SESSION 03 · UNIT 1 — LIGHT & OBJECT · Oct 06, 2026

Roger Fenton & Timothy H. O'Sullivan

Fenton 1819–1869 · English — O'Sullivan c.1840–1882 · American

War, expedition, and working within real constraints



Valley of the Shadow of Death · Fenton, 1855

KEY WORKS

- Valley of the Shadow of Death, 1855 — road strewn with cannonballs, Crimea (Fenton)
- Council of War, 1855 — Lord Raglan, Omar Pasha, and Marshal Pélissier (Fenton)
- A Harvest of Death, 1863 — Union dead at Gettysburg (O'Sullivan)
- Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, 1873 — Wheeler Survey of the American Southwest (O'Sullivan)

CONTEXT

Roger Fenton and Timothy H. O'Sullivan worked a decade apart, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, but they share a job description almost no photographer before them had held: official photographer to a war. Fenton was sent to the Crimea in 1855 by a British publisher anxious to counter mounting public criticism of the war, traveling with a horse-drawn photographic van that doubled as darkroom and living quarters — necessary because his wet-collodion glass plates had to be coated, exposed, and developed within minutes, on-site, before the chemistry dried. Working under instructions not to photograph the dead or wounded, he produced calm, composed images of camp life, officers, and empty battlefields, most famously the shell-strewn road he titled Valley of the Shadow of Death. O'Sullivan, photographing for Mathew Brady's and then Alexander Gardner's Civil War survey teams less than a decade later, had no such restriction — his Harvest of Death is one of the first photographs to show American war dead exactly as they lay. After the war, O'Sullivan carried the same portable wet-plate darkroom west, photographing the geological surveys of the Colorado Plateau, the Grand Canyon region, and the Great Basin. Both photographers, in other words, built their entire visual language around a horse-drawn darkroom and a hard chemical deadline — the same kind of real-world constraint you're about to meet with your own object today.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Fenton and O'Sullivan didn't have the luxury of working however they wanted — wet-plate collodion gave them minutes, not hours, and a horse-drawn van instead of a studio. Every image here is a negotiation with a deadline. As you shoot your object today, notice what you're negotiating with: time, light, a pod-mate's patience. Working within a real constraint isn't a compromise — it's often exactly where the strongest images come from.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Fenton was instructed not to photograph the dead or wounded; O'Sullivan photographed almost nothing else at Gettysburg. Does a photographer have an obligation to show the full truth of what they see, or is choosing what not to show also a legitimate creative decision?
2. Both photographers built their whole working method around a horse-drawn darkroom and a hard chemical deadline. What's the modern equivalent of that constraint for you today — and does it make your work worse, or just different?

MORE IMAGES



Council of War · Fenton, 1855



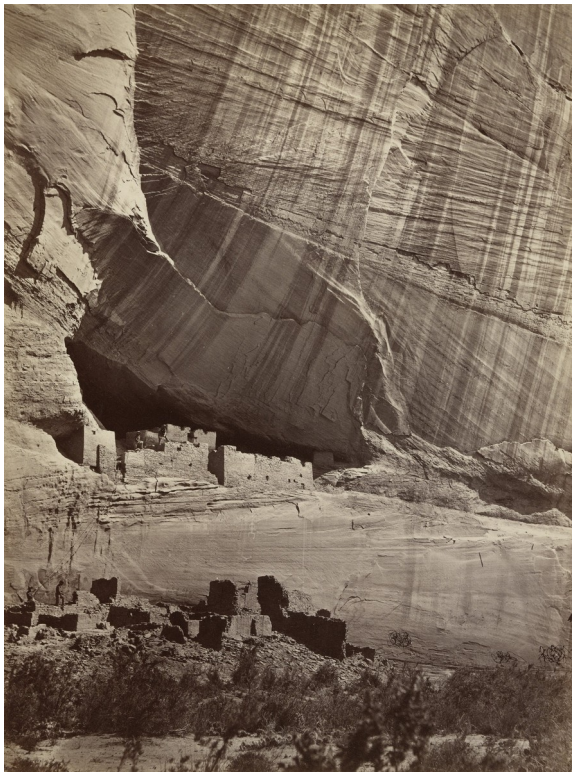
Fenton's photographic van · Fenton, 1855



The Cookhouse of the 8th Hussars · Fenton, 1855



A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg · O'Sullivan, 1863



Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle · O'Sullivan, 1873



Black Cañon, Colorado River · O'Sullivan, c.1871