Wilhelm von Gloeden and the Construction of a Sicilian Idyll
“If photography produced for us only the best, we should indeed exist in Utopia!
As it is, photography reproduces everything, good, bad, and indifferent.”

W.B. Richmond, Is the Camera the Friend or the Foe of Art?

Introduction

In 1878, German photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden made a pilgrimage to Southern Europe that mirrored the actions of countless Northern Europeans in the nineteenth century. Relocating to a Sicilian fishing town, he discovered a bucolic innocence in a region he saw as a remnant of ancient civilizations: a rural economy composed of farmers, shepherds, and fishermen that had failed to progress with the industrial Northern Europe and was seemingly unchanged. Von Gloeden began to photograph and found international acclaim, exhibiting his work at the Royal Photographic Society (Brookes and Simpson 273), in Austria, Berlin, and the Linked Ring in London (Swinnen 707). His widely consumed images, most prominently classicized male nudes, formed a romanticized portrait of Sicily. Though this image was based on the idolatry of ancient empires, Sicily’s perceived political inferiority to Northern Europe and the British Empire gave the photographs imperialist implications. Von Gloeden’s depiction of an idyllic and exotic Sicily enraptured his audience of Uranians (nineteenth-century homosexual, classicist men), reflected imperialism, and amplified the Victorian attraction to the south.

Thesis, Purpose and Methodology

A complex interaction between Northern and Southern Europe has been explored in a literary context by the broad thesis “Constructing the South” (1998), among others, which established imperial conceptions of the south and related these to the south’s appeal to Northern Europeans. However, that study did not significantly analyze photographic evidence of imperialist views. Ulrich Pohlmann’s catalogue Wilhelm von Gloeden: Taormina (1998)
addressed an idyllic depiction of Sicily in von Gloeden’s work, but largely neglected the influence of imperialism. This paper will demonstrate that von Gloeden’s images are reflections of imperialism and classicism. It seeks to provide a crucial and novel connection between classicist opinions of the south and imperialist theory, investigating how they interacted to produce the Victorian conception of Sicily, and how they informed von Gloeden’s photography.

This paper will conclude that von Gloeden’s photography reflected and facilitated imperialism and classicism through its representation of the south. It will first place von Gloeden’s photographs in political context by discussing how imperialism in the British Empire informed Northern European political views of the south. Imperialist sentiments are later identified as pastoral themes in photography. These photographic depictions are paralleled in the literature and travel writing examined in this paper and explained by cultural context. In this analysis of photography and its cultural effect, this research will show that von Gloeden’s photographs contributed to imperialism and classicism.

**Background and Cultural Context**

Von Gloeden’s photographs found an international stage during the end of the nineteenth century, at the height of the British Empire and industrial prosperity in Northern Europe. His audience’s imperialist political background prompted a view of Southern Europe as an underdeveloped, stagnant place that had preserved ancient lifestyles - an image that was immensely attractive to classicist Northern Europeans whose power had been constructed on the model of Ancient Rome.

When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert designed the Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, they commissioned a fresco from William Dyce titled *Neptune Resigning to Britannia the*
Empire of the Seas, in which Neptune, representing Rome itself, relinquished an imperial crown to Britain (Broughall). Indeed, the Victorian reign brought the British Empire enormous international power reminiscent of that of Rome, which reinforced and inspired their fascination with the ancients. Classicism had been rampant throughout the nineteenth century, but in the Victorian period it was transformed into a political statement and imperialist reflection. The similarities between the empires of Britain and Rome led Northern Europeans to turn their eyes to the modern Mediterranean, the birthplace of the classical empire they so idolized. The south was “pre-eminent for the power of bringing the Greek past forcibly before us” (Sketches 175), wrote influential critic and historian John Addington Symonds, demonstrating the Victorian association of the south and antiquity. Instead of a flourishing world power, Southern Europe was found to be impoverished, left behind in the modern environment. This southern struggle assured the British Empire that they were the true heirs to the classical glory that had surpassed the Mediterranean; their success was a clear translatio imperii, a transfer of rule. Thomas Carlyle, in 1840, quipped, “Romans dead out; English are come in” (172). This attitude gained momentum throughout the century. Years after Carlyle, Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas remarked, “All or nearly all the terms which indicate the political status of Greater Britain and its component parts are a legacy of Rome” (1).

Sicily was of a particular interest: it had a history of empire, having been under Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, and Spanish rule. Late nineteenth century travel writings such as William Agnew Paton’s Picturesque Sicily and F. Hamilton Jackson’s Sicily emphasized Sicily’s political history, often placing this heritage in their first chapters to glorify Sicily’s past before remarking on its modern descent to a region “brutalized by suffering” (Jackson 242) in an
economically decaying region. Poverty was viewed by disdainful Victorians as not only the fault of the poor but as linked inherently with moral degradation and transgression (“Constructing the South” 122). John Henry Newman’s writing typified the theory of southern glory decayed through sin:

[Sicilian] history begins with the earliest times and lasts thro' Greek and Roman annals, down to the eras of the Saracen invasions and Norman chivalry. In it I read the history of . . . high aims and manifold talents corrupted by sin and humbled by continual failure. (248)

Victorians were quick to characterize the south as a failed and “corrupted” power, and, by contrast, identified the British Empire as a fulfillment of the south’s past potential. In his 1870 Slade lectures, John Ruskin emphasized Britain’s imperial capacity, saying, “There is a destiny now possible to us . . . We are still undegenerate in race; a race mingled of the best northern blood . . . And we are rich in an inheritance of honour, bequeathed to us through a thousand years of noble history” (215).

The “inheritance of honour” Ruskin speaks of involves, for his audience, not only the nobility of northern history but a classical heritage hijacked from the people of the Mediterranean - who, if Britain was “undegenerate”, had decayed through sin (a demise that justified feelings of northern superiority). Martin Bernal said of orientalism in the Victorian Era, “ancient civilizations could be completely appropriated by Western scholarship because the modern inhabitants, it was argued . . . in their decadence, had 'lost' the high culture of their ancestors” (235). This is equally true of attitudes toward Southern Europe. By adopting the
cultural heritage of the south, a heritage of idealized empires, northerners legitimized their perceived imperial right.

Robert Browning’s 1855 “By the Fire-Side” wrote of Italy as a “woman-country, wooed not wed / Loved all the more by earth's male lands” (554). The description presents a passive country, one “wooed” instead of wooing, compared to the active and empowered imperial Britain. Britain is characterized as masculine, a quality equated to dominance. It was considered a superior empire that loved the weaker Italy all the same. This was the stance of many northerners; though the south was degenerate and politically inferior, it charmed with a classical reminiscence that enthralled the north.

Viewing the northward shift of European empire as a validation of their authority, Northern Europeans found their discussion of antiquity to be a discussion of themselves. They acknowledged the strong classical history of the south and juxtaposed this previous power with its modern state. W. A. Paton declared that Sicilians were, “if we may apply the term to a degenerate race, classic Greek” (287). For photographers in Sicily and their audiences, who looked on from a flourishing north, the presence of a classical past in a degenerate region provoked an imperialist attitude that not only recoded identities of the European North and South, but also shaped sexual definitions. Sicily’s sin and moral decadence when considered with its classical connotations was interpreted in part as homosexuality. The appropriation of this classical heritage carried with it Greco-Roman sexual definitions, which shaped cultural and sexual discourse. As the University of Catania’s Stefania Arcara describes, it allowed Sicily to become “the terrain where a complex and variegated cultural debate on questions of national identity, history, sexuality, and modernity takes place” (“Constructing the South” 132).
The south’s idyllic nature, being the region where pastoral poetry itself had been developed, established an appealing culture: one of rustic farmers, shepherds, and fishermen leading simple, unhurried lives. As the portrayal of Sicilian lifestyle starkly contrasted with Victorian industrialism, the Northern European audience for Sicilian travel writing and photography eagerly romanticized Sicily as having preserved an unaltered classical heritage. Paton in *Picturesque Sicily* wrote:

> No traveller in this enchanting island can remain insensible to the poetical interest that clings to and adorns so many places and things Sicilian . . . he will not fail to call to mind the romantic tales of Greek and Roman mythology. (xiii-xiv)

An imperialist perspective fostered the perception of Sicily as a place of degeneration and transgression. However, the construction of the south as a polar opposite of northern development gave it new appeal. This, with the south’s classicist origins and perceived moral and sexual decadence, aligned the region with homosexual communities. Von Gloeden’s audience of homosexual Northern European men (Uranians) romanticized Sicilian lifestyle and environment. Sicily’s contrast to the restrictive Northern Europe made it incredibly appealing to these Uranians, sparking tourism that gave Sicilian photography new renown.

**Mediterranean Passion: Uranian Identity and Southern Pilgrimage**

“The inspiration for my favorite theme of life in Antiquity, which was new to me, came in the classical regions of Sicily. The verses of Theocritus and Homer, which transported me back to the world of Arcadian shepherds and musicians, worked their spell on my spirit,” wrote von Gloeden (qtd. in Mussa 11). Sicily represented a classical counterpart to the bustling
Northern Europe; in the north, industrialization had altered landscape and lifestyle. This classicism, enhanced by props, is evident in fig. 1, which exemplifies von Gloeden’s style.

![Image](image.jpg)


Because Sicily had failed to industrialize, its poverty was thought to indicate a place where landscape and way of life were preserved. Photographs from the 1907 *Sicily, the New Winter Resort* “illustrate the hitherto unexploited and unphotographed interior [of Sicily]” (Sladen xv). The hills, “beautiful by reason of their nakedness” (*Sketches* 210), praised here provide a suitably classical physical setting for many photographs, which identified their subjects as Sicilian and the atmosphere as classical. As von Gloeden wrote, “the landscape had to lend [itself] to the notion in order to reinforce the mood of it all” (4). Preserved, tranquil nature implied a similarly
ideal culture where the complexities of modern life could be evaded. John Addington Symonds saw Sicily as such, writing:

On the Mediterranean shores . . . the same occupations have been carried on for centuries . . . The same fields are being ploughed, the same vineyards tilled, the same olive-gardens planted, as those in-which Theocritus played . . . City and country are not yet wholly harmonized by improved means of locomotion. Then the people of the south are perfectly unchanged. *(Studies 317)*

Fritz Loescher emphasized the appeal of Sicily’s conserved beauty in his article *Sizilianische Freilichtbilder*. Of von Gloeden’s image of Sicily he wrote, “The treasures of this happy isle speak to us of those days of ultimate artistic bloom whither we to this day look back with wonder and longing. A place full of natural beauty, the island has preserved them all” (182).

As a gay man in Germany, where “unnatural fornication” between men was banned by German Criminal Code (Johnson 22), von Gloeden profoundly felt the allure of an allegedly sexually liberal southern lifestyle. The image of a southern opposite created a destination appealing in its vast difference from northern society, drawing on the “cultural polarities . . . associated with the Mediterranean and the Northern European countries” (Østermark-Johansen 43). Uranians, wishing to escape the constraints of their northern homelands and hoping to find a shared homosexual identity, conceptualized Sicily as a place where the sexual attitudes they viewed in Greco-Roman societies had been maintained. This idea was confirmed by von Gloeden’s photographs of classicized, often homoerotic nudes. The idea was immensely appealing to Northern Europeans from Lord Byron and Johann Goethe to Symonds and Oscar Wilde, who traveled southward to find a more welcoming society.
The south’s depiction as a total opposite to the north combined with its depiction as transgressive and classical to assign the south a strong homosexual identity; homosexuality was, like the south, linked with the classics and decadence. Shelley, himself an expatriate in the south, called such traits “the emblem of Italy - moral degradation contrasted with the glory of nature and the arts” (171). The south advertised classicism and consequent homoeroticism as well as tranquility. “All that is missing in England, all that exquisite food and sunshine, and random ancient religion, is there” (Viscusi 24).

Von Gloeden’s Self-Portrait in Arab Garb shows the photographer dressed in a turban that evokes the ancient Arab control of Sicily. It identifies von Gloeden with not only a classical south but with a homosexual south. Like Byron’s 1813 portrait Lord Byron in Albanian Dress, a Romantic example of an identification with the south with similar costuming, the work uses Mediterranean dress to express its subject’s adoption of a southern, sexually liberal identity. Byron’s attraction to the south is evident in his relocation to Italy, then Greece. In both portraits, Sicily’s ancient connotations are used as “a code for the expression of dissident desire” (“Hellenic Transgressions” 135).

A southern pilgrimage became a means of rejuvenation after life in a limiting society. Symonds, who died in Rome after years of annual trips to Italy (during which he was a fervent patron of photographs in the style of von Gloeden), published a poetic homage to the south:

You shall grow wise; and, walking, live again

The lives of buried peoples, and become

A child by right of that eternal home,

Cradle and grave of empires . . . (Many Moods 3)
Britain’s imperial fixation with Rome is evident from the northern traveler living “the lives of buried peoples” in the “cradle and grave of empires”, but the poem also exemplifies the sense of belonging Uranians felt. As a scholar of Greek poetry and a gay man, Symonds found the south a restorative escape that let him “live again”. Sicily’s association with homosexuality gave Uranians shared identity and ideological support, and the classical transgression that formed such an association wasadvertized and constructed through photography. The appeal of Sicily to the Uranians is perfectly reflected and perpetuated in von Gloeden’s work.

**Photography in the Construction of Sicily**

In the third issue of *The Studio*, 1893, Wilhelm von Gloeden’s *Caino* and photographs from Baron Corvo accompanied the article “The Nude in Photography: With Some Studies Taken in the Open Air”, alongside an editorial titled “Is the Camera the Friend or Foe of Art?”. This issue discussed the artistic validity of photography compared to painting, a debate that became more urgent as time went by. The emergence of photographic exhibitions were acknowledgements of artistic merit that provoked an argument against photography’s legitimacy. *The Studio* claimed that “the fact that we knew the production to be a matter-of-fact rendering projected by a lens upon a plate, would of necessity break the spell, and bring the whole performance down to the level of a clever piece of copying” (Pringle 88). It is also argued that, “We can photograph the handsomest man, or the prettiest woman in the world . . . but we cannot photograph a demigod with an aggregate of beauties unknown in any one body” (88). In a following article Gleeson White claimed the photograph could become a “crowd of facts” (“Studies in the Open Air” 106), though he later wrote of photographic nudes: “The poise of the
bodies, the perfect carriage of the head, and the irresistible truth of the arrested movement . . . tell out with such certainty” (106).

These words profess photography’s undeniable realism - its ability to observe and preserve a moment, a significant contributor to the success of photographic eroticism. Voyeurism is implicit: von Gloeden’s nudes possessed a unique intimacy because their photographic nature ensured that their subjects had verifiably stood before the photographer’s lens (Lucie-Smith). Von Gloeden practiced photography as an observant art. “I clung to the feasibility of portraying real-life scenes as my eyes saw them,” he wrote. “I have never considered it necessary for photography to deny its origins in order to elevate itself” (qtd. in Mussa 11). These origins, for von Gloeden, are not just reality but the origins of a photograph’s setting: a classical heritage that facilitated an erotic viewing of Sicily in its association with homosexuality and antiquity.

Amateur photography, practiced by von Gloeden at first, gave the medium a vast range. The process was portable and cheap enough that postcards and small prints (the main formats used by von Gloeden and contemporaries) became part of a large tourist market. Increased tourism was triggered by the construction of a homosexual and paradisal Sicily, which brought waves of classicist Uranian travelers with a taste for the exotic nudes that von Gloeden produced. Photographs became more readily consumed, and so functioned as a major vehicle for erotica. Photography’s voyeuristic intimacy and inexpensive production allowed it to claim the sexually-charged market that painting and engraving had once occupied (Werbel 98). This association of photography with pornography sanitized painted nudes and irrevocably sexualized photography.
The objectivity of the camera not only made von Gloeden’s photographs more erotically appealing, but it generated an allegedly reliable image, which established archetypes that defined the south as inferior, contributing to the hierarchies between north and south. These photographs depicted an other and opposite culture (Verdicchio 1) to that of the north with a documentary eye that appealed immensely to von Gloeden’s Uranian audience.

**Victorian Classicism in Photography**

“We only need to reconstruct in fancy the green gardens and orange-groves, where fair-haired Normans whiled away their hours among black-eyed odalisques and graceful singing boys from Persia.”

*John Addington Symonds, Sketches in Italy and Greece*

The classicism that connected Northern European imperial identity with the south, perceived as the origin of British and northern power, is a defining motif in von Gloeden’s work and that of his contemporaries. It has been established that the south helped form a northern political identity, as it was constructed as a passive counterpart to northern empire; the north could often define itself by what the south was not. The south also held immense appeal as a place of classical heritage, to which northerners felt entitled. It was thought to be a place of simplicity and sexual freedom, in part as well because it was so different from the north. Classical drapery and props prevailed in von Gloeden’s work, and its anachronistic quality intensified the south’s appeal and gained him a wide artistic platform. This, paired with the setting of Sicily, intentionally relayed a classical idyll. The photographer himself said:

> My models are peasants, shepherds, fisherman . . . I was able to observe their thinly clad figures outdoors . . . and then stimulate their minds with tales from
Homer’s epics . . . and the props and the landscape had to lend themselves to the notion in order to reinforce the mood of it all. (von Gloeden 4)

Von Gloeden’s classicist photographs maintained an image of the Sicilian people that fulfilled northern fantasy born of an idolatry of the ancients and an appropriation of southern heritage. His subjects, who themselves were “replicas of the past” (Riggs 177), were placed in an environment that implied idealized “ages of old” (von Gloeden 4). One of von Gloeden’s nude studies was reprinted in 1909 as the frontispiece for the narrative and travel guide *Seekers in Sicily* and titled there as *Demeter’s Well-Beloved Children*. Though the scene it depicted is void of props and transparent allusions to classicism, the widespread approach to nudes and the perception of Sicily itself gave all von Gloeden’s nudes classical connotations.

The ideal of beauty for von Gloeden and his classicist audience, with their veneration of the ancients, was strongly rooted in Greco-Roman depictions of the body. *The Studio* claimed that “[c]ivilized peoples . . . have accepted the superlative beauty of the human form as one of the chief elements in the classical ideal of art” (“Studies in the Open Air” 104). Human form was manifested by its natural state - an ideal nude. Without excessive staging nudes still displayed pure classical form. Von Gloeden’s nudes, “amid ruins of amphitheatre and fountains and terraces” of Sicily where “the young figures - whether draped or undraped - look as natural as in any painting of the Golden Age, or of classical times” (“Nude in Photography” 215). Nude figures and Sicily interacted in harmony, each reinforcing the other’s classicism. An 1898 critique of von Gloeden stated that “background must be such as to make the nude figure appear perfectly natural” (Adams 63), and, indeed, von Gloeden utilized a classical landscape to imply classicism in all his nudes.
Von Gloeden made use of props and stereotyped costumes, like the turban in fig. 2, to assign his models ethnic identities that reiterated the south’s classical past. This racial categorization functioned as evidence of Sicily’s ancient heritage, showcasing remnants of cultures that had occupied it. Imperial powers from the Normans to the Spanish were revealed in the ethnic composition of the south. Racial categories also enabled imperialism: the races exhibited were often those considered inferior by white Northern Europeans. This placed Northern Europe above Southern Europe, adding to the political and economic hierarchy between north and south. Photography accomplished this effectively with its “efficacy . . . in establishing [racial] hierarchal types and maintaining the definition of what was being represented as ‘other’” (Verdicchio 1), exercising its documentary quality to display and label the “others” of the exotic south.

Photographs titled *Sicilian (Saracen Type)* and *Sicilian (Arab Type)* decorate *Picturesque Sicily* (Paton 72, 168) and a photograph similar in mood and content to von Gloeden’s portraits of villagers is captioned “Norman and Saracen Types” (192). Sicilian characters like these encountered in travel writing reinforced photographs’ racial categories. In *Seekers in Sicily* they are described as having “eagle-like Saracen profiles, but grey Norman eyes” (Bisland and Hoyt 184), in *By-Paths in Sicily* “the men [are] darker and leaner . . . of the Greek type, perhaps . . . There is also a type almost African in tint and feature” (Heaton 282). *Picturesque Sicily* describes the locals of Syracuse as being:

as distinctly Greek in type . . . the people of Castrogiovanni or Caltanissetta, for instance - Saracen in type . . . in Cefalù we had discovered traces of Tunisian and Norman blood. (Paton 287)

As the ancient Greek, Roman, and Arab civilizations that ruled Sicily were represented in the ethnic categories established by von Gloeden’s photographs, race indicated a classical heritage - “a survival of an ancient race” (Jackson 242) - for “the Sicilian people’s sense for classic beauty lies in their blood” (Loescher 182).

**“This Happy Isle”: The Idyll of Poverty**

The characterization of Sicily as the “happy isle” imagined by Fritz Loescher and von Gloeden’s northern audience is an Arcadian one. Shepherds and farmers pose in pastures by the sea, establishing the common image of untouched landscape and lifestyle that so appealed to Northern Europeans. The lifestyle of the south was thought to have remained unchanged; economically and politically, the region was underdeveloped and, culturally, it was a remnant of
a classical heritage that was frequently appropriated by northern classicists (as evidenced in previously discussed photographs). Symonds, observing the stagnancy of the south, wrote of:

the fisher boys of Castellammare . . . the wild Apulian shepherds . . . laughing in the olive-fields and vineyards . . . But though the gods are gone, men remain unaltered . . . their joys and sorrows, their vices and virtues, their loves and hates, are still the same. (*The Greek Poets* 317)

The Victorian conception of a morally degenerate south is found where Symonds claims “the gods are gone”. This assertion shows Sicily as a backward-facing region, out of its time, with “crumbling temples of ancient gods” (Paton xiv), and it implies the south’s glory has long passed. Sicily was “an imagination of vanished gods” (Bisland and Hoyt 184). This communicates that ancient, pagan culture remained - perhaps inordinately as Northern Europe and the gods themselves were thought to have progressed - but dignity and greater civilization abandoned the south to shift northwards. Symonds strikes a balance between presenting an idyllic, preserved culture and the imperialist depiction of a region so unchanged it was underdeveloped. This balance allowed Uranians to idealize the south while maintaining an imperialist feeling of superiority over it.

Symonds’ prose itself is lyrical, emphasizing the mythical nature of the south. Walter Pater’s pastoral and reverential *A Study of Dionysus* exhibits a similarly flowered prose and dramatic description, as does Paton’s *Picturesque Sicily*. All create a mystic atmosphere, remarkably idealized and nearly fictionalized by these writers’ hyperbolic and sensational descriptions, and all emphasize the “day labourers and shepherds” (Jackson 230) of the Sicilian pastoral. The Sicilian people, according to their descriptions in travel writing and photography,
were rustic laborers who farmed Theocritean fields or fished on Polyphemus’ sea. These appealing associations allowed Sicilian labor to be easily glorified; photography had cemented an image of a sloth-like, paradisiacal lifestyle that involved more pan flutes than poverty.

Though von Gloeden’s medium was considered a reflection of facts, his photographs were often fictionalized portraits of an island filled with tranquility and repose, where rural poverty signified an ideal and ancient simplicity. “Men and beasts were settling themselves on hammocks in the hollows; the herdsmen in taciturn groups leaning on goadsticks - black as Moors they were” (192), claimed Eliza Heaton in 1920. By referencing “Moors”, she further assigns Sicily to classical empires and assists the Victorian racial coding that helped to construct the south as an opposite to the Anglo-Saxon north. This account in By-Paths in Sicily is one of many that conceived Sicily as a veritable Arcadia; Seekers in Sicily (1909) even contained a flagrantly pastoral “Song of Thyrsis” in which Daphnis calls “O Pan, Pan!” (Bisland and Hoyt 136). Farmers and fishermen posed for photographs with anachronistic staffs or fishing boats that evoked their vocations. By using these props, von Gloeden placed an obvious emphasis on his subjects’ jobs, which identified them as members of a rural, rustic society, and identified Sicily as antiquated, as “pastoral habits are singularly unchangeable” (The Greek Poets 317).

In von Gloeden’s [Two Nude Young Men in a Garden] (fig. 1), the “green gardens and orange-groves” (Sketches 165) described so rapturously by Symonds give shade to two boys, nude and adorned in classicized crowns. Their relaxed poses, the setting of the garden, and an ancient-looking vase are used to enforce an Arcadian theme. Though the boys personify ancient Sicily, they were photographed in the nineteenth century, placing the ancient and modern cultures side by side to emphasize the lack of differences, of change.
Von Gloeden’s images of fishermen use classicism to negate the hardship of poverty in Sicilian fishing communities and instead convey pastoral leisure. His fishermen appear in classicized and often erotic poses, lounging near identifying boats, spears, and nets, as in the photograph *Near Capo San Andrea* (fig. 3).

![Near Capo San Andrea](image)


The composition and array of poses mirror those of blatantly classical works such as *Terrace with Nudes*, and the nudity they contain is implicitly classical due to its Sicilian setting. Von Gloeden’s oeuvre consists overall of variations on such overtly classical scenes; even his herdsmen appear as incarnations of Daphnis and his water-bearers as transported nymphs, entirely idealized. The fishing tools in this photo immediately assign the figures an identity as fishermen, a job performed for centuries, and nudity aside the Mediterranean Sea attaches a classical association.
Though these boys have fishing nets at the ready, the tranquility of photograph and its setting invent a scene of anything but hard labor. Von Gloeden worked to maintain this quality, avoiding movement - “I never made spontaneous photographs” (von Gloeden 5) - in order to produce a serene atmosphere. The decorative images of fishermen served as a continuation of their counterparts in classical drapery, continuing the idyll of Sicily. “Pan sleeps in noontide heat, and goat-herds and wayfaring men lie down to slumber by the roadside” (Sketches 6) and Sicilians were exposed to solely "perpetual sunshine and perpetual ease - no work . . . that might degrade the body” (Studies 414); the people of the south supposedly enjoyed an Arcadian bliss, cementing the conception of an idle culture. This confirmed the imperialist theory that the south had lost power through decadence - a pure recreation and contented unwillingness to change, displayed in photographs by seemingly carefree scenes - which contributed to the south’s attraction as an escape from a hurried, constricting north. During such an escape, Oscar Wilde wrote:

[Romance] comes in boats, and takes the form of fisher-lads, who draw great nets, and are bare-limbed . . . I was at Nice lately: romance there is a profession plied beneath the moon. (Aldrich 91)

Von Gloeden’s fishermen, much like those observed by Wilde, represented poverty in a highly romanticized light. By placing his models, who were iconically identified as fishermen and laborers, in an environment with heavy classical associations, von Gloeden gave them a picturesque quality. Southern European labor and its everyday culture, like the region itself, became romanticized. The young male laborers that occupied von Gloeden’s work acted as
reincarnations of antiquity, even performers and spectacles, to attract the northern gaze and maintain the imperialist construction of a non-industrial, simplistic south.

**Conclusion**

An image of the European South emerged in the nineteenth century from the prosperity of Northern European empires, showing a culture built on the remains of ancient civilizations but failing to sustain their glory. The British Empire held huge admiration for antiquity and characterized their own imperial success as a continuation of Ancient Rome while the nineteenth-century Mediterranean region had degenerated, supposedly through decadence. This created a hierarchy that placed Northern Europe above a radically different Southern Europe, politically, racially, and economically. However, in the recognition of the south’s classical past and its failure to progress, the south became represented as a place where lifestyle remained unchanged; imperialist observations led Victorians to consider the south classical, as evidenced by their literature and travel writing. Wilhelm von Gloeden’s photographs in particular reflect this classical conception, and therefore the imperialist opinions that formed it, by portraying classicized male nudes and the locals of Sicily. The idyll of Sicily and the south that von Gloeden constructed made the south incredibly attractive to his classicist and generally homosexual Northern European audience. This image was a result and reflection of the imperialist notion of an unchanged, opposite south, where a northern traveler could still find the bucolic shepherds, lounging nudes, and simplistic way of life depicted in von Gloeden’s photography.
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