
MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH

The Return of Vittorio Sella

A distant view of a snowy range ... has a strange power of moving all poets and persons of imagination – Douglas Freshfield, *Round Kangchenjunga* (1903)

I first heard his name over 30 years ago. I was working with Bill Brandt on an exhibition of 20th century landscape photography at the time. Our show, *The Land*, was presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1975. We included grand mountain photographs, including masterworks by Ansel Adams, Yoshikazu Shirakawa and Bradford Washburn. Vittorio Sella (1859-1943) was reputed to be one of the greatest photographers of mountains. If my recollections are accurate, I looked at Sella photographs at the Alpine Club but failed to find anything I thought would appeal to Brandt. (Maybe the prints weren't in the best condition). If I'd known more about Sella, perhaps I would have travelled to Biella, where he had lived – between Milan and Turin – to seek out his archive. The moment passed, but Sella's name continued to flicker at the edge of my awareness of the history of photography. His kind of photography always appealed to me – I devoured the Sierra Club 'Wilderness' books that came out in the 1970s and curated the first exhibition of Ansel Adams held in Europe (at the V&A in 1976).

It fell to a friend of mine, the late Michael Hoffman – publisher at Aperture in New York – to instigate the long overdue return of Vittorio Sella. Aperture brought out *Summit*, a large-format, splendidly printed, Sella monograph in 2000. On the cover was a breathtaking telephoto image of – appropriately – the summit of Siniolchu as seen from the Zemu glacier in Sikkim. It was taken in 1899 but the peak, as delicately patterned as frost on a window, stood out dramatically against the kind of deep, dark sky that we associate with Ansel Adams. The preface was by Adams himself and reflects the generosity of spirit that made him champion other photographers – from Timothy O'Sullivan in the 19th century to Brandt in his own time. He wrote that 'The purity of Sella's interpretations move the spectator to a religious awe. Sella has brought to us not only the facts and forms of far-off splendours of the world, but the essence of experience which finds a spiritual response in the inner recesses of our mind and heart.'

Adams's words came, of course, from beyond the grave as he had died in 1992. However, his remarks contained his unrivalled experience of photographing in the mountains. He admired Sella, he added, for 'The exquisitely right moment of exposure, the awareness of the orientation of the camera and sun best to reveal the intricacies of form of ice and stone, the



165. Vittorio Sella, 1859-1943, *carte de viste* (Alpine Club Photo Library)

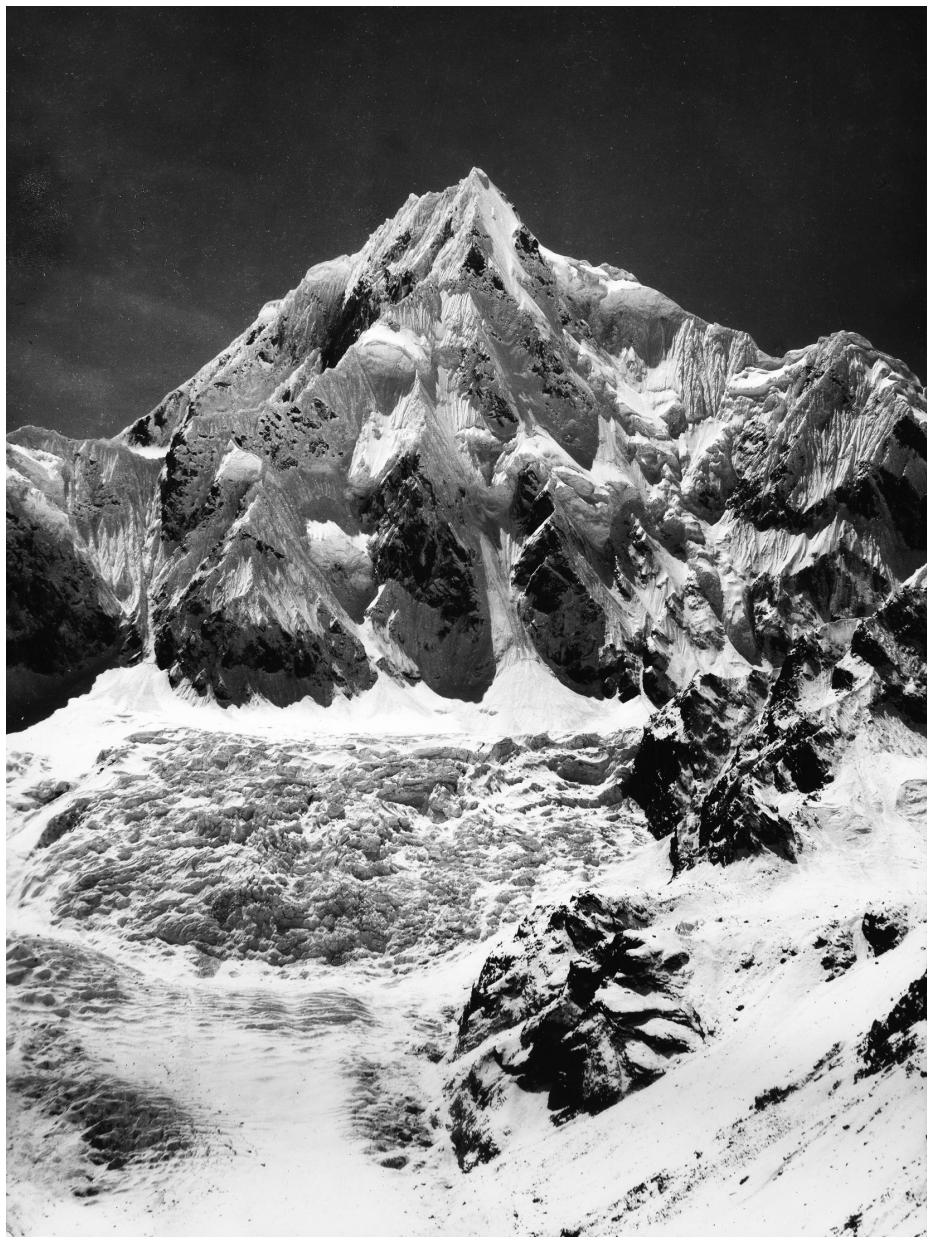
unmannered viewpoint...there is no faked grandeur; rather there is understatement...' Adams's preface – so eloquent and exact – was published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* in December 1946. What was originally published as an appreciation, three years after Sella's death, became – when reprinted in 2000, with minor errors corrected – a major step in the Italian photographer's return to the public domain.

In order to publish a beautifully printed, large-format book like *Summit*, Michael Hoffman brought together not only funding from well-wishers but also a coalition of interests. Ansel Adams was the ideal figurehead,

but the supporting cast were also distinguished. The book's foreword was contributed by David Brower, who led the Sierra Club through its most active decades - and had exhibited Sella's photographs and initiated the Adams essay back in 1946. Essays were contributed by mountaineers Greg Child and Paul Kallmes and an art historian, Wendy M Watson (of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley, Massachusetts). Sella's work belongs to all of these constituencies. Greg Child's essay immediately tells us something that is more obvious to a mountaineer than to a viewer with little experience of the places in these photographs. Take Sella's heroic, six-part panorama from 1909 of the Baltoro glacier, featuring K2 (the world's second highest mountain), Broad Peak (Child: 'a vast empire of a mountain; Manhattan could fit onto its upper snowfields') and Gasherbrum IV. Child remarks that Sella did three extraordinary things in this panorama: he had 'crammed more information into his image than the eye normally sees, and the effect was startling'. Secondly, 'Sella's camera had captured a sense of movement - the relentless ancient ritual of ice, the thirty-five mile long Baltoro glacier, chiselling away the mountain flanks and conveying the rubble at a speed of a few feet a year.' Third, Sella had photographed the mountains as an experienced climber: an expedition nearly 50 years later used this panorama and other Sella photographs of Broad Peak like 'roadmaps to plot their way up its 10,500-foot west face'. (The supposed falsehood of photography has been enthusiastically overstated in recent years).

Paul Kallmes, building on the biography of Sella published by Ronald Clark (*The Splendid Hills*, 1948) and the excellently organised archive at the Fondazione Sella in Biella, provided a most useful guide to Sella's career, including descriptions of his major phases of work and special expeditions from 1879 to the finale in the Western Himalaya in 1909. I have followed Kallmes's outline in the following paragraphs, augmenting his remarks with observations of my own, which derive from visits to the Fondazione Sella in 2005 and 2007. Like others before me, I have had the pleasure and benefit of conversations with two extremely knowledgeable individuals - Lodovico Sella, descendant of Vittorio and head of the foundation, and Luciano Pivotto, conservator of the photographic archive. On the first visit I took part in the lively discussions of a group of international experts included Maria Francesca Bonetti, Régis Durand, Giuseppe Garimoldi - author of the important *Fotografia e Alpinismo* (1995) - Filippo Maggia and Ulrich Pohlmann. On the second visit I spent a week studying Sella's prints, negatives and publications in more detail. I found that his photographs - because of the way tonal subtlety is combined with dynamic compositional organization - constantly reminded me of the early Ansel Adams.

Sella grew up with photography and mountains. His father, Giuseppe Venanzio Sella, not only photographed as a serious amateur but published the first Italian treatise on photography - *Plico del Fotografo* (Turin, 1856). Vittorio Sella's uncle, Quintino Sella, founded the Club Alpino Italiano in 1863. The young photographer grew up in a family that was prominent



166. 'The purity of Sella's interpretations move the spectator to a religious awe,' –Ansel Adams. Siniolchu (68878m) Sikkim, from the Zemu glacier, 1899. (*Vittorio Sella, Alpine Club Collection*)

in industry, through its linen mill in Biella, and politics – Quintino Sella, trained as an engineer and was a statesman in the tumultuous decades of the 1860s and 70s. Vittorio Sella's education included languages – including English and German – as well as drawing. He received lessons from the painter Luigi Ciardi. Sella exhibited a charcoal drawing and a painting, both of mountains, in 1882. As a young man, Sella read Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (*Voyages dans les Alpes*, 1787), John Tyndall (*Glaciers of the Alps*, 1857) and the classic accounts of mountaineering in the 1860s and 70s by Edward Whymper. He took up photography in the age of wet collodion, which – for maximum rapidity of exposure and sensitivity – required glass negatives to be coated and developed on site. His first efforts, preserved at the Fondazione Sella, located in the family's former linen mill, show the usual problems of applying the syrupy collodion mixture evenly to the glass. There are also problems with fogging – light leaking into the camera or the dark tent and onto the negative – and with focusing the lens: the foregrounds are often out of focus and therefore not merely empty of information but aesthetically formless. Sometimes the whole negative was out of focus. However, despite all the technical glitches, from the first box in the archive – *Prime Fotografie, 1879-80* – Sella demonstrated an interest in rhythmical composition. Some of his early alpine compositions are almost abstract. As usual with collodion negatives, the skies in these early photographs came out dead white (because Sella, to avoid the characteristic mottled effect, painted them out). He printed these early efforts on albumen paper.

Very fortunately, Sella persevered with the skills required to photograph with large cameras in the mountains and become a virtuoso of panoramic photography at high altitudes. A new negative came into general commercial production in 1880 – the gelatin dry plate. This not only allowed photographers to leave their mobile dark-tents and chemicals at home but gave them vastly enhanced exposure speeds and improved spectral sensitivity. Sella took a wet collodion apparatus onto the Alps in 1879 – when he made his first ascent of Monte Mars, in the mountain range north of Biella. In 1880 and 1881, he took dry collodion plates (which he had prepared himself in advance). In 1882 he began using the new, factory-coated gelatin dry plates. Soon there was a new printing paper too: Printing Out Paper. P.O.P., as it subsequently became known, was made and marketed from 1884 onwards by J H Obernetter in Munich – a commercial centre important to Piedmont. As its name implied, P.O.P., sometimes called Aristotype, was a paper for printing out in daylight, under a negative in a printing frame. This was the original means of printing, practised by Henry Talbot, the inventor of positive/negative photography. As it happens, several prints by Talbot (apparently once owned by Michael Faraday) belonged to Sella's father and were presumably known to Sella himself. P.O.P. (still in production) gives delicately warm-hued prints with a very long tonal range. These characteristics differed from the other new possibility – gelatin-silver paper (also introduced around 1880) that required print-



167. K2 from Windy Gap, 1909. (Vittorio Sella, *Alpine Club Collection*)

ing by chemical development and produced the comparatively cold-toned black and white image that is characteristic of much of the 20th century. Both these type of prints were usually gold-toned to enhance tonal richness and as a means of preventing the prints from fading – unfortunately, not always successfully. When perfectly preserved, Sella's prints convey the effect of pristine purity he evoked in these words: 'the great cold cleanses the air'. In old age he often toned his prints, in pink and yellow, by hand. Sella also made good use of the newly-perfected photo-mechanical colloid process to print copies of his panoramas in ink rather than silver salts.

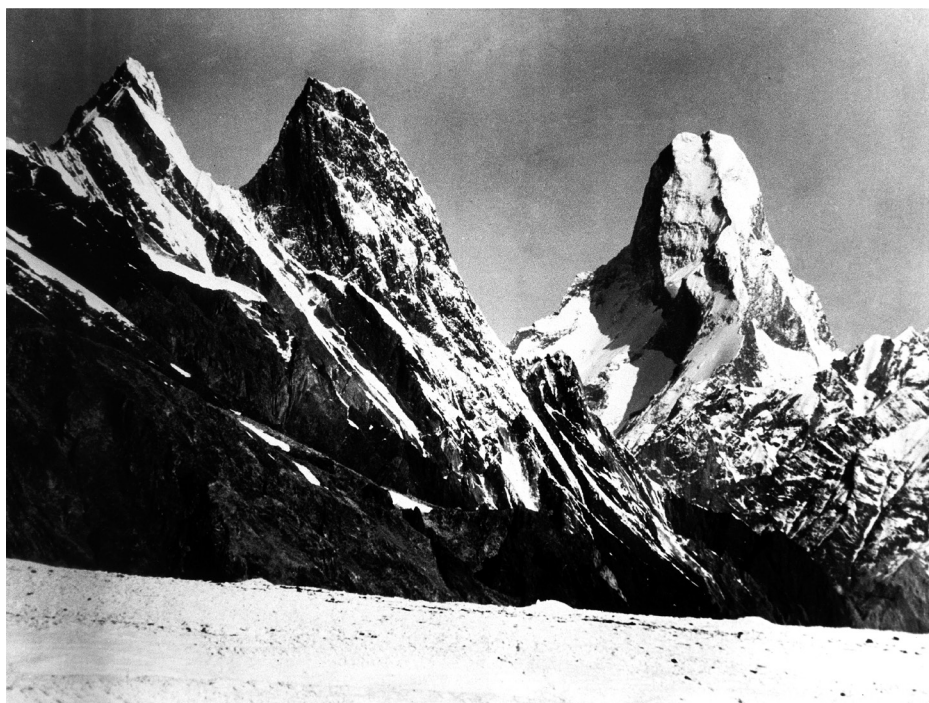
The Alps provided Sella's first great challenge as climber and photographer. Although his first attempts with a camera began in 1879, the key year was 1882. In March that year Sella and his guides achieved the first winter ascent of the Matterhorn, a triumph saluted by the Alpine Club in London. Later that same year Sella sent a significant letter to the Dallmeyer Camera Co. in London: 'I beg you to undertake immediately the camera for plates 30x40 cm described in my letter. I beg you to make it in the best mahogany, with every care possible, as I will serve myself of it for taking photographs in the high Alps ... Here we have splendid weather and I burn with impatience to start photographic excursions.'

A camera taking glass negatives approaching 12x16 inches in size makes the 10x8 inch cameras of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams seem modest. Sella's camera, which Kallmes describes as weighing 40lbs (and each negative 2lbs), is in the heroic mould of the great photographers of the American West a generation earlier – William Henry Jackson, Edward Muybridge, Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. It would be instructive to see their prints exhibited side by side. As it is, one can compare Sella's work with his European contemporaries quite easily. Many of them appear together in the pages of *The Alpine Portfolio*, edited by Oscar Eckenstein and August Lorria (London, 1889). Even when translated into reproductions printed in collotype, Sella's alpine photographs make those of even distinguished rivals, like the English photographer/mountaineer William Donkin, seem like photocopies. They lack Sella's air and sparkle, as well as his compositional skill.

Sella used his large camera like a magnifying glass. He was aware that such photographs as his could be more than a secondary record of the experience of high places. He once remarked: 'The wish to reproduce faithfully the atmosphere of the panorama even more accurately than it can be seen by the eye or retained by the mind delights the photographer.' Although Sella built a solar enlarger, which still exists, as part of his darkroom and laboratory at San Gafalo in Biella, he preferred to work with large negatives and generally offered contact prints for exhibition and sale. His photographs were distributed commercially for many years by the Spooner agency in London.

Sella extended his range as a climber and photographer very significantly with three visits to the Caucasus in 1889, 1890 and 1896. On the 1889 expedition Sella and his companions made the fifth ascent of Mount Elbrus (5642m), Europe's highest mountain. Kallmes points out that, on returning to his darkroom, Sella inserted figures into his photograph of the summit of Elbrus – 'to add a human dimension to the work and dramatize the scale of the mountains'. This is a practice in which Vittorio indulged on a number of occasions. They are usually easy to identify with the naked eye. Using smaller cameras, Sella was also able to make vivid portraits of the people met with on the three expeditions.

Sella increased his range still further thanks to the patronage of Prince Luigi Amadeo di Savoia, Duke of the Abruzzi (1873-1933). Abruzzi led the first great mountaineering expedition to Alaska in 1897, with Sella as official photographer. It led to the conquest – to use the language of the time – of Mount Saint Elias (5489m) and a substantial volume by Filippo de Filippi, *The Ascent of Mount Saint Elias*, published in London in 1900. The book contains a wealth of scientific data and reproductions of Sella's photographs. Before it was published, however, he had taken part in another major expedition. With the British mountaineer, Douglas Freshfield, Vittorio explored Kangchenjunga in Sikkim and Nepal in 1899. Although heavy snowfalls obstructed the climbing, the fresh snow provided Sella with spectacular photographic opportunities. His image of the summit of



168. Mitre Peak and Muztagh Tower, 1909. (*Vittorio Sella, Alpine Club Collection*)

Siniolchu, one of the cluster of peaks around Kangchenjunga, derives – with many other masterpieces – from this expedition.

The Duke of Abruzzi invited Sella to join him on an expedition to Uganda in 1906. The aim was to explore the Ruwenzori, also known as the Mountains of the Moon, whose snowy peaks rise from tropical forests. No one had climbed the higher peaks before 1906. Abruzzi's expedition not only climbed but mapped and photographed the peaks. Sella also photographed the local people and the flora. A substantial volume – published in Milan in 1908 – recorded all aspects of the expedition. Abruzzi next led a seven-month expedition to the Karakoram mountains in the Western Himalaya. The climbing team failed on K2, but reached approximately 7470m in the ascent of Chogolisa, the highest that any human had yet climbed. According to Paul Kallmes, here 'Sella produced a portfolio of images that stands alone for its time – a striking record of the Karakoram, arguably the finest visual representation of a mountain range that has ever been done'. A volume of nearly 500 pages was published in London to record the expedition's findings, including Sella's photographs, in 1912.

The term 'visual representation' opens up a quite different prospect – the position of Sella's photographs within the history of image-making. Wendy M Watson addressed this in *Summit*, telling us the fascinating fact

that Sella read P H Emerson's passionate essay on photographic art – *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (1887) – shortly before leaving for the Caucasus in 1899. Sella copied a quotation by the painter J F Millet from the book, onto the flyleaf of his expedition diary. Part of it reads: 'We should accustom ourselves to receive from nature all our impressions.' The passage connects with the impulse we find in Wordsworth, in which the poet opens himself to nature as the source of inspiration and goodness. Watson tells us that the bookshelves of the Sella family home contained the works of Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley. The Romantic reverence for mountains was carried deep into the 19th century in the writings of John Ruskin, which were also to be found on the Sella bookshelves. The literary background and many other aspects of Sella's formation as a photographer have been helpfully explored by Marina Miraglia in *Paesaggi Verticali: La fotografia di Vittorio Sella 1879-1943* (Turin, 2006).

I was struck some years ago by the fact that one of the first important early English collectors of fine photography – mainly of landscape – was a poet and a disciple of the 'Lake Poets'. Studying Chauncy Hare Townshend and the photographs he bequeathed to the V&A in 1868 suggested to me that photography was seen by both its artists and their audience as a 'natural poetics' in which nature itself directly impressed not only the artist's receptive spirit but the practitioner's sensitive plate - producing 'sun pictures', as they were then called. Such observations remain speculations, but the whole question of the spiritual meaning of mountains has been refocused with great clarity by Robert Macfarlane in his book *Mountains of the Mind* (2003).

There have been many other changes in recent years in the intellectual and physical landscape in which Sella's photographs are situated. One cannot think with equanimity of the current state of the places he photographed, as great glaciers recede and high peaks are stripped of snow. Sella's achievement now seems not only immense but unrepeatable.

* This essay is based on the foreword to the catalogue written by Mark Haworth-Booth for the exhibition *Frozen in Time: Mountain Photographs by Vittorio Sella (1859-1943)* at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London, 25 June to 14 September 2008. Some 50 of Sella's extraordinary vintage photographs and multi-plate panoramas were on display, borrowed from the Fondazione Sella which owns the Sella Museum, established in 1948 at the laboratory in his home town of Biella.

