson's] paper, I was inclined to attribute [this] to downright carelessness; but, having read it, I now perceive that he has given the scissors and paste-pot credit for qualities properly emanating from the study of art – or, in other words, followed the crowd of photographers in perseveringly or obstinately giving to their tools the credit which should have been won by their brains, and



making a boast of qualities really and purely mechanical, instead of such as reside in the higher regions of the intellectual, the poetical, and the artistic.<sup>77</sup>

77 – Wall, “Composition” versus “Patchwork”, 190.

It seems it was Robinson’s textual revelation that clarified for Wall the mechanical nature of what he was seeing, and what this meant for the status of Robinson’s images as art.

Indeed, Robinson’s ‘On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives’ proved to be so central to the critical understanding of his work that Wall appended a review published in the journal *Photographic Notes* early in 1860 to acknowledge the photographer’s description of his process. Following Wall’s assertion that there was a sense of ‘unreality’ in one of Robinson’s landscapes, an asterisk was inserted to add:

These remarks were written before the publication of Mr. Robinson’s Paper on the subject of *composition* printing, in which he explains the ingenious fraud he has been practising on the public, of manufacturing mountains, rivers, etc., out of the material at hand in ‘his small back yard.’ Photographs have been pardoned many faults on the ground of their redeeming merit – *truth*. When it is confessed that this is wanting, what contemptible shams his productions become.<sup>78</sup>

78 – A. H. W. [Alfred H. Wall], ‘Photographic Society Exhibition’, *Photographic Notes* (15 April 1860), 112 (original emphases).

As indicated by this addendum, knowing how Robinson worked not only encouraged Wall and other critics to spot his mechanism, but also completely changed the ethical value of his prints, both as photographs and as works of pictorial art. Rather than waning over time, the responses to *A Holiday in the Wood* and *Carolling* demonstrate that approaches to perceiving composite prints remained surprisingly consistent over a thirty-year period. Awareness of process was not easy to ignore, even while the real and continuous difficulties in discerning the evidence of composite procedures left even the most confident of viewers in doubt.

## Conclusion

In the second half of the nineteenth century, interpreting a photograph, or indeed any picture, was a negotiation between what could be seen and the kind of looking that was prompted by insights into an artist’s method of working. Robinson expressed frustration with the impulse to interpret his photographs in terms of their process, but he did not disavow the importance of the artist’s technique. Composite prints were remarkable because of the way they were made, and Robinson expected viewers to take his labour-intensive procedures into account when they looked at his pictures. In fact for Robinson the photographer’s intervention was requisite in order for the photograph to have a claim to be art at all. Writing in an American journal in 1892, he suggested that those who demanded literal truth from photographic images put a cap on the medium’s artistic possibilities. ‘[A] method that will not admit of the modifications of the artist cannot be an art’, Robinson maintained. ‘Photography gives us the means of a nearer imitation of nature than any other art, yet has the sufficient elasticity to show the directing mind, and therefore is the most perfect art of all’.<sup>79</sup>

While the perceived visibility of Robinson’s ‘modifications’ was a constant source of criticism in the press, the disputes generated by combination printing reveal a persistent fascination with making that advanced the photographer’s work as a marker of artistic value. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, these debates can be seen as the catalyst for transformative change in the interpretation of art in photography, and they continue to reverberate in photographic practice to this day.

79 – Henry P. Robinson, ‘Paradoxes of Art, Science, and Photography’, *Wilson’s Photographic Magazine*, 29 (1892), 242–45, reprinted in *Photographers on Photography: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Nathan Lyons, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall in collaboration with the George Eastman House 1966, 83–84.