

## In the Nude

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He photographed nude models for science. At the corner of 36<sup>th</sup> and Pine on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, Eadweard Muybridge (or Edward Muybridge or Edward Muggerridge for he changed his name multiple times), was photographing the body movements of humans as well as animals using a technique called chronophotography. John Ott, a professor of art history, states that his instantaneous photographs represented a “different kind of perception” (Ott 9). They represented an image the naked eye cannot perceive. Muybridge’s eventual publication *Animal Locomotion An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements, 1872-1885* contained 781 movement studies. More than half the human photos were of nudes. Muybridge’s motion studies were released in a conservative time and the copious amount of nudity became a sensitive issue. Even though Muybridge’s motion studies revolutionized science and art, scholars agree that Muybridge’s life was clouded by controversy.

Eadweard Muybridge was born in 1830 in Kingston-on-Thames, England. At the age of twenty-five he immigrated to California and became a bookseller. Edward Ball author of *The Inventor and the Tycoon a Gilded Age murder and the birth of moving pictures* explains the relationship between Muybridge and Leland Stanford. In 1860 near Fort Worth, Texas he was in a disastrous carriage accident which left him with double vision and he was unable to taste or smell for, according to him “three months and to a lesser extent for a year” (qtd. in Ball 251). After recovering from the crash he turned to photography. His photos of the American West became well known. Commenting on a photo from Yosemite National Park, *Alta California* wrote, “The view of the Yu-wi-hah or Nevada Falls is a fine piece of instantaneous photography”(qtd. in Ball 80). The image caught the water in midair. This was a premonition of his future work.

In 1872 Muybridge took a picture of the horse Occident, one of the best trotters in the United States. Occident’s owner, Leland Stanford was a horse enthusiast and the president of the Central Pacific Railroad. He asked Muybridge for a photo of Occident “taken while the horse was at full speed” (qtd. in Ball 120) Stanford wanted to see if a horse’s hooves were simultaneously off the ground during motion. When Muybridge expressed doubt, Stanford simply said, “I think if you give your attention to the subject, you will be able to do it, and I want you to try” (qtd. in Ball 121). And so Muybridge did.

The succession of images proved that, indeed, a horse's hooves were simultaneously off the ground. Muybridge and Stanford became good friends following the first Occident pictures. Their friendship would come to an abrupt end when Stanford published *The Horse in Motion* in 1882 using Muybridge's pictures, with no mention of Muybridge in the text. Following the failed attempt at beating Stanford in court, Muybridge said "Stanford is a man of contemptible tricks" and that he "thought he was a generous friend, but his liberality turns out to have been an instrument for his glorification" (qtd. in Ball 341). Stanford felt that Muybridge from beginning to end "was an instrument to carry out [his] ideas" (qtd. in Ball 341). They now hated each other.

In 1874 Muybridge murdered Harry Larkyns in cold blood. He learned that Harry was his wife Flora Stone's lover. He stated, "My act was a justifiable defense of my marital rights" (Ball 193). His lawyer Wirt Pendergast cited the carriage accident and argued that it caused Muybridge's personality to change. Therefore he stated that the murder was an act of madness. Silas Selleck, Muybridge's friend, stated that prior to the Butterfield stagecoach accident, Muybridge was "active, energetic" and "open and candid". However, after the accident he was "eccentric, peculiar" and "seemed like a different man"(qtd. in Ball 252). He was later acquitted by justifiable homicide. A reporter commented, " the satisfaction with the verdict was very much unanimous" (qtd. in Ball 279).

Following that controversial incident, Muybridge came to the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1880s. William Pepper, the provost of the university, agreed to sponsor Muybridge's motion studies. A Muybridge Commission was formed. It included a sculpture, physicist, engineer and painter. The painter was no other than Thomas Eakins. Muybridge set up 24 cameras side by side that peered through a long window. Each camera had an electronic shutter that with a timing device. He photographed the movement of faculty and students at the university, as well as animals from the Philadelphia Zoo. He photographed "unnatural movement" as well (Ball 353). This included people with disabilities. He would even "apply electric shocks to a patient in order to provoke convulsions, and then photographed those" (Ball 353). Towards the end of the process *The Pennsylvanian*, the University of Pennsylvania newspaper, reported, "Twenty-four thousand instantaneous photographs have been taken, and of prominent University athletes, men and women in the various operations of every-day life, and almost every representative animal in the Zoological Garden, have been caught by the camera in every conceivable posture and active motion".

Pepper's motivation to host Muybridge's work was far more than scientific. He felt that Muybridge's work would, according to art historian Sarah Gordon, bring "general recognition" to the university (Gordon 25). Janin Mileaf, an expert in modern European and American art, writes that Pepper believed that sponsoring Muybridge would "contribute to the universities prestige" by producing work "of lasting service to art and science" (qtd. in Mileaf 34). However the university became wary when it was clear that Muybridge intended to photograph nude models. Some administrators wondered, "whether Muybridge's plans for copious nudity would offset the benefit to Penn's reputation" (Ball 346). So, in response to this, it was assured that the nude series

could not be “bought by those who do not intend to use such for serious study” and that only “known and responsible persons” could subscribe” (Ball 359). Individual images also could not be bought on their own. You had to purchase 100 plates before being able to choose more. Mileaf writes, “this constraint limited the accessibility of the photographs to wealthy or institutional clients” (Mileaf 35). Therefore, the “luxurious format, prohibitive prices, and restrictive circulation methods demanded a sophisticated audience” (Mileaf 35). It excluded the lower class, which in their view would misuse the semi-pornographic images. Just to be sure, the University of Pennsylvania stated in the catalogue notes for *Animal Locomotion* which models were nude. Pepper advertised the finished volume *Animal Locomotion* as a “scientific study of animal locomotion.” (Gordon 102). Nudity therefore, was only being used for scientific reasons.

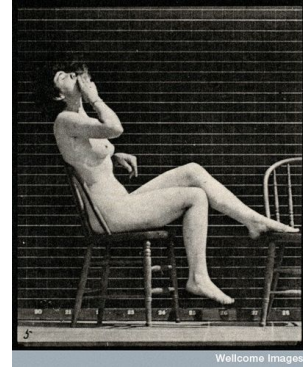


Figure 2: *Sitting down, placing feet on chair* (*Animal Locomotion*), 1887, Plate 247

Muybridge classified his male models as expert, or elite, while his females were “more or less graceful” (Mileaf 37). Sexual stereotyping is apparent in Muybridge’s movement studies. While the men were running and boxing, the women were picking up handkerchiefs and taking each other’s clothes off. While the males “celebrated their athleticism”, the females photos “praised the familiarity of their movements” (Mileaf 35). Muybridge stated that his “female models were chosen from all classes of society” (Ball 347). He had heavier women, unmarried woman as well as married. Muybridge’s plate “Nude Woman Disrobing Another” is an eerie scene (Figure 1). One approaches the other unawares and tugs off her white scene forcibly. This scene is quite erotic. Mileaf writes that while male models demonstrated their strengths Muybridge classified his woman models by their age and marital status only. One of his models named Miss Aimar would pose in sensual scenes in bed or while bathing. Muybridge even told her to “crawl on her hands and knees” (qtd. in Ball 350).

These photos in particular seem to have little scientific value. Art historian Marta Braun believes that the movement studies shouldn’t be considered “scientific studies of locomotive mechanics but as a treasure trove of figurative imagery” (Braun 173). Braun feels that Muybridge’s work lies in the aesthetic sphere rather than the scientific. Mileaf takes a stronger stance by saying that Muybridge’s photos “appear utterly inapplicable to scientific research” (32). This places Muybridge’s work purely on the aesthetic side in their view.

There were court cases that occurred during the creation of *Animal Locomotion*. In 1884, during the production of *Animal Locomotion* a store clerk named August Muller was charged with selling indecent photos that represented, “nude females in lewd,

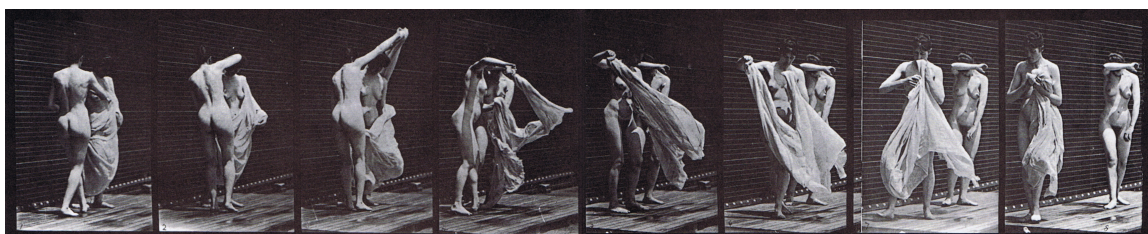


Figure 1: *Nude Woman Disrobing another* (*Animal Locomotion*), 1887, Plate 429

obscene, indecent, scandalous, and lascivious attitudes and postures” (Gordon 94). Clearly this man wasn’t using the photos for “serious study” (Ball 359). When 117 of Muybridge’s photos were seized from the art dealer Roland Knoedler, there was public outcry. It turned out that only two were indecent, and Knoedler wasn’t prosecuted. Outside the spectrum of science the nude photos were considered obscene.

In spite of the questionable scientific application and the controversies regarding nudity, Muybridge’s motion studies revolutionized photography and energized artistic development at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chronophotographer, Etienne-Jules Marey said in regards to *Animal Locomotion*, “As for artists, it is a revolution, since they will be provided with the true attitudes of movement, those positions of the body in unstable balance for which no model can *pose*” (qtd. in Mileaf 38). Indeed, Muybridge’s act of capturing motion in a series of frames influenced a young Spaniard by the name of Pablo Picasso in 1908 with *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. The figures become more geometrized as the painting progresses from left to right, similar to Muybridge’s motion studies. Arthur I. Miller, author of *Einstein, Picasso* states Muybridge’s motion studies “influenced Picasso’s realization of cubist simultaneity and the interpretation of forms” (Miller 118). Cubist simultaneity represents the “world that is unavailable to our vision” as stated by Marta Braun (150). Cinema emerged directly from Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope. A zoopraxiscope was a type of primitive projector inspired by the zoetrope. Thomas Edison, who pioneered early cinema, said that he and Muybridge spoke about “using the Zoopraxiscope, in association with the phonograph, so as to combine, and reproduce simultaneously, in the presence of an audience, visible actions and audible words” (qtd. in Ball 363). Little did Edison know what cinema would become. Though he murdered a man and took thousands of photos of nude models, Muybridge’s controversial photos created a revolution in photography, changed the course of art and were an early premonition of cinema.

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## Photo Credits

- Muybridge, Eadweard. *Sitting down, placing feet on chair* (Plate 227). 1887. Photograph. *Animal Locomotion*, Philadelphia
- Muybridge, Eadweard. *Nude Woman Disrobing another* (Plate 429). 1887. Photograph. *Animal Locomotion*, Philadelphia