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Veiling the Mechanical Eye: Antoine Claudet and the Spectacle of Photography in Victorian London

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Abstract

The rise of commercial portrait photography in the mid-nineteenth century placed the bourgeois body squarely within technological processes of visual representation. Photography's chemical and optical operations required the subject's physical presence before the camera's mechanical eye, reciprocally exposing the apparatus to the subject's fixed gaze and provoking an unprecedented confrontation of vision, body and technology. Setting the client within photography's technical processes, however, could endanger efforts to promote photographic portraiture as a product of artistic endeavour. In response to this in photography's first decade, London studio owner Antoine Claudet enshrouded the apparatus in a competing visual rhetoric evoking luxury and the sublime. Examining contemporary accounts of Claudet's studios and neighbouring attractions of entertainment and consumption uncovers the overlapping references to enlightenment, beauty and pleasure that surrounded photography's early machinery. While this alternative discourse may have softened the stare of the mechanical eye, it nevertheless contributed to technology's increasing hold on the body and mind.

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