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REALLY GOOD DOG PHOTOGRAPHY

Written by Lucy Davies

HOXTON MINI PRESS
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Introduction

Dogs and photography have gone hand in paw almost since the medium was invented, in 1839. Before dust had even settled on the first photographic prints, devoted owners were hauling their dogs in front of cameras, intent on preserving their furry, four-legged friends for posterity.

Most subjects took an almost comical approach to eluding capture, appearing next to their master or mistress as a blurry smudge. But they could hardly be blamed. Exposure time was exasperatingly long and they were probably excited by the considerable attention a portrait sitting involved.

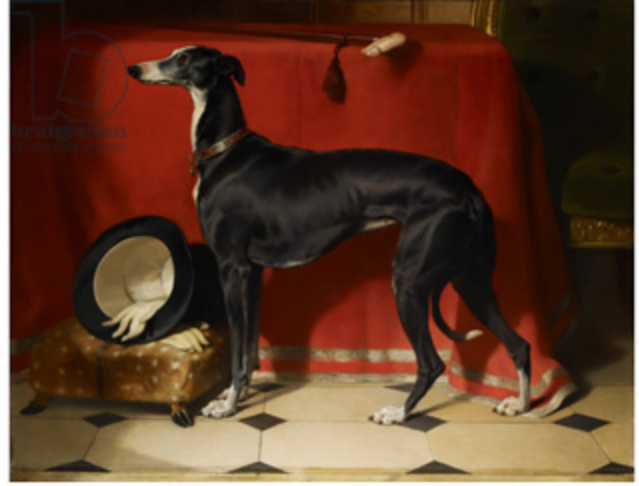
It wasn't unheard of for dogs to be sedated in the studio. Certainly the hobbyists and tinkerers who reported their experiments in the journals of the day were not above discussing the merits of drugging children to make them sit still, and why stop there? There are reports of an itinerant photographer in America dosing his canine sitters with whisky, which must have made them awfully sick.

Both ethics and exposure times have improved since, but our passion for photographing dogs is undiminished. Last year we uploaded nearly 200 million pictures with the hashtags #dog and #puppylove to the photo-sharing app Instagram, which far outstrips the measly 13 million of our #brunch. According to Google, when it comes to questions about animal photography, the search term 'dog' beats all other species hands down.

But, in the modern world, photography has become less about preserving, more about conveying. And cute, happy and shiny-coated seem to be the things we want to convey. The appetite for those qualities, particularly online, is staggering.

For those without a dog of their own, following the daily romps of Burrito the corgi, or the sartorial élan of Menswear Dog via their social media accounts may offer some of the testified benefits of dog ownership (reduced rates of stress, depression and heart disease) without having to actually go for a walk in the howling wind or bear the indignity of a pooper hoover. Dogs are affectionate, positive, go-getting types; the visual embodiment of love, loyalty, enthusiasm and fun. For five minutes we can live in a world that isn't competitive, that doesn't involve commuting or meetings, career ladders or mortgage rates.

In many of these photos, though, dogs are made human-like and infantilized. They bear little resemblance to the dignified creature on which artists have lavished acres of canvas and painted over many hundreds of years. In the artworks including dogs to be found around every corner in the National Gallery, the Louvre, Frick and Prado, the impression is of an altogether different animal: an elegant, handsome and noble thing, something to be pored rather than cooed over.



The photographs in this book offer an alternative to all the fluff and slobber. They have been chosen because, like their painterly antecedents, they approach the dog as a sentient, intelligent and mortal being and because they consider the relationship that has formed between dogs and humans for the extraordinary and intriguing thing it really is. Many of them also address the issues facing dogs and their owners in the modern world. In effect: they restore photographs of dogs to the fold of fine art.

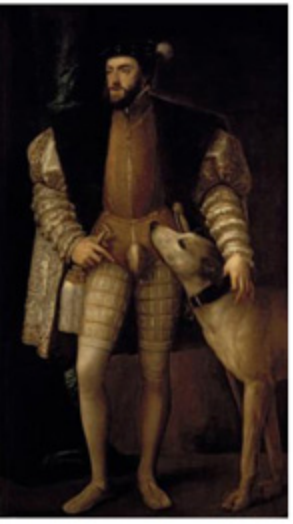
That's not to say they are humourless, or worthy, or even grandiose. Many are charming, even comical. Some conjure brilliantly the rural harmonies we left behind long ago, others the value working dogs continue to play in our lives, even in these technology-focused times. Time and again they reflect on how a creature that is a third of our size, and which cannot speak our language, still succeeds in quelling our deepest fears and anxieties.

In truth, if ever there was a time we needed to surround ourselves with fitting imagery of dogs, it is now. Here in the UK, we own nine million of them. In France, Italy and South Africa, it's about seven million. The USA tops the list, with 70 million, where the number of households with a pet is almost double the number with a child. That's an awful lot of dogs.

As conventional family structures continue to founder (more people now choose to live alone, marry later, have fewer children), pups are steadily filling the vacuum. They provide us with emotional support, obey (most of) our commands and, in return, we treat them as members of the family. Arguably we treat them better than our children; certainly better than we treat the elderly.

Left: Lengthy exposure times during the early days of photography meant that this dog, captured with his mistress in a portrait studio in 1875, failed to sit still long enough to be captured in detail.

Above: Commissioned by Queen Victoria as a surprise Christmas present for Prince Albert in 1841, this painting by Sir Edwin Landseer depicts Albert's favourite greyhound, Eos, alongside her master's gloves, hat and cane.



Surveys conducted in both the UK and the US last year reveal that many owners would feel more devastated by a dog running away than the break-up of a long term relationship. More than half of dog owners admit to buying their pets a Valentine's Day present.

Indeed, spending on dog-related merchandise has outstripped the high-street average for years. In fact, it's positively booming. From chiffon harnesses, to doggie cupcake kits, anxiety-relieving tonics, 'pawdicures', dog yoga classes, dog therapists (to treat separation anxiety and depression), even exhibitions of contemporary art and a television channel designed specifically for four-legged viewers, the canine marketplace boasts everything to fill your needs, and then some.

All of which begs the question, why, in this day and age, are neglect and abandonment still an issue? The British rehoming charity Dogs Trust handles around 45,000 calls each year from people trying to give up their pets. And the RSPCA picked up 102,363 strays last year, of which only about half were reunited with their owners. That leaves many thousands of dogs that weren't. Space in UK shelters is limited: every day, twenty-one dogs have to be euthanized. In the US, where the problem is much worse (the ASPCA estimates 3.3 million dogs enter shelters each year), that figure is closer to 1,800 per day.

Where does this obsessive, contradictory behaviour concerning dogs come from? We can't lay everything at the internet's feet. These attitudes and actions are ingrained in our culture, inherited from schmaltzy china sets and biscuit tins, in myths such as Greyfriars Bobby (a terrier who supposedly watched over his master's grave for fourteen years), in children's literature, television and Hollywood. From *Lassie* and *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* via *Old Yeller*, *The Littlest Hobo*, *Hooch*, *Beethoven*, *Dog with a Blog*, we're steeped in half-truths and fables. It's no wonder our expectations have become muddled.

The idea of the dog as a cosseted being, wholly recused from strenuous labour, is Victorian. Prior to that, unless you were very rich (usually a member of the court) a dog would first and foremost have been a replaceable animal that had to herd, hunt or protect for its living.

But at around the same time that William Henry Fox Talbot was up to his elbows in salts and acids attempting to fix the first photographs on paper, two other important adjustments to our way of seeing the animal world were afoot, adjustments that would have a profound effect on our dealings with dogs.

First, animals began to disappear from daily life. Slaughterhouses and livestock markets were expelled from the centre to the outlying edges of the city, chiefly so that society's growing squeamishness about the killing of animals could be assuaged. Animals bred for use – with the exception of horses – disappeared almost entirely from view. Then, in 1839 – the same year that Fox Talbot announced his findings to the Royal Society – carts and barrows pulled by dogs were banned within fifteen miles of London's Charing Cross station. Compassion towards dogs was suddenly seen as civilized, whereas cruelty suggested moral delinquency.

That same year and less than a mile away, in Soho, the naturalist Charles Darwin opened his first notebook on the transmutation of species. He had recently returned from his voyage aboard the brig-sloop *Beagle*, and on his desk lay specimens awaiting identification.

A dog lover to the last (he owned five terriers, a retriever, a Pomeranian, a pointer and a deerhound), many of Darwin's ideas were explained by analogies with dogs. Indeed it was partly the Victorian mania for breeding dogs (an encyclopaedia of dogs published in 1800 lists twenty-three breeds; by the end of the century, the number was nearer 350) which led him to question the effect of such interventions on innate instincts. The first conformation dog shows, in which breeds are measured according to a prescribed standard, was held in Newcastle in 1859, the same year Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*.

All of these ideas concerning dogs – their looks, their nature, our treatment of them and our relation to them – were bubbling away at the surface of Victorian life, trickling slowly into established codes of behaviour. To those unmoored by Darwin's ideas concerning natural selection, what better way to refute the idea of 'nature, red in tooth and claw' than lavishing care on a fluffy parlour pet? The smaller breeds in particular became quite as fashionable as a box at the opera, as did doggy accessories. By 1840, London boasted fourteen shops specializing in ornamental collars.

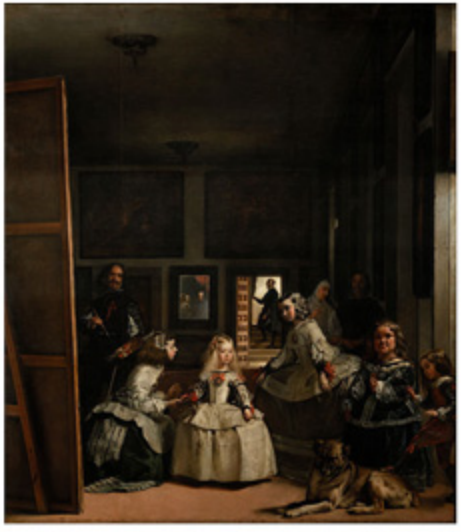
The women of the realm had Queen Victoria's example to follow. The newly crowned monarch was hopelessly in love with dogs. Hours after her coronation, in 1838, she was discovered giving her spaniel, Dash, his usual bath.

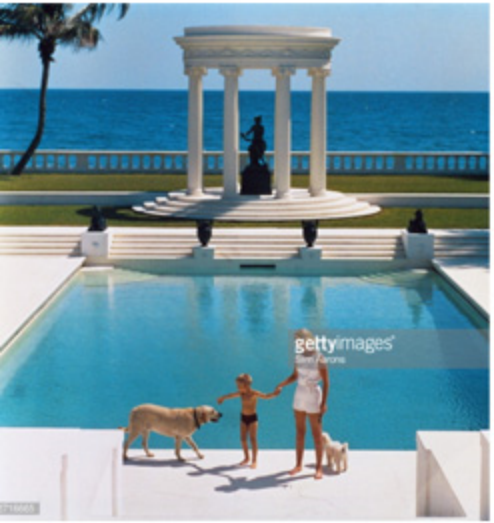
Among the menagerie of animals that later belonged to her and Prince Albert were collies, deerhounds, greyhounds, terriers and mastiffs, and she introduced two new breeds to Britain: the Pekingese and the Pomeranian. At one time she had thirty-five of the latter. Turi was her favourite, and he travelled everywhere with her, nestled on her lap among the great folds of black bombazine. Legend has it he was on her bed when she drew her last breath.

But if the notion of keeping animals regardless of their usefulness is a Victorian invention, dogs have been close to the heart of humankind for very

Left: TBC

Below: Diego Velazquez's 1656 ensemble portrait of the family of King Philip IV, named for the maids – '*Las Meninas*' – fussing over the Infanta Margarita, includes one of the royal hunting dogs in a prominent position at the front of the canvas.

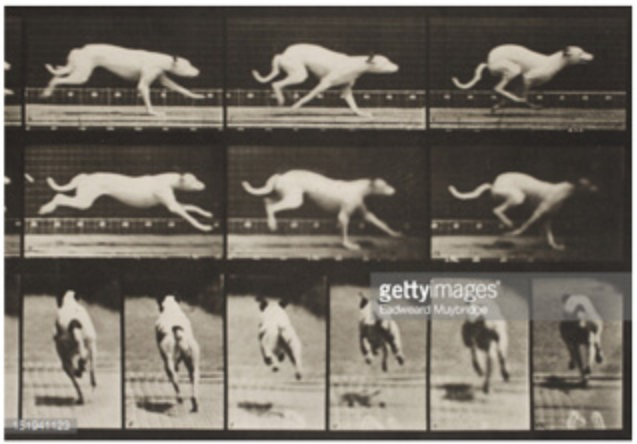


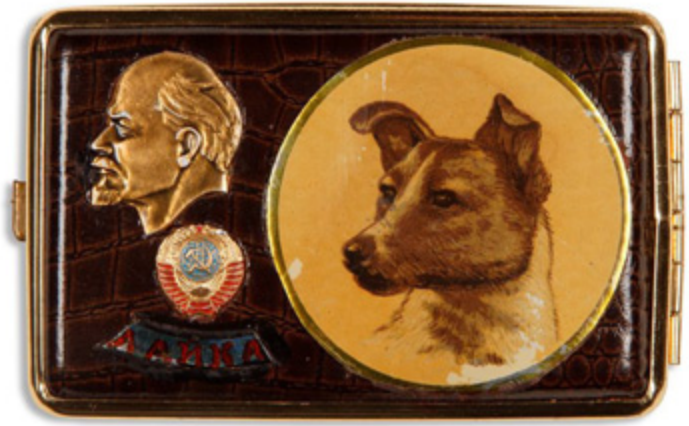


Left: CZ Guest, a horsewoman, author and socialite, with her young son and dog in front of the swimming pool of the Villa Artemis in Palm Beach, 1955. The photographer, Slim Aarons, was renowned for his images of the upper classes enjoying the good life.

Below: Dogs were some of the many animals photographed by Eadward Muybridge for the ground-breaking studies of animal locomotion he conducted between 1872-1885.

Right: Laika, the first living being to be sent into orbit, was one of several Soviet dogs who took giant leaps for mankind during the 1950s and 1960s. She became a cult hero, her image plastered over cigarette packets, toys and household items.





much longer, and to understand the complexity of that relationship, we need to go back thousands rather than a couple of hundred years.

Before we learned to sow and reap wheat; before we hammered spear-heads or shifted counters on the abacus, we fell into partnership with the grey wolf. Popular theory has it that it was the wolf rather than us that chose to initiate an alliance, by hovering at the edges of the fire, eating our surplus meat and then deigning to allow us to domesticate it.

In turn, they helped us eat, carry, labour and stay alive. Without dogs, humans would never have enjoyed the feeling of safety that allowed them to evolve from hunter–gatherers into farmers with permanent settlements. But far more intriguing – and romantic – is that dogs soon became a means of charting the world and understanding its many peculiarities. They inspired the names of the constellations. Plato assures us that behind those goofy faces they were actually first-rate philosophers. The Egyptians made them gods. In Classical mythology they guarded the underworld and waited ten years for their master to return home. In Arthurian Legend they could see the wind, and for Aesop they offered instruction in the art of contentment.

The love that flourished between our two species must have happened early on, as evidenced by the number of prehistoric people who chose to be buried *per canem*, presumably so they could enter the afterlife together. Dogs were often interred with a bone or a blanket.

What seems to have cemented the relationship is the dog's skill at reading our patterns of behaviour and our moods, then learning and anticipating them. It's made us think they are crazy about us. Many are the dog owners who insist their pet completes and understands them in a way no other person can. 'The average pet owner … can be to his pet what he is not to anybody or anything else,' wrote John Berger, in his book *Why Look at Animals*

Left: Georges Seurat's 1886 painting *La Grande Jatte* includes no fewer than three dogs hidden among its cast of 50-odd wealthy Parisians enjoying a Sunday afternoon on the banks of the river Seine.

Below: TBC

(1980). Furthermore, 'the pet can be conditioned to react as though it, too, recognizes this. The pet offers its owner a mirror to a part that is otherwise never reflected'.

Perhaps it's only natural that so many creatively inclined minds, whether poets or painters, have sought to puzzle out this unique and mutually rewarding *entente*. The history of art is certainly rich with examples. Those sixteenth-century dukes, emperors and kings portrayed by master portraitists such as Titian, Van Dyck and Velasquez often have a dog at their side. As was the custom at the time, the animal's presence came loaded with symbolism. Nobility, loyalty and tenaciousness were canine attributes.

Intriguingly, hordes of artists have also chosen to paint themselves in the company of a dog. Many more still were owners themselves, including Rembrandt van Rijn, Thomas Gainsborough, William Hogarth, Gustave Courbet, Edwin Landseer (Queen Victoria's favourite), Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo, Norman Rockwell, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Lucian Freud and David Hockney. Perhaps it's because the companionship and affirmation a warm dog offers is a panacea for the lonely life of an artist. Perhaps dogs simply ground a flight-prone mind.

It wasn't until the seventeenth century, when Dutch and Flemish artists began focusing on everyday life, rather than history or myth, that any sign of a dog's real pursuits and nature began to appear. In these kinds of paintings they are pictured at the market, drooling over cuts of meat, or watching the kitchen maids at work, even urinating on the pillars at the back of churches.

Here in England, it was George Stubbs who led the dog to centre stage. Though horses were his first love, dogs ran a close second, and he was one of the first to approach them as beings with their own special character and beautiful form, rather than as generic or symbolic.

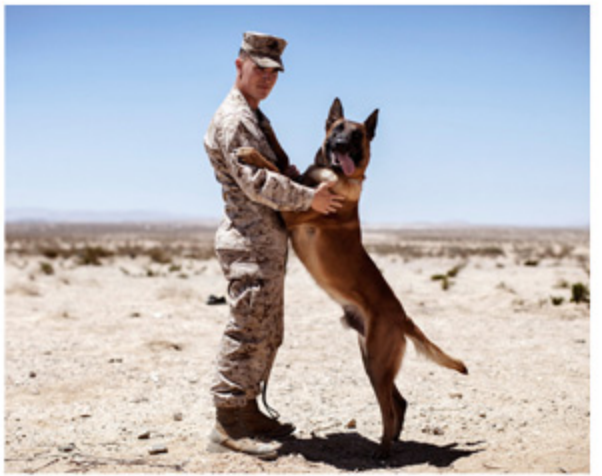
Given the domestic dog's sudden prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, it's unsurprising that the same era gave rise to a sort of heyday for dogs in art. Landseer's hyper-realistic (if at times uncomfortably anthropomorphic) portraits lined the walls of many of the royal residences. And John Singer Sargent made no bones about his love of dogs. His loose, lively brushwork was perfect for capturing the wriggling Yorkshire Terrier belonging to Beatrice Townsend, for example. Though its paw is clamped in his mistress's hand, the dog seems moments away from making his escape.

Something I'd never noticed before researching this book is the number of dogs hiding in plain sight in the works of the Impressionists. There they are on the Japanese bridge in Claude Monet's garden at Giverny; in the foreground of Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*; lying on the riverbank of Georges Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, crouched by the sides of tables and even under the bath in the domestic scenes favoured by Pierre Bonnard.

Andy Warhol, Lucian Freud and David Hockney, three of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, were and are great dog-lovers. With Hockney and Freud particularly, the tenderness of the connection radiates from every stroke. Freud once said that he was 'interested in people as animals … I like people to look as natural and as physically at ease as animals, as Pluto my whippet'.

Given the varied and reverential treatment dogs have received from artists over the centuries, it's odd that the history of photography has failed to produce any comparable examples. Certainly, if dogs appear, they are almost never the main focus, and only ever considered in relation to their human owners.

August Sander's early twentieth-century catalogue of the people living in and around Cologne, classified according to profession and class, included



Keith Arnatt's 1976-9 series *Walking the Dog* pictures dog owners and their pets on the pavements and country lanes of Tintern, Monmouthshire.

a subset of men with their dogs. Sander was interested in types and how those might represent the social order, so the matching of breed and profession seems pronounced – the schoolteacher with his friendly, practical dog, the showman with his rough dog, the notary with his refined breed, and so on.

Diane Arbus sometimes included dogs in her photographs of people – her Lady Bartender, for example, and her Carnival Hermaphrodite. Usually it was a means of suggesting we should re-evaluate initial impressions or preconceived ideas. In the case of Blaze Starr (1964), the body of the notorious burlesque performer is captured mid-shimmy in her living room, but, just behind, sits her tiny white dog looking distinctly puzzled. Along with her perfectly placed cushions, house plants and macramé, the pup marks her out as much more bourgeois housewife than aloof temptress.

Keith Arnatt's 1976–9 series *Walking the Dog*, in which dog owners local to the photographer's hometown of Tintern, Monmouthshire, are depicted full length with their dog at their feet, is probably the only truly dog-centric work. The black-and-white images gain everything in being side by side, where repetition underscores both owner and dog's individuality. They're overflowing with period detail, too: all flared trousers, sheepskin and shaggy hair.

Truly, the time is ripe for new ways of seeing and portraying the dog. For one, in tandem with huge advances in the field of photography, the twentieth century has brought with it scrutiny of the dog's inner life. Whether dogs remember much beyond yesterday, for example; whether they dream, experience jealousy or guilt, or whether they empathize.

We know now that they have the same brain structures that produce emotions in humans, and that those structures undergo the same chemical changes as ours do. Love, joy, fear, anger, disgust, excitement and distress are all within their range, which must – eventually – have an effect on the way we rear and treat our dogs, as well as what we expect of them.

The best of the work being produced today considers whether our understanding of dogs can ever be more than conjecture. Whether in the spirited shadows captured by Thomas Roma at his neighbourhood dog park; John Divola's sketch-like capture of the dogs who chase his car in the California desert; Dougie Wallace's tongue-in-cheek survey of the canine mega-elite, or the anonymous couple who spent a lifetime trying to photograph their obdurately un-photographable black dog, the images on the following pages open our eyes to a far wider, more nuanced and ultimately far more rewarding view of our closest animal companion.

It is only a view, though. We may think we understand them, but ultimately our judgement of a dog and its behaviour and intellect is almost always affected by our own way of perceiving the world. 'We seem to judge the worth of every animal on the planet, according to what they can give us or how much they resemble us,' explains the American photographer Traer Scott, who has been making portraits of dogs almost her entire life. 'Can they think like us? Can they feel like us? It's the wrong way to look at it because we're not acknowledging their innate worth. There are so many different kinds of intelligence in animals that are nothing like ours. However much we like to think we understand them, they probably understand us better'.

Charlotte Dumas

THE SEARCH-AND-RESCUE DOGS WHOSE HEROIC EFFORTS
AT GROUND ZERO ON 9/11 PROVIDED THE WORLD WITH
A SPARK OF HOPE AMONG THE DEVASTATION

RETRIEVED, MOXIE, WINTHROP, MA, 2011