

Narrated in Calm Prose

Photographs of Guests in Costume
at the Duchess of Devonshire's
Diamond Jubilee Costume Ball, 2-3 July 1897

Photographs from the Lafayette Archive

November 2011



A photographic exhibition

- The following pages give an outline of an exhibition currently available from the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
 - The exhibition comprises 60 exhibition-quality prints, prepared by the curator and the photography department of the V&A
 - The prints will be made approximately 540 x 640 mm
 - There are texts available to accompany the prints. The texts cover the historical, art- and costume-historical aspects of the portraits
 - The exhibition is augmented by at least 4 didactic panels discussing the background to the Devonshire House Ball and the history of the Lafayette Photography Studio
- The selection of 62 portraits attempts to show how the cream of late-Victorian society, on one night in 1897, indulged their fantasies, or at the very least, the fantasies of their dress-makers and London's most distinguished theatrical costumiers.
- Freed from the constraints of money and operating within the rigid rules of society with its emphasis on appearance, the sitters in these portraits interpreted their dreams of history and mythology by drawing on myth, literature, painting, poetry and music.

Statement

- A noticeable proportion of the costumes are those of the great characters of oriental history reinterpreted.
- The occidental personalities at this costume ball, which were mostly interpreted in an “archæologically correct” manner, also give us an insight into how the West re-imagined itself in a similarly romantic fashion.
- All the exhibition prints of sitters in costume are made from the Lafayette archive of the V&A, except for that of King Haakon VII and Queen Maud of Norway, which is included courtesy of The Royal Collection.
- All other exhibition images but one are reproduced from the original glass negatives .
- It is hoped that a hosting institution will participate in a co-edition catalogue with V&A Publishing:
 - catalogue details:
 - c. 37,000 words
 - 60 full-page b/w prints from the Lafayette archive
 - 70 other illustrations (b/w & colour)

Statement (cont'd)

- The structure of the exhibition, and catalogue also, is as follows:
 - Background to the Devonshire House Ball
 - Introduction and background to the Lafayette studio
 - The plates of guests in costume with accompanying texts
- For a breakdown of costs involved, please contact James Stevenson (j.stevenson@vam.ac.uk). Costs are hoped to remain minimal – i.e. shipping costs for 60 prints, travel and hospitality for the two names shown below, and all other expenses (framing, insurance, translation of texts) to be covered by the hosting institution.
- A selection of these images has been seen in museums in the United Kingdom, Austria, Norway and Jordan, but the current selection includes many images never previously exhibited as well as more detailed accompanying texts and ancillary illustrations.

A Great Ball in 1897

- “At the Duchess of Devonshire’s historic ball at Devonshire House last week, a photographic studio formed part of the arrangements, and we read that a camera was much in request to record some of the wonderfully accurate costumes worn by the guests. These included the creme de la creme of Society, from Royalty downwards, and some of the most celebrated men and women of history were personified. A photographic record of the scene and those who took part in it was no doubt secured, and in future times, when the doings of this great year are calmly narrated in calm prose, its interest will be extremely deep.”

Photographic News, 9 July 1897

Background to the Devonshire House Ball and the Lafayette studio

The Duchess dreams up a ball

- Louisa, Duchess of Devonshire (1832-1911) was one of London's foremost political hostesses. Once it was announced that she was planning a costume ball to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on 2 July 1897, there was no attempt by other London hostesses to hold a competing event.
- As the respected mother of the nation, Queen Victoria's sixtieth anniversary on the throne along with her title as Empress of India (of recent vintage), her Jubilee was celebrated, in the press at least, with a feeling of exhilaration and respect tinged with hysteria.

Background to the Devonshire House Ball and the Lafayette studio

A photographic commission for Lafayette

- In order to commemorate the Duchess of Devonshire's much-anticipated costume ball, the London photographic firm of Lafayette, who had ten years previously been awarded a Royal Warrant, was invited by the Duke of Devonshire to set up a tent in the garden behind the house to photograph the guests in costume during the Ball.
- Lafayette's remit was to photograph guests who would be in costumes ranging from mythological and ancient Greek down to renaissance and oriental characters, and in order to capture the sense of event and location, the studio prepared a new backdrop (a painted canvas stretched on a wooden frame) which represented the lawn and gardens of Devonshire House complete with statuary. In the event of guests desiring a different background, the studio also transported its baronial hall and country estate backdrops as well as some studio balustrade, a piece of wall and a Turkish carpet.
- In an interview with *St James's Budget* in 1898, Mr. Lafayette stated: "I created a temporary studio in the garden, with a powerful installation of electric light; and though it may sound immodest to say so, the appearance of 'a gay photographer' at such a function was considered highly original, and was openly spoken of as a feature of the historic occasion."

Background to the Devonshire House Ball and the Lafayette studio

Costumes for the Ball

- Many of those invited to the Ball spent fortunes on their costumes which in almost all cases were worn only for this event. The couturier Jean Worth of Paris wrote of “a number of freak orders taken” by his establishment, for which each pearl and diamond was sewn on by hand. One piece of jewelled embroidery “kept several girls busy for almost a month”, and he claimed that the most expensive costume cost 5,000 francs.

Studio beginnings

- The Lafayette studio has one of the oldest histories of any photographic business in the world. During its peak years, the studio photographed a succession of Queen Empresses, King Emperors, Viceroy and Vicereines, royalties domestic and foreign, top colonial administrators, Emperor William II of Germany, Prince Nicolas of Romania, Queen Elizabeth the late Queen Mother, the great Abyssinian general Ras Makonnen, Malay Sultans, Earls, Marchionesses, Prime Ministers and colonial administrators, peers and peeresses in their robes, diplomats, debutantes and other court attendees, as well as professional men, a sizeable proportion of the maharajas and maharanis of important salute states in India, and actors and actresses, as well as early film stars.

Background to the Devonshire House Ball and the Lafayette studio

- Lafayette was founded in Dublin in 1880 by James Stack Lauder, who used the professional name of James Lafayette (“late of Paris”, as his own firm’s publicity billed him). James was the eldest son of Edmund Lauder, a pioneering and successful photographer who had opened a daguerreotype studio in Dublin in 1853 under the adopted French name “Lafayette.”



Studio letterhead, c. 1903
(private collection)

Sample thumbnails (60 images total)



Mrs Arthur Paget, later Lady Paget,
née Mary (Minnie) Paran Stevens
(1853-1919), as Cleopatra

Neg: V&A L1400a



Grand Duke Michael Michailovitch
of Russia (1861-1929), and Sophia
Nicholaievna, Countess de Torby
(1868-1927), as King Henry IV of
France (1553-1610) and his
paramour Gabrielle d'Estree (1571-
1599)

Neg: V&A L1423



Frances Evelyn (Daisy), Countess of
Warwick, née Maynard (1861-1938),
as Marie Antoinette (1755-1793)

Neg: V&A L1470D

Sample plate, text and illustrations



Neg: V&A L1479

Lady Fitzgerald, née Amelia Catherine Bischoffsheim (d 1947), as Marie Josephe, Queen of Poland (AD 1737)

Lady Fitzgerald, the daughter of the fabulously wealthy banker, Henri Louis Bischoffsheim, in 1882 married Sir Maurice FitzGerald, 2nd Bt. and 20th Knight of Kerry and equerry to the Duke of Connaught. At the Ball, she impersonated a character named as Marie Josephe, Queen of Poland (1699-1757), daughter of Emperor Joseph I of Austria and wife of Frederick Augustus III, King of Poland (also Frederick Augustus II, Elector of Saxony) by whom she had fourteen children.

The commission for the costume went to Madame Hoban, of 27a Cavendish Square, who created a gown of dark blue peau de soie, embroidered in butterfly and palmette motifs with emeralds, rubies and turquoise worn over a vest of old point d'Alençon lace. Over this Lady Fitzgerald wears a Polish coat, or *kontusik*, of cherry velvet, bordered with sable, with gold and jewel butterfly motifs embroidered on the sleeves. One of the longsleeves of her gown has been removed by the retouchers, perhaps to give more prominence to the scroll in her hand. The *kontusik* is given definition at the waist by a sash or stylized *pas kontuszowy*.

Sample plate and text

On her head Lady Fitzgerald sports a turban or stylized *kołpak* of velvet and sable in which she wears a white egret in an emerald-studded holder. In addition to the ropes of pearls, the precious stone and diamond pendant may be a reference to the famous Dresden Green emerald which was bought by Frederick August II of Saxony in 1743.

The ensemble is an interpretation of Polish noble costume, which by the 17th century, had adopted certain elements of Crimean Turkish costume as a symbol of triumphalism.

It is tempting to conjecture that the inspiration for Lady Fitzgerald's costume was *The Turkish Lovers*, one of three painted *turquérie* panels attributed to Jean-Baptiste Huet (1745-1811) and bought by Lady Fitzgerald's father in the early 1870s for his London residence, Bute House. The panels were later transferred to the tapestry boudoir of Lady Fitzgerald's home at 16 Mansfield Street, one of London's few remaining palatial residences by Robert Adam.

Madame Hoban, like most costumiers of the time, may well have consulted Racinet's monumental six-volume illustrated *Costume Historique* to discover inspiration for the main attributes for Lady Fitzgerald's costume.

Of the guests of Jewish origin at the ball, almost all chose an eastern tinge to their costumes. Arthur Sassoon appeared in full Turkish costume, Mrs. Leopold de Rothschild was Zobeida, and Reuben Sassoon was a Persian Prince.



Polish noble lady
from Racinet's
Costume Historique.



The Turkish Lovers
(detail), attributed
to Jean-Baptiste
Huet (1745-1811).

Curator

Russell Harris, curator, author and translator, studied Oriental Studies at Balliol College, Oxford.

He is a contributor to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of 19th Century Photography*, various international journals and magazines and has published books on Indian royal portraits from the Lafayette archive held by the V&A and from the Bassano and Vandyk archives at the National Portrait Gallery.

Russell is the co-author with Hélène Alexander, director of The Fan Museum, Greenwich, of *Cool*, a book on fans seen in the Lafayette archive. With the Polish art historian, Barbara Borkowy, he has written *Automobiles of English High Society – the 1902-1905: Photographic Portraits by Lafayette*, published in Cracow, Poland, 2007. His latest book, *Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years* – a re-creation of her social circle through images from the V&A's Lafayette archive - was published in a bi-lingual Polish-English edition by Castle Pless, Poland, in 2011.

He has also translated literary and political works from French and Arabic. He has also been a guest lecturer at the Association for Historical & Fine Art Photography, London, The Eurohistory Conference, San Francisco, and the British Council, New Delhi and is a feature writer for the Lahore-based magazine *Libas International*, the Cairo design magazine *Magaz* and *The Asian Art Newspaper*. He currently works as a consultant editor at the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

He is the curator of exhibitions of late-Victorian and Edwardian portrait photographs in cooperation with the British Council (New Delhi, Mumbai and Karachi), the Nehru Centre, London, the National Portrait Gallery, the Fan Museum, Greenwich, the Bucharest History Museum, the Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia, the Royal National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan, the Photography Museum of Upper Austria, Kravaře Palace in the Czech Republic, the palace museums in Pszczyna, Książ, Łancut and Kozłówka, the Municipal Museum in Tychy, Poland, the Municipal Engineering Museum in Cracow, Poland, and the Levanger Museum, Norway.

V&A Lafayette archive exhibition history

2012	Nordenfjeldske Kunsthindustrimuseum (National Museum of Decorative Arts) in Trondheim, Norway	Visions of Orient and Occident: The Devonshire House Ball of 1897
2010	Levanger Museum, Norway	Visions of Orient and Occident: The Devonshire House Ball of 1897
2009	Kravaře Palace, Czech Republic	Daisy von Pless: Stastná léta (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
	Municipal Museum in Tychy, Poland	Księżna Daisy von Pless: Szczęśliwe Lata (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
2008	Palace Museum in Książ, Poland	Księżna Daisy von Pless: Szczęśliwe Lata (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
	National Gallery of Jordan, Amman, Jordan	Visions of Orient and Occident: The Devonshire House Ball of 1897
	Częstochowa Museum, Poland	Samochody Wytwornego Towarzystwa – Miodowe Lata Automobili 1902-1905. (The Lafayette Studio and Early Glamour Portraits of the Motor-Car 1902-1905)
2007	Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai	The Lafayette Studio and the Maharajas
	Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Neither East Nor West - The Lafayette Collection: Asia in the Age of Monochrome
	Castle Museum in Łańcut, Poland	Księżna Daisy von Pless: Szczęśliwe Lata (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
	Castle Museum in Kozłówka, Poland	Księżna Daisy von Pless: Szczęśliwe Lata (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
	Muzeum Inżynierii Miejskiej, Cracow, Poland	Samochody Wytwornego Towarzystwa – Miodowe Lata Automobili 1902-1905. (The Lafayette Studio and Early Glamour Portraits of the Motor-Car 1902-1905)
2006	Muzeum Zamkowy w Pszczynie, Poland	Księżna Daisy von Pless: Szczęśliwe Lata (Princess Daisy of Pless: The Happy Years)
	Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur, India	The Lafayette Studio and the Maharajas
2005	Photomuseum des Landes Oberösterreich im Marmorschlössl, Bad Ischl, Austria	"HIGH SOCIETY": Gesellschaftsfotografie aus dem Victoria & Albert Museum London (High Society: Images from the Devonshire House Ball of 1897)
	The Bucharest History Museum, Romania	"Printii Autohtoni" Indieni la Londra 1897-1924 (India's Ruling Princes in Studio Portraiture)
	The Fan Museum, Greenwich	Presenting a Cooling Image: Fans from the Fan Museum and Portraits from the Lafayette Photographic Archive at the V&A
2004	The Bucharest History Museum	Universul Familiei Regale Române: Portrete din arhivele britanice (The Romanian Royal World: Images from British Archives)
	Porțile de Fier Museum, Turnu Severin, Romania	Universul Familiei Regale Române: Portrete din arhivele britanice
	Museum of the Lower Danube, Călărași, Romania	Universul Familiei Regale Române: Portrete din arhivele britanice
	The Nehru Centre, London	The Unforgettable Maharajas
1999	British Council, Karachi and Peshawar, Pakistan	Princely India in British Archives
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