



## Goethe Discovers the Image as a Social Medium

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Around 1800, parts of western Europe saw a vogue of so-called tableaux vivants—literally translated from French, “living pictures.” Tableaux vivants depict a scene presented by silent and stationary participants who are posed and in costume. These peculiarly intangible images, despite their fleeting character, acquired considerable prominence at the time of their emergence. Initially a pastime in the nascent bourgeois salons and the aristocratic courts of France, they were then gradually adopted in German-speaking lands. Frequently relying on motifs from the history of painting, people at such gatherings grouped themselves into images for their peers to contemplate—primarily in spaces that served as social meeting places; eventually and to a smaller extent also on theater stages. These images are the subject of my research.

### Seeing Before Photography

One of the entry points into the realm of tableaux vivants, and one of the focal points of my investigation, is textual, even literary: Goethe’s 1809 novel *Elective Affinities*, which contains a number of famed descriptions of such gatherings. The novel played a considerable role in spreading tableaux vivants to the German states. Historical sources, for example, journals covering the elegant and literary tendencies of the day, report a strong uptick inspired by *Elective Affinities*; the book’s main mediating role seems not to have consisted in transmitting specific images, but, rather, in instructing its readers how to create a tableau vivant.

The published scholarship on the topic revealed a set of ubiquitous assumptions about these transient images: Authors spoke of moving bodies freezing into stasis; speed brought to a halt; an abruptness that sapped life. I was doubly struck: First of all, these views are quite at odds with the descriptions in Goethe’s novel, where the making of a tableau vivant is described as a gradual process of construction involving a careful planning of the image to be presented, a gathering and even

fabrication of costumes, and, ultimately, a deliberate placement of the protagonists. Our own contemporary approaches frequently seemed to be getting the temporality of tableaux vivants wrong.

Further, the way in which the coming-into-being of these images was accounted for sounded very familiar: In it I recognized a certain preconceived understanding of how a photograph, in particular of a person, is taken. Moving bodies are snapped into sudden freezes. Much recent scholarship about tableaux vivants seems to project our assumptions about the photographic medium’s “fixing” qualities back onto a whole stratum of visual culture and a body of writing that, judging by Goethe’s accounts, operated under a different logic. In this logic, wresting a stable image from otherwise fleeting constituents required other procedures. One of the challenges I face is thinking about a highly mobile, intermittent type of image that relied on stagings of the body but did not behave according to the logic by which our eyes (or minds) are accustomed to seeing them. To think about tableaux vivants, I was required to learn to see before photography, as it were.

Lady Emma Hamilton, a contemporary mentioned in Goethe’s memoir *Italian Journey*, invented a posing technique that eventually garnered her widespread fame: The stances she adopted in her *Attitudes* took cues from the figurative patterns of antique vases, successfully inscribing her work into what was to become Europe’s international style of the moment—neoclassicism.



Goethe modeled one of the tableaux vivants in *Elective Affinities* on ter Borch's *Gallant Conversation*. Focusing on the dress that takes center stage in the painting—the artist's contemporaries referred to these and similar works as “satin pieces”—this garment's textile architecture exemplifies the generative principle of the tableaux: careful construction, rather than sudden arrests.

### Building an Image

Attending closely to Goethe's words, it became clear to me that the way in which he envisioned the production of such images was, in a manner, more classical. In touch with older painterly discourses on the construction of images, the idea was that a host of material constituents, including the models, had to be pulled together and arranged in a fortuitous manner to make the image appear and become stable. Goethe considered material composition, rather than a medial freezing, to be the core technique for making a tableau vivant stick. Rather than “snapping” it, one had to build it, pull it together from its components.

### 19th Century Social Media: Anticipating the Future

One passage in Goethe's text, which I am particularly fond of, describes a dress worn by one of his novel's protagonists as she poses as part of a restaging of the 17th century Dutch painter Gerard ter Borch's *The Gallant Conversation*. Around the waist, the garment gathers together stiff white satin folds, an above-and-below of tailored pleats. To me, this intricate folding not only embodies the careful compositional activity that, according to Goethe, constituted the force that kept these

otherwise fleeting arrangements together; the dress also connects to another medium that Goethe's novel treats on a number of occasions: fashion. For indeed, Goethe not only thought of tableaux vivants as a practice but also reflected on its social life. Tableaux vivants were a fashion—a manner of making images that, while it was being transmitted, acquired distinctness, readability and clarity, but then fell back into obscurity after it had run its course. Instead of understanding tableaux vivants as proto-photographs, we are thus perhaps better advised to think of them structurally as anticipations of a different, more recent condition that we have become all too familiar with: What we are encountering here is an early version of the image in and as social media, of the image as a form that traverses the social, is picked up and articulated by its members, spreads, perhaps trends, gains distinction, (self-)stabilizes and then peters off and dissipates.

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