To students of photography, the name Roger Fenton is most closely associated with a series of pictures taken in Balaklava and other locations in the theater of Britain’s Crimean War. Between February and June of the year 1855, the indefatigable Fenton, a young Englishman who three years earlier had produced some of the first photographs of Russia, traveled to the front lines of battle, on the shores of the Black Sea, returning home with some three hundred and sixty large glass-plate images of his nation’s highly unpopular war.

These early photographs, produced only fifteen years after the announcement of the invention of photography, are considered by historians of the medium to be the first sustained documentary coverage of a war. Tragic in subject, through careful composition, command of technique, and a sharp eye for detail, this epoch-making series brought home to the British public in strong graphic form the difficult and dangerous conditions experienced by its troops in the field and established Fenton’s reputation as one of the foremost photographers of his time.

The most famous image from this series, “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” a stark landscape littered with cannon balls, reveals the new historical and journalistic power of photography and presages the much larger body of work soon to arise from the American Civil War. Like his contemporary Florence Nightingale, Fenton emerged from the Crimea, directly through his work, as both a contemporary public figure and a paradigm of quality for all time.

Exactly how Fenton became involved in photography is not known, and much of his personal and artistic history remains conjectural. He was born in 1819 in Lancashire, near Manchester, into a well-to-do family with ties to politics, banking, and law and with a modest fortune acquired in the early industrial manufacture of cotton. After graduating from University College, London, Fenton embarked on the study of both painting and law. The latter he soon suspended, though he came back to it later in life, and sometime in 1842 or 1843, he crossed the Channel to Paris to continue his study of painting.

Though little specific is known of this period in his life, scholars have speculated that Fenton may have studied in Paris with the important history painter Paul Delaroche and perhaps with his successor Charles Gleyre. Not only had Fenton’s British teacher, Charles Lucy, also been a history painter, but notably, from the studio of Delaroche, had emerged at about this time three of the most outstanding early French photographers, Gustave Le Gray, Charles Negre, and Henri Le Secq. (The defection to photography of such evidently strong artistic talent appeared only to confirm Delaroche’s oft-quoted remark on first seeing the Daguerreotype, words far better known today than his work.

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What is clear, even from an early point in Fenton’s career, is that he came to photography with a background in painting and an outstanding artistic ability. Throughout the remainder of his brief pursuit of photography, the whole spanning roughly the years 1852–1862, after which he returned to the law, he produced series of views of landscape and architecture that have never been surpassed. He also created genre scenes (especially focused, like the...
Orientalist painters of the era, on the Middle East) and photographed the children of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria in the *tableaux vivants* so popular in Victorian times.

Thus, when he began his series of still lifes, taken in 1860 and 1861, Fenton was able to bring nearly a decade of his own extensive experience, and the most sophisticated precepts of British and European art, to bear on his work in photography. Although artistically a clear extension of the traditional still lifes seen in painting, works like “Flowers and Fruit” and its companion pieces in the series bring something more to the table. Certainly, “Flowers and Fruit” exhibits the balance of textures and forms and the care in composition (pyramidal) of a fine painting; indeed these are among the pleasures of this series. The organization of the space in “Flowers and Fruit” is complex and pleasing, and the positive significance of this natural scene atop a marble table—one might call it abundance or plenty—is suggested in the symbolic admixture of flowers and ferns to its array of more functional vegetable life. A small bit of cloth, characteristic of the artist’s still lifes and genre scenes, softens otherwise rigid lines, and a neoclassical urn adds a touch of civilization, aristocratically lording it over the humble and overburdened basket below, alluding to the timeless grace of the whole and perhaps adding a subtle message regarding class and the realities of life in the Victorian era.

But there is something more here, as well. Through photography, through the deep dark tones and lucid clarity of a peerless nineteenth-century print, through the modeling achieved in the delicate recording of light—a feature assisted by the collodion-on-glass negatives of the day—Fenton has captured an image whose visual and natural vitality fairly burst the simple borders of the photograph he has created. In the numinous cluster of mysterious fruits and vegetables he has assembled, visual satiety replaces that of the edible and pungent flowers and foods it depicts.

What Fenton has achieved in “Flowers and Fruit,” as well as in other images in his still life series, is not really possible in any other medium, nor, one might conjecture, given the brief life of the particular tools that he used, at any other time. Despite the new levels of sophistication and technical advances that were to come and that, indeed, continue only accelerated in our own time, photographers have rarely equaled and have certainly not, in the area of their own strengths, surpassed the artists of Fenton’s time. For this particular feast a necessary ingredient is the photographer’s eye.

Roger Fenton, “Flowers and Fruit.”

*The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television*