

THROUGH THE CROWD

A Selection of Images from The Fouad Debbas Collection

When a crowd rushes to gather around a spectacle, the photographer stands ready.

The spectacle that unfolds – whether a street market scene, a religious procession, or historic event – results from an unrehearsed action, in contrast to group photography which, for its part, is orchestrated by the photographer.

In capturing crowds, the photographer utilizes what have become the guiding rules of photojournalism. He assumes the role of spectator, chooses a favorable vantage point, and releases the shutter upon the immediate action, eagerly capturing the haphazards of instantaneity.



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Being part of the crowd

In a newspaper column published on 23 March 1882 in *Le Gaulois* and entitled “Les Foules” [Crowds], Guy de Maupassant wrote:

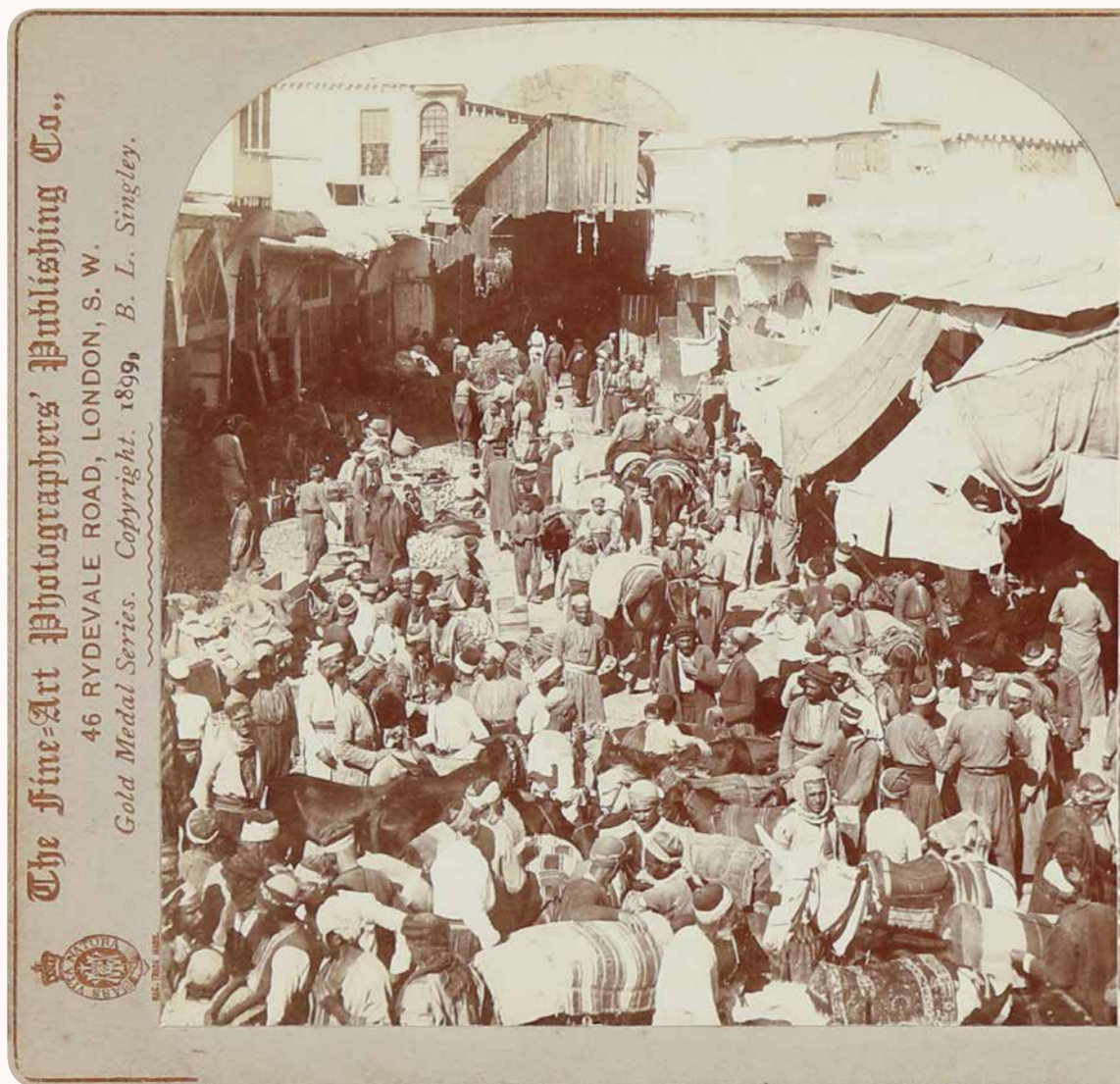
“I entered the crowd and looked around me. How ugly men are!

I [...] cannot bear crowds. I am unable to set foot in a theater or attend a public festivity. I immediately experience a strange, unbearable malaise, a terrible nervousness as if I were struggling with all my might against an irresistible, mysterious influence. This struggle is in fact a resistance to the spirit of the crowd that tries to penetrate me. How often have I remarked intelligence extending and soaring when one remains alone, and shrinking and plummeting the moment one mixes once again with others. [...] But the crowd stirred, the bride and bridegroom were about to emerge. And suddenly, everyone stood on tiptoes to catch a glimpse and I followed suit, longing to see the events – a stupid, lowly, repugnant, and common longing. My neighbors’ curiosity overcame me like a drunkenness; I had become part of the crowd.”¹

At the turn of the 20th century, photographers were never part of the crowd. This was firstly for obvious technical reasons, as they sought out a good vantage point, and also because they were in need of space to work and set up their bulky equipment. The jostling of the crowd would have been too much of an interference. Thus, the photographer chooses to observe a spectacle from a distance, and to opt for a vantage point that is somewhat elevated from the focal point of the action. Photographers often stand apart from the crowd, on its margins but overlooking it, specifically to capture its immeasurability and power.

The photographer’s inattention to the identities of his subjects is such that he often captures gathered crowds with their backs to the camera, as if unexpectedly photographed without their knowing. Whilst photographers often choose to portray an activity or a group of individuals in order to preserve their memory and lift them out of anonymity, these photographs of masses reveal a deindividuation of their subjects. Crowds, whether assembled for a ritualistic or more spontaneous occasion, offer a singular proximity, an almost body-to-body experience. The individual no longer exists, dissolving in a sentiment of immersion and fusion with those around him and becoming one with the crowd, through singing in unison or replicating the same gestures.

1 Guy de Maupassant, *Sur l'eau*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993 (First edition 1888), pp. 109-116.



Benjamin Lloyd Singley

General market, Damascus, Syria, 1900

Publisher: The Fine-Art Photographers' Publishing Co., Gold Medal Series

Albumen print on stereoscopic card, 8.7 × 17.7 cm

The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



Directions.—When looking through the Realistoscope, press the Velvet Edge of the Hood **QUITE CLOSE** to (touching) the face. Slide the carrier (containing the photograph) backwards and forwards until the correct focus is obtained, when figures and objects will be seen solid, in relief. Hold the Realistoscope so that a **STRONG** light falls on the **FACE** of the Photograph.

11125—General Market, Damascus, Syria.

An aesthetic of the crowd

There is something fascinating – almost sacred – about witnessing the monumentality of a crowd unfolding. It is in this sense that one might evoke a certain “aesthetic of the crowd.”²

From the key work on the subject, *La foule, mythes et figures*, let us consider the analysis of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger: “Pertaining to an innumerable mass of all sorts of individuals, a crowd does not have a clear and distinct identity: firstly, because we cannot assign it precise criteria that would enable us to mark its beginning, and secondly, because it is rarely a stable phenomenon; it is constantly assembling and dispersing. Amorphous by nature, it is imprecise in size and ephemeral in duration. It is more easily read by the event it relates to than by its structure, by the metamorphic rather than the morphological.”³

The crowd is simply movement, forming and deforming organically, and not according to set rules. Shooting is all the more complex because the crowd does not pose for a photograph; it is merely present, occupying a space and time. Whether linked to an established social practice (such as a pilgrimage or political gathering) or an improvised or impromptu event (a market scene, for instance), the crowd is a phenomenon of individuals congregating in a specific space-time. The gathering is geographical, physical, and it is the flow of encounters, the urban and religious to-ing and fro-ing, or what Anne Jarrigeon calls the “motion blur of moving bodies”⁴ which make up the crowd’s unique aesthetic. How could one not appreciate the aesthetic value of such shifting silhouettes in the Place des Canons, in front of the new garden facing the Petit Serail? The walkers and carriages have a ghostlike quality, and as we trace their journeys across the square, we imagine their swift steps.

2 The expression “esthétique de la foule” is taken from “Le futurisme et l’esthétique de la foule” by Claudia Salaris, in *Les foules et la démocratie*, pp. 59-82, in Mil neuf cent, 28, 2010. <http://www.revue1900.org/spip.php?article174>

3 Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, “Esthétique et épistémologie de la foule : une auto-poïétique complexe,” pp. 13-23, in *La foule, mythes et figures*, Jean-Marie Paul (ed.), Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005.

4 Anne Jarrigeon, “L’ambiance des foules anonymes : Eléments d’anthropologie poétique des espaces publics parisiens,” Jean-François Augoyard. *1st International Congress on Ambiances, Grenoble 2008, À La Croisée*, pp. 261-267, 2011, Ambiances, ambiance.

Nowadays, both amateurs and art historians, conscious of the evolution of photographic practice, would find there to be something particularly “photogenic” about these views of crowds, religious rituals, and even market scenes. They lend themselves to viewing; they “look good.” However, when these images were first published, the absence of a certain “stillness” could easily be perceived as a defect and render them almost unmarketable.



Anonymous photographer
Easter procession of the Greek Patriarch entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, Palestine, Circa 1900
Publisher: Underwood & Underwood Publishers
Albumen print on stereoscopic card, 8.7 × 17.7 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum





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Tancredè Dumas

The Petit Sérail and Martyrs' Square, Beirut.
Inaguration of the new serail and the garden in
Martyrs' Square, 1884
Albumen print mounted on board, 20.3×27.6 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

The photographer-anthropologist

Positioning himself at the heart or slightly outside of the crowd, the 19th-century photographer conducts himself in a similar way to an anthropologist. He observes the scene before him and attempts to interpret it. He is an attentive spectator of an action that eludes him, to which he does not exactly partake, but that he records, and then describes by way of words. Photography of this kind represents “ethnographic reality,” authenticity, and truth. It could even be called “photography for public use” in that it informs through reconstituting a collective memory, rather than a personal one.

A particularly interesting series of stereoscopic views veritably propels the viewer into the heart of the crowd experience. From 1845 onwards, six years after the official invention of photography (1839), cameras with two lenses and two optical chambers were invented, leading to the first “pairs” of stereoscopic images obtained from one same shutter release. While three-dimensional binocular vision, natural to humans, was not a new understanding – it had been described by Euclides in Antiquity, then Leonardo da Vinci in the 15th century – with stereoscopic views, binocular vision could be reproduced simply using a stereoscope, also known as a “realisticscope.” The right eye receives the right angle of vision and, reciprocally, the left eye receives the left angle of vision. The brain then assembles the two to form a relief.

Stereoscopic views, such as those of a Damascene market or the return of pilgrims from the Eid al-Adha festival in Cairo, were often accompanied by a text intended for Western clients who would buy such relief images as a means of journeying from the comfort of their armchairs. The notes that were printed on the verso had an informative tone; they describe the depicted event, often relating it to a similar event or ceremony customary in Europe. Hence “the custom of keeping special market days is still in vogue in the Orient, though Damascus in many ways resembles occidental cities,” and the festival of Eid al-Adha, or Eid al-Kabir, “is a time of general gladness, and as is the custom at Christmas in Christian lands, so here also, gifts are exchanged as tokens of particular friendship.”



Benjamin Lloyd Singley

Pilgrims of the Festival El-id-el-Kebir Returning to Cairo, Egypt, 1900

Publisher: The Fine-Art Photographers' Publishing Co., Gold Medal Series

Albumen print on stereoscopic card, 8.7 × 17.7 cm

The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



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9811—Pilgrims of the Festival El-id-el-Kebir Returning to Cairo, Egypt.

This selection of images from the Fouad Debbas Collection around the representation of the crowd at the end of the 19th century raises several significant questions that a short exhibition guide cannot fully answer. The crowd, itself a photographic motif, is captured by the photographer as a mass in motion, made up of individuals gathering fortuitously around the stalls of a popular market, or those of the same faith congregating during a religious procession, for example. According to a chosen composition, constructed by the operative agent (the photographer), the crowd becomes the subject of these images that reach us, and that illustrate the shifting of the orientalist gaze towards a modernity in the making.

Studio Bonfils

Greek Washing of the Feet ceremony outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, Palestine, Circa 1890
Albumen print, 28.2×22 cm

The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum



1860. Ceremony of washing the feet of the Greeks.—Greek ceremony of washing the feet
of the outside part of the Holy Sepulchre.

