Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXIV-No. 26 November 2026 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-256

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The Prince Consort's Raphael Collection: The Cultural Politics of the Victorian Monarchy

Abstract I: Nel 1839, l'anno prima di sposare la regina Vittoria, il principe Alberto di Sassonia-Coburgo-Gota si recò in Italia per completare la sua formazione. Qui, come molti stranieri nel loro Grand Tour, rimase folgorato dall'arte e dall'architettura italiane al punto di conservarne le suggestioni e riprodurle in terra britannica. Questo contributo ripercorre gli interessi del Principe Consorte, dalla personale interpretazione del genio italiano al suo sostegno convinto nei confronti della scienza e della tecnologia, che egli vide coniugate nell'arte della fotografia tanto da dare vita alla cosiddetta *Raphael Collection*, che comprende più di cinquemila stampe e fotografie di opere di Raffaello o a lui attribuite o dei suoi epigoni, una collezione che costituisce un patrimonio culturale inestimabile in termini di risultati artistici, storici e pedagogici, il cui valore deve essere ancora tutto raccontato.

Abstract II: In 1839, the year before his marriage to Queen Victoria, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha travelled to Italy to complete his education. Like many foreign visitors undertaking the Grand Tour, he was deeply impressed by Italian art and architecture, whose influence he retained and later translated into the British context. This article traces the Prince Consort's interests, from his personal interpretation of Italian artistic genius to his firm support for science and technology, which he saw brought together in the art of photography. These interests culminated in the creation of the so-called Raphael Collection, comprising more than five thousand prints and photographs of works by Raphael, attributed to him, or produced by his followers. The collection represents an invaluable cultural heritage in artistic, historical and pedagogical terms, whose significance has yet to be fully explored.

Keywords: Prince Albert, Raphael Collection, Italy, Art, Photography.

Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in February 1840 when she was 20 years old and had been on the throne for less than three years. Despite the fact that she was so young and had only been reigning over the country for a short period, Victoria had already demonstrated that she was a strong sovereign and thanks to Lord Melbourne's and her uncle Leopold I of Belgium's political experience, she led the monarchy into a new phase. The Queen's political authority was supported by an iconography that redefined its

terms. Such an iconography was not separated from Victoria's cultural authority that entailed inevitable modernisation based on the notions of scientific and technological progress and on the general improvement of English society. The choice of Prince Albert, a first cousin and the younger son of the ruler of one of the many German principalities, as consort to the most coveted sovereign among the European courts, indicated a radical change in the image and lifestyle of the royal family, characterised by a sense of respectability, morality and cultural guidance of the country.

Albert was a few months younger than Victoria and in 1840 he had finished his private education, which mainly consisted of studying Latin and history and he had also completed his university studies in Bonn, where he had taken courses in law, politics, philosophy, botany and history of art (Wilson 2019: 60-61). He was introduced to the history of art by Johann Wilhelm Eduard d'Alton[1], who played an important role in the preparation of the journey to Italy that the Prince was about to undertake as the final part of his education. Albert's Grand Tour was, as Andrew N. Wilson wrote, "part of the preparation for Albert's English life" (2019: 62), a real test for his future life as Queen Victoria's consort. The Prince, accompanied by Baron Stockmar[2], arrived in Munich in December 1838 and then travelled to Verona, Pisa and finally Florence, where he stayed from January to March 1839. The Prince stayed in Florence with the Marquises Gerini[3] and became acquainted with European nobility. However, he maintained the strict lifestyle he was used to: he woke up at six, had a light breakfast, then had Italian lessons, piano or organ practice, composition and singing lessons, he went for walks around the city and visited museums or artists' workshops. In *The Early Years of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort*, which Victoria commissioned immediately after the death of her husband and that she herself helped write[4], the Queen recalls that Albert was a great admirer of Florentine architecture: "He was a great admirer of the buildings in Florence, and among these there was none he admired more than Palazzo Pitti, which he especially mentions for the beauty of the external architecture and the magnificence of the apartments" (Grey 1867: 164). Nonetheless, a letter preserved in the Royal Archives contains the young Prince's unusual reaction to the masterpieces that he admired at the Uffizi and Pitti Palace:

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[1] After living in Italy for many years, d'Alton (1772-1840) was a professor of history of art in Bonn, although he was best known as a naturalist and archaeologist. One of his students, in addition to Prince Albert, was young Marx.

[2] Christian Friedrich Freiherr, baron von Stockmar (1787-1863), secret advisor, one of the dominant figures during Victoria's reign, who devised many of the political strategies in Europe, cf. Sotnick (2008).

[3] Andrew N. Wilson made a mistake with the name of the noble family that hosted Prince Albert in 1839 and that later hosted Queen Victoria herself on several occasions from 1888. Wilson speaks of "Casa Cerini" (2019: 71) because he probably followed the example of Charles Grey who, in the memoirs commissioned by Queen Victoria in 1867, wrote "Casa Cerini" when he included a letter from Albert: "We are now established in the Casa Cerini, which is very well situated. We have very airy and pretty rooms, still furnished in the style of Louis XIV" (Grey 1867: 163). Weintraub also speaks of "Marquis Cerini" (1997: 67). This, however, is the Gerini family, whose origins go back to the 14th century and which was active in the political and economic life of Renaissance Florence. From the mid-18th century, the Gerini were also patrons of art and promoters of artistic initiatives, as well as being art collectors. See Ingendaay (2013).

[4] The subtitle "*Compiled under the Direction of Her Majesty THE QUEEN*" not only indicates the Queen's desire to commemorate her late husband but also anticipates her future aspirations as an author-narrator.

> I can't attain to the state of ecstatic enthusiasm in which so-called connaisseurs envelop themselves as in a mantle in order to hide their real failure to understand the nature of art. I have been clever enough not to let anyone notice my coolness, or even to confess it, otherwise I should be regarded as a frozen Vandal from the ice-bound regions of the North (Royal Archives: RA/VIC/ADDA6/13).

There is disappointment in these words, which are to be interpreted partly as a criticism of those who were described as "connaisseurs" – that is, the pseudo-experts whom Albert, who was a serious scholar of the old masters, never missed a chance to berate – and partly as a search for artistic grandeur that would be able to stimulate not only his senses but also his intellect. In fact, this was his reaction when he saw St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, in late March 1839:

> I have long yearned to look upon something great and uplifting: here I found it, but it oppressed me to depths. Here I found the standard by which men's achievements must be measured. I felt as though I were looking at the Alps from the summit of the Faulhorn, to which they seemed so near that one could stretch out to touch them, and then again, so immense that one could imagine them one with the heavens. So it is here. Everything is in such perfect harmony (Royal Archives: RA/VIC/ADDA6/18).

The majesty of St. Peter's evoked feelings in the Prince that were similar to those he had when he looked at the sublime scenes of the Alps described by the Romantic artists. It was almost a Wordsworthian "spot of time", an epiphany that revealed the connection of man, in terms of his intellect and spirit, to the external world of unfathomable vastness, like the one described by the poet in Book VI of *The Prelude*, after climbing Mont Blanc:

> Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld,
> Or heard, was fitted to our unripe state
> Of *intellect and heart*. With such a book
> Before our eyes, we could not choose but read
> Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
> And universal reason of mankind,
> The truths of young and old (Wordsworth 1995: 237, ll. 541-547, my italics).

Intellect and heart: a combination that Albert must have had in mind while admiring Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican Rooms, when he first became passionately enthusiastic about this Renaissance painter. Queen Victoria then shared Albert's enthusiasm, to such an extent that on special occasions like birthdays and wedding anniversaries they gave each other artworks, often inspired by Raphael. One example is the small watercolour painting on ivory by Robert Thorburn that the Queen gave her husband in 1847 for his 28th birthday. In the painting, Victoria is represented in a Raphaelesque pose, with little Helena in her arms in the role of the Child Jesus and Prince Alfred at her side in the role of John the Baptist (Figure 1). Victoria expressed her delight with the painting in her diary:

> Thorburn has brought back my miniature, finished & it is beautiful. My likeness seems very good, & he has made additions below and above. In the background are trees, & a deep blue sea, not unlike Osborne. I have got a fine piece of dark blue drapery round me, with a basket of flowers near me. The whole is splendidly coloured, & the drapery most carefully studied [...][5].

The English Royalty's enthusiasm for Raphael's paintings soon gave way to a far more modern enthusiasm for photography, the new technology they even used for taking photographs themselves, and of which they became advocates and patrons. In fact, in the summer of 1842 the daguerreotypist William Constable took photographic portraits of Albert in Brighton (Figure 2), the first photographs of a member of a royal family in the history of photography. A darkroom was soon set up in Windsor Castle and all the couple's children were taught how to take and develop photographs. As patrons of the *Photographic Society of London*, in January 1853[6], Victoria and Albert were present at the first photographic exhibition in the world, which featured the work of 76 photographers from all of Europe[7]. From the early days of photography, British royalty commissioned and collected photographs of themselves, their family, friends and landscapes, since they perceived the documentary and political value of this new means of communication. These photographs were collected in 110 albums, for a total of over 100,000 items that the Royal Collection Trust now preserves.

Prince Albert was an enthusiastic advocate of all forms of science and technology: he was credited with the complex organisation of the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, held in London in 1851, which showed England to the world in its role as a leader on the international stage. Albert also purchased the site of the Great Exhibition and later turned it into an area of museums and colleges that focused on science and technology (the so-called "Albertopolis"). In addition, as Chancellor of Cambridge University, he reformed the university curriculum, introducing the study of the sciences[8]. He was instrumental in providing social housing for the working classes, and he supported many scientific and professional societies. As a pioneer of the private and public use of photography, Albert perceived the power and potential of a technology that made it possible for the royal couple to create an image of themselves as the ideal model of a democratic and imperialistic society. Victoria and Albert presented themselves as an ordinary bourgeois couple who embodied the "bourgeois" values of family and sobriety, considered essential for contributing to the greatness of the country. At the beginning, many photographs were for the family's private use, but very soon they became a political instrument

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[5] *Queen Victoria's Journals*, 17th November 1847, http://www.queenvictoriajournals.org (consulted on 21/05/2026).

[6] *The Exhibition of Recent Specimens of Photography* was organised in 1852 by the Society of Arts. It was the first photographic exhibition in the world and led to the foundation of the Photographic Society. Due to its success, the exhibition remained open till the end of January 1853.

[7] One of these photographers was Roger Fenton (1819-1869), the Society's first secretary and one of the court's official photographers. Albert soon afterwards sent him on a mission to Crimea, so he became the first war photographer.

[8] The subjects on the curriculum included natural sciences, arts, law, medicine and mathematics.

for upholding the monarchy and consolidating public consensus. One example was the *cartes de visite* of members of the royal family, which many ordinary citizens started to collect[9]. This contributed to creating a new relationship with their subjects, through which the royal family played a decisive role in the spread of the photographic press and the development of the visual culture (cf. Plunkett 2003).

The photographs for private use include 44 albums in the category called "Portraits of Royal Children" that cover events concerning the couple's nine children and grandchildren between 1848 and 1899. Some photographs of Prince Arthur (1850-1942) in particular stand out. They were taken by Leonida Caldesi[10] in 1857, with the Prince in poses that clearly remind one of the putti in Raphael's Sistine Madonna (Figure 3). The photographs of the young Prince appear to have been inspired by another photograph, taken by Oscar Gustave Rejlander, which Albert had only purchased a few months beforehand, of two children imitating the putti in Sistine Chapel. The title of the photograph in Latin, "Non Angeli, sed Angli", is a clear pun on the words *angeli*/*angli* and it alludes to a comment attributed to Pope Gregory the Great: when the Pope asked who some children in a slave market in Rome were, he was told they were "angels", and he said: "Angelicum habent faciem et tales angelorum in caelis decet esse consortes"[11] (Figure 4).

The domestic context of these photographs was Osborne House, the royal residence built between 1845 and 1851 on the Isle of Wight. Osborne House was designed by Albert himself according to Italian Renaissance models and was built by Thomas Cubitt, who built most of Victorian London's buildings. The residence echoed the architectural and stylistic elements of the majestic Italian villas that faced the sea, like the ones Albert had admired in the Naples area.

As an advocate of photography, Albert perceived the great social value of the "mechanical reproducibility" of works of art. As Walter Benjamin claimed, "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility [...] But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic reproduction, the total function of art is reversed" (1992: 218): not a ceremonial function but a political one; not for the elite but for the masses. Through photography, Albert was able to carry out one of his most ambitious projects, which was to make otherwise inaccessible masterpieces of art available to the masses. The aim was to educate the masses in artistic aesthetics and also direct their response in political terms. This was a social mission that intellectuals like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold defined more systematically later but that in the meantime became one of the main areas of Albert's work, and he deliberately placed the royal family in the forefront of the history of nineteenth-century cultural progress.

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[9] In 1860, Queen Victoria gave J. E. Mayall (1813-1901) permission to print a series of portraits of herself and the Prince Consort that served as *cartes de visite*.

[10] Leonida Caldesi (1822-1891), an Italian photographer, co-founder of the Caldesi and Montecchi studio in London, author of numerous photographs of the royal family, including some famous ones taken in the Osborne House residence. In May 1858, the photographs were officially part of the *London Photographic Society's* fifth yearly exhibition.

[11] The episode is narrated by the Venerable Bede in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (731), II, 1, pp. 96-97, https://archive.org/details/bedehistoriaecc00bedegoog/page/n4/mode/2up (consulted on 21/03/2026).

The Raphael Collection, consisting of over 5,000 prints and photographs of works of art by Raphael and by artists of his school, was created on these grounds and was destined to become an essential visual asset for the study of this Renaissance artist. The collection, which started in 1853 and was completed in 1876, after the death of the Prince Consort, was an important instrument for the study of the history of art. The choice of Raphael was almost obligatory since the Royal Library already owned numerous drawings by the Italian artist. These drawings were also reproduced and the photographs became part of both the Windsor collection and other European collections. The vast amount of material available, between photographs of works of art that were already owned and those of paintings and frescos in Italy and Europe, was organised in a single sequence according to the cataloguing criteria established by Adam Bartsch in his ground-breaking study *Le Peintre Graveur* (1803-1821). Albert and the curators identified 25 categories, including "Portraits of and by Raphael", "Old Testament Subjects", "New Testament Subjects", "Christ and Other Religious Subjects", "Holy Families & Madonna and Child", "Life and Legend of the Virgin Mary", "Saints", "Mythology and Putti", "Allegory", "History and Battles", "Genre", "Vatican Frescoes", "Other Frescoes", "Tapestries", "Architecture", "Sculpture", "Studies". All the photographs were placed on large sheets of paper in a total of 49 portfolios and stored in a special cabinet in the Print Room in Windsor Castle. For each category, the material was divided according to whether the works of art were signed by Raphael or attributed to him and whether the photographs reproduced prints, paintings or frescoes. All the items were catalogued chronologically, so Raphael's works can be traced from the first draft to their completion, followed by more recent works of art inspired by Raphael's art.

The first catalogue in the collection was published in 1876 by Carl Ruland[12], the royal librarian, who also explained how it began and how it developed. There is an example, "Three Cardinal Virtues: Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance [from *The Jurisprudence Wall*]", in "Portfolio 27" of the subcategory "Vatican Frescoes" (Figure 5). It is the photograph of a lunette painted on a window of the Room of the Segnatura in the Vatican, made with a "carbon printing" process that the English chemist Joseph Swan had just finished perfecting at the beginning of the 1860s. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, "Photography gives an account of the state of the world when we are absent" (2006: 94, my translation): in this case, the absence of the viewer from the location of the work of art is clearly compensated by an image reproduced technically. The photograph is for educational and cultural purposes and, at the same time, contributes to the preservation of the work of art and establishes the latter within a process of democratic participation.

If one considers the thousands of photographs that reproduce the details of Raphael's frescoes, his paintings, studies and cartoons, and the works of artists of his school and of those who, in the following generations, recreated his style and subjects, one can appreciate the enormity of the work. This was the project of a modern monarchy that was engaging with

[12] Carl Ruland (1834-1907) was in the service of Prince Albert from January 1860 and succeeded Ernest Becker (1826-1888). After the Prince's death, Ruland returned to Germany, where he became the director of the Ducal Museum and of the State Museum in Weimar but he continued to be in charge of the Raphael Collection until 1876.

a country which, within a few decades, had become increasingly and irreversibly technological. Prince Albert was behind this change, since he was convinced that the monarchy had to promote the wellbeing of the workers according to a widespread practical idea. He also intended to promote the cultural growth of all social classes by giving them the chance to have a broader education and to be able to appreciate works of art. The early death of the Prince in 1861, when he was only 42 years old, represented a great loss for the project, but it did not stop the enthusiasm for it and its momentum. Proof of this was the work in the following years involving collecting and cataloguing and, more recently, the vast digitalisation project carried out by the Royal Archives. Thanks to this latest development, it is now possible to go online and consult not only Victoria and Albert's letters, memorandums, private and public writings, but also the English Royal art collections, including the Raphael Collection.



Figure 1. Robert Thorburn, *Queen Victoria with Prince Alfred and Princess Helena*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

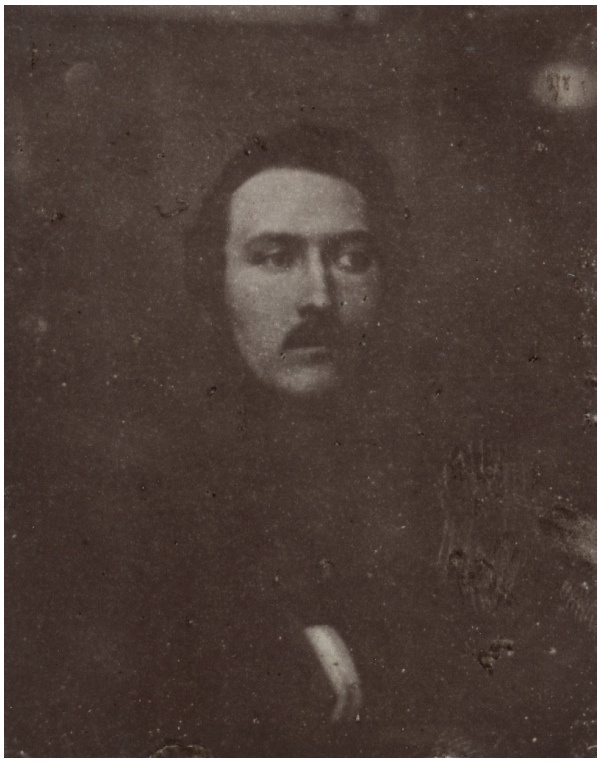


Figure 2. William Constable, *Prince Albert*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 3. Leonida Caldesi, *Prince Arthur, later Duke of Connaught*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 4. Oscar Gustave Rejlander, *Non Angeli, sed Angli*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 5. After Raphael, *Three Cardinal Virtues: Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance* [from "The Jurisprudence Wall"], © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

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