

Isabella Bird Bishop:

Korea, the Yangtze Valley, and Beyond

by CAROLE GLAUBER

"Travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety."¹

Isabella Bird Bishop

Isabella Bird Bishop composed an extraordinary life for herself during the English Victorian Era. For most of 30 years, Bird circumnavigated the globe, writing lively letters home about peering over the edge of erupting volcanoes in Hawaii, experiencing the desolate tablelands of Asia, riding alone through the

early winter snows of the Colorado Rockies, or enduring a raging hurricane on a steamer in the Pacific Ocean. She seemed fearless and tireless, comfortable sharing housekeeping with a group of snowbound cowboys in Colorado, riding out of Baghdad with an escort of Turkish soldiers, or touring China in a sedan chair, risking the occasional attack by angry mobs suspicious of foreigners.

She took up photography later in life — she was nearly 60 — but once having discovered its remarkable properties, she traveled nowhere without her camera, tripod, plates, and chemicals. Isabella's photographs of mountain peaks, street scenes, temples, people, rivers, and canyons were reproduced in two of her books, *Korea and Her Neighbours* in 1898 and *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* in 1899.

She was born on October 15, 1831, to Dora and Edward Bird, an Anglican minister in Boroughbridge, Yorkshire. Her younger sister, Henrietta, appeared two years later. Edward took Isabella riding outside their village of Tattenhall in northern England, teaching her to identify the native plants and crops and to observe people's lifestyles. Their mother educated the girls in reading, writing, painting, religion, and sewing. Isabella enjoyed reading and was writing serious essays about contemporary political and social issues by the time she was 15.

At age 18, she developed a back ailment. The all-purpose medical remedy then was "a change of air," so her doctor recommended a sea voyage. In June 1854, Isabella sailed for Halifax, Nova Scotia, to visit her cousins' farm on Prince Edward Island and there discovered the enjoyment of exploring on her own. She toured a 6,000-mile loop through Chicago, Detroit, and



Isabella Bird Bishop: Yahia Khan, Chief of the Mian Kuh Tribe



Isabella Bird Bishop: A group of Armenian girls in a Bakhtiari Village

Niagara Falls, while writing daily about her adventures. Isabella had discovered her niche: traveling and writing.

By 1866, both her mother and father had died, leaving Isabella and Henrietta enough inheritance to provide for the two of them. They decided Henrietta would manage the household, leaving Isabella free to write. However, Isabella developed more unexplained aches and pains that confined her to bed. Evidently, living a quiet, genteel life did not suit her disposition.

As a cure, in July 1872, at age 41, she sailed from Liverpool for Australia and New Zealand. Her sister meanwhile took up housekeeping at Tobermany on the island of Mull and in Edinburgh. After 12 weeks at sea,

Isabella landed in Melbourne, but she found Australia and New Zealand not to her liking, so she boarded a leaky steamer to Hawaii, then called the Sandwich Islands. In Hilo, she tried riding horseback astride rather than sidesaddle and discovered her back no longer hurt. Since riding astride in England was unacceptable for women, traveling gave her the freedom to do as she pleased.

She borrowed a Hawaiian riding costume, made of full Turkish trousers covered with a dress down to her ankles, and so attired, climbed volcanoes, braved rainstorms, crossed flash-flooded streams, rode over dangerous gulches, and slept on mats in tents. On August 7, 1873, after six months on the islands, she left for Colorado via

San Francisco and Lake Tahoe. In Colorado, Isabella struggled to the top of 14,000-foot Longs Peak with the assistance of the one-eyed desperado poet, Rocky Mountain Jim. Their romance was partially described in her book, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*.² She rode in a cattle round-up and crossed the 12,000-foot, snow-packed continental divide alone.

Back in Edinburgh, Isabella returned to being "respectable Miss Bird," but within four years, her health again deteriorated. Bedridden with pain and illness, she left her doctors baffled as to how this delicate woman could be such a courageous and independent traveler. Realizing that travel was the only road to recovery, Isabella arranged to visit Japan.

She left England in April 1878 and sailed for New York, boarded a train to San Francisco and caught a steamer headed for Japan. There she traveled over 1,400 miles, riding native pack-horses and living among the Ainu. Continuing to Malaya, she rode on elephants, befriended a pet ape³ and, on the way home, stopped in the Middle East for an 18-day pilgrimage by camel to Mt. Sinai, led by Bedouins.

A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains, relating the story of her six-month tour in Colorado, was published in 1879. Its success established her celebrity as an adventurous traveler and writer. Two years later, Isabella Bird married John Bishop, whose previous proposal she had declined by declaring she was not "a marrying woman."⁴ His devotion to Isabella lasted until his death, five years later, in 1886.

In 1889, with the return of her aches and pains, Isabella planned another expedition, this time to India. During this trip, she resolved to visit Persia, and when a Major Sawyer invited her to accompany him there as a "cover-up" for his actual activities of surveying and mapping, she accepted. Traveling with a man under such circumstances suggested no impropriety to Isabella, who, in fact, preferred to be on her own. However, she once noted, "I ... often think how much better it is to travel with a man than with almost any woman."⁵

It was during this Persian trip that Isabella discovered photography.⁶ After watching Major Sawyer use a tripod and camera, she asked him to demonstrate taking and developing photographs. At Ardel in western Persia, while visiting the Bakhtiari chief's harem, she offered to photograph the women, but they refused, claiming "no good women have their pictures taken, we should have many things said against us if we were made into pictures." Later, Isabella photographed the chief, with his three brothers standing behind his chair and their three young sons in front.⁷

Back home, Isabella again transformed her letters home into a travel narrative, this time with her photographs. In December 1891, *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* was published in two volumes, each about 400 pages long with maps, sketches, and photographs. She also produced an unpublished album with 102 six-by-eight-inch silver prints of Muscat, Baghdad, Teheran, the Qum and Isfahan areas, and the Kuran River.⁸ On November 28, 1892, amid much controversy, the Royal Geographic Society appointed her its first woman Fellow. Around the same time, she was presented to Queen Victoria and studied photography.⁹

In January 1894, at age 62, Isabella returned to the Far East, this time bringing along a tripod, camera, and developing materials. She planned to explore Korea, China, and Japan, avoiding cities and traveling off the beaten path. By April, she had hired a sampan to explore unknown regions upriver from Seoul. Excess weight added to the difficulty of finding transportation in Korea: for the first time in her journeys, she was burdened with a 16-pound "tripod camera," and a four-pound hand camera.¹⁰ During her five weeks on the Han River, she passed her time visiting villages, climbing ridges to gain a view of the valleys, taking "geographical notes, temperatures, altitudes, barometric readings, and measurements of the river (nearly all unfortunately lost in a rapid on the downward journey), collecting and drying plants, photographing, and developing negatives under difficulties, all the blankets and

waterproofs in the boat being requisitioned for the creation of a 'dark room' — all these occupations made up busy and interesting days."¹¹

Weeks later, as Japanese soldiers marched through the streets of Seoul, she left Korea for Mukden, China. On August 1, 1894, she witnessed the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War and photographed the Chinese soldiers. However, hostility to foreigners was on the increase; while photographing a large stone archway in the city, Isabella was mobbed by an angry crowd, "who believed her camera was a black devil with an evil eye so that whatever living thing it looked on died within a year, and any building or wall would crumble away." A missionary friend, Reverend Gilbert Walshe, who saw her photographing in China, observed, "Even in the face of the largest and noisiest crowds, she proceeded as if she were inspecting the Chinese exhibits in the British Museum. Her absolute unconsciousness of fear was a remarkable characteristic."¹²

Subsequently, in Vladivostok, the Russian port near the Korean border, she "photographed the 'Russian army' and the barracks and the corporal slouching against the forlorn quarters in an attitude of extreme dejection."¹³

Again in Seoul, she received an invitation to visit the King and Queen for a private audience and was asked to photograph the King for Queen Victoria.¹⁴

After leaving Korea, Isabella planned to explore the remote mountain regions of the Tibetan-Chinese border by going up the Yangtze (Yangzi*) River from Shanghai to Wan-Hsien (Wanxian). At Wan-Hsien, she intended to travel overland into the mountains, altogether a journey of over 5,000 miles.

Arriving in Shanghai, she employed "a boat and a servant" to begin her journey. She would later add another interpreter/servant who "was willing to face the possible risks and certain hardships of the journey I proposed."¹⁵ Discarding most of her possessions, she bought an open, bamboo armchair to be carried in and plenty of tea and curry powder. In mid-winter, she left for her journey of "six or seven months remarkably free from

**Throughout this article, we have used the 19th-century transliterations of Chinese names familiar to Isabella Bird. However, at the first reference, the present-day conversion is given in parentheses.*



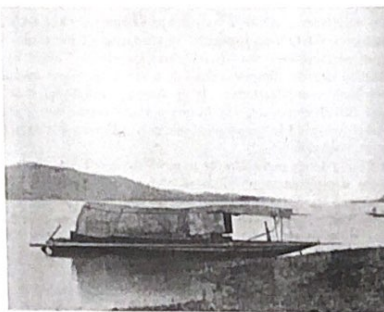
Isabella Bird Bishop: Kahva Rukh Pass



Unknown: Isabella Bird in Manchu Dress



Isabella Bird Bishop: The author's trackers at dinner



Isabella Bird Bishop: The Author's Last Wu-Pan

encumbrances of every kind.”¹⁶ Her photography equipment, however, had become part of her valued possessions. “Photographing,” she wrote, “has been an intense pleasure. If I felt free to follow my inclinations, I should give my whole time to it. I began too late ever to be a photographer, and have too little time to learn the technicalities of the art; but I am able to produce negatives which are faithful, though not artistic, records of what I see.”¹⁷

At Chinkiang (Jinjiang), her first stop on the Yangtze River, she visited a German albumen factory where she observed how “the albumen, dexterously separated from the yolks of the eggs, is made into slabs, which are sent to Germany for use in photography, the preparation of leather, and the printing of cotton, etc.” The next day in Wuhu, she encountered another German albumen factory employing 50 women and 10 men, and learned that it took 7,000 eggs to produce 100 pounds of albumen.¹⁸

Six hundred miles up the Yangtze, she toured Hankou (Hankou). From her chair, she experienced the crowded streets, filled with beggars; people gambling, sleeping, cooking, shouting,

bargaining; itinerant barbers; children playing; and shopkeepers selling bean cakes, melon seeds, and dates. In these surroundings, Isabella made photographs, later developed onboard a steamer leaving Hankow with hundreds of Chinese on board. She described the captain as “kind and genial. He let me tone unlimited photographic prints in the saloon, ignoring the dishes and buckets in the process, and the engineer provided an unlimited supply of condensed water, free both from Yangtze mud and from the alum used to precipitate it.... I had abundant occupation in writing, printing and toning photographs, learning a little from [a] Mr. Endacott of the region for which I was finally bound....”¹⁹

As she approached the rapids of the upper Yangtze, she saw ominous signs of disaster everywhere: submerged masts, boats on shore being repaired, encamped people drying out clothes, and occasional skeletons lying on the rocks. She employed a boat and crew for the next stretch of river to Chungking (Chongqing), but before starting, her ship's crew made offerings and vows at their favorite temples, and on the first evening they

slew a fowl as a sacrifice to the river god and smeared its blood over the boat. Her own preparations were limited to packing her “plates, films, and general photographic outfit, journals, a few necessities, and a few things of fictitious value, in a waterproof bag, to be carried by my servant, along with my camera, at each rapid where we landed.”²⁰

After much effort, they reached the “wild and beautiful village”²¹ of Hsintan (Xindan). Isabella noted the men insisting “as they did everywhere on the river, that with my binoculars and camera I could see the treasures of the mountains, the gold, precious stones, and golden cocks which lie deep down in the earth; that I kept a black devil in the camera, and that I liberated him at night, and that he dug up the golden cocks, and that the reason why my boat was low in the water was that I was ballasted with these auriferous fowls, and with the treasures of the hills!”²²

It took 70 men, called trackers, nearly six hours to pull the boat past the Hsin-tan rapids, followed by dangerous reefs, boulders, and more rapids. She described the trackers as troublesome, rebellious, and insolent but was totally dependent on them to travel upriver. She later recorded “that by the end of three weeks they became considerably humanized, so that I was able to show them my photographs taken on the Yangtze. They recognized their boat with yells. They said pictures could only be seen with one eye, so they used one hand for holding down one eyelid and made a tube of the other.”²³

With trackers pulling and guiding her tiny boat upriver, she reached Kuei Fu (Guifu), where every junk that traveled up or down river was required to stop and pay an annual tax. She lived on her boat, in a six-foot-square room, more like a stall, with three sides and no window, but with ample work to do: “above all, there were photographic negatives to develop and print, and prints to tone, and the difficulties enhanced the zest of these processes and made me think, with a feeling of complacent superiority, of the amateurs who need ‘dark rooms,’

sinks, water 'laid on' tables, and other luxuries. Night supplied me with a dark room; the majestic Yangtze was 'laid on'; a box served for a table: all else can be dispensed with. I lined my 'stall' with muslin curtains and newspapers, and finding that the light of the opium lamps still came in through the chinks, I tacked up my blankets and slept in my clothes and fur coat. With 'water, water everywhere,' water was the great difficulty. The Yangtze holds any amount of fine mud in suspension, which for drinking purposes is usually precipitated with alum, and unless filtered, deposits a fine, even veil on the negative. I had only a pocket filter, which produced about three quarts of water a day, of which Be-dien [her servant] invariably abstracted some for making tea, leaving me with only enough for a final wash, not always quite effectual, as the critic will see from some of the illustrations. I found that the most successful method of washing out 'hypo' was to lean over the gunwale and hold the negative in the wash of the Great River, rapid even at the mooring place, and give it some final washes in the filtered water. Printing was a great difficulty, and I overcame it by hanging the printing-

frames over the side. When all these rough arrangements were successful, each print was a joy and a triumph, nor was there disgrace in failure."²⁴

From Kuei Fu, she arrived at Wan Hsien on February 19, nearly 1,300 miles upstream from the mouth of the Yangtze. Claiming to be the first European woman to walk in Wan, she climbed the mile to the China Inland Mission House, partly by a flight of 150 steep steps and up back streets "and being bare-headed and in Chinese dress, escaped a very great crowd."²⁵ Recent hostilities to foreigners had abated with the arrival of a new magistrate, providing Isabella the freedom "actually to walk about and to photograph with no worse trouble than the curiosity of the people in masculine crowds of a thousand or more. Four months before I was told that this would have been impossible. My camera would have been smashed, my open chair would have produced a riot, and I would have been stoned or severely beaten."²⁶ Crowds followed her everywhere, and in one case, attempting to photograph an arched pagoda in Sze Chuan (Sichuan), the soldiers accompanying her made the crowd "stand to right and left by a se-

ries of vigorous pushes, shouting the whole time."²⁷

Isabella continued her journey overland. Chair traveling, she wrote, was the "easiest way of locomotion on land."²⁸ Sitting in her bamboo chair, suspended on 14-foot poles and carried by servants, they sometimes covered 25 miles in a day. The roads were narrow, one-way footpaths with steep drop-offs, and accommodations were primitive. One day, chased by a crowd, she fled to her cockroach-infested room at an inn. The tripod of her camera served as a candle stand and a clothes rack. At night, she hung her clothes and boots on it, out of the way of rats.²⁹ Sometimes locals bored a hole in the wall, peering in, whispering, and giggling. She developed negatives in her room as it was "almost always a perfect 'dark room.'" When a flash of white light revealed that her neighbors had successfully worked a hole into the wall, she was annoyed that her "precious negative was hopelessly 'fogged.'"³⁰ A few days later, while chased by an angry mob screaming "kill her, burn her," she again made a hasty retreat to her room, as they tried to break down her door. Yet, going north, in Ying-San Hsien (Yingsan Xian), Isabella befriended local families by sharing her photographs.³¹

Proceeding in the sedan chair to a hamlet, and having "learned much caution" about using her camera, she asked to "make a picture" of a mill powered by a blindfolded buffalo-cow. "They were quite willing, and stopped the cow at the exact place I indicated. They were friendly enough to take me to another mill, at which two women grind, turning the upper stone by means of poles working in holes. The Chinese use a great deal of wheat flour.... After seeing the mill I showed the people a number of my photographs taken *en route*, to show them that I was not doing anything evil or hurtful, but they said, though quite good-naturedly, that it was 'foreign magic.'"³²

By this time, it was mid March, and Isabella, dressed in Chinese clothes and straw shoes, traveled with waterproof baggage — two deep,



Isabella Bird Bishop: Lanjen Valley



Isabella Bird Bishop: Three members of the China Inland Mission dressed in native clothes



Isabella Bird Bishop: Kanaya, Isabella's host in Nikko, with his family

square bamboo baskets “fitted for the mountains, and no loose packages but my camera.”³³ She described “the glories and surprises of that day’s long journey ... grandeur and vastness are the characteristics of the scenery ... villages on hilltops, on rocky peaks, on ledges of precipices built of stone” in contrast to stepping over opium-smokers while climbing on a roof to make her photographs.³⁴ She had traveled well beyond the Yangtze River, north into unmapped areas surrounded by Tibetan gorges, “forest-covered mountains breaking into gray, bare peaks, and crags gleaming in the sunshine.”³⁵ Days later, she fought her way through a raging blizzard.

Deep in the Tibetan “beyond,” she met the “Matang Man-tze” women, whom she characterized as “extremely beautiful, after the Madonna type. I twice secured a giggling group in front of my camera, but I no sooner put my head under the focussing cloth than there was a stampede, and partly in fun and partly in fear the laughing beauties fled like hares, so the reader must take their good looks on trust.... I found them hospitable, friendly, and polite, ... full of frolic and merriment, affectionate to one another.... In the regrettable absence of photographs, it is difficult to give any idea of their appearance.”³⁶

Returning to the Yangtze by a different route, she left Sze Chuan “in a small flat-bottomed *wupan*, with a mat roof, and without doors at either end. Yet my cambric curtains were never

lifted, and when I desired it, I enjoyed complete privacy at the expense of partial asphyxiation. At that time, May 20th, the water was so low that no bigger boat could make the passage, and numbers of small, trim house-boats were aground. It was the start for a river journey of over 2,000 miles, the first thousand of which were accomplished in this and similar boats.”³⁷

At the end of June, after about six months, Isabella reached Shanghai in sweltering heat, rested for several months in Japan and Seoul, Korea, and departed for England. In March 1897, after a three-year absence, she arrived in London.

On May 10, 1897, Isabella became the first woman to address the Royal Geographic Society, recounting her journey in the mountains of northwest China, and illustrating her talk with 45 lantern slides and 200 photographs from her travels. Later, the RGS Journal reproduced her speech with several of her photographs.³⁸

In January 1898, John Murray published *Korea and her Neighbours* in two large volumes with maps and photographs. Two thousand copies sold in two days and within the first year, it was reprinted five times, including an American edition. Amid favorable reviews, the press no longer referred to her as a travel writer, but as a “political authority on Korea.”³⁹ John Murray issued the 550-page *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, in November 1899, but interest in the Far East had declined and few copies sold.

Isabella’s books displayed her expertise as an observer in numerous ways. She regaled readers with her adventures in the midst of little-known geography, climate, and people. On later trips, she added recordings of a more scientific manner, making notes of barometric readings, temperatures, and altitudes. Photography became an extension of her contextual studies and equipped her with an additional technique of providing information to her readers. She solved the logistical problems of using her camera, developing her negatives, and printing without the benefit of collegial advice, and produced some of the first images of sites yet unseen by outsiders. Her accomplishments indicate a vitality and inner strength superceding any English Victorian restraints. When Isabella died on October 7, 1904, at age 72, after completing a trip to Morocco, she left her photographic plates to the Royal Geographical Society, a suitable repository for a woman who once claimed, “I am doing what a woman can hardly ever do — leading a life fit for a man.... it showed some originality and energy to have devised such a life.”⁴⁰

Carole Glauber is a photographer and writer from Portland, Oregon. She is the author of Witch of Kodakery: The Photography of Myra Albert Wiggins 1869–1956 (Washington State University Press) and writes about women photographers.

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ter (Venice: XXXVI Biennale, 1972), p. 23.

6. Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 1986," in *Daily Practice*, p. 148.

7. For a popular account available in English, see Stephan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group: The Inside Story of a Phenomenon*, translated by Anthea Bell (London: The Bodley Head, 1985); Richter read this book.

8. The Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt compiled the reviews during the run of the tour in: *Pressberichte zu Gerhard Richter "18. Oktober 1977,"* Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1989.

9. Richter compounds the issue of instrumentalization by photographing the photo-paintings and inserting them into the *Atlas*, literally creating a photograph from a painting. ■

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Endnotes

1. Evelyn Kaye, *Amazing Traveler Isabella Bird*, (Boulder, CO: Blue Panda Publications, 1999), p. 101.

2. See Louisa Ward Arps, "Letters from Isabella Bird," *Colorado Quarterly*, 4 (Summer, 1955), pp. 26–41.

3. Dorothy Middleton, "The Lady Pioneers: Isabella Bird Bishop, 1831–1904," *The Geographical Magazine* 34 (January 1962), p. 504, and Amy H. Badger, "The Centenary of Mrs. Bishop (Isabella Bird)," *The Quarterly Review* (October 1931), pp. 278–99.

4. Kaye, p. 138.

5. Kaye, p. 63, from Isabella Bird, *The Hawaiian Archipelago: Six Months Among the Palm Groves, Coral Reefs, and Volcanoes of the Sandwich Islands* (London: John Murray, 1875).

6. Kaye, p. 194.

7. Kaye, p. 198.

8. *I.B. Photographs Persia 1890*. Unpublished photograph album inter-

leaved with descriptive body text; Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA, California.

9. Kaye, p. 216.

10. Isabella Bird Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbours*, reprint (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1970), p. 67.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

12. Kaye, p. 224.

13. Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbours*, p. 233.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

15. Isabella Bird Bishop, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, Vol. I, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons; London: John Murray, 1900), p. 84.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

17. Kaye, p. 223.

18. Bishop, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, Vol. I, pp. 87, 88.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 124.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 228–231.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 380.

32. Bishop, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, Vol. II, pp. 29–30.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 144.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 195, 217, 218.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

38. Kaye, p. 240.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

40. Kaye, p. 61; xii: "The Royal Geographic Society in London searched for, but could not find, the original plates of Isabella's photographs which she left to the Society in her will." For a tribute to Bishop, see Agnes Grainger Stewart, "Some Recollections of Isabella Bishop," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 176 (November 1904), pp. 698–704. ■

LETTERS

Congratulations on the 25th anniversary. You have established and raised a significant and enduring tree with strong roots and beautiful foliage over these years. And it's still growing.

With warm regards,
Diane Farris

I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed and appreciated Frank Day's intelligent critique of Gursky. One of the reasons *The Photo Review* is worth reading.

Ina Loewenberg

While I always enjoy reading *The Photo Review*, I was especially pleased by your Spring 2002 issue. The review of the Whitney Biennial by Colette Copeland was especially well written and important for TPR in the way that it reached beyond photography narrowly-defined to consider the Biennial's full range of photo-related work (which indeed comprised most of it). This centrality of photography within contemporary art was again underscored in Frank Day's excellent piece about Andreas Gursky, which I especially appreciated for its straightforward — even humorous — style balanced with significant insight and a great deal of information about the artist's processes and intentions. I do need, however, to offer one small factual correction: as a Sicilian-American who has travelled extensively in Southern Italy, I can confidently say that the port of Salerno is nowhere near Sicily!

Blaise Tobia