

# A HISTORY OF LARGE FORMAT PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE TABLEAU VIVANT

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The history of large format photography and the *tableau vivant* (French), or “living picture”—a staged scene with purposefully arranged figures and props—are critical to a deeper understanding of Lalla Essaydi’s work. The artist draws on both of these practices to combine a pureness in her technique with Orientalist themes of staging and setting. Essaydi takes a unique approach to exploring cultural boundaries and critiquing nineteenth century Orientalist paintings. She explores many aspects of female identity by her use of henna painting; her visual commentaries on Orientalist stereotypes for Arab women; and her theatrical staging of photographs. Essaydi’s use of traditional large format photography supports her painterly techniques and strengthens the overall concept of her work.

## **A History of Large Format Photography**

In 1816, French artists Joseph Niépce and his brother Claude Niépce successfully produced the first positive image from a negative. After this discovery many others soon followed, improving the technique. Thus large format photography became more accessible by the mid 1800’s.

Joseph Niépce, a great enthusiast for the art of lithography, started to improve the photographic process by using tin plate. He used pewter plates coated with bitumen of

Judea, which is varnish that hardened when exposed to light. Niépce exposed the plates to light through an oiled etching on top of a piece of paper. Afterwards the plates were washed in a solvent to remove hardened residue, leaving a positive image. Niépce decided to place these plates in a camera and expose them, thus creating the first permanent images.

Large format film allows the contemporary photographer to achieve from a large negative the greatest amount of clarity and a minimum grain. This also allows for much bigger enlargements.<sup>1</sup> Essaydi's final stage of production is the large format print produced in a darkroom. She uses this technique to render an image much larger in scale than many of the Orientalist works she responds to, works of nineteenth-century Europe and America commissioned and used by playboys.<sup>2</sup> She then goes to great lengths of taping the film edges to produce Polaroid-like edges. Polaroid is also a large format technique that is no longer in traditional production. Utilizing film and maintaining the black frame conveys a pureness in Essaydi's images that is distinctive.

### **The Beginnings of the *Tableau Vivant* and Essaydi's Work**

Translated from the French, *tableau vivant* means 'living pictures.' The dramatic genre peaked in popularity between 1830 and 1920. It designated a cast of actors remaining still and silent for approximately thirty seconds on a stage while representing scenes from literature, history, art, or daily life. Often a large wooden frame would outline the stage, referencing a painted canvas. The *tableau vivant* found a natural home

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara London and John Upton, *Photography*, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Maureen G. Shanahan, "A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi," ed. Sarah T. Brooks, *The Photography of Lalla Essaydi. Critiquing and Contextualizing Orientalism* (Broadway, VA: Branner Printing) 2014, 6-22.

in early photography with its emphasis on posing, costumes, make-up, and lighting.

Essaydi discusses how her work is haunted by space and every aspect of her photographs is staged. She uses extensive henna calligraphy on everything in the picture frame, which she paints exclusively by hand. In her desire to recreate art, history, and the everyday life of Arab women, Essaydi makes extensive use of the *tableau vivant* in her work.

In conclusion, Essaydi's large format photography and use of the *tableau vivant* capture exactly what is in front of her lens. There is no manipulation in the artist's photographic process, and thus Essaydi allows the subject be the focal point of the work even as she reframes older Orientalist paintings. Her work blends painting and photography in a way that uniquely combines innovation and traditionalism.

Cited Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading:

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image of the first photograph

1816.



Joseph Niépce