WHAT PHOTOGRAPHS DO

THE MAKING AND REMAKING OF MUSEUM CULTURES

EDITED BY
ELIZABETH EDWARDS
AND ELLA RAVILIOUS

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For all museum photographers, past and present

Contents

List of figures

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

This publication explores the role of photographs in the making and remaking of museum cultures. It draws together multiple strands of research into different aspects of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)'s photographic cultures: from the collecting of photographs to serve specific pedagogical or comparative research purposes, to the ways in which photographs have been, and continue to be, used by the Museum to promote and disseminate images and ideas. Interjecting at points throughout the volume are the voices, eyes and hands of practitioners, foregrounding their role as creators and mediators historically and today.

What Photographs Do is the culmination of an Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Professorship held by Professor Elizabeth Edwards with the V&A Research Institute (VARI). This affiliation has been enabled as part of a major transformational grant awarded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the V&A in 2016. Building on the V&A's long history of collections-led research and research-led postgraduate teaching – the V&A was the first national museum to establish a dedicated Research Department and has co-delivered, with the Royal College of Art, a world-renowned MA in the History of Design and Material Culture for almost 40 years – the Foundation's generous support has enabled us to undertake a series of research projects, programmes and partnerships that seek to transform access to, and understanding of, the collections that we hold in trust for the public. Some of these strands of enquiry have centred on a single object, exploring and capturing many different forms of knowledge about it and communicating that knowledge using new physical and digital tools. Others have focused on particular museological challenges, such as those posed by contemporary digital

creative practice, which defies traditional museum collection, classification and display systems. Others are experimenting with new ways of teaching with collections and learning through making. Working towards the creation of new open-access collections and research facilities as part of the development of V&A East (due to open 2024–5), others explore how to break down barriers to engagement with stored museum collections, developing and piloting new modes of 'serendipitous' encounter.

What these projects and programmes all have in common – as this publication exemplifies – is that they not only involve research into or on objects within the V&A's collections, but are interested in what those collections *do*: what they have done in the past, what they are doing now and what they could do in the future.

The V&A is known for holding one of the largest and most significant collections of photographs in the world. But most of the photographs discussed in this book do not formally exist within those collections. As these essays explore, the presence, impact and influence of photography beyond and around the edges of the formal collections is pervasive and multi-faceted. And even the boundary around the formal collections is a fluid one, with photographs often having crossed boundaries, from one curatorial collection to another, between museum collection and library reference resource, or between collection object and 'non-collection' object. These border crossings challenge preconceptions of the fixity of museum objects once they have entered museums and, more importantly, highlight the role that photographs – and, by implication, museum objects more widely – play in the continual and evolving formation of different kinds of knowledge and different ways of understanding the world. This book continues that endeavour and commitment to interrogating and understanding these processes and practices and, in doing so, offers a new contribution to the ongoing shaping and reshaping of museum cultures.

Joanna Norman, Director, V&A Research Institute,
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1
Museum cultures of photography: an introduction
Elizabeth Edwards and Ella Ravilious

What are photographs 'doing' in museums? Like the x-ray permeating objects to reveal internal structures (figure 1.1), photographs permeate museum practices at all levels – display, collections management, conservation, retail, publicity and exhibition publications, for instance. Photographs inhabit museums in huge numbers. However, these
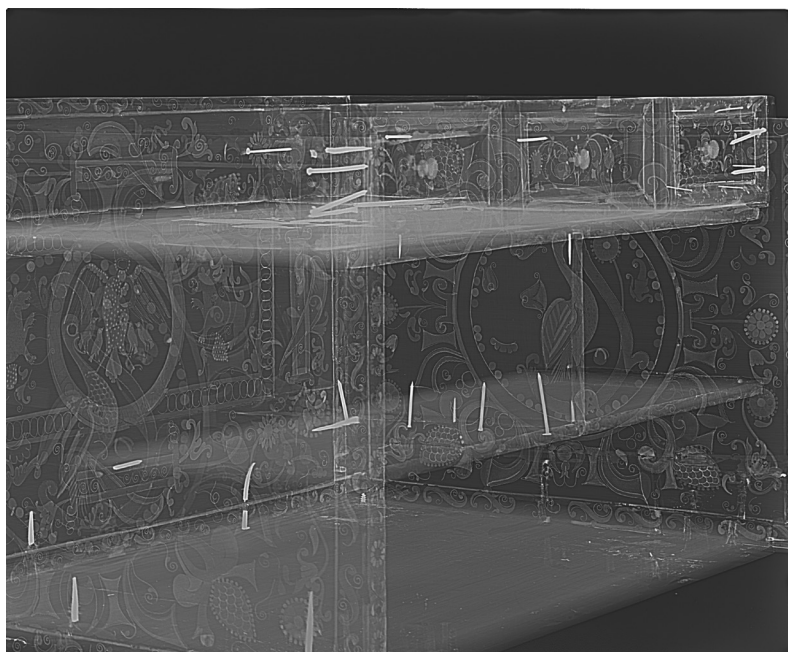
Figure 1.1: X-ray image of a cabinet of Barniz de Pasto (W.5-2015), 2017. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

photographs are rarely part of formally accessioned collections: despite their epistemic and historical presence, they are active yet invisible, there but not there. Museums are shaped and defined through photographic practices that constitute and reproduce values, hierarchies and knowledge systems, generally with little cognisance of the power of these practices. Such images and their uses are, as Crane has described them, 'a lowly sort of thing' that 'appears or hides in many guises'.[1] Consequently, this book is about the work of the photographs that are not part of a museum's formal collection, although they might once have been, or might become so. It addresses a range of institutional conditions which exceeds 'the collection' as it is officially recognised.

Whether one is considering 'the collections' or the material accruals around them, museums are centres of calculation in Bruno Latour's sense,[2] where accumulated objects, networks, proximities and values become knowledge through an institution's procedures and devices. Photographs are the unconsidered heart of these processes, as they accumulate and circulate knowledge, even more so in an age when digitally available photographs of objects are at the front line of 'accessibility'. While it has been argued that museums have, for some time, been post-photographic in their increasing dependence on networked, digital and multimedia realms,[3] it remains that beneath these developments of the last three decades or so, photographs as imaging practices remain central. Since the nineteenth century, photographs have widened the reach of what museums can do and how they can function. They form both the background and the spine of museum practice, from record keeping to questions of decolonisation,[4] from archival accrual to retail source, to the degree that it has been impossible to think about museum function and praxis without encountering photographs.

This mass of photographs can be said to form an 'ecosystem': a finely balanced network of dependencies and connective tissue which create and underpin values, hierarchies and knowledge systems and which are present in the museum in dispersed multiple, folded and overlapping layers.[5] The various sites of photographic activity, from the studio through collections management to exhibitions, are nodes in the ecosystem which have their own micro-cultures that mutually inform and conflict. They form massive and shifting bodies of photographic utility and practice which translate objects into certain kinds of things and displays into certain kinds of spaces (figure 1.2). Photographs shape the texture and fabric of both internal professional procedures of museums and their external public face. They are,

Figure 1.2: Images in the exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House*, 1974. © The Robin Wade Estate.

in sum, a key organising principle of museums and markers of its 'rhetoric of value'.[6]

This book offers the first coherent exploration of a museum's photographic ecosystem. It argues that photographs do not merely reflect the changing shape and agendas of museums, but are active within their continuities, disruptions and transformations. Such arguments have been made for digital environments,[7] in that they change what museums can do and how they think. In this volume we want to tease out the work of photographs by exploring the entwined

interdependence of the technologies and apparatus (in a Foucaultian sense of a fluid and enabling set of formative discourses and practices) of photography and of curatorship. These practices and their ongoing legacies shape curatorial practice, develop expertise and construct and reflect shifting institutional values as they are performed, not only through exhibitions but also through informational, preservational and communicative functions. Here the museum is a sum of networks of meanings, skills and practices which are articulated through the presence of photographs. The book addresses the many points at which the ecosystem becomes materially visible – in boxes, files and labels, in marks on the backs of photographs, in gallery spaces, on the postcard stand, on websites, posters and databases, and in public spaces, shops and special exhibitions. All these are spaces where photographs are manifested, and where historical and contemporary practices overlap. As photographic practices, they are dispersed, impure and unfettered.[8] Their abundance saturates the consciousness of the museum and its audiences.

Consequently, this book is a contribution not only to photographic studies but to ethnographic approaches to museums that attend to the internal practices and skills of institutions as they produce and communicate knowledge. We are exploring these questions through the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) as a case study. The V&A not only houses one of the world's greatest formal collections of photographs, one that is far from static, but also has a robust history of photographic engagement and ecosystem development that dates back to the early 1850s. Like other museums, its 'ecological' assemblage of photographs has accrued through its day-to-day activities, as routine work in studios, storerooms and conservation, for instance, mediates both the objects in its care and their photographic surrogates.

Photographs which were made for different purposes, accrued serendipitously and assembled sometimes almost absent-mindedly, can be termed 'non-collections'. They are assemblages that fall outside the perception of 'the collection': they are everywhere and nowhere, yet they are equally part of that 'rhetoric of value'. However, museums are inclined to 'conceal or naturalize their own technologies'.[9] Such photographs and their practices are essential to the function of museums yet are not seen as part of their structure and purpose, despite the fact that they manage, reproduce and disseminate the museum's value system in crucial ways. Though they relate to collections, they are not *of* them.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHS DO

Theoretical and historiographical landscape

In the burgeoning critical literature on museums of recent decades, little has been concerned with photographs and the formative cultures of photographs in museums. This literature has overlooked, repeatedly, how many of the subjects addressed by critical museology are photographically driven. Only in recent years, with increased focus on digital and the virtual museum, have the performative proclivities of images and imaging practices begun to be addressed. But even in such environments, photography, as a bedrock of the virtual, is often subsumed within the discussion of the effects of the virtual world on the perception of the 'traditional' museum object. There is nothing surprising here. Photographs, or the majority of them which do not fall into the definitions of 'art' or 'fine/precious' photography, have long been marginalised as supporting information for the real business of museums. Recent explorations of media archaeology and the use of contemporary media in museums address some of the issues that concern us, for instance around conservation, documentation or the impact of technological change of practices. The emphasis, however, has been on macro-level questions about the access to, and structure of, communication, end-point experiences in galleries and online encounters, and their translational and pedagogic predispositions, with a stress on audiences.[10]

But at the same time there has been a recognition that media radically affects how museum objects are understood and alters modes of attention to objects.[11] The media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously not only stated that 'the medium is the message' but that media technologies instigate 'the change of scale or pace or pattern that [they] introduce into human affairs'.[12] In this book we consider the *longue durée* of the work of photographs in museums, and those changes in scale or pace, from the 1850s to the present. It is not a linear history, nor an archaeology of neat stratigraphy, but one that twists, turns and folds back as layers of photographic practices and lacunae shape an institution.

There is also extensive scholarship on the more general role of photography in establishing art history as a discipline, on the establishment of modernism and on the disciplinary project, often taking Walter Benjamin's essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' and André Malraux's *Museum Without Walls* as its foundational texts.[13] Similarly, there has been a solid tradition of work

on the emergence of photographic curatorship in the aesthetic and gallery realm, or as a teleological movement towards curating the 'art of photography', in both the V&A and the wider field.[14] While these studies provide important and detailed accounts, they emerge from very specific assessments of the role of photographs where museal and aesthetic teleologies merge into one another.

Where photographs are discussed more broadly within institutional structures and practices, again, it has most often been in terms of the end-point delivery of images in the exhibitionary space and as acts of representation, however complex. These acts have attracted comment as photographs have been used to construct economies of truth, points of identification and connection,[15] or, as is often the case, as visual wallpaper to set the mood or period eye of an exhibition, often without the acknowledgement afforded to other classes of object.[16] The actual practices, skills and cultural assumptions, and the challenges offered by photographs in the everyday practices of museums, have received much less attention.[17] Where such studies exist, they have seldom been integrated into the analysis and critiques of museums more broadly.

Yet in both their analogue and digital existences, photographs perform museum professionals' encounters with objects in their care, and the values that shape such encounters. Consequently, there has been scholarship on the photography of museum objects. One of the earliest was Edwards's chapter in *Raw Histories* entitled 'Photographing objects', and this has been followed over the years by studies which have explored the way in which the 'posing and arrangement of objects is a complicated balance of theory and practice'.[18] Such a balance inflects every chapter in this volume. Photography and photographs are active entities in every aspect of what it is to exercise 'curatorship', museum practice and indeed policy, the latter because photographs, though unacknowledged, shape the structures which sustain museums as institutions and anticipate their visitors' encounters with objects.[19]

Photographs as museum ecosystems were first discussed by Edwards and Lein's *Uncertain Images*.[20] A central premise of that volume is the mutability of photographs in museums. As they state, 'Outside art exhibitions, the cult of the fine print, and narratives of creative and temporal originality, the status of photographs is uncertain.'[21] They pose the question 'when does a supporting document become an historical object?' This present volume addresses that question by analysing various photographic groupings within one institution at a range of stages along a spectrum of 'document' to 'object', offering assessment

of what is gained and lost in such metamorphoses and considering the effects of such changes on wider museum epistemologies. Edwards and Morton built on this theme by studying the role and effect of museum photographs in larger museum discourses. By bringing previously overlooked photographic activity to the surface of research and collecting histories, the case studies showed how crucial photographs had been to wider research narratives in inscribing how other classes of museum object are considered.[22] Their volume also applied the idea of the 'multiple original' to museum photographs, emphasising how photographs exist in multiple contemporary forms across space, making meaning in different contexts. This has an important bearing on many of the chapters in this book.

This present book also addresses the ways in which 'communities of practice',[23] skills and knowledge are integral to the photographic ecosystem. It is a museological truism that institutions make objects into certain kinds of things and through specific institutional procedures. Consequently, different kinds of institutions have different sets of boundaries between 'collections' and 'non-collections': art museums and social history museums have different ecosystems and systems of value, but both have photographic non-collections. Research and evolving museum priorities propose or challenge notions of historical, informational or indeed aesthetic significance, which filter into curatorial practice, so non-collections become collections, or vice versa.[24]

The churning and recalibration of photographs and fractures in the ecosystem, in both positive and negative ways, has a long history. In 1998 Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford accessioned all its photographic collections *en bloc* as 'objects' in order to give them the same inalienable status as the object collections. This was to protect them from easy disposal in the face of the 'microfilm/digitise and dump' school of managerial thought, which remains more widespread than one might imagine. Conversely, in the name of rationalisation, the Ethnographic Department of National Museums Scotland disposed of its photographs in the 1950s and 1960s, largely by destruction. Of 135 collections/ objects that came to its Disposals Board in 1959, 114 were photograph collections.[25] In other cases, photographic collections were transferred wholesale. Some local museums transferred them to archive offices, as happened in Leicester, considering them 'documents', not objects. In 2012, the Tate Gallery planned to dispose of its archive of photographs of comparable artworks, which was rescued by the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, CT,[26] while the transfer of the Royal

Photographic Society collection from the Science Museum Group to the V&A in 2016 effectively enacted a major epistemic transformation and translation of that collection, as it moved across categories from science to art.[27] This is further complicated by the way in which the same technology, photography, is both collected in museums as a precious object and used as a disposable tool of collections management.[28] What links all these shifts and moves, fortunate or not, is an evaluation of the purpose of photographs in museums tensioned around collections and non-collections.

Many V&A non-collections and submerged collections are actively in the process of changing states within the ecosystem. They are being subjected to new questions, transferring from non-collections to archived collections and being sifted, reassessed and transferred to other buildings, institutions or formats. Shifts have taken place for many of the non-collections we discuss, even in the course of writing this volume. This demonstrates how rapidly and fluidly photographs continue to evolve in the museum space. A lucid example in this volume is Lederman's account of the reabsorption of Isabel Agnes Cowper into the Photography Collection at the Museum.

But it remains the case that, despite seismic shifts in some instances, 'non-collections', if acknowledged at all, exist in a hierarchical relationship with other museum objects and as such are sequestered to the margins of curatorial practice. They are seen, in many museums, as servicing 'real' collections. They are understood as merely providing information about more recognised areas of the museum's holdings, for instance how items of 'ethnographic' collection were used, how clothing was worn or how an architectural feature looked when still in situ. They are not understood as historically important or active in the museum's thought landscapes, and nor are the processes, skills and actions that make them visible. Yet photographs of huge variety, analogue and digital, are produced by museums for a diverse array of internal and external processes, to the extent that arguably museum objects are 'made' by the sum of their photographic representations. Even intentionally collected photographs, in formal 'collections of photographs', are subject to these procedures. For instance, an 1860s print of a Julia Margaret Cameron photograph (endowed with the discourse of authorship and singularity) has its value and significance ratified by reproduction in a web resource or an exhibition catalogue, and its status is produced through a meta-data of other photographs, and through an operationally invisible layering of those photographs. As Jackson and Davis note (in Chapters 6 and 15,

respectively), the same 'star' objects are rephotographed time and time again to augment their status, to the detriment of other, undigitised areas of the collection. The net result has been a tendency to underplay not merely the excess of the photographic ecosystem, but importantly the abundant vitality of what that photographic ecosystem *does* over the dispersed fields of action.

This lacuna has begun to shift in recent years. Non-collections are becoming more visible not only as a focus of study but as objects for exhibition. Various institutions have started exploring their deposits and their agency in the museum ecosystem in ways often tensioned between the competing epistemes of the aesthetic, scientific and museological, the library, the archive and the museum. There have been a number of interdisciplinary projects that have excavated the photographic deposits of institutions, practices of archiving (or not), meaning-making and flows of images in disciplinary environments in institutions as diverse as the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Hungarian National Museum, the Royal Engineers Museum in the UK or the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery.[29] Analytical exhibitions of photographs gathered for informational purposes and presented as archaeologies of institutional and disciplinary practice have been shown at Le Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris and the Kunstbibliothek of Universität der Künste in Berlin, for instance.[30]

A sustained and expansive example of this is 'Foto-Objekte', a project which addressed the intermedial dynamics of the mass of accumulated images of the Berlin State Museums and Humboldt University.[31] This project addressed externally and internally generated and accumulated photographs and both historical and current image practices of the institutions. Its multimedial approach included detailed analysis of the institutional life of the photographic assemblages from historians, archivists, artists and filmmakers, and the historical and contemporary skills and practices that constitute both the archive and its critical address. Like the collections of the V&A, these collections had links to education, preservation and industry. However, the focus of 'Foto-Objekte' was specifically on archival practices, assemblage, their scientific aspirations and their poetics over time and space, rather than the broader cultures of photography in museums and more dispersed questions of hierarchies of knowledge, visibility and labour which concern us in this volume – the work across the institution to create and apply photographs and photographic knowledge.

Steve Edwards has explored the labour of photography more generally, especially through the mid-nineteenth century when the V&A's photographic practices and culture were emerging, and Georgina Born has flagged 'the differential spaces of authority and anonymity' which mark museum photographic practice.[32] While these processes have been under-analysed, there is, again, an increasing body of work which at least nods in the direction of these practices, and which comes out of a trend towards the history of photographic efficacy in various situations. This literature has explored the epistemic and processual nature of assemblage, taxonomies, cataloguing, collecting, dissemination or the status of object photography and photo-materialities, for instance.[33]

The sprawling ecosystem also has a geo-political dynamic, as its tentacles move beyond the walls of the museum, and the critical work on ecosystems and non-collections has played an important part in this. If collections, including that of the V&A, were born of an imperial fantasy of knowledge accumulation,[34] non-collections, as the tools of such fantasies, also hold points of fracture in their marginalisation. For many First Nations and colonialised peoples, photographs, both analogue and digital, play a very substantial mediating role in access to their cultural heritage owing to the suppression and destruction of any other available historical material. Despite the fact that much of the debate has focused on objects, this quietly places photographs within debates about decentring authority in museum collections; Abdel Barr (Chapter 11) points to the role of photographs, originally made and acquired as records of colonial salvage archaeology, in preservationist and restitutive agendas in Cairo, and thus in extending the ecosystem into new spaces. Sometimes humble non-collections photographs are all that is left. For instance, museum photographs have been used to photographically reconstruct collections in Guinea-Bissau, where a set of contact prints enabled the intellectual and physical reconstruction of the National Museum collections which had been destroyed in the civil war of 1998–9.[35]

What all these strands and projects point to is the centrality of photographs, and their claims to 'reality', in the construction and maintenance of museum knowledge. This is clear, in very different contexts, in both Brandon's account of photographing for the Theatre Collection (Chapter 7) and Abdel Barr's use of Creswell's photographs of urban fabric in Cairo. These strands point to shifts in use, location and status, which are also shifts in the ecosystem and the dependencies that define it. Further, they represent an ever-expanding complexity of photographic efficacy in institutional ecosystems. Our focus in this

volume is to explore the photographic interconnections that shape museums as working institutions with varied and constituent labour, skill and practice. While they have now been joined by interactive technologies and digital imaginings, attention to the work of photographs can add to debates about representation, process and policy in museums, bringing to the surface the latent assumptions and invisible labour through which those processes are realised.[36] They frame how things are ordered, how catalogues work, how objects are known, how digital interfaces operate and how exhibitions feel and function as a rhetoric of value.

History of photographic collection and practice at the V&A

Museums and photography emerged simultaneously as disciplinary and material technologies in the nineteenth century. Although many museums took note of the emergence of photography and other media forms to record and disseminate objects and views of their institutions, certain factors made the V&A a perfect biome for photographic ecosystems to flourish. The engagement with photography (and with art reproduction more generally) of the first director, Henry Cole, and his skilful use of the medium to advance his many ambitions, made the South Kensington Museum (hereafter SKM, renamed the V&A in 1899) more advanced in photographic terms than other UK museums between the 1850s and the 1870s. Though this institutional commitment wavered significantly after his retirement in 1873, many of his photographic enterprises at the Museum continued in terms of the collecting, creation and uses of photographs. The ecosystems set in motion by his efforts continued in many distributed forms.

The V&A's connection with photography dates from the early years of the medium. With its roots in the Great Exhibition of 1851, and under Cole's direction, the Museum began employing freelance photographers from 1853 and photographers as permanent staff in 1856,[37] when Charles Thurston Thompson[38] was appointed the first Official Museum Photographer. The output of his Photographic Studio at the Museum was concerned with technical reference photography of objects for scholarly use and publication, as well as for sale to the public. The purpose of photographs was therefore, from the beginning, a function of institutional objectives and practice in art and design education, and of public utility. The Museum was also networked into

developments in the processes of photography. For instance, Captain Francis Fowke, the Museum's Architect and Engineer, made a special camera body for Thurston Thompson in 1857.[39] Similarly, William de Wiveleslie Abney was utilising photography, with the help of the on-site Royal Engineers, in his solar physics laboratory based at the Museum in 1882, and Francis Galton was given space within the South Kensington complex to create his composite photographs after the International Health Exhibition of 1884.[40]

Cole used reproductions, photographs, casts and electrotypes as vanguards and proxies to extend the reach of the museum during the 1850s and 1860s.[41] He wanted SKM to rival the British Museum and National Gallery, but it had been set up with the remit of being a teaching collection for artisans rather than a treasure house. Cole overcame this by arguing that to improve British design, students and makers needed to see the best examples. 'The South Kensington Museum's mission shifted according to opportunity and the use of the term "manufacture" was loosened strategically when required.'[42] Having an 'Official Photographer' and the services of talented military scientists from the Royal Engineers on staff lent a photographic hand to many of Cole's flagship schemes, such as that to photograph the Raphael Cartoons at Hampton Court or life-size photographic replicas of the Bayeux Tapestry in 1872/3. Cole was remarkably bold in this activity. There were complaints, articles and public enquiries objecting to his behaviour – but he often got away with it, and the place photography held in his strategies to democratise access to art and design in Britain and to expand the scope of his Museum is clear.[43]

By the time of Cole's retirement, the Museum was deeply embedded within discourses around knowledge and the formation of disciplines.[44] It was committed to the ideal of acting as a repository of universal visual knowledge entangled with, notably, those of empire, industrial might and cultural capital. The growth of the Museum's photographic holdings, which were housed in the National Art Library (NAL) (figure 1.3), demonstrate Cole's involvement in debates about which UK museum collected what things, and whether certain classes of objects were considered art, ethnography or history, and thus debates about the shape of collections.

Servicing this ideal of universal visual knowledge demanded vast quantities of photographs, and lingered as an aim within the NAL Photography Collection until the early twentieth century. Through the second half of the nineteenth century, SKM/V&A was avidly acquiring photographs. It bought whole catalogue lists from major commercial
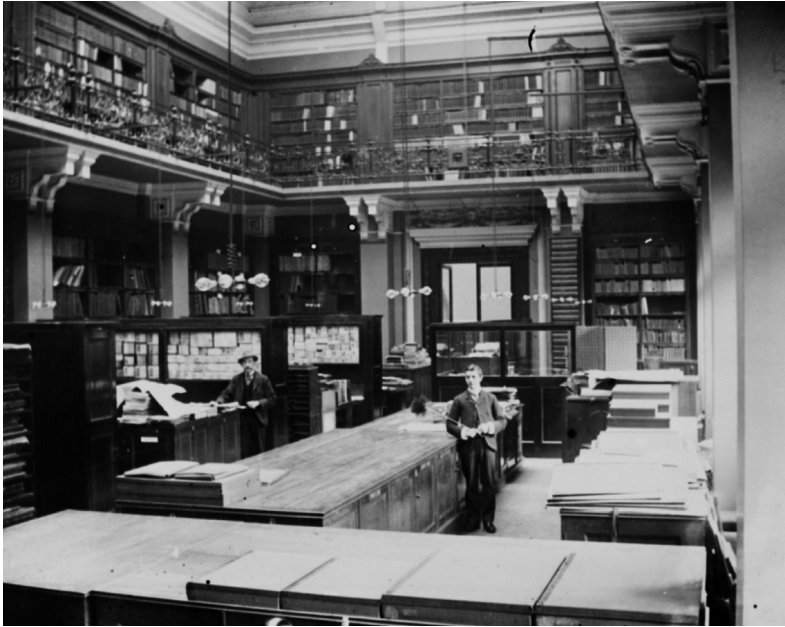
Figure 1.3: Interior of the National Art Library, c. 1899. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

photographers working on art objects, sculpture and architecture across Europe, the Middle East and India (see Chapter 8), for instance from Alinari Company in Florence, Mieusement in France, Sébah in the Middle East and Bourne in India. In this, the Museum's activities align with other major centres of calculation in art and design history of the period, for instance the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris, which were likewise building their visual informational structures.[45]

At SKM/V&A these acquisitions were intended for use by students, designers and artists, through the NAL, with the intention of both providing source materials and building sensibilities to the best in art and design. Within these contexts, Cole's activities as Superintendent of the government's Science and Art Department also meant that SKM and its close relationship with the government's Schools of Design was seen as a template to imitate by many other museums and art schools across the UK, and, increasingly, across the world. Institutions from the Ballarat Gallery and Art School in Australia to the Lahore Museum and School of Art were deeply influenced by the 'South Kensington System'. Many national and global nodes in the ecosystem of South Kensington

received photographs circulated by the Museum (see Chapter 5), and many tried to emulate the Museum's photographic activity. SKM was therefore pivotal to the story of photography in museums more generally.

To a greater or lesser extent, the history of photographic cultures and practices in the V&A can stand, as a hyper-form and meta-narrative, for those of a myriad of cultural and collecting institutions more broadly. All encounter those central questions of praxis, of the making, utilisation and instrumentalisation of photographs in documenting collections, of accumulating information to support other classes of object, of facilitating management of collections, of recording conservation techniques and interventions, of branding institutions or circulating collections beyond the walls of the institution (a situation and practice radically transformed in the digital age). Kathleen Davidson has described photographs in such contexts as 'boundary objects' which provide connections between groups and their various, even divergent, interests.[46] All museums, and similar institutions, are engaged in such practices, enabled by the flows of 'boundary objects'.

By 1908 the NAL held between 180,000 and 200,000 photographs.[47] The first major review of its photographic holdings was carried out in this year by an Assistant Keeper, T. C. Grove.[48] He described them as 'being intended for the use of all varieties of workers – manufacturers, teachers, art students, pattern designers, and workers in the various trades and crafts',[49] reinforcing the view of photographs as a practical tool for the inspiration of craftspeople in line with the original aims of the Museum. And it is from these aims and their practical realisation that the V&A's contemporary photographic ecosystem has been built, as photographic activity spread into every aspect of museum work. However, Grove also began the process of dispersal of NAL photographs to other departments in the Museum, which was to gather pace over the course of the twentieth century, moving and transforming photographs seen as more 'niche' in topic from being publicly accessible records to being internal reference sources for curators. Initially, this action was driven mainly by a lack of storage space rather than any theoretical concerns. But as this volume shows, the effects are profoundly epistemic.[50]

However, there was another major strand of photographic acquisition that co-existed and entangled with the acquisitions from antiquarians, collectors and commercial photographers. This was the internally produced photographs from the Museum's own studio. As elsewhere, the archival records of these histories are surprisingly

piecemeal. Often only fragments of debates survive. The working practices of the Photographic Studio itself, for instance, as Erika Lederman shows (Chapter 5), have to be largely constructed from the photographic objects themselves rather than the paper trails of their activities. For instance, the photographic requisition forms from curators to photographers, which would have been fascinating, do not survive. We have a limited sense of how ecosystems worked in everyday practice, although it is clear that curators understood and appreciated the implications of the processes involved, and that there was general understanding vested in photographically minded imaginations. Archival files across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show an enormous amount of senior managerial energy was expended on the work of photography in the museum in ways that still resonate – who should do it, where, to what end, who should see it, how it should be circulated, where and how it should be stored, how lines of command should work or who had authority.

In the early days, many aspects of photographic work, such as printing, happened in-house. Through the later nineteenth century parts of photographic practice had been contracted out commercially, but by about 1900 it again became increasingly focused internally at SKM, with a well-established system for photographing Museum objects. From the beginning, a print of every negative made for the Museum was placed in what were called the Guard Books.[51] The Guard Books became objects of record, containing prints from all the negatives made in the Museum. They continued until 1997, when colour film, and then digital, changed practices in the Museum, representing, therefore, a continuous existence and dynamic, additive space for 140 years. They number 859 volumes, containing about 270,000 black-and-white prints over a huge range of sizes, from imperial plate (and, in a few cases, larger than that) to quarter plate (figure 1.4).

Considered in their entirety, the Guard Books are an unparalleled visual resource which reveals much about the photographic ecosystem, reflecting glimpses not just of the processes at the V&A, but of a much larger documentation of art objects moving around nineteenth-century Britain. They also provide a window into the past museum experience, both front of house and back of house, and have much to contribute to all manner of interests, from object biographies to commercial histories of the Museum (figure 1.5).

The Guard Book photographs, often annotated, are arranged by negative number – that is, arranged by the temporal sequences of Museum practice and the pace of work in the studio, not by any

Figure 1.4: Photographs of markings on ceramics in V&A Guard Book, 1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

taxonomy. The Guard Books are also a classic assemblage – a grouping of diverse elements structured in space and time. They entangle actions that build the network of photographic dependencies from studio to department to public space, and which constitute both the photographic

Figure 1.5: Photograph of two screens used for exhibiting textiles, V&A Guard Book, 1906. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

ecosystem and the culture of photography in the Museum. But at the same time as a print was placed in the Guard Books, another print went to the NAL, and a third to the catalogue stall, where the public could both look at the photographs and order prints for their own use, in various sizes and prices. Further prints went to the Circulation Department, which was responsible for disseminating the values and methods of the Museum to the growing network of provincial art,

design and technology colleges and regional museums. Later, when material-based curatorial divisions and departments were introduced in the early twentieth century, prints were also produced for their use, joining earlier clusters of non-collection photographs (see Chapters 8 and 14). The Guard Books become a key source for understanding non-collection photographs and attendant practices.

In 1934 the ecosystem was disturbed again and new sets of dependencies emerged. The NAL Collection was again reorganised, under the supervision of Assistant Keeper Charles Gibbs-Smith. He reframed and refocused the Collection, stating that:

> The general character of the collection had become rather too miscellaneous, that certain sections were lop-sided, and that in many classes there was not a sufficient number of prints to make even a representative display … The general policy was therefore inaugurated of expanding architecture and sculpture, with special attention to foreign material.[52]

These reductions in the scope of the collection align with wider struggles with the management of archives, as Thomas Richards notes:

> If today we call this the 'information explosion', it was because by the century's end many people had stopped using the word 'knowledge', which always had something about it of a prospective unity emerging, and started using the word 'information' with its contemporary overtones of scattered disjunct fragments of fact.[53]

Gibbs-Smith was also the instigator of the first reappraisal of the collection in photographic terms. He curated the *Centenary of Photography 1839–1939* display at the Museum, arguably the first exhibition celebrating the medium since the 1860s. Interest within the Museum in photographs as historic and aesthetic objects slowly grew from this point, aided considerably by its hosting of the 1951 exhibition, *Masterpieces of Victorian Photography*, curated by foundational photographic historian Helmut Gernsheim.[54] After the Second World War, Gibbs-Smith was also instrumental in the expansion of popular illustrated publications for the visitor. He extended the range of postcards and reformulated the photographically driven *Small Picture Books* originally produced by the museum between 1925 and 1938. By the 1970s postcards of the Photography Collection itself were being produced.[55] Within the assessments of the massive assemblage of photographs, we begin to see a shift

in the perception of photographs and their role: from mere information and tools of the trade, to objects to be preserved. But this also represented a bifurcation that brought specific concepts of photographic value and utility to the fore. By 1975, the NAL photographs numbered over 300,000. The Museum's then director, Sir Roy Strong, stated, 'One was always aware that the Victoria and Albert Museum had a great historic collection of photographs that had been inherited from the past but it was largely hidden away for many years in a basement.'[56]

With the rising tide of interest in photography as a historic and contemporary art form (both with art market implications), in 1977 the V&A decided its remit should address photography from an aesthetic perspective, and a new section was to collect photographs as works of art.[57] The new Photographs Section staff made a selection of photographs from the former NAL, and also from the Circulation Department, which fitted their new remit.[58] This constituted an act of transfiguration and purification for some photographs, while others became non-collections existing outside the emerging dominant value system and exercises in taste.[59]

While the Circulation Department had toured photographic exhibitions to the provinces, importantly, in relation to our concerns here, it had also, from its inception in the nineteenth century, used photographs of objects in the collections to expand its educational reach. These tentacles of the ecosystem and its new network of dependencies worked in provincial museums and libraries, consolidating the values for which the Museum stood. It also helped to establish a specific discourse of fine and important photography, exemplified in the travelling exhibitions of photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bill Brandt and Don McCullin. So, while the concept that photographs were 'collectable' as art had very little traction before the early twentieth century,[60] the new Photography Section was founded from the eclectic foundations we have described, and its remit was very much on the art of photography as an aesthetic practice or in relation to photographs of sufficient antiquity or rarity as to render them important in the wider teleological trajectory. Universal knowledge became universal aesthetic, a position now challenged in the post-modern and post-colonial museum. Collecting gathered pace and forged paths in new directions, and from this point these photographs were looked after by Photographs curators, were stored and catalogued as designated 'Museum objects' and were made available to the public in the V&A Prints and Drawings Study Room and later digitally through the Museum website. There was a

Figure 1.6: Crated Textile Department photographs in a corridor, 2017. Photograph by Elizabeth Edwards.

dedicated Photographs gallery within the V&A from 1998 onwards, now known as the Photography Centre galleries.

Photographs, categorised variously as aesthetic productions or informational 'bits of knowledge', can be understood as forms of disciplinary tracks that 'facilitate the travelling of facts, but at the same time, like rails, they may also limit the range and possibilities for travel'.[61] NAL photographs which had not been selected to join the new section were relegated to filing or to out-of-the-way storage areas. As a result of this and of many similar historic previous transfers, a great number of photographs still exist in V&A offices and storerooms. Some remain in the original library boxes, some are in filing cabinets and some are in crates and cupboards, mixed in with non-photographic material. If many of them had come from the same initial sources as the Photography Collection, they nonetheless joined the multitude of 'unimportant' photographs scattered, often unrecorded, across the Museum (figure 1.6).

Practices in the museum

Photographs infiltrated all aspects of the Museum's activities, to the extent that objects, and some routine undertakings, became photographically dependent. They also performed its hierarchies and value systems. Svetlana Alpers has famously described the 'museum effect' by which institutions embed, perform and produce objects in certain ways, demanding specific forms of attention in specific contexts.[62] Our contention is that photographs are the mechanism and practice through which such effects are realised and reproduced. Photographs are part of the descriptive system that gathers around objects in museums. Objects in displays are posed in ways that make them amenable to photographic translation, and that cohere with expectations of what objects are supposed to be.[63] Thus the 'poses' of objects, as sets of museum values, are spread photographically through the practices of collections management, gallery displays, digital asset management systems, publications, postcards, websites, publicity and fundraising campaigns which shape the perception of an institution.

Yet the ways in which photography is valued, seen and utilised shift markedly from the highly visible value systems of curatorship and the material object to the invisible presences of websites and other forms of communication – all of which might employ the same photographs, photographs of photographs, or photographs of photographs of that photograph, in a system of almost infinite regression. They have flashes of coherence and then slip away into invisible incoherence or visible instrumentality, as Kate Hay's discussion on the photographic archive of furniture demonstrates (Chapter 14). There is a clear trajectory of value in which the visibility of photographic practices and their material evaluation decrease the further away they are from concepts of originality, singularity and curatorial endeavour. For instance, postcards, leaflets and posters employing museum photographs are almost invisible as photographic practices. Yet they are fundamental to the public perception of an institution. As Ellen Handy neatly expressed it, the postcard rack in the museum is the 'road to the institution's sleeping unconscious'.[64]

The history of attitudes to photography is also an active element: those attitudes lay down the systems and assumptions which place photographs in hierarchies of value, and shift their placement over time. In this the V&A is no exception. Indeed, it has particularly thick layers of value, hierarchy and assumption which entangle and blend,

for instance, aesthetics and utility, imperial action and local narrative. But these are patterns that can be found in all museums to some degree. One sees their traces in manuals of curatorship and discussions of museum practice where the presence of photographs in the everyday practices of museums is very clear. Curators are instructed to carry a camera with them, for instance, to make records of objects and displays – 'the camera should become as familiar as a pencil or notebook, and used in the same way', a practice enhanced by digital availability,[65] but there is no sense of the constitutive role of photographs. Conversely, museums, as media-defined institutions, have become a highly theorised field.

This position is indicative of the extent to which there is a whole range of photographically driven practices which enable an institution to function beyond the visible practices of collecting and displaying. These are manifested, perhaps, through the normalised practices of the photographers or through the 'everyday' image making of curators who do not necessarily perceive themselves to be 'doing photography' (see Chapter 14). Knowledge about objects is made photographically: objects are 'posed' in the studio in ways that foster expectations of a museum and its objects – the exhibition poster in a bus shelter is as potent a space in this connection as an exhibition catalogue. Similarly, the photographic dissection or x-ray penetration of an object in conservation laboratories creates knowledge, and the Marketing Department's assessment of candidates for postcards is shaped by the photographic performance of objects. All institutions are 'groups of statements which structure the way in which a thing [here a museum] is thought'.[66] All are part of the culture of photography through which an institution expresses its identity and the network of dependencies that form the ecosystem we describe. In this the Photographic Studio becomes a key site of making museum values as it translates objects into their photographic surrogates in ways that sustain desired categories.

Auto-ethnographies and present pasts: the chapters and their methodologies

This history of the photographic engagement and function of the V&A is, as we have argued, singularly suitable for a study such as this one. In focusing on one institution, the book offers an integrated account necessary for 'ecosystem' thinking. However, it is a case study of practices that define all museums to a greater or lesser extent.

The questions discussed in the chapters will be recognisable, and the reflexive methodologies applicable, across the museum and heritage sectors. We hope that this volume will become just one of such institutional studies. We hope, too, that it will align with a well-established tradition of ethnographies of museum practice dating back to foundational studies, such as Sharon Macdonald's study of exhibition making at the Science Museum[67] and the many others that followed this.

The structure of this book is not that of a conventional academic study. Situated in the *realpolitik* of museum practices, it is intended to keep its theory close to the ground and the skills and voices that make museum knowledge visible and close to the surface. Consequently, as well as longer chapters more typical of an academic project, there are also series of 'vignettes', short essays and case studies, in which those working with aspects of the Museum's photographic culture give direct accounts of the different approaches which constitute the ecosystem. These are overlapping and mutually interdependent. This is because the ecosystem is made up not only of different practices, but also of communities of practice, as different skills produce photographs in certain ways as knowledge items. Different specialisms – the conservator, the cataloguer, the publications office – are interdependent and mutually sustaining, as images made in the Photographic Studio are used to multiple ends: exhibition photographs are made into postcards, photographs are turned into engravings and engravings are photographed, nineteenth-century photographs are put to work in twenty-first-century galleries, and photographs disperse the collections globally through digital resources. Consequently, the 'vignettes' bring to the surface many points at which the ecosystem is materially visible yet often unnoticed – in files, boxes and labels (Chapter 14), in marks on the backs of images (Chapter 16), in the Photographic Studio (Chapters 6 and 15), in documentation (Chapters 7 and 9), in dissemination (Chapters 2 to 4). All are spaces where the work of photographs and the photographic culture of the institution are manifested, fold back on themselves, layer and disassemble, as historical and contemporary practices sustain one another in ways that render the modern museum as a centre of contemporary calculation.

This book is, in a sense, auto-ethnographic, and as such offers a methodological case study, too. While drawing on the extensively debated concept of auto-ethnography within qualitative sociological frameworks, we use the concept here to frame and legitimate the 'insider view' methodologically, and as a way of connecting the personal and subjective with the social, cultural and analytical.[68] Here a museum

becomes the subject of a lived experience within a particular context. As Troiano points out in Chapter 17, discussing digital photographic cultures, 'curatorial practice can … be considered as an interrelated branch of the ecosystem, rather than hyper-independent'. Not only does this book account for individual curatorial practice, and as such the volume could also be described as 'practice-led'; it is also intended to generate and communicate a critical position concerning the processes through which photographs in the Museum have been made, used, celebrated, marginalised, reproduced, re-engaged, circulated and overall made to work within the evolving ethos of the institution. Most museum critiques are generated externally to their objects of study. The chapters collected here are different, in that they present a productive tension between experiential closeness and critical engagement. They make labour and its processes visible and present a critically aware account of normalised and embedded epistemic procedures. Thus, the volume's approach overlaps with the notion of 'practice-led' as a foregrounding of labour, a balance that manifests differently in different chapters. But the auto-ethnographic also implies a robust, unifying and critical self-distancing from those practices. For instance, Fleury's chapter, which addresses the laying down of photographic utility in conservation, which still informs practice, is also a spring-board for a critical questioning and theorisation of the structures of that practice in a digital age.

All the contributors are, or have been, V&A staff or individuals with close connections to the V&A, and as such their personal experience, critical engagement with everyday processes and knowledge of the V&A's history and collections merge in order to critique how institutional cultures are made through photographs. As we have noted, the V&A's long historical engagement with photography in all its facets provides a particularly rich manifestation of such a photographic ecosystem. But it is one which brings into analysis structures that frame the relationship of all museums with photography, be they in the all-saturating presence of non-collections or increasingly in digital forms of mass image. The V&A ecosystem should be seen not as an idiosyncratic example, but as a demonstration of the patterns, material insistencies and digital explosions that are found in all museums in some way or other. It has been impossible to encompass the whole of the Museum's ecosystem in one volume, but we have focused on aspects that are broadly common to all museums. We are intentionally not addressing activities more specific to a national museum, such as large-scale commercial image licensing and an expansive collection of fine art photography, although these are

part of the culture of photography within the Museum. These chapters therefore aim to provide a grounded analytical and methodological model and series of sensibilities for museum and heritage studies more broadly, as well as wider historical disciplines.

The studies here cover the whole range of photographic existence, from the 1860s (Chapters 3 and 10) to the digital age (Chapter 17) and the consequent dynamic shifts in the very concepts of the photograph, collection and curatorship. They all reveal the workings of museums and the centrality of photographs to that working. Chapters with a historical focus can also be seen as auto-ethnographic in their broader character. Historical questions lead to a critical positioning of current curatorial practice: concerns about colonial legacies and the discourse of decolonisation in museums furnish a timely example of this in action. Likewise, the ecosystem itself is historically constituted in its dense network of sustenance and dependency. What, for instance, does the marginalisation and then recent rehabilitation of Cowper's work teach us about changing hierarchies of value in the photographic culture of the museum (see Chapter 5)? What is its current impact? Through acts of research as acts of self-representation, the historical chapters open onto new spaces of assessment, as Lederman and Fleury suggest (Chapters 5 and 10). Likewise, Edwards's chapter on postcards points to the ongoing relations between museums and the public sphere (Chapter 2).

Current practices are seldom divorced from their histories. Even ruptures in practice, such as the establishment in 1977 of the Department of the 'Art of Photography' at the V&A, are historically located responses. Indeed, arguably this volume is another such rupture in the narrative of photographs in the museum, in that it privileges photographs and practices which have been largely invisible as active players in the institution. Even in a museum environment which addresses the challenges, transfigurations and opportunities of the digital age, as Lederman, Fleury, Ravilious and Troiano demonstrate (Chapters 5, 10, 13 and 17, respectively), current experience cannot be divorced from its historical determinants, given the epistemic longevity and circularity of museum systems. Rather, histories contribute to that living collective auto-ethnography, as demonstrated by Patel's exploration of the way that historical collections of Indian photographs have shaped her own curatorial work (Chapter 8). Many of the chapters illustrate how histories contribute to that living collective auto-ethnography. After all, as Foucault noted in discussing categories and the flow of knowledge, discourses have not only meanings and truths but also histories, 'forms of dispersion in time, a mode of succession, of stability, and of reactivation, a speed of deployment or rotation'.[69] As the chapters

here demonstrate, cultures of photography in museums behave rather like this. They embrace both the tenacity of old categories and the challenges of the new.

These histories are also being reconstituted and critically addressed as part of the Museum's contemporary identity. Thus, the historical dimension here demonstrates the deep-rooted values that still play invisibly in shaping contemporary practices, and highlights points for critique of those practices. All the chapters are linked, mirroring the workings of the ecosystem. As such, the book presents an integrated and interwoven narrative of a culture of photography with multiple voices and dialects. So, for instance, Lederman on Cowper (Chapter 5) links to the NAL and conservation. Studio practices described by Jackson, Woodhouse and Davis (Chapters 6, 9 and 15, respectively) link to Hay's short essay on the Furniture and Woodwork Department (Chapter 14) and to Edwards on postcards (Chapter 2). The practices of the NAL (Chapter 13) relate to Patterson's short discussion of copies (Chapter 12) and inflect those of the Asian Department (Chapter 8). Ecosystems emerge as networks of dependencies of different scales and intensities, ones that spread ever outwards in a digital age (Chapters 4, 10 and 17).

Journeys through museums' non-collections are also journeys through the historical and contemporary contexts, needs and desires of an institution. Photographs are perhaps the most volatile of presences in the museum. They are constantly shifting as value and significance drop in and out of focus, documents become art, art becomes a social practice and records become routes into different histories. The culture of photographs in museums also reveals what is expected of both museums and photographs at given historical moments; photographs pinpoint shifts in the ecosystem and sea changes in museum processes more generally. This is not simply cause and effect, but the intricate networks of function, expectation, aspiration, resistance and uncertainty which shape museum practice. This volume was conceptualised and developed before the restructuring of the V&A in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the pandemic the 'backroom' practices that we have described here became increasingly visible and appreciated as museums attempted to keep their public connection afloat through photographically and filmically driven virtual platforms, offering online exhibitions, commentaries on collections and curator-led webinars. But there has been massive institutional and personal impact. While ecosystems change and evolve constantly, as the chapters here show, time will tell as to the impact of this most recent and explosive disturbance to the photographic cultures of this, and indeed every, museum.

Notes

1   Crane 2020, 493.
2   Latour 1987.
3   Walsh 2007.
4   Lien and Nielssen 2021, Odumosu 2020. For general discussion, see Bennett et al. 2017; von Oswald and Tinius 2020.
5   Edwards 2019.
6   Crane 2020, 493; Kratz 2011.
7   Cameron and Kenderdine 2007; Henning 2015a.
8   Henning 2018.
9   Henning 2015a, lv.
10   Henning 2015a, lv.
11   Grasskamp 2016; Henning 2015a.
12   McLuhan 1964, 8.
13   Benjamin [1936] 1992; Malraux [1947] 1967. For commentary and a useful summary, see Grasskamp 2016; Henning 2015a.
14   Haworth-Booth and McCauley 1998; Hamber 1996; Mauro and Roubert 2014; Henning 2015b.
15   Porter 1989; Kratz 2011; Staniszewski 1998; Riggs 2019, 211–18.
16   Crane 2013, 2020; Edwards and Morton 2015; Riggs 2019.
17   Born 1998; Edwards and Lien 2014; Davidson 2017; Repper 2021.
18   Edwards 2001, 51–79; Wehner 2011; Wilder 2017, 379. See also Bärnighausen et al. 2020; Brusius 2015, 159–81; and, for a more aesthetically driven account, Grossman 2009.
19   Crane 2020, 508.
20   Edwards and Lien 2014.
21   Edwards and Lien 2014, 4.
22   Edwards and Morton 2015.
23   The concept comes from Wenger 1998.
24   Edwards 2017.
25   Knowles 2014, 73–91.
26   Edwards and Morton 2015, 17.
27   Belknap Forthcoming.
28   See Crimp 1993, 56.
29   Boast, Guha and Herle 2004; Fisli 2020; Bessel 2015; Repper 2021.
30   Quéquet 2021; https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/kunstbibliothek/exhibitions/detail/paragons-afterimages [accessed 21.06.21].
31   Bärnighausen et al. 2020.
32   Edwards 2006; Born 1998, 225.
33   Edwards and Lien 2014; Edwards and Morton 2015; Brusius 2015; Davidson 2017; Wilder 2017; Henning 2018.
34   Richards 1993; Bennett 1995.
35   https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/blow-up-in-bissau [accessed 04.06.2022].
36   Born 1998, 224–5.
37   See Physick 1975, 6 (note 10).
38   Charles Thurston Thompson (1816–68) previously assisted Cole with photographic arrangements at the Great Exhibition. He remained Official Photographer until his death in 1868.
39   This creation was to allow the Photographic Studio to make the three-foot-wide negatives of the vast drawings for tapestries known as the Raphael Cartoons. They were photographed by Thurston Thompson at Hampton Court before being transferred to SKM in 1865. See Physick 1975, 6, note 10.
40   Baden Pritchard 1882, 61–9; 'A morning with', 1888.
41   Whitehead 2009.
42   Whitehead 2009, 126.
43   Hamber 1996.
44   Whitehead 2009.
45   Quéquet 2021; Caraffa 2011.

46   Davidson 2017, 10.
47   Report by T. C. Grove. *Minutes of the Committee of Re-arrangement*. V&A Archive (VAA) ED84/45, 255–9.
48   Thomas Childe Grove (1861–1949), Assistant Keeper (Art Branch).
49   Grove, VAA ED84/45, 255–9.
50   Edwards 2017.
51   The name refers to their form of hinged binding, which prevents pages being crammed together and thus protecting them to some degree while allowing flexibility.
52   Gibbs-Smith 1936, 49.
53   Richards 1993, 5.
54   Gernsheim 1951.
55   VAA A.0065. See Edwards 2020.
56   Harker 1983, 281.
57   The Government Office of Arts and Libraries also assigned the V&A responsibility for the National Collection of the Art of Photography.
58   This new section gained a member of staff from the Circulation Department, Mark Haworth-Booth, who became the first Senior Curator of Photographs, serving in that role until his retirement in 2004.
59   Haworth-Booth and McCauley 1998.
60   Haworth-Booth and McCauley 1998, 30.
61   Howlett and Morgan 2011, 31.
62   Alpers 1991, 29.
63   Wehner 2011, 84–5.
64   Handy 2010, 120.
65   Ambrose and Paine 2012, 196–7.
66   Rose 2006, 126.
67   Macdonald 2002.
68   See, for instance, Haynes 2018; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011.
69   Foucault 1989, 127.

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Part I
Disseminations

2

Little marks of ownership: photographic postcards and the culture of the museum, 1913–39

Elizabeth Edwards

In 1920 the V&A produced its first picture postcards of objects in its collections for sale through its catalogue stalls. First mooted as a desirable photographic direction for the Museum in 1912/13, the shifting fortunes of humble picture postcards, the forms they should take, their purpose and their relationship with both museum and
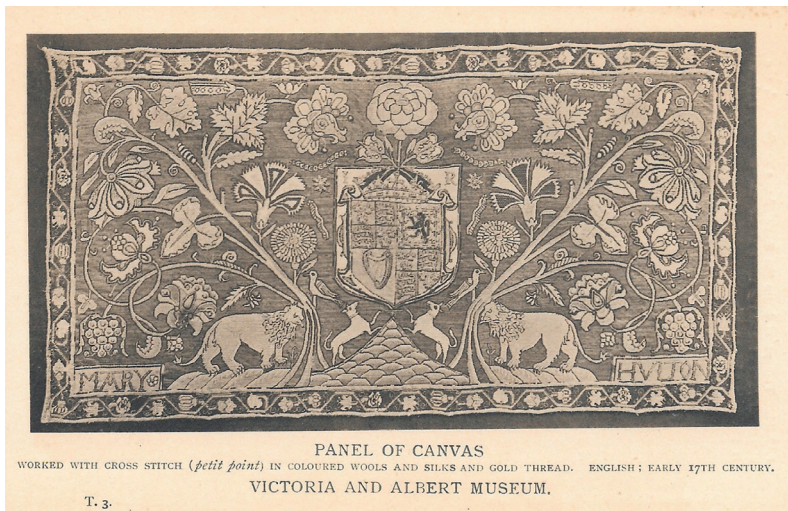
Figure 2.1: Postcard, early 1920s. Embroidered canvas panel (author's collection).

photographic values provide a revealing performance of the Museum ecosystem at work and its photographic manifestations (figure 2.1). In the same way, their current decline marks new media concerns in the Museum and differently constituted ideas of the public as museum visitor/consumer and concepts of collective ownership within the public sphere.

Picture postcards are seldom considered as significant players in the photographic culture, or indeed any culture, of museums. They rarely feature in the museological literature, and photographically they are seen as mass-produced, transitory, low-quality and commonplace, and as divorced from the photographic cultures, practices and debates that produce them. While there have been a few exceptions, notably Ellen Handy's essay on museum postcards and the making of art canons, Tapati Guha-Thakurta's consideration of postcards at the Indian Museum during the colonial period and Mary Beard's 1992 paper on contemporary postcards at the British Museum, postcards are not perceived as significant to the culture, practices and politics of museums, photographic or otherwise.[1] In addition, within this analytical lacuna, the consideration of museum postcards has tended to be conflated with the emergence of museum retailing, the commodification of collections and the expanding of visitor experience.[2] While undoubtedly these elements are at play, postcards can also be explored through a different prism: that of performing values, hierarchies and tensions in the museum's relationship with its public. Thus, I suggest that the categories that informed postcard production in the interwar period offer an insight into the ways in which postcards were integrally embedded in the cultural practices of photography. This illuminates larger questions about museum values and their reproduction (both literally and metaphorically); as Handy puts it, the postcard rack in the museum is the 'road to the institution's sleeping unconscious'.[3]

My particular concern is in the role of postcards, as photographically derived objects, and as visualisations of certain readings of objects within the broader ethos and practices of the museum. I came to postcards in museums because I am interested in the role of photographs in the marking out of the concept of public history and its work in the public sphere. Postcards translate and compress museum objects haptically, spatially, physically, aesthetically and visually, in ways that articulate the values at work. In this chapter I suggest that they can be used as an analytical prism to explore the intersection of an educative agenda and an invigorated political sense of public ownership and public rights of access to objects. Postcards also represent networks

of photographic skill, production and expectation as performances of museum values, and as a complex site through which to think about these things. This is especially so in terms of an expanded sense of the public which increasingly informed the Museum and other such public institutions charged with the care and management of national heritage in the period after the First World War.[4] Postcards thus became crucial sites and vehicles for that publicness as it shifted in the Museum.

Contexts and influences

Postcards were inserted into an image provision of the Museum that had been in place since the 1850s (see Chapter 1). As public demand and expectation shifted, postcards were increasingly seen as filling a need that had been serviced by photographic prints and as doing it in more accessible ways.[5] Photographic outputs of the Museum had been aimed largely at collectors and students in art, design and technology, in order to foster both the best in design practice and a national narrative of design excellence. By the early years of the twentieth century, there was an increasing sense of what Latour has called 'an object-orientated democracy',[6] in which material objects work over collective and political discourses, infiltrating and infiltrated by the discourse of publicness. Postcards became a form of public address and a statement of cultural authority and institutional values within this remit. As one V&A official wrote in 1914, 'I think we are justified in considering … the dissemination of photographs of Museum objects … as fulfilling one of the purposes of this Museum.'[7]

In the years just before the First World War, national museums and other sites, such as ancient monuments, brought photographic and postcard production under internal control.[8] This not only asserted their cultural authority but also acknowledged the increasing demand from the Treasury for income generation and, in an atmosphere of enhanced articulations of public ownership, accountability, a point to which I shall return. In 1913 the V&A terminated the licensing agreements with three postcard and stationery firms that had produced views, largely of the buildings and galleries and of paintings in the collection.[9] Henceforth, it intended to produce its own photographic cards of objects in the collections, thus drawing on networks of skill and knowledge in the Museum itself: postcards both became part of, and expanded, the culture of photography in the Museum as it merged its own ecosystem of image production and dissemination with educational aspiration.

The V&A's direct impetus and inspiration had come from the introduction of postcards by the British Museum, which, in 1912, had produced postcards of 135 subjects, printed by Oxford University Press and the Fine Art Press. Named on the early cards, these printers might perhaps be understood as providing a mark of authority and a concern for quality which might differentiate their production from the mass-produced German-printed cards and those of the popular British firms such as Raphael Tuck and Valentine & Co.[10] The British Museum's innovation was extensively reported in the press. For such august institutions as the British Museum, the production of postcards was a novelty and an untried departure into the popular domain. There was some sniping in the press; for instance, *The Athenaeum* described the new stall selling postcards inside the front door of the British Museum as 'undignified', with the 'large and obtrusive stall' which was 'surrounded by a chattering throng of schoolgirls', although in most cases the reception was positive, noting the high quality and affordability.[11]

Despite having the photographic networks in place, national museums were latecomers to postcards, but the dominant discourses surrounding postcard production seem to reflect an increasing sensitivity to the rights of the public to collections that they, as citizens and tax-payers, owned. This was a demotic age in which subjects were being reconstituted as citizens who had a stake in the national collections which museums held in trust for them, a position increasingly stressed by the various commissions which examined museums in the interwar period.[12] If the post-First World War period was marked by an increasing sense of the role of museums in the public sphere, museums were also responding to the craze for sending and, especially in this context, collecting postcards, which had been raging for the best part of 20 years among a public for whom postcards were entirely normalised within the everyday. People collected by subject or hobby, or by place. There were collecting clubs, exchange clubs and pen pals which permeated social classes.[13] I have not encountered an exchange club on museum postcards, but this does not mean it did not exist. As Frederic Corkett of Tuck and Co.[14] stated in a lecture to the Society of Arts in 1906, 'picture postcards enter very largely into the life of the public to-day and whether one looks at the extremely interesting nature of these little publications, or their utilitarian object, there can be no doubt of the usefulness and advantage to be generally gained from their existence and use', for 'good cards … cannot but tend to elevate and improve the mind'. Consequently, museums positioned

their postcard production between educational dissemination and a response to popular interests.

The advent of postcards, as small, portable, visual representations of objects in the collection, was clearly popular. The British Museum's *Account of Income and Expenditure* to March 1914 reported that in the 16 months up to that date they had sold 155,000 cards, describing the enterprise as 'strikingly successful'.[15] They also reported that not only did this bring immediate financial and educational benefit but, importantly, it had stimulated the sales of other museum publications, guidebooks and photographs. Above all, it was seen by the Museum as, to quote one commentator, 'evidences of the progressive character of the museum'.[16] Indeed the word 'propaganda' crops up often in museum discussions about postcards: the latter were seen as having an outward movement of purpose – as one commentator later put it, they were 'penny ambassadors'[17] – for both the significance of collections and a sense of collective ownership.

The shifting concept of the 'public' is important here. Along with its core interests, the V&A, like other museums, increasingly acknowledged a concept of 'public' that was the collective of the democratic, liberal state in which collective values were shaped, regardless of social class and specifically constituted public entities (of which the V&A was one).[18] The V&A's first series of postcards, published in 1920, can thus be seen as a response to a post-war national psyche that placed value on the past and on a normality represented by the past.[19] 'The public' was thus increasingly understood as owning traces of the past as a collective history that stood for the interests of the whole nation. However, if public access had always been at the heart of the Museum's purpose, and its earlier focus had been on art, design and technology education, the Museum was also seen by this time as drifting increasingly towards the haughty and connoisseurial. This caused concern among some; as an official commented, it was 'difficult to resist the criticism that, as the Museum was a public institution … endeavour should be made to cater for the general public as the specialised student'.[20] Postcards became a vehicle through which both identities could be negotiated for the public good and through which the public could participate in the histories and objects that were increasingly seen as rightfully theirs – a collective clustered in part through the consumption and activation of photographs.[21]

Postcards in the V&A

Given the clear success of the British Museum, the V&A was keen to emulate it, despite resistance. Some asked if this was a fitting project for an educational institution given the association of postcards with the popular, ludic and indeed brash and frivolous commercialism. Only a few years before, the V&A Deputy Director Paul Oppé was of the opinion that it would be better 'to avoid involving ourselves in any commercial undertakings such as the sale of postcards', while in 1912 Mr Fisher of the museum secretariat had commented that postcards constituted 'the most troublesome category that savours the most of commercialism and in the main only answers the demand for pictorial souvenirs'.[22] However, the success of the British Museum persuaded them. The V&A Archive (VAA) contains a small press cutting about the British Museum postcards, which was pasted onto a sheet and circulated to the V&A secretariat and senior curators.[23] They were clearly watching carefully. The Treasury, concerned as it was with the accountability of public expenditure in this sphere, was also piling on the financial pressure and 'pressed this course of action'. The V&A was effectively told to do what the British Museum was doing, and to get on with it.[24]

As a result, an internal minute of June 1914 noted 'The Director is anxious to get on with them [postcards] at this museum.'[25] What follows, in terms of museum culture, is significant. Dependent on photographic ecosystems, not only does the memo flag the obvious concerns with the commercial and the popular, but it also points to the way that photographic infrastructures and values are at the unarticulated centre of these concerns. What kind of photography should be used, how was it to be reproduced and what values were at stake? These concerns shape the fate of postcards in the museum in the interwar period and lay the groundwork that informs the shifts in policy in the post-war period.

In July 1914 the Director, Sir Cecil Harcourt Smith,[26] circulated a minute paper around the curatorial departments, which by this date were based, as they are now, on materials – ceramics, textiles, metalwork and so forth. He announced the following:

> It is intended shortly to begin issuing picture post-cards of objects in the Museum and I should be glad therefore if you would let me have a list of 20 objects in your Department which are likely to

be in popular demand. I do not propose in the first instalment to cater for the specialist student as such.[27]

This is an important and crucial statement because it contains an essential paradox. The choices made by the departments, for this popular form, are performances of their own cultural authority as experts, acting to shape public apprehension of 'significance' and creating a hierarchy of objects, including showing off new accessions. For instance, the Woodwork Department suggested 'Prince Arthur's Chest' of about 1500 as a postcard:[28] the chest had been acquired in 1912 and photographed, as a new accession, with a 12 x 10-inch plate, negative no. 35393, with a print also pasted in the Guard Book. One sees postcard production as enmeshed in extant museum processes. At the same time, external printing firms were invited to tender and produce three specimen cards, and to choose the appropriate photo-mechanical process for each, thus extending the Museum's photographic ecosystem. The Museum's object choice for specimen cards, using existing negatives, is revealing. They represent different textures and scales of objects that might be found throughout the collections, and form subjects in an expanded postcard project: a marble Madonna, an embroidered silk dress and a Gothic livery cupboard.[29]

Yet at the same time, the Museum's widening sense of its public is suggested. Postcards emerged at a moment when the Museum's addressive concerns about its 'public' were shifting in emphasis towards a more generalised 'democracy of objects'. The need to employ, not necessarily willingly in the case of some curators, not merely a connoisseurial eye, but a popular eye runs through the V&A's deliberations. While its educational remit under the Board of Education focused on art, design and related technological training, the production of postcards was also a response to 'changing patterns of cultural consumption and mass entertainment', which included increasing interest in domestic craft work and its historical dimensions (figure 2.2).[30]

Thus postcards, from the start, were seen as 'public-facing' and as tools to project collections into a broader public rather than into scholarly and professional design spaces only. Conversely, one could argue that the issues raised by shifting debates about public accountability could be addressed in part by the modest postcard, without disturbing the core values of the Museum and the ways in which it made its objects.

Although the departmental lists were drawn up in 1914, nothing decisive happened until 1920. As the First World War dragged on,

LINEN CAP
WITH EMBROIDERY IN SILVER-GILT THREAD AND BLACK SILK.
ENGLISH ; LATE 16TH CENTURY.
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM.
T. 29.
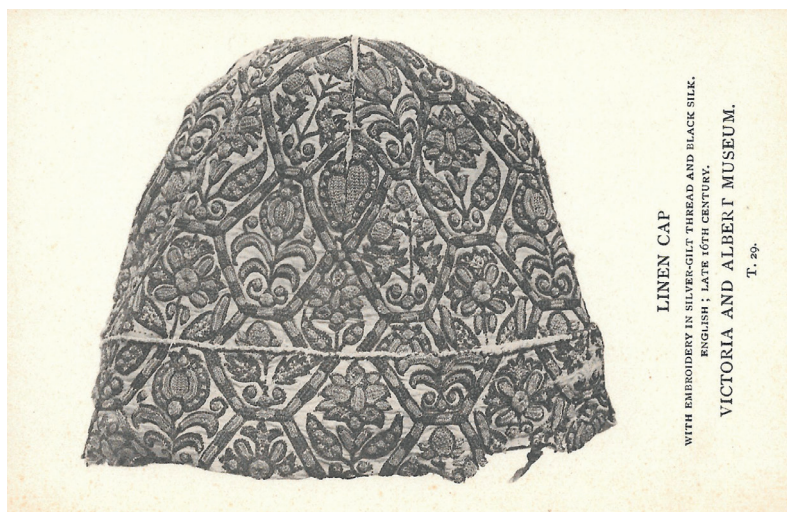
Figure 2.2: Postcard, early 1920s. Embroidered linen cap
(author's collection).

labour (especially skilled labour), space and materials were in short
supply, and there were oblique suggestions about the inappropriateness
of worrying about postcards and the like in the face of industrial-scale
slaughter. But in 1920 came huge and substantial investment, with
almost 700 monochrome cards from collections across the institution
being issued over two years, in departmental series, to be sold at
1d. each. These series (usually printed 1,000 at a time), the pacing
of their publication and the production of batches of new postcards
were developed as demand was demonstrated. The curators were also
responsive to popular (not only specialist) tastes. In an early glimmer
of 'audience research', Miss Peach, who ran the Museum's sales stall
(another node in the ecosystem), was consulted about 'what was asked
for', the answer being woodwork, embroidery and sculpture, subjects
which certainly figure large in the first tranche of postcards.[31] Textiles,
for instance, quickly produced a very substantial offer of postcards, and
soon had over 100 cards of objects in their collections. Significantly,
this department's very first postcard, T.1, was of the famous Syon Cope,
a prime example of medieval *opus anglicanum* embroidery and thus
standing for national histories of skill and design.[32]

The 1914 lists comprised object names and their accession
numbers, from which postcard demands could be plugged into the
photographic ecosystem of studio negatives, plate preparation and
rephotography. The postcards appear to have been made using both

extant and new museum photographs (traditionally 10 x 8 inches or 12 x 10 inches, but increasingly 5 x 4 inches in size). Unfortunately, along with so much related to the cultures of photography in the Museum, the Photographic Studio requisition and request forms for this period do not survive. However, a detailed excavation of the patterns of photographic work documented in the record cards filed by accession number reveals concentrations of photographic activity. While the first submitted lists have a range of negative numbers reflecting a wide time span of studio activity, conversely, there appear to be clusters of new photographic work in the 1920s and 1930s – of glassware and embroidery, for instance – which seem to map onto the production of the postcards and other popular publications that were beginning to emerge as part of this wider agenda, notably the *Small Picture Book* series.[33] A contemporary note also suggests that very considerable studio time was taken up by photography for publication, including, we can assume, postcards. This suggests that photography was undertaken, at least in part, with the needs of photo-technical reproduction in mind.[34] These small and focused photographic campaigns can be identified by the clusters of activity noted on the studio object record cards and then through their prints in the Guard Books (see Chapter 9). Conversely, some much older negatives appear to have been used, for instance those of metalwork. A monochrome postcard required only one block to be made from the Museum photographs. Both photographs and blocks appear to have been used repeatedly until they wore out and had to be replaced, and often with a new photographic negative.[35]

Whatever the precise photographic origination of the Museum negatives, the photographs were very much 'in the museum style'. This is of major importance, because the postcards reproduced the museum's way of seeing, not only stylistically but intellectually. They translated and consolidated objects as 'museum things' in which 'everything in a museum is put under the pressure of a way of seeing'.[36] The postcards adhered to museum values: objective, straightforward and, above all, legible (figure 2.3a).

They performed the educational and informative object. Derived from negatives, often intended for more general record purposes as 'museum seeing' in both the Guard Books and departments,[37] even photography made for publication followed the parameters established as 'effective object photography' established in the Museum in the course of the late nineteenth century. It is one that persisted into the late twentieth century, when public demands on both museums and images shifted. Postcards, illustrated publications and catalogues are

Figure 2.3a–c: Three postcards, mid-1920s (author's collection).

thus tied, materially, technically and conceptually, into the prevalent cultures of seeing and thus photography in the Museum.

Consequently, there is a regularity, pattern and pulse to the postcards visually: the way they fill the frame, the frontal angles 'as if' standing in front of the object, the ways in which focus is managed, the way lighting is used and contrast used and managed, the regularity of distance from the object and the ways in which it constructed a sense of proximity to the object (figure 2.3b).[38]

This is repeated across all formats and all subject matters/ materials, giving a sense of formal comparability and substantive similarity. There is a miniaturisation, almost domestication, of the collection, yet their scale is uncertain within the serial sameness of the postcard. Many objects float in the white space of the card, outside space and time. Perhaps with postcards in mind, the V&A had acquired the aerograph technology for doing this quickly and efficiently just before the First World War.[39] This became the major representational strategy, used to focus attention on the pure form of the object, laid out like a scientific specimen as a form of visual purification. Dark backgrounds are used, but only when necessary, to throw forward visually pale objects such as marble sculptures. Some large objects are represented as grounded, while visual noise above floor level is removed (figure 2.3c).[40]

There are seldom details, just occasionally for items like lace, but again these exceptions align with the photographic practices of the Museum more widely, which clustered around certain classes of object (see Chapter 5). The Museum's central photographic practice seldom departed from these stylistic norms.

Postcards thus conformed to a uniform standard of excellence which both bound together and performed the museum's curatorial and scholarly standards in the public realm. If, in the past, this stance had been that of the connoisseur or the specialist art student, now, through postcards, this point of view was disseminated to all for one penny. Further, the haptics of unmediated connection with an object was important. Held in the hand, postcards focused attention on the object outside the mediating frame of the gallery and display case. Although Beard's work on British Museum postcards is focused on a period 50 years later, she points to the way postcards encouraged certain forms of embodied aesthetic contemplation.[41] It is not unreasonable to assume that something of the sort was in play in the interwar period. And for one penny.

Overall, it is difficult to gauge the consumption of these postcards beyond the fact that almost all were purchased in the Museum itself (figure 2.4). By 1929 the museum was selling over one million cards a year for the proverbial 1d. plain monochrome (or seven for 6d.) and 2d. coloured. Many seem to have been collected or kept as souvenirs rather than sent, perhaps in albums or propped on mantelpieces as a display of personal cultural capital: one can only speculate.[42] Again, pointing to their invisibility within the visual economy of the Museum, very few are archived within the Museum and many survivals appear serendipitous rather than part of an intentional collecting policy such as that put in place more recently. There is a relatively complete set of the first couple of tranches of both monochrome and colour cards arranged by department, which, apparently, was kept in the Director's office. The whole series is punched through as if kept in a library-type catalogue drawer. There is an album in the National Art Library, probably dating from the late 1930s, containing almost all the postcards from the Sculpture Department (arrangement in production order) and a few scattered through the departments (see Chapter 14).[43] Postcards were, after all, objects intended for dissemination as far as the Museum was concerned.

There are ballpark figures in Museum accounts and reports to the Treasury,[44] while printing requisitions (just occasionally, there is a note on the back of the negative index cards) and reprint notes point to the big sellers. However, detailed disaggregated sales figures do not survive. Likewise, relatively few of these postcards survive in the contemporary postcard-collecting trade. While they occasionally surface on eBay (where I acquired mine), overall, they, and other museum postcards which are not linked into local history interests,

Figure 2.4: Museum postcard stall (left of image), c. 1930. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

are seen as too boring for dealers to bother with and, according to my informants, too often land up in recycling.[45] This historio-graphical fragility is perhaps another reason why these extremely prodigious photographic outputs in museums have largely slipped from the analytical frame.

Museum values and the production of postcards

Given the aims of postcard provision in the Museum and the established photographic and cultural values brought to it, quality of production was paramount, from printing technique to paper or card quality. As one official put it in 1946, reflecting a commitment still in place today, 'it has been officially recognised that every publication put out by this museum must be a model of the matter and manner – a fit job of applied art in fact'.[46] For this reason, the V&A fought hard to be able to set its own production values, especially around photo-graphically driven publications including postcards: as one official commented, 'nothing except friction will be gained by the interposition of the Stationery Office [HMSO]. As for quality, we know from bitter experience that the Stationery Office hardly understand the meaning

of this word.'[47] Indeed, if certain museum officers, in private, viewed postcards as 'mere souvenirs', in public, the monochrome quality and price of photographically derived publications became representative of a long-running battle between the V&A and HMSO.[48] Rejecting half-tone printing on the grounds of quality, most of the V&A cards were printed in the collotype process and a few by photogravure, although the suitability of printing processes for translating Museum objects with authority and credibility was under constant review.[49] Consequently, postcards were produced by some of the best commercial printers of the period, including Oxford University Press, Waterlows of Dunstable (who also printed the V&A's *Small Picture Books* in high-quality rotogravure), Fine Art Press and the Rembrandt Press. The connection with these quality producers was clearly intentional, and, as I have noted, gave the cards an authority and a statement of museum values rather than the appearance of a mere souvenir, which worried so many curators.

The photographic and moral qualities of black and whiteness in postcards and their printing became a major source of both tension between competing values in the Museum and debates about what the postcards were for. In the case of V&A postcards, there was a profound distrust of the colour dynamic and its social implications.[50] As noted, the first postcards were monochrome, and while monochrome was part of a dynamic chromatic culture, by the late 1920s colour was increasingly produced as chromolithographic technologies improved and printing costs fell.[51] By 1929 half the postcards sold were in colour. This shift not only brought about a change in the perception of the objects depicted. It also brought to the surface a debate about objects and the purpose of the Museum. For Museum curators there was a clear differentiation between the informational and educative quality of black and white and the souvenir quality of the colour half-tone which catered merely for the desire for 'pictorial keepsakes'. Although the V&A had long used chromolithography in its expensive catalogues (see Chapter 3), it would appear that different technologies were evaluated differently. In the affordable technologies of postcard production, the dynamics of colour carried an implied sense of detrimental excess.

The different qualities of information capture and legibility inherent in both monochrome and colour held moral qualities of both ways of seeing, the focusing of attention, and those that shaped cultures of photography in the museum. Monochrome printing was of better quality than colour, at least at the technical level required to be able to sell monochrome for 1d. and colour for 2d. Intellectually, it was more important to be able to

'read' the stitching of an embroidery or the stamping of a bookbinding, both of which were offered by the clarity of monochrome printing, than it was to be able to apprehend its colour range. Monochrome created a way of seeing which was not necessarily understood as wanting or deficient; rather, its own unadorned tonalities provided a precision of required information. Careful attention to tonality, which marks the photographic production, was 'an intentional and positive quality instead of marking a deplorable lacuna'.[52] It was effectively part of the pedagogical remit to teach the public to see properly.

This concern was part of a wider debate about the correct registration of artworks and what colour and its translation does to an object (figure 2.5). As late as 1960, the art historian Edgar Wind stated in his Reith lectures that:

> Colour photographs and colour prints have indeed fostered a coarseness of vision on art … It would be tempting to reply that colour distortion is a technical imperfection that is bound to be overcome with the progress of science, but this is an evasion of the actual problem: for it is precisely during the time-lag that vision is mechanically shaped and coarsened.[53]

This view is mirrored in the V&A's earlier concerns about colour, and technical decisions were shaped by how best to perform objects in the public space in ways that enhanced museum values. As noted, there were discussions about whether postcards should be printed in half-tone, photogravure or collotype. The British Museum was consulted, and responded with a view that mediated against colour, stating that it used photogravure or collotype depending on the subject; half-tone – it stated – was 'out of the question for this particular purpose'.[54] The quality of photographic printing, tonality and colour were strongly linked to ideas of legibility, noted above, and the ability of object photographs to do their broad work of art and design education. Consequently, in order to maintain their educative agenda, the V&A continued to privilege monochrome production. Postcards had to present viable representation and evidence of an object in a way that might be enhanced by the absence of colour, despite the consequent departure from the reality of the object.

The distrust of colour thus articulates wider museum values and ideas of 'correct ways of seeing'. Further, there is a persistent sense that postcards and other cheap reproductions, so often associated with the ludic and the vulgar, were somehow not suitable – questions of taste

Figure 2.5: Colour postcard, 1930s. Painted wooden head of the Virgin. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

and quality come up constantly. It was Sir Eric Maclagan's view[55] 'that it is an obligation of the Museum to produce monochrome cards as they are of far more value to the serious student'.[56] In a memo to one of his senior officers, Maclagan, even in the face of sales figures, reasserted the suspicion of colour for the public, suggesting that coloured postcards were made merely 'with a view to selling them':

> I regard them as of little or no educational value but they appeal to the public taste. The sale of our monochrome postcards on the other hand, has remained fairly constant. If we cease altogether printing new monochrome postcards, I regard it as certain that the sales will decrease. It seems to me that our only reasonable policy is to limit our new monochrome postcards to those subjects which it appears to us absolutely necessary to issue in such a form, and to print the smallest edition consistent with their being sold without actual loss for 1d … During the last few years we have made every effort to popularize the Museum publications. We have issued far more of these publications at a popular price and of a popular character than ever before, and I do not think that our efforts have been altogether unsuccessful.[57]

This explains the longevity of monochrome postcards, even in the face of the financial realities and unsold stock. The V&A was still producing

black-and-white postcards into the 1970s, often from older negatives, even though the captions were brought up to date through the various reprintings. However, in the 1960s, the soft greyscale tones of the collotype and photogravure were replaced by more modern-feeling hard, glossy 'real photo' printing with strong contrasts. Black and white lingered longer in some subjects than others: for instance, the formal qualities of sculpture translate more robustly into black and white.[58] By about 1935, out of 150 Architecture and Sculpture postcards, only six were in colour, whereas Ceramics, where glaze tone and decorative colour are especially important, had early offers of colour postcards.

If curators, concerned about the maintenance of connoisseurial values in the public domain, preferred the values associated with monochrome, it was the raw economics of public demand that forced change. The public, voting with their purses, wanted colour postcards. By the late 1920s colour was beginning to overwhelm monochrome. For the public consumer, colour was integral to the legibility and thus utility of the image. It is notable that many early colour postcards are of textiles, while, for instance, monochrome appears to have been used for subjects such as lacework, where black backgrounds projected and made legible the intricacy of the white threads.

However, a debate about museum and photographic values ultimately became a financial debate. Quantities of 'unsalable' monochrome postcards were seen by the Treasury as draining the public purse in both their production and storage. By 1930 monochrome cards were being sold off (not very successfully) at 12 for 4d., and by 1933/4 nearly a quarter of a million monochrome cards were seen as 'dead stock'.[59] There was even a scheme to packet up surplus stock and send it to schools in the colonies. Capitulation to colour, and the inevitable (at the time) lowering of production standards and thus legibility of objects, was viewed with unease but with an understanding of the economic reality.[60] It also points to a shifting away from the V&A's core original audience to a wider public in ways that align with shifts in the ethos of museums more generally.[61] To an extent, postcards came to give the public what they wanted from the collection, not what curators wanted them to have. By 1950, as museum publication started rolling after Second World War, this debate quietly disappeared, despite the longevity of black-and-white postcards. It was no longer an issue. Values had changed, and so had the photographic values at play within the ecosystem.

Conclusion

These debates, public and institutional, are interesting because they tell us, at least in part, what, within the networks of the civil society, people wanted the collections that they owned to be, and how they wanted to access them and hold them in their minds. That the postcards were of interest and indeed desirable to the public, and that they resonated with a sense of national design history and attendant identities, is indicated by the way it was suggested that the postcards could be used educationally in schools and colleges, pinned on the wall or projected through an epidiascope.[62] Postcards were also supplied to the War Office, along with the Museum's *Small Picture Books*, for educational use by troops and internees during the Second World War, and postcards of V&A objects were purchased by London County Council in the mid-1930s to be overprinted and given as reward cards in schools. Some 30,000 cards were supplied to the London Education Authority for this purpose, children being seen increasingly as a major museum audience.[63] This represents a major circulation of museum values.

The complex narrative of these small, seemingly insignificant visual objects operated in the wider world and expands the photography complex of the Museum beyond its walls in multiple ways within the processes of access, dissemination, education and ownership that had shaped the values of the V&A and other museums since their foundation. The huge amount of energy expended – at very senior levels – on the publication of photographs and postcards, and their formats, is significant (figure 2.6).

They point to a tension between traditional connoisseurial practice and public service within the institution, which remains today. Postcards were perfectly capable of facing both directions. They, and the wider cultures of photography that produced public-facing illustrated publications, museum records and reproductions for displays, for instance, are things that matter in the *realpolitik* of public utility. The humble postcard points to the disturbances of authority, legitimation and public purpose of the museum. As the *Museums Journal* noted of the British Museum's postcards in 1922, they were: 'a valuable propaganda and carry far beyond the confines of the museum knowledge that is essential to a nation with any claims to culture'.[64]

Postcards were 'not merely [for] tourists and the "Bank Holiday crowd"', as the V&A's Director thought, but for the greater museum visitor. As Sir Frederick Kenyon, Director of the British Museum, put it in his 1927 Romanes Lecture at Oxford, museums were for 'every person

Figure 2.6: Colour postcard marked up for revision, c. 1930. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

who can see and read, of every grade of education and mental capacity, from an archbishop to an errand boy', a sentiment echoed through the various commission reports into museums in the interwar period.[65] Postcards, those humble little bits of printed card, were integral in the positioning of museum collections as under public ownership with rights of public accessibility, while at the same time disseminating the museum's own value system around art and design. They give potent demonstration to the ways in which cultures of photography perform cultures of the museum and vice versa. As Ellen Handy has pointed out, there is an 'indexical relation between [a] museum's self-presentation of its collection and its canon'.[66] But equally important are the tensions between different strands of museum value and their public role that played out on the site of the postcard. The policy of a public institution was seen as a public matter, and it existed only through public support. So it was essential for the museum to move, as a contemporary review put it, 'nearer the heart of the public'.[67]

Coda

The integral relationship between shifting ecosystems, the rise and decline of museum postcards and the dissemination of public knowledge is very clear. Like many museums, the V&A now offers

relatively few postcards for public purchase, and most of those relate to special exhibitions, so that postcards can be linked to singular paths and controlled viewing rather than a ramble through the galleries.[68] However, while postcards are markedly fewer in number, they still carry a sense of the Museum's branding (although such a word was not used in the interwar period), its standards and the values that marked museum debates about postcards in the 1920s. They remain concerned with high production standards and popular consumption, though these are now often tied into public visibility of Museum objects such as posters and press photographs. That is, postcards remain an integral part of the ecosystem of museum values and its relationship with the public. Despite their analytical invisibility, the availability of postcards is expected of museums and part of the visitor experience. While the educational potential remains, postcards have become the souvenirs and keepsakes that the interwar curators anticipated. Further, the dissemination of museum knowledge has moved online and images of objects can be downloaded from online catalogues. The photographic ecosystems and practices from which these images are drawn have replaced the photographs that served as postcards and related reproductions of objects. In most cases, these latter (see Chapter 14) do not even appear on the Museum's main objects databases. They have joined the ranks of liminal non-collections.

The internet is the new postcard stall, behaving in a very similar way in terms of reproducing a 'museum point of view' as well as side-glancing and assemblage. It also operates in very similar ways: if postcards allowed haptic connection outside the formulations and presentations of the gallery and display case, digital resources do something similar. However, the foundations of the continuing tensions between connoisseurial and commercial concerns, the kinds of photographs that projected the museum values into the public space, were laid down in the early twentieth century. Postcards also point to the way in which museums managed public desires and expectations around their collections and access to them, and how cultures of photography, as an expression of those values, remain at work.

Notes

1   Handy 2010; Guha-Thakurta 2004, 190–5, 239–41; Beard 1992; Hamill and Luke 2017.

2   Kent 2010; Larkin 2016.

3   Handy 2010, 120.

4   Edwards 2019; Kavanagh 1994; Pearson and Keene 2017.

5   It was still possible, as now, for special photographic requirements to be serviced.

6   Latour 2005, 18.

7   VAA ED84/402 Postage on Photo Orders 1914. 4966 9.12.1914. Minute by Mr Hall.

8   In all cases, this was linked to questions of public accountability and Treasury incomes; see Edwards 2019; Larkin 2016, 113–14.

9   These firms were Keliher's, Levi's and Eyre & Spottiswoode. These cards were sold largely outside museum premises but were nonetheless part of the visual experience of the museum. At the same time, the V&A internalised other aspects of photographic supply and production, such as supplying prints to the public, a task undertaken by the firm of Morgan and Kidd. The V&A looked to employ an extra photographer to absorb this new work (VAA ED84/150 4204M).

10   Valentine's exhibited collotype postcards at the Board of Trade's British Industries Fair 1916 held at the V&A, as did Waterlows, who did a lot of high-quality printing work for the V&A. Catalogue. P. 108. NAL. A.38.35.

11   *The Athenaeum*, 4424, 10 August 1912, 144; 4425, 17 August 1912, 166.

12   There is a very sizeable literature; see, for instance, Joyce 2003*;* Arronsson and Elgenius 2015; Boswell 1999; Hill 2005; Pearson and Keene 2017.

13   Staff 1966, 64.

14   Corkett 1906, 622, 631.

15   BM Standing Committee Minutes Vol. 57, 3127; Larkin 2016, 113.

16   *The Athenaeum*, 4425, 17 August 1912, 166.

17   *Daily Telegraph*, Letter, 16 May 1952, 4 col. 7.

18   Warner 2002, 60; Miles and Welch 2020.

19   This translated into increased museum visitor attendances immediately after the war. While a number of factors came into play, the V&A weekly average attendance rose from 9,404 in 1918 to 12,000 in 1919: see Kavanagh 1999, 50, 160.

20   VAA Advisory Council Minutes 20.6.1913, 7; Burton 1999, 178–9.

21   Miles and Welch 2020, 8.

22   VAA ED84/174. 14.7.1914 (with Minute 12/1964M 4.4.1912).

23   VAA ED84/162, 28.3.1914.

24   VAA ED84/174. 14.7.1914 (Kennedy to Director). There was alarm in the Treasury, which, not understanding the difference between a photographic print and a photo-mechanically reproduced postcard, was under the impression that the V&A was going to set up a printing works in the backyard. This caused much merriment in the Museum. As one exasperated V&A official commented, the Treasury letter was 'clearly drafted by someone who has only a very vague idea of the difference between a print from a negative and a print reproduced by some printing process'; VAA ED84/151 5993. 3.8.1920.

25   VAA ED84/174, 26.6.1914 (Kennedy to Hart).

26   Director 1909–24. He encouraged a series of initiatives from illustrated lectures and postcards to children's activities which addressed a wider sense of public; see Burton 1999, 168–72.

27   VAA ED84/174, 14/3279.

28   Accession W.15.1912.

29   VAA ED84/174, 14/3279.

30   Kavanagh 1994, 164.

31   VAA ED84/174, memo 14.7.1915. These subjects had also been the most requested subjects for earlier photographic sales.

32   See 'The Syon Cope', *VAM*, http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93171/the-syon-cope-cope-unknown [accessed 01.01.2021]. Earlier photographs of it, probably by Isabel Agnes Cowper (see Chapter 5), survive in the Department of Photographs: PH.1058A-1891.

33   The *Picture Book* series is beyond the scope of this essay but is itself a related node in this particular corner of the photographic and museum ecosystem; see Edwards 2020.

34 VAA ED84/151 March 1929. Maclagen to Treasury.

35 The studio undertook periodic assessments and revisions of its negatives stock. Disposal, however, was premised on the quality and condition of the negatives rather than, it would appear, on photographic style.

36 Alpers 1991, 29.

37 In a folding back of production and values, some departments such as Furniture absorbed postcards of 'their' objects back into records and research data around those objects (see Chapter 14).

38 Grasskamp 2016, 78–80.

39 VAA ED84/150, 4300M 10.1914. Before then, such effects were created in labour- intensive ways with 'scissors or a sharp knife' and 'mounted on cardboard' to be prepared for printers' blocks.

40 Some very large objects are photographed in situ in the Museum.

41 Beard 1992, 511.

42 There is a series of V&A postcards of Asian art which, unlike the others, do not have a 'split back' (for message and address) in accordance with Post Office regulations. This suggests a collector's rather than a casual market in this particular case. All V&A postcards in this period carry their captions under the image, not on the reverse, again pointing to album/ collection use.

43 VAA A0803; NAL 1946.003. Many of these sculpture postcards were reused in a booklet, *50 Masterpieces of Sculpture* (1951), as part of the V&A's post-war publication programme; VAA A0065 comprises five boxes of post-war postcards, mostly dating from the 1970s. These appear to comprise the record series from the Publishing Department; they carry notes of reprints and associated instructions on their reverses.

44 TNA ED23/387.

45 Various personal communications, Shepton Mallet 'Festival of Cards', March 2018, and in passing at other sites.

46 VAA. Registry 400. Publications (Policy and Precedents) Part 1. 1898–1968: Letter Gibbs-Smith to Director, 7.5.1946.

47 VAA ED84/151. 5993. 3.8.1920.

48 This relationship, whereby HMSO managed contracts but printing was external, pertained through the interwar years. Visually led publications only returned to HMSO in 1947, a coming together of happenstance: under the guidance of Sir Francis Meynell, HMSO worked to improve design and production standards, while the V&A, constrained in its own production by post-war paper rationing yet pushed by the Treasury, was desperate to restart its publications programme after 1945. For this it needed access to HMSO's liberal paper ration; VAA. Registry 400. Publications (Policy and Precedents) Part 1. 1898–1968: ME49, 8.11.1947; TNA ED23/387. See also Marriage and Stubbs 2001, 1–19.

49 VAA ED84/174, 14.7.1914. As noted, the printers were also asked for an opinion on this matter.

50 Young 2018, 14.

51 Colour postcards were well established by the early twentieth century, and used chromo-lithographic technologies. However, until into the mid-century, the high-quality work required by museums and galleries was economically prohibitive for postcards.

52 Geimer 2016, 56. This aligns with a debate in photography more generally – until the late twentieth century, serious photography, especially documentary work, was assumed to be black and white. For extensive discussion on the significance of colour, see Gockel 2021. The V&A Photographic Studio was working predominantly in colour by the mid-1990s (see Chapter 6).

53 Wind 1963, 165, n. 131. I thank Martin Kemp for drawing this reference to my attention.

54 VAA ED84/174. 14.7.1914. The standardised colour of the Munsell system was naturalised within the printing industry by this date (Young 2018, 3).

55 Director, 1924–44. He continued the postcard project started by Harcourt Smith.

56 VAA ED84/163. Director from Mr James on state of publications, 15.4.1931.

57 VAA ED84/163. Maclagen to Mr Howarth, 16.4.1931.

58 Johnson 1998; Hamill and Luke 2017.

59 VAA ED84/174 5720.

60 The V&A also maximised photographic investment, using the blocks for colour postcards to produce two *Small Picture Books* in colour, unlike the monochrome *Small Picture Books*, which have their own photographic identity.

61 Pearson and Keene 2017.
62 My own collection includes V&A Furniture postcards which seem to have been used in an educational environment. Not only are they very worn, but many are marked up with light pencil lines as if they are being used to work out the scale, proportion and measurement of a piece of furniture.
63 VAA ED84/287: 37/555.
64 *Museums Journal*, 21 February 1922, 169.
65 Kenyon 1927, 18; the archbishop reference was possibly a little dig at Maclagan, who was extremely learned, elegant, well connected and the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury. See Pearson and Keene 2017.
66 Handy 2010, 132.
67 The Victoria and Albert Museum 1939.
68 I am very grateful to Elizabeth Lovatt of V&A Enterprises (Retail) for enlightening me on contemporary postcard provision.

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3

The museum and the image factory: the South Kensington Museum, the Brothers Dalziel and the making of Victorian museum catalogues

Bethan Stevens

A necessary part of the Victorian museum's photographic ecosystem was the linked technology of wood engraving. This chapter explores museum catalogues from the 1870s, looking at how engraving was used alongside photography to translate a wide range of museum objects for illustration.[1] The catalogues were published at a key moment in the history of image technologies: the practice of transferring designs onto woodblocks photographically was by then well established, having been commercially viable since around 1860. At the same time, wood engraving was still *the* primary medium of mass reproduction, before photo-mechanical techniques became sufficiently cheap and developed to replace it, in the 1880s and 1890s. Wood engraving is a relief-printing technology, allowing woodblocks to be printed letterpress alongside type. It was also an end-grain technique, in which printing blocks of dense boxwood were cut across the grain. This makes for a hard surface that renders great detail (far more than other available relief-printing technologies, such as wood cuts).[2] Wood engraving was crucial for transmitting ideas, information, visual art and culture, and it facilitated the explosion of mass visual media that characterised the period, during which photography and print worked hand in hand.[3]

Let me first give a very brief account of how wood engraving worked. A design was drawn and/or transferred onto a boxwood block, and the white parts were cut out by the engraver. Prints could then be made from the woodblock, or from an electrotyped reproduction of

the block. With a ubiquity comparable to digital photography today, wood engravings were used across society, in packaging, adverts and news, in literary illustrations, political cartoons and decorative and fine arts. In the South Kensington Museum (SKM), as well as being represented in fine art collections, wood engraving was a working medium. Wood engravings made up the humblest and most numerous illustrations in museum catalogues and other publications (in more expensive volumes, they appeared alongside more elite media such as chromolithography). They were a crucial part of the Museum's operational ecosystem, enabling the drive towards accessibility and education that was always part of the institution's *raison d'être*.

Dalziel Brothers was the leading firm of London wood engravers, and its prints circulated nationally and globally. The firm was directed by George and Edward Dalziel alongside their siblings Margaret, Thomas and John. They employed at least 36 wood engravers and made around 54,000 prints in their five decades of business. When George and Edward founded their firm in 1839, they would have been following the multiple public announcements of photographic inventions that same year: the two media grew up side by side. Decades later, in 1893, photo-mechanical print processes were cited as the reason for Dalziel's bankruptcy. But there were also many productive links between wood engraving and photography.[4] Dalziel engravers interpreted onto the woodblock work by leading photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron, and annotated proofs of book illustrations show that wood engravers were debating major visual discoveries, such as Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of the movement of horses. Later in the century there are stylistic changes to engraving practice that were inspired by photography, and there were even legal developments, as the involvement of photography changed the way that designers and printmakers shared their rights in images.[5]

As London's leading wood engravers, Dalziel Brothers was bound to have links with a major new cultural institution like SKM. The firm was positioned within the networks of the emerging Museum even before its founding; as young engravers in 1851, George and Edward Dalziel handled all of the engravings for the Art Union's catalogue of the Great Exhibition, a major event in the Museum's pre-history. Later, Edward Dalziel's son Gilbert studied at the South Kensington art schools. In the 1870s, Dalziel Brothers was commissioned to contribute to several SKM catalogues and handbooks. The company produced illustrations of all kinds of objects, from medieval ivories to contemporary jewellery, glassware, textiles, carvings, weapons, sculpture and museum architecture. These images were translated through

multiple media, as a three-dimensional object was rendered as a wood engraving only after layers of reproductions had been made, involving both photography and intermediary drawing. The final prints were produced through the labour of a dispersed network of artisans who created these multiple layers. It has been possible to identify some of these makers through V&A records, and also through the Dalziel firm's substantial visual archive, kept chronologically in albums in the British Museum. The acquisition of these albums as part of the collection proper at the Prints and Drawings Department of the British Museum was an act that lifted these humble illustrations to the status of fine art prints. The archive helps illuminate the authorship and making of museum illustrations, including the fascinating stories and status of linked non-collection photographs at the V&A.

Let's begin by considering illustrations of glassware made for SKM in 1875 for a catalogue and a handbook by Alexander Nesbitt. Among this series are works cut by 'Burnett' (see pencil note on figure 3.1), probably William Hawtrey Burnett, a versatile wood engraver who was outstanding at sculptural and architectural subjects. Burnett was born in around 1833, and worked for Dalziel at least from 1872 to 1884, as well as running his own engraving office at Wine Office Court in the mid-1870s.[6] He came from a family of silk weavers from Bethnal Green, and started out in that trade; he and his father were both working as weavers when he was 19 years old, in 1851.[7] Their business didn't prosper, probably hit by the industrialisation of the textile trade. By 1861, when Burnett was in his late twenties, his father had become a baker and he was a wood engraver, living in crowded lodgings in Camden Town – Dalziel's neighbourhood.

The best of Burnett's proofs for Dalziel have a dizzying elegance; he combines a restrained linear aesthetic, faithful to the patterning of the vessel, with dreamy and abstract shapes that emerge from both the textures of the glass and the light of the intermediary photography. In these engravings, Burnett's attention skips from the glassmaker's patterning, to the abstract forms of photographic reflection, to the visible depths of the glass medium, and back again. The result is tiny prints that – in flat, opaque black and white – appear deeply layered and three-dimensional. They are astonishing love songs to other media. Although I have not been able to trace the negatives for these engravings (many museum negatives do not survive), they were probably made by Isabel Agnes Cowper. Erika Lederman's work (Chapter 5) has revealed Cowper's importance as a professional woman in charge of SKM's growing photographic service, with a studio and a number of assistants;

Figure 3.1: William Hawtrey Burnett for Dalziel after Cowper (photographer) and unknown maker in Catalonia, Spain, Wood-engraved proof for Alexander Nesbitt, *Glass: South Kensington Museum Art Handbooks* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1878). Dalziel Archive Volume 34 (1875), BM 1913,0415.195, no. 285. By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. All Rights Reserved © Sylph Editions, 2016.

she was also a former wood engraver.[8] Some of Cowper's photographs for the expensive chromolithographed illustrations printed alongside the wood engravings in the *Glass* handbook *do* survive, however.

Technologies for the transfer of photographs onto woodblocks enabled the kinds of mixed media effects achieved in figure 3.1. Surviving partially engraved photographic woodblocks at the University of Reading give a good sense of how linear diagrams shared the block's surface with beautiful, tonal photographs that assisted in their making.[9] The technology of photographic transfer was intended to provide practical assistance in accurate documentation, but the

technology also invited an aesthetic response from engravers. Aesthetic engagement came hand in hand with a desire for artistic credit. Some of Dalziel Brothers' proofs for the *Glass* project include the engraved Dalziel signature, delicately curving around the lower edge of the object. And 20 of the proofs also have the names of individual engravers pencilled on them. In almost all of these, the tiny pencil names hug the lower edge of the vessel, just as 'Dalziel' does, so that the manuscript signature mimics the printed one (figure 3.1).

While the elegant 'Dalziel' signature is privileged in these proofs, on examining the published volumes it turns out that the Museum trimmed off *all* signatures before publishing the engravings. Trimming of printed signatures happened throughout Dalziel's work for SKM, in a process that made the numerous collaborating artists involved invisible, in order to present the published illustration as a transparent representation of a Museum object – borrowing Elizabeth Edwards's concept of the 'rhetoric of transparency' around museum photography.[10] The Museum's power in establishing narratives of art production is well established, but we also note the assertive act of an unidentified album maker from the Dalziel firm, whose manuscript annotations reclaim authorship for individual wood engravers.

In 1873, two Dalziel employees, Burnett and John Eastop, collaborated to engrave an illustration of traditional Indian silk reeling for Henry Hardy Cole's *Catalogue of the objects of Indian art exhibited in the South Kensington Museum* (1874). For Burnett, formerly a weaver, this may have sparked memories of his own previous career and his original family trade. To make the *Indian Art* catalogue illustrations, a series of photographs were taken in the Museum on 20 March 1873 by Cowper; this time, prints, glass negatives and records of the photoshoot survive in the V&A Archive. Dalziel Brothers then engraved and proofed the wood engravings, and finished woodblocks were delivered to the Museum on 22 July. Annotations in the Dalziel Archive at the British Museum confirm this date and enable the identification of several engravers.

Again, comparing the wood engravings with photographic prints in the V&A's Guard Books, we see how, even though they are representing *sculptural* objects, the engravers pay enormous attention to the shadows, lights and surfaces of the photographic intermediary. An example is a wood engraving of a pen box and cover, made by an unknown maker in Lahore, in nephrite jade, ruby, emerald and gold; it was photographed by Isabel Agnes Cowper and engraved by John Eastop (figures 3.2 and 3.3).

Figure 3.2: Isabel Agnes Cowper after unknown maker in Lahore, *Pen box and cover, nephrite jade, ruby, emerald and gold*, photographic print from 1873. Guard Book MA/32/29, neg. nos 9778 to 10032. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

As well as producing a detailed visual record of the object itself, Eastop used painstaking black- and white-line technique to show qualities that were not inherent to the box but rather to Isabel Agnes Cowper's acts of lighting and photography. Take, for instance, the large, reflective white surface on the lid of the box; this white area is defined at the top by an elegant arc, not part of the object but nevertheless a defining formal feature in both photographic and wood-engraved print. And note the way that in both versions this light then disperses underneath in a hazy, dreamy way; Eastop's skilful engraving captures qualities of photography as carefully as it captures those of the jade box. His engraving is enchanting because it effortlessly combines two aesthetics: the regular, repeating motifs of the Indian design, and the irregular, abstract light patterns of the photographic response. Eastop achieved these effects with a deceptively simple use of parallel tints, occasionally interrupted by bold, restrained, black or white lines that pick out the object's patterning. The technique is characteristic of engravings Eastop made for Dalziel; his sparse but intricate style particularly lent itself to engravings of scientific instruments and machinery.

Figure 3.3: John Eastop for Dalziel after Cowper (photographer) and unknown maker in Lahore, wood-engraved proof for H. H. Cole, *Catalogue of the objects of Indian art exhibited in the South Kensington Museum* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1874). Dalziel Archive Volume 31 (1873), BM 1913,0415.192, no. 615. By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. All Rights Reserved © Sylph Editions, 2016.

Another wood engraver involved in SKM's *Indian Art* catalogue was John Bowcher, who cut 3 of the 18 illustrations. Figure 3.4 (top) depicts a contemporary sandalwood carving; the other illustrations made by Bowcher represented a pen box and an anklet. Bowcher (born c. 1837) began his career as a leatherworker and maker of military accoutrements; this had been his family's business for at least two generations, and his father had employed up to six workers.[11] Early in 1862, John married Maria Read. They established a home in Bartholomew Road, a few blocks and a brisk 10-minute walk from the Dalziel firm on Camden High Street. At some point in 1862, John Bowcher changed his profession, and became a wood engraver.[12] Bowcher advertised in trade directories from 1871 to 1885, switching between periods of working from home in Camden, and periods of sharing offices near the printing hubs of Fleet Street or the Strand.[13] He also did irregular work

Figure 3.4: Top of page: John Burnett for Dalziel, after J. J. Shaw (inter-mediary draughtsman), I. A. Cowper (photographer) and unknown maker in Ahmedabad, wood-engraved proof for Cole, *Indian Art* (1874). Dalziel Archive Volume 31 (1873), BM 1913,0415.192, no. 607. By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. All Rights Reserved © Sylph Editions, 2016.

for Dalziel. It was clearly a career of some success but considerable instability and change.

Investigating Dalziel employees through census returns and trade directories reveals interesting employment patterns. Through following clues in Dalziel's annotated archive, I noted a significant group of casual workers who were not primarily engravers, but had one or more major career changes in their lives. Industrialisation made artisans flexible by necessity. While those at Dalziel who started engraving as teenaged apprentices were more likely to have stable jobs and full-time employment (despite the increasingly precarious environment), a number of engravers who switched in from other careers worked as uncertain freelancers, engraving 'on their own account', and were hired by big firms to help when needed. Bowcher fitted into this pattern. Wood-engraving manuals reassured new engravers that with patience and application, it was possible to learn independently; the necessary equipment cost 25s.[14] Since wood engraving boomed fairly suddenly in the mid-century, there was considerable demand for labour.

On examining Bowcher's engraving for Cole's *Indian Art* catalogue, an alienated network of global imagemakers emerges. The sandalwood carving was made in the district of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Cole's catalogue does not name artists involved in making the piece, but emphasises its imperialist function; it was 'given by the government of India', and accessioned in 1868.[15] The V&A's Negative Registers record Cowper's authorship of photography for *Indian Art*, on 20 March 1873.[16] Having herself worked as a wood engraver, Isabel Agnes Cowper knew well the kind of definition and contrast required in a photograph to make it translate well into the medium (figure 3.5). However, while Cowper's photograph strongly evokes the sculptural and three-dimensional qualities of the carved object, Bowcher's engraving is transformed into a flat pattern. This is largely because the deep, inset elements have been represented by Bowcher as solid black, while in the photograph they are variegated, with shifting shadows and textures. Without explanatory text, Bowcher's print could be taken as representing a textile, carpet or graphic work as easily as a wooden carving.

It is hard to know who is responsible for this change, since yet another artist was involved. Dalziel's proof is signed by an intermediary draughtsman: 'J. J. SHAW DEL'. Indeed, printed signatures on the proofs of the *Indian Art* engravings testify to the involvement of three such intermediaries: Shaw, W. Clausen and G. Payne. In February 1873, all three had been listed in *The Art Journal* for male student

Figure 3.5: Isabel Agnes Cowper after unknown maker in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, carved sandalwood panel, photographic print from 1873. Guard Book MA/32/29, neg. nos 9778 to 10032. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

prizes at the South Kensington Schools of Art.[17] These intermediary draughtsmen would have painstakingly translated Cowper's photographs into line drawings suitable for engraving. They probably drew directly on top of a photograph printed on the woodblock. Curiously, on the *Indian Art* proofs, the *only* engraved signatures are those of Shaw, Clausen or Payne (despite the many collaborators involved). It is possible that these ambitious art students were particularly keen to sign their early forays into commercial work. In any case, the lone signatures were again removed by the Museum before publication, presenting illustration as a transparent technology.

SKM embodied a grand school of design, and the Museum habitually used talent in its schools for a wide range of tasks. Henry Hardy Cole's *Indian Art* catalogue contributes to this vision in some ways, but in others its production processes seem markedly opposed to it. There is an unnecessary and obfuscating distance between John Bowcher and the object of his wood engraving which had been reinterpreted both by photography and drawing before it arrived at the Dalziel office in Camden. Bowcher would not have seen the sandalwood carving, even

though it was nearby, within London. Many individuals separated him from the client (he wasn't even *directly* employed by Dalziel Brothers); more degrees still separated him from the maker of the object.

More information on the production of the woodblocks is contained in the V&A Archive in a 'Memorandum on wood engravings for catalogues':[18]

> On the 6th inst I called on Dalziel Brothers the Engravers … They are willing to undertake the Engraving of Wood Blocks drawn by the Students in the National Art Training Schools under Mr [Richard] Burchett's supervision, and to pay for these Drawings, including the cost in their account … The Wood Blocks will be provided through Stores.[19]

This was written on 10 March, just 10 days before Cowper started her photography for the *Indian Art* engravings. It makes sense that the woodblocks were provided by the Museum itself (not the engraving firm); this would have allowed Cowper or her assistants to print their photographs directly on the prepared surface of the woodblocks. Intermediary draughtspeople were commonly employed to work with photographic wood engravings, since it was thought that many engravers would not be capable of translating a tonal photograph into a linear design. This was increasingly perceived to be the case, as wood engraving followed a more and more specialised 'factory' system.[20] From the Museum's point of view, intermediary draught-speople could also refine information from photographs to enhance the documentary qualities of engravings. Returning to the engraving and photograph of the pen box, for instance (figures 3.2 and 3.3), we may now notice that the details of the pattern on the *sides* of the box are considerably more legible in the engraving than the photo-graph, where they are obscured in shade. This sort of detail could be clarified by museum draughtspeople before the block was sent to Camden for engraving.

Though common practice, photographic transfer was not always routinely used for the production of wood engravings. In 1879 engraver William James Linton recorded his strong preference for engraving from drawings made direct on the block. Photographic transfers could be fragile and blurry;[21] drawn lines increased accuracy (especially for fine work). Dalziel's museum illustrations suggest that it could be confusing to engrave from photographs, particularly if an intermediary drawing was layered on top of a photograph transferred
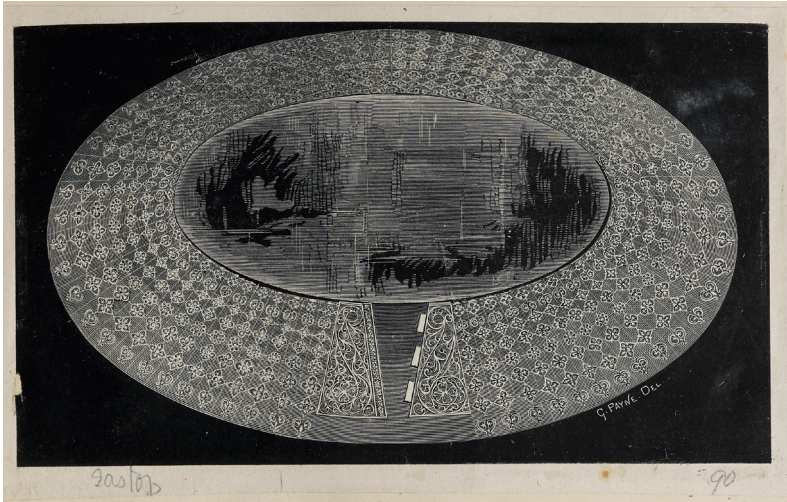
Figure 3.6: John Eastop for Dalziel after G. Payne (intermediary draughtsman), Cowper (photographer) and an unknown maker from Calicut. Wood-engraved proof for H.H. Cole, *Indian Art* (1874). Dalziel Archive Volume 31 (1873), BM 1913,0415.192, no. 617. By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. All Rights Reserved © Sylph Editions, 2016.

onto the woodblock. Muddling layers of visual mediation distanced engravers from the representational aspects of their art; they were not always able to decipher the *content* of images they made. Let's conclude with a final example from Cole's *Indian Art* catalogue, again cut by John Eastop, after an intermediary drawing by Payne, a photograph by Cowper and an object by an unidentified maker from Calicut (figure 3.6).

Eastop's sparse parallel white-line work beautifully accentuates the repetitive pattern in the design. His restrained, geometric approach renders all the more dramatic the abstract shapes of reflected light that emerge in black at the centre of the design. We see from the patterns of light how the object is mediated by Cowper's photography. When tracing the engraving to its final publication, however, it turns out that this is *not* a splendid plate or dish – as Eastop represents it – but a well-known necklace. Working from Payne's interpretation of Cowper's photograph, Eastop mistakes a display stand for an intrinsic part of the object, making a feature of how light pools on it. This whole central portion of the engraving, as well as the black background, was cut away before the final
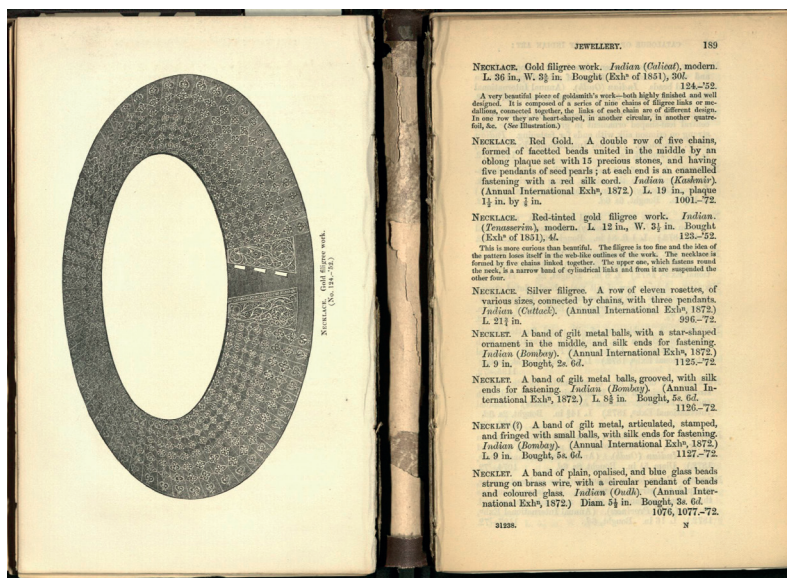
Figure 3.7: Henry Hardy Cole, William Tayler, Eyre & Spottiswoode and South Kensington Museum. *Catalogue of the Objects of Indian Art Exhibited in the South Kensington Museum*. London, 1874. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

publication (figure 3.7). The first engraver's proof (figure 3.6) is visually bolder, but misleading. It's important that we see Eastop's aesthetic pleasure and judgement at work in this print, *despite* an alienation from his subject matter.

Victorian museum wood engravings were collaboratively made by a complex network of specialist makers, photographers, draughtspeople and engravers. Through the astonishing prints they produced of collection items, the museum extended itself visually and educationally, and the makers contributed to an expanded ecosystem of objects – and surprisingly poetic replications. The silent use of photography in the production of wood engravings is what enabled the marvellous layered textures of the finished prints, artworks that convey art-historical information to the reader but which also capture the aesthetic ambitions of anonymous artists and intermediaries.

Notes

2 Wood cuts, in contrast to wood engraving, use the side-grain, and tend to use a softer wood.
3 For the importance of photography to print and periodical culture, see, for instance, Belknap 2016.
4 See, for instance, Beegan 2008, Stevens 2022.
5 Aspects of this essay are addressed in expanded form in Stevens 2022.
6 Listed in the Post Office Directory; see Engen 1985, 37.
7 TNA HO/107/1541, 1851 Census of England.
8 See Lederman 2020 and Chapter 5 in this volume.
9 I am grateful to Rob Banham for showing me these. See woodblocks from the Reeves Collection, on loan to the University of Reading from the Museum of English Rural Life, accession nos 70/258/1–8.
10 Edwards 2001, 55.
11 TNA HO/107/1510, 1851 Census of England; TNA RG/9/120, 1861 Census of England; TNA RG/10/250, 1871 Census of England; TNA RG/11/221, 1881 Census of England.
12 London Metropolitan Archives, P90/tri/004, *Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1917*, 15 February 1863.
13 All of Bowcher's appearances in the directories are listed in Engen 1985, 28.
14 Linton 1884, 37. For more on the Dalziel annotations, see Stevens 2022.
15 Cole 1874, 136.
16 VAA, Negatives Register, 20 March 1873; VAA MA/32/29, 9778 to 10032, Guard Books.
17 'Schools of art', *The Art Journal*, February 1873, 48.
18 I am grateful to Elizabeth James for drawing my attention to this.
19 Memorandum by A. C. King, 10 March 1873. VAA, ED84/153.
20 See Beegan 2008.
21 Linton 1879, 79–81; also Linton 1884, 93–102.

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4

The image as asset

Tom Windross

The Digital Media and Publishing team at the V&A are – with one notable exception – not professional imagemakers. Only one of us, the Museum's Motion Media Manager, carries a camera for work. The rest of the Department uses images in many different ways all day, every day, but we rarely create them from scratch ourselves. We rely on a series of interactions to deliver us images, singly or in substantial numbers, from within the organisation and outside it; we work to order them, refine them, contextualise them and then publish them in one form or another – and it's true, I think, that without image making there would be very little publishing at the V&A.

To that end, we spend a great deal of time assessing, commissioning and gathering images and their associated rights. The files that we collect, however, are often not the ones that we actually put before the public; pictures that we commission are frequently part of a process, or a basis for later selection. We might be seen as partially wasteful with the assets that we have cause to generate, but we are very careful about the ones that we incorporate into the final project. Indeed, rarely, if at all, do we use any image that we receive from anyone exactly as we receive it. If we are not professional image makers, we are professional image managers.

The V&A produces publishing and digital products and services that are intended to support its mission to promote makers and the made. We produce these commercially (through publishing and licensing) and non-commercially (through our website, or other platforms). We think of individual pieces of (mostly now) digital data (an image, a film clip, an audio file, a text, some meta-data) as 'assets', and of the finished presentation as 'content'. Our task is to refine and combine assets into

a content form that our audiences will find compelling – and to deliver that content in a manner appropriate for the national museum of art and design.

Our projects are complex. We have processes that draw on different types of creative producers throughout – authors, curators, designers, developers, filmmakers, illustrators, photographers, printers, publishers. The idea of a book (or other output) as the product of one imagination, possibly contained in a garret, is somewhat alien to the kind of work we do. In order to reduce the complexity of our work, we rely on lists to break things into component parts – richly informative, often hilarious, lists. We have lists of tasks, lists of objects, lists of problems, lists of things we've done, or will do. Shared lists. Private lists. Lost lists. We have many, many lists of photographs.

An exhibition book has its genesis in two primary lists – a contents list (the structure of the book in terms of writing) and an image list. This second list (an 'Exhibits List', formed initially in part from works to be shown in the relevant exhibition) might be structured very generally into sections, but even at a very early stage each potential object will have a number. This number is unrelated to any other; it's not an inventory number, or an asset number, or a catalogue number. It is there purely to ensure that when the organisation talks of 'the Austrian Madonna' or 'the KHM Virgin' or 'the MFA Donatello', we are all talking about the same object. After a very specific and agreed point during the project, the exhibit numbers given to loan objects must not change – even if the proposed loan does not eventually come to the exhibition. There have been instances where an allocated number has been given to another work substituted for it. Such instances always mean lost work, and can give rise to potentially profound embarrass-ments. Normally, such lists apply to potential photographs of works we have not seen in real life.

At another agreed point, the Exhibits List is moved into a rights database (bespoke), maintained by our Commercial Rights team. Normally, by now, the spreadsheet, generated by the Exhibitions Department, will have embedded low-res images of the relevant works. These might be anything from images from institution websites to photographs from curatorial phones. Here is where our work begins. Spreadsheets, for their many virtues, are not, in any way, shape or form that I'm aware of, useful for managing images. Our first task is to save the document as a webpage (or to get to the XML through some other means) and access the images directly. Typically, these are .png files, with filenames beginning with the informative 'image001.png' and

carrying on from there. These filenames are not ordered as presented in the (in this instance, Microsoft Excel) worksheet, but in the sequence in which they were added to the document. We then create our own list, mapped with the filenames created by the spreadsheet, and import the images into our database, along with useful pieces of information from the original document (notably title, lender, inventory number and any contact information). The useless 'birth name' given to an image is irrelevant, as is the data attached to it.

This – notably specific – example is intended to show the lengths to which we will go in order to get a useful list of images (not objects: an object will frequently have more than one image). Picking over the remains of a dismembered spreadsheet for images with no meta-data is not fulfilling work in itself, and the images themselves are useless to us in terms of book making; but the fact that they exist gives us the beginnings of a list to start work with. It may be that it becomes worthwhile to use these initial images as FPO (For Position Only) files when we begin to work with a book designer, but what we need is the list, so that rights clearance can begin. This is 'photography' in the aggregate; we don't need to know very much about each individual image – but we care deeply that the list exists, presenting us with a set of challenges to resolve.

In the same way, a file or set of files (be they for a book, webpage, video or augmented reality experience) – more useful in itself than a spreadsheet, perhaps – is best thought of as a resolved list of assets (text, required images, required layout, required fonts … and many other things). An illustrated book, website or article taken to publication is the summation of many crossed-out tasks on a lot of people's lists.

Our process of image gathering normally continues separately from the author's work of writing. In order to publish something as content on one of our platforms, we need both the asset itself and the permission(s) to use it. The V&A exists to champion the work of makers of all kinds – but in order to do that, we have to 'exploit' their work. There are similar tensions in play across the Museum – between wanting to display and share work and seeking to own and protect it from visitors, between wanting to give intellectual property away and needing to generate income, between wanting every show to be a blockbuster and not having space for everyone to come; that is, between making things accessible and 'dumbing down'.

But image rights are an interesting case for a museum. This chapter is not the place for a detailed consideration of the different

kinds of rights that we might need to secure in order to publish a picture in a book – but it's worth noting that our procedures are careful and respectful of rights holders. Our notable challenges arise where there is uncertainty around either the law (whether we need to secure permissions), the identity of a rights holder (from whom we should secure permissions) or the perceived value of the rights to an image (how much we should pay for them).

Normally, the charge a publisher pays for an image has two components: a supply fee (sending us the file) and a rights charge (a licence to use it). It's very normal to secure an image from a supplier, only to then establish that the supplier is not the only rights holder – and that further permissions need to be obtained. It's also normal to be told that the image supplier doesn't know who the further permissions should be secured from. Infrequently, we are told that a supplier has all the rights they need to license an image to us, but we subsequently find out that they're mistaken. In many cases the V&A Photography team will supply us with an image – but the V&A may well not have the rights necessary to then reproduce it.

The V&A, particularly its more commercial elements, is in a complex position here. If we want to publish a book on a subject, and one particular artist working in the area charges exponentially more for their images than others, we sometimes have to choose not to use that artist's work. But might that commercial decision impact the scholarship of another part of the Museum? Do we then risk excluding that artist from a particular narrative? From another view, let us say that including a controversial image in a book is an important part of – say – the history of political cartoons. Should our scholars expose the commercial arm of the Museum to potentially damaging litigation, or reputational disruption?

These decisions, based on rights charges for images, seem to distort the publishing market. We cannot, currently, create a new edition of a book on our list, Lesley Jackson's *Modern British Furniture: Design since 1945*, not because there is no market for the book, but because the rights issues surrounding it are too complex to make it viable. Some photographs now contain so many layers of rights complexity that they become self-referential Gordian knots of overlapping challenges.[1]

It is certainly possible for the Museum to rely on copyright exceptions in order to use images within certain exceptions to copyright clearance. The exceptions might include criticism and review, or education, or excerpt – or, less frequently, transformation and parody. But we prefer not to do so, because we should be respectful of the rights

of creators, just as we hope others will be respectful of rights to intellectual property that we create.

The V&A, in its employment contracts, claims copyright in the work of its staff completed during the course of their normal working duties. Our photographers work late into the night to make our schedules possible; I wrote this text on a bank holiday. The Museum claims this text as © Victoria and Albert Museum, but the nature of copyright law is such that precedent is necessary to define the status of legislation. The digital dissemination of images of works of art and design as didactic tools is increasingly fundamental to cultural life, but the position of museums as creators and custodians of digital images is fraught with complexity. The tension between sharing every image we create openly and our ability – legally or financially – to do so is an ongoing challenge.

When we choose a cover image, we choose not an object, but an image of it. That image has two main functions: to sell the book (and its content), and possibly to generate a link in our audience's mind to the other communications the Museum creates around an exhibition. A curator has a feeling for which object represents the story of the book most effectively, but that might not be the object for which we have the 'best' image. The photograph might not have been taken from the 'best' angle, or be of sufficient resolution to extract a detail. We might not be able to fit text on to the image in a way that allows the cover to be readable.

In considering what is 'good' about a photograph, we have to consider what the end use will be. On an object page of 'Explore the Collections',[2] our research has shown that absolutely any image is regarded by our users as being better than no image; in a book, we would normally show a photograph created by a professional photographer, taken after the object has been conserved and mounted by other professionals – but we rely heavily on what we call 'record shots' to create our image lists. This plethora of images, each of which can be incredibly useful to our work and to our audiences, includes single JPEGs of less than a megabyte in size, all the way through to tiled pyramid TIFFs of multiple gigabytes.

As of May 2021, there are 33 images of Donatello's panel of *The Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* on our collections site (figure 4.1). The shallow relief has been photographed with different angles of raking light, inside and outside its frame, cropped and on white and black backgrounds. Some of the shots have a shadow from the frame that obscures the very top of the panel, some of the
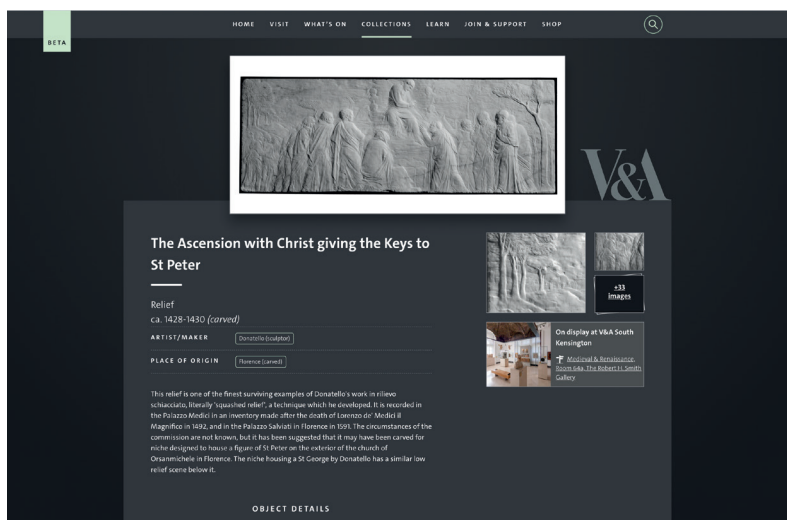
Figure 4.1: 'Explore the Collections' page for *The Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* by Donatello (https://collections.vam.ac.uk/ item/O93255/the-ascension-with-christ-giving-relief-donatello).

photographs are reproductions of reproductions. The date of the image files suggests that it's likely that some of the pictures on the website were originally shot as transparencies, which have subsequently been scanned. In some of the pictures the marble is almost white; in others the panel becomes a moody grey. The shallow relief, *rilievo schiacciato*, makes this a complex object to photograph – but choosing which image best represents the object is very difficult (figures 4.2a–f).

The intention is to make our reproduction as close as possible to what the object actually looks like for visitors – but in fact each photograph we share represents a complex interplay of choices made at different times. Can we allocate photographer and conservation time? How many images did they take in the capture? Which is the best angle? Is the image for a recto or verso page? How has the designer sized it? What colour correction has been done? How many proof stages do we have? What kind of paper are we reproducing on? When the book is printed, will we need to balance the needs of some pages against those of others? The question 'What is good?' is difficult to answer.

At an objective level, there is a fundamental difference between the imaginative photography of Tim Walker,[3] and the record photography of the V&A Photographic Studio. But when working with a Tim Walker image, our objective is clear: to be as truthful as possible to the

Figure 4.2a–f: Variations of image assets relating to *The Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* by Donatello. (Images depicting no. 7629-1861). All © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

digital art supplied. And that in itself can be complicated. With a work in the Museum, often our intention is to honour not just the captured photograph, but also its relationship to the original object, the presentation in the content we're making and the experience of the visitor/purchaser. The relationship between those priorities is nuanced.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

In general, each image in a V&A book has at least seven digital iterations: the first low-resolution file, the professional RGB (Red-Green-Blue) capture, the working version of that capture, the edited CMYK (Cyan-Magenta-Yellow-blacK, used for press) version, the working iteration of that file, the separated file processed through the RIP (Raster Image Processor) and the archived file. Each of those files, and the links between them, represents a system and process of work that can be fairly precarious, and needs careful attention. The teams, internally and externally, that work to create the photographs, clear the permissions, design the books, colour-correct the images, print the books and manage the projects have my grateful admiration.

Our work with images (not necessarily photographs) functions as a shared space – between the object and the public. Accumulatively, the images and our presentation of them become a representation of the V&A brand – what we offer, and what we can share. By bringing together images supplied by the V&A with those of other institutions and creators, we can create new contexts for our collections and practice, allowing the Museum to reach beyond its physical spaces. Our use of images allows access to the collection from other countries, in other time zones, in bookshops and on platforms (social media, the web) that the V&A does not own. By publishing V&A images, we try to disperse them as widely as possible, building engagement (commercial or non-commercial) with the Museum and its mission.

Notes

1   'How many layers of copyright infringement are in Emily Ratajkowski's new NFT?' *The Verge*, https://www.theverge.com/2021/4/24/22399790/emily-ratajkowski-nft-christies-copyright-nightmare-richard-prince [accessed 24.06.2021].
2   'From the collections', *VAM*, https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections?type=featured [accessed 21.05.2022].
3   https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/tim-walker.

Part II
Collections

5

The Official Museum Photographer: Isabel Agnes Cowper

Erika Lederman

Among the many stories concealed within the V&A's photographic archive are narratives that define the unexamined role of women in the nineteenth-century institution. This chapter discusses one of these hidden stories, that of the V&A's first female Official Museum Photographer, Isabel Agnes Cowper. Cowper, whose photographic contribution has only recently been discovered, ran the Museum's photographic service from 1868 until she resigned in 1891.[1]

Through the prism of a single negative made by Cowper, I reframe existing gendered institutional histories, defining the practices of object photography in the Museum while also demonstrating the multiple ways in which photographs accrue and make meaning within, and as an agent of, the complex Museum ecosystem. In the process, I reassemble Cowper's career, substantiating her professional reach and agency, complicating existing institutional narratives and illustrating the creative ways in which nineteenth-century women forged professional lives.[2] More broadly, critical engagement with Cowper's negative demonstrates the utility of the material approach in excavating latent historical biographies embedded in photographic archives: the negative is evidence of, and metaphor for, the absence of Cowper and her female peers in prevailing understandings of institutional photographic practices.

A woman?

The possibility of a nineteenth-century female Official Museum Photographer at the V&A was first suggested while I was working as a member of the V&A cataloguing team in 2010. When cataloguing these

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHS DO

photographs, my first action is to consult the original Photographs Register, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century volumes documenting photographs acquired for the Museum's collection. Soon after joining the team, I came across the name 'Mrs Cowper' listed as the source of a series of photographs documenting a collection of gold jewellery from Romania.[3] Intrigued by the idea of a female photographer, I consulted later registers, and found Mrs Cowper's name associated with hundreds of photographs recording a wide range of Museum objects made over a period of 23 years. Yet, despite the significance and number of images documenting the institution's early history, there was no information on Cowper in the Photograph Department. With Museum object numbers to hand, I went on the hunt, uncovering specimens of Cowper's photographs within the historic filing systems of many of the Museum Departments. With each new discovery, Cowper was emerging as a significant participant in the Museum's nineteenth-century photographic ecosystem – so my question became: how extraordinary was it for women in this period to contribute to the image-making ecology of a museum?

'Close-up looks'

Over the past three decades, the material approach in photography studies has been shaped by a diverse platform of transdisciplinary methodologies, coalescing to challenge the objectivity of photographic images and as a response to the grand narratives concerning photographic histories that rely upon a narrative of 'exceptional images'. Practically, this method locates photographs as three-dimensional objects in time and space, taking notice of the physical traces associated with their conditions of production and contexts of proliferation. Critically, these traces are considered in the context of social, political and institutional authorities. The process thus charts the shifting and accrual of layers of meaning photographs amass through infinite acts of mediation arising from ever-changing contexts. Viewed in this way, photographs not only represent the objects they reproduce, but also perform 'in the processes of meaningmaking', accruing a social biography along the way.[4]

    As this volume attests, the Museum is a productive site to locate an analysis of photographs, conferring a contextual scaffold even when the photograph moves beyond institutional confines into wider visual economies, and reifying their dynamic nature as they circulate.[5] The

notion of a museum as a collective of people and things, as cultural historian Kate Hill so compellingly argues – 'all of whom', and every one of which, 'could have effect' – evokes a space of infinite potential, where photographic objects negotiate and renegotiate status and interpretation.[6] The discovery of Cowper's photographic legacy coincides with this increased attention paid to the status of photographs in museums. Cowper's negative, in all its resulting manifestations, is revealed as an object possessing a dynamic social life governed by an 'epistemological apparatus' informed by institutional political, social and moral discourses.[7]

The challenge becomes how to locate meaning in the midst of this dynamism. Elizabeth Edwards argues the necessity of the 'close-up look' to articulate photographic histories unrecognised in the 'broader more comprehensive viewing, and vice versa'.[8] Documenting the journey of a single Cowper negative and the ways its multiple manifestations moved and were employed among a diverse network of consumers within the Museum and beyond is an example of an accumulation of these 'close-up looks'. Gathered, they narrate Cowper's professional life, and direct a critical light on institutional gendered narratives.

The South Kensington Museum (SKM) Photographic Studio

The SKM established a dedicated photographic service in 1852 and employed the first Official Museum Photographer in 1856. Working alongside the Museum's photographer was a network of in-house and external skills: trainee photographers, clerks, librarians, cataloguers, hand-colourists, printers and publishers. Their transactions – reproduction requisition, negative production, positive printing, registration, cataloguing, classification, colouring, circulation and storage – were recorded in registers, catalogues and correspondence, documenting a codified set of practices governing photographic objects in the Museum. Viewed together, these individuals, their transactions and the associated 'photo-objects' define a photographic ecosystem underpinned by discrete institutional authorities.[9]

From the beginning, negatives began to accumulate in the stores of the Photographic Studio.[10] These fragile, hand-coated collodion on glass plates ranged in size from roughly 5 x 6 inches to a colossal 48 x 30 inches. They recorded Museum objects, facilities construction and views made during dedicated photographic campaigns abroad. The

range of subjects and sizes characterised the scope and dynamic nature of the studio's mandate.

As the inventory of negatives grew, a simple finding system was established to manage retrieval and storage, with each negative assigned a unique sequential number beginning with '1'. This number was scratched into every negative's collodion emulsion and simultaneously entered into a bound, ruled Negative Register, the chronological indexing system reflecting their perceived status as neutral tools. Negatives were stored in ascending numerical order in grooved pine boxes manufactured for the purpose.[11] More recently they have been rehoused in a specially equipped climate-controlled facility, their numerical storage arrangement preserved as a record of the Museum's early photographic activities, representative of the shifting status of negatives in the hierarchies of value applied to photo-objects.[12]

Consistent with Geoffrey Batchen's observation on the 'elision of the negative' in photographic histories 'to insist on the indexicality of the photographs', museums' negatives are rarely subjected to critical analysis.[13] Curator Damarice Amao cites a variety of practical reasons for the institutional privileging of photographic prints over negatives, including difficulty in 'reading' and cost issues (issues yet to be addressed in most museums), thus positioning negatives as a 'burden' and as material falling outside the standards of art museum practice. But this 'burden' should not discount their potential as sites for 'methodological and epistemological experimentation'.[14] With Ella Ravilious, I have been sifting through the Museum's assemblage of negatives, looking for, among other things, evidence of Cowper's role within the Museum, contesting the way negative collections are frequently perceived, classified and engaged with.[15]

My analysis begins with the search for a negative recording a fifth-century, highly articulated piece of gold jewellery with a compelling backstory of discovery in Romania. The object is a brooch, or 'fibula', a pin used to fasten garments, wrought in gold in the shape of a bird and encrusted with precious stones and rock crystal. Now part of the permanent collection of the National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, it is one of 12 objects that make up a highly prized collection known as the Treasure of Petrossa, exhibited at SKM from December 1867 to April 1868. The albumen prints recording these objects represent Cowper's first confirmed assignment for the Museum.

Entries in the Negative Registers include brief descriptions of the object photographed, the date of negative receipt, and size and status (such as missing or broken). Also recorded, but less consistently, is the

Figure 5.1: Negative no. 7543, wet collodion on glass plate, 1868, reproducing a Romanian seventeenth-century silver and enamel chalice. VAA: MA/90/7543. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

source (usually the photographer), the amount paid for the negative and its circulation within and outside the Museum in the service of the making of reproductions. The Negative Registers were used not only as a record of inventory but also as a finding aid by the staff of the Photographic Studio. The entry for negative no. 7581 is entered under the heading 'Roumanian Objects', received into the Museum's negative stores on 24 March 1868.[16] The content is described as 'Brooch in form of an eagle', a descriptive match to the albumen print detailed in the

Photographs Register that initially provoked this research. A notation in the margin records its subsequent movement to the printers Cundall & Fleming on 5 June 1868. There is no reference to the photographer who made it. The entry for this negative immediately follows an entry for a group of negatives received a few days earlier on 12 March, recorded under the heading 'Paris Exhibition'. This is a reference to the *Exposition Universelle*, the Paris international fair of 1867. Romania, among the participating nations, contributed a significant collection of metalwork, including the Treasure of Petrossa 'brooch'.[17] A closer look at the register reveals the faint text 'No Negative' stamped next to the brooch entry. This is not unusual, since glass negatives are fragile; the more they circulate, the more they are at risk, and, as we will see, this negative was put to heavy use. Fortunately, a few negatives from the series survived (figure 5.1). A close inspection of these reveals a telling detail: in addition to the negative number, Cowper's signature is clearly visible, scratched into the collodion emulsion of the negative, as evidence of Cowper's role in their creation.[18]

Having identified Cowper as the photographer of the brooch, I scoured the Museum's archive of correspondence, aiming to define a network of relationships and activities distributed between Cowper, the negative and the institution. Correspondence dated 11 March 1868 emerged, recording Mrs Cowper 'Enq[uir]ing as to mounting of the Roumanian Photos'. On the same day, an agenda item originating from the Museum's Director Henry Cole records: 'Stores to order Photos of Mrs Cowper'. The next day, on 12 March 1868, Cowper submits an invoice for £30 15s. 3d.[19] These records documenting Cowper's correspondence in relation to this negative describe the parameters of Cowper's role in the institution. Not only do they define and quantify her financial compensation, but they also indicate the status of her authority within the image-producing ecosystem, suggesting a privileged position, reporting directly to Cole and other senior staff.

Beyond Cowper's position within the Museum hierarchy, an analysis of this negative in relation to the 1867 exhibition in Paris associates it with a range of Museum image-making policies and practices. Records relating to the exhibition suggest a substantial commitment of Museum resources on behalf of the British government, including the display and acquisition of photographs.[20] In the midst of this photographic activity, on 6 November 1867, three days after the official close of the exhibition, Cole recorded the arrival of Cowper in Paris with Charles Thurston Thompson, the first Official Museum Photographer, whose extensive photographic activities in Paris on

behalf of the Museum are well documented.[21] This was the first mention of 'Mrs Cowper' in Museum records. Although I was initially surprised by Cowper's unchaperoned travel to Paris with Thurston Thompson, it transpired that Cowper was his sister. Her presence with him while on official Museum business strongly suggests that she too was engaged in photographic activities while in Paris, where the Romanian gold brooch that she would record in negative no. 7581 was on display.

It was during the Paris Exhibition that Cole crystallised his scheme for an international exchange of reproductions of art works. The resulting programme, the Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of All Countries, was conceived as an important means of increasing the Museum's collection of reproductions, especially photography (see Chapter 12).[22] In conjunction with this initiative was the organisation of the Museum's first international inward loan exhibition of art objects, selected from the Paris Exhibition for display at SKM, including the Treasure of Petrossa collection, regarded at the time as a significant example of ancient goldsmithing. The loan was conceived 'for the benefit of the Schools of Science and Art in the United Kingdom' for the 'means of making [the] Exhibition useful to the manufacturing industry of Great Britain and Ireland'.[23] Part of this 'benefit' was the opportunity to make photographs to further Cole's international initiative regarding the exchange of reproductions. Cowper was to become a key player in this scheme.

Thurston Thompson died in Paris on 20 January 1868 after a protracted illness.[24] Soon after, his widow, Charlotte Thompson, visited Cole recommending Cowper for the role of Official Museum Photographer. Cole recorded: 'In the E[veni]ng Charlotte [Thompson] came and resolved to have nothing to do with Photography in future: proposed … that Mrs Cowper sh[oul]d take up the Artistic work but not the Trade.'[25] The endorsement of Cowper is significant, as she was not the only eligible candidate. Museum correspondence confirms that at least four other (male) candidates applied for the job, including Stephen Thompson, who photographed objects for the British Museum.[26] Other potential candidates included Thurston Thompson's studio assistant, William Wright, and the many staff from the Royal Engineers trained by Thurston Thompson.[27]

In response to the enquiries, the Department officially announced the decision to abolish the post and divide the work between photographic practitioners possessing the best qualifications for the different types of work required, stating: 'My Lords consider it undesirable to renew the

office of official photographer and accordingly abolish it.'[28] Yet curiously, despite this, on 10 February 1868, Cowper submitted an application for the position.[29] The subsequent frequent references and correspondence between Cowper and senior Museum officials relating to the administration and the production of photographs remain constant for a period of 23 years, suggesting that while never officially acknowledged, Cowper assumed the responsibilities of Official Museum Photographer.[30]

Once the Romanian objects were on display in the Museum, they were employed to further Cole's vision regarding the international exchange of reproductions of significant works of art from around the world.[31] Cowper, back in London, photographed the objects sometime between 10 February (when she applied for the job) and 24 March 1869, when she delivered the negatives to the Photographic Studio. Yet, despite her signature on the negatives, Cowper was never acknowledged as the photographer.

In many ways, Cowper's anonymity is consistent with photography's evolving status at this time into what photography historian Steve Edwards refers to as a 'culture industry', with photographs commoditised according to their use value.[32] In this context, the technological advances of the late 1860s that served to standardise and mechanise photography progressed the business of photography into a more profitable space, amplifying its value and, as Paul Frosh argues, diminishing the centrality of the individual practitioner.[33] To this point, a recently discovered archive of negatives made in Romania of these objects, taken around the same time as Cowper's, is also unattributed.[34] It is important to note that up to the time Cowper started taking photographs for SKM, this 'anonymity' was not Museum policy. Throughout his tenure as Official Museum Photographer, Thurston Thompson frequently placed a small block with his name and his title 'Official Museum Photographer' in the photograph's frame, ensuring his name and professional title were linked to every print made from his negatives. The terms defining his attribution were minuted as part of the Museum's Photographic Studio policy and his name also appeared posthumously on the title page of volumes made from his negatives.[35] Anthony Hamber posits that this was indicative of the ways Thurston Thompson promoted himself for private commissions, but there were other instances of individual photographers being credited, suggesting a hierarchy of skill (and gender) within the Museum.[36] While Cowper's anonymity can be attributed in part to the characteristics of a 'culture industry', that Cowper's invisibility at the Museum was for reasons of gender should not be discounted.

'Copies for Guard Book'

Before the entry for the 'brooch negative' was annotated 'No Negative', it circulated within the Photographic Studio in the service of various of the Museum's image production activities. The first application was an albumen print made for the Guard Books (see Chapters 1 and 9).[37] The Guard Books extended the utility of the negatives to Museum personnel beyond the Photographic Studio for an expanding range of curatorial and educational activities, from the maintenance of the Art Library's visual catalogue of architecture, art and design to the production of visual aids to support the fabrication of ornament for the Museum building. Allan Sekula's metaphor of a 'toolshed' to describe a photographic archive is particularly apt in the context of the Guard Book: a depository from which the best 'tool' might be retrieved in order to construct and promote potential meanings.[38] The Guard Book print made from Cowper's brooch negative was one of these tools (figure 5.2).

The Guard Book version of the Romanian brooch measures 382 x 215 mm, suggesting it was made from a negative of substantial dimensions.[39] On the mount above the print, the negative no. '7581' is handwritten in ink, corresponding to the number scratched into the emulsion of the negative and entered in the Negative Register. The letter 'C' in oil crayon is visible on the upper left of the page, referring to one of the four box sizes into which photographs were sorted and stored. A label with a handwritten description is pasted to the bottom of the album page, the text taken from the catalogue of the loan exhibition. Presented in this format, in a resource available to staff, the epistemological potential of Cowper's 'brooch negative' was exponentially magnified.

Stylistically, the Guard Book print represented the brooch floating against a plain light background, singly, centred in the frame, uniformly lit, with small margins, devoid of any contextual setting or background, and all annotations embedded in the negative are trimmed, including Cowper's signature and the negative number. The uniform background suggests that the negative, like many from this period, was heavily masked before printing, a process that comprised the careful coating of the area of the plate glass surrounding the photograph. This served to remove any visual 'noise' that might arise from cracked collodion emulsion, shadows or a 'busy' background resulting from objects being photographed outside in order to take advantage of the daylight necessary for their production. To convey a sense of scale, Cowper included a small block marked 'one inch' in the view, faintly visible in

Figure 5.2: Guard Book, 1868, entry no. 7581. VAA: MA/32/24.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

the lower right of the frame, though unlike Thurston Thompson, she does not include a block with her name or title.

This presentation accentuated the contrast between the object photographed and the background, prompting what Svetlana Alpers describes as 'the museum effect', the isolation of an object from its context and subsequent transformation into art through the practice of 'attentive looking' (see also Chapter 2).[40] Framing objects in this way engages a system of what Sekula has identified as an 'abstract visual equivalence', or neutrality, among objects, and in this instance serves to focus (and/or divert) the viewer's attention from the deafening silence of the photographer, Cowper herself.[41]

'On the means of improving public taste'

The next manifestation of the brooch negative is another albumen print (figure 5.3), now mounted on card with additional annotations and deposited in the National Art Library, employed as a resource for artists, designers and students (see Chapter 13).

Like the Guard Book version, the library print is annotated with curatorial information, but it has also been assigned a museum number, inscribed by hand onto the lower right of the mount: '59656'. The number corresponds to a detailed entry in the Museum's bound Photographs Register, a catalogue representing a complete listing of the Museum's Photography Collection, from 1856 until the establishment of a collection database in 1988. The entry in the register now distinguishes the photograph as a Museum object. Despite this, the scuffed and stained mount shows evidence of heavy use, reinforcing its status as a library document rather than an example of fine art, further evidence of the 'non-collection' status of institutional photography.[42] Entry no. 59656 is identified as a mounted print, one of a group of 57 'Roumanian' photographs 'photographed by Mrs I A Cowper' received on 9 and 22 May 1868.[43] Cowper's role in reproducing this object could not be clearer.

In this manifestation, classifications are assigned to the photo-object for the first time. These appear as stamped annotations on the mount: 'Gold and Silversmiths Work, Jewellery'. Additionally, handwritten on top centre of the mount is the Roman numeral 'XV', which refers to the metalwork classification in the Museum's subject taxonomy, an institutionally applied hierarchy of skills and knowledge and their assumed inherent values, rather than one of the individual makers.[44]

Sometime in the twentieth century, this photograph was removed from the Library Collection. The object never made it onto MODES, the Department's first cataloguing software database, or onto the subsequent digital online versions, CIS and CMS, which fed into the collection's public interface; and there is no notation directing Library users to its missing status.[45] The object was discovered at the Museum's off-site storage facility in a box labelled 'metalwork', along with hundreds of other similar 'non-collection' photographs.[46] Until recently, many such photographs languished outside the boundaries of the stores of curatorial sections, accumulating in offices and document storerooms as overspill from the original Library Collection or as part of the dispersal of photographs left behind in 1977, when the Photography Collection was formed. As Edwards and Lien have noted, 'photographic

Figure 5.3: Isabel Agnes Cowper, *Brooch in form of an eagle, Byzantine Gothic, fifth century*, albumen print, 1868, Museum no. 59656. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

ecosystems are dynamic and shifting', and the recent journey of this Cowper photograph, back into the Photography Collection stores and onto the collection database, is a testament to that view.[47] 'Found', Cowper's photograph has been reclassified and re-catalogued with new text that designates it as an important example of early museum photography, linking it to new knowledge hierarchies surrounding the production of photographs in the Museum.

'For the use of schools of art and amateurs'

However, before Cowper's photograph was 'reunited' with the collection, we see there were further disseminations through the visual economy and value system of the Museum. The 'brooch negative' made its next appearance in 1869, printed as a photographic plate in a volume titled *The Treasure of Petrossa and Other Goldsmith's Work from Roumania* (figure 5.4), part of the photographically illustrated series *Examples of Art Workmanship of Various Ages and Countries* published between 1868 and 1871 in partnership with the Arundel Society.[48] The series was originally produced for distribution to national schools of art and design, as part of an officially sanctioned 'Deposit Loan' programme mandated to extend the visual resources of the Museum to students. The partnership produced 17 different volumes, all illustrated with prints made from Museum negatives.

This novel publishing initiative coincided precisely with Cowper's employment. Before this agreement was in place, the Museum published few photographically illustrated books. This was due to a variety of factors, not least of which were the technical challenges involved in integrating text and photographs, a practice that only emerged with the advancement of photo-mechanical processes in the 1880s.[49] Until then, while photography might have been employed in the execution of other book illustration processes such as wood engraving (see Chapter 3), photographically illustrated books, involving the labour-intensive mounting of individual prints onto the page, were not widespread.[50] Despite this, the publishing programme was sanctioned by the government in January 1868 and the first volumes in the series, subtitled 'Under the sanction of the Science and Art Department, for the use of schools of art and amateurs', launched in July 1868 – four months after Cowper began working at the Museum.[51] Much of Cowper's output went towards producing photographs for this series, four of which are illustrated exclusively with prints made from Cowper's negatives, including the Petrossa negatives.

The partnership transferred the sale and distribution of all Museum reproductions to the Arundel Society with the aim of distributing the Museum's art reproductions to schools of art and the public in a more efficient and cost-effective way, responding to ongoing complaints concerning unfulfilled orders and unanswered public queries that dated back to Thurston Thompson's tenure.[52] The publishing initiative also served to monetise the growing value of the inventory of
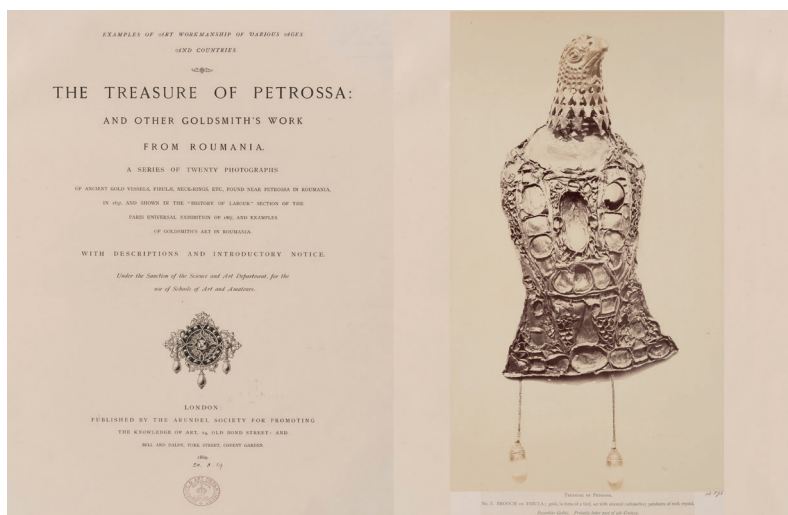
Figure 5.4: Title page and Plate 8: Brooch or Fibula from *The Treasure of Petrossa and Other Goldsmith's Work from Roumania* (1868). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

negatives, which, as public property, was beginning to attract notice as a substantial asset.[53] But in the context of Cowper's employment, the scheme is noteworthy as a response to forceful claims of unfair competition lodged by independent photographers. Up until 1860, citing security issues (and in no small part due to Thurston Thompson's intolerance for competition), the Museum banned independent professional photographers from making reproductions of its objects.[54] In response, these professionals railed against what they regarded as a monopoly involving a public collection. By entering into the publishing partnership with the Arundel Society (which, itself, relied upon Cundall & Fleming to print the albumen prints from Museum negatives and Bell & Daldry to manufacture the books), the Department hoped to assuage critics by spreading the production and circulation of photographs among outside firms.[55] Cowper's unacknowledged and unrecorded employment as Official Museum Photographer probably worked similarly, giving the impression that photography at the Museum was open to the trade, though in reality most Museum objects were still photographed by a single individual – Isabel Agnes Cowper.

Thus, in June of 1868 Cowper's 'brooch negative' was transferred to Cundall & Fleming to print the multiple copies for use in the volumes. The series was published in a large folio format, with

20 labelled albumen prints mounted one to the page, accompanied by a letterpress title page, a descriptive list of illustrative plates and a historical essay. The volumes destined for circulation to national schools of art and design were bound in Moroccan leather; additional copies bound in printed card were used in the Library; others, stamped 'Board Room', were distributed to the Director's office as promotional material for the Museum.

The prints made from Cowper's 'brooch negative' were inserted in the *Petrossa* volume as plate no. 8 and labelled: 'BROOCH OR FIBULA; gold, in form of a bird, set with oriental carbuncles; pendants of rock crystal. / *Byzantine Gothic. Probably latter part of 5th Century*'. Robert Soden Smith, Keeper of the Art Library, authored a historical essay identifying the *Treasure* as exceptional examples of goldsmiths' work.[56] Cowper's photograph, accompanied by Soden Smith's scholarly analysis and packaged for distribution, was primed to negotiate meaning beyond the walls of the Museum.

The volumes were announced and reviewed in both the popular and art press and were put into circulation.[57] The surviving volumes still carry labels documenting the journeys of these volumes to national schools of art as part of the 'Deposit Loan' programme.[58] Appendices attached to the Department's *Annual Reports* record the number of loans per year for each title. For example, in 1872, copies of the *Petrossa* volume travelled to more than 36 schools in the United Kingdom, from Edinburgh to Bristol.[59] Priced at three guineas, the *Art Workmanship* volumes, while advertised 'for public instruction', also served to promote the Museum to an increasingly educated and middle-class public. To this end, the Arundel Society maintained a dedicated sales room on the Museum premises.[60]

The volumes were also promoted in the Museum's catalogue of reproductions, which benefitted the nascent international museum community.[61] As the art historian Bruce Robinson argues, 'What was copied by museums like the Metropolitan in New York was not South Kensington's type of collecting, but its usefulness, its educational vision.'[62] Many museums relied upon SKM for pedagogical material. Ongoing research has identified volumes illustrated with Cowper's photographs in the libraries of North American museums and schools of art and design founded in the second half of the nineteenth century in cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Washington DC, Cincinnati, New York and Toronto, acquired to support a curriculum modelled on the 'South Kensington System'. Additionally, copies of these volumes are found in libraries of former colonial territories, including the national

libraries of Victoria and New South Wales in Australia.[63] They have also been discovered in the databases of art libraries in Europe.[64] Yet Cowper's name was never associated with these volumes and searching her name on WorldCat, the global catalogue of library collections, will not retrieve them, though inputting the name of Soden Smith will, signifying a hierarchy that privileged text over image (and female imagemakers).

The Illustrated London News

My final consideration is the use of the photographic print from Cowper's negative as a model for engravings in popular periodicals (figure 5.5). Correspondence confirms the frequent loan of photographs and negatives to the editors of *The Illustrated London News* (*TILN*) for use in the production of wood engravings.[65] On 18 April 1868 *TILN* printed a full page of wood engravings of the *Treasure* to accompany a notice of the international loan exhibition at the Museum. The page featured five images based upon Cowper photographs, and the Romanian brooch is one of those images. Such publications visualising people, places and things were, by the late 1860s, capturing the middle-class audience on an unprecedented scale, with a typical readership of around 10,000 per week. This greatly surpassed the number of consumers accessing the material in the Art Library or the catalogue sales stalls. Through these publications, Museum values were exported into the public and domestic space, allowing for the popularisation of art history beyond the context of the art academy, or the Museum.[66] Viewed through the prism of the periodical – as a medium of mass communication – Cowper's photographs took on new meanings, 'fundamentally and irrevocably embedded in the textual, discursive, and cultural' discourses of the periodical press.[67]

A professional

Through the 'close-up' views presented here, I have been able to define the scope of Cowper's career at the Museum. Tracing the circulation of other works by Cowper, I also found evidence that her negatives were employed as lantern slides to project illustrations for art lectures[68] and were photographically transferred onto woodblocks to illustrate art handbooks and catalogues and in art journals.[69] They were printed as

THE LOAN ART COLLECTION IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM.
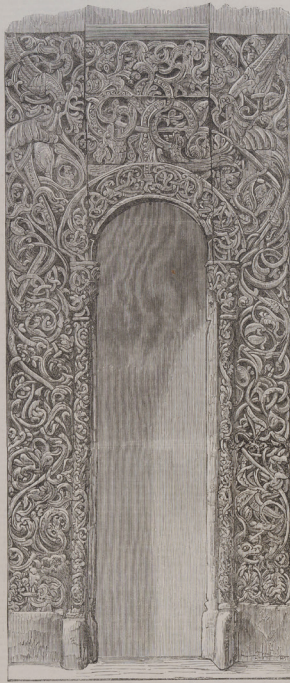
DOORWAY CARVED IN PINE-WOOD (RUSSIAN).
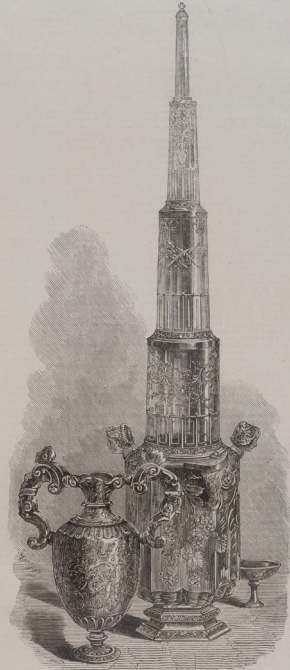
GOLD ENAMELLED ROCK CRYSTAL VASE, AND CENTRAL TABLE ORNAMENT
OF ROCK CRYSTAL AND SILVER (GERMAN, 17TH CENTURY).

GOLD EWER OR WINE-JUG
(DACIAN, 5TH CENTURY).

BOWL OR BASKET, WITH TIGER HANDLES
(DACIAN, 5TH CENTURY).

BROOCH OR FIBULA IN THE FORM OF
AN EAGLE (DACIAN, 5TH CENTURY).

Figure 5.5: 'The loan art collection in South Kensington Museum'. *The Illustrated London News*, 18 April 1868, p. 393. Author's collection.

chromolithographs in large-format albums,[70] and were used as models for the production of ornament in the construction of the Museum buildings.[71] Indeed, one of Cowper's albumen prints was bound into a National Art Training School examination booklet as a model for still-life painting exams.[72] The range of formats derived from Cowper's

negatives attests to the breadth of her engagement and suggests the degree to which the institution relied upon her skill and expertise to promote its platform of photographically focused influence.

Evidence that Cowper was compensated at prevailing rates confirms her status as a valued professional. Initially, I was tempted to interpret Cowper's signature on her negatives as a subtle act of resistance in response to her elision from the official record, but I have concluded that it was likely a book-keeping method she employed for invoicing purposes. As the Museum was a public institution, career-minded male employees were eligible to join the civil service scheme, a secure professional track not accessible to women in 1868.[73] Museum records document numerous instances of invoices being submitted by Cowper requesting payment for her work calculated at a rate of three pence per square inch of glass – the same rate Thurston Thompson was paid as Official Museum Photographer.[74] Treated as an outside contractor, Cowper probably signed her negatives in order to ensure accurate compensation.

An expanded biography

The practice of excavating the archive for objects made by Cowper has uncovered further details of her professional life, including her work as a wood engraver before marriage, apprenticed to her father, the eminent engraver John Thompson.[75] This suggests that Cowper's subsequent photographic career represented a precise pairing of existing skills with professional responsibilities. As a wood engraver, Cowper developed highly specialised visual skills, such as reading images in reverse or mentally swapping dark for light; these supported quick and accurate 'reading' of the quality of negatives and their suitability for practices such as translation into a wood engraving or the production of a positive print, for which they were frequently required. Cowper's experience as a wood engraver would have prepared her for the professional role she assumed in the Museum's image-producing ecosystem.

But beyond her technical expertise, investigating Cowper's output in this manner has facilitated the visualisation of the intricate web of connections in which Cowper was embedded and the way this served as a professional network, taking the place of established specialist networks, which, in most instances, were the purview of men. While these networks were often familial, they nonetheless indicate the

A. Sidney Cowper: Isabel Cowper's son; employed at the SKM and subsequently emigrated to South Africa, where he was instrumental in establishing the South African Fine Arts Association.

B. Arundel Society: Fine arts publishing firm; partnered with the SKM to publish volumes in 'The Art Workmanship Series', illustrating SKM objects and circulated to schools and institutions.

C. South African Fine Arts Association, part of the arts education system in the Cape Colony modelled after the South Kensington System.

D. Julia Margaret Cameron: Celebrated fine art photographer who sold or gave work to and exhibited work at the SKM in 1865. Her connections with Henry Cole facilitated her use in 1868 of two rooms at the SKM as a portrait studio during a period when Cowper was running the photography studio.

E. John Thompson: Eminent wood-engraver; Cowper's father and close friend of Henry Cole; engraved illustration for Julia Margaret Cameron's translation of Leonora by Gottfried August Bürger.

F. Messrs Chance Brothers: Pre-eminent sheet-glass manufacturing firm providing materials to the photographic industry.

G. Richard Thompson: Assistant Director of the SKM; Cowper's brother.

H. John Ruskin: Eminent art critic; Cowper produced illustrations for his only published work of fiction.

I. Alan Cole: Henry Cole's son; employed at the SKM as a specialist in history of lace and textiles; Cowper provided many of the images for Cole's published books on the topic of textiles and his lectures illustrated with lantern slides.

J. Charles Thurston Thompson: The SKM's first Official Museum Photographer; Cole's brother-in-law; Cowper's brother for whom she worked when widowed.

K. National Schools of Art and Design: The regional art schools administered by the Department of Science and Art and beneficiaries of the SKM circulation collection of reproductions, including photographs.

L. Cundall & Fleming: Printers and publishers of SKM negatives.

M. The Great Exhibition 1851: An international exhibition that took place in Hyde Park, London, from 1 May to 15 October 1851; the profits from the fair were the economic foundation of the SKM; Cowper's brother and husband were both involved in the arrangements.

N. Illustrated London News: Popular British weekly illustrated paper; Cowper's husband's family fabricated a printing press employed for the production of this journal; there are many records during Cowper's tenure of the ILN requesting photographs from the SKM studio for use in producing wood-engraved illustrations.

O. Charles Cowper: Isabel's husband; chemist for Messrs Chance Bros involved in the production of sheet glass for the photographic industry; later, worked on his own account as patent agent and establishing patents for improvements in photography.

P. Applegath & Cowper: Printing press manufacturers featured in the Great Exhibition 1851; Cowper's father-in-law was one of the founding partners of the firm.

Q. Henry Cole: Founding Director of the SKM.

R. Dalziel Brothers: the most substantial London wood engraving firm. They provided the engravings for many South Kensington Museum publications, often relying upon photographs provided by Isabel Agnes Cowper.
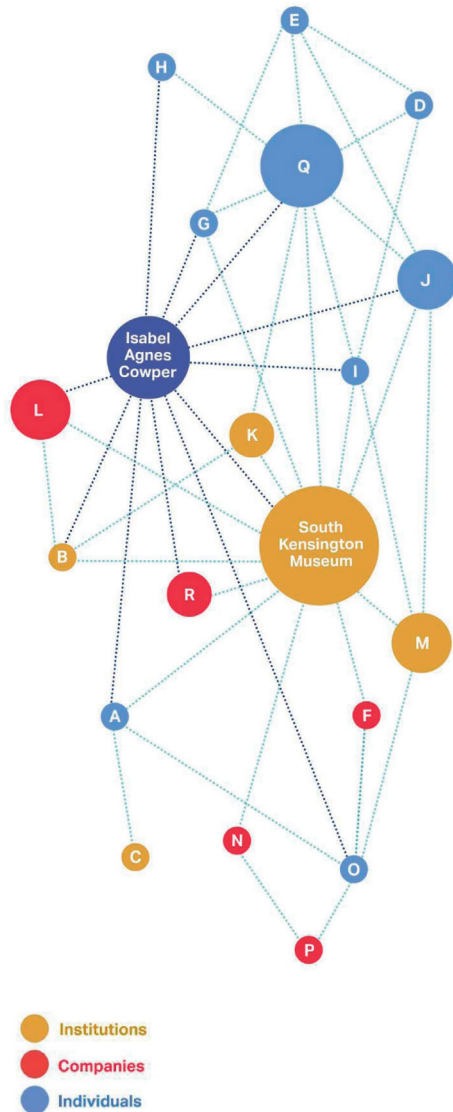
Figure 5.6: Isabel Agnes Cowper's relationship network. © Creative Jay Design for Erika Lederman.

resourceful and commercial ways in which nineteenth-century women negotiated their professional lives (figure 5.6).

Despite her invisibility within the institution, Cowper possessed a certain level of self-regard. Between 1871 and 1874 she exhibited examples of her work in the 'Photographs' section of the annual International Exhibitions in London. The 1871 catalogue lists her photographs installed in the Royal Albert Hall adjacent to those by celebrated photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.[76] Cowper also made the effort to register some of her photographs with the government's Copyright Office.[77] And once Cowper had taken over from her brother at the Museum, it was not long before her skill was publicly acknowledged in the contemporary art press. *The Art Journal* of 1870 refers to the 'silver photographs of lace taken by Mrs Cowper for the South Kensington Museum, which are considered to be the greatest success yet attained by the art', suggesting that Cowper was recognised in her lifetime as a specialist in the photography of textiles. In the same article, the critic notes that Cowper is producing negatives of three feet square, implying a high level of technical skill.[78]

And despite Cowper's absence in extant histories, her resignation letter, which survives in the Museum's archives, clearly identifies her as the Official Museum Photographer. She writes to SKM Director Philip Cunliffe-Owen: 'I … resign the post of Official Photographer which I have held for twenty-three years. I shall be obliged by your accepting my resignation from the 31st of December next.'[79] While the Museum might not have officially acknowledged her role, Cowper had no doubts concerning her responsibilities within the institution. Yet, despite her important position within the Photographic Studio, this is the only confirmed image we have of the Museum's first female Official Photographer, underneath the photographer's cloth, cloaked in anonymity (figure 5.7).

Multitudes

With Cowper 'found', I am stimulated to search for other female institutional photographers. I would argue that Cowper was by no means an outlier. As Kate Hill notes, 'There were … surprising numbers of women working in museums [between 1850 and 1914]. However, uncovering their contribution is less easy than men's.'[80] Though they were systemically overlooked, their work unrecognised and often attributed to men, female photographers were employed by institutions, and played an important role in their mission to use photography for administrative
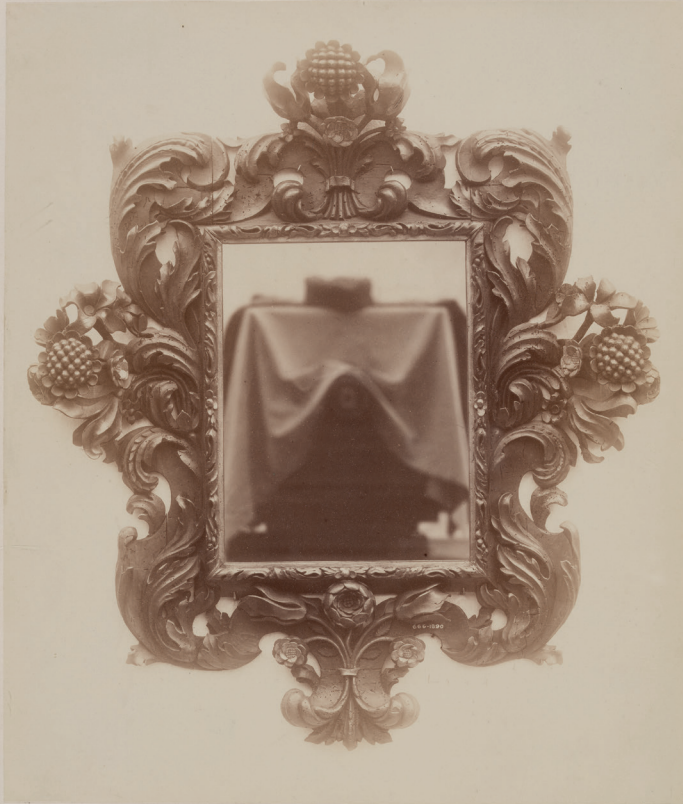
Carved walnut wood Frame with glass Mirror.

Italian.   16ᵗʰ Cent.

Bought, £8. 13. 0.   666.–1890.

Mirror and frame.

1132 – 91.

Figure 5.7: Isabel Agnes Cowper, *Carved walnut wood frame with glass mirror, Italian, sixteenth century*, albumen print, c. 1891, no. PH.113A-1891. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

and educational purposes. I have found evidence that the Museum engaged with other nineteenth-century female institutional photographers, including Katherine M. Reynolds, who documented the collections at London's Royal Institution and Natural History Museum as well as the Booth Museum in Brighton, and produced photographs for the Palestine Exploration Fund;[81] Jane Clifford, who documented the collections at the Royal Collection (now the Prado) in Madrid;[82] Louise Laffon, who documented the collections at the Musée Napoleon III (now the Louvre)

in Paris;[83] and Emma Schenson, who documented the Linneaus archive in Uppsala, Sweden.[84] Widening the scope of my analysis to include some of the ancillary activities around image production at the Museum, I found women working as colourists, photograph sales stall attendants and cataloguers.[85] And this represents only those women with whom SKM engaged that I have discovered.

Afterlives

Now that she has been excavated, Cowper and the understanding of her professional presence have informed many histories. She regularly features, named, in national exhibitions, including the recent V&A Photography Centre installation, where one of her signed negatives documenting historical needlework was paired with its large albumen print.[86] Her work was included at Nottingham Contemporary in *The House of Fame*, a display curated by the artist Linder.[87] Cowper's photographs are also on display in the reinstalled Cast Courts at the V&A as part of the historical narrative charting the use of reproductions at the Museum.[88] In 2018, Cowper's biography appeared in a book taking on the subject of museums and feminism.[89] In 2021, she was included in an award-winning publication surveying the history of photobooks by women.[90] And you know Cowper's made it when one of her photographs is reproduced as a recent V&A postcard.[91]

But the most compelling aspect regarding the circulation of the Romanian negative is the way in which it can be used to speak for Cowper, whose professional 'voice' up until now has been muffled by gendered institutional hierarchies. The material approach here not only elucidates the expanse of Cowper's professional reach but also addresses how and why Cowper went about the everyday business of making photographs. It demonstrates also how employing a single negative as a tool to analyse specific acts of photography within the discursive space of the Museum exposes hitherto invisible historical narratives as they relate to female institutional photographers, one of the many 'other histories' that photographs have to tell. This analysis not only establishes the biographies of women expunged or missing from photography's historical narrative: it also reveals gendered institutional and historiographical biases. As Hill puts it,

> The norms of male career patterns and definitions of success have obscured the significant numbers of women working in museums,

but if we pay attention instead to the distinctive strategies of women, we can see and hear them much more clearly, and can think about what they did, as well as what they did not do. By exploring outwards into dispersed networks and less obvious or prominent actors, we can find a better, fuller picture of women and museums.[92]

To this end, Cowper's work should not be viewed as representative of an exceptional career; to do so engages a discourse that historically marginalises women and perpetuates their invisibility. Rather, Cowper and her female peers are more clearly perceived when considered in the context of the diverse practices and networks that make up the institutional photographic ecosystem.

Notes

1   See Lederman 2013.
2   Cowper's name is absent from the Museum's *Board Minutes* (1868–91) and from the first survey of the Museum's photographic service by John Physick (1975). Anthony Hamber acknowledges the possibility of Cowper (but misspells her name), admitting that 'the lack of information about her career as a photographer is … representative of the paucity of research into the important role played by women in the rise of commercial photography from the 1860s' (1996, 441). Cowper is overlooked in the 1996 exhibition chronicling the history of the Photography Collection at the V&A curated by Mark Haworth-Booth (1997). After Hamber's research was published, a photograph of Cowper's was included (again with her name misspelled) in the exhibition *Things* (2004, 8), again curated by Haworth-Booth. More recently, as part of a V&A public lecture on Ruskin (*Ruskin and the Idea of the Museum*, 20 November 2020), V&A Director Tristram Hunt employed a Cowper image without attribution to illustrate his lecture; photographs by male photographers were attributed.
3   VAA, *Photographs Register* (1868, entry no. 59656).
4   Caraffa 2020, 17.
5   Edwards and Morton 2015, 3–23.
6   Hill 2018. See also Edwards 2001, 6–16; Caraffa 2011.
7   Edwards 2017.
8   Edwards 2001, 3.
9   Caraffa (2020) designates 'photo-objects' as encompassing both photographs and negatives and the administrative documents and physical vessels governing them.
10 In 1866 all Museum negatives were transferred to the Photographic Studio: VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1866: vol. 2, 130).
11 For a summary, see VAA, *Production of Photographic Negatives and Prints* (1918: vol. 151, item 2604).
12 In 1993 the negative store moved to a storeroom at Blythe House, the Museum's off-site storage facility. It will again be re-sited to a purpose-built facility at V&A East in 2022.
13 Batchen 2021, 3.
14 Amao 2015, 242.
15 One of the few negatives included in a V&A exhibition before the 2016 RPS transfer was a Cowper negative, part of a 2015 display on the Museum's early institutional photographers. More recently, another Cowper negative was included in the Museum's Photography Centre *Inaugural Display* (2018).
16 VAA, *Register of negatives and lantern slides* (1886: vol. 2, entry 7581).

17 *Exposition Universelle de 1867 à Paris: Catalogue Général Publié* (1967: 357, no. 8).
18 See VAA, negative no. 7543.
19 VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1868: vol. 5, 149, 74).
20 *Exposition Universelle de 1867 à Paris: Catalogue of the British Section* (1867). See VAA, *Photographs Registers* (1867–8, vol. 8) for details of photographs acquired during the exhibition.
21 Cole (6 November 1867). Thurston Thompson's professional activities in Paris are documented in the *Reports on the Paris Universal Exhibition 1867* (1868, 51, 185–96, 245). See also *Précis of the Board Minutes of the Science and Art Department* (18 June 1867).
22 Department of Science and Art 1868a, 24.
23 Department of Science and Art 1868b, iii.
24 'Obituary: Charles Thurston Thompson' 1868.
25 Cole (8 February 1868). Trade refers to the printing, selling, marketing and publishing of photographs, while artistic work refers to the production of negatives.
26 Records of applicants in VAA *Abstract of Correspondence* (1868: vols 5, 2, 3, 5, 7).
27 See e.g., 'R. Thompson urged that his brother's man Wright should be employed in [Thurston Thompson's] absence', Cole (18 December 1867). For Thurston Thompson's training of Royal Engineers, see Hamber 1996, 416–21.
28 VAA, *Production of Photographic Negatives and Prints* (1868: vol. 145, item 4959).
29 VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1868: vol. 5, 6).
30 See VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1868–91, vols 5–41) and *Library Receiving Room Diaries* (1868–91, vols 7–23).
31 See Smith 1869, 8: '[T]his loan enabled the present photographs to be taken, and gave the opportunity for long and careful study of the specimens themselves.'
32 Edwards 2006, 76.
33 Frosh 2020.
34 See Endangered Archives Programme 2021; Cătălin 2020.
35 *Précis* (12 January 1864, 236).
36 Hamber 1996, 421–2.
37 *Précis* (12 January 1864, 236). For the first reference to print production for the Guard Book, see VAA, *Register of negatives* (1864: vol. 1, entry 3159).
38 Sekula 2003, 443–52.
39 In 1868 positive prints from negatives were usually made as contact prints.
40 Alpers 1991, 25–32.
41 Sekula 2003, 445.
42 Edwards 2017.
43 VAA, *Photographs Registers* (1868: vol. 8, entry 59656).
44 VAA, *Photographs: Classification* (n.d.).
45 For a history of the V&A cataloguing systems, see Dodds 2018; Dodds and Ravilious 2009.
46 Found by Ravilious in 2019.
47 Edwards and Lien 2014, 4.
48 Smith 1869.
49 See Hamber 1996, 38–51.
50 See Belknap 2016 and von Lintel 2012 for an overview of the use of photographs in the production of wood engravings in the popular press.
51 Hamber 1996, 309.
52 See extract from minutes reproduced in *Catalogues of Reproductions of Objects of Art* 1869. See also 'a report of arrears in delivery of positives or negatives by Mr T. Thompson', VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1866, vol. 3, 53).
53 Deazley 2010, 4, n. 19.
54 House of Commons 1860, 72–3.
55 'Five years of the Arundel Society' 1874, 39. See also House of Commons 1860, 116.
56 Soden Smith ran the Art Library from 1868 to 1890.
57 e.g. 'Fine art gossip' 1868, 899; 'Photographs taken for the Department of Science and Art' 1867, 161; 'The South Kensington Museum: The photographs', *The Art Journal* (1869) 31: 18–19.
58 e.g. NAL pressmark 92.E.72.
59 Department of Science and Art 1872, 438–9.
60 Hamber 1996, 309.

61 *Catalogues of Reproductions of Objects of Art* 1869.
62 Robinson 2004, 9.
63 See   http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/permalink/f/1cl35st/SLV_VOYAGER374678   [accessed 26.05.2022]. For reproductions and colonial institutions, see Galbally 1992.
64 See 'Memo. For list of Arundel Society publications intended to be sent to institutions on the continent', VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1869, vol. 8, 66). For copies of volumes in the Kunstbibliothek, Berlin, see https://lhiai.gbv.de/DB=2/SET=8/TTL=1/CMD?ACT=SR CHA&IKT=1016&SRT=YOP&TRM=arundel,+art+workmanship [accessed 26.05.2022].
65 e.g. VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1874, vol. 36, 305), 'For permission to photo & engrave picture named', and (1882, vol. 38, 366) '*Illustrated London News*. May Mr Liddell look at photos with view to their appearance in Illustrated London News? Jones Bequest'.
66 See von Lintel 2012.
67 Belknap 2016, 20.
68 De Montfort University Archive, *National Art Slide Library* (n.d., item 539-1875).
69 Smith 1881, 148–52.
70 Department of Science and Art and the Arundel Society 1868.
71 Cowper made many negatives of Frederic Leighton's preparatory works for the frescoes that were eventually installed overlooking the Museum's South Court and executed by students in the Art Training School, some as large as 36 x 36 inches: see negative nos 9594 and 10543; see also Ormond 1975.
72 Lederman 2019.
73 Martindale 1938, 15–74.
74 See Deazley 2010, n. 34.
75 See Lederman 2018.
76 *Official Catalogues* 1871–4.
77 *Records of the Copyright Office* (1872, COPY 1/20/341–2).
78 Roubiliac 1870, 357–9.
79 VAA, *Production of Photographic Negatives* (1891, vol. 146, item 7403).
80 Hill 2018, Chapter 1.
81 See Royal Institution n.d.; for evidence of Reynolds work at the Natural History Museum, see Natural History Museum Archive (1882–1937); for Reynolds's work at the Booth Museum, see *Records of the Copyright Office* (1896, COPY 1/424/429–58).
82 See Fernández Albarés 2019.
83 See Galifot, Pohlmann and Robert 2015.
84 See Wigh 2003, 60–89.
85 For the terms of female colourists' employment, see VAA, *Abstract of Correspondence* (1894, vol. 42: 236). For women employed as cataloguers of photographs, see *Abstract of Correspondence* (1896, vol. 12, 48, 23, 56). See also Ventrella 2017, 120. For examples of women as saleswomen, see TNA, *Procedure for Sale of Photographs and Postcards* (1896).
86 *V&A Photography Centre Inaugural Display* (12 October 2018–27 September 2021).
87 *The House of Fame: Convened by Linder.* Exhibition, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham. 24 March–24 June 2018.
88 *Cast Courts* (Revival). Exhibition, V&A. 1 December 2018–ongoing.
89 Lederman 2018.
90 Lederman and Yatskevich 2021, 27–8.
91 *Sgraffito on the Science Schools*, photographed by Isabel Agnes Cowper. Postcard, V&A, London.
92 Hill 2018, Chapter 1.

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6

Photographing the Eltenberg Reliquary

Ken Jackson

From an interview with Ella Ravilious.

The meaning of museum objects is often constituted imperceptibly through the serial photographic practices applied to them. The shifts in those practices reflect not only technical changes but also shifting foci as active components in the museum ecosystem. Ken Jackson unpicks the developing photographic practices that are hidden in plain sight yet shape objects as certain kinds of things. Consequently, both this intervention and that of Richard Davis demonstrate the interaction of curatorial value and photographic skill to maintain and reproduce the values and 'look' of an institution.

Until his retirement in 2019, Ken Jackson was Chief Photographer at the V&A Photographic Studio. After joining the Photographic Studio in 1972, he engaged himself in photography across the Museum's varied collections and at its several outstations: Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, Osterley Park and House, Ham House and Apsley House. He has a long specialist interest in the history of the photography of the Photographic Studio at the Museum. He has recorded a longer interview for deposit in the V&A Archive.

It is interesting to look at the work of the Photographic Studio's archive, created when we were founded in 1857, through one Museum object in particular: the Eltenberg Reliquary. This is an object that has been photographed time and time again, which really maps out the history of photography using the processes that were available in different eras. The earliest photograph of the reliquary is dated 1868, and was given the negative no. 7903 (figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Ken Jackson holding negative 7903, dated 1868, in the V&A Negative Store, Blythe House, 2017. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

We begin with the use of early processes, but we continued to photograph this object for the next century. I'll come onto digital later, but we're really looking at the moment at analogue photography. The Museum has a collection of glass plate negatives and a collection of bound volumes, the Guard Books (see Chapter 9), which contain a print of every negative produced from 1857 right up until 1997. This first photograph of the Eltenberg Reliquary was taken in 1868 by the photographer Isabel Agnes Cowper (see Chapter 5).

We acquired the object in 1861; Cowper photographed it first in 1868, and in 1890 she photographed it again. In the Photographic Studio archive, black-and-white negatives (both glass plates and film) are identified by their sizes alphabetically, from A to F. This, one of our earliest glass plate negatives (reference no. 7903), is approximately 24 x 20 inches (figure 6.1). In the Guard Book is an original print made by the photographer's assistant at that time (figure 6.2). It is almost certainly taken outside in daylight. There would have been gas lights in the Museum by this time, but they wouldn't have been using them for photography, as they would not have been bright enough.

Reference no. 13186 (figure 6.3) is almost certainly taken in natural daylight because the object is very top lit. It shows the object
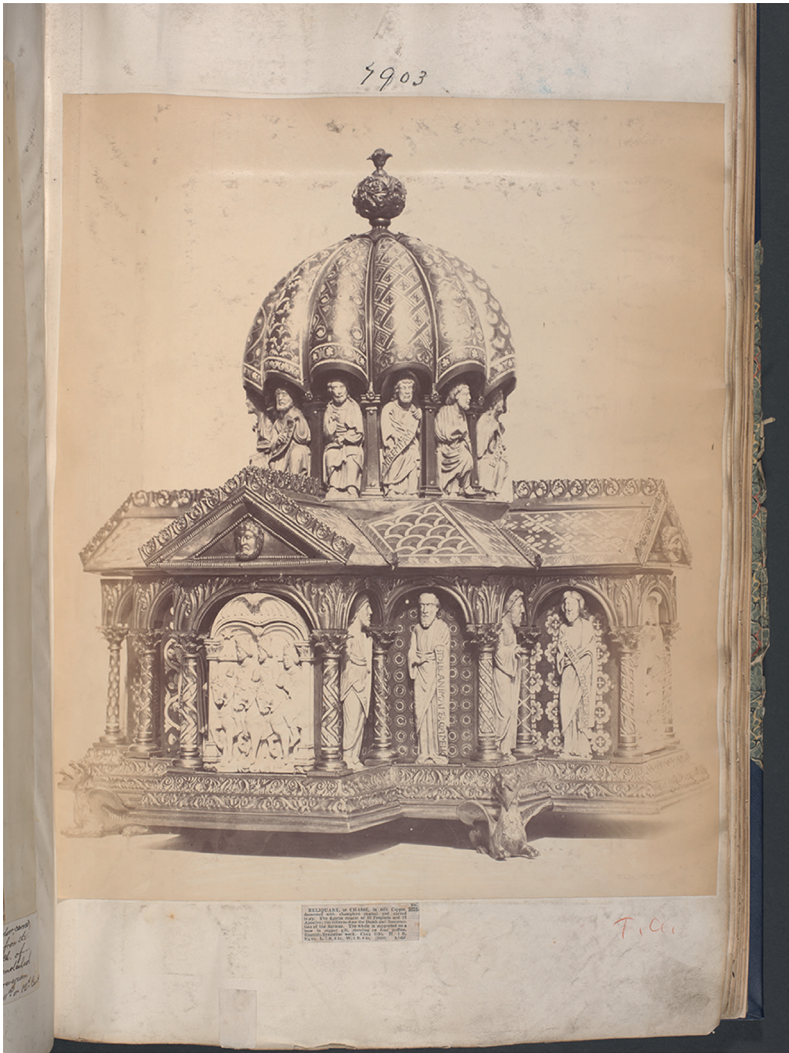
Figure 6.2: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed by Isabel Agnes Cowper, 1868. Guard Book MA/23/25, neg. no. 7903. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

three-quarter left and is on a pale hessian background with a much lighter background. It's got what we would call a split horizon: it's obviously been placed on a box and over that has been draped in a piece of hessian fabric. In the background is possibly fine linen or fabric, which is out of focus: it's clearly not the background paper we use today. The Eltenberg Reliquary has a dome on the top, which is very

Figure 6.3: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed by Isabel Agnes Cowper, 1890. Guard Book MA/32/36, neg. no. 13186. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

clear and has lots of highlights around each facet of the dome. When you look at the base, there is a very strong shadow almost directly underneath it. There are four griffins in the corners – two are visible at each corner – and a figure of Christ. The nineteenth-century print illustrates the sepia tone range, and really, for its time, the quality is quite outstanding – but of course the lighting could be improved.

The idea behind these Guard Books was to make the Museum's collections visible and sell prints to the public. Our prime purpose was to make the collections accessible through photography, something that is still done today via our online catalogue.

We kept photographing the same objects, what I would call the premier objects of the time. The Museum and its activities were almost certainly led by the senior curators. The Senior Keepers of Collections led the Museum's activities guided by their own enthusiasms, their own agendas. What we did in the Photographic Studio was very much led by them, and therefore if they presented an object to us, we photographed it.

When we look at the next image (figure 6.4), we find it is a much darker sepia tone print, a different process, and we have the negative retained in the archive reference no. 22396, A-size, 12 x 10 inches).

The negative for this photograph is an absolutely superb example, beautifully kept and preserved really by the nature of its make rather than how we've looked after it. Of course, we've looked after it in the best way we can. Glass is very permanent, and it doesn't suffer like film. Glass plate negatives are quite outstanding and are only replicated today by dedicated enthusiasts of historical photographic processes. The image shows the front of the reliquary, but more from head-on now; you can see the figure of Christ in the centre, the dome is slightly clearer, so the lighting was softer or they've softened the lighting from the top, possibly with muslin or a gauze to take out some of the really strong contrast. It doesn't have the deep shadow that the previous image had, but now the reliquary is on a block of dark velvet and that's standing on a white panel or a baseboard. It's difficult to tell because it's cropped quite tightly. This is obviously a box that was made to be used when the reliquary went into the galleries, into the case or into the display.

In 1910, a very short time later in the Museum's life, and lo and behold, we photographed the object again (reference no. 33888; figure 6.5). Here we've reverted to the original view that we had in 1890, slightly three-quarter left, much softer lighting, really good detail definition in the dome. We've made a digital ink print which is, in my view, a bit light, but nevertheless, it still shows the detail and again it's on the same box, so it probably went back out into the galleries, back into the case and then someone's got it out again. So, maybe in those 10 years, there was another reason for an image to be used and the Curator or Keeper of the Collection wanted it photographed again. In the time from 1890 to 1910 there had been considerable changes in the photographic process.

Figure 6.4: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 1901. Guard Book MA/32/68, neg. no. 22396. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

We are still with the A-size, 12 x 10-inch glass negatives, and again this glass negative does illustrate slightly different contrast and detail, shadow detail, highlight detail which we perhaps didn't see in the previous one. In this case it is much denser; you can see there is much more softening between the highlights and the shadows, and it's really compressed so that when you print, you are able to keep the

Figure 6.5: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 1910. Guard Book MA/32/97, neg. no. 33888. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

detail in the highlights and the shadows. All of these negatives would have been contact-printed, and that means you lay the actual negative in contact with the printing paper and expose it to light and then process it through the photographic chemical process.

With all of these photographs, there would have been an analogue data record. There is a museum register of all the photographs: this is

held at the V&A currently, and there is what we call subject index record cards, which are held in the V&A Archive. The administrators in the Picture Library filled in those cards with the details of the museum accession number of the object and whatever the image number was. There would be a new card for each of the negative references so you could search these to find any information about the object and when it had been photographed.

In 1926, we photographed the reliquary again (reference no. 57451; figure 6.6). It has now come off the plinth on which it was probably displayed in the gallery. The contrast is much greater. The change of exposure or processing activity makes the contrast between the much more garish gold and the ivory very high: too high, in my view. It's on a dark felt-type material with a black background, and the thing about the black background is that it draws it into the side of the object. You begin to lose the hard edge all around the object. The gold reflects the black, and that's not a good thing, because you can't see the whole object. The print we are looking at here was made by the photographer in 1926. This is a B-size, 10 x 8 inches.

Leaping to 1955, almost 30 years, and the object reappears to be photographed again. This time we've started with the general view of the front, and it is again on its hessian background on the base of a box. Then there is a background paper or linen in front of that which is out of focus and slightly mottled in tone. Again, there is softer light from the top and there is a shadow, so one tends to think that there could be some form of artificial lighting, almost certainly, in these. By now we've started using tungsten or cold cathode-type lighting. In this instance, there is a whole set, as we photographed from a number of different of viewpoints, a linked sequence of negatives (reference nos N397 to N404, B-size, 10 x 8 inches). There are details from a slightly higher elevation looking down on the object, a slightly plan view, a sequence of the four corners and then the four facets of it on each side. It's trying to describe the object through photographs. The sequence is very consistent in terms of image quality; it's just the angle of view that has changed. In 1958, yet another sequence is made. It is very similar to the 1955 series, with the same light grey hessian, but with lower viewpoints this time. The negatives here were given the reference nos R676 to R688, B-size, 10 x 8 inches. The N sequence and the R sequence are both film negatives, the number sequences reflecting shifts in practice in the studio.

This 1958 sequence includes a plan view of the top, which is quite interesting (figure 6.7). I don't think anyone had ever seen the
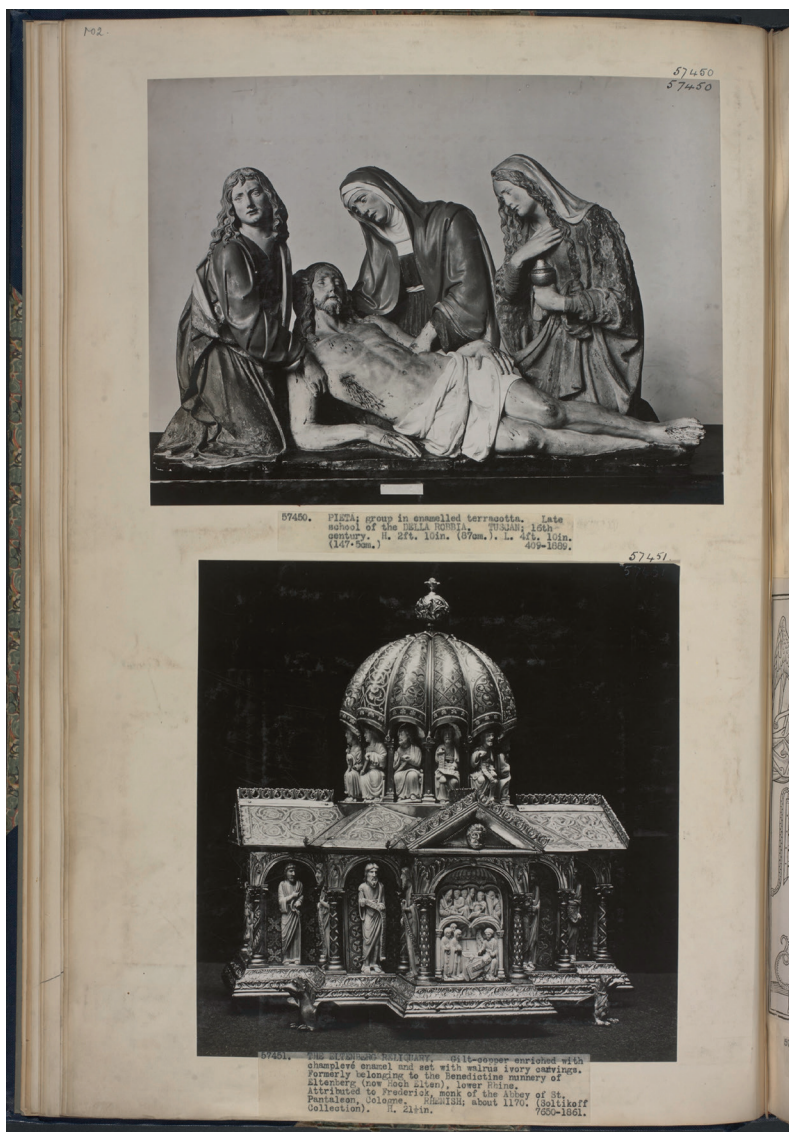
Figure 6.6: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 1926. Guard Book MA/32/194, neg. no. 57491. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Eltenberg Reliquary like that before, because it's not a position that you would see the object in if it was in a case. You wouldn't be able to get that view of the dome with all its different facets and then the tops of the four chapels proceeding north, south, east and west quite so interestingly in that way. Then, we move even closer. We are photographing

Figure 6.7: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 1958. Guard Book MA/32/346, neg. nos R683 and R684. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

details, the figure of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the three kings, so that really begins to describe the object in much more detail.

What's interesting about the last two negatives, the N series and the R series, is that they belong in a period of the 1950s when the photographic process had gone through significant changes. All of those film negatives are now deteriorating because of a fault in the manufacturing of the film that has resulted in the emulsion layer shrinking away from

the base layer. This is familiarly known as 'vinegar syndrome'. They emit a very strong acetic acid, a pungent smell. There are various options that people explore; we have kept all ours, while I am aware that other museums have thrown away their collections of deteriorated negatives because of the problems that they caused with off-gassing.

We made a decision during our recent move of this collection to a new negative store at Blythe House, and the option that we chose was to seal all of that sequence of negatives: there are some 20,000 suffering with that vinegar syndrome. We sealed them in zip-lock bags and double-bagged them, trying to exclude as much of the air within each bag as possible at the time we sealed them.

We very occasionally have to access them to see if there's a negative that we can still use. But the thing about our collection is that we do have a print of every one of those 20,000 negatives. The images are still preserved, although we don't have the use of the original film: it cannot be printed or scanned. The negatives have what appears to be a very crackled glaze across them. There will be someone that will find a process to perhaps recover them. There has been talk about actually removing the emulsion layer and relaying it onto another base layer, but it is time-consuming, very costly. At the end of the day, the history of processes in the studio is fragile.

The first colour photography came to the museum in the late 1950s, maybe 1960s, but it was expensive and very little used in the Photographic Studio. However, some objects were photographed in colour, and the Eltenberg Reliquary was one. I don't have the precise dates for these two films (D-size, 6.5 x 4.75 inches, CT463; figure 6.8). Both were early Kodak Ektachrome, which is now showing signs of deterioration in terms of the colour process. They are turning red, but we can scan them and colour-correct them.

This is possibly the earliest image and it shows it on the hessian ground. It's difficult to tell the colour because the transparency has gone very red. It's possibly a brown tone or something like they used to have in the gallery cases at that time. Someone's used a board plinth. What's interesting is that it does have a greyscale and also a Kodak colour scale. We've got the red, green and blue and the yellow, magenta and cyan and the white and the black references. We can scan that and we can recover it to a more accurate colour.

We photographed it yet again in 1998 (reference CT464; figure 6.9) and again it was in its case. This is a much more neutral colour transparency. It was photographed by one of the photographers who was with us for many years, Dominic Naish, a metalwork photographer.

Figure 6.8: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in late 1950s or early 1960s. Colour transparency CT463. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Photographed in its case, in quite soft lighting, it's got good highlights around it but it is not ideal that it was done in a case. It would have been better if it was taken to the studio and done in a better position.

In the 2000s the object was due to go away to Austria for very in-depth conservation prior to it going into the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the Museum. As a requirement, before it was packed and transported, we photographed it, creating a comprehensive set of images. The photographer, Richard Davis (see Chapter 15), captured the sequence (5 x 4-inch Ektachrome colour transparency, reference nos CT130417 to CT130423, dated 2003). Photography took place in the new Royal College of Art North Wing

Figure 6.9: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 1998. Colour transparency CT464. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

photographic studio using a Sinar technical camera and Broncolor studio electronic flash. He photographed a whole range of images. We can show all the details, the figures around the side, the dome, the top, plan view, the crown on the top, which I can describe as an intricate gold ball etched, the feet with the griffins: every conceivable angle. It was away for quite some time, and when it came back, we photographed it all again before it was displayed in the new galleries in 2008 (figure 6.10). The extensive conservation meant the object would have changed in some way. Interestingly, the photographic technology had also changed, and when the object returned, the photography was captured using the latest Sinar digital camera with Broncolor studio electronic flash.
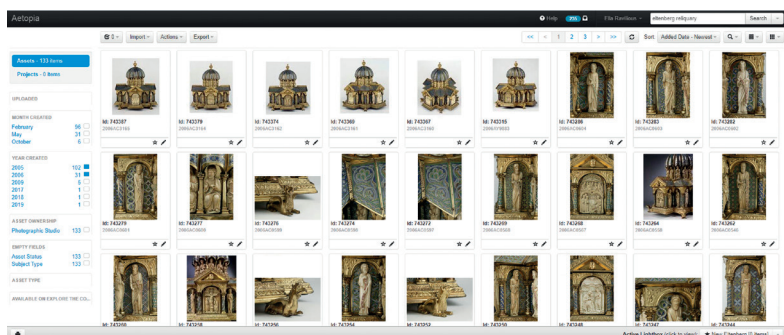
Figure 6.10: Eltenberg Reliquary photographed in 2005. Screengrab from the V&A Digital Asset Management System. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

There is an important history in the photography of the Eltenberg Reliquary from the late nineteenth century and the making of the first photographs of it onwards. It illustrates the object throughout its life within a museum: how it might have changed, how it may have been repaired, cleaned or polished. But it also gives us a glimpse of the history of photographic practice and curatorial practices/needs. Having photographed it in the way that we did more recently, I really don't think the Eltenberg Reliquary needs to be photographed any more, because there are very many objects within the collections that have never been photographed. If we are to illustrate our collections fully, these are the ones we really need to move on to and not keep returning to the same ones, the ones I would call premier objects. That's a personal view, but I think it's one that we illustrate very well in this object. It's a fantastic object, and it's been a pleasure to have worked with it and photographed it during my time in the Museum. I've actually seen it on many occasions when it's been in the studio, and it really is a remarkable piece of fine and decorative art.

7

Photographing theatre and performance

Graham Brandon

From an interview with Elizabeth Edwards.

The status and role of the photographs made for the Museum's Theatre and Performance Collection demonstrates an interconnectedness of photographs as practice, collection and interpretation. There is a sense that photographs fill absences in the Theatre and Performance Collection, populating the collection of objects and ephemera with those who actually 'perform'. As such, the photographs become 'boundary objects' which connect objects and interpretative groups. Photographs as 'boundary objects' are not prescriptive but open a space for interpretation in collections and facilitate the operation of the Museum ecosystem, here in relation to theatre and performance. Graham Brandon's account links the collections to the external dynamics that define them in ways demonstrable across museum photographic practices.

Graham Brandon originally joined the Museum's Transport and Packing Department in 1975. He transferred to the Photographic Studio in 1977. In the course of his photographic training, he became particularly interested in recording the performance and process of theatre. This led to him joining the Theatre Museum of the V&A as their photographer in 1980 until his retirement in 2021. All the photographs in this chapter were taken by him.

I am technically employed by the Photographic Studio of the V&A. The prime objective of that department is to record objects with their museum numbers. It's a systematic, technical style of photography, a very logical and precise process. I started doing that when I first began in the Photographic Studio: I was faced with an object and had to think

very precisely about how much volume, representational accuracy and aesthetic access I could bring to it in one frame. It's a technical job that's very, very skilled [see Chapters 5, 6 and 15], and maybe I am not temperamentally suited to that kind of precision!

I soon moved on to photographing for the Theatre Collections, which involved both object and live photography. Some 15 or 20 years ago I was given the opportunity to concentrate solely on performance photography. My real drive with performance photography is being away from the exacting demands of the studio, and attempting to document the passing moments of a live production, be it street theatre or opera: catching something of that performance, and perhaps something extra. If I miss something, it's my fault! Such documenting possibilities complement precisely and integrally the collecting needs of the V&A's Theatre Collections, because performance itself is, of course, at the heart of the object collections. Without performance, such object collections are incomplete.

EE: How has the changed access within theatre photography shifted the way in which the V&A can collect theatre and performance?
The V&A always had to adapt and respond to the kinds of photographic projections that the theatres wanted to do. I was encouraged by the Photography Curator of the Theatre Museum at the time, Sarah Woodcock, who worked with me to deliver a jointly satisfying portfolio – satisfying as a photographer and for the collections. At first, I attended company photo calls, events which are usually structured around two or three scenes from the show, selected and controlled by the Director and the press agent, who need to produce images suitable to promote the play in the press and so forth.

A typical example of a simple West End photo call was set up for *Hamlet* (figure 7.1) at Wyndham's Theatre in 2009. We were presented with Jude Law playing the title role in a few highly staged moments from the production, which is ideal for the national press to advertise/sell the production, but not at all representative of the production from an archival point of view. In a way, it was a performance of a performance – a good portrait opportunity of a star, but little else. For large, more complex productions, such as ballet and opera, one attends the final dress rehearsal, a complete run-through of the production in full costume and makeup, and finds one's own moments to record. The dress rehearsal gives the photographer so much more freedom to create a wider representation of the whole production – tight and wide shots, for instance – and a chance to capture a wider view of the

Figure 7.1: Jude Law in the title role, *Hamlet*. Wyndham's Theatre, 2009. (TM 090602-0139). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

whole cast rather than being star-led. It allows the creation of a much more valuable record for the Museum archive. As time has moved on, companies have started to limit photographers' access at photo calls, preferring to hire a photographer to both cover the production process and produce press images in-house, so as to keep a tighter control on

Figure 7.2: *Wind in the Willows*. Mole (Adrian Scarborough) working with voice coach Patsy Rodenburg. (TM 10448-1-36A-37). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

style, quality and copyright. Such a shift has made it more difficult for the Museum to pursue effective collecting procedures in relation to photographs. As a consequence, as access to calls became more limited, we changed our approach to shooting for the archive. We recorded fewer productions but in greater depth.

So, a more productive 'page-to-stage' approach was adopted, creating a photographic record from play text to 'final dress' where possible, taking in rehearsals, set, costume, props, set production and so on. This was found to give a more useful product for the archive. It creates a comprehensive photographic document to accompany texts, publicity material, costumes and so on within the archive and Museum, and is ideal source material for creating an exhibition.

An example of this is the play based on Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (figures 7.2–5) adapted for the stage by Alan Bennett, a National Theatre production revival. I shot it over a number of months for the Museum and the exhibition that ran for over two years at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden. With this project, the aim was to carefully document, as much as possible, the process of putting a show on the stage – that is, illustrating the side of theatre that the audience cannot access. Everything from performers working with a
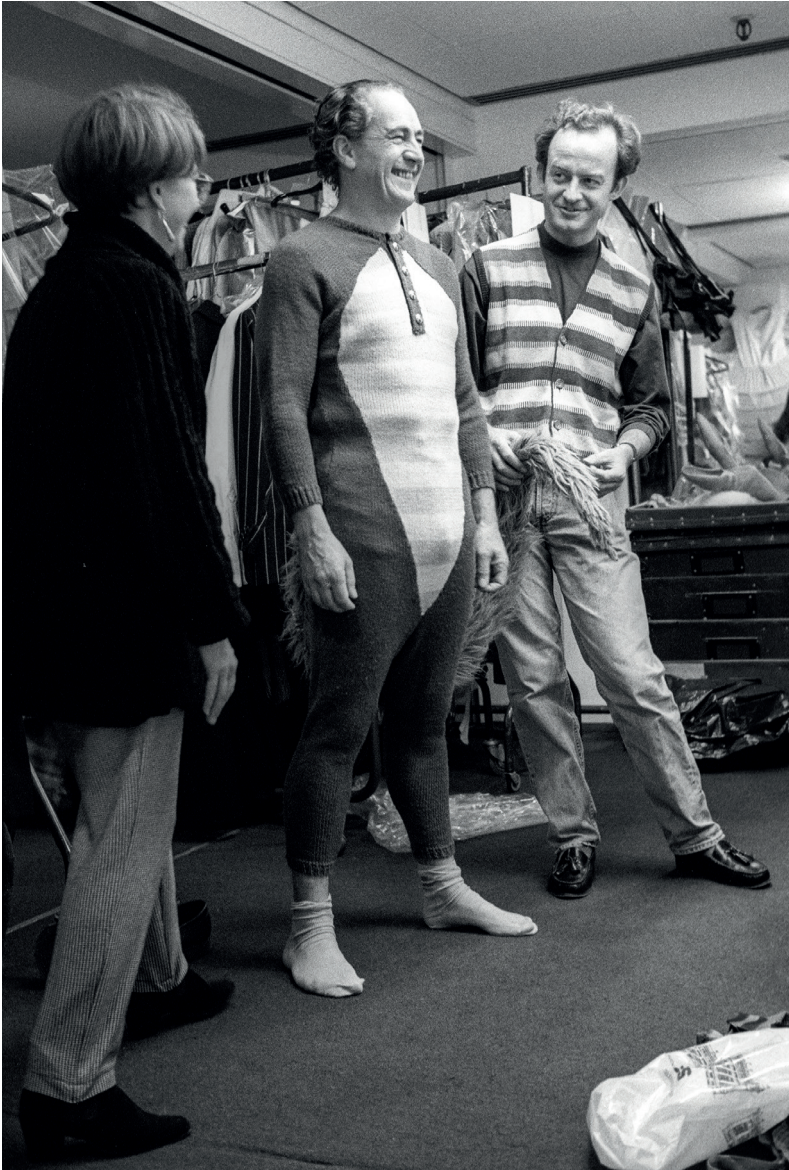
Figure 7.3: *Wind in the Willows*. Otter (John Matshikiza) costume fitting with production designer Mark Thompson and costume mistress. (TM 10435-2-22-22A). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 7.4: *Wind in the Willows*. Prop maker adding the finishing touches to Ratty's picnic hamper. (TM 10436-3-21-21A). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 7.5: *Wind in the Willows*. Toad (Desmond Barrett) in his dressing room. (TM 10453-2-5-5A). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

voice coach, makeup, costume fittings, prop and set manufacturing, music rehearsals and so on was covered, along with, of course, the final dress rehearsal.

EE: How has technological change affected the way theatre is collected photographically?
The photography in Theatre Collections goes back to almost the beginning of the medium. In terms of early 'theatre photography', there is an extensive collection of photographic prints documenting performers, often as cartes de visite from the 1860s, and later the larger cabinet prints. With technical advances, by the 1880s, photography was taking place in theatres, recording somewhat 'staged' moments of a performance complete with set. Also housed within the Theatre Photography Collection is a vast archive of negative collections of various photographers, such as Gordon Anthony (1930s–1950s), Houston Rogers (1930s–late 1960s) and Anthony Crickmay (late 1950s–2020), to name three, which gives an invaluable, almost unedited view of theatre and performance at a given moment. These negative collections have huge research potential as fresh eyes come to them.

The advent of digital and the digitising of a number of analogue collections has shifted the focus of my work as a photographer yet again. The ready availability of photographic images of theatre worldwide has raised the question of the necessity of creating and acquiring vast numbers of physical prints for reference in the archive; for instance, one can find photographs of the Jude Law *Hamlet* photo call with ease on the internet. Consequently, we have been increasingly focused on creating integrated packages around productions such as *Wind in the Willows*. These have much more lasting value from a research/documenting point of view in the Museum archive.

EE: Is it choice and narrative versus moment?
As I say, what the V&A needs, what works for them, is always shifting. And different performance types, of course, have different demands, which in turn make an impact on the shape of the collections. It is a very personal choice in many ways. Ballet, for instance, is very formal, while contemporary dance, by contrast, is freer and looser, allowing a much more personal approach to recording it. I try to find a more fluid moment to record as opposed to the more formal moments of classical ballet. Ballet has very specific demands as regards the perfect shape and poise of a movement. That extra layer of constraint and perfection has to be captured photographically: the feet, the arms and the hands,

and the expression – everything has got to be right to make the photograph summarise the perfect artistry. But often by the time you've seen it, it is too late. This is where experience and specialist knowledge come in. I am often guided by the music to indicate the coming moment: the music tells me when to press the shutter. Yet while such balletic icons/moments form part of the collections, from an archival point of view, the 'missed shots', not only of the ballet, but across all the performing arts, can be of interest from an archival or study point of view. They hold much interesting information regarding costume, makeup, set design. Again, they are valuable research documents for the future. That is also something to bear in mind when one is finally editing the shoot for the archive. At times it's not only the perfect shot we file away!

Variation comes with the type of performance, as I've said. Sometimes one gets run-throughs, sometimes set-ups – they produce very different kinds of images that work differently in the archive; they are documents of different status. For instance, set-up publicity shots of a performer can be very glam, telling us more about the star than the performance. Shooting from photo calls and the like maintains an illusion of a performance rather than documenting. As a document, a photo-call photograph raises some interesting issues about its status as an 'actuality'. However, demands have changed, and this in turn has influenced what is available to the Museum. The ideal operatic photograph of the golden goddess, the diva, has shifted to a more realistic, dare I say honest, representation, and this in turn reflects changes in how the performing arts are sold to the public. These styles are historical and tell us a lot about theatre.

EE: To what extent do you think that you've been able to shape the overall collecting patterns of the Department of Theatre and Performance?
The collection impetus, of course, comes from the curators, but the photographs I produce can create and enrich those collections. The photographs I have taken for the Museum have been a joint venture between the needs and wishes of the curatorial staff and me as photographer. There were directives from the Theatre Collections curators about what they wanted. The Photographic Collection Curator at the Theatre Museum and I would go through the season's productions and make a wish list, taking into account future exhibitions, the video archive (with which I worked closely and in a complementary fashion) and maybe the photography of productions relating to designs, costumes and so on recently acquired by the Museum within the overall balance of the collections. Premieres are always an attraction,

Figure 7.6: David Bintley, choreographer, rehearsing his ballet *Choros*, Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, 1984. (TM 10035-29A-30). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

especially if one can record not only the new production but also the interaction of the creator with the performers, again a sort of 'page-to-stage' approach. An example is David Bintley's *Choros* for Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1983 (figure 7.6).

A few shots of the choreographer explaining details or giving notes are always useful additions to the archive. The photographs also record theatrical careers over time – actors, dancers, singers, designers, producers and so on – another important archival function. Despite the close collaboration about what was to be recorded, ultimately the decisions at the coalface, out there in the theatre, were mine as the photographer. The curators at the Theatre Museum had faith in me to deliver. I had free rein on how curatorial objectives were delivered photographically.

Trust is essential to being able to photograph in a useful, and indeed ethical, way: again, this is a very different dynamic from studio photography. Much time is invested in creating relationships of trust between my camera, the artists and companies, but this is very interesting and enjoyable, it must be said! The camera/photographer is peering into a very professional, and at times private, working environment, which requires sensitivity, trust and a lot of goodwill.

Trust and skill are fundamental and possibly the most important part of the job. But they are relationships that enrich the collections. So perhaps that is my 'influence'!

EE: This brings us to the [Blackpool drag show] Funny Girls, which has an enormous sense of connection. Was this perhaps something of a photographic departure for the V&A?

It certainly was, at least for me! It emerged from conversations in the Department about what kinds of theatre and performance people were actually watching in changing times. What was the required curatorial and photographic response? Although the V&A had always collected the 'edgier' end of performance – music hall or the Windmill Theatre [known for its striptease], for which there is a sizeable archive, as well as Shakespeare – the first drag show I recorded was *The Lady Boys of Bangkok* in Manchester in July 2011 and again in Brighton in May 2016. I shot both shows behind the scenes and at the live show, including the audience.

Following the successful shoot of *The Lady Boys of Bangkok* for the archive, Curator Catherine Haill and I decided to approach *Funny Girls*, a hugely popular drag show in Blackpool, to see if we could work with them. It was very conscious, proactive collecting to fill these gaps in the archive of theatre photographs. This developed into an amazing project running over a number of days, involving two visits in June and September 2017. The project was met with great enthusiasm by the company, resulting in a 100 per cent open-door policy for my camera and myself (figures 7.7–9). Working with a very polished, professional company, I covered everything from rehearsals, costume fittings and makeup, to the show from the house and the stage wings. It was a dream, but importantly it was a collaboration based on trust and respect that effectively allowed the Funny Girls to determine the conditions of the archival record. The photographs for the archive were intended to capture the whole experience of the evening, including the audience and the bar and dance floor front of house.

I think the audience, those performed to, is very important, and often overlooked in 'theatre photography' and its collection. These new kinds of performance enjoyed very mixed and demographically diverse audiences, much more so than one might imagine. Audiences are very difficult to photograph, yet they are an integral part of the performance, especially in forms such as the *Funny Girls*, drag acts in pubs (where some of the best LGBTQ+ acts are to be found, such as the Royal Vauxhall Tavern) and, of course, the circus, all of which I

Figure 7.7: Costume fitting, *Funny Girls*, 2017. (TM170607-1030). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 7.8: *Funny Girls*. Peter Lorek, dancer, applying his makeup, 2017. (TM 170608-2629). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 7.9: *Funny Girls*. The show from the wings, 2017. (TM 170922-1169). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

have recorded for the collections. The challenge is always to become a part of the group, gain everyone's trust, maybe flirt with the camera, disappear a little; that suddenly allows you to get those photographs. There'll be a thousand-plus *Funny Girls* photographs for the archive when I finish working on this project!

EE: Has the V&A been collecting the material culture of performances like Funny Girls?
While obviously my job is to document for the collection, and collect with the camera, there is a general shift in curatorial policy towards 'package' collections, of which I am part. That is, we create a whole package, from posters, scripts, programmes and costumes to, of course, photographs. In many ways, the photographs create the crucial links between objects, not simply giving 'context' to objects, but adding something more: a sense of completeness. This creates a historical depth rather than the more superficial practices of the photo call, perhaps. These can also be project-led – around a planned exhibition, for instance.

EE: How are the photographs stored and managed, and who does this?
My earlier analogue work (some 20 years plus of it) consists of black-and-white negatives, colour slides and colour negatives, in formats

from 35 mm to 10 x 8-inch sheet film. They are all stored in the Photographic Studio negative store, so they are in that sense integrated with the rest of the Museum's photographic output, part of its photographic ecosystem. A set of the contact sheets for all my 35 mm and roll film work (both black-and-white and colour) is held in the Theatre and Performance Collection's archive, along with a number of 10 x 8-inch reference prints. For productions photographed digitally, I create a folder identified with a code that in turn identifies it as part of the Department archive, provide the details of the photographer and set up a digital file and index number that relates to the performance and subject. Within the folder are three further folders containing camera raw files, the edited and processed TIFs up to publishable standard and scanned reference material such as call sheets, programmes and other items relevant to the shoot. It is all fully integrated and organised for future use. The files are eventually stored on DAMS (a digital asset management system; see Chapter 17).

As a photographer providing some 'flesh' for the collections, I am very aware of the ways in which the digital has shifted how we, as a museum archive, collect. The ready access to photographic images available worldwide via the internet, such as the photo calls and historical material – they are all there, and the days of referencing hard copy in the reading room are limited. Hence the focus on photographic, object and document packages that I've described; they go deeper and, due to the nature of the photographic process, offer a unique view of the birth of a production. That, ultimately, is what it's all about, as the spotlight moves to the archive.

Part III
Histories

8

Collecting India: photographs, pedagogy and power

Divia Patel

Within the Asian Department sits an archive of some 60,000 photographs, mostly nineteenth-century images of South Asian architecture and landscape, and a smaller number of the people of the region.[1] Here, non-accessioned objects sit with accessioned ones in a state of semi-organised chaos. These are photographs that have, over the course of a century, been admired, studied, exhibited, forgotten, devalued and revalued.

This chapter narrates the implications of my encounters with this archive, trying to account for its significance and its contents, as they point to the importance of ongoing curatorial value systems and assumptions in shaping collections. A descriptive recounting best conveys the ebb and flow of the photographs through the Museum's ecosystem and explains its amassing as a non-collection. This chapter will examine how the core of this Indian archive evolved as a repository for what can be described as the 'residue' of two eminent nineteenth-century institutions: the South Kensington Museum (SKM) and the India Office, the governing body of India. The 'residue' consists of photographs separated from the formal collections of both institutions. The histories of this collection operate on a dual axis: the history of the image content or what the photograph depicts, and the history of the photographic object, as a three-dimensional entity that exists within a network of multiples.[2] The existence of duplicate prints within this amalgamated collection suggests many roles for the same image, and therefore provides a route into exploring how the same images were *made to work* for different institutions.

The existence of multiples, however, does not exclude originality, for while the photographic image may be a duplicate, the

mount to which it is adhered has features which make it unique, and through which the biography of the object can be read.[3] The accumulation, interpretation and function of these photographs in the Museum is to be read in the materiality of the objects: the way they are mounted, the labels and stamps attached to them and the scribbled numbers and handwritten notes on them. Investigating that materiality[4] has led to what the auto-ethnographic process terms as 'moments of epiphany' which reveal the journey and role of these photographs.[5]

It is important to examine the intention of these nineteenth-century institutions in their use of photographs, and here Bruno Latour's concept of 'centres of calculation' provides a useful framework.[6] SKM and the India Office emerge as centres where resources are accumulated through networks and cycles of collecting. The systematisation and classification of these resources, and their transformation or development into new knowledge which is disseminated and validated through a network of associations, will be explored in this narrative. Photographs are resources that can be accumulated and moved from one centre to another, and mapping their trajectories offers a valuable insight into how streams of knowledge are created. As this archive demonstrates, priorities and values of one moment in history rarely remain static. Photographs move across hierarchies of value over time; the significance they accrue and the meaning they bestow changes over time. By recounting and understanding that process of accumulation, we look afresh at this ambiguous non-collection.

First encounters

The upper level of the Indian Study Room is lined with mobile shelving filled with Indian paintings dating from the twelfth century to the present day. The last aisle contains photographs, some stored in a series of neat red boxes on the right-hand side of the aisle and others kept in a more random collection of blue and red boxes on the left-hand side. This visual and physical difference in storage is a significant feature in this narrative. I first encountered this archive as a curatorial assistant, the most junior level in the hierarchy, over 20 years ago. Curators turned to this archive for contextual images, but rarely were they regarded as objects in their own right. It sat on the margins, physically, intellectually and curatorially, of the Museum's collection of fine and decorative arts of India.

At the time of my encounter, the history of photography in India was slowly emerging, with curators, historians, dealers and collectors piecing together a chronology of photographic practice.[7] The nascent status of this field of research spurred my desire to make my own discoveries. I entered the field with little knowledge of the subject; the value system that framed my curatorial eye was developed through books, exhibitions and the curatorial environment that surrounded me. It gave primacy to art-historical methods, to developing connoisseurship, recognising rarity, seeking attribution and dating, and stylistic analysis. Early photographic technologies had been privileged within histories of photography thus far, and I too succumbed to that value system.[8] I sought and found rare calotypes by Dr John McCosh and Linnaeus Tripe. I greatly admired the picturesque views of the Himalayas taken by Bourne and Shepherd in 1866 and Joseph Lawton's dramatic landscapes of Ceylon, taken in 1870.

Preliminary discoveries

Exploring the blue boxes, I found a charming calotype: a ghostly image in pale sepia tones of a cascade of temple spires along a mountainside, encased within the walls of an impressive fort. The print was attached to a mount that had once extended beyond it but had subsequently been trimmed. A label on the back identified the photographer as Dr Narayan Dajee, the production date as 1855, and the subject as a view of the Palitana hill in Kathiawar in Gujarat (figure 8.1). Beside the label there were lengthy pieces of handwritten text describing the architecture, much of which was lost when the mount was trimmed. The box included four more photographs by Dajee, one of which was a self-portrait. Being of Gujarati origin, I was instantly engaged in the subject matter; the early date of the images and the rare discovery of an Indian photographer heightened my interest. Unfortunately, there were no accession numbers, no register entries, no indications of provenance. Another blue box revealed another set of picturesque calotypes of Burma, many of which bore the signature of Linnaeus Tripe that was becoming canonical in the narrative of 'early Indian photography',[9] yet all were unnumbered and unregistered.

Spread across the archive were photographs of the deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri in Agra. This included single prints and multiples mounted together, depicting the wide range of buildings and fine architectural details. The mounts were dirty, evidence of the wear and
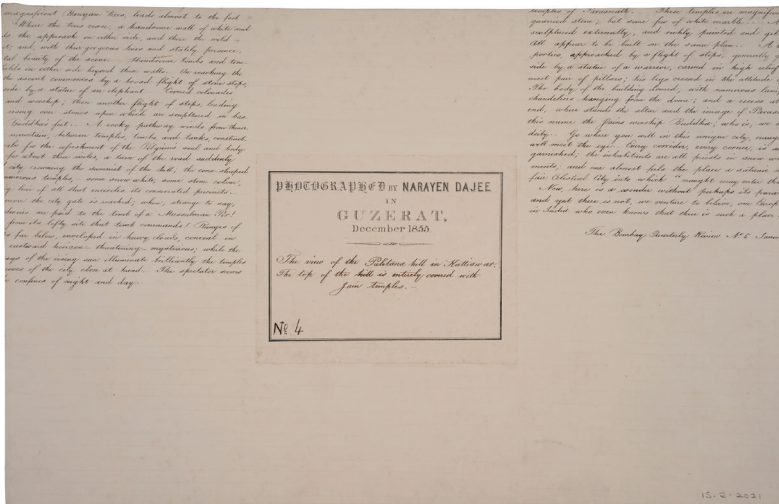
Figure 8.1: View of Palitana, Gujarat, by Dr Narayan Dajee, 1855. Front and back of mounted photograph. (TN 1763-2021). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

tear of use, and on the reverse were handwritten numbers scrawled in pencil, along with white labels edged in black, printed with the name of the Photographic Studio, Bourne and Shepherd, and the image title. My curatorial value system disregarded these because of their poor quality and the knowledge that multiple originals existed within the collection and in others around the world (figure 8.2).
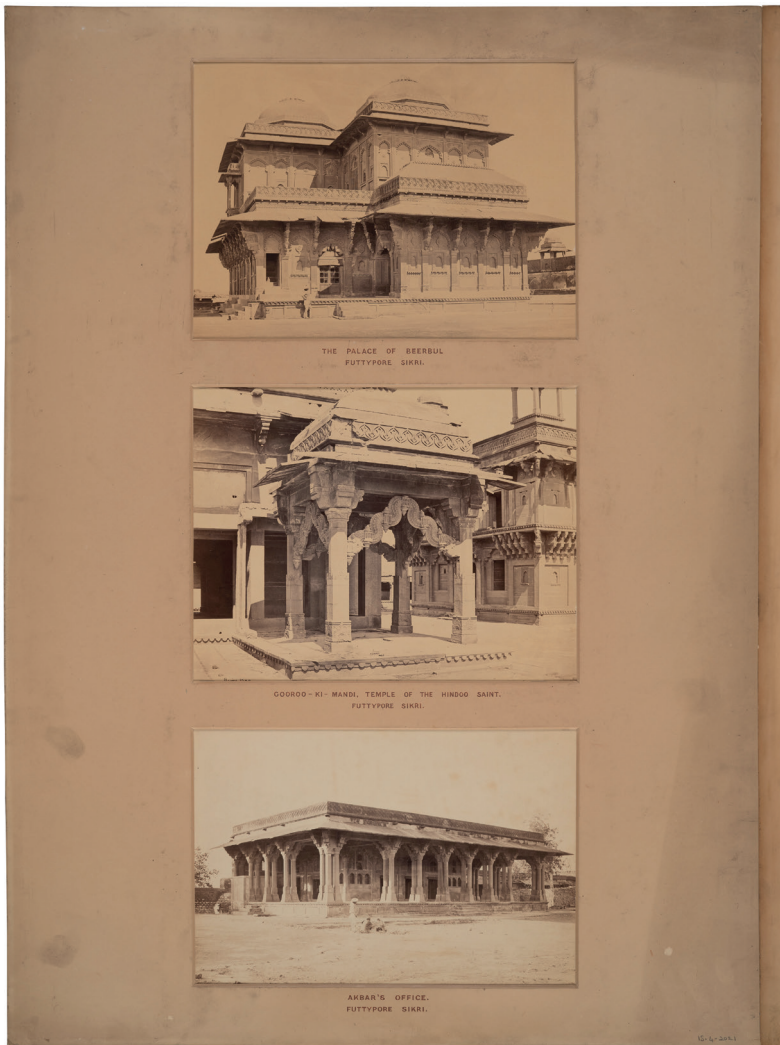
Figure 8.2: Three photographs in one mount of various buildings at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra. All photographs by Bourne & Shepherd, 1865. Front and back of mounted photographs. (TN 1765-2021). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

These examples are united in their lack of accession numbers, their grubby condition and their haphazard storage. By contrast, on examination of the red boxes, I found neatly housed photographs all marked with accession numbers offering clearer pathways into their history. However, on first encounter, the accession numbers were not familiar
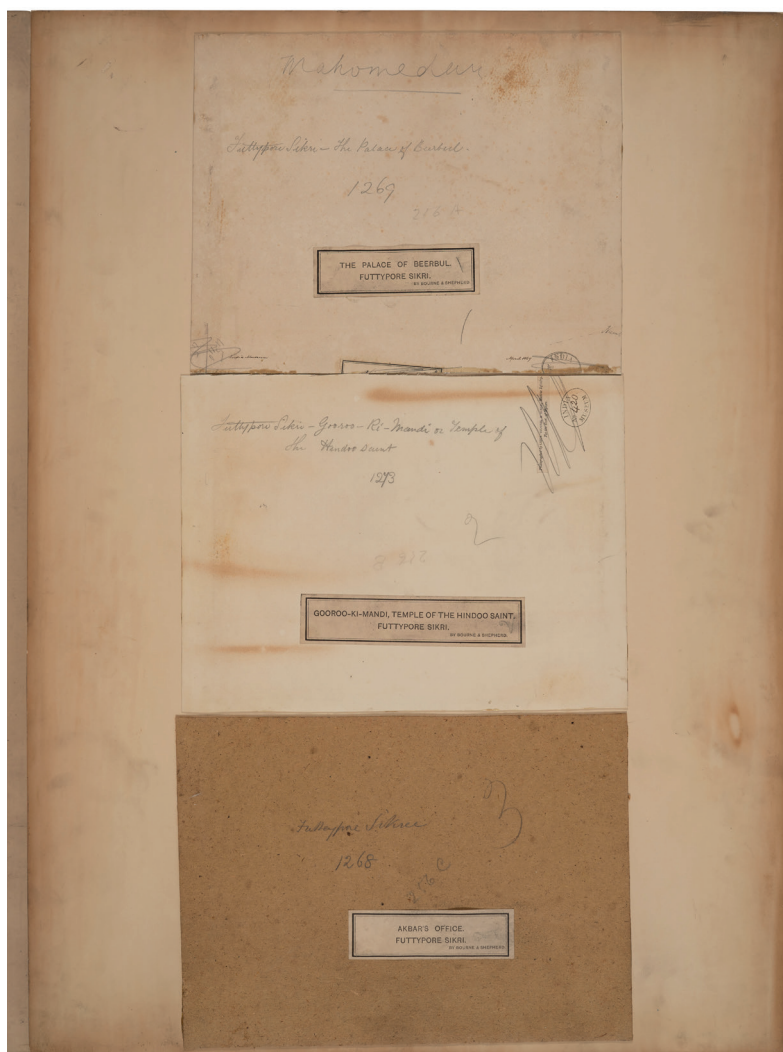
to me as being from the Indian Section registers. The retired Keeper informed me that this part of the archive had been transferred from the Prints, Drawings and Paintings Department in the 1970s and that the acquisition registers would be located with them.[10]

A particularly notable discovery was a group of calotypes of Burmese architecture and people. Some were beautifully composed, but in general there was a sense of amateur experimentation about them. One of them was mounted on white paper with the handwritten title 'Great Pagoda Prome (very ancient)'; however, of much greater
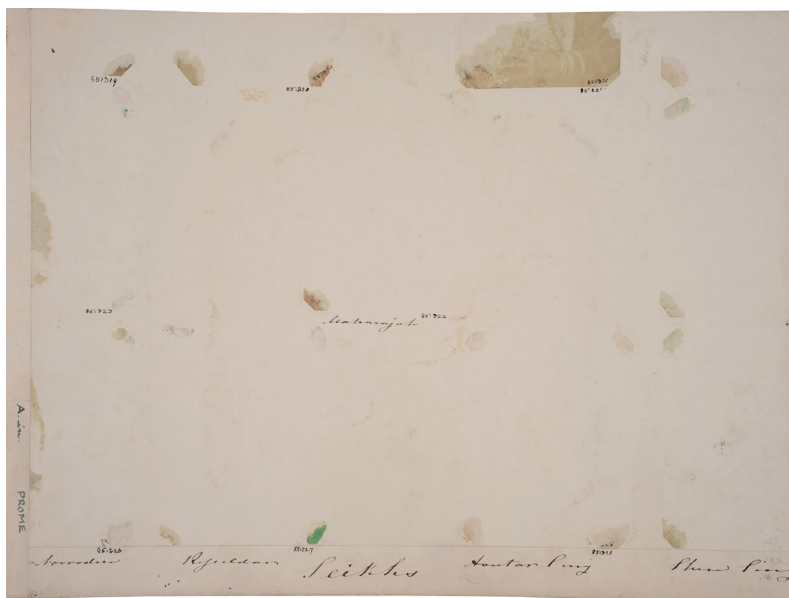
Figure 8.3: *Great Pagoda Prome (very ancient),* Burma, by John McCosh, 1852. Front and back of mounted photograph (no. 85330). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHS DO

Figure 8.4: *Hullabeed. S.W. Front of Northern Vimana* by Bourne & Shepherd, 1865. Image shows white mount, label with red border and handwritten title, with museum accession number handwritten in bottom right-hand corner. (no. 80121). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

interest to me was the reverse of the page. Here were nine empty spaces with torn sepia remnants where whole photographs had once been; each of the spaces was marked with an accession number, and the group was titled 'Sikhs', with the central image 'Maharajah'. This was probably the result of a misguided attempt to lift the images from the page and potentially rearrange them according to new evaluations such as separating architecture from people, but I recognised this as a significant loss. Cultural knowledge enabled their identification as the earliest photographs of the Sikh people and their ruler Duleep Singh. The acquisition registers revealed that Dr McCosh deposited them in the Art Library in 1884, and subsequent research identified them as extremely rare prints by Dr John McCosh (figure 8.3).[11]

Throughout the red boxes I encountered photographs mounted in white card with red-bordered labels and handwritten titles (figure 8.4). The mounts had been cut crudely to fit into the boxes, and the images were of a variety of architectural sites across India. The register entries noted only that some were transferred from the Art Museum in

1880 and that some were duplicates. These distinct mounts indicated an exhibition history, but where and when was unrecorded. Other red boxes contained more photographs of Burma by Linnaeus Tripe, and unlike those in the blue boxes, they were numbered, and their acquisition records noted their donation to the Museum in 1909 and 1933.[12]

How and why these groups of photographs came to sit together in the Indian Study Room, and the reasoning behind the differing treatments of storage and numbering, is aligned to the value systems at play during their accumulation and the subsequent shifting of those values over time.

Design education: the South Kensington Museum (SKM)

A more detailed examination of the archive determined that the red boxes housed a topographic index of the architecture and landscapes of India, organised alphabetically.[13] There were about 7,000 prints all recorded in the Art Library registers at SKM. The process of exploring this archive, alongside my completion of an MA degree in South Asian History and Anthropology, led to a widening of my curatorial outlook, moving beyond the aesthetics of the image and towards a consideration of the deeper cultural context of the making of these images and their circulation. To better understand the collection, I began to trace the deposits of photographs from India chronologically by systematically going through the registers, regardless of whether I had come across the photographs in the boxes. Register entries varied from scarce information to a full record of the depositor, photographer, date of entry and price of purchase. From this process emerged a history of the formation of the collection of photographs of India, set within the context of the objectives of SKM.

SKM and Henry Cole's educational mission was to be achieved through collecting photographs and plaster casts from around the world (see Chapters 1 and 12). The first photographs of India entered the Art Library in 1862, followed by notable acquisitions annually up to 1871, and then less frequently. India was of particular interest to Cole and the SKM committee: they fervently believed that the underlying principles of Indian design, in both artefacts and architecture, were the perfect examples from which the British could learn. Their opinions had been formed on seeing the Indian Court at the Great Exhibition of 1851, where the splendour and riches of the displays, particularly the fine textiles and decorative objects, had made a strong impression.[14]

Photographs of India were collected within the context of design education and relied on a network of associations, such as Dr Alexander Hunter from the Madras School of Industrial Arts, who sent photographs of South Indian architecture and the Buddhist shrine at Amaravati to SKM in 1862. The Madras School, along with others in Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore, were run by the colonial government and became vehicles for the SKM model of education. Dr Hunter, compliant with the SKM vision and aware of the expanding photographic resource in London, contributed to its development. He commissioned Linnaeus Tripe to teach photography to his students, an approach in keeping with the SKM pedagogy of providing practical skills while emphasising observational drawing and the importance of studying historical ornamentation. This process led to the purchase of over 100 photographs of architectural details taken by students at the school by the Art Library in 1871.

The centrality of Indian exemplars is marked by 1866, a particularly significant year for acquisitions which saw several large purchases, including impressive leather-bound publications with tipped-in photographs such as *Architecture at Ahmedabad* by Colonel Thomas Biggs purchased for £4 5s. 9d. on 25 August, and *Architecture of Dharwar and Mysore* as photographed by William Harry Pigou, A. C. Brisbane Neill and Thomas Biggs, purchased on 11 August for £11 7s.[15] The remit to collect representations of art and architecture led to the rejection of Felice Beato's photographs of sites associated with the rebellion of the Indian army in 1857, which were submitted to the Art Library for purchase in 1864. While these included striking examples of architectural details ideal for teaching students, a greater proportion of them documented the atrocities of the fighting.[16] Similarly, Roger Fenton's famed photographs of the Crimean War taken in 1854–5 were not purchased at the time of production but came into the Museum as a bequest in 1868.[17] These ambiguities point to two different ways of collecting at work – as content of Asian photographic acquisitions and as the processes and practices of photography itself, which marked the Fenton bequest. The purchase in 1868 of the first volume of *The People of India*, a publication with tipped-in photographs produced by the India Museum, suggests categories of acquisition beyond art and architecture.[18] Throughout the next decade the Art Library collected photographs from India; however, it was not the only institution to do so. At the same time, and in another part of London, a parallel collection was accumulating and forming another centre of knowledge.

Figure 8.5: Photograph of the inscription on a doorway of a tomb, Gulburgha, by the Bombay Photo Company, c. 1865. The India Museum stamp is in the bottom right-hand corner. (TN 1764-2021). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Possession and preservation: the India Museum

My survey of the photographs moved from the red boxes to the blue boxes. These contained a mix of images of people and architectural sites; most, as I have noted, had no accession numbers, and some had numbers that had been crossed out. There was a jumble of different-sized mounts; many were grubby, with a multitude of labels and numbers written on the reverse, some had been torn off their mounts

and others had been marked with the stamp of the India Museum (figure 8.5).

The India Museum and Library of the East India Company was established in 1798 as a repository for books, manuscripts and objects sent back by East India Company officers. Located in Leadenhall Street in the City of London, the accumulated collection was of a disparate nature, including antiquities, raw products, natural history specimens and geological samples, as well as textiles, manuscripts and military loot. By 1817 the museum had become one of London's major attractions, its rising popularity concurrent with the expansion of the British Empire in India.[19] In 1858 the museum was put under the administration of the India Office, a department of the British government. Its contents celebrated the abundance and wealth of imperial possessions through crowded cabinets and dense wall displays. The museum also became a facility for the deployment of the photographic medium into a tool for capturing those 'possessions' that were beyond the physical boundaries of the museum.[20]

The East India Company initiated several photographic surveys of Indian architecture in the 1850s; this included Linnaeus Tripe's commission to document monuments in Southern India and Captain Thomas Biggs and Dr William Henry Pigou's commission to document the regions of Dharwar, Mysore and Bijapur.[21] The photographs were published in 1866 with text by James Fergusson, copies of which were acquired by institutions in India and Britain, including, as we have seen, the Art Library at SKM.[22] Assembling photographic records became an imperative in 1867, with the issuing of a directive by the Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Northcote, requesting all local governments in India to organise a system for photographing the ancient architectural monuments of their territories to facilitate their conservation and preservation. Two prints of each negative were sent to the India Museum in London.[23] Cycles of accumulation continued in the forthcoming decades, with further commissioned surveys such as Captain Lyon's appointment in 1865 to photograph South Indian architecture more thoroughly than the previous survey conducted by Linnaeus Tripe a decade earlier.

The India Museum, in which these photographs amassed, emerged as an enriched centre of knowledge. Ray Desmond's seminal account of the history of the India Museum dedicates an entire chapter to the centrality of the photograph to the institution. Under the directorship of John Forbes Watson, the museum set up a photographic department to receive, systematise, categorise, duplicate, publish and distribute

photographs to other institutions. Their publishing enterprises included James Fergusson's book *Tree and Serpent Worship*, which had two editions in 1868 and 1873 of 500 copies in total, each containing 53 pasted-in photographs, amounting to 26,500 prints. *The People of India*, an eight-volume set of books with photographs and text of the tribes and castes of India, had 200 copies produced between 1868 and 1875, containing 468 photographs per set, which amounted to 93,600 prints/ duplicates. Like SKM, the Indian Museum was photographically active. It is noted that Griggs, the Museum Photographer, produced 1,200 negatives and 70,000 prints in one year.[24]

Thus, from the 1860s both the India Museum and SKM were collecting photographs of India, often prints from the same negatives. These parallel centres of knowledge used the same images for the development of different knowledge strands. SKM cultivated a pedagogy for design education and a means of charting the progress of photography around the world. The India Museum was used for the official government purposes of documenting and preserving the monuments of their Indian Empire. The two strands were important nodes in the growing network of imperial knowledge mobilised by eminent figures, scholars, museum directors and curators. One of the primary means by which these strands were disseminated across the world was through the International Exhibitions.

The function of photographs: India at the International Exhibitions

I was able to establish how the photographs in both collections were deployed during a moment of epiphany when deciphering a register entry. As Ellis and colleagues have summarised, 'epiphanies stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity'.[25] The process of deciphering relied on my position within the institution, being part of the culture of the Museum, understanding its historical processes and developing an intuitive understanding of the collection and those who formed it.

In 1867 the Art Library made one of its most significant purchases: the entire first catalogue of Bourne and Shepherd photographs, consisting of 668 images bought for the sum of £203 12s. 9d. Of particular interest in the register entry was the associated note which stated that the collection remained unregistered until 188 of the images, which had been borrowed by Mr James Fergusson on the same

day that they had arrived in the Museum, 25 March 1867, had been returned in 1880.

Fergusson, a self-taught architectural historian, sought to establish a new discipline on Indian architecture and quickly recognised the value of the photographic medium for his work.[26] He advocated for the creation of a national collection of architectural art, to include plaster casts, models, drawings and, especially, photographs of India.[27] As this was a parallel intent to Henry Cole's own vision, Fergusson was invited to be an art referee for SKM in 1866, and most likely Fergusson initiated the purchase of the Bourne and Shepherd photographs. Cole asked Fergusson to curate a display of Indian architecture for inclusion in the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867.[28]

The exhibitions Fergusson curated were phenomenal exercises in the scale of their execution and in the degree of public exposure. The Paris Exhibition made Fergusson's systematisation of Indian architecture physically visible for the first time.[29] Located in the British Section, some 500 photographs were exhibited under the heading 'The History of Labour in India'. Fergusson's theory of architecture as a mirror of the history of the Indian people was conveyed through the categorisation of the photographs according to religion and race, starting with Hindu Architecture of North India, then Hindu Architecture of South India and Mohammedan Architecture.[30] The exhibition was followed in 1869 with the publication of a book specifically for the use of schools of art in the United Kingdom, which included 15 pasted-in photographs showing the variety and beauty of architectural styles to be found in India.[31] The two were credited with bringing the subject 'prominently forward'.[32] Fergusson had created a linear narrative through the photographs, a strand of knowledge that fed back to SKM, reinforcing it as the centre of the study of architecture.

Returning to the physical archive, examining the Bourne and Shepherd photographs in the red boxes, particularly those with white mounts and red-bordered labels, it was possible to match the scribbled pencil numbers on the reverse to the numbering system in the Paris Exhibition catalogue. Furthermore, re-examining all the red-bordered labelled photographs across the 7,000 prints uncovered at least 198 that had pencilled numbers that corresponded directly to the Paris catalogue. Thus, in my moment of epiphany, I understood that Fergusson had borrowed the 188 photographs from the Bourne and Shepherd acquisition for exhibiting in Paris. This led me to other connections: the 200 photographs displayed in the Oriental Courts at SKM in 1869, as noted by Fergusson, were selected from those exhibited in Paris, which

meant that the red-bordered labels could also be from their redisplay at SKM. When they were eventually returned to the Art Library in 1880, the registers recorded that 360 were returned; this was 102 more than originally borrowed and they must have been from Fergusson's own collection – they were accessioned into the registers as duplicates.[33]

Following my epiphanous moment, I re-examined the original body of photographs in the archive with their numerous labels, scribbled numbers and stamps. From cross-referencing several catalogues, it emerged that those with black-edged white labels correlated to the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873.[34] This time Fergusson curated the display on behalf of the India Museum and was able to incorporate a much larger group of photographs to fine-tune his categorisation. India Museum photographs were also included in the London International Exhibitions of 1871 and 1872; there are photographs in the archive that have discreet pencil notes with 'Exhibition 1871' inscribed on them, and the Vienna catalogue lists the fact that some were exhibited in 1872.[35] Photographs travelled from the London exhibition to the Vienna exhibition, as they carry all the markings of that journey. Inter-estingly, the reverse of some mounts have sketches of display layouts showing how groups of four or more photographs should be organised for display, which gives an insight into the curator's vision for the design of the exhibition.

Examining the photographic object through a detailed forensic investigation of its materiality has been essential to understanding the role of these photographs and their value within a flurry of frenzied activity, moving in, around and out of the museums or centres of knowledge, to and from national and international exhibitions, through a network of connected people. It also points to the vast range of photographs, to the educational perception of them and to the instru-mentalisation of India. Had the mounts been destroyed, our knowledge of the function of photographs as part of an ecosystem with values set within the context of nineteenth-century institutions, colonial power and pedagogy would be more conjecture than fact.

The function of photographs: the South Kensington project of reproductions

Photographs also had a key functional role within the Architectural Court at SKM itself. Plaster casts of the Indian buildings once housed there, and the site photographs displayed alongside them, highlight a

structure of dependencies between the two but also, as the narrative unfolds, illustrate how shifting attitudes not only erode those dependencies but nullify them altogether.[36]

Fergusson and Cole were united in their drive to include India in their educational vision for the study of architecture.[37] In 1867 Cole set into motion his plans to acquire plaster casts of the great architectural monuments from around the world and their photographs (see Chapter 12). His plans coincided with Sir Stafford Northcote's directive which, as noted above, requested regional governments in India to gather photographs of antiquities in their territories. Northcote's directive included a letter from Cole asking that additional information on the dates, construction, ornamentation and condition of ancient buildings be recorded.[38]

This critical directive therefore served the parallel needs of the India Office and SKM, but the objectives of the two institutions remained distinct. The two projects are often considered as separate endeavours, both from the perspective of scholars focusing on the SKM model of educating with reproductions and from the perspective of those focusing on the imperial implications of surveying and, in this case, gathering archaeological and historical knowledge. The elision of the projects, the fact that they were allied and mutually beneficial, was articulated by Henry Hardy Cole, who personally linked SKM with the India Office:

> the distinction between the seemingly allied interests, viz. 1stly, of the Indian Government; and 2ndly, of the SKM, should be perhaps be pointed out. India is not yet well provided with museums or with buildings affording accommodation for large works of fine art, and the special efforts of the Government have been directed to enquiries affecting history rather than those affecting art; the SKM on the other hand, in prosecuting its desire to obtain a series of illustrations of architectural monuments of all countries, seeks to procure records of the art of India.[39]

As Henry Cole's son, he was familiar with SKM objectives, and as Super-intendent of the Archaeological Survey of India for the North West Provinces, he sought to fulfil Northcote's request, starting with a survey of Kashmir and Agra. In 1869 he sent the Art Library 101 photographs of architecture of those regions, followed by a publication based on the photographs entitled *Illustrations of Ancient Buildings in Kashmir*.[40] Henry Hardy Cole noted that the illustrations were produced from the

Figure 8.6: Eastern Cast Court of the South Kensington Museum, photographed in 1874, albumen print. Showing the close proximity of the photographs to the plaster casts. Photograph collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, accession no. 602342. © Museum of Asian Art, Staatliche Museen.

original negatives held in the Photographic Department of the India Museum by the autotype process and were therefore permanent.[41] A greater value was being placed on the autotype process, for the permanency it offered to the image, than on other forms of photographic printing.

Figure 8.7: Upper galleries of the Indian Section at the South Kensington Museum, 1909. Showing the placement of the Indian casts and related photographs within the galleries of the Indian Section after their removal from the cast courts . Print from Photographic Studio neg. 33174.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Henry Hardy Cole coordinated the phenomenal task of making casts in India and sent back to London casts of the eastern gateway of the Sanchi Stupa, Akbar's throne in Fatehpur Sikri and the ornate pillars of the Kutb Minar.[42] Cole instructed that photographs be taken that were an accurate representation of the architectural details rather

than picturesque views.[43] The casts were installed in the SKM Architectural Court in 1872 along with groups of photographs (figure 8.6). Fergusson and Cole's educational vision is captured in a photograph where we see the relationship between the plaster casts and the photographs placed in close proximity to each other. The photographs, two or three to a mount, are framed and installed in a wooden showcase simulating the pages of a book. This device enabled the visitor to turn the frames and see multiple images, placing the casts within the landscape from which they came.

The close proximity of the Indian casts and photographs conveyed a symbiotic relationship which was removed from the SKM and transferred in 1880 to the relocated India Museum in a building along the Exhibition Road close to SKM (figure 8.7).[44] It was renamed the Indian Section of SKM, and photographs of the upper galleries taken in 1909 show a reconstruction of that relationship. The shifting value of photographs and the photographic medium in relation to casts is demonstrated through the destruction of the casts in the period between 1949 and 1955. Casts, once seen as worthy educational tools, were considered to be space consuming and of very limited educational interest, as the 'originals in India had been fully photographed and published'.[45] Photographs used for context therefore replaced the object that they gave context to. This has a synergy with James Clifford's argument that objects can become secondary to photographs if the object is not explicable without the photograph.[46]

The 'residue' collection

When the India Office transferred the India Museum collections to SKM in 1880, the contents of the library, the books, manuscripts and photographs, stayed with the India Office and later became part of the British Library. However, the evidence from our archive suggests that some photographs made the journey to South Kensington instead, probably as an oversight rather than a planned transfer. They are the 'residue' of the main collections, unrecorded and forgotten. This would account for them having an India Museum stamp but no accession numbers and their treatment more as ephemeral documentation than Museum objects.

The Indian Section continued to acquire photographs after 1880, thereby embedding two streams of Indian image collection within SKM. In 1910, re-establishing a lost connection between the old India

Museum and Library, some 2,300 photographs were purchased by the Art Library from the Archaeological Survey of India through the India Office. The India Office questioned the need for this duplication, as prints already existed with them and could be referred to easily. SKM's curt response stated that:

> in order to render the Indian Collections (which form part of the museum) as useful as possible to students, it is considered to be very desirable that the library of this institution should be equipped as fully as possible with such material as may be necessary for the study of architecture and arts of India.[47]

In 1914, 125 photographs from the sale of Fergusson's effects[48] were gifted to the Museum and sent to the Indian Section, where they might be deployed 'in forming an Indian architectural index',[49] and any duplicates sent to the Art Library were forwarded for inclusion in this 'index'.[50] However, there is no evidence, no formal documentation, to suggest that this index was anything more than the group of blue boxes into which photographs were amassed with little attention to systematic organisation.

Another substantial transfer led to an expansion of this informal index. In 1977 the Office of Arts and Libraries assigned responsibility for the National Collection of the Art of Photography to the V&A. Representative samples of most Indian acquisitions were kept in the Photography Section, and the 'residue' – that is, any that were surplus to requirements either as duplicates or not considered to be worthy examples of the 'art of photography' – were transferred to the Indian Section, thereby imposing a value system which elevated some photographs and marginalised others. Thus, 7,000 prints entered the informal architectural index. Acquisitions such as the Bourne and Shepherd catalogue of 688 photographs were split between the Photography Section and the Indian Section. There are no official papers to acknowledge this sizeable transfer; occasionally there is an annotation alongside the register entry, but not always. On arrival in the Indian Section, they were stored alongside the other photographs, and although they had acquisition numbers, they were treated not like Museum objects, but like supporting archival material. It is from this series of transfers spanning almost a hundred years, and the histories of two eminent nineteenth-century institutions, that this non-collection has accumulated in the Indian Study Room.

Where to with this non-collection?

Within this narrative, photographs (multiple originals) sit in multiple centres of knowledge; they have been systematised and categorised and shaped into knowledge strands that ebb and flow through gallery displays and International Exhibitions and are reproduced and distributed in abundance through publications. This is illustrative of the 'complex network of multiplicities … with frequent branches, diverging and converging points of visual and material connection' of which Edwards and Morton speak.[51] The work they do, how they are employed, how they perform in these spaces, is underpinned by the values, hierarchies and knowledge systems of the institutions in which they are housed, which themselves change over time. The complexity is overwhelming, but identifying the connecting paths of photographs, institutions and people is a crucial step in enabling a more comprehensive writing of the intertwined histories of this archive and the value systems that prevail. The unravelling of these histories is made possible by being embedded within the culture of the Museum, by 'living' with the photographs.

The shifting value of photographs is ever present in this narrative. Values change over time; they are subject to curatorial preferences as well as public interest, and they reflect the waxing and waning of social and political factors. For instance, interest in India began to decrease from the 1900s as the political and public perception of the Empire shifted from one of wealthy possession to financial burden. Consequently, in 1955 the India Museum building was repurposed, the greater proportion of the Indian collections was moved into storage and a considerably reduced collection of the courtly arts of India was put on display within the V&A. The loss of space and shift in curatorial perspective led to the deaccessioning of groups of photographs in the 1960s. The curatorial justification argued that, as objects with accession numbers, these photographs needed to be accounted for in the quinquennial audits. Implied is that, as photographs, they were not worthy of the attention.[52] Their accession numbers were crossed out with a red line and the objects now sit numberless in the archive.[53]

This devaluation of the photographs, set more broadly within the devaluation of the India Museum Collections, put into motion a way of thinking that has persisted. It has embedded a perception of them as being of lesser interest and value than was attributed to them in the past. With photographs, the perception that they are not

worthy of attention as objects within the Indian Section is illustrated in the response to the transfer of the 7,000 prints from the Photography Section in 1977. Since that time, despite the fact they have accession numbers, the majority of them still await inputting into the Museum's computer database. Tiny pockets of the collection have enjoyed attention, they have been catalogued, digitised, published and exhibited, but the majority exist physically, and in the memory of this curator.[54] Despite multiple efforts to find funding, time and staff, there are always other Museum priorities, and as my own curatorial interests have widened to cover other areas of the South Asian Collections, the photographs remain under-utilised.[55]

This transfer of photographs highlighted the problem of categorisation, location and cultural knowledge. Moving 7,000 prints out of the 'National Collection of the Art of Photography' immediately elevated some and diminished others. The aesthetic evaluation seems arbitrary in many cases, particularly when assessing, for instance, the photographs of Linnaeus Tripe or Samuel Bourne, both of whom have been celebrated in recent times for their contribution to the art of photography, but whose prints were part of the transfer.[56] Relocating also places photographs into a different value system: they are catalogued and appreciated differently. My own deep involvement with the history of this collection has impacted my curatorial practice, as it has led to my embracing a value system that acknowledges the historical, social, economic and cultural importance of the photographic object alongside the aesthetics of the image.

The absence of cultural knowledge may not have been problematic in 1977 when creating those value distinctions between 'art' and 'the other', but were that process to take place today, in the shifting political context of the twenty-first century, cultural knowledge would be essential to the assessment. Cultural knowledge is what gives these images meaning and places them in the context of their production and consumption.

Histories matter now because they help us to avoid and address the problems of the past. A step towards moving the archive out of its non-collection status comes with extracting its histories. Cataloguing and digitising offer another step. They are not neutral tasks (see Chapter 17), but the more we know of their pitfalls, the better we can mitigate them.[57] For instance, when a digital image is taken, ensuring that the mount of a photograph and the back is included, and that it is of a sufficiently high resolution, might give researchers an experience similar to 'living' with the collection, being able to turn the object over

and seeing all the details. Cataloguing, the use of language, how we categorise, how we digitise, all have a role in removing value distinctions and shifting perceptions, but vital to that, in the case of this narrative, is knowledge of cultural, colonial and photographic history.

Notes

1   This archive consists of several smaller archives and groups of photographs that have been amalgamated into one. This chapter will be focusing on just two groups within the whole.
2   Edwards and Morton 2015, 9.
3   Edwards and Morton 2015, 10, note that the existence of multiple originals means that most photographs do not enjoy the attention given to 'singular objects' and makes the tracing of their social biography far more complex because the trajectory of their travel is multi-branched and potentially on a vast scale.
4   Edwards and Hart 2004.
5   Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011. When researchers do *auto-ethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, auto-ethnographers use their methodological tools and research literature not only to analyse experience, but also to consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders.
6   Latour developed this concept in his *Science in Action* (1987); I have used Jöns's 2011 analysis of Latour's concept for this chapter.
7   Pioneers in the field include Desmond (1982b), Falconer (1990), Dewan (1992), Edwards (1992), Sampson (1992).
8   See Solomon-Godeau 1991, 4–27.
9   See Dewan 1992.
10 The Prints, Drawings, Paintings and Photographs Department holds the registers that documented the acquisition of photographs in the Art Library. The Archives of Art and Design hold the receiving books for objects submitted for acquisition. They are entitled *A Diary of Books, Prints, &c. Inspected, Purchased for, or Presented to the Art Library*, the first of which was begun on 28 January 1853.
11 McCosh 1856.
12 See nominal files for Edith S. Storrs and Lady Ida Low, V&A Registry.
13 See F. Myrone, 'Looking at topographical images' for the use of the term 'topographical' in relation to historic collections: https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/looking-at-topographical-images [accessed 27.5.2022].
14 For an overview of the Indian Court at the Great Exhibition, see Kriegel 2001.
15 Hope 1866; Taylor et al. 1866a.
16 H. Hering, *Photographic Views and Panoramas*, London, n.d. This is a catalogue of Beato's photographs offered for sale.
17 Haworth-Booth 1997, 45.
18 Forbes Watson et al. 1868.
19 For a history of the India Museum, see Desmond 1982a.
20 Desmond 1982a. Chapter 9 is on the India Museum's use of photographs.
21 See Dewan 1992.
22 See Taylor et al. 1866a and 1866b.
23 Desmond 1982a, 113.
24 Desmond 1982a, 111–28.
25 Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011.
26 See Guha-Thakurta 2003.
27 Fergusson 1869, 22.

28 Fergusson 1868, 2.
29 List of the photographs displayed in Catalogue of the British Section Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867 (1868, 27).
30 For an analysis of Fergusson's architectural theories, see Guha-Thakurta 2004, 1–42.
31 Fergusson 1869.
32 Cole 1882, ixxiv. See point 2 and related note in Appendix L.
33 Fergusson 1869, vi.
34 Forbes Watson 1873.
35 The catalogue of the Indian Department of the London International Exhibition 1871 is a much more reduced listing than the catalogues for Paris 1867 and Vienna 1873, and it does not include the photographs I found with the handwritten notes. I believe that the India Museum's general lack of organisation meant that they were excluded from the catalogue.
36 For an account of the Indian plaster casts on display, see Singh 2019.
37 Fergusson 1869, and for Cole's advocacy of producing casts of Indian monuments, see Bryant 2017, 22.
38 H. H. Cole: see point 36 (Cole 1882, 7).
39 Cole 1872, 2.
40 Cole 1869.
41 Cole 1882, Appendix F, xiii, point 4.
42 Cole 1882, Appendix F. For an analysis of the making of the cast, see Singh 2019.
43 Cole 1872, 5.
44 For a history of the India Section, see Bryant 2017.
45 Board of Survey file 49/385 (SF710) part 6, V&A Registry. Memo from John Irwin regarding the cast of the central pillar in the Diwan I Khas at Fatehpur Sikri (Akbar's Throne): 'The cast is obstructing the display of textiles. The cast was made in 1872, before good photographs of the throne were readily available; but it has since been published innumerable times, and I don't think the cast is worth the considerable amount of gallery space it occupies. I would therefore like permission to have it dismantled.'
46 Clifford 1997, 160, quoted in Edwards and Lien 2014, 8.
47 Nominal file: Indian Archaeological Survey, V&A Registry.
48 Fergusson 1876, ix. He had 3,000 photographs in his own collection: 'I possess … more than 3000 photographs of Indian buildings, with which constant use had made me as familiar as with any other object that is perpetually before my eyes.'
49 Registered file 14/2063M, V&A Registry.
50 Nominal files for Edith S. Storrs and F. Coston Taylor, Esq., V&A Registry.
51 Edwards and Morton 2015, 10.
52 Registered file 67/276, V&A Registry.
53 The impact of disposal and deaccessioning practices is analysed in Knowles 2014.
54 For instance, Patel 1999; 2008.
55 The Indian Section was renamed the Indian Department in 1979 and became part of the Asian Department in 2001.
56 For instance, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and V&A jointly curated the touring exhibition *Linnaeus Tripe: Photographer of India and Burma, 1852–1860* in 2014–15.
57 Edwards 2017.

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9

The digitised Guard Books:
another history

Steve Woodhouse

The Guard Books collectively constitute a central and fundamental node in the photographic ecosystem of the Museum. Grounded in the daily procedures of the Museum, they both gather and disseminate the multiple layers of its values, histories and practices. It was from photographs represented in the Guard Books that collections records and knowledge, postcards, departmental files and, ultimately, the Museum's history emerged. Their digitisation and collation by Steve Woodhouse has been an essential layer in the analysis that has shaped this book, and one in which the practicalities and labour of museum work are clearly visible.

Between 1998 and 2021, Steve Woodhouse was Picture Library Administrator, then Digital Asset Resource System Administrator and then Digital Asset Manager of the Museum's Collections Management and Photography Departments. Prior to this, from 1983 to 1994, he had been a photographer and photographic technician within the Photography Department.

The Guard Books record the photography taken by the Museum of its collections, building and events between approximately 1856 and 1997 (see Chapter 1). They number 859 volumes and hold approximately 270,000 albumen, platinotype and silver gelatine photographs. Most of the earliest examples are albumen prints from hand-developed glass negatives in various sizes from 24 x 24 inches to a quarter plate. Later negatives from the mid-1950s became film based, from 10 x 8 inches down to 35 mm roll film, though the last glass negative, a quarter plate, was used in 1961.

As part of a project to address and digitise these Guard Books, I processed the digital images of each page created by Ken Jackson (see

Chapter 6) and Clare Johnson in the Photographic Studio. I uploaded and added metadata in order to bring them within the Museum's collections management systems. This project aims to digitise each of the Guard Books, including the front and back covers and all of the pages. They are being scanned at a high resolution of 248 Mb per page. This is required as most pages have two or three images. Each of these can be cropped for any uses at approximately 124 Mb per image if a focus on a single image is necessary, or the whole-page image can be used to get the sense of the whole book as an object. This also enables us to preserve these fragile resources in a digital format and reduce the need for manual handling of the original Guard Books. Where, as is largely the case, the image is of an object in the Museum collection, each image can then be linked to the relevant collections management system record for the object depicted, thus enhancing the history of that object and showing how it has looked and been photographed over time. This is also an especially important reference for those items in the collection that only have a Guard Book image and have not been digitised since. Each Guard Book is also now part of the Museum Archive with a general reference no. of MA/32, with each Guard Book having individual archive nos from MA/32/1 to MA/32/859.

The word 'Guard' is important here. The purpose of Guard Books was to keep protected, or safe, things that are precious or important, or of sentimental value, or all of these and more. In the world of bookbinding and conservation of books, the definition of a Guard Book is:

> A book containing compensation guards equal to the anticipated thickness of the additional matter to be added at a later time. The guards are sewn with the book and are intended to prevent gaping of the boards or damage to the spine when the book is filled with photographs, clippings, etc.[1]

They were a common part of nineteenth-century life and put to a wide variety of uses, and indeed Guard Books can still be purchased at specialist suppliers today.

The Guard Books of 1965 were the starting point of the digitisation, which worked backwards; the project has, at the time of writing, reached 1918. This reverse working order was adopted because some of the earlier volumes are so fragile that they require conservation before they can be photographed. The sequence of Guard Books from 1918 to 1965 is in good condition, so these have now all been digitised.

Importantly, this process of digitisation has shone a light on histories of the Museum which had disappeared from sight – not only the histories of objects in the collections and the styles and practices of photography applied to them (see Chapters 6 and 15) but also those of the institution itself, its staff and their work. For instance, at the beginning of the Second World War, we find conservation photography beginning to be used extensively: for example, detailed photographs of the condition of the Raphael Cartoons were taken as they were removed to safety, away from the threat of bombing in January 1941.

The Guard Book archive (MA/32), together with the Museum Archive (MA/22), is a valuable photographic record and a tool for research into the Museum's building and environments, with views of gallery spaces, exhibitions and activities. These are important because they show how visitors to the Museum actually saw it and its objects. The set of scanned Guard Books that cover the years 1928 to 1950 shows examples of areas of the Museum, styles of display and how some activities changed during this period; for instance, an exhibition of posters in the Museum's North Court in 1931 shows the very simple and straightforward display techniques employed (figure 9.1).

Another example is in the way that the Museum is constantly in the process of looking at and changing its visual brand and identity. It has also done so in the past – for instance, in changes in lettering styles for signage and other Museum branding. The Guard Books record this, and show 'work in progress' as typefaces were considered. The example of lettering, photographed in December 1932, was made for a revised edition of the Museum's Picture Book No. 32, *Roman Alphabets*, published in 1933. Though these typefaces were originally made to improve graphic design more generally, in 1950 these designs for lettering for use in the Museum were released not only for picture books, but also for room signage. The photographs show the typeface to be very close in style to panels of lettering by Eric Gill (whose work was included in *Roman Alphabets*), now back on display in the Sculpture Gallery. These latter have a revealing history of usage and value. They were once part of the V&A collection (A.25-1931, A.26-1931), returned to the Tate Gallery in 1986 but then loaned back to the Museum in 2006 (figure 9.2).[2]

The photographs also reveal everyday objects of the Museum such as display cases and panels, long lost to the galleries. Though the displays themselves varied, the cases were standard 'equipment', in use for many years. For instance, in the 1947 exhibition *Nicholas Hilliard & the Elizabethans* standard cases were used extensively, while the

Figure 9.1: *The British & Foreign Posters Exhibition*, North Court, July 1931. Guard Book MA/32/220, neg. no. 66291. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

exhibition display of *English Pottery Old & New*, held in August 1935 in the North Court, uses both the cases and open display not dissimilar to a shop display; in 1949, a new set of display cases was introduced, which held both two- and three-sided versions (figure 9.3). Standard display cabinets were also adopted by the Circulation Department of
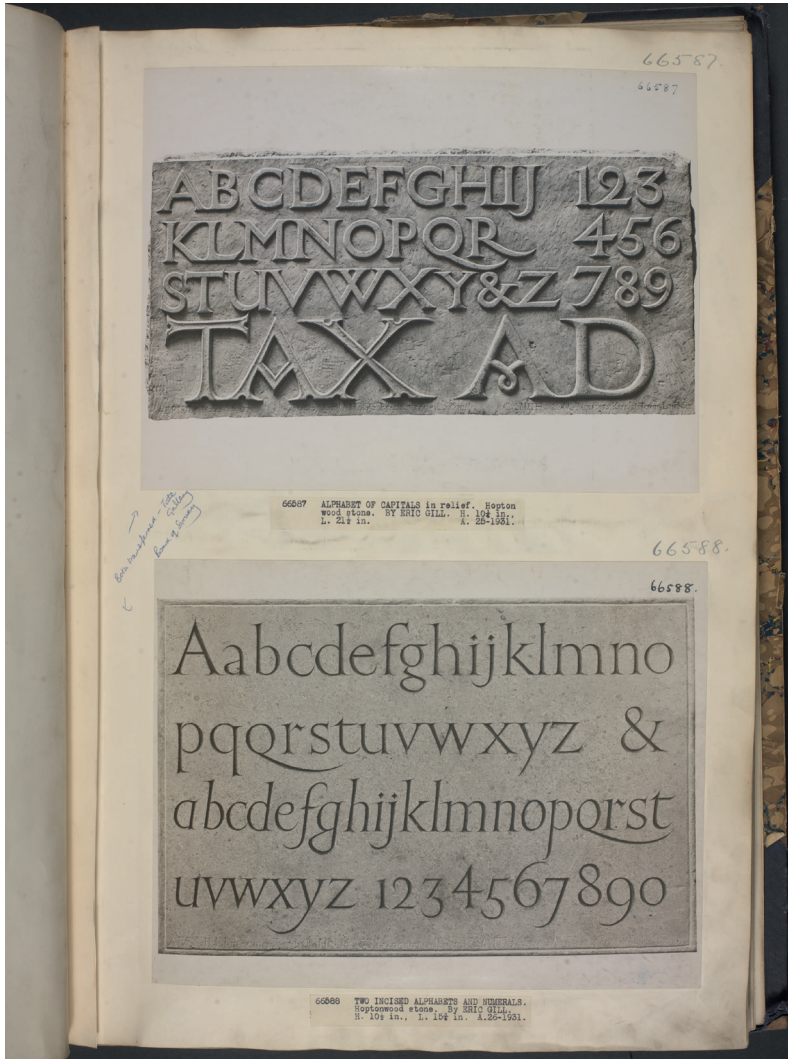
Figure 9.2: Alphabet of Capitals; Hoptonwood Stone, by Eric Gill, 1931. Guard Book MA/32/221, neg. nos 66587–8. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

1940, which were still in use into the late 1990s and beyond. Importantly, only in the Guard Books do we find revealing traces of museum design as it was seen and experienced by the public.

The Guard Books also record displays and equipment off site, such as the Circulation Department's 'education and activity' displays

Figure 9.3: V&A Exhibition: *English Pottery Old & New*, The Council of Art & Industry, 1935; North Court. Guard Book MA/32/241, neg. nos 73745–6. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

at Leicester Square Station in 1939 (figure 9.4) and, maybe more poignantly, Harrods shop window displays, photographed in August 1939, before the lights went out for the years of the Second World War (figure 9.5).
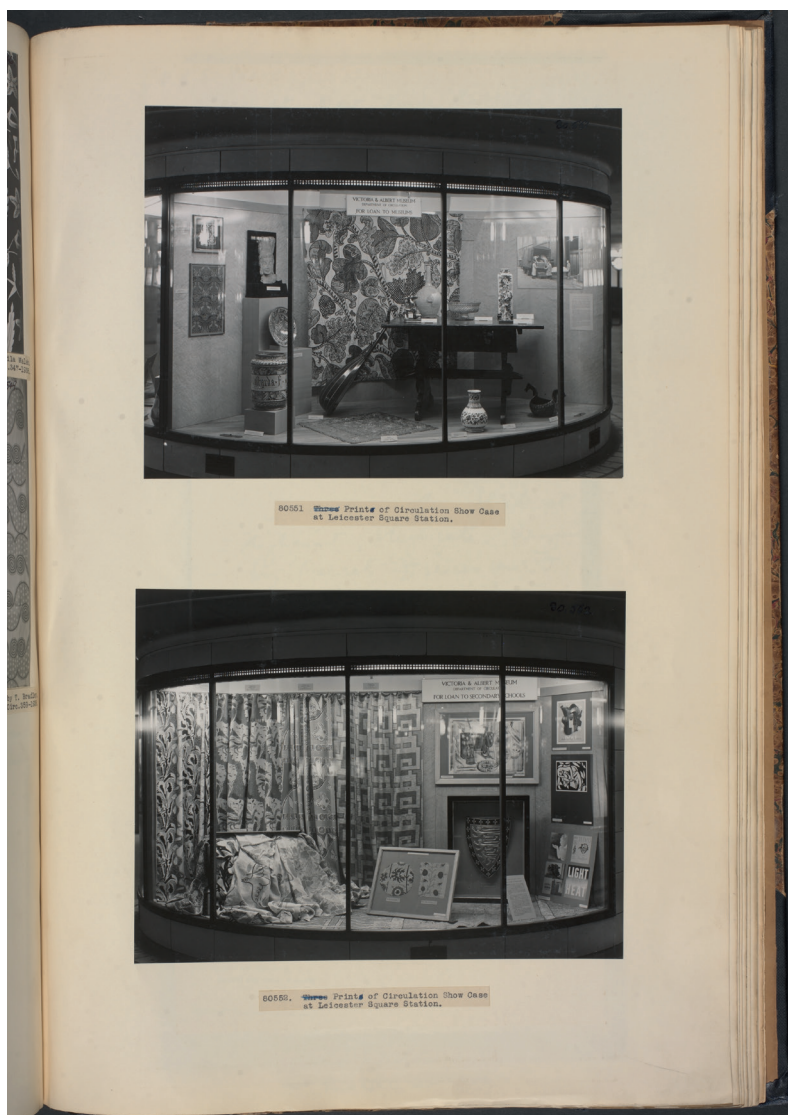
Figure 9.4: Circulation Department displays for loans to museums and secondary schools. Guard Book MA/32/258, neg. nos 80551–2. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The Guard Books are also often the only way through which to excavate the everyday practices of the Museum and its staff, especially technical staff and their skills. These range from the photograph of the Venetian mirror (see Chapter 12), in which photographer Charles Thurston
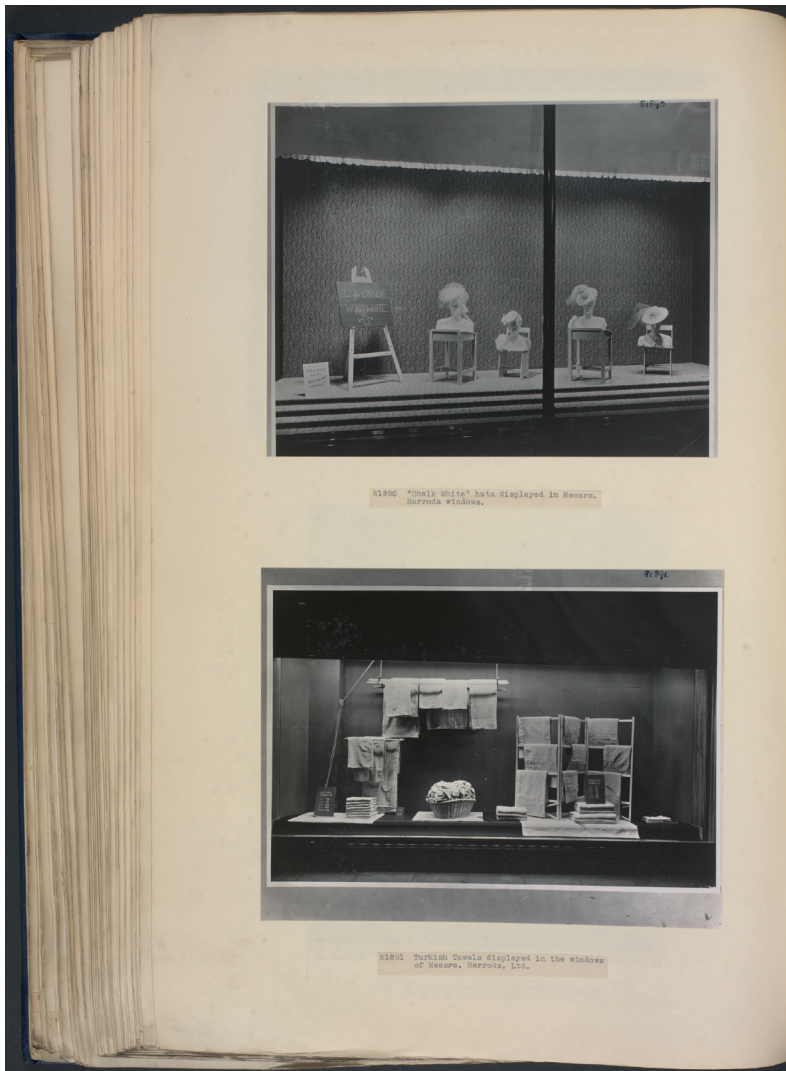
Figure 9.5: Shop window displays of Chalk White Hats and Turkish Towels, Harrods, London, 1939. Guard Book MA/32/260, neg. nos 81890–1. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Thompson records himself. This is probably the most famous photograph in the Guard Books, prints of which have entered Photographs Department Collections as objects in their own right. The original is a Guard Book print – negative no. 55 – while print no. 61, with the camera on its own, also entered the Photography Collection (figure 9.6).
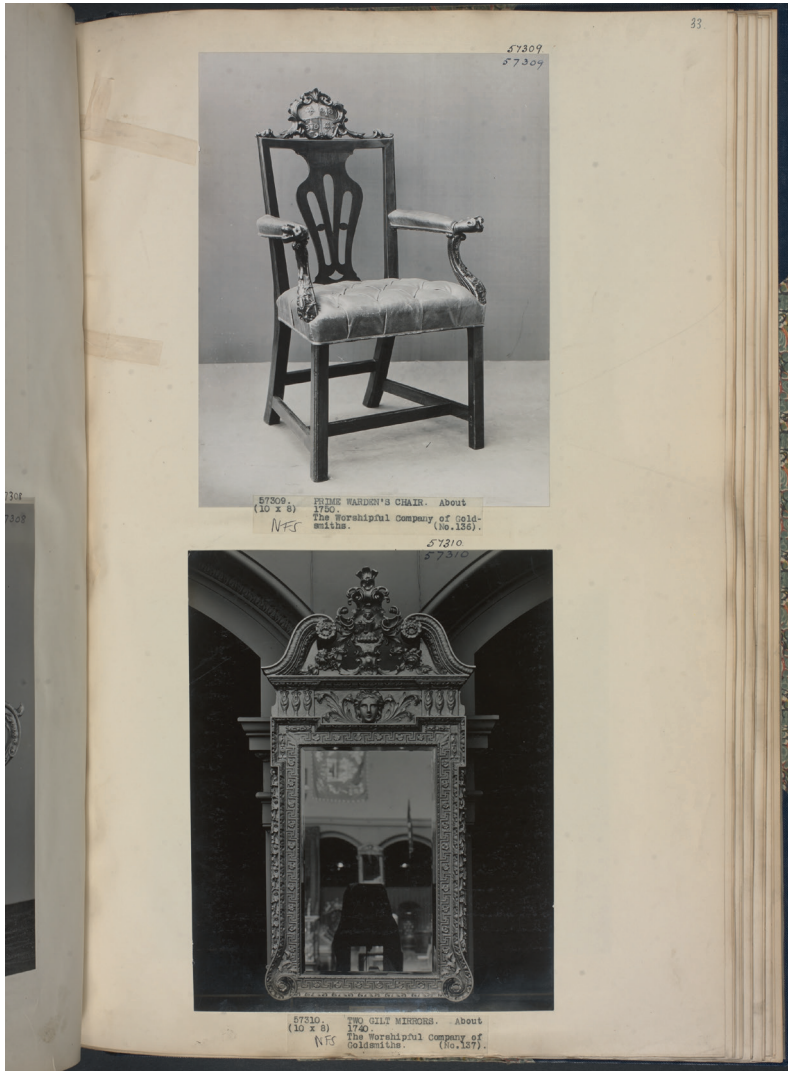
Figure 9.6: Mirror – gilt frame by Chippendale, English, c. 1760. Owned by the Worshipful Company of Carpenters, 1926. Guard Book MA/32/193, neg. nos 57392–3. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Both intentionally and unintentionally, the Guard Books repeatedly reveal the presence of the photographers, their cameras and working environment, reflected in mirrors, silver spoons and glassware.

Consequently, the history of the Museum is peopled through the Guard Books, and this has been one of the most revelatory aspects
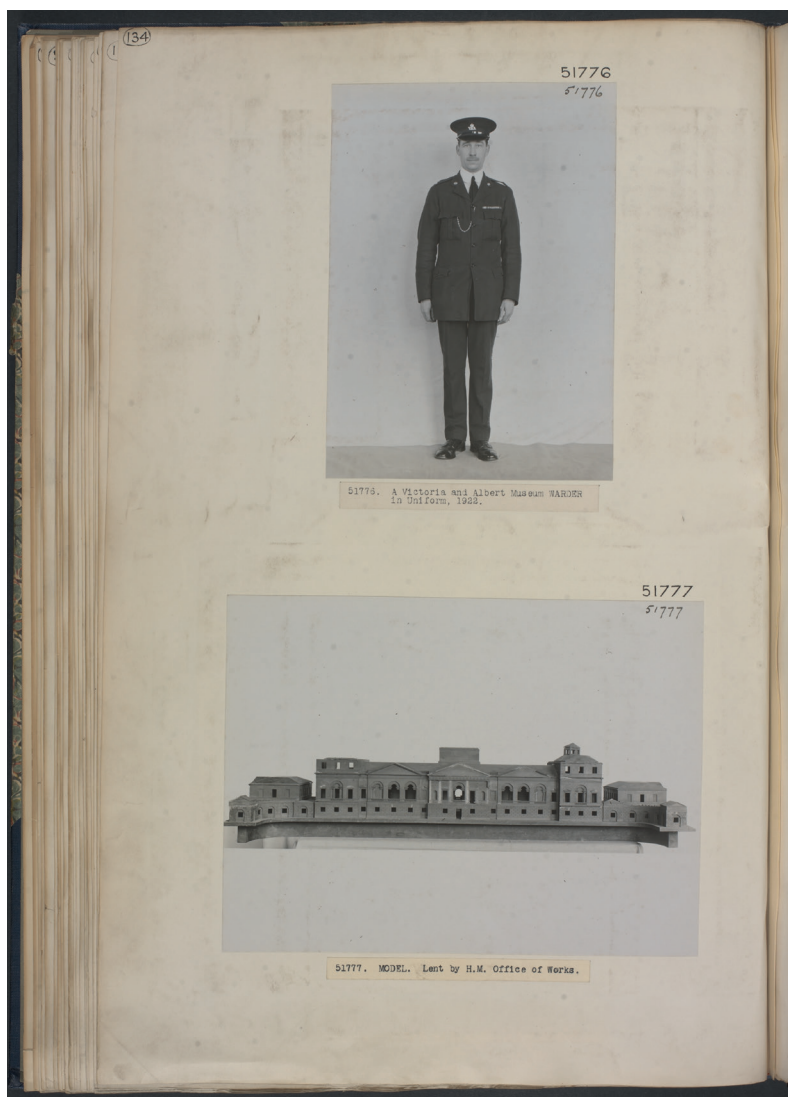
Figure 9.7: Warder in the new uniform, 1922. Guard Book MA/32/162, neg. nos 51776–7. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

of the digitisation project. This applies to all aspects and levels of the Museum's activities, staff and visitors. The Guard Books reveal officials inspecting new works and judging competitions, visitors attending lectures and, in particular, the Museum's close connection with the Royal College of Art's students, who actively engaged with

the collections. Likewise, the unseen support staff of the Museum – technicians working in the galleries, the women of the typing pool, the wardens in new uniforms and the wartime efforts of all to safeguard the collections – emerge from the Guard Books (figure 9.7).

The Guard Books can be seen as records of objects and examples of what is now recognised as fine early photography, which they are. But the digitisation project and its processing as contemporary information has revealed so much more for future scholars to contemplate, including, most importantly, the internal social history of the Museum.

Notes

1   Etherington and Roberts 1982.
2   LOAN:TATE.157-2006, LOAN.159-2006.

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Part IV
Reworkings

10
Condition report: drawing things together

Simon Fleury

It is only the most noteworthy injuries that could be registered, and that extensive injuries of minute nature – such as abrasions of their surface or scaling of tints – could hardly be included, although using the photographs as the basis of the registry has been a great aid.[1]

Figure 10.1: Richard Redgrave, condition report, 1864, of the Raphael Cartoon. Albumen print with annotations on card (no. 76601).
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In 1864, Richard Redgrave, the Inspector General for Art and the first Curator of the South Kensington Museum (SKM), took up a stylus, over-writing a host of concerns for the condition of a series of artworks in his care (figure 10.1).[2] Redgrave was tasked with assessing the condition of the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons at the time of their move from their home at Hampton Court Palace to SKM. His inscriptions, indelibly inked on the photograph's albumen surface, mark in meticulous detail the object under study. Many of his pragmatic and empirical concerns for these large, fragile works of art are familiar: where were their weaknesses and fragilities, how might they be safely transported … should they be repaired … what conditions best suited their long-term care, and how to document their condition? In response to this last question, Redgrave creates a novel form of material analysis: one of the first photo-based condition reports. These reports, a curious amalgam of photographic image and over-written text, along with a series of close-up photo-graphs of the Cartoons, represent one of the earliest and most ambitious uses of photographs to document the condition of works of art in a museum. Condition reports – photographs with over-written notes – are an everyday feature of conservation practice: a fortuitous invention, as I will show, coming as it did at the advent of the new institution, with the promise of alternative museum futures.

Redgrave's reports exposed strange, intimate secrets behind the creation of some of the greatest artworks within the Museum, but did so by interpreting these exposures through a utilitarian approach to conservation, information and the indexical properties of photography. However bold, his overarching utilitarian approach to objectivity and data gathering continues to stubbornly inform conservation and the associated modes of photo-documentation. However, my account emerges from two earlier encounters: one with Redgrave's curious image-objects, and the other with the latest, somewhat feral, iteration of the condition report. Time and things are both fugitive, with the tendency to run away, here in the Museum. I will begin with the former. As I've learnt as a conservator, such tangled stories often begin with encounters: a question stirring, something untoward – out of the ordinary – happening. I am drawn to respond to such encounters in kind and they have formed the basis of my art/design research entitled *Condition Report: feral information* (figure 10.2). Museums are held together by stories, from the formal structuring narratives to the informal versions, lively, 'just so' and everyday.[3]
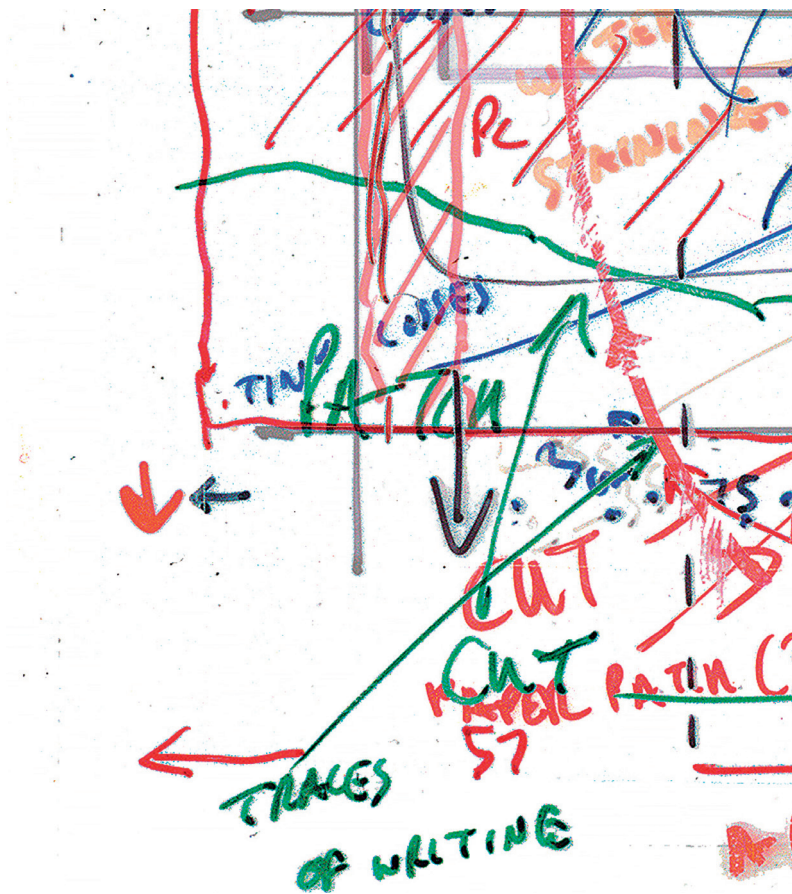
Figure 10.2: *Condition report: feral information,* design for a conceptual museum map, composed of 45 tiled A3 prints on Japanese paper. © Simon Fleury.

Encountering the general condition statement

The photograph, mounted on a secondary paper support, is stable, in fair condition. The surface shows signs of overall dirt (minor). The many widespread inked inscriptions (image and border area) appear stable. The thin albumen print is well adhered to the secondary support (heavy paper), with no signs of lifting or deformation. The edges of the support paper have numerous small tears and folds. Overall, the paper support is marked/grubby, and there are several areas of loss (with evidence of previous repair), most likely the result of handling. The

object requires minor treatment and surface cleaning – unsurprising, given what's known of its past utilitarian life.[4]

Aside from concerns with its condition, the conservator is intrigued that this once functional object is soon for exhibition, destined for the V&A's 'art of photography' gallery. The object in question – an early condition report of one of the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons – had obviously not come into the Museum through the traditional curatorial pathways, such as acquisition, commission, bequest or donation. Rather, generated in-house, it appears to have emerged, somehow transformed by the Museum's internal systems. Conservators, attentively attuned to the objects in their care, develop an intimate knowledge of their shifting material condition. However, this encounter suggests that materials are not alone in being in a state of flux in the Museum. The conservator wonders what is going on. How is it that they are now assessing and treating an object that was originally made to document the condition of another museum object, that this once instrumental photo-based report has somehow returned, reconfigured into a museum object?

The morning's work, of assessment, treatment of Redgrave's report and production of the associated documentation, as well as numerous 'before and after' images of the minor repairs and inter-ventions, including the high-resolution images of the report for the Museum's digital image database (VADAR), was now entangled not only with Redgrave's report but also with the original objects of capture: the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons.[5]

The museum//photograph

The museum from which and of which I speak has a long and emmeshed relation with the photograph (see Chapter 1). As an artist/researcher, while working as a conservator responsible for the care of the V&A's photographic holdings, I became fascinated by the historic relations of co-presence and co-dependence of these two modern phenomena, particularly photography's troubled relation to the indexical as it manifests in conservation documentation, and the slippery and complex relations between words and things.

The Museum's founding milieu installed the photograph in the institution, collected, displayed, archived and put to work, never to leave. Woven into the fabric of the institution, the Museum is saturated in the photographic. With the two so inextricably bound, is it possible to imagine a museum without the photograph, or vice versa?

Experiencing these intimate relations from the inside, so to speak, it is as if this mutual dependence has created a dynamic and indigenous photo-atmospherics (museum//photograph). Installed along parallel lines by the Museum's founding milieu, on the one hand, photographs were acquired as aesthetic/historical artefacts, while on the other, in all its 'just-thereness', the photograph was put to work – prized for its descriptive properties – as a technical means to utilitarian ends. In the conservator's encounter, we can see this bifurcation still at work: Redgrave's photo-based report – the focus of concern for the conservator as the museum object – is attentive centre for a host of lens-based media, from the conservator's handheld camera phone to the high-resolution images produced by the latest scanning apparatus of the V&A's in-house studio. As it was for Redgrave and the Museum's founding milieu, the empirical and epistemic value of the photographic image remains an essential mode of documentation, material analysis and wider museum-based practice, especially in conservation.

Returning to the conservator's encounter with Redgrave's report, all is not what it seems. Something untoward is happening: value boundaries are being crossed, and the status of objects disrupted. It is as if, through a pragmatic grasping for evidence of the material condition of the objects in his care, Redgrave was loosening the categorial divisions existing between an artwork and its associated documentation. Is it possible, as theorist Ariella Azoulay notes, that photography has an 'incomplete and unruly temporality that resists the past-present-future divide'?[6] My thesis is that unwittingly putting the photograph to work creates a circular and relational economy. The recursive effects of this produce new museum objects and potentially disrupt the order of things. This counters the utilitarian assumptions that continue to determine the role of these practices of knowledge production in the museum setting. Instead, objects and things are on the move.

Default modern settings

This argument is framed by the 150th anniversary of the 1867 Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of All Countries, initiated by SKM's first Director, Henry Cole, and its recent redraft, known as the ReACH 2017 Declaration (see also Chapter 12).[7] The latest iteration, shared among a range of global museums and cultural institutions and outlined in the accompanying publication, *Copy Culture: Sharing in the age of digital reproduction*, demonstrates

that little has changed in 150 years.[8] The either/or categories remain intact: objects are classified as either 'works' or 'records'.[9] The universal narrative still subdues temporal difference and tethers technical practice to an unspoken utilitarian and essentialist conception: the same default modern settings put in motion by the museum's founding milieu (model/ copy, art/information, etc., *ad infinitum*). The default modern provides here a working definition for a way of thinking about and ordering things, and a modern sensibility that demands certainty of order. This either/or gesture, as an apparatus, conditions what constitutes a subject of knowledge in the museum setting, or, to put it more simply, demarcates what can be seen and said about things.[10] For the philosopher Melanie Sehgal, the 'modern aesthetic' gesture, division and separation, acts as 'the common drive towards categorisation, demarcating a particular realm that is aesthetic, creating or confirming separations that are easily recognisable as specifically modern divisions – fact and fiction, primary and secondary qualities, subjective and objective'.

For all its 'revolutionary' claims, the ReACH manifesto fails to recognise the radical and transformative possibilities of these image-based modes of knowledge production and, by association, the conservation-based practices of material analysis that in part constitute the duty of care to the museum object. Thus, by default, this stubborn means/ends conception is reinstalled in the Museum, with only a scant acknowledgement of the complexities of the situation. This oversight is unsurprising. The Museum's value systems are geared towards specta-torship, the exhibition and display of objects and artworks: a top-down and hierarchical model. However, what is pressing is a re-evaluation of how we understand and value the things we use in museums and archives at a time of considerable existential 'crisis' for museums as they reel from the impact of late capitalism and the colonial legacy.[11] Such a missed opportunity suggests that 'museum thinking' has come little closer to realising the transformative possibilities inhabiting these techniques and practices of knowledge production. This omission matters: the current default modern settings are long-overdue mainte-nance, revision and care.[12] I argue, therefore, for the pressing need to 'ecologise' these practices and give them slow attention.

As an artist/researcher, I have been able to test this experience. Over the last three years, my membership and contribution to the New Alphabet School at HKW Berlin has informed how I think/make and respond with care to my place of work, practice as a conservator and study: the Museum. The school, premised on (un)learning, sets out to resituate knowledge practices:

Assuming that knowledge is not universal, but always located, or bound to a specific context, one's own position or place, the school aims to explore critical and affirmative forms of knowledge production in order to create solidarity between different approaches in theory and practice … to rethink criticism as a practice of shared responsibility and care.[13]

As Bruno Latour argues, the dichotomies associated with the modern project, as I touched on earlier, are pervasive and often 'tenaciously maintained'. He stresses the importance of paying attention to what is close to hand:

The most powerful explanations, that is, those that generate the most out of the least, are the ones that take writing and imaging craftsmanship into account. They are both material and mundane, since they are so practical, so modest, so pervasive, so close to the hands and the eyes that they escape attention. Each of them deflates grandiose schemes and conceptual dichotomies and replaces them by simple modifications in the way in which groups of people argue with one another using paper, signs, prints and diagrams.[14]

With the study of materials/materiality again central, conservation and its broader aesthetic agencies remain overlooked by theoretical-practical concerns within the leading disciplines of fine art, photographic history, museum studies and visual culture. As such, the dynamic and trans-formative processes that inhere these material practices remain hidden in plain sight. The key theoretical premise of this argument revolves around making explicit the intimate relations between the photograph and the museum: a workflow aesthetics that pays specific attention to how it manifests in the conservation-based encounter with the museum object.

Condition report 1.0: Redgrave and his curious practice of over-writing Museum objects

In reference to the register of dilapidation, it must be evident that in going over so large a surface as that of each cartoon, it is only the most noteworthy injuries that could be registered, and that extensive injuries of a minute nature, such as the rubbing of their surface or scaling of tints, could hardly be included, although using the photo-graphs as the basis of the registry has been a great aid; neither could the numerous corrugations and cracks be thoroughly noted.[15]

Figure 10.3: Richard Redgrave, detail of the condition report, 1864, of the Raphael Cartoon. Albumen print with annotations on card (no. 76601). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Although long past its original function, it is still possible to make out the object's complex material structure, caught in the conjunction of the albumen photographic print and the painstaking annotations (figure 10.3). Through this process of inscription, the object's material condition becomes the subject of a concern. Redgrave systematically maps the object, expressing numerous concerns for its fragile condition. He draws attention to: 'Corrugations, cracks or folds, the effects of folding', marking a series of vertically spaced 'X's, along a series of extensive structural fault lines. Intermittently, along the path of these complex 'cuts', visible in the albumen yellow of the photograph, he marks the letter 'H', denoting a series of patches infilling the rough, uneven cuts to the object's fabric and the areas of 'paper loss' ('C'). In contrast to traditional linear historical texts, the annotations range across the albumen photographic print.

Not unlike media theorist Vilém Flusser's materialist account, for Redgrave the photograph was a surface on which to overwrite his concerns for the condition of these large, fragile works of art. Flusser suggests that images 'signify – mainly – something out there',

a specific process of abstraction that 'reduces the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions … in order to encode phenomena into two-dimensional symbols and to read these symbols'.[16] To read images takes time. To capture and reduce any object, not least one as complex as the Cartoons, transcribing the salient details to a two-dimensional representation, remains no small feat. With the Cartoons, the reduction in scale is pronounced: although they measure approximately 5 x 4 m, in Redgrave's reports they are reduced to a single image measuring approximately 400 x 500 cm. There is little to be gained unless one slows down and practices slow looking:

> The significance of images is on the surface. One can take them in a single glance, yet this remains superficial. If one wants to deepen the significance, i.e., to reconstruct the abstracted dimensions, one has to allow one's gaze to wander over the surface, feeling the way one goes. This wandering over the surface of the image is called 'scanning'. In so doing, one's gaze follows a complex path formed, on the one hand, by the structure of the image and, on the other, by the observer's intentions.[17]

We can see this process of inscription at work. The photographic print's semi-gloss albumen surface becomes a space on which Redgrave can overwrite his concerns, while simultaneously scanning the surface conditions of the object under scrutiny. Redgrave frequently writes 'Rubbed' to describe what he refers to as a 'scaling of tints'. The V&A's current Condition Report Terminology Guidelines suggest 'abrasion' to denote 'a scraped spot or area: the result of abrasion or rubbing'. The guidelines contain more than 80 terms for describing the condition of objects; many are common to drawing/art practice. This rich material vocabulary is shared by 10 conservation disciplines, representative of the Museum's large and diverse collections. The thin albumen photograph is attached to a heavier paper support. In the border, Redgrave adds a key to the annotations, and a brief general condition statement. The key also includes the mark 'X' to represent 'folding', most likely attributed to historic damage resulting from poor handling. It is easy to forget that these rare examples of Renaissance history painting were themselves once designs instrumental to the making of tapestries, and therefore utilitarian objects in themselves.

Unlike Henry Cole, Redgrave had no genuine interest in the aesthetics of photography. Rather, he was drawn to the evidential and empirical value of the new medium. It was the 'static nature of

the photograph', the ability to fix and stabilise an image of an object, that made it a perfect fit for Redgrave's art-historical and institutional ambitions to monitor material change over time. In the lower right corner, Redgrave signs and dates the report: May 1863. This temporal and spatial element is the final key ingredient. The material timestamp is an essential function of the condition reporting process. In the simplest terms, the report establishes a fixed frame of reference of an object's condition at a point in time which can then be referred to later. For the photographic historian and media theorist Michelle Henning, the gesture of 'arresting' appearances was key to the early development of the photographic apparatus. Henning notes that 'even before it is technically achieved, photography is understood as a means to stop flow, linked with a desire to seize the moment from the flow of time'.[18] The photographic slow apparatus was key. The extraordinary feat of producing the wet-collodion-on-glass negatives of the Cartoons, from which the prints were made for Redgrave's reports, was undertaken some years earlier, in 1858.[19]

Redgrave's reports continue to prove of pragmatic value to the Museum project. Over time, the conventions, tentatively laid down in the 1860s, have morphed into a sophisticated and widely used mode of documentation. Reducing complexity, the process of material inscription establishes a fixed frame of reference, whereby objects and artworks become sensitised, the subject of information. The techniques of drawing on and annotating an image are a cornerstone of conservation practice as a mode of sustained material analysis. However, as Redgrave pioneered, the condition report acts as a protocol for tracking the flow of objects leaving and entering the contemporary museum. The V&A Conservation Department Condition Report Terminology Guidelines state:

> Condition reports are produced for objects leaving the Museum for loan and tour and when in-coming loans for exhibition or display arrive in the museum without documentation. A condition report also travels with any object (be it a loaned-in object or from the V&A collection) going off site to receive additional work carried out by an approved contractor. A Condition Report provides a snapshot of the current condition of an object and identifies any potentially vulnerable areas. A large component of the report comprises good quality images, which clearly show different aspects of the object. Any written sections or annotations should be succinct and comprehensible to all, including non-specialists,

and only added to identify features/damage not clearly visible in the image/s provided. A condition report helps to determine any changes in the condition of the object during the lending and borrowing process and may be used as a supporting document in the event of an insurance or legal claim. Condition reports are a prerequisite of the Museum where the Government Indemnity Scheme (GIS) will be used as insurance when borrowing or lending objects. A copy of the original report accompanies the object to its venue and any changes in condition are noted.

Day to day, the condition report functions mostly without question or problems. The ability to isolate and point at things works: a semiotic gesture that says 'look: here is an object; there are folds and creases, areas of damage – it has changed'. This commonplace operation, fixing and establishing a 'simple location' for an object at a point in time, is historically contingent. In his book of 1925, *Science and the Modern World*, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead traces the gesture of 'simple location' to the invention of scientific materialism:

> To say that a bit of matter has simple location means that, in expressing spatio-temporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite region of space, and throughout a definite duration of time, apart from any essential references to the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and other durations of time.[20]

For Whitehead, that this abstraction works is proof of a pragmatic efficacy, that the report functions. He gently reminds us to take care: to never forget that abstractions, however veiled in habit, have limits and consequences. We can see this dilemma at work in the role of photography, and the associated modes of documentation, in what could be seen and said about the Cartoons.

Opening the shutter

There is always more to see. Recognising the limitations of any single image in capturing the material complexities of the Cartoons, Redgrave commissioned a further series of photographs of areas of specific concern. In Charles Thurston Thompson's large-format close-ups, the 'cuts' are revealed as deep, ravine-like meandering wounds,

giving way in places to dark rents in the Cartoons' fragile paper infrastructure. Redgrave's eye, with the relatively new and radical photographic technology, transformed what could be seen and said about the material condition of objects and artworks in the museum.

Redgrave's ambitions did not end there. Aware of the fragility of the Cartoons, in his official report, as the Inspector General for Art, he was adamant that no 'repairs' should be made. He preferred instead to focus his energy on the considerable logistics involved in transporting the Cartoons from the royal residence at Hampton Court Palace to their new home at SKM, and the documentation of their condition on arrival (the condition reports and associated photo-based documentation). He also started an extensive in-house programme to ensure a suitable environment for the long-term care and display of these large, fragile Renaissance masterpieces. Timothy Stevens, then Assistant Director (Collections), marked the occasion of the reopening of the Raphael Gallery by Her Majesty the Queen in October 1996 with an editorial in the V&A's conservation journal, describing the historical arc of concern for the conservation and long-term care of the Museum object/artwork at the V&A: 'Their arrival at the Museum in 1865 on loan from Queen Victoria gave rise to extensive discussion about their long-term conservation. This is revealing about the state of knowledge at the time and illustrates how seriously conservation was taken in the early days at South Kensington.'[21]

This wide-ranging concern, not only for the material condition of the artworks, included, in the 1860s, updating the display method (glazing the Cartoons' frames), installing an innovative lighting system (among the earliest examples of gas-lit museum galleries) and putting in place measures to monitor and control the galleries' environmental conditions by installing an innovative ventilation and heating system. Redgrave notes: 'The hygrometric state of the atmosphere in the room should be tested from time to time, and its temperature regularly registered night and day.'[22] It is both arresting and instructive to witness this concern for the object and its environment – the intimate connection between environmental conditions and the care of the object – taking shape through an early ground-breaking approach to the duty of care and preservation of Museum objects that survives to this day.

A duty of care

Museum objects exist in highly artificial environments, and are studied and displayed, written about and, as we have seen, occasionally written on. They are the subject of an aestheticised attention from a host of cultural caretakers – conservators, archivists, photographers, scholars, scientists, curators, technicians and administrators (among others). Away from the public gaze, museum objects are catalogued, assigned numbers, regularly photographed, documented, assessed, repaired, moved, handled with care, analysed, treated, cared for and preserved. Access is restricted. The museum object spends much of its time behind locked doors: out of harm's way in studios, labs and workshops, housed in cabinets, presses, bespoke mounts, enclosures and boxes, or wrapped and tucked away in stores. The spaces of storage and display are often conditioned to protect the objects from the often deleterious effects of temperature, humidity and airborne pollutants: the museum functions as 'a general isolator for objects: whatever there is to see or experience in it appears as an insulated artifact whose presence seeks interactions with a specialized form of aesthetic attention'.[23]

These pampered individuals travel, going out into the world. Most often this is for exhibition and loan, with the items housed in bespoke museum-grade crates, insulated from the vagaries of transport. The logistics of travel involve a host of procedures and documentation: loan agreements, object lists, packing and handling notes, condition reports and so forth. These processes and techniques of care and attention are localised in specific generative sites of practice (such as the various darkrooms, labs, offices and studios). The outpouring of informational material sedimenting from these innumerable events of technical inscription accumulates and pools in numerous archives, collections, computer drives and databases. These vast ecosystems of informational material, crystallising around the museum object, and the practices of care and attention, attest to a life well lived. As we have already seen, no matter the status, the system is replete with potential for transformation. That said, it is usually one-way traffic. Once it crosses into the aestheticised world, it is highly unlikely to return.

Condition report 2.0: A grammar of things, the luxury of time

> New knowledge of the object emerged through the latest investigative technologies, and close scrutiny with the naked eye.[24]

Although it is not only the Museum's 'greatest hits' that are subject to scrutiny (see Chapter 6), the status of the Cartoons has made them the focus of subsequent attention and analysis. A major project, started in the mid-1990s, took the opportunity to close the V&A's Cartoon Court for redecoration, to 'undertake a fresh evaluation of them'.[25] In her accompanying publication, curator Sharon Fermor positions the extensive research within a historical arc of scholarship and analysis, describing the investigations as grounded in 'collaborative' enterprise, contingent on, and determined by, the photographic apparatus.[26] Heralding the arrival of the conservator on the scene, these painstaking investigations employed a wide range of lens-based technologies: x-ray, transmitted light, raking light, macro-photography and photogrammetry. Drawing on the expertise of the V&A's in-house Photographic Studio and with the conservator's extensive condition reports, the study shed new light on the Cartoons' complex construction. The technique of photogrammetry (at that time most often employed in the aerial mapping of the spatial measurement of buildings) made it possible, for the first time, to map the objects' complex underlying paper infrastructure, a fragile assemblage of surprisingly small sheets of paper, tiled together, mosaic-like.

The defining characteristic of this practice is one of observability, rather than objectivity. The eye moves, as it did for Redgrave, scanning from the object to the report and back to the object, moving in closer to examine specific areas, and back out to capture the bigger picture. Frontality is also a key mechanism; whether it is the position of the camera, in plane to the object, or the conservator, it is most often the classical epistemic gesture of taking up a position in front of the object that we enact. The word 'episteme' that we use to connote knowledge systems comes from the Greek word meaning 'to stand in front of' an artwork. This point of view was transferred to the photographic apparatus; pointing a camera at things is, after all, a commonplace gesture.

Redgrave's doubts and concerns for the material stability of these large fragile artworks returned. By the 1990s the condition report had become an essential tool for the conservator. The Cartoons were

Figure 10.4: Condition report of the Raphael Cartoon. Alan Derbyshire. 1994. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

remapped through successive condition reports and associated modes of lens-based capture (figure 10.4). This recursive relationship between the museum object and its corresponding documentation resonates with the work of architect, artist and architectural preservationist Jorge Otero-Pailos. In his ground-breaking practice, under the rubric of 'experimental preservation', he explores the agency of preservation documentation, noting that:

> The document is the object under study itself returned to us with the marks of the discipline's conventions. The document is the visual equivalent of an echo. It is by definition not just the original repeated, but an original that comes back transformed into a delayed response to itself. It is important to note that this rejoinder returns a renewed original, but of even greater significance is the fact that it does so later. This temporal difference between the original and its echo situates the object in time.[27]

The annotations form a meshwork of marks, interlacing lines, words, arrows, hatched areas and geometric forms. Occasionally, in pale blue

marker pen, the 1990s condition report's author, Alan Derbyshire, traced the outline of several figures, probably to index the extensive material inscriptions to the black-and-white photographs of the artworks beneath (figure 10.4). The evidence of previous activity, the deleterious forces of movement and upheaval, are exposed by the conservator's keen eye. The material traces of these earlier workings include an array of 'puncture marks', 'losses' and undocumented 'repairs', numerous 'folds' and 'creases', resulting in considerable 'buckling' and surface 'de-formation', a series of overlapping lines at the lower left quadrant, branch and reticulate, as they follow the passage of water damage (a question mark in blue); some lines fold back on themselves in places to form hatched patches commensurate with 'pooling of water', possibly the cause of the 'de-lamination' of several of the fragile paper layers. Among the extensive examples of over-writing are multiple question marks (I counted at least 20), while doubts and speculations abound. The cuts, barely visible in the albumen yellow of Redgrave's reports, are exposed by macro-photography as a complex material intersection, a border area, composed of two distinct canvas linings, paint and a series of patches.

When compared with the pressures of the twenty-first-century museum, time in the 1990s was less constrained and resource dependent. Derbyshire's painstaking attention is a luxury of sorts rarely found in today's museum setting, giving time for 'thick description' and 'deep hanging out', as anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it.[28] This approach to documenting the object's condition is less formal; there is no key or general condition statement. Whereas Redgrave's reports are concise, the twentieth-/twenty-first-century conservator adopts a 'freestyle', essayistic mode of documentation practice, more akin to 'notes to self'. As conservator Michelle Moore puts it, 'There are two forms that written documentation can take when recording conservation work: a free-text, essay style of reporting or an abbreviated check-list style. Both have their own advantages and disadvantages and may be used in combination or alone.'[29]

I have dwelt on the revealing and formative case of the Cartoons because it illuminates modern practice at a profound level. Before moving on, it is important to reiterate that while the conventions remain consistent, one minor difference stands out. Whereas Redgrave inscribed directly on the photographic surface, the conservator's extensive over-writings are now carried on transparent acetate sheets, overlaying a composite of multiple black-and-white photographs montaged on card backing. This minor difference in the pragmatics of the report had considerable consequences, to which I will return later.

Condition report life support system

> Please provide clear, high-resolution images (300DPI) of all sides (incl. top and underside where possible) and inside objects. If there is any cause for concern, please provide several close-up images of, and around, that area and state where they occur on the object. Should you be confused which term to use for any area of concern, it is vital you include an image of this area and annotate accordingly – these annotations can be directly onto the printed image if necessary.[30]

Today, the most conspicuous form of the condition report is produced for objects both leaving and arriving at the Museum. Museum objects are often on the move, most often for exhibition or loan, both incoming and outgoing. The processes and procedures that underpin their circulation and exhibition are well established and integral to the functioning of the Museum and the wider cultural sphere. It could be said that the Museum is sustained by these ongoing processes of arrival and departure, not least because the loan of objects brings in significant revenue to the contemporary Museum. As was the case for Redgrave, the condition report helps to regulate this prodigious flow.

The condition report is in the process of further change from a computer-generated, paper-based composite of image and text to a fully digital, tablet-based report (figure 10.5). The contemporary report also includes additional information that is essential to the object's well-being, such as the designated environmental parameters of temperature and humidity, appropriate light levels for display and instructions for handling and installation. By establishing a fixed frame of reference, the report also underscores the Museum's legal obligations pertaining to insurance. The process of 'checking and monitoring' the material condition of objects is now just one element of a comprehensive range of 'supporting documents' that accompany the object on its travels.[31] This could be said to perform an essential immunological function, acting as a mobile life-support system for the object, underpinning and sustaining institutional commerce. This discursive material encapsulates many of the key facets of the duty of care to the museum object.

The report is initially made by a conservator, but the reporting process often involves multiple authors. At each point of arrival and departure, the object's condition is examined against the report. Any
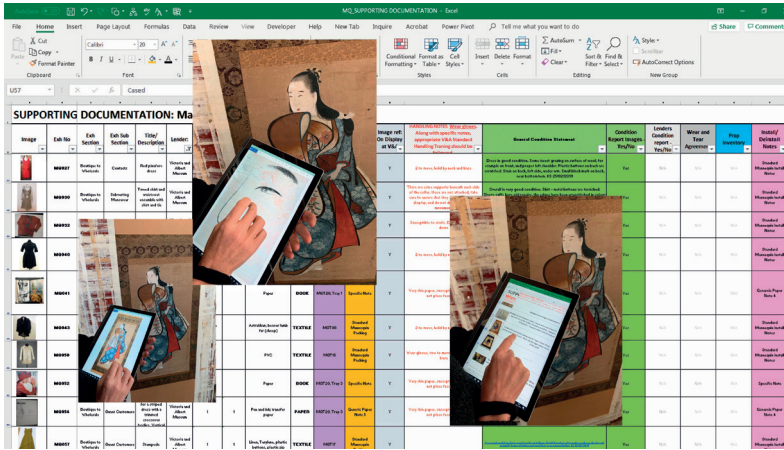
Figure 10.5: Composite image showing the contemporary condition report and supporting documentation process. 2019. Image by Louise Egan. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

change is noted, additional annotations and images are added and the report is signed off. On return, the report is updated, the object undergoes a last check and any further change in condition is noted. The report is then archived, becoming one episode in the object's ongoing biography.

The condition reporting process relies on consensus. At the time of handover, or return, an agreement must be reached on the object's condition. Occasionally, the encounter between an object and its representatives exposes an inherent tension. The report's conjunction of text and image is considered as complicating and determining the condition of the object under scrutiny. The recent acceleration of the number of objects in transit exposes a problem. The process of over-writing is deemed too subjective compared to the perceived objectivity of the digital image. What I see, when I look at an object at a point in time and choose to record, is not always what you might see. And, likewise, you may well see things I missed. Sometimes this disjuncture can get out of hand. The over-writing proliferates. Each reporter has a slightly distinct style. The report can become a somewhat confusing discursive tangle, as each actant writes the object differently.

The latest version of the condition report currently under development at the V&A – no less innovative than Redgrave's – relies on multiple digital images where possible. Significantly, at a time of overwhelming acceleration in the number of Museum objects in

transit, conservators are revisiting the spirit of Redgrave to reassert a 'more pragmatic approach to documentation' by doing away with the problematic annotations that are deemed to slow down the reporting process.[32] A shift in the pragmatics of the reporting process means that the object and its condition reports become the sum of its photographs. The number of digital images produced for such reports, and the increasing reliance on image-based documentation, only add to the significant increase in lens-based imaging in the Museum. From the aptly named 'Factory' to the images made of an object soon to leave for tour, the Museum is saturated with digital imaging. Dominating practice, conservators commonly spend more time photographing objects than conserving them. After a long exhibition tour, a condition report can arrive back at the Museum resembling an anarchic over-writing of urban graffiti.

Condition report 3.0: a new lease of life

In 2019 a further imaging of the Raphael Cartoons was undertaken in 3D by Factum Foundation in a series of extraordinarily detailed, high-resolution facsimiles.[33] However, it is not the hyper-realism of the latest scanning technologies that informs my interest in these modes of documentation, but rather the abstract and epistemic questions that these practices engender. What if there is more to these practices than what Latour calls the 'heavy weight of instrumentality?'[34] As I will show, rather than a problem to be overcome, this breakdown in the reports function is an opportunity, a gift. Michel Foucault proposed an alternative modality for the analysis of discursive practices through both the 'loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things' and the way that practices systematically form the objects of which they speak.[35] The poet and educator Fred Moten makes a case for uniting the twin hemispheres of Foucault's extensive history of the organisation of knowledge, this being the distinction between the 'technologies of the self', as care of self/other, and the 'technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things'.[36] Moten's argument turns around the possibilities for making a situated account in relation to others. Such an imperative takes the form of a 'constant study', entailing a responsibility to account for being entangled in-and-with the social life of things and others. For Moten, this mode of study operates at the 'juncture of technological breakthrough and technological breakdown … at the horizon of an

event where certain instruments, insofar as they can no longer either calculate or be calculated, are bent toward the incalculable'.[37] This raises both a pragmatic and empirical question that speaks to the transformation of seemingly intractable antagonisms, vested in the default modern setting, which shape the stubborn utilitarian conception that continues to determine the institutional lives of technical practices such as photographic documentation.

Missing from the utilitarian account are the affective and experiential dimensions that traditionally fall outside of what constitutes a subject of knowledge. By this I mean the preoccupation with the museum object (duty of care). For Whitehead, writing in 1933, knowledge is 'a mere high abstraction'; what comes to matter foremost, in an encounter, is the 'rise of an affective tone originating from things whose relevance is given'.[38] Whitehead ties together the experiential and systemic to an event that he provisionally calls a 'concern'. This revised mode of empiricism brings to the fore the relations and connections, the invisible dimensions that inhabit and shape any encounter. These interstitial realms are always there, as 'real' as the terms they connect (e.g. the object and its associated informational material). Togetherness and feelings were technical terms in Whitehead's speculative cosmology. From this position, it becomes a matter of thinking beyond the habitual 'misplaced concreteness' that stubbornly informs practices of knowledge production, slowing down and paying attention to what is really going on. If we wish to gently bend the duty of care and the technologies of capture, building out from the conservator's encounter with Redgrave's report, a key question is how to account for transformation and all the relations and networks of dependencies – conservators, technicians, administrators, cleaners, photographers and curators: 'study' is always going on in the 'undercommons' of the institution.[39] So we must think about how to account for the lively, deeply felt lived experience of those practices and technical processes that maintain and make an artwork work, for this social excess currently falls outside the operational parameters of the institutional duty of care.

The lives of objects and things are not fixed. No matter their past use, they have the potential for reactivation. We find the museum 2.0 in the 'throes of a crisis of self-understanding', the zero-sum game of late capitalism and the colonial project and, more recently, responding to the pandemic with controversial cuts which disrupt or destroy the long chains of technical knowledge and ecologies of practice. In contradistinction, Wright asks museums to be bold – to 'rethink the conceptual architecture of our evolving institutions from a perspective outside the

public/private binary – repurposing tools, categories and opportunities inadvertently made available to new ends' – and playfully calls for a museum 3.0.[40]

Conservation practices must be at the heart of this. The discursive structures, material-semiotic ecosystems, historical traces and technologies of image capture are there to be cut and made again, transformed and manipulated; to recall Foucault again, 'knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting'.[41] These processes of remaking and revision resonate with the complicated relations of the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons over time and space. To reiterate, these Renaissance masterpieces were initially designs; they were cut, folded, transported, used to make tapestries and then pasted and cut back together, and later rejoined, to make the artworks we see today. It is reassuring to learn that objects are elusive; never fully relinquishing to the modes of image-based capture, they remain subject to transformation through use and the practices of acculturation.

Feral information

> But can we say that the spider's project is to weave its web? I don't think so. We might as well say the web's project is to be woven.[42]

In drawing to a close, I'd like to introduce the second encounter I mentioned initially and its by-product (figure 10.6). I don't now remember the exact chronology – or which came first out of the conservators' encounter with Redgrave's report or this latest feral iteration of the condition report. That said, both are symptomatic of the recursive play at work in the Museum, for dominant narratives, such as cause and effect, lose their grip when things get complex.

Tucked away in the Museum's Paper Conservation Studio, my institutional home, is a cabinet containing seven large black archival boxes relating to the conservation of the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons. They contain a cornucopia of uncatalogued photographic material. Among the jumble are copious black-and-white negatives and positive prints using different techniques for material analysis, such as transmitted light and raking-light images of the Cartoons. Other prints show the technical staff and conservators at work, and dignitaries being shown around the gallery, possibly in the 1960s, while work was in progress. There are numerous x-ray images, an array of reports ranging from the 1920s to the 1990s and multiple boxes of
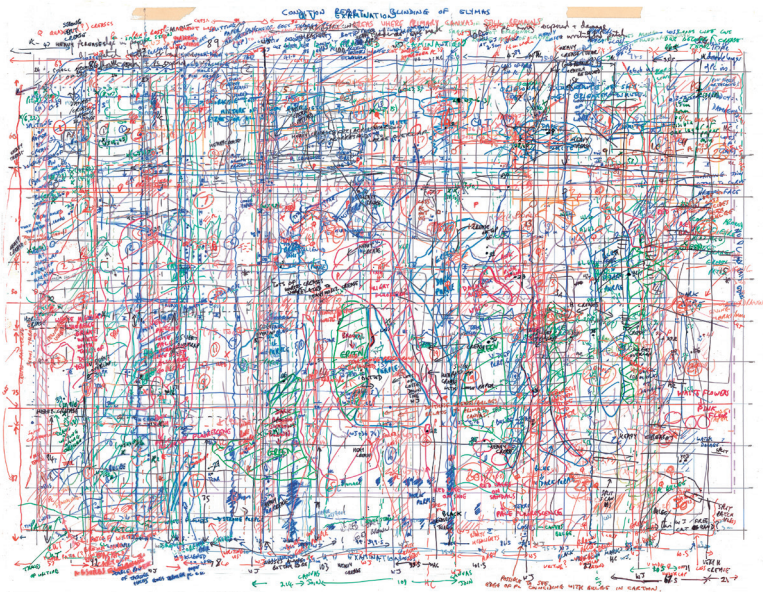
Figure 10.6: *Condition report: feral information*, 2017. © Simon Fleury.

colour transparencies. The accumulated material also includes the condition reports produced at the time of the major scholarly project in the 1990s.

My practice-led research, *Condition report: feral information* (figure 10.6), operates somewhere between conservation, art and institutional analysis. It is informed by a sense of care that might be characterised as re-wilding – that is, conservation to allow the multiple ecological connections of a revised polytechnical practice. It is a mode of material participation or attunement. Looking through the reports for the first time, my attention was caught by a slight loss of registration, caused by the minor space between the acetate, carrying the conservator's extensive annotations, and the underlying photographs of the Cartoons (figure 10.7). This small breakdown in the chains of signification undermined the accuracy of the report. This anomaly was curious, echoing the disparate relations between text and image in the contemporary report. Ghosting, the effects of this interstitial spacing, had considerable, unforeseen consequences.

In paying attention to the tension between the modes of signification (text/image), a shift in perspective asserts itself; while this is challenging to a particular and established worldview of the Museum,

Figure 10.7: Condition report of the Raphael Cartoon (detail) showing annotated acetate layer over record photograph. Alan Derbyshire. 1994. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

once we are attuned to the interstitial possibilities, it is surprising what becomes significant. To quote Donna Haraway, 'it matters what stories make worlds, what thoughts think thoughts'.[43] For Haraway, there is an ethical imperative: a responsibility to take care of your abstractions. Representation's hold is limited, but necessarily a possible portal to more complex patterns of thought. In the logic of relations I inherit, somewhat paradoxically, everything stays in place, and everything changes. As Whitehead described, being-in-tension is not solely a human prerogative. Knowledge does not retreat: it gets more complex and lively. Matter and meaning are intimately tangled.

My hunch was to stay with, and pay attention to, what was going on as these processes manifested themselves through conservation practices. Constrained and subdued for nearly 160 years, it was as if the informational material was waiting to express itself otherwise. Gently removing the acetate sheets from the underlying images, teasing apart the tension between text and image, I set about recomposing the 'meshwork' of over-writing carried on the multiple acetate sheets into one image (figure 10.7). A form of post-production, working with and remixing the informational material, it was seemingly in keeping with

the cut and paste of the Cartoons,[44] only this time, the experiment was virtual, made possible by a digital workflow.

The process of transformation seemed to require little effort on my part. The tension between the report's text and image was generative. Once freed from their corresponding images, line and text proliferated, taking on a life of their own – running feral – and the annotations worked for themselves, mapping a constituent liveliness inhabiting the most unlikely of places.

While no longer wedded to a specific object, this latest iteration of the condition report takes its place among the efflorescence of informational material that has crystallised around the Raphael Cartoons while they have remained at the V&A. This includes Charles Thurston Thompson's extraordinary wet-collodion-on-glass negatives; the plethora of photo-based material accumulated in the boxes housed in the paper conservation studio, including Alan Derbyshire's condition reports. To this we can add, looping back to the encounter with Redgrave's report, the conservator's assessment, treatment and associated documentation, and the numerous 'before and after' images of the minor repairs and interventions, including the high-resolution 'object image' now sedimented in the V&A's collections management system, which also stands for the object's biography. All are entangled with the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons themselves.

These patterns of information/knowledge grow, spread, branch out and reticulate. This is not a linear process. Rather, it is recursive and contingent on the complex historic entangling of museum and photograph, as a non-linear pattern of mutual implication. Could it be, therefore, that the effects of this recursive activity, as it manifests in the saturation of the Museum in the photograph, are disrupting the order of things? Such intimacy implies that any steady-state either/or notion, as in 'art/information', 'subject/object' or 'model/copy', that informed Redgrave's utilitarian conception of the technical photograph, and by association his condition reports, gives way under the force of the generative processes at work in the Museum, revealing the dynamic and transformative potential of the encounter between the Museum and the photograph. The museum//photograph is a relational device. It draws things together, performing their relations with one another. The philosopher Isabelle Stengers suggests that taking an 'ecological perspective' is to enter a field of 'reciprocal capture'. In such relational fields there is no 'unitary', universal point of view, only different perspectives: '[e]cology is, then, a science of multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creations of meanings'.[45] But I wonder

if we have the relation between these two modern phenomena wrong. Who put whom to work? Is the museum//photograph waiting patiently for us to catch up? I have come to think of the coming together of these modern phenomena as being, as anthropologist Roy Wagner puts it, 'within the presence of time rather than the passage of time, the "once upon a time" of story-telling'.[46] A fugitive and deeply social time. For Stengers, an 'ecology of practices' is not only concerned with how things are, but importantly, with telling how they might be otherwise.

What distinguishes this new cartography from previous iterations of the condition report is a shift from an instrumental function to an expressive aesthetic texture. Any steady-state notion of an object under study slips through the warp and weft of the conservator's annotations. It is, therefore, of little use to the Museum, regarding any teleological drive for efficiencies, nor does it offer fresh insights into the Cartoons (Condition Report 1.0/2.0). Its value lies elsewhere. As a by-product of these processes and practices of knowledge production, it expresses the inextricable link between the pragmatic and aesthetic. Somewhat unforeseen, but no less welcome, what emerged was a new lease of life for the condition report. A technique of over-writing, the possibility of a museum self-reporting otherwise. This I will provisionally call version 3.0, in a playful nod to museums yet to come.

Notes

1   Redgrave 1857–88, 9.
2   Richard Redgrave (1804–88) was a key figure in the early years of SKM. His responsibilities included those of curator, educator and administrator. V&A Painting Conservator Nicola Costaras has undertaken detailed research into Richard Redgrave's pioneering work; see Costaras 2013.
3   I am indebted in my thinking here to fellow members of the practices of attunement research collective, https://attunement.study [accessed 31.5.2022].
4   Extracts taken from the conservation assessment notes, January 2017.
5   For an introduction to the Cartoons, see https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/raphael-cartoons [accessed 31.01.2022].
6   Azoulay 2019, 236.
7   V&A 1867.
8   V&A 2017.
9   V&A 2017.
10 Foucault and Gordon 1980, 194–8.
11 Wright 2013, 39.
12 Latour and Porter 2013, 99; Petrešin-Bachelez 2017.
13 Haus der Kulturen der Welt 2022b.
14 Latour 1983, 1–33.
15 Redgrave 1857–88, 9.
16 Flusser 2000, 8.
17 Flusser 2000, 8.
18 Henning 2018, 135.

19   Fleury 2014.
20   Whitehead 1925 [2010], 58.
21   Stevens 1997.
22   Redgrave 1857–88, 9.
23   Sloterdijk 2016, 314.
24   Fermor 1996, 96.
25   Fermor 1996, 96.
26   Fermor 1996, 96.
27   Otero-Pailos 2005.
28   Geertz 1993, 10.
29   Moore 2001.
30   V&A 2015.
31   Battisson and Egan 2017.
32   Battisson and Egan 2017.
33   The Factum Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation, has worked on an impressive range
     of projects to conserve and preserve global cultural heritage through high-resolution
     recordings and the fabrication of facsimiles to 'demonstrate the importance of documenting,
     monitoring, studying, recreating, and disseminating the world's cultural heritage through
     the rigorous development of high-resolution recording and re-materialisation techniques':
     see https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/explore-the-raphael-cartoons [accessed 31.05.2022];
     https://www.factumfoundation.org/pag/1560/the-high-resolution-recording-of-the-
     raphael-cartoons [accessed 31.05.2022].
34   Latour and Porter 2013, 99.
35   Foucault 2002, 25.
36   Moten 2018, 162.
37   Moten 2018, 162.
38   Whitehead 1933 [1967], 175–6.
39   Harney and Moten 2013.
40   Wright 2013, 39.
41   Foucault 1984, 88.
42   Deligny, Burk and Porter 2015.
43   Haraway 2016, 12.
44   See Campbell 2014; Hebdige 2010.
45   Stengers 2010, 33–6.
46   Wagner 2019, 60.

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11

Revisiting the K. A. C. Creswell photographs of Islamic architecture

Omniya Abdel Barr

This image (figure 11.1) shows two children from the neighbourhood of al-Darb al-Ahmar in Historic Cairo. They are attending a workshop at Bayt al-Razzaz, a courtyard house built in the fifteenth century.[1] The trainers used a photograph taken by Beniamino Facchinelli (1839–95) from the V&A collections.[2] They downloaded and printed it to explain to the children how the house they were standing in had looked in the past. The photo is showing the entrance door with street graffiti of two lions on the lintel, which have now disappeared. This small detail, preserved in the old photograph and provided online by the V&A, became a great source of inspiration for the children. After spotting it, they started drawing their own versions of the lions. That these children were able to work with this photograph is the result of both the V&A's long history of collecting photographs of the region, and my own and my colleagues' recent efforts to rediscover, catalogue and digitise these photographs, and in particular to locate the exact places they depict.

The use of historical photography has greatly increased in the past two decades, with the digitisation of various collections in international institutions, and free online accessibility. These digitised collections have become invaluable resources for both general and specialised publics. My focus here is the way in which the K. A. C. Creswell Collection at the V&A has been used as part of the research supporting campaigns to understand, identify and preserve Cairo's architectural and urban heritage. K. A. C. Creswell (1879–1974) was an English architectural historian who made his career in Egypt and pioneered the scholarship of medieval Islamic architectural history in the Middle

Figure 11.1: Workshop at Bayt al-Razzaz, Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation, February 2021. © The Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation.

East. The V&A holds 1,587 photographs of Cairo taken by him between 1916 and 1929.

Cairo's medieval city was one of the first historic centres to be added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.[3] Despite this privileged recognition, the authorities were not entirely successful in protecting its monuments and urban fabric. Today, the city is severely at risk after decades of neglectful governance. In the absence of a comprehensive management plan, in recent years Historic Cairo has been witnessing an unprecedented wave of destruction and vandalism. In 2011, the situation was exacerbated by the unstable political situation, which allowed for more looting and illegal construction to take place. Monuments were stripped of their valuable architectural elements and more than 40 per cent of the traditional urban fabric was replaced.[4] These destructions have now been contained, but other aggressions are still ongoing. The Egyptian government has launched an ambitious plan to 'upgrade' Cairo's infrastructure by developing a wider network of roads, linking the city to the newly built administrative capital. In the summer of 2020, mausoleums were demolished in the historic necropolis to pave the way for new motorways. Moreover, some old neighbourhoods were incorrectly classified as 'informal settlements', putting them at risk of demolition. Serious concerns about these plans causing damaging alterations to the

Figure 11.2: View over the Citadel of Cairo and the quarter of Arab al-Yasar, K. A. C. Creswell (no. 1426-1921). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

historic areas and critically threatening the integrity of the cityscape were raised by specialists and the general public.[5]

These neighbourhoods have been preserved in Creswell's photography. At a time when Cairo's urban heritage is under threat from demolition to make way for motorways, or crumbling without maintenance and intervention, or being overlooked in favour of tourist-attracting sites of antiquity, Creswell's images are a reminder of Egypt's material, cultural and social identity and are an important part of the narrative around their preservation. They are supporting the wider debates and discussions within Cairo's communities to contest the government's plans. Many, including experts, took to social media to voice their anger and disagreement with these assaults on the historic quarters. One retired inspector, who was once in charge of several areas in the old city, supported his argument with legal clauses from urban protection laws in combination with the V&A views taken by Creswell more than a century ago (figure 11.2). These photographs, therefore, effectively show the authenticity of the urban fabric, and are used to justify its protection from obliteration.

Creswell was a pioneer in the scholarship of medieval Islamic architectural history. In 1921, the V&A was the first public collection

to acquire his photographs. Then, in 1975, a year after his death, his unique collection of negatives on medieval architecture from the Arab world, Turkey and Spain was bequeathed to the Eastern Art Department at the Ashmolean Museum, amounting to a distributed network of knowledge.[6] His collections of photographs and drawings, along with his monumental publications, such as two volumes of *Early Muslim Architecture*, remain an important resource on Islamic architecture.[7]

Creswell knew the importance of using photography as a medium to create visual records. It is evident that when he left for Egypt in 1916, he already had a detailed plan for documentation, as he immediately started chronologically photographing the Islamic monuments of Cairo. Creswell's methodology is based primarily on creating a complete set of photographs, with a list of views and details which he repeated with every monument. In his first correspondence with the Museum, he explained that his collection from Egypt consisted of a systematic series of photographs 'illustrating practically every monument from the commencement of the Muhammadan period down to 1650 AD, every façade, entrance, doorway, interior, mihrâb, dome pendentive and minaret being illustrated'.[8]

To demonstrate the efficacy of Creswell's photographs in these urgent projects of cultural identification and preservation, I want to focus on one series of photographs which also entangles with my own career, interests and activity in the field. In August 2016, I visited the funerary complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq (r. 1399–1412), built at the turn of the fifteenth century in Cairo. I noticed that the inscription panel above the entrance door in the wooden screen covering the southern mausoleum was missing. Signs of damage were visible, and parts had clearly been looted recently. My investigations with the authorities revealed that they had been stolen earlier that year, in February.

The unrest in Egypt in 2011 had created a security void, and since then, many museums and historic sites had been attacked.[9] Some of the most valuable medieval architectural elements were stripped of their monuments.[10] In 2012, I decided to start documenting the destruction and looting taking place in Historic Cairo. With each theft detected, I would gather all available documents, so that one day this data could be used for identification should a missing piece resurface on the international art market. Architectural fragments from Cairo's traditional buildings and monuments have been popularly collected by Western individuals and institutions since the nineteenth century.[11] However,

since the UNESCO 1970 Convention, these actions have been officially banned. Today, it is important to establish the provenance before the sale, yet such fragments in wood, metal or ceramics are frequently on sale in prominent auction houses in London and Paris.[12] Most recently, I recorded an octagonal panel in wood auctioned at Christie's in London on 28 October 2020 and sold for £6,000.[13]

Despite the presence of extensive documentation on Cairo's medieval monuments, it is challenging to secure drawings or photographs with sufficient clarity for provenance.[14] With the absence of complete visual records online, I had to rely on my personal networks.[15] Sometimes the missing pieces are found in a photograph, but very often, when enlarged, the image is not sharp enough to act as evidence and show provenance, and I'm not able to read the text or conclusively identify a pattern's outline. In addition, most available photographs, whether taken by amateur or professional photographers, were produced with a view to possible commercial use or photography competitions, rather than as images for technical documentation. In that summer of 2016, I failed to locate an image showing the looted panels from the complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq.

I joined the V&A in September of that same year, and started cataloguing the photographs of K. A. C. Creswell, recently digitised by the Museum.[16] In one of the boxes on Cairo, I finally came across the information I was looking for. Among the prints from Faraj's complex, there is one with a complete view of the wooden screen at the entrance of the southern mausoleum, including the missing panel.

Faraj's complex was the first building erected in the northern section of the necropolis known as *Sahara al-Mamalik*, or the Desert of the Mamluks.[17] It is considered one of the most remarkable Mamluk monuments, with a courtyard, two mausoleums and two minarets. The mausoleums are surmounted by the largest masonry domes from this period (figure 11.3).[18] The popularity of these twin domes is probably based on their scale and imposing visibility to travellers on the old caravan routes.[19] Even following the city's expansion, they are still visible from two main roads. The complex is usually empty, but occasionally frequented by more adventurous visitors. The daily prayers and Friday sermons are still held there.

This site was well recorded in the nineteenth century, and Faraj's complex features in watercolours, photographs and postcards with a famous Orientalist title: *The Tombs of the Caliphs* (figure 11.4).[20] The photographs were mainly for touristic consumption and focused on capturing romanticised views.[21] Therefore, it was rare to find an image

Figure 11.3: The funerary complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq from the east, K. A. C. Creswell (no. 1224-1921). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 11.4: The funerary complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq from the west, entitled: *Tombeaux des Kalifs (Sultan Barkuk)*, Gabriel Lekegian (no. 3512-1920). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

with architectural or decorative details. The reason for this might not have been a lack of interest, but the difficulty non-Muslims had in accessing the buildings, given that photographers at the time were a mix of foreigners, none of whom were part of the faith.[22] Views such as these have now become widely popular in Egypt and are part of its visual culture. Many reproductions are hanging in shops and cafes in Cairo, as they depict romantic views of the city in the nineteenth century, with a *défilé* of domes and minarets evoking a glorious past. They represent an important visual record of the cemeteries, capturing the people and the architecture.

Creswell was far from being the first to photograph this iconic monument. However, he was the first to produce a complete set of visual records, with the four facades, the inner courtyard surrounded by porticos and praying areas, the stone pulpit, the minarets and domes. Creswell believed that architectural history acted as a biography for great buildings. He gave great attention to the details and the creation of complete visual descriptions – essential for the study of architectural history.[23] He may also have taken these photographs with some anticipation that they could be used in the future to safeguard these monuments and their decorative features, because he would have been well aware of the instances of damage and looting in his own era. He surveyed Faraj's complex before its restoration with the intention of using the photography in his research and publications,[24] although, ultimately, he did not manage to publish these photographs, as he never completed the third volume of the *Muslim Architecture of Egypt* on late Bahrite and Circassian Mamluks, the latter being the period in which Faraj's complex was built.

Central to my argument and focus are two wooden screens in this monument, at the entrance of each mausoleum. No inscription panel survives from the northern mausoleum, where the sultan and his father are buried. The looted inscription panel used to adorn the entrance of the southern mausoleum, where three women from the sultan's household are buried. This entrance was previously photographed and drawn, but none of these records documented the inscription.[25] I had seen Creswell's photographs before, as they are available in other online collections, but with a very reduced resolution.[26] Creswell took two views of the wooden screen: a general view from the sanctuary (figure 11.5) and a detailed one with perfect angles and parallel lines (figure 11.6). The V&A online copy is the only record on which we can read the inscription with clarity:

> Our lord the sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq has ordered the construction of this blessed mausoleum, may God bless him with his mercy and rest him in his paradise, with God's benevolence and generosity.[27]

This photograph could be used as evidence if the panel should ever resurface on the market. In addition, it could support future restoration, as it makes it possible to trace the inscription and the decoration precisely.

Thus, more broadly, Creswell's photography is important not only for the information it is providing on looted and missing pieces, but also because it is showing how the monuments and the historic city looked a century ago, before restoration, destruction and alteration. For instance, Creswell systematically photographed the minaret/s in every monument he surveyed to show their stylistic variations as well

Figure 11.5 View of the southern mausoleum from the sanctuary at the Complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq, K. A. C. Creswell (no. 1231-1921). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 11.6: View of the wooden screen on the southern mausoleum at the Complex of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq, K. A. C. Creswell (no. 1232-1921). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

as their structural condition. When he started photographing Cairo, many minarets were already missing their tops from previous earthquakes, and several had been reconstructed in the Ottoman style. Later, these minarets were restored by the *Comité* (see note 23) to their original Mamluk style.

Creswell was therefore able to document the Islamic architecture of Cairo in a transitional time. His photographs are not just a testimony of the buildings, but also a view into their place in historical and political narratives. In a view showing the Mausoleum of al-Sultaniyya, built in the southern cemeteries in the mid-fourteenth century, the dilapidated and damaged condition of one of the twin domes can be seen. While other views exist, Creswell's views are different in that he climbed the minaret positioned in front of the mausoleum and took the photograph from an elevated point, and not from the ground level like

Figure 11.7: View over the Mausoleum of al-Sultaniyya, K. A. C. Creswell (no. 948-1921). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

the older views (figure 11.7). By doing so, Creswell created an image which can be used as a technical record, illustrating the inner structure of the collapsed stone dome before it was restored. He also created an urban record, showing the inner courtyards of the private burial spaces in their surroundings.

Creswell focused on medieval architecture, yet in some rare views, especially the ones over the citadel, the dense and rich traditional urban fabric is visible, and thus his photographs become important tools in tracking the destructive interventions that continue in the historic quarters of Cairo, whether formally or informally. Today, with digital access, the Museum has become accessible to a public far away from its London walls, such as those children in the workshop at Bayt al-Razzaz. By digitising, cataloguing and giving access to its photographic collections, the V&A has stuck to its core mission of inspiring the makers and designers of the future, and supporting research. This is even more the case in the global flows of the twenty-first century, as the tentacles of the Museum's photographic ecosystem reach far beyond the Museum itself.

Notes

1 The workshop was funded by the Petra Foundation, through the UK's Cultural Protection Fund, and implemented by the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation in February 2021.

2 V&A No. 911-1917.

3 See https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/89 [accessed 01.06.2022]. Historic Cairo, consisting of the medieval city, was listed in 1979.

4 Based on a survey I conducted in 2017 and documented with Galila El Kadi in 'Patrimoine hors guerre en Egypte, du vide sécuritaire au vide patrimonial', as part of a research project organised by the Ifpo in Beirut, 'Heritage at war in the Mediterranean region' (2015–17).

5 See Keith 2020.

6 Other Creswell collections are at the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at the American University in Cairo, the Berenson Library in Villa I Tatti and the Fine Arts Library at Harvard University. Smaller collections are at the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, as well as one private collection in Cairo; more photographs could also possibly be found at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Egypt. The Ashmolean Museum has 7,000 negatives (1,000 on glass). See Fitzherbert 2014.

7 Creswell 1932; 1940; 1952; 1959.

8 V&A Archive, MA/1/C3193. Letter from Creswell, 15 September 1920.

9 For information about the looting of Egyptian heritage after January 2011, see Ikram and Hanna 2013; Hanna 2015; Abdel Barr 2020.

10 The most prominent Islamic piece lost during this period, from my point of view, is one of the bronze door knockers of Sultan Hasan placed on the entrance door of the Mosque of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh.

11 See Volait 2021.

12 There are two major sales of Islamic art per year in London, in March and in October. After the 1970 UNESCO Convention, any object leaving the country with missing or incomplete provenance is deemed to be doing so illegally.

13 https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-an-ivory-inlaid-carved-wooden-panel-mamluk-egypt-6282089/?from=salesummary&intObjectID=6282089&lid=1&ldp_breadcrumb=back [accessed 01.06.2022].

14 Old photographs in Egypt and the Arab world are usually held in governmental institutions, which give very limited accessibility to a selected audience. Most of the digitised archives accessible online are offered by international institutions.

15 See Ryzova 2014.

16 This was done under the scope of the Factory Project at the V&A.

17 The Mamluks ruled over Egypt from 1250 to 1517. The City of the Dead is the site of the popular historic cemeteries, housing monuments and shrines of venerated saints and eminent scholars and rulers. See El Kadi and Bonnamy 2012.

18 They have an inner diameter of 14.3 m and an inner height of around 30 m.

19 The routes leading to Syria and the pilgrimage in the Hijaz, where the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, are located.

20 On the V&A 'Explore the Collections' webpage, see Pascal Coste (SD.272:7), James Wild (E.3831-1938), Francis Frith (E.208:617-1994), Pascal Sébah and son (PH.132-1887; PH.138-1887; 367-1924), Gabriel Lekegian (3453-1920; 3456-1920; 3496-1920; 3512-1920), Lehnert and Landrock (1695-1954; 2624-1954) and unknown photographers (338-1924; 3513-1920; PH.2788-1897; 3492-1920).

21 Cairo was an important and popular destination in the nineteenth century. Tourists, artists and photographers flocked to the city before embarking on a train south to visit the ancient Egyptian sites or continue to Palestine in their Grand Tour.

22 Francis Frith and Francis Bedford, two Englishmen who photographed Cairo in the mid-nineteenth century. Beniamino Facchinelli (active from 1875 to 1895) was Italian. Gabriel Lekegian and Pascal Sébah were Armenians, and they first established their practices in Istanbul/Constantinople. See Volait 2013.

23 Creswell worked closely with the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe*, which was very actively restoring Cairo's historic buildings. The *Comité* was established in December 1881 by a khedivial decree as a technical bureau in the Egyptian government to oversee the rescue and preservation of the medieval monuments and to establish a museum for Arab art.

24 The V&A received 16 prints of this monument.

25 Photographed by B. Facchinelli and Lehnert and Landrock. Drawn by E. Prisse d'Avennes and Jules Bourgoin. The earliest record is a famous view by Prisse d'Avennes in his *Art Arabe*, published in 1869. The screen was used as a background for the subject of the drawing: a reciter sitting on a qur'anic chair. The same screen was meticulously analysed by Jules Bourgoin in *Précis de l'art Arabe*, which was first published in 1889, though the drawings were made between 1863 and 1866: Section III, Plate 15, 16. A small restoration detail assures me that these views and Creswell's photograph are of the southern mausoleum.

26 Ashmolean Museum 'Search the Collections' online: https://collections.ashmolean.org/collection/search/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/relevance/object/182111 [accessed 08.07.2022], and the collection of the Fine Arts Library of Harvard University available on the Archnet website: https://www.archnet.org/sites/2209?media_content_id=34306 [accessed 08.07.2022].

27 See V&A Explore the collection: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1288385/wooden-screen-at-entrance-of-photograph-creswell-keppel-archibald [accessed 08.07.2022].

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12

Two dimensions among three: museum photography in the V&A's refurbished Cast Courts

Angus Patterson

In one of the Museum's earliest photographs, the V&A's first photographer, Charles Thurston Thompson (1816–68), is reflected back at us in a seventeenth-century Venetian mirror (figure 12.1). The mirror belonged to the collector John Webb (1799–1880). Thompson took several photographs of it, and in this one he has been careful to detail the elaborate Baroque cresting, with its richly carved scrollwork, flowers and statuary. A dark canvas backdrop neutralises the setting, but the mirror glass offers a glimpse of a garden. Thompson has taken advantage of natural light in the grounds of Gore House, Kensington,[1] where a purpose-built photographic studio has just been established to record objects borrowed for exhibition at the fledgling Museum of Ornamental Art (later the South Kensington Museum (SKM)).

Photography was not the only revolutionary new means of reproduction accommodated at Gore House. On 17 May 1854, Henry Cole recorded in his diary that he had hosted Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and two of their children, who 'Stayed nearly two hours. Went overall into Photographic & Electrotyping rooms.'[2] Electrotyping was the new alchemy of using electricity to deposit copper, silver or gold, particle by particle, into moulds to create a perfect likeness of three-dimensional objects. At Gore House the process was outsourced to its patentee Elkington of Birmingham, whose demonstrations had caused huge excitement at the Great Exhibition. The company produced electrotypes for the Museum for the next 70 years. At the same time, the Museum

Figure 12.1: *Mirror Frame. Carved And Gilt, Venetian, Date about 1690,* albumen print, Charles Thurston Thompson, 1853 (no. 33588). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

established its own in-house Photographic Studio.[3] These two great products of the scientific and technical revolution – photography and electrotyping – added extremely accurate copies to long-established methods of reproducing works of art, in particular the production of plaster casts.

Thurston Thompson's photograph, taken in 1853, captures more of the process than it does of the mirror. It records the beginning of an orchestrated, state-controlled programme to provide a collection of exemplar designs from which artists and designers could gain inspiration and instruction (see Chapters 1 and 13). Only the first shoots of the vast collection we know at the V&A today were visible in 1853. Twentieth-century connoisseurship and its focus on artists and authenticity has blurred our understanding of the nineteenth-century museum. In its early days, the collection was built at a fast pace and was as reliant on copies as it was on original works. The process was revelatory. Mirroring Gore House's own transformation from private to public venue, exhibitions of private collections in its rooms put little-known works of art into the public domain for a brief period. Thurston

Thompson's photographs and Elkington's electrotypes kept them there long after the objects had been returned to their owners.

SKM-inspired museums and art schools were soon established in other countries, but the copying programmes of each were initially singular and opportunistic. At the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1867, SKM's first Director, Henry Cole, organised a *Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of All Countries.* It was signed by 15 European princes, who agreed 'mutually to assist the museums of Europe in procuring casts and copies of national objects for the promotion of art' which were 'necessary to the progress of art'. Reproductions 'would be of a high value to all museums for public instruction'. The negotiations for the Convention championed recent inventions of photography, electro-typing and elastic moulding as 'sufficiently matured and employed … whereby admirable substitutes may be easily obtained with perfect security to the originals'. The agreement opened the door for works of art in royal, civic, cathedral and private collections to be copied and circulated worldwide. A key component of the Convention was the production of catalogues with price lists explaining what was available. Cole's Convention turned the production of museum copies into a coordinated system of international exchange involving diplomacy at the highest levels.[4]

The Architectural Court at the South Kensington Museum (SKM)

Fast-forward 165 years, and Thurston Thompson's photograph of the mirror has become an important object in unlocking the meaning of one of the V&A's most celebrated galleries, the Cast Courts (figure 12.2).[5] Refurbished between 2011 and 2018, the Cast Courts were built as the Architectural Court in 1873 to the designs of Henry Scott (1822–83), architect of the Royal Albert Hall, to show large-scale works of architecture and sculpture. So ambitious had the vision nurtured 20 years earlier become that among pulpits, tomb sculptures and church doorways the new Court displayed a 10-metre-wide, seventeenth-century Dutch cathedral screen of stone, marble and alabaster[6] facing a 1:1 scale reproduction of the 35-metre-high Trajan's Column[7] in Rome that was so large that it had to be shown in two parts. Given the scale of the objects it displayed and the difficulty of acquiring originals, the Architectural Court was more reliant than any other gallery on

Figure 12.2: The Cast Courts (November 2018) with the museum's largest object, the plaster cast of Trajan's Column (no. REPRO.1864-128.) Photograph by Peter Kelleher. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

reproductions in order to tell a comprehensive story. Here you could see plaster casts of the 12-metre-wide doorway of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain[8] and walk just a few yards to compare it with that of the Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna.[9] The Court was spectacular. When it opened in 1873, a writer in *The Builder* magazine enthused at 'impressions that can scarcely be effaced' and compared seeing the spaces with 'a first glimpse of Mont Blanc'.[10]

For the next 50 years, the Court accommodated thousands of visitors. Many of them were students sketching, studying and preparing for relentless examination as they worked through the rigorous South Kensington System of art training. Additional copies of the casts, in some cases small details such as scrolls of ornament or hands, feet, noses or eyes from famous statues, were, like photographs, lent or sold by the Museum to regional art schools or to other museums and colleges around the world built in the South Kensington image, where they served the same purpose. The Court also showed large electrotypes including gilded reproductions of the fifteenth-century doors from the Baptistry of Florence Cathedral, known as the 'Gates of Paradise',[11] drawings of the buildings of the world scaled against each other and photographs to provide original context to the artworks on show. The decoration of the Court, as with other galleries, complemented the collections within so that students and visitors were immersed in art history wherever they went.

The 'practical utility' of copies

The vast building complex developed at South Kensington from the late 1850s had struggled to keep pace with the growing collection. The Architectural Court was crammed with objects as soon as it opened, one student calling it 'a gigantic curiosity shop arranged on no comprehensible principle, which can only perplex and irritate the student'.[12] It was in no small part the Museum's championing of *facsimiles* that enabled its collections to expand so rapidly; reproductions are in the DNA of the V&A. Thurston Thompson and his successor, Isabel Agnes Cowper, worked to a clearly defined, pan-museum collecting strategy that established an ecosystem of copies (see Chapter 5). Photographic and electrotype copies in the Museum performed the same function as the plaster casts.

'Original works are to be obtained as far as possible, but where this would seem to be impracticable, the system … of representing

the finest known examples by electrotypes, casts and drawings will be followed … fully to illustrate human taste and ingenuity,' explained a museum collecting policy of 1863.[13] The Museum also acquired replicas in cast iron, ceramics, oil paintings and brass rubbings. This was not art for art's sake but a pragmatic solution to tackling a more embarrassing legacy of 1851: British product design did not match its industrial or scientific prowess. The Department of Science and Art, its showroom (the Museum) and its classroom (the schools of art) used copies to complement original works to create a Victorian encyclopaedia of international ornament. John Webb's mirror may have returned home, but Thurston Thompson's photographs of it were available and could be reproduced in multiples so that students in London, Manchester, Walsall and Stoke could study it at the same time through access to identical reproductions.

The Museum's approach leant heavily on the work of the great architect and design theorist Owen Jones (1809–74), whose principles on form, colour and proportion informed the curriculum for the Government Schools of Design. His seminal work, *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), is still in print today.[14] The Cast Courts were Jones's principles in action. For Cole, this collection had a 'practical utility' in meeting the Department's twofold remit. Firstly, it aimed to get good design into British factories in order to improve Britain's manufactured products. The collection and its magnificent setting in South Kensington also sought to attract members of the public – 'a schoolroom for everyone', according to Cole[15] – so that potential consumers could nurture their aesthetic tastes and become more knowledgeable in the choices they made when furnishing their homes. 'I apprehend that the benefit should be strictly commercial. I do not think that these schools were created for aesthetic purposes, or for general educational purposes. I apprehend that the age is so essentially commercial that it hardly looks to promoting anything of this kind except for commercial purposes,' claimed Cole to a Parliamentary Committee in 1849.[16] The Department of Science and Art was, after all, a branch of the Board of Trade.

Locating the South Kensington Museum now

When the Museum was reconceived as the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899, the old SKM began a slow retreat into the background, a process that eventually threatened the Architectural Court because of

a change in the Museum's approach to reproductions. The decline of the gallery reflected the decline of the copy when museums like the V&A stopped using replicas as teaching aids. The rise of the Arts and Crafts movement and its focus on making shifted the Museum's value system more towards original works, while the roots of modernism negated the need for a collection of ornament. Many copies were sold off, destroyed or relegated to the basement, while photographs became increasingly marginalised (see Chapter 13). For a while, in the 1960s, the Cast Courts were also boarded up as a store.

Now reopened, refurbished and still housing the collection they were largely designed to show, the courts remain the Museum's grandest and most vivid expression of the V&A's founding mission as an art school. You would not have sensed their original driving purpose, however, if you had walked into the space in 2010. The gallery was renamed the 'Cast Courts' before the Second World War, its original works had been redisplayed elsewhere and it had become a crowded mix of siloed plaster casts whose misleading labels focused more on the original works to which the copies alluded than the material objects in front of visitors. Black lino laid over the bright terracotta floor tiles had plunged the lower half of the galleries into gloom, and unrelated, synthetic wall colours had divorced the two courts from both their original decorative context and each other.

Audience research carried out in 2011 revealed that visitors were puzzled by these vast spaces and their monumental displays that showed plaster casts in isolation. Some were surprised to learn that the plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David*[17] was not the original: 'Why do we show copies?' asked some visitors; 'Are copies second rate?' Many thought so, and wandered off to find 'real' art. The Cast Courts were felt to be archaic, offering a gloomy view of a lost past. To make matters worse, the Museum's Fakes Gallery ran between the courts, leading the casts to be associated with deliberate counterfeits. The Museum's copies have nothing to do with fakes. They were intended to instruct rather than deceive.

A gallery of images

When the Museum set about refurbishing the Court in 2011, it was clear that it also needed an intellectual refit. The doorway at the foot of the cast of Trajan's Column offered a suitable gateway to a new approach. If a visitor steps across the threshold, visually, at least, they

Figure 12.3: The interior of the base section of the cast of Trajan's Column (November 2018). Photograph by Peter Kelleher. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

move from first-century A D Rome into a Victorian industrial chimney (figure 12.3). The construction of the copy is quite different from that of the original. The two 17-metre-high brick cores on which the plaster impressions of the column are shown were a pragmatic nineteenth-century solution to supporting a veneer that captures only the outside surfaces of the original. The column is effectively a three-dimensional image.

Those plaster casts and electrotypes that reproduce mechanical or moving originals illustrate this characteristic best. A plaster cast sanctuary knocker from the door of Durham Cathedral[18] is 'frozen' in position, its hinge and knocker cast as one, meaning an attempt to use it would break it. An electrotype of a sixteenth-century locket watch copied from one in the Louvre has no mechanism inside and no moving dials. Its watch face was moulded as one with the surround, so that the watch is frozen at 1 p.m. (figure 12.4).[19]

The plaster cast and electrotype are nineteenth-century images in the same way Isabel Agnes Cowper's photograph *99. BROWN SATIN JACKET* of 1874 (figure 12.5) is an image of an embroidered jacket rather than a jacket itself.[20] They are all surrogates, the others of objects, but integrally related to those objects. Each is a copy but was made for a purpose that gives it its own originality.

Seeing three-dimensional reproductions as analogous to photographs allows the history of the Cast Courts to unfurl in front of us, transporting us back to SKM. There was no stigma surrounding these items. They were active teaching tools. A new gallery running between the courts now tells this story, foregrounding the copy as an image. Copies are presented as historical objects in their own right with their own biographies that are quite separate from the objects they depict. Image took precedence over originality because the collection was not so much about teaching makers to make as teaching artists to draw.

Drawing on Ella Ravilious's research into the Museum's Guard Books, which record the photographs available in the nineteenth century for reproduction, this approach has propelled historical photographs of objects, buildings and landscapes from deep in the stores into one of the Museum's most visited public spaces. As historical reproductions used in art teaching, photographs of an Elizabethan bed, a Spanish silver salver, a doorway in Paris and a Venetian chair have the same status as the cast of Trajan's Column. These are not just photographs of objects; they are photographs *as* objects. In order to emphasise this, while photographs reproduced simply for documentary

Figure 12.4: Electrotype of a sixteenth-century locket watch, electroformed copper, electroplated and electrogilded, Elkington & Co., Clerkenwell, 1888 (no. REPRO.1888-446). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 12.5: *99. BROWN SATIN JACKET, embroidered in green silk cord and gimp, said to have been worn by King Charles I. English. 17th centy. Lent by the Baroness Willoughby de Eresby.* Photograph by Isabel Agnes Cowper, c. 1873 (no. 74934B). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 12.6: Ornamental glass from *Models for Craftsmen* (1855), albumen print, Ludwig Belitski, Minutolisches Institut in Liegnitz, Silesia (now Legnica, Poland), 1853–4 (no. 36223). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

purposes, such as historical views of the gallery, are cropped to the edges of the image, those we present as historical reproductions in the refurbished Court are not cropped, and instead reproduce the card on which the photograph was mounted along with historical labels and annotations. In doing so, we are aware we have created a further layer of reproduction – a mounted gallery illustration – with no built-in status and an assumed obsolescence, deemed replaceable, able to be updated and that update unnecessary to record.

The gallery also explores why one method of reproduction might be favoured over another. Unlike plaster casting and electrotyping, the process of capturing likenesses by photography requires no physical contact with the original. Fragile trophy displays of ornamental glass such as the collection in the Minutolisches Institut in Liegnitz (now Legnica, Poland) (figure 12.6)[21] or textiles in the Musée de Cluny[22] were only reproducible as photographs. Photographs of objects may not have had the three-dimensional materiality of casts and electro-types, but they were cheaper to reproduce, easier to publish, lighter to transport and could be used to copy copies.

Reproductions did not travel in straight lines. Electrotypes might be made from plaster casts, and both might be reproduced as photo-graphs. A photograph by the Florentine photographers Alinari records Donatello's marble statue of St George in a niche in the church of Orsanmichele, Florence,[23] capturing its historical context before it was moved into the Museo Nazionale, whereas its plaster cast[24] stands among other casts at the V&A, recontextualised as a designer's model. Yet another copy stands in the original niche at Orsanmichele.

Digitisation and a new challenge

The Museum's historical championing of revolutionary new imaging technologies enables us to present the courts as the height of Victorian modernity rather than an archaic view of the past. Historians afflicted by hindsight tend to see the Cast Courts as a place where visitors came to see artworks from around the world because travel was so difficult. It is the reverse of that. It was advances in replicating technology coupled with advances in telegraphy, shipping and train travel that made it possible to compile such a wide-ranging compendium. Travel was easier and more predictable than it had ever been, enabling artworks from far and wide to be copied and seen by visitors from just as far afield. In that sense, the Cast Courts represent a Victorian vision of a future in which the world was becoming more connected and technology-driven. This perception of sudden change compares to recent generations' experience of the development of the internet. The response of museums was to digitise their collections. Online museum databases showing photographs and catalogue records were the Cast Courts of the twentieth century.

Two decades into the twenty-first century, and the museum object photograph faces a new challenge. Interest in copying has been revived

Figure 12.7: *Head of a Young Woman,* nylon print by 3D Compare from photogrammetry supplied by Scan the World, 2018. The print was made from a plaster cast made in 1889, in turn reproducing the original limestone 'Head of a Young Woman' in the Bode Museum, Berlin. Print purchased with the support of 3D Compare with Scan the World and the Peri Charitable Foundation (no. A.23-2018). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

by digital photography, scanning, photogrammetry and three-dimensional printing, and as museums debate their uses in collections today, they revive, sometimes unwittingly, the same arguments put forward in the 1850s. In 2017, the V&A was a leading partner in the *Reproduction of Art and Cultural Heritage* (ReACH) project, an agreement linking heritage organisations around the world to record and protect archaeological sites in danger.[25] The agreement marked the 150th

anniversary of the Convention organised by Henry Cole and champions digital reproduction in exactly the same way that the 1867 Convention promoted photography and electrotyping as new modes of copying alongside traditional plaster casts.[26]

Digital copies have, in turn, stimulated renewed interest in historical copies, including photographs of objects. The scan, the point cloud and the digital model add new layers to an innovative world. In the Cast Courts now is a three-dimensional, nylon reproduction of *Head of a Young Woman*,[27] the original of which is in the Bode Museum in Berlin.[28] It was printed from a three-dimensional model that was rendered from a point cloud, itself generated from photogrammetry using a mobile-phone camera directed at a plaster cast that is also in the courts.[29] The plaster version was cast in a mould taken from the original. Each of the stages represents either a material or virtual reproduction. The photograph shown here represents another (figure 12.7).

Virtual reproduction may become the Cast Courts of the twenty-first century. For much of the twentieth, the Museum's historical object photographs, like the casts and electrotypes, were siloed and seen as valueless or superseded copies. They have struggled for survival. Re-embedding them in their original ecosystem of reproduction has encouraged a symbiosis where each makes sense of the other. The Cast Courts are the environment that most vividly expresses the vital role they played in the formation of one of the world's great museums, even if their status as objects has waxed and waned over time. This ecosystem has had new life breathed into it by digital technology, which has helped make these historical collections relevant again. The Cast Courts today offer us a way to understand the V&A as the great flowering of the cultural and technological legacy of the Great Exhibition, whose seeds were first planted in the garden of Gore House in 1853.

Notes

1   The Royal Albert Hall was built on the site of Gore House, which was demolished in 1857 when the Department of Science and Art built its new museum premises in Exhibition Road.
2   Henry Cole's Diary, 17 May 1854, NAL 55.AA.17.
3   For a history of Gore House and the V&A's electrotyping programme, see Grant and Patterson 2018.
4   *Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions* 1867.
5   For a history of the Cast Courts, including essays on historical museum photographs, see Patterson and Trusted 2018.
6   Museum no. 1046-1871 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O103046/faith-roodloft-van-norenberch-coenraed [accessed 01.06.2022]).

7   Museum no. REPRO.1864-128 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O102467/trajans-column-copy-of-trajans-apollodorus-apollodorus-of [accessed 01.06.2022]).

8   Museum no. REPRO.1866-50 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O40955/puerta-de-la-gloria-copy-of-the-brucciani-domenico [accessed 01.06.2022]).

9   Museum no. REPRO.1887-41 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O40757/central-doorway-of-s-petronio-plaster-cast-quercia-jacopo-della [accessed 01.06.2022]).

10   *The Builder*, October 1873.

11   Museum no. REPRO.1867-44 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O127840/gates-of-paradise-doors-ghiberti-lorenzo [accessed 01.06.2022]).

12   Letter to *The Times* from 'A student', 20 September 1882.

13   Quoted in Board of Education 1905.

14   Jones 1856.

15   Department of Practical Art 1853.

16   Quoted in London County Council 1975, 74–96.

17   Museum no. REPRO.1857-161 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O39861/david-plaster-cast-michelangelo [accessed 01.06.2022]).

18   Museum no. REPRO.A.1916-9 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1345637/copy-of-a/sanctuary-knocker [accessed 01.06.2022]).

19   Museum no. REPRO.1888-446 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O375180/watch-elkington-co [accessed 01.06.2022]).

20   Museum no. 74934B (https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1324882/photograph-cowper-isabel-agnes [accessed 01.06.2022]).

21   Museum no. 36223 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O91284/vases-etc-institut-minutoli-liegnitz-photograph-belitski-ludwig [accessed 01.06.2022]).

22   Museum no. 318-1909 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1433565/order-of-the-saint-esprit-photograph [accessed 01.06.2022]).

23   Museum no. 37712 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1294364/photograph-fratelli-alinari [accessed 01.06.2022]).

24   Museum no. REPRO.1864-36 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O40923/st-george-plaster-cast-desachy-monsieur [accessed 01.06.2022]).

25   See ReACH at https://www.vam.ac.uk/research/projects/reach-reproduction-of-art-and-cultural-heritage [accessed 19.01.2021].

26   Grant and Patterson 2018, 111–15.

27   Museum no. M.23-2018 (https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1457336/3d-sls-print [accessed 01.06.2022]).

28   *Head of a Young Woman*, 1450–1500, Limestone, Andrea dell'Aquila, Italy, Bode Museum, Berlin.

29   Museum no. REPRO.1889-91 (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O41563/portrait-of-a-young-woman-plaster-cast-dellaquila-andrea [accessed 01.06.2022]).

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Part V
Visibilities

13

A submerged collection: photographs in the National Art Library, 1853–1977

Ella Ravilious

My role as a curator working on collections storage often finds me negotiating unfashionable areas of the Museum's holdings, particularly what I shall call 'submerged' photography collections. I consider these submerged groupings to be a type of 'non-collection' of objects which were valued and documented at their time of acquisition, but which have since been relegated or have slipped from view. Such collections are often physically present in museums, though perhaps in remote or liminal storage areas, but they are misunderstood, unmapped, divorced from their origins or supporting data and perhaps no longer considered 'a Collection' at all. The photographs that this chapter explores were welcomed initially but then relegated, used as a curatorial image reference resource, reclaimed as 'art photography' or purged altogether. Museum photographs frequently inhabit such cycles in ways that make the ecosystem an apt metaphor. Such thinking renders the cycle of rejections and rehabilitations of areas of the Collection as a constant, and disturbs the concept of a complete catalogue, a comprehensive classification, a final order. As Wilder describes, museum photographs are often 'wildly proliferating items supposedly tamed by the bureaucratic function of lists'.[1] The cataloguing and management of these photographs echo far larger epistemological and disciplinary shifts within museums; therefore, analysis of photographs marginalised in different eras can elucidate the value systems at work and bring into focus the hierarchies at play in the evolving canon of both photography and the Museum.

Submerged photographs

An example of a submerged collection at the V&A is the Kineton Parkes Bequest. William Kineton Parkes was an art historian who bequeathed his research collection on modern sculpture to the V&A in 1938 (figure 13.1). This consisted of questionnaires completed by sculptors working in the 1920s and around 4,000 photographs of their work, gathered by Kineton Parkes from various commercial photographers or sent in by the sculptors themselves. The photographs were accessioned into the Photography Collection, but later split up and repurposed. At the time of their rediscovery in 2016, many of the photographs were in filing cabinets in the V&A Sculpture Department offices, organised in files by sculptor but mixed in with photographs from other sources, curatorial notes and other ephemera. Any known link to Kineton Parkes had disappeared, as had the concept of these as 'Museum objects', though they were valued and relied upon as reference materials by Sculpture Department curators. Other smaller clumps of Kineton Parkes's photographs turned up elsewhere, scattered through filing in other departments and in remote storage. Only the photographic portraits of the sculptors themselves had been retained within the Photography Section as part of the 'known' Collection available to the public. Until their rediscovery, these photographs were present and even in use internally, but submerged with regard to status, provenance and value in photographic terms. At no point were these photographs deliberately hidden by staff, but they were instead gradually obscured by the changing tides of collections usage. In reforging these links between the questionnaires, the photographs and their former owner, a unique and useful archive has suddenly re-emerged for study and display.

Though most such processes of submersion were gradual, two key points of upheaval for the V&A's Photography Collection (which began in 1853, and which was based within the National Art Library (NAL) at the Museum until 1977) were the librarian Charles Gibbs-Smith's reassessment of the Collection in the 1930s and the formation of the first curatorial section for photographs at the Museum in 1977.

The 'submerged' photographs I discuss were of a similar status to those considered as the official Photography Collection, in that they had been acquired and given museum numbers in the same system as our 'known' photographs. However, they mysteriously existed throughout the Museum in filing systems belonging to other departments or languished in remote storage. From around 2015, as other curators had

Figure 13.1: Photograph depicting the sculptor Mateo Hernández working on the sculpture *The Bather* in front of a life model, 1925. Photograph collected by William Kineton Parkes (no. 6813-1938). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

done before me, I began spotting photographs by significant named photographers such as Eugène Atget, Henri Le Secq and Jane Clifford in departmental filing and returning them to the Photography Collection stores for safekeeping and digitisation. I gradually realised that my rescuing of photographs from other departments and returning them to an 'art object' status in the official Photography Collection was, in fact, moving them from one area of an ecosystem to another.

This effected loss as well as gain. The loss was that of the use

value of the photographs to departmental curators, and of their function in the ecosystem of curatorial filing, but the gain was in their recognition as art objects, their becoming publicly accessible in the Print Room and online through digitisation and their reconnection with their provenance information. This chapter considers the reasons why I found these photographs where I did and the different ecosystem branches of which they were and are part, as well as discussing what could be learnt from the V&A's Photography Collection in its former iterations and those to whom it was addressed. Historically, the Photography Collection has closely reflected developments in curatorial trends and approaches over time, but later iterations of the Collection have partially obscured this. The Collection in its former arrangement as a visual reference library has nevertheless had a marked legacy on curatorial practice at the V&A.

The ecosystem

The liminal and secondary status of photographs lent them particularly well to a sedimentary process of collecting. Ideas of ecosystem apply here in explaining how the small, flat, storable nature of photographs allowed them to silt up in corners of the Museum. The desire for filing cabinets full of ordered photographs and notes by subject has often featured in museum spaces as a tangible expression of a curatorial specialism and a material tool to extend curatorial knowledge, comparison and memory of objects. These cabinets are also particularly ripe ground for purges and rediscoveries as curatorial agendas evolve.

Alongside some works being reclaimed as 'art photography', historical photographs from the Collection are also used now by curators and conservators as everything from data for the conservation and repair of objects to evidence to block illegal art sales, as considered in Chapters 10 and 11. As Edwards notes, 'photographs and photography are the only class of museum object which is simultaneously a collectible item (a precious object) and a tool of management'.[2]

Scholarship by Edwards, Schwartz, Wilder, Caraffa and others supports the multifaceted uses and appreciation of these photographs, demonstrating the importance of the background data in understanding photographs as documents and as integrated material objects. Close analysis of the stamps, marks and annotations on the photographic object itself has proved to be a fruitful way of unpicking a photograph, but the registers, historical letters, classification systems

and physical order and placement in a particular box in a particular store in a particular collection also form part of the ecosystem which creates the photograph as a particular thing. The photograph needs its own documentation to be legible as a photographic document, even if that is only information as liminal as a single letter written on the mount, or an adjacency to other material in a box. Understanding of the former habitats in which photographs existed at the Museum often depends on these slight traces. As Schwartz describes, 'Archivists must recognise that archival value in photographs resides in the interrelationships between photographs and the creating structures, animating functions, programmes and information technology that created them. It is for this very reason that we must preserve the functional context which transforms photographic images into photographic documents.'[3]

Shifting values

The first Director of the Museum, Henry Cole, was a catalyst for photography in museums. His early impetus initiated many of the branches of the ecosystem described in this volume. The NAL Photography Collection was formed as a reference image library rather than a collection of photographs-as-artworks. Cole used plaster casts, electrotypes and photographs (see Chapter 12) to extend the scope of the early Museum collection far beyond what could be materially collected firsthand, and thereby stretched the remit of the Museum itself in support of his ambition to democratise access to cultural capital. Given this deliberate activity, it is unsurprising that the Photography Collection grew unsustainably and almost exponentially under his tenure.

This continued for some 80 years, until Charles Gibbs-Smith initiated a reappraisal and celebration of 'important' 'early' photographs in the Collection around the centenary of photography in 1939, with his exhibition *A Centenary of Photography 1839–1939*. Under Gibbs-Smith's guidance, the Collection was gradually and incompletely sifted into categories of 'Special' or 'Reference'. 'Special' applied to photographs deemed important or early as well as those considered artistic, and 'Reference' applied to photographs only considered of value for their subject matter.

In 1977 the first curatorial Photography Department was formed at the Museum. This new venture had a mandate for 'the aesthetics of photography'. This was spurred into being in part by the influential collecting and display of contemporary photography by the Circulation

Department at the Museum, and in part by the increasing financial value ascribed to photographs by the art market. This new curatorial section had limited resources and much to defend in terms of the status of photography as an art form, within the Museum as well as within the sector more generally. The need to forge this new identity led to further marginalisation of 'reference' photographs, though this was often neither particularly deliberate nor complete. Analysis of the serial readings of this Collection as either 'reference' or 'artistic/ important' shows what was gained and lost with each framing. Each attempt at sorting the Collection has proved to be interventive rather than conclusive – but each shuffling permits new meanings to surface for different areas of scholarship, often beyond the photographic.

One result of Cole's initial utopian and expansive remit is that cries of lack of storage space have been emanating from the NAL almost since it first began. Storage space became a driver for purges, and accelerated thinking on shrinking and reorientation of the Collection. This had reached new levels by the early 1980s, when an internal briefing discussing NAL photographs noted:

> If the government mandate was given to the V&A Photograph Collection in 1977 to collect 'the aesthetics of photography' then there are huge areas within the existing collection that are not relevant to this mandate … The collection … should be more streamlined and structured with a real core of fine photographic work. The 'document' photographs take up an enormous amount of valuable storage space … I would like to feel that the important items in the collection will have the level of care and attention that they deserve, rather than essentially being lost in the bowels of this rambling, incontinent mammoth we have at the moment.[4]

Audiences and sources

The main users of the NAL before 1977 were art students, and rhetoric on the aims of the Photography Collection was clearly geared towards their needs. Whole classes of students from colleges and schools around London were registered as readers as a matter of course. The NAL formed what was possibly the only major non-commercial photography collection organised by theme which was accessible to the middle and working classes in Britain.[5] Cole's dedication to building up a collection of photographs and other reproductions of art for art students could be

seen as subverting class boundaries.[6] His activity democratised access, through reproductions, for students from a range of backgrounds to artists' work otherwise unavailable to them. Through photographs they were also given the visual means to depict in their artwork places, people and things previously inaccessible, owing to class, gender or economic barriers. Artworks in private or foreign collections were photographed through Cole's efforts at an impressive rate under the rhetoric of improving British design and manufacture.

The Collection appears to have been well used throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1924 and 1933, for instance, internal reports show that between two and four thousand requests came in per year for boxes or portfolios of photographs. During this period, between four and six staff worked on the Photography Collection exclusively, managing retrievals for the public, indexing and cross-referencing, typing labels, dealing with enquiries and handling administration, representing a serious investment in managing this Collection. Indeed, documentation for photographic acquisitions was on a par with that of bronzes or paintings.[7]

Photographs poured into the NAL Collection during the nineteenth century: acquisitions made by Cole and other staff on museum-sponsored trips abroad, diplomatic or philanthropic gifts from the great and the good, purchases from individual photography firms and professionals catering to the art and heritage market, as well as from dealers, artist-photographers, amateur photographers and photography collectors.

Once clusters of specialist photographs were established from external experts, they sometimes accrued further as the Museum became known as a resource for such material, thereby extending the legacy beyond the instigator. Others were sustained solely on the personality of the donor and withered away once their influence ended. The legacy of this has left anomalous pockets of photographs – mountaineer P. J. Unna's collection of Austrian inn signs, engineer and historian Rex Wailes's photographs of windmills, W. G. Gibbons's photographs of the 'Street Lamps of Leamington Spa' (figure 13.2) – sat dormant in corners of a collection catering towards fine art photography. The examples listed above were acquired in the first half of the twentieth century – clearly Unna, Wailes and Gibbons saw the V&A as an obvious home for these photographs in that era, and in acquiring them the V&A confirmed that impression, showing that it had a broad reputation as a reference resource during these years, and still embraced that definition in its collecting.

The Photographic Studio at the Museum was a long-running source of

Figure 13.2: Photograph of a street lamp in Leamington Spa by W. G. Gibbons, c. 1950. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

images for the NAL, as an extra print of most images that the Studio created was made for the Collection. As well as photographs of objects the V&A owned, the Photographic Studio also produced many images of the Museum building and its surroundings, objects in other museums or private collections and objects in auctions. At the request of curators, the Photographic Studio also made prints for the NAL Collection from loaned negatives by external experts on a wide range of subjects such as Colonel Alexander Greenlaw's 1856 calotypes of India, lent to the Museum in 1910, or Captain C. J. P. Cave's 1930s negatives of cloud formations, lent in 1943 (figure 13.3). Such activity would later seem anathema to specialist photography curators, once values changed from information and collective endeavour to the art market, singularity and authorship.

Aside from the steady stream of images coming from the Photographic

Figure 13.3: *Chichester Harbour looking North, 21.8.33*. Photograph: Captain C. J. P. Cave, 1933. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Studio, the NAL obtained photographs from many other sources. Staff actively pursued exchanges of photographs with other museums and had long-running relationships with commercial firms of photographers producing for the art-historical market. Over time, the NAL acquired sets from firms and professionals who specialised in images of objects, collections, architecture and topography, such as Alinari in Florence, Jean Laurent in Madrid, Adolphe Braun et Cie in Dornach and Mieusement in Blois (later Paris). The Collection included many photographs collected or taken by travellers, tourists, experts or enthusiasts from a wide range of specialist areas. For instance, John Henry Parker, Alfred Percival Maudslay and Gertrude Bell all gave or sold sets of archaeological photographs to the V&A, and architectural photographs came from architects James Cubitt, Richard Phené Spiers and George Somers Clarke.

Photographs also came from dealers attempting to sell artworks to the Museum, and from firms sending photographically illustrated catalogues. These include photographs of electroplated objects made by Christofle et Cie in 1862 and from the stained-glass firms Powell and Sons and Lavers and Barraud in 1865. Photographic commissions and acquisitions were also sometimes connected to surrounding art

educational activity – for instance, the opening of the Royal School of Needlework in 1872 was reflected in a burst of accessioning of photographs of embroidery in the NAL. In this way the Collection tracked institutional enthusiasms, and now provides a research link back to such endeavours.

Material was acquired haphazardly as well as intentionally. This included donations by VIPs that curators didn't want to offend, photographs which arrived anonymously and so couldn't be returned or, as is particularly common, photographs which arrived as auxiliary material with other objects or collections that the Museum did definitely want. These types of acquisition have always been a factor in many institutions; as Schwartz notes, 'the history of making and keeping records is as littered with chaos, eccentricity, inconsistency, and downright subversion, as much as it is characterized by jointly agreed order, sequence and conformity'.[8]

The range and extent of these photographic sources position the Museum as a major 'centre of calculation' with a global network, heavily enmeshed with colonial projects as well as cultural and scientific education, and with photographs acting as a primary visual currency. This torrent of photographs coming into the Museum was matched by extensive outflows of photographic material. Photographs were loaned, toured, circulated throughout the UK, swapped with European partner organisations, published, loaned as lantern slides, sold as prints and postcards and presented as prizes to students. Here we see the Photography Collection cross-pollinating in far wider ecosystems, with aspects of their values being imported back into the Museum. In short, the Photography Collection was as strongly shaped by external forces and happenstance as it was by deliberate internal strategies.

Data systems, knowledge systems

The first catalogue of the Photography Collection was a list of 338 portfolios by subject issued in 1868. The volume also contained a subject index which listed photographs individually by topic. No photographers are mentioned here by name aside from Charles Thurston Thompson, Francis Bedford and Julia Margaret Cameron, again demonstrating the value system which privileged content over authorship – though here making exception for three photographers connected with the Museum.[9] Archival sources suggest that the catalogue was created by

the photographer and publisher Joseph Cundall, a close associate of Cole and founder member of the Royal Photographic Society.

All items entering the NAL, including photographs, were logged in the NAL Receiving Room Diaries, now held by the V&A Archive (VAA). The diaries record the date of receipt, the vendor or donor, whether they were a gift or purchase, how much was paid, the number of objects and a title or brief description. Photographs were logged separately in the Photographs Accession Registers, which run from 1863 to 1987. They also give the donor/vendor information, a brief description of each photograph or group of photographs and the content classification code they were assigned.

All of this collections management data contextualises and yields provenance information for photographs in the Collection. Although at times it has been considered superfluous or obsolete, it is pivotal data in terms of explaining why the photographs are here and where they came from. Revisiting these data sources allows submerged collections to resurface and become items of revitalised curatorial interest. They also provide detailed insight into the networks of staff, external experts, patrons, collectors, governments and commercial bodies shaping the Collection.

From 1863 to 1907 a classification code based on content was given to each photograph as it entered the NAL. The classification appears to have been first adopted to differentiate between schools of painting depicted in photographs but grew to include the categories shown (figure 13.4). These give us a sense of the breadth of the photographic collecting aims during the era when this system was in use. The majority of these thematic categories were divided further by painting school, for instance, or country. No photograph was exempt from this system while it was in use; famously, the photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron acquired before 1907 were assigned the category 'Photographic Studies for Paintings'. Those which could not be broken down into countries or schools were given other subcategories; for instance, 'Photographic Studies for Paintings' was divided into 'Figures at rest; Figures in motion; Foregrounds; Trees; Flowers, Fruit; Seascapes; Landscapes; Clouds; Shells; and Draperies'. It is clear, therefore, that photographs were considered primarily as reference material rather than art objects until Gibbs-Smith introduced his different ideas of photographic value in the late 1930s.

An incomplete, but more detailed, subject index also exists, running to 31 volumes. Of those, one lists solely photographs of paintings and drawings of the Virgin Mary, indicating the depth of

Class 1.	Anatomy.
2.	Architecture & Topography.
3.	Armour & Weapons.
4.	Books &c.
5.	Ceramics.
6.	Coins & Medals.
7.	Clocks, Watches & Sundials.
8.	Construction, Machinery &c.
9.	Costume.
10.	Enamels.
11.	Etching & engraving.
12.	Furniture and Woodwork.
13.	Gems.
14.	Glass.
15.	Gold & Silversmiths' Work.
16.	Heraldry.
17.	Brasses & Incised Slabs.
18.	Metal work.
19.	Mosaics & Inlays.
20.	Musical instruments.
21.	Ornament.
22.	Painting.
23.	Drawings.
24.	Photo. Studies for painting.
25.	Sculpture.
26.	Seals.
27.	Textiles.
28.	Portraits from life.
29.	Carts, Carriages, Horse Furniture &c.
30.	Shipping.
31.	Lettering.
32.	Gardens.
33.	Pageants & Plays.
34.	Photo. Process reproductions.
35.	Posters &c.
36.	Playing cards.
37.	War photographs.
38.	Miniatures.
39.	Mural painting.

Figure 13.4: List of categories of photographs in the National Art Library Photography Collection. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

specialist iconographical research the Collection supported. Updating the index was abandoned at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, and many of the other data systems listed above became more sparsely filled in or were abandoned altogether. Such trajectories accord with Thomas Richards's description in *The Imperial Archive*:

> Most Victorian epistemologies presupposed a superintending unity of knowledge … People began the 19th century believing that all the knowledge in the world fell into a great standing order, a category of categories, but, after dozens of Casaubons had failed to make sense of thousands of facts squeezed into library catalogues, biological taxonomies and philological treatises, they ended it by believing that the order of things was easier said than done. By 1900 not even the librarians at the British Museum seriously believed they would be able to chip away at this backlog of knowledge.[10]

By the time Gibbs-Smith made his changes to the remit of the Collection, the NAL was far from the only photographic reference collection.

The Witt and Conway libraries at the Courtauld amassed, for their students, large collections of photographs of paintings, architecture and sculpture, most art schools and local museums and institutes had burgeoning photograph collections and photographically illustrated art books were increasingly available, all of which encroached on the usefulness of the NAL Collection. Similar initiatives abroad, such as the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and the Winckelmann-Institut at Humboldt University, were also peer organisations in reference photography collecting.[11] Commercial picture libraries and photo-agencies were also increasingly taking over aspects of image provision formerly served by the NAL Collection, and as purely commercial operations these were able to organise and market their offer in ways the library could not.[12]

Gibbs-Smith published a further catalogue/finding aid to the Collection in 1937 which emphasised the new direction the Collection took under his review. Gibbs-Smith split the Collection into 'Classified' photographs and 'X' boxes – the 'X' boxes contained photographs valuable on artistic grounds, while the 'classified' were viewed as reference photographs. This is the first documented point of schism between the two frameworks for regarding photographs within the Museum, and it was to have a long-lasting effect in enforcing boundaries between the two value systems. While the framing valorised certain photographs and raised both their metaphorical and financial value as art objects, it removed them from their previous use in what Latour terms a 'centre of calculation', meaning that they lost their place in the accumulated visual knowledge system that their earlier organisation by content was designed to provide.[13] Though their authorship, technique and artistic or compositional qualities were brought to light and celebrated, their activity as photographic documents was necessarily suppressed. By contrast, the 'reference' photographs rapidly lost value, less effort was expended in making sure these areas of the Collection remained navigable, whole chunks were transferred to other departments or disposed of and entropy set in. By 1977 over 308,000 photographs had been accessioned in total, but around half of that number had come in before 1900, and the pace of collecting dropped off particularly sharply during and after the Second World War. The reference use value of the Collection as a whole gradually lost its order, lost its usability and lost its place in the public consciousness as a resource.

After Gibbs-Smith, various paper-based photographic cataloguing initiatives took hold until the institution of electronic cataloguing

in 1988, and photographs continued to enter the Collection and be listed in the register to varying degrees of specificity. Giving photographs classification codes by subject had been abandoned, though as Edwards notes, 'Categories have ideological origins, and their consequences become naturalized within institutional practices and agendas and resonate through them long after their apparent demise.'[14] All surviving rhetoric regarding photographic cataloguing describes impossible backlogs and serial reorderings. By the mid-1970s, the percentage of the Collection which was meaningfully catalogued or accessible to the public was small, and centred on recent acquisitions and famous photographers. The proportion of 'submerged' photographs was far higher.

The new curatorial Photography Section formed in 1977 to collect 'the art of photography' reoriented the Collection entirely around the singular authorship of the photographer. Collection boxes were divided into runs demarked '19th century British photographers', '19th century Foreign photographers', '20th century British photographers', '20th century Foreign photographers', and a partial run of topographical boxes organised by country and separated into those in which the photographer was known, versus unknown. Topographical photographs were liminal: some were relegated and others sorted into the new Collection. The division into known/unknown emphasises the new value system regarding the centrality of the authors of the works. The new runs of topographical boxes covered European countries for the most part, plus Australia and Iran. The uneven range of countries can be ascribed partly to the V&A's designated areas of collecting interest at different points in time, and also to historical attitudes as to which countries were deemed to produce art, architecture and design worthy of record. Regarding the UK, photographs of London had been re-sorted into a run in the new Collection, but 20,000 photographs of buildings in the rest of the UK had not.

Internal biases may have played a part in these divisions, but the role of the visiting researcher in directing staff time towards areas of the Collection, and museum participation in various funded research projects, have both been significant factors affecting which areas of the Collection got catalogued and rehoused. Therefore, biases among funding bodies and the wider research community were also made manifest in the Collection. Recent examples of geographically focused externally funded activity include cataloguing and rehousing of photographs of Egypt thanks to funding from The Barakat Trust and cataloguing of photographs of the Alhambra connected with the

REMAI project funded by the EU Culture Programme. Another factor that has shaped the Collection, although at times overlooked, is the interaction of the public with the Museum, through making collections enquiries and digitisation requests and visiting with their own objects for the Museum's monthly 'Opinions Service'.

Such instances form key moments of direct redress, where curatorial opinions of public interests and preferences meet reality and encourage curators to perform research outside their own lines of enquiry. The celebration or submergence of sets of photographs within the Collection can therefore be attributed to forces outside the Museum, such as trends in academia, evolving funding streams, public requests or pressure from donors, as much as to forces within the institution.

The ability to compare similar art objects or works by the same artist through photographic surrogates transformed expertise in applied and fine art, as Prince Albert realised in 1853 through his Raphael project, and as many scholars have discussed since.[15] This was particularly relevant for the V&A, since in 1910 the curatorial structure was reordered by material (creating departments of Architecture and Sculpture, Woodwork, Metalwork, Textiles, etc.). These material specialisms required broad knowledge bases rooted in the physicality of things, in contrast to museums ordered primarily by geography or art-historical period. These material-specific departments arguably created an even greater reliance on photographs to support an expansive curatorial brief.

Each departmental photography collection reflects art and design through a different prism. For instance, among the photographs transferred from the NAL Collection to the Metalwork Department can be found Eugène Atget's photographs of Parisian ironwork, photographs by Pascal Sébah of the collections of the Arab Museum in Cairo, photographs by Georges Saboungi of metalwork in Beirut and photographs of objects included in the International Exhibition of Persian Art held at Burlington House in 1931. Alongside these were boxes of sundry other photographs of a vast array of church plate, jewellery, arms and armour, gold and silversmith's work, church doors, reliquaries, croziers, light fittings, weathervanes, inn signs, lead pipe-heads and gutters, enamels, bells and clocks. Each Department has, or has had, similarly diverse and overwhelming arrays of material-specific photographs reflecting departmental interests. These submerged photographs still have much to say, both to the disciplines their contents reflect and to the history of photography, in that they provide a window into research history across disciplines and demonstrate the role of photography in those sectors.

Purges

Promotion of the photographic holdings at the NAL appears to have gradually dwindled during the twentieth century. Groups of photographs were transferred from the NAL into internal curatorial department resources from the 1900s onwards, the reasoning being that they were too little used by the public – though whether this was due to a lack of interest or connected to the lack of promotion is not clear. The Museum itself was evolving further and further away from Cole's art-for-all approach in favour of connoisseurship and a specialised European art-historical focus celebrating original art treasures. Correspondingly, the value of 'reproductions' of all types within the Museum declined radically during the early part of the twentieth century. The situation also suggests a certain acceptance that the nineteenth-century vision for the Photography Collection was no longer a feasible construct, and the Collection had to shrink in terms of what it already held and in what it might collect in future. This was by no means a process unique to this particular collection. Richards describes this trajectory from utopian to entropic archive: 'the grand narrative of the nineteenth century archive fragments into smaller narratives of interdepartmental disputation and finally into autonomous practices such as the image of the British Museum "basement", a peripheral zone of lost or forgotten knowledge buried deep within the catacombs of the London archive'.[16]

Photographs transferred from the NAL into curatorial departments included images of all kinds of objects, from textiles, sculpture, woodwork, metalwork and paintings to manuscripts and drawings. Many represent apparently rather niche areas of applied art. As Edwards notes, 'Different institutions constitute different thought landscapes which both enable or hamper research'; this is even true between different departments within the same museum or institution. The photographs' combined meaning as a grouped and ordered entity on a particular subject embodied a different value system which brought qualities to the surface that were entirely distinct from appreciation of individual photographs as art objects.

Contrary to Berenson's famous phrase, 'Photographs! Photographs! In our work one can never have enough!', even images relating to the most canonised areas of art-historical study were not exempt from purges and relegation. Over 10,000 photographs of European paintings and drawings from all centuries, divided by school, were sent on long loan to the University of Essex in 1977 and returned to

the Museum in 2001, and until recently were in a remote basement store. Though they were conserved and listed in a spreadsheet on their return, they were not regularly consulted by photography curators, and were entirely unknown to paintings and drawings curators, for whom they might also have held relevance. These are now re-entering the photographic canon as examples of masterpieces of early photography – for instance, the photographs by Robert Bingham and others for Prince Albert's Raphael project form part of this group.

Many of the photographs which were relegated in the first half of the twentieth century depicted non-Western art and people, reflecting wider museum values during that era as the institution moved to a European art-historical focus. The University of Essex loan, however, shows that by the 1970s, it was art history itself which was abandoned in favour of the canon of photography-as-art, at least within the Photography Collection. Many nature photographs were transferred from the V&A to the Natural History Museum Archive and Library in 1981, and photographs of military uniforms were transferred to the Imperial War Museum during the same year, both seen as insufficiently artistic to fit the new curatorial section's brief.

Another grouping of submerged photographic material originally within the NAL was the National Art Slide Library (NASL). This collection embodied photography as a means of communication rather than an exploration of the medium as an art form. Anyone in the country could borrow Museum slides for the cost of postage and could give lectures with them of their own devising. The liminal nature of this collection is evidenced by it later becoming part of the V&A Picture Library, shifting from a scholarly setting within the Museum to a commercial one. This collection was in operation from 1898 until 1992, at which point the bulk of the 80,000 lantern and 35 mm slides was disposed of by the Museum and transferred to Leicester Polytechnic Library (now De Montfort University Library), though a further 6,400 NASL lantern slides were found in the V&A Photographic Studio negative store by the present author in 2018 and moved into the curatorial Photography Collection. The rationale behind the initial transfer was that the slides (and indeed the physical holdings of the Picture Library altogether) had lost their use value with the rise of digital images and presentation software. Annebella Pollen, discussing the similar fate of the University of Brighton Slide Library, summarises the reasons given for disposal as follows: 'It [the slide collection] was too big a problem; it took too much room in a building under pressure to create further study space; individually the items were tiny transparent

slivers; together they were a bulky burden that must be broken up.'[17] The V&A slides were so submerged as to be unintelligible as photographic objects and were considered in the 1990s only as an obsolete data source. However, both De Montfort and the V&A are now revisiting the importance of these objects in photographic and epistemic terms to explore the circulation of images, the history of visual tools in art education and social and time-based performances of photography.

Regular targets for the disposal process were hand-painted photographs of art objects, which have a curious history of their own within the V&A. An early mention of these concerns hand-coloured photographs of objects from the Louvre, which went on display in the first iteration of the Circulating Museum in 1860. Making these unique objects was time-consuming and expensive, but they were desirable for lectures and for circulation as a way of disseminating the art objects visibly and accurately. Much resource was assigned to creating hand-coloured large-format photographs of V&A objects. Particularly favoured were painted photographs of colourful textiles such as the fourteenth-century Syon Cope. The NAL holds an 1868 book advising on techniques for painting photographs.[18] Early examples were collected from external sources, such as painted photographs from the stained-glass artist Franz Xaver Zettler of works of art belonging to King Ludwig II of Bavaria (figure 13.5). The latter examples are only half-painted to display the technique but were turned into chromolithographs and published in around 1874.[19] The most ambitious examples are undoubtedly the hand-coloured photographs of the Bayeux Tapestry.[20] These were made to form a life-size replica of the Tapestry for display at the International Exhibition of 1873. Five copies were made, of which the Museum acquired two – one complete on a rolling mechanism which allowed visitors to scroll through the tapestry, and the other in sections for ease of circulation to other institutions. Both copies were used and displayed extensively, before falling into complete disfavour.

The painted photographs of V&A objects, despite their uniqueness and the hours of work that went into their creation, also fell from popularity and understanding almost completely in the twentieth century, perhaps falling victim to the same distrust of colour in photographs discussed by Edwards (Chapter 2). There were at least 208 of these which were initially housed with the Paintings Collection, though the most appropriate department for them was often disputed. Remaining examples are generally large, battered through use and not immediately recognisable as painted photographs – they resemble slightly uncanny paintings, which in many senses they are. One can see

Figure 13.5: Hand-coloured salted paper print of a house altar made for Duke Albrecht of Bavaria, Franz Xaver Zettler, early 1870s (no. 60-1961). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

why they might have been marginalised. A note from Paintings Curator Peter Ward-Jackson dated 1960 describes them in a way that sets up the conditions for non- and submerged collections:

> A good deal of money was spent on buying these photographs, between 1880 and 1905. Since then the department appears to have abandoned any idea of building up a collection of works of art, and the question arises whether the small haphazard collection which we possess is of any use, and if so whether it properly belongs in a department otherwise entirely devoted to the graphic arts. Are not the photographs which shew Museum objects superfluous, as long as the objects themselves can be seen in the Museum?[21]

However, recent curatorship has reclaimed some surviving examples of this work. One was put on display as the first object in the *Opus Anglicanum* exhibition at the V&A in 2016 to represent a particularly rare piece of textile and to demonstrate the depth of interest the Museum had in this particular object in the 1880s. Another example was included in the opening display of the Photography Centre at the V&A in 2018 to represent the Museum's long and creative engagement with photography, and the complete Bayeux Tapestry replica was shown in the V&A's 2019 Tim Walker exhibition and used by the photographer as inspiration for new work. These objects have been re-evaluated as documents in that they contain information about the colours of objects which have since faded or been lost, but their popularity also denotes a contemporary redrawing of the boundaries of the 'photographic' to embrace such liminal and multimedial creations.

Conclusion

The gradual reclamation of photographs-as-artworks begun by Gibbs-Smith in the 1930s and culminating in the formation of the curatorial section for photography in the 1970s did an enormous amount to support the study of photography, to engender a desire for photographic exhibitions in the public consciousness and to give seminal photographic works a serious platform within the Museum. Much of this was done in the face of weighty arguments both inside and outside the Museum that photographs were a lesser form of art than other Museum objects, so it made sense that the more functional aspects of

the Collection were suppressed, while the artistic aspect had to be so robustly and continuously defended. Edwards notes that 'photographs present us with perhaps the most perplexing kind of object, being, with equal epistemological force and symbiotic power, both collections and "non-collections"'. Within an artistic frame, the epistemological energy contained in the Collection was necessarily downplayed. However, the contemporary era has placed photography at the heart of the museum, so greater space can now be given to the functions of photographs and their status as documents in dialogue with artistic values, rather than maintaining a division between art and reference.

Part of the ecosystem of museum photographs involves entropy, decay and waste. Photographs have been disposed of almost since they began to be acquired, though it is important to note that 'disposal' in a museum context does not often mean outright destruction – the phrase covers transfers to other departments or other institutions and deaccessioning as a 'handling collection', among other endpoints, and in the United States it can mean sale or trade of collections.[22] Even within material historically earmarked for disposal, a surprising amount has later resurfaced within the Collection – clearly librarians and curators had a hard time actually getting rid of things. Photographs were put in far-away cupboards with a note saying 'for disposal', and then found and rehabilitated later by a new era of curators with different research agendas – a classic example of museum ecosystem cycles at work.

The Photography Collection also purged itself of photographs by giving them to other Museum Departments as reference. This occurred in a steady stream throughout the twentieth century, though notable bulk transfers took place in 1981, in particular to facilitate the move of the Collection from the library to collection stores. Lists were drawn up of boxes of photographs relevant to each Collections Department and were duly offered and accepted or rejected by curators in those specialisms. Some photographs with perceived departmental interest (such as the Liegnitz Minutolisches series) were retained in the Photography Collection due to being 'early' – as in, according with what Edwards calls the 'dominant discourse of rare early photography'. Only a few photographs were disposed of outright for being considered 'duplicates', or for condition reasons such as being 'too faded', or 'oxidising fast'. Physical decay accelerated knowledge decay, as both individual photographs and their place in knowledge systems suffered data loss.

The degree to which the Collection has seethed with epistemological possibilities, has been shuffled and reshuffled between library boxes, museum walls, filing cabinets and back again, has been formidable, and

remains unmatched by any other medium in the V&A. Its unremarked mapping of wider trends in curation and of museum history is only now being engaged with. An ecosystem involves generation, replication, movement and decay/loss, all characteristics embodied by this Collection more than any other in the Museum. Some would say this happens despite photographs in general being such static and unchanging, often overlooked, little paper objects – indeed, one might say precisely because of that. The Museum continually exfoliated photographs, and all this sloughed photographic matter was kept and numbered within the library to service utopian ideals of universal knowledge.

These photographic ecosystems are even now far from dormant. For example, 450 nineteenth-century photographs recently surfaced in Textile Department stores and were transferred back into the Photography Collection due to their financial value, perceived historical interest and consideration as photographic artworks. These were former NAL photographs which showed examples of traditional dress in different countries, namely Japan, Serbia, China, the Netherlands, Egypt, France, India, Spain, Ethiopia and Croatia. Seemingly gathered from the NAL and used as clothing reference by former Keeper of the Engraving, Illustration and Design Department, James Laver (1899–1975), they include works by such canonical photographers as Roger Fenton, Bourne and Shepherd, James Robertson, Felice Beato, Charles Clifford, Emile Bechard, Frank Mason Good and others now being actively researched. Our current photographic values make this kind of discovery feel surprising – how can works by such canonical photographers have been relegated? – but the history and previous uses of the Collection put this find and other similar internal resurfacing of photographs in context.

It is curious to see such inert items – a faded albumen photograph of objects in the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867, an Alinari photograph of Vicenza, a Dovizielli photograph of Rome – having such contested and lively paths through the Museum. But it is the paper trails which tell these stories: seldom are they inscribed on the objects themselves. Only the registers and archive files can tell us that this photograph was given to the Museum by Robert Louis Stevenson, or that photograph used to be part of the painter John Singer Sargent's image reference collection, or that photograph was used as inspiration by the architects building the Museum.

Individual images also lived out their own life cycles of negative generation, print generation, cataloguing, display, replication, publication and disposal, leaving residues and remains within Museum

collections and systems at every step. Groups of photographs fell (and fall) in and out of fashion more drastically than is commonly accepted. This is healthy rather than something to be avoided, but needs to be factored into disposal decisions – the V&A's collections show that having material in a continual process of relegation and recovery can benefit exhibitions and research, whereas a more tightly edited collection could lead to stasis.

Though disposal is not always a negative – as this chapter has indicated – finding meaning in photographs often depends on their originating/supporting data and on expertise beyond the photographic, so if that data and expertise are better served by another institution, the research community benefits if the photographs move to join it.

This chapter is an attempt to chart the history of a collection as an evolving entity gathering and shaping visual knowledge, in contrast to the tone of the following more traditional collections history of key photographers and collections:

> If we so enquire into the function of archives in society, then we must deal with two intimately related, but separately conceived themes: 'knowledge and the shaping of archives' and 'archives and the shaping of knowledge'. Imbricated in these themes is the exercise of power – power *over* information and power *of* information institutions.[23]

From Cole's initial use of photography as a proxy to expand the Museum territory to curatorial photography collections mushrooming in order to act as material expressions of expertise, one can see how photographs acted as proxies, flags and territorial markers within museums. The departmental filing cabinets of photographs also provided a reassuring bastion of expertise. Such material contributed to the continual shaping and shedding of departmental specialisms and boundaries and assertion of cultural territory between individual staff, departments and museums.

What makes the V&A Photography Collection such an interesting case to study is that it has serially designated itself a reference collection and an artistic one; unpicking the scars of that dramatic transfer of meaning helps us to explore the polysemy of photographs and allows us to keep a weather eye on that which currently forms the canon of photography.

Notes

1 Wilder 2017, 378.
2 Edwards 2017, 3.
3 Schwartz 1995, 50.
4 Departmental filing, 1981.
5 This is evidenced by rhetoric by Henry Cole and by physical changes to the Museum, such as installation of electric light so that workers could attend in the evenings.
6 Careers of the National Art Training School 'National Scholars' were recorded for the period 1863–84 to show the kinds of jobs they came from and went into after their studies. Examples included shoemakers becoming carpet designers, house decorators becoming artists and tailors becoming design teachers. Many students went to work as designers in the Potteries, or as art teachers in regional art schools.
7 It should be noted that although much of the theory being drawn on in this chapter discusses 'the archive', these NAL photographs always formed a 'Collection'. The difference between the two, at least as far as this author is concerned, is that a collection has a flat structure – each object stands alone and has equal official status – whereas an archive relies on a hierarchical management structure of fonds, series, files and items, each one nesting inside the other.
8 Schwartz and Cook 2002, 14.
9 Thurston Thompson was on the Museum's payroll as 'Official Photographer', Bedford photographed objects for the Museum in 1853 and Cameron exhibited her photographs at the Museum in 1865.
10 Richards 1993, 4.
11 Klamm 2016, 70.
12 Blaschke 2016, 10.
13 Latour 1994.
14 Edwards 2019, 73.
15 For example, Benjamin 1973 [1935]; Malraux 1967; Roberts 1995.
16 Richards 1993, 16.
17 Pollen 2021, 133.
18 Rees, James and James 1868.
19 Enzler et al. 1874.
20 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/caring-for-our-collections/photographing-bayeux [accessed 02.06.2022].
21 VAA, MA/50/2/52.
22 https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/disposal [accessed 02.06.2022].
23 Schwartz and Cook 2002, 9.

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14

Revitalising research: the fall and rise of the furniture image collection

Kate Hay

Between the early 1960s and the 1980s the V&A's Furniture Department built up a visual archive amounting to about 85,000 images of furniture, here referred to as the 'furniture research images collection'.[1] This chapter is an account of this working image collection, which was little used and effectively closed for over 20 years until the moment for reassessment arrived. Before the internet revolutionised image searching, this sizeable databank of photographic prints and cuttings, meticulously filed by furniture type and date, was a valuable tool for scholarly research, within a wider ecosystem of departmental files and archives relating to furniture history. However, by the late 1990s, changing priorities and space constraints meant that most of the 42 increasingly dilapidated filing cabinets had been moved to an off-site store at Blythe House, becoming an 'archaeological deposit' of previous curatorial times. As in other V&A collections, changes in storage facilities from the mid-2010s have more recently prompted a critical review of all such 'non-collection' material deposited within them. This is a vulnerable moment for such material, both practically and intellectually. The decision to invest time and effort in preserving this particular collection was informed both by a reassessment of its potential ongoing use as a curatorial resource and by recent research into the photographic cultures of museums and the history of collections, which has illuminated its historical value.

Scope of the furniture research images collection

The collection comprises a set of images of historic furniture, about half being British furniture dating from before 1900, and most of the rest European. The images, reflecting the scope of the V&A's Furniture Collection, cover a wide range of object types, including musical instruments, clocks and architectural woodwork. Each image is pasted onto a standard cardboard mount, with the mounts in turn made to fit the filing cabinet drawers that housed them. Image quality ranges from 10 x 8-inch professional monochrome photographic prints, through cuttings from magazines and catalogues to informal photographs taken by curators, the latter the result of everyday image making being increasingly delegated to curators, especially after the mid-twentieth century. The image quality is mixed, in ways that mark the collection within museum value systems as an informational research tool rather than as a collection of historical photographs (figure 14.1).

The images accumulated incrementally, with no recorded collecting policy other than the aim to illustrate as wide a range of historical furniture as possible, nor any written guide to their arrangement. The first task in their reassessment was therefore to compile a spreadsheet listing the more than 1,500 categories. The images are arranged by nationality, type and date of furniture, mirroring the arrangement of the Furniture Collection object files. They are further subdivided into narrowly defined categories according to decoration. For instance, within 'British: 18/2 [second quarter of the eighteenth century, 1725–50]: side tables' there are numerous subdivisions such as 'four legs, miscellaneous figure carving on knees', a category that contains 76 images, some of which can be seen in figure 14.2.

Supporting information is minimal, usually consisting of the original printed caption or a handwritten annotation on the mount; very rarely are designers or makers credited, since they were usually unknown. Some images are annotated with valuable cross-references, for instance photographs taken of a table at Clandon Park in Surrey (figure 14.3). Here the serial number of the card is top right, plus a second number within a circle, added when the image was micro-fiched in the 1980s. The initials and date, bottom right, indicate that the photographs were taken in 1968 by John Hardy, a V&A Furniture Curator. Various hands have added other notes: descriptive comments, a reference to an illustration in *Country Life* magazine in 1927 and a
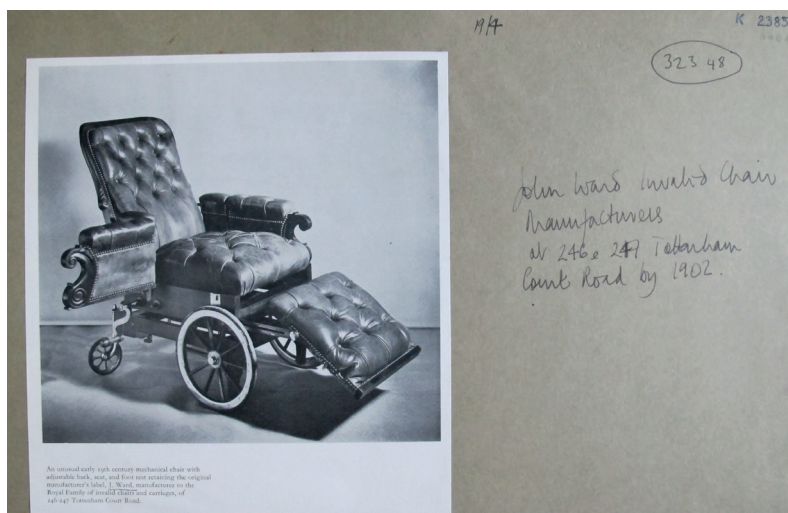
Figure 14.1: An early twentieth-century invalid chair by John Ward
(author's photograph).

Figure 14.2: Selection of images in the category 'British: 18/2:
side tables; four legs, miscellaneous figure carving on knees'
(author's photograph).

note of a similar table at Longford Castle, illustrating how the mounts
remained in active use as gathering points for recording informal and
fractured information.

Despite the informal quality of the Clandon Park photographs,
they functioned as useful references for research into carved side
tables. Furthermore, this card demonstrates the potential wider value
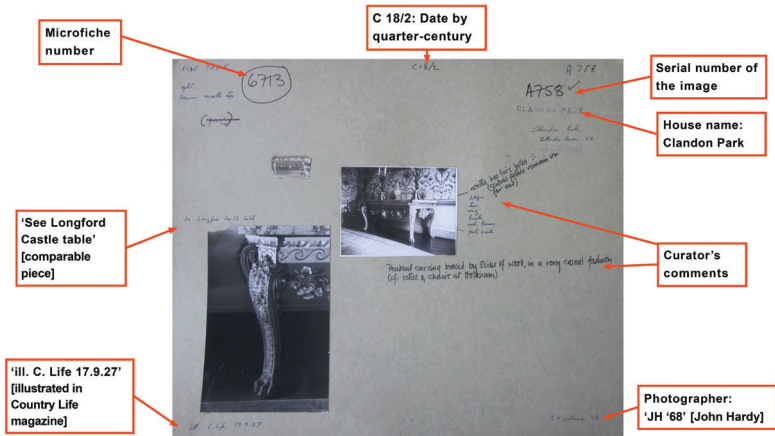
Figure 14.3: Curator photographs with handwritten annotations showing a table at Clandon Park (National Trust) in 1968, since destroyed by fire (author's photograph).

Figure 14.4: Record shot of the Clandon Park side table taken by the National Trust before the 2015 fire. © National Trust.

of the research image collection as record photographs. Recently, National Trust curators were interested in having a copy of this card, as the table did not survive a disastrous fire that destroyed the interiors of Clandon Park in 2015. The image carries some otherwise unrecorded 'object history', notably the room in which the table was displayed in 1968.[2] This is not a unique case: house owners do not always have photographs of their furniture or interiors, and sometimes ask for departmental photographs in cases of theft or other loss (figure 14.4).[3]

Origins

Creating a visual archive was integral to attempts during the 1960s to raise curatorial standards and associated research values within the Furniture Department. In order to more fully understand the motives of the curators who established the image collection and to locate it within an historiography of furniture studies, it has been helpful to investigate its origins. My account is the result of an 'auto-ethnographic' exercise, drawing on colleagues' recollections, published histories of the Department and contemporary memoranda and reports from departmental files, as well as critically addressing my own experience of working in the Department.[4]

An examination of departmental correspondence tells us that Hender Delves Molesworth, Keeper of Woodwork (1954–66), founded the research image collection in the early 1960s with the express aims of improving scholarship within the V&A and furthering the development of furniture history as an academic discipline. He inherited a department still preoccupied with re-establishing its galleries and stores after the Second World War. He became concerned by its lack of academic rigour, having transferred, under sufferance, from the Keepership of Sculpture, a field in which scholarship was highly developed.[5]

In July 1962 Molesworth wrote to the Director, Sir George Trenchard Cox:

> As some semblance of physical order has been established … we come to the next stage of the Department's needs; serious and proper cataloguing and scholarship … to this end … it was agreed that the museum should establish a sort of 'Witt' library of furniture and furnishings, concentrating on English for a start.[6]

Among unregistered departmental papers is another handwritten draft memorandum to the Director, possibly never sent, which reveals his deeper frustrations:

> We need serious catalogues and something more than just picture books with notes … nothing of quality has ever been presented from the Museum … [a] centre for the consultation of basic material is essential before this can be attempted. Nothing has been done in the hundred years of our existence – the departmental files are trivial and the whole so-called study of English furniture and decoration has depended on one or two outside enthusiasts … or the commercial interests of magazines or the trade.[7]

Before departmental research resources were established in the 1960s, furniture curators had indeed principally relied on publications by authors outside the Museum, one of the standard works being the *Dictionary of English Furniture,* co-authored by Ralph Edwards in 1924 while he was working for *Country Life,* which drew on the magazine's own extensive photographic archive.[8] At the V&A it had been usual for curators to keep their working photographs and files in their offices and remove them on their retirement rather than pool them.[9]

As an art historian, Molesworth saw a shared photograph collection as an essential tool for raising standards of scholarship in furniture studies. But the 'library of furniture and furnishings' he was boldly proposing would differ significantly in nature from the Witt Library of Art, which is arranged by artist. Since the makers of most historical furniture, especially before 1850, remain anonymous, the furniture photographs would be arranged instead by nationality, type and date. They would form a databank unparalleled in the field at the time, which would enable curators to make quick visual surveys of a wide range of furniture, for instance when identifying an undocumented piece.

Molesworth envisaged the photographs as one element of a wider set of shared departmental resources forming the foundations of rigorous evidence-based scholarship, which would include copies of documents such as house inventories and bills. In later years other resources were added, including object files for the accessioned Furniture Collection ('the catalogues') in which departmental values again cohered around photographs. A working library of essential reference books widened the information 'ecosystem' still further. These resources, built on the foundations laid by Molesworth, are

still used on a regular basis by everyone dealing with the Furniture Collection and continue to shape curatorial practice today. The value of easily accessible images to the study of decorative arts has been underlined by the rapid expansion of digital cataloguing, providing invaluable access to images of the V&A's collections both internally and on the website.

Under Molesworth's leadership, the Department began to amass photographs at an astonishing speed. By November 1965 he was able to inform the Director that 'We have some 40 to 50,000 photographs as a start. We have converted the old lavatories to house them, and our long-term plan [is] to build up this reference library.' He reported that field work was being undertaken by two members of staff photographing country houses, and that negatives acquired from two antiques trade photographers were being printed up by the V&A Photographic Studio. In addition, hundreds of photographic prints were sourced from antique dealers such as James Lewis of Brompton Road and Hotspur Ltd. Volunteers filed images from all the major art magazines such as *The Burlington Magazine*, *Apollo* and *Connoisseur*. Molesworth noted that he expected 'an annual accretion of photographs of … 6,000 to 7,000 prints a year at first, with a drop to perhaps only a thousand or two in succeeding years'. Molesworth was keen for furniture curators to actively collect and use the photographs and archival resources he had established in order to develop long-term expertise.[10]

Glass negatives

A by-product of this activity was an accumulation of glass negatives acquired from antiques trade photographers, antique dealers and furniture makers, from which the V&A Photographic Studio made prints to add to the Furniture Department photograph collection.[11] For instance, the trade photographers E. & N. Gibbs, on their closure in 1963, sold to the Department approximately 6,000 glass negatives.[12] The negatives arrived without any supporting information other than a serial number, but were valued for the visual information they carried. Glass negatives were also acquired from Raymond Fortt Photographers and other sources.[13] In 1963 Molesworth commented: 'incidentally this raises rather a problem of numbering and cataloguing and I suggest at least until the thing is well established, we save . . . staff time … and just regard them as departmental photos.'[14] Consequently, the glass negative collection, totalling about 25,000 plates, remains

Figure 14.5: One of the negatives bought from E. & N. Gibbs in 1963 for the purpose of making prints for the image collection (author's photograph).

the responsibility of the Furniture Section. Once printed, the negatives were moved to V&A stores or tucked away behind display cases in the galleries. Some later batches of negatives were never printed up, as the Photographic Studio had less time for the task after 1970.[15] However, curators felt that later donations should be accepted to save them from destruction, since many were being broken up and disposed of by studios and dealers owing to their bulk, weight and costly storage. Accepting glass negatives in order to preserve them denotes a shift in purpose away from practical use towards guardianship of historical photographic resources for the study of furniture history (figure 14.5).

Development and change

The acquisition of photographic prints as well as glass negatives continued apace. The photographic networks and deposits scattered through the Museum, of which Furniture and Woodwork is a prime example, were encouraged in 1969 by the V&A Director Sir John Pope-Hennessy, when he announced that, for the first time, each Department

would have £150 a year to enable them 'to improve their photographic collections and to procure books for their departmental libraries', in the hope that this would lead to 'a progressive modernisation of the photographic collections and other research facilities available to departments'.[16]

Peter Thornton, who in 1966 succeeded Molesworth as Keeper of Woodwork, enthusiastically took up the challenge and went on to make the Department a dynamic centre for furniture studies, changing its name to 'Furniture and Woodwork' to emphasise its renewed focus and newly energised value system at work. John Hardy, appointed in 1966, dedicated the next 10 years to building up the photograph collection and archive, undertaking photographic tours of country houses across the country. Furniture studies were in the ascendancy during the 1960s, partly driven by rising prices in the marketplace. The Department was closely involved with the founding of the Furniture History Society in 1964, at whose inaugural meeting Molesworth gave a presentation about the archive. Under Peter Thornton's keepership, the archive, with its integral photograph collection, became more widely known and was used by visiting dealers, auction-house specialists, interior decorators and researchers. The Department began to function as an international research hub, offering desks and its growing research resources to scholars, including Bill Reider, later at the Metropolitan Museum, New York; Reinier Baarsen, now Senior Curator of Furniture at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; and Gervase Jackson-Stops, who had a desk in the Department while working on the seminal exhibition *The Treasure Houses of Britain* for the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, in 1985. As Christopher Wilk has observed, 'Around these activities was a sense of novelty and excitement that revitalized the Furniture Department.'[17] Its influence spread: departing curators, understanding the value of research photographs, established similar photograph collections at Christie's in London and at the J. Paul Getty Museum in the USA.[18]

Eclipse of the research images collection within the 'Information Section'

Several concurrent factors, both internal to the V&A and externally, contributed to the gradual eclipse of the research images collection from the mid-1980s. Within the Furniture Department, the impetus of furniture studies moved away from the study of furniture styles

towards an interest in securely documented furniture. The value of connoisseurship, in which expertise is developed primarily by close study and comparing a wide variety of similar types, was falling out of favour. Clive Wainwright, a nineteenth-century specialist who took over the archives from John Hardy in 1976, renamed the archive the Furniture 'Information Section' to reflect its wider remit. While photographs were still collected and seen as a key tool, different categories of value came into play. Photographs were filed by known maker or location in 'craftsman' and 'buildings' files. Only anonymous furniture was filed in the general research images collection. The Information Section, which has been developed along these lines ever since and contains both documentation and photographs, is arranged specifically to be user-friendly for departmental needs. With a card index and, since 2004, a database, it allows free searching and cross-referencing. It is not required to follow archival or library conventions, as it holds in the most part copies and cuttings, with very few unique archival documents, and falls outside the scope of the accessioned V&A collections.

When the Information Section began to outgrow available office space in the 1980s, Wainwright began to microfiche the research images collection and gradually move it to store. Although no definite decision appears to have been taken, the image collection eventually fell into abeyance, since the microfiche, cumbersome to use, was in practice employed by few curators. The photographs themselves were still used occasionally by staff and researchers, particularly those working on eighteenth-century furniture. More recently, the availability of internet images for comparison work has also had an impact, reducing reliance on the research images collection. In 2002, when the Department merged physically with the Textiles and Fashion Department, the last few cabinets of images were removed from the offices to an off-site store.

While the remaining elements of the Information Section are still a much-valued in-house resource, in the last 20 years or so its use by external researchers has reduced, owing to wider changes in interior decorating taste that moved away from furnishing with antiques and, related, a marked downturn in the market for eighteenth-century 'brown furniture'. Many antique shops have closed, and auction houses hold fewer furniture sales.[19] Consequently, to a large extent the Information Section has reverted to its original purpose, as an in-house facility within which V&A curators share and develop expertise.

Revival

Improvements in collections management since the 1980s, largely driven by the digital revolution, the establishment of the V&A Archive (VAA) with professional archivists to care for the V&A's own historical documents and a wider interest in the history of museums and collections, have all contributed to a growing awareness that relatively neglected non-collection material within the Museum should be readdressed. In 2011 the V&A Archivist, in a review of all departmental non-collection material held in stores, stated that the furniture research image collection retained value and should be put in better order.[20]

While furniture curators recognised the importance of revisiting this material, other priorities intervened until 2017, when, with the store move impending, the need to act had become urgent. We agreed that the collection was a unique resource, with nothing similar available online, and that, if lost, it would be impossible to replicate. It was impractical to continue to add to the images, but we decided to preserve it as a closed collection, as a useful resource for furniture historians.

At a time of renewed interest at the V&A in 'working photograph' collections (including images taken for record-keeping purposes), the support of colleagues involved with other photograph collections was crucial. We were advised that collections such as ours, quite apart from their continued practical value, are increasingly seen as 'evidence of curatorial practice' and should be thought of as the 'archaeology of the discipline [of furniture history]'. Further, there is an awareness that, as evidence of museum history, it could have considerable future value we could not predict, since 'we do not yet know what questions might be asked in future about the material'.[21]

The idea of digitising and then disposing of the research images was briefly considered but dismissed as problematic for several reasons. Non-collection images are not a priority for digitisation by the hard-pressed V&A Photographic Studio. In any case, museum digitisation would involve the enormous task of cataloguing each image individually, and even then, they could not be made available online, as many are still in private or commercial copyright. Whether or not they were digitised, we agreed that the physical images themselves should be retained, following precepts established by the Florence Declaration on the preservation of photograph archives. We set about finding a long-term location for the images and restored them to good order.

Figure 14.6: One of a group of images of tables with humanoid feet recognised as a useful research set. From a glass negative donated by Raymond Fortt photographers (author's photograph).

The breakthrough came with the arrival of a new research curator, Jenny Saunt, who immediately recognised the value of the images for her work on the eighteenth-century furniture collection. To illustrate how useful this collection is as the 'archaeology of the discipline', she gave as an example a group of photographs of rare tables with feet carved in the shape of human shoes, such as that in figure 14.6, which provided vital context for a table she was cataloguing. The image collection provided her with a set of comparable tables brought together by earlier curators.

Figure 14.7: The team of volunteers taking digital photographs of the research images in the V&A Blythe House store, May 2018 (author's photograph).

Realising how much simpler it would be to browse through the images from our desks, Jenny Saunt courageously and ambitiously decided to set up a do-it-yourself programme of digital photography. The seren-dipitous result of the V&A value system, which prevented official photography, was that this project was in the end achieved by the Department. A team of student volunteers photographed all 85,000 photographs at speed over four weeks in May 2018 (figure 14.7), in an atmosphere of dedication and fun which helped to drive through such a repetitive and physically demanding project. The digital images were uploaded to departmental folders as JPEGs in the departmental shared drive, where they can be reviewed in folders as 'large icons' or opened as individual JPEG files. (As non-collections they are excluded from the digital collections management system (CMS) designed for the accessioned collections.) The digital images are now available from departmental desktops, bringing them back into regular use. The physical images have been allocated space in storage, where their long-term material existence is safeguarded, and they can be retrieved when required.[22]

There are few accounts of how the physical images were used in the Department, other than long-standing members' memories of using them as a quick ready-reference tool for public enquiries, and flicking through looking for comparable pieces.[23] In digital form they will have lasting value for enquiries or cataloguing arcane pieces of furniture. The study of furniture is essentially a visual discipline. Comparable

images, even if anonymous, are useful for 'getting your eye in' on salient features in a group of similar pieces. Furniture is rarely unique and usually follows prevailing styles; if 5 or 10 comparable examples can be reviewed, a richer understanding of the whole group is gained. Breakthroughs are often made through the careful study of a family of objects, and when a documented piece is found, improved attribution or dating can be made for the whole group. The image bank is useful to curators who care for a relatively static permanent collection, but need a wide knowledge of historical furniture elsewhere. It is of particular use to early-career curators, as a huge visual resource enabling them to review a range of comparative but relatively unpublished pieces.

In all, we have, with limited resources, succeeded in reviving, digitising and bringing back into use a departmental collection of non-accessioned images that had been in storage for more than two decades.[24] An important element of the Department's research resources, they had largely fallen out of sight, but are now easily accessible, both to V&A furniture curators and to other researchers on request, as an adjunct to growing online resources. The vulnerable physical images have been preserved as historical evidence for future curators and historians to examine as they will.

Notes

1   The Department of Woodwork was established in 1909. After many changes in name and organisational hierarchy, it became, in 2021, the Furniture Section within the Performance, Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department.
2   Correspondence between the author and Megan Wheeler and Sophie Chessum (National Trust).
3   Comment by Leela Meinertas, Senior Curator of Furniture, V&A, 2020.
4   For accounts of the development of furniture studies, see Thornton 1969; 1978; for the history of the Department, see Jervis 1990; Wilk 1996, 9–24.
5   John Hardy, who remembered Delves Molesworth, interviewed by the author, November 2019.
6   'History of the Information Section', in V&A 'buildings file', Furniture Section, V&A.
7   'History of the Information Section', in V&A 'buildings file', Furniture Section, V&A.
8   Macquoid and Edwards 1924 [1954]. Edwards later joined the Department, where he became Keeper.
9   An exception was William Arnold Thorpe, who worked in the Department from 1937 to 1962, latterly as Deputy Keeper, and left many folders of handwritten notes still retained in the Information Section.
10 'History of the Information Section', in V&A 'buildings file', Furniture Section, V&A. Molesworth, despite his keenness to establish the academic basis of furniture studies within the Museum, published very little on the subject himself.
11 Glass negatives were acquired from the antique dealers Phillips of Hitchin, the furniture makers Nicholls & Janes, the antiques trade photographers E. & N. Gibbs and Raymond Fortt, and others.
12 VAA MA/1/B1600.

13 VAA nominal file Fortt, Raymond, MA/1/F1016. Approximately 5,000 negatives in total.

14 Handwritten memo, Delves Molesworth to the Director, 19 July 1963. VAA MA/1/B1600: Blairman, H. & Sons Ltd. George Levy of Blairman's alerted Molesworth to the offer of the negatives by Mr N. L. Gibbs of E. & N. Gibbs, 31 Montague Road, E8, and donated £25 towards their purchase.

15 Printing was on a selective basis. Unfortunately, no record appears to survive noting which Gibbs negatives were printed and added to the Photography Collection. An early batch of Raymond Fortt negatives donated in 1964 was selectively printed, but later deliveries in 1972 and 1975 remained unprinted (V&A file Fortt, Raymond, MA/1/F1016); 6,000 negatives donated by the antique dealers Phillips of Hitchin were not printed but were accepted by the Department to preserve them as an archive. A total of 2,600 negatives from the furniture makers Nicholls & Janes, bought in 1969 for £125, were printed and added to the Information Files on the firm in the Furniture Department but not filed with the research image collection (V&A file Nicholls & Janes MA/1/N638).

16 Director's Memo, in 'History of the Information Section', in V&A 'buildings file', Furniture Section, V&A.

17 Keeper, 1990 to date, Christopher Wilk (1996, 18).

18 John Hardy took the idea to Christie's London and Gillian Wilson to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu.

19 See Quince n.d.

20 Marsden 2011. He recommended that 'Although they are little used now they do have some reference and research potential and are a significant document of the curatorship and connoisseurship at the V&A … The … collection should be rehoused as a matter of urgency.'

21 Personal communication with Elizabeth Edwards.

22 The boxes are trackable on the CMS using 'non-collection' nos NCOL.701 to 871-2020.

23 Leela Meinertas, Senior Curator of Furniture, remembers using them in this way and has championed their preservation.

24 I would like to thank V&A colleagues for their help and advice, especially Claire Allen-Johnstone, Elizabeth Edwards, John Hardy, Nick Humphrey, Sarah Medlam, Leela Meinertas, Ella Ravilious, Jenny Saunt (Oliver Ford Trust Curatorial Fellow) and Christopher Wilk. Thanks also go to Sophie Chessum and Megan Wheeler at the National Trust and all the volunteers who worked on this project, especially Jenny Casson, Ville Kinos and the team of V&A/Royal College of Art master's students who carried out the digitisation project, including Kamla Sultan Alolama, Stephanie Blythman, Jessica Eddie, Rhiannon Lewis, Mariana Lima, Elena Porter, Jekaterina Potasova, Eva-Maria Spampinato and Elif Uluca.

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Part VI
Digital

15

In the Photographic Studio

Richard Davis

From an interview with Ella Ravilious.

This intervention explores the interaction of curatorial value and photographic skill to create the public face of the Museum through its exhibition catalogues and other publications. In ways that resonate with Bethan Stevens, Tom Windross and Angus Patterson's accounts in this volume (Chapters 3, 4 and 12, respectively), Richard Davis reveals the intricate attention given to modes of reproduction as part of the Museum's ecosystem as it engages with the public sphere. This process is found across all museums, as the intersection of photographic practice and skill and curatorial value forms the base of the visualisation practices that enmesh object collections.

Richard Davis trained as a photographer and started work at the V&A in 1983. His first 10 years were largely spent working on the photographic needs of the press office, the Design Department and the Exhibitions Department. After a Photographic Studio restructuring in the mid-1990s, he began concentrating on object photography, and from 2008 until his retirement in 2020 he led the team working in the highly specialist field of object photography, including publication photography. His team is responsible for the high standard and much-emulated practice of museum photography for which the V&A is well known.

ER: Tell me about the different styles and challenges of object photography. In many ways, most museum photography is the same. With three-dimensional objects you start by looking at the object, assessing its

characteristics. What do you need to show? The form, the texture, the colour and any other important aspects. All objects have their challenges, but the basic principle of three-dimensional object photography is that you need to see the edges clearly defined from the background. This allows anyone viewing the image a sense of having the object in front of them. When you've been doing it for a long time, you develop a second nature as to how you need to light an object, but as with all photography, you're learning all the time … you're always developing.

Small two-dimensional objects are normally simpler, and basically you just need to make sure that it is lit evenly, but larger two-dimensional objects can present more of a challenge. Since the introduction of digital photography, large posters and large textiles are often photographed in sections these days, and the images are then digitally assembled to create an image of the whole object.

Digital photography has allowed us to create our images in a more time- and cost-efficient way. It has also allowed us to develop new techniques to deal with tricky objects.

We can also shoot more images of individual objects. In the time it would take to shoot two or three shots on film, we may be able to shoot 10 with digital equipment.

Another important consideration is ensuring that colours are represented accurately. At the V&A we try to keep this to a simple technical procedure.

ER: What are the particular challenges of glass for instance?
Glass isn't really typical of normal object photography. Clear and translucent glass requires a different technique from opaque objects (figure 15.1). It mainly requires backlight. This means that you have to pass the light through the glass rather than reflecting it off the surface.

Allowing the background to fade to a dark tone is a common technique but is not appropriate for all glass objects. Sometimes a strong side shadow can actually help to sit the object on the background, accentuating its shape and texture. On some occasions we struggle to get enough light through translucent glass to show the colour, but we have developed techniques using mirrors and reflectors behind the object to push more light through and almost falsify it. This is something that you can easily do with digital photography because you can digitally remove the mirror or reflector, but that wouldn't be possible with film.

Those are the normal techniques for clear and translucent glass, but there are many different types of glass object (figure 15.2). Opaque

Figure 15.1: Vase designed by Tapio Wirkkala for Iittala glassworks, Finland, 1950–64 (no. CIRC.438-1964). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

glass can often be photographed using the same techniques that we would use for normal three-dimensional objects. Some of the most challenging objects are some of the modern metalwork objects, often highly polished and sometimes spherical, conical or cylindrical in shape, which basically act as a mirror, reflecting every single thing in the room. You then have to control what's reflected onto the surface of the object. Often with highly reflective objects we completely surround the object with white, which is commonly known as a tent. This controls what's seen in the surface of the object, but can make it difficult to maintain edge detail, so we may try to strategically place strips of grey paper around the edges to help define the edges. Another particularly difficult type of object is the lustreware in the Ceramics Collection: very unpredictable in the way they behave under the lights and difficult to get right.

Figure 15.2: Glass decanter, made in northern Netherlands, 1660–90 (no. C.421-1936). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Much more enjoyable are objects such as costumes, sculpture or furniture that, I would say, lend themselves to photography, as you know that you're going to get an interesting image from them. Often, it's the nature of the surface of the object which gives a photographer a chance to do something creative.

Everything we photographed on film actually had to be achieved in one shot, but digital photography has allowed us to develop techniques; this often involves taking multiple shots with lights and reflectors in different places and then combining the images into layers, which allows us to use the parts of the image that look best and create one 'perfect' image. So, like some high-end advertising photography, what you see in the end product may have been assembled from half

a dozen different images. Until a few years ago, when newly recruited photographers started to receive training in these skills, most of the photographers in the V&A studio had never had any formal Photoshop or digital imaging training, so they learnt on the job.

Being a bit 'old school', my tendency is always to do as much as I possibly can with the camera. That basically means using my lighting skills and experience to capture an image which doesn't need too much post-production, but I must admit that in recent years I have come to rely on digital tricks a bit more.

ER: What about backgrounds?
The background is one of the most important choices we make when photographing an object. The choice we make really determines what the image will look like and allows us to show all of the different elements of the object. Since about the early to mid-1990s, we've adopted neutral backgrounds as a general rule, so that's white, black, grey and graduated tones of grey. Back in the 1980s, I can remember there was a fad for bright blue backgrounds. This was partly due to the increasing use of colour photography. Going further back, hessian backgrounds were popular in the 1970s.

If you look across the world of museum photography now, you'll see most museums have adopted the principle of neutral backgrounds, because a coloured background will affect the colour of the object, either in general or just in certain areas. This is not to say that you can't use coloured backgrounds by carefully isolating what's reflecting into the object, but I would say that images with coloured backgrounds can tend to look a bit dated. A lot of our photography is shot on a standard light-grey background paper, which allows you to create either an even tone or a gradation by controlling the light falling on the background. In this way, you can show a light-toned object against a dark background, but the base of the object can be on a lighter area to show a shadow which gives the object something to stand on rather than floating on an entirely dark background. The control of lighting is one of the photographer's greatest skills and is probably 90 per cent of most object photography.

ER: How much curatorial input is there in the way objects are photo-graphed?
We normally use our own initiative for standard shots, but it is important to get information from the curator, particularly if there is something about an object that they want to illustrate in an image so

that they can write or talk about it. It can save us a lot of time, because if we, for whatever reason, don't shoot that particular angle or detail, we have to go back to it later and do it again, which is never popular. For simple objects we don't really need much guidance, but for more complicated objects like furniture we often ask for a list of shots so that we don't miss anything.

The first major publication I did as my own project was the first of the Fashion in Detail series, which is titled *20th-Century Fashion in Detail* and was shot in the late 1980s. We'd always shot details of costumes, but this book concentrated on a single detail of a costume accompanied by a line drawing of the whole object. This marked the start of my interest in costume photography and the style that I later developed.

The kimono shot I took for the recent kimono exhibition *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (2020) (figure 15.3) is very typical of my costume photography. It is the style that I've been using for quite a long time. With costume photography, the longest time is often spent by the Textile Conservation Department, arranging the object on the mannequin or stand and getting it to look right. If we were shooting a book on kimonos, as we were in this case, we'd ask that we could set up and shoot three or more objects in one session, rather than having to keep swapping and changing. Once you've got the lighting set up for one, it makes it a lot more efficient for us to keep everything in roughly the same place and just make minor changes to suit each object. This could mean the photography of a kimono may take only an hour.

With most costume photography, you can probably shoot it comprehensively in two or three hours, but then the same amount of time is often spent in post-production, cleaning up backgrounds, doing any other digital retouching and then loading the images onto our digital asset management system. Generally we shoot a few standard views of costumes – front, three-quarters, side, back – and then the details. More often than not, the important details are fairly obvious to the eye, but a photographer's eye may see things in a slightly different way to a curator. We tend to see things in a visual way and recognise where an attractive image will come from, but it is often helpful to get the opinions of the curator.

Once the object is on the set, if it's an object we can handle ourselves in terms of turning it, then we can just crack on and shoot it without further assistance. If it's something complicated like a big wedding dress which needs to be turned by a conservator and rearranged, it could be in the studio all day.

Figure 15.3: Kimono, plain weave crepe silk with resist-dyed and embroidered decoration of bamboo and plum, Japan, 1910–30 (no. FE.17-1994). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

ER: How does exhibition catalogue photography relate to other photographic work the studio undertakes?
It's not different, generally. We apply the same standards to most of the photography we do, because we know at some stage any image could be published. We normally try to achieve the highest quality we

can within any time constraints. Sometimes, if you know that you're working on a particularly high-profile exhibition publication, you might put a bit more effort and time into it. But the general rule is that we apply the same principles and quality to everything we shoot. The only time we may try and lower standards a bit is if we're doing a large digitisation project.

A particular example springs to mind. We were shooting all of the shoes in the collection a few years ago (figure 15.4). The objects were just being taken out of storage and going straight onto a set, so they were not necessarily in their best condition. We tried to make that a bit more of a production line approach, where you don't put as much effort into it because the objects have not been properly prepared. That's really the only time that we try to persuade photographers to lower their standards a little bit. Photographers don't really like lowering their standards very much, so they still tend to try to make as good an image as they possibly can. Our current digitisation project, *Glass*, is slightly different because most of the objects are being checked by Conservation before coming to the photo studio, but it is still a bit of a production line, as we have the set permanently set up in a way that suits that type of object and its particular challenges.

ER: What do you think about when you position an object in front of the camera and do the set-up? Do you make a lot of creative choices?
As I said before, initially you're looking at the object and assessing its characteristics in terms of shape, texture, shininess and any other important aspects. You think about the background choice you need to make. You may also think about whether you need to use soft lighting or a harder, more directional light, or maybe a combination of both.

Then, you're looking for the obvious angle to shoot it from. Some objects are very obvious and others not so obvious. There have been odd occasions when modern ceramics have been shot upside down. That's not necessarily the photographer's fault. Sometimes even the curator doesn't know which way up they're supposed to be! Assessing the best angle, and asking how many shots do I need to take, which details should I be thinking of, are there any maker's marks that need to be recorded? Those are the main choices, really, and, as I've said, the biggest influence on the way you photograph an object is the background you choose.

I would say that there are basically two types of objects: things that you can easily apply creative style to, such as mounted costume (figure 15.5) and figure-type sculpture, and others which are more of

Figure 15.4: Green silk damask shoes, Great Britain, 1740s (nos T.47:1, 2-2008). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

a technical challenge, like highly reflective metalwork and ceramics. Often objects which are a technical challenge can also be shot creatively but require more time and effort.

I photographed quite a few Rodin sculptures a number of years ago when the Sculpture Gallery was being redisplayed. I think that I did about 20 of them in the end. They were a challenge in themselves because most of them are bronze. There are particular challenges to controlling the highlights on the dark bronze while also showing the patina on the surface (figure 15.6). Fortunately, I had enough time to overcome the technical challenges and also managed to add some creative input, which was satisfying. Marble, terracotta and wooden sculptures are normally easier to apply a creative lighting style to.

Most objects come to the studio. Photography is a lot easier to do in controlled studio conditions, and having to move enough kit into galleries is always hard work! It's only the real biggies – things that are physically fixed to walls or that are too fragile to move – that are photographed in situ. The types of objects that we photograph in the galleries are normally things like large sculptures, very large furniture and really large tapestries that we can't fit into the studio. We have often worked in galleries over the years, but it often limits the style of the images that you can shoot.

Figure 15.5: Theatre costume with matching accessories, worn by the female impersonator Danny La Rue as Widow Twankey, 1994–5 (nos S.1618:1 to 3-2014). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

ER: Do you think about the audience much when you're taking the photos?
Not really, to be quite honest. Our normal approach is to try to create an interesting, descriptive image of the object which allows the audience to view it almost as though they had the object in front of them and helps the viewer to understand the most important aspects of the object. Since the V&A is the national museum of art and design, I believe that

Figure 15.6: Bronze bust of the Duchesse de Choiseul by Auguste Rodin, cast by Montagutelli Frères, Paris, France, 1908 (no. A.46-1914). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

it is important to show audiences the Museum's objects in the best light possible and attract people to explore the collections either physically or online. Sometimes it is difficult when you're working so closely with the objects to think of it in that way; you're just doing your job, but that's what we've been trying to achieve, certainly for all of the time I've been doing object photography.

Publications are the main driving force behind our work and are normally the most rewarding part of our work. The images that we produce are such an important part of a publication, and generally speaking, we know that many people are going to look at the pictures but may not read all of the words. You might not be able to see all aspects of an object in one shot, but the important thing is allowing whoever's looking at the images, whether it's in a publication or, these days, published online and seen by a much bigger audience (see Chapter 4), the opportunity to understand that object.

ER: Do you think of yourself as a translator or a magician?

Not so much a magician, and I think translator's probably not quite the right word. I think maybe interpreter; you're interpreting the object, using your eye to understand the object in the first instance and trying to capture that, be it on film or digital media. There are times when you do things which allow the viewer to see things that you probably wouldn't be able to see with the object in front of you. There are times when you photograph something, particularly small objects, where you'll see detail much more clearly in the image than you would be able to see with your eye. Sometimes curators and even conservators see things in an image that they didn't realise were there. I remember some metal printing plates (figure 15.7) where I pulled out a lot more information than could normally be seen from just looking at them, by using the correct lighting technique. It's not really being a magician, it's just having the skills and technical knowledge to bring that information out.

In the digital age, we are viewing images of objects on large monitors, allowing us to see things much more clearly than you would normally, even on large-format film. The quality of the cameras and lenses that we have been using in recent years definitely allows us to see a lot more than the eye would.

ER: Do the photographers see more of the collection than curators and conservators?

I think that we see a much wider selection than most curators and conservators. Generally, the only people who handle as much of the collection as photographers are Technical Services. The photographers have the privilege of working with every part of the collection. I think the smallest thing I have photographed was a tiny single pearl, and some of the biggest are objects like Trajan's Column and the cast of Michelangelo's David.

We do see the full range, and every type of material. We have a certain style to our photography, but I wouldn't say that it's particularly different to what other institutions are doing. However, the V&A has been a leader in producing that style. I remember when the Rijksmuseum was about to reopen after an extensive refurbishment programme, one of its curators wanted to do the costume photography in a similar style to the V&A. They sent two of their photographers over to work with me for a couple of days. They quickly understood the techniques, and subsequently set up one of their studios in a similar way to ours so that they could produce a similar style.

Figure 15.7: Photographic printing plate, Woodburytype process showing a still-life image of fruits and a vase (no. RPS.1161-2019). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

A lot of what we do at the V&A follows fairly basic photographic principles, but experience counts for a lot … the more you do it, the more you'll understand the objects themselves. You don't necessarily need to know the history of the objects, but by understanding how they react under different lighting conditions and having a photographer's eye, you can know how you want the final image to look and how to achieve it.

16
The backs of things

George Eksts

For the last 12 years, I've worked as a photographer on the Factory Project. This project, nicknamed for Andy Warhol's famous studio, systematically catalogues and digitises our collection of prints, drawings, paintings, designs and photographs. Unusually, the Factory Project works shelf by shelf through the stores, photographing every object within each box and digitising entire runs of material, rather than cherry-picking particular objects wanted for display or publication. This means that I get to see vast quantities of objects, including material no one else may have requested to see for decades. This approach throws up curiosities and marvels from time to time.

Quite early on, I started to pay attention to marks on the backs of some of the objects I was photographing (figure 16.1). Most objects have some kind of information on the reverse – museum number, box number, catalogue text – firmly establishing the objects within conventional museum practices. I have to check the museum numbers closely to precisely input the correct metadata for each image, so I interact with these kinds of official marks a lot and spend time deciphering them. But it seemed to me that there was also more happening on the backs of objects, a conduit to different existences and practices in the Museum and from the life of the objects before they joined the collection. I was particularly interested in the unintentional artworks caused by accidental marks, damage, fragments of sketches, notes and remnants of reuse, imprints caused by proximity to other objects that have been stored together. On many occasions these, to me, seemed at odds with the 'proper' museum objects they were part of.

I enjoyed these for aesthetic reasons (figure 16.2), and I sensed that they might be worth recording, so I began to photograph them – this

Figure 16.1: Reverse of a drawing by Arthur Ambrose McEvoy (no. E.1295-1935). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

was outside the official remit of my work for the Factory Project, but since I already had the object in front of the camera, it took very little time to also capture the reverse. When my collection reached about a hundred images, I began to think that it might have some significance to a wider audience, so I started an Instagram account to publish the project.[1] I uploaded an image every few days, with the Museum's object location information, a number of relevant hashtags and the museum number, so that the object could be easily located in the Museum's online and physical archives. The museum number is key metadata

Figure 16.2: Reverse of embossed flower card (no.75A/13). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

which not only links the image to the correct object data in the Museum's cataloguing system, but also, in this instance, links a more informal and artistic project which slightly subverts Museum practice with the official public structures of the Museum. The idea of front and back therefore expands beyond objects and starts to draw attention to the 'front' and 'back' of the Museum itself.

What I did not share on Instagram, however, was the fronts of the objects. I wanted the viewer's attention to be on the backs alone, so that they were appreciated in isolation, divorced from their normal context. By stating the museum number under each image, I ensured that any Instagram viewer could find the front on our online catalogue, but I also wanted to impose a bit of friction so that they had to deliberately go and seek it out.

The reverses (versos) of images link them to the wider ecosystem of photographs and to the values that shape V&A and indeed other museums' practices. The status of the actual versos seems ambiguous – sometimes they are documented in the object record, but often not. This appears to be the clearest indication of status, although the designation is somewhat arbitrary, as cataloguing protocols shifted over time. The registration of the versos also appears to depend to a degree on the status of the artworks themselves – hand-drawn or painted works are more likely to have recorded versos than printed material (figure 16.3). Unsurprisingly, versos are more likely to be documented if they seem deliberate and authored, rather than marks left by wear and tear or reuse of materials.

Versos are also more often logged in sketchbooks and designs, where there is more interest in an artist's process and trains of thought, than in a single finished work. The status of the digital images of the versos follows this distinction – if the verso is mentioned in the record, the images will have the same status as the recto image. If the verso is not documented in the record, its image then becomes more slippery, its existence (or not) in any record depending mainly on my personal and subjective choice to document it or not, without any central definition or oversight. In that moment of seeing and selecting, my role is more similar to that of the artist-in-residence, bringing a fresh eye to temporarily reframe the collection. Therefore the closest relatives of the versos seems to be the artworks and publications created by artists-in-residence at the Museum. This view is borne out by the interest shown in them by, for instance, Helmut Völter[2] and Avani Tanya.[3]

However, recording of these marks, both deliberate and incidental, can sometimes support formal research into the provenance and material history of museum objects. When I posted 7650:70, for example, the resulting conversation on Instagram allowed us to decipher an illegible list of errands by the artist William Etty (1787–1849) with the help of a palaeographer and artist based in France. An evocative series of London locations, acquaintances and art materials thus emerged (figure 16.4).

Consequently, attention to the reverse images could be seen both as a kind of subversive project and as adding an important extra layer that might inform research and the understanding of collections. Crucially, data on the reverse of objects is activity that clusters around photographs and other graphic media.

On the most basic and immediate level, and therefore the most consequential, the choice of what to post (and in what order) is made on

Figure 16.3: Reverse of *Three Holy Women*, etching by Jacques Bellange, France, c. 1610 (no. F.141:3.). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

purely aesthetic grounds (figure 16.5). However, in terms of audience engagement, mainly in replies to comments and questions, these different values do inform the conversation and affect how the image is received. For instance, marks made by damage and subsequent repair have generated conversations involving museum conservators discussing the ethics of their own practice. Viewers have entered into conversations about what events may have created certain unintentional marks, or have hazarded guesses as to what abstract shapes may represent in the manner of a Surrealist game. A collector of rare books got in touch to tell me about a volume published in 1946 titled *Paintings and Drawings on the Backs of National Gallery Pictures*, which I would not have otherwise been aware of.[4] I was surprised and pleased to find that others had had a similar interest to me, though this book takes a slightly different
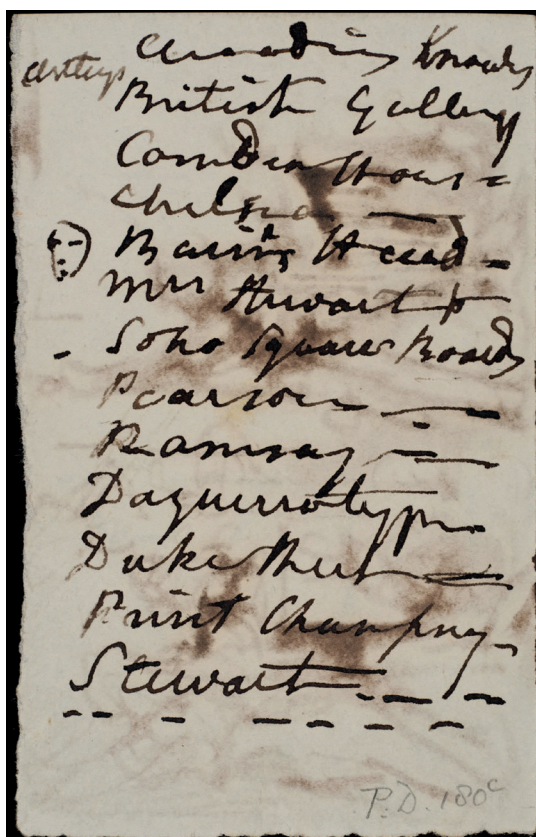
Figure 16.4: Reverse of drawing by William Etty, c. 1820–45 (no. 7650:70). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

approach to my own. It discusses the reverses of paintings within a scholarly framework, showing how they can inform provenance research and material histories, and therefore keeping firmly within the established boundaries of art-historical value systems (figure 16.6).

Beyond the museum world, other commenters have alerted me to various fine art projects around the idea of the reverse, such as Cornelia Parker's book *Verso*.[5] Going further, a poet based in the United States, Roger Palmer, has regularly composed brief texts in response to the images, posting in the comments unrequested but much appreciated. For example:

> It was a good idea that leaked beautifully on a wet moonlit night, and the chandelier under it exploded, Style without a weatherproof build, is not a roof over histories head.[6]
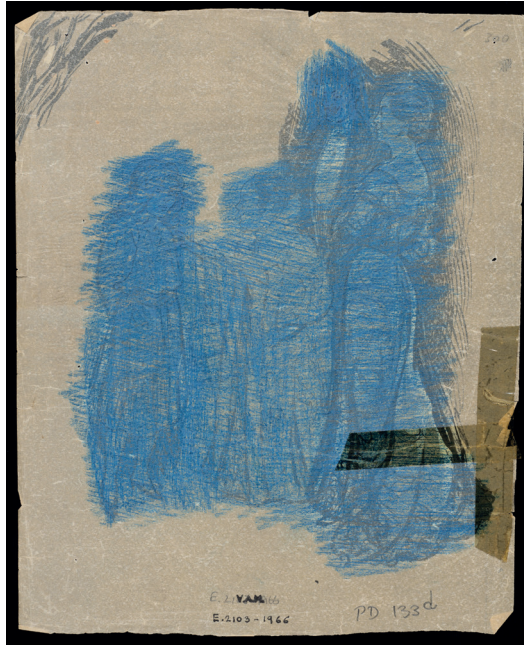
Figure 16.5: Reverse of a drawing for an illustration by Eric Forbes-Robertson (no. E.2103-1966). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 16.6: Reverse of a drawing of Powerscourt, Ireland (no. E.1819-1924). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
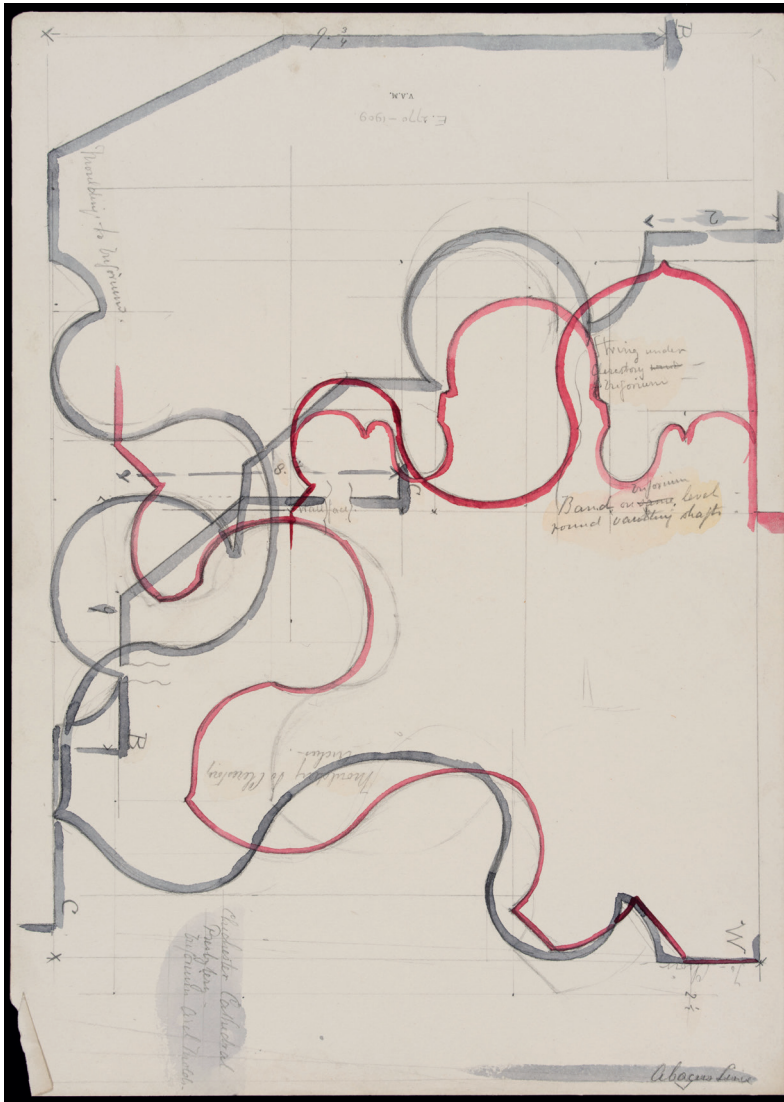
Figure 16.7: Reverse of an architectural drawing by George Somers Clarke of Chichester Cathedral (no. E.2770-1909). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

This brings us to the way in which museum cultures of photography and their ecosystems extend beyond the museum itself. When photographs of the reverses are posted on Instagram, they assume a presence outside official Museum systems. This also creates a potentially productive

relationship between internal and external systems in ways that align with the aims and values of museums in the digital age.

In posting the object number, I am attempting to establish precisely such a dialogue. Maybe this is somewhat idealistic, as experience has shown that, for the outside user, it is not currently a simple process to locate an object record via the V&A's 'Explore the Collections' webpage.[7]

Occasionally, I find myself acting as the interested party's personal guide through this platform. At the moment I think there's more potential in creating a dialogue between official external platforms (notably through the Museum's social media channels) and unofficial ones such as my Instagram photographs of reverses. I have tried to establish this, but have so far failed – perhaps because it is seen as falling outside the Museum's formal cultures of photography. This again raises interesting questions about the role of photographs in reproducing Museum values.

As photographs – both as objects and as a practice – undergo a shift in terms of their role and significance in museums, one can see ways in which these photographs of reverses would enhance the value of the images themselves and the kinds of understanding represented by official museum systems (figure 16.7). Within social media environments, the images of reverses have accrued a prominent numerical value (number of likes) and the project itself has an equivalent (number of followers) which is difficult to ignore. In any case, as this project demonstrates, artworks and their images have little value without visibility.

Notes

1 https://www.instagram.com/_museum_ [accessed 27.06.2022].
2 Artist in Residence at the V&A in collaboration with the Goethe Institut in 2016; see https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/the-cabinets [accessed 27.06.2022].
3 Avani Tanya was South Asian Collections Artist in Residence at the V&A in 2017; see https://www.delfinafoundation.com/platform/collecting-as-practice-avani-tanya/ [accessed 27.06.2022].
4 Davies 1946.
5 Parker 2016.
6 Instagram comment posted by Roger Palmer, @rogerpalmer7491 under post E.669:263-1955.
7 https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections [accessed 27.06.2022].

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17

Computations and complications: value systems of institutional photography

Catherine Troiano

In October 2018, the V&A opened the first phase of its new Photography Centre. At one entrance a set of double doors led visitors into Gallery 100, to the chronological start of a thematic display addressing the history of photography: *Collecting Photography: From daguerreotype to digital* (figure 17.1). Dim lighting, though it had been adopted to prevent light damage to objects, was nevertheless dramatic, illuminating jewel-like photographs glittering in custom-built showcases alongside a host of wall-mounted prints, and showcasing some of the best-known parts of the V&A's internationally renowned formal Photography Collection. The doors in question were flanked by a pair of showcases filled with cameras from the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) Collection, signalling the photography located within. Through objects, interpretation and environment, the Centre was unequivocally communicated as a space in which to look at and experience photographs.

Such clear curatorial messaging suggested to visitors a corporeal encounter with photography, supported by collections and intellectual spaces that are defined by their photographic contents, which are separate from other, often transparent or embedded engagements with photographic images that have permeated daily – and museum – life. The cachet of the museum experience relies on this separation to a certain extent, ensuring the consistent flow of in-person visitors essential to its operations and countering fears of 'being surpassed by the "virtual" museum … that physical visits to museums would be inexorably abandoned'.[1] In fact, visitors to the Photography Centre might have already had several, if not several hundred, encounters with photography on any given day through mobile applications, social media, advertisements or publications, among an almost endless list

Figure 17.1: Gallery 100, the Bern and Ronny Schwartz Gallery, from Room 108, V&A Photography Centre, 2018. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

of possible sources of photographic images. Even within the Museum, photography would have featured intermittently on visual content including leaflets, exhibition banners and screen-based interactives.

Near-limitless roles of photography in the 'post-scarce' image economies of the 2020s condition the experiences of visitors to cultural institutions.[2] Audiences are increasingly specialised, as is evidenced not only by personal behaviours but also by engagement with institution-led networked initiatives, projects and simulations.[3] Curated output at institutions thus exists alongside, and in relation to, imported experiences of photography, and traditional models of knowledge transfer, facilitated by curators, are in need of updating. Curated output is also enmeshed with how extra-institutional image cultures have filtered into institutional functions, represented by the Museum's photographic ecosystem (see Chapters 8 and 13). Curatorial practice can, therefore, be considered as an interrelated branch of the ecosystem, rather than as hyper-independent.

Photography has been present across institutional departments at the V&A since the nineteenth century, as elaborated upon by numerous authors in this volume. But shifts towards digital and computational technologies have introduced the expanded notion of photography as an 'idea and an image category', as described by Sabin Bors, activating

its agency in newer institutional tasks like digitisation; marketing and communications; image licensing; and other broadly digital functions, such as websites, in-gallery interactives, audio guides and mobile applications.[4] The reconciliation of digital institutional activity with pre-digital remits of curating, focused on historic collections, has provoked confusion around photography's value systems. To understand and unpack these value systems is to map out branches of the ecosystem, comprehending the various claims on photography across museums and situating curatorial practice in its wider institutional environment.

Considering photography as the basis of an ecosystem presents photography as a pan-institutional issue. However, photography curators play an important part in determining how – and how smoothly or connectedly – the ecosystem functions. Silos of photographic practice, at least at large-scale national museums, foreground the work of curatorial departments over activities involving 'non-collections' objects.[5] Where collections are defined by a remit of art, this dynamic takes on a qualitative hierarchy where objects categorised as 'art collections' are intellectually and experientially valued in ways that 'non-art' objects are not.[6] The line between art and 'other' photography has been blurred by the integration of digital processes into museums, as a mass of digital imagery served to reinforce art-based hierarchies through press, marketing and online media (meanwhile perpetuating its own position of lesser value) or as photographs came to represent art collections in digital catalogues. There is a challenge in avoiding the reapplication of canonical hierarchies to a wider base of imagery. With digital image cultures now at the core of the ecosystem, there is a central question of how to fundamentally reframe institutional understanding towards photography as a culture rather than a tool.

In order to clarify the complications and contradictions laid out thus far, I first discuss how the goalposts of curatorial thinking have changed in relation to photography since the integration of digital processes into institutional environments. Next, I look at particular events from 2018–19 led by the V&A Photographs Section (now in the Department of Art, Architecture, Photography and Design): the inauguration of various screen-based media in Phase One of the V&A Photography Centre, then the Section's first digital-born acquisition.[7] Through this, I hope to sketch out an expanded idea of photographic significance and demonstrate the need for curator-led shifts in knowledge systems to account for the evolving constitution of photography.

Curating/photography/institutions

The notion of museum curator has shifted in light of digitally mediated social behaviours and as digital processes have become embedded in institutional functions over the past two decades. The concept of curators as caregivers, administrators and gatekeepers to collections with exclusive authority and intellectual access, which was popularised in practice by imperial institutions throughout the twentieth century, has been displaced by priorities of inclusion, collaboration and 'democratisation'.[8] As Bodil Axelsson argued, 'today, curatorial practices at museums cannot be separated from the ways in which the advent of digital media has promised to solve a whole range of challenges'.[9] Tendencies historically 'owned' by curatorial departments have cascaded across, and out of, museums; and sorting, selecting, sequencing, captioning and interpreting images have come to dominate personal and professional interactions through 'user-created networked software-driven photography'.[10] This latter phenomenon, a result of the 'dramatic change in the way in which sociality is performed and mediated through new distributed digital media technologies', has dispersed aspects of curatorial practice among institutional colleagues and museum audiences, fuzzing the previously perceived edges of photography, the boundaries between maker, user and curator, and the efficacy of qualitative hierarchies that have hitherto maintained conceptual and financial institutional value systems.[11]

The institutionalisation of image-led digital technologies and the concurrent socio-professional devolution of photo-curatorial practices were facilitated by the universalisation of computational systems. According to Lyle Long, former Director of the Penn State Institute for Computational Science, 'computational science is the use of computers, networks, storage devices, software and algorithms to solve problems, do simulations, build things or create new knowledge.'[12] This definition applies to modes of photographic image making, with the integration of cameras into personal devices, as well as to institutional uses of photography beyond collections departments, like in digitisation or marketing and communications, which have equally struggled to mobilise rapidly accumulating image libraries. But it is also relevant to curatorial work, as the bones of what used to comprise the discipline of museum curator have been rehashed to indicate expertise, energy, effort or success in wide-ranging commercial and non-commercial endeavours alike, with visual – photographic – content at the root.[13] Networked image

economies have thrown the discrepancies between institutional fetishi-
sation of the singular object and industrial reality of mass imagery into
sharp relief. And computational culture has challenged interpretations
of photography grounded in material theory still prevalent at many
museums of art and design, undermining perceptions of photography
reliant upon medial segregation, and provoked examination of the
'myth of immateriality' surrounding digital objects.[14] Haidy Geismar
describes a 'slippage' in defining digital objecthood, torn between
'digital files that themselves serve as their own kind of "objects" and
the technologies (screens, phones, kiosks) that deliver them'.[15] In the
context of this text, in line with V&A rhetoric, the term 'object' is used
to specify items formally accessioned to collections.

At the same time, the pervasiveness of the 'curated image' has
dismantled the constructs of originality, materiality and individuality
which perpetuated the higher status of objects considered to be art
collections. At museums, these systems of meaning-making separate
photographs of perceived worth from photography of mass anti-
significance, supporting qualitative institutional functions. However,
qualitative approaches to photography defined by parameters of 'art'
– itself a rhetorically meaningless term given its limitless modes of
application and interpretation – are less and less relevant to museum
audiences. A personal sense of curatorship and creativity in everything
from blogging to social media presentation and organising images on
a smartphone has deconstructed the idea of selective quality, and the
paradigm of aesthetics has been a growing focus for computer scien-
tists for more than a decade.[16] So, while qualitative curating protects
the inimitable experience of art museums, it does not recognise
creativity in parallel practices resulting from computational science or
the 'reciprocal relations' between computation and epistemological or
ontological questions.[17] As Katrina Sluis stated, 'if the contemporary
task of the photography curator has been to rescue the photographic
image from photographic reproduction, then the task of the computer
scientist has been to rescue the photograph from semantic oblivion.'[18]

The greatest differential of worth in value systems of institutional
photography is object status – whether an object is considered to be
collections or not – recalling the notion that 'museum objects are said
to function as active producers of meaning'.[19] Traditionally, delinea-
tions of 'collections' and 'non-collections' photography have been tied
to dialectics of photographic representation and the stubborn presence
of the '(im)material binary', which, for decades, was used to legitimise
'real' – that is, tangible, 'material' – photography, and delegitimise

'virtual' – or intangible, 'immaterial' – photography, typically deriving from digital processes, in an art-world context.[20] In the 2020s, this binary is theoretically obsolete, supported by a growing literature addressing 'the material infrastructures that underpin digital networks' and acceptance that ideas of substantive tangibility clearly apply to digital frameworks.[21] Scholars like Kylie Budge and Alli Burness have argued for a consideration of digital interactions with museum objects 'through a lens of humanising theory … that perceives humans as moving between the digital and non-digital realms of daily life without discrimination or the need to dichotomise these experiences or place it in a hierarchy'.[22] However, binaries of materiality still linger in institutional processes that are beholden to lengthy timescales, complex procedures and convoluted processes of approval that limit scope for experimentation and failure, provoking overly physicalised attempts to redress value systems and incorporate expanded photographic practices into curatorial activities.

Andrew Dewdney describes the result as 'zombie photography', explained as 'either the continuation of the analogue in digital terms or conversely the networked image simulating the analogue. The first is achieved through digital technology producing the photographic print image and the second through the Internet's transparent interface.'[23] A potential solution to 'zombie photography' can be found in Christiane Paul's conception of 'neomateriality', which she describes as objecthood that 'incorporates networked digital technologies, and embeds, processes, and reflects back the data of humans and the environment'.[24] This framework would recognise diverse photographic imagery implemented across institutions as entities embodying *objecthood*, if not legal object status. Natalie Kane, Curator of Digital Design at the V&A, described this conundrum as concrete recognition of context that 'does not tend to be considered an object outside of social history museums, which the V&A is not'.[25] For instance, the Pussy Power Hat, acquired by the V&A in 2017 following the women's marches of that year, legally affords the V&A ownership of a pink woollen hat. However, according to Kane, it was 'collected as a digital object because of its viral dissemination through photographs online'.[26] A shift in thinking around objects in this way must be accompanied by a shift in curatorial processes, recalling Joasia Krysa's challenge: 'if the assumption is made that traditional curating follows a centralised model, then what is the position of the curator within a distributed network model?'[27] Following Krysa's line of questioning, should curators be spearheading institutional movement towards

expanded significance for photography within new systems of value, more closely aligned to the anti-selective, massified image cultures that so deeply condition public audiences?

Engagement with and through online media has become an essential component of institutional communications. In fact, outside of museums, an institution's agility online has come to reflect its position in relation to issues of diversity and accessibility, as online platforms are perceived as 'enablers' for 'connect[ing] with a diversity of visitors' who are younger and more socially engaged than audiences readily reachable through traditional modes of institutional marketing and communications.[28] However, online, institutions and individuals mimic the same activities within the same functional frameworks of image-led social accounts, stripping away the legitimacy afforded by 'unassailable institutional authority'.[29] Museums' online activities, underpinned by photographic visual content, often comprise the first point of contact for an in-person visitor or the full experience of a digital visitor, reinforcing the need for joined-up approaches towards varied photographic output. COVID-19 set a precedent for greater integration of photography-based practices straddling curatorial, interpretative and communications functions, rooted in digital technologies. However, barriers remain in understanding 'both the nature of the transformation of analogue modes of cultural and communicative reproduction and the shaping of emergent network practices' that need to be addressed in the long term, well after the practical outcomes of the pandemic subside.[30]

The assumption that photography is a relatable way to communicate via digital platforms has magnified photography as a 'hybrid and converged set of socio-technical practices generating alternative image economies, sites of expertise and cultural value'.[31] In institutional contexts, this idea requires reconciling hierarchised photographic value systems with the full ecosystem of photography and recognising photography as mediator of varied realities rather than harbinger of representation. By nature, many national institutions are set up to support photography according to its material qualities, and legal or security responsibilities mean that functional concerns such as storage and framing necessarily remain important. As a result, the introduction of screen-based, software-based or computational approaches can be complicated, as they do not always align with existing procedures that 'were not originally designed with digital objects in mind'.[32] Procedural discrepancies can also generate issues with funding and executive-level support, meaning there is a reliance on curatorial departments

to advocate a shift in the thinking around how photographic practices and processes are valued and made visible within cultural institutions.

The basis of expanded significance is already in place within curatorial remits, in creative production, collections, exhibitions and other core curatorial activities. This is not to say that expanded photography should exclusively comprise the content of curatorial programmes; there is doubtless genuine public interest in historical holdings, the importance of making permanent collections accessible and the value of recognising curatorial expertise. At the V&A, there is also a fundamental curatorial responsibility to its globally significant Photography Collection numbering an astonishing 800,000 objects, dating from the 1820s to the present day. And there are, evidently, aspects of institutional curatorship that emerge from a deep and specialist knowledge, and which cannot be devolved. Expanded significance only challenges the exclusivity of curatorial authority, similarly to how 'the Internet, the default medium of dominant communication, challenge[d] the historical cultural authority of the analogue photographic archive'.[33] A greater understanding of how curated collections function alongside digitally mediated image cultures would allow institutions to harness their practical role in a 'post-digital' reality, where computational systems are positioned as indivisible from socio-cultural experience in the 'attempt to grapple with the immersive and disorienting experiences of computational infrastructures as they scale up and intensify'.[34] Programmes framed by an apprehension of photography's active *and* potential cultural value would thus align the Museum's public offer with the realities of image-led behaviours in the twenty-first century, which inevitably inform how visitors approach visual culture in museums.

Photography Centre

Phase One of the V&A Photography Centre (2018) marked a substantial expansion of the spaces dedicated to photography, simultaneously inaugurating various screen-based display elements into the Museum's permanent photography galleries. In the years immediately prior to the Centre opening, the Photographs Section was responsible for rotating displays of objects from the photographs collection in an upper-floor gallery (Gallery 100) and often, though not always, in an exhibitions space on the ground floor (Gallery 38A). In comparison, the Photography Centre's first phase occupied

a suite of four rooms on the Museum's first floor (Galleries 99, 100, 101 and 108), amounting to about two and a half times the previous footprint of the photography galleries. The first phase also marked the Museum's commitment to a second phase, which, at the time of writing, is due to launch in early 2023 with a further five rooms extending from the north end of Phase One.

When Phase One opened, the majority of the gallery space remained dedicated to showing a history of photography, which had been the subject of Gallery 100's changing displays since 2011.[35] However, there were several other elements that bookended the Phase One experience, broadening the types of photographic objects on display and how things were shown. Room 108, a semi-open landing at the south end of the Photography Centre, featured the aforementioned camera showcases and a camera-handling table.[36] These were intended to signpost the photographic contents of the galleries to visitors yet to enter, and to encourage the public to engage simultaneously with the Museum's photographic collections and its characteristic architecture. The handling table was situated in front of a large, arched window that recalled the famous latticed window at Lacock Abbey, represented in a contemporary print elsewhere in the Centre.[37] There was no digital or device-based camera on the handling table, which instead drew upon manual cameras from the recently transferred RPS Collection.[38] But the custom-built showcases, designed to fit existing niches, were advantageously the correct format for a portrait-orientation smartphone image and functioned as a 'selfie spot', encouraging visitors to share their experience as 'communal and social practice'.[39] A Project Space (Gallery 101) was offered with the intention of annual rotations – more frequent than the biennially rotating 'history of photography' display – and flexibility; the first two shows on view in the Project Space debuted work commissioned from artists Thomas Ruff and Valérie Belin, made in response to photographs in the V&A collection.[40] Finally, Gallery 99 opened with three elements: a new acquisitions wall (biannually rotational), the Dark Tent and the Light Wall.[41]

The Dark Tent and the Light Wall faced each other across Gallery 99 and represented complexities generated by the digital arm of the photographic ecosystem and its points of delivery in public museum spaces. Both involved screens, which, though conceived with different remits, uniformly communicated a curatorial and experiential departure from the framed or showcased objects in the rest of the Photography Centre. The Dark Tent was an architectural construction featuring a pitched roof and concertina doors, reminiscent of nineteenth-century

photographic dark tents. From inside, the concertina doors suggested the bellows of a camera and the red-stained wooden interior and red lights gave a sense of being in a darkroom or, indeed, inside a camera itself. Functioning ultimately as a screening room, the Dark Tent had two sets of screens, one on the short and one on the long side of the oblong space. Its usual set-up during the first hang was with the doors almost closed, showing films about processes and techniques or projected photography, though it was also possible to open the concertina doors and use the larger, long-side screen to facilitate events with greater audiences in Gallery 99.

Seven films were produced to mark the opening of the Photography Centre in 2018: three about processes and techniques approached through archetypical practitioners of those processes; three explaining, and then recreating, various types of projected photography; and one expanding upon the work in the Project Space.[42] These films were commissioned and created in collaboration with the Museum's Interpretation Section and external production teams, and scripts were collaboratively edited and finalised in a manner not unlike the typical handling of gallery label texts. With this emphasis on a formal interpretative approach, the films were presented in-gallery as a way to gain depth of information and augment the visitor experience around processes, techniques and objects seen in the main 'history of photography' display. In some cases, for instance in one film about autochromes, the Dark Tent screen provided the only route for visitors to see featured objects, as autochromes are too light-sensitive for originals to be shown in-gallery.

On the opposite side of Gallery 99, the Light Wall was intended to fulfil a different role. Dedicated to showing artwork, it pledged to show 'the digitally-born, screen-based photography of today and tomorrow'.[43] The first display on the Light Wall was a commissioned work by visual artist Penelope Umbrico, titled *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885* (figure 17.2). To make the 56-minute-long moving piece, Umbrico spliced together cloud studies cropped from digitised asset photographs made by the V&A's in-house Photographic Studio of paintings in the Museum's collection (figure 17.3). Umbrico sourced these images from 'Search the Collections' (now redesigned as 'Explore the Collections'), the V&A's online catalogue (figure 17.4).[44]

The colours of the piece broadly arced from 'day' to 'night', through orange, pink, purple and blue tones, and the way in which Umbrico put the piece together meant that the transitions from image to image were subtle, barely noticeable in the slow-moving work. In its reliance
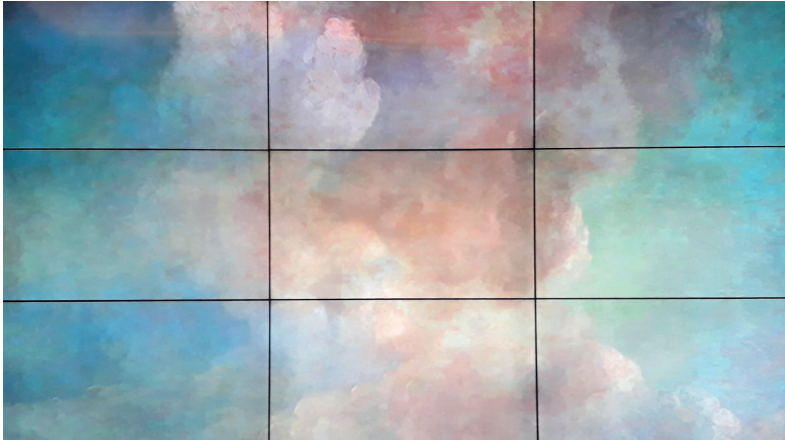
Figure 17.2: *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885*, 2018, in situ on the Light Wall, V&A Photography Centre, 2018. Image courtesy Penelope Umbrico.
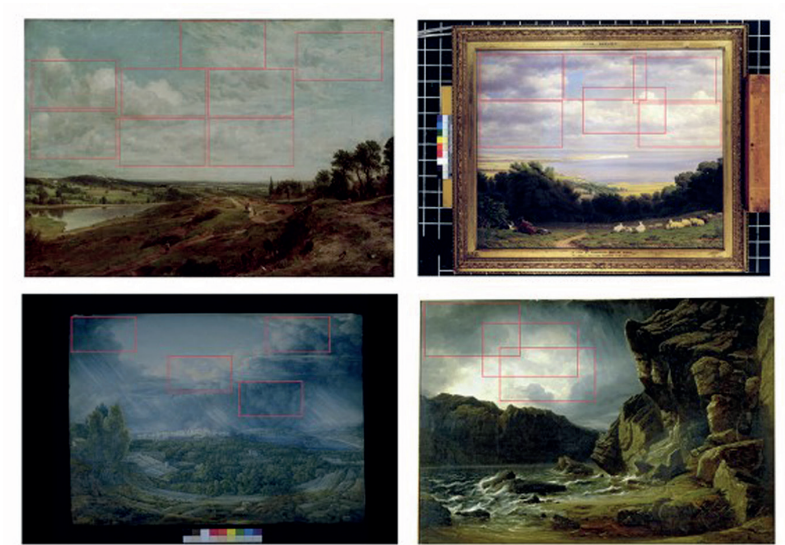
Figure 17.3: Images conveying Penelope Umbrico's process of cropping full-frame object photographs, used to make *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885*, 2018. Image courtesy Penelope Umbrico.
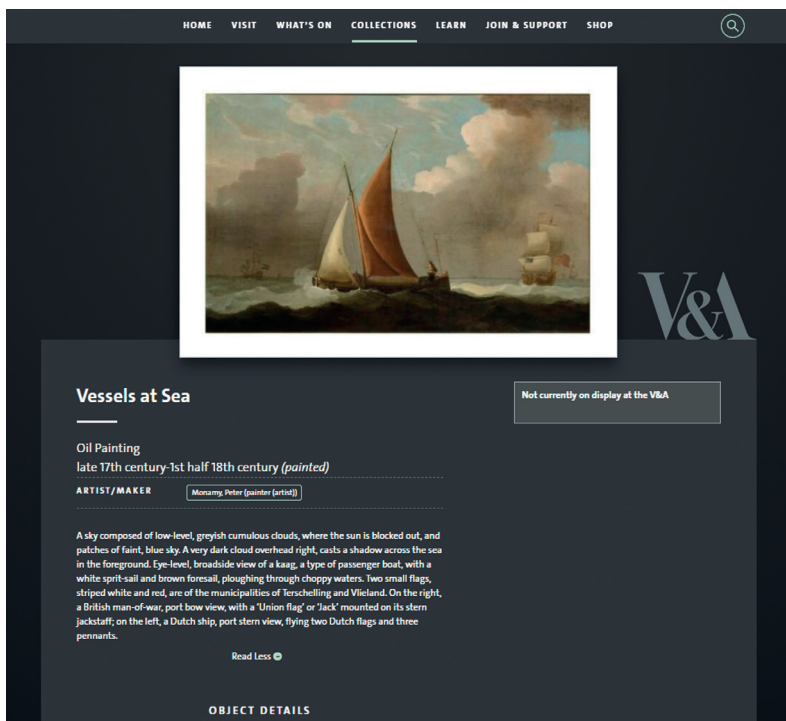
Figure 17.4: 'Search the Collections' page for *Vessels at Sea*, late seventeenth–early eighteenth century, by Peter Monamy, which featured in *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885*, 2018, by Penelope Umbrico (author's screenshot).

upon photo studio output, Umbrico's work both referenced and drew upon the wider ecosystem of photography at the V&A. Meanwhile, it highlighted the transparency of photography across these systems, as the agency of object photography is lost in its devaluation as reproduction in the context of 'Search the Collections', where images are abstractly experienced as collections objects on a screen, rather than *photographs* of collections objects on a screen. To emphasise this, Umbrico worked with low-res files compared to the size of the Light Wall's screens, intentionally maintaining a pixellated view.

Gallery 99 is a relatively small space, meaning that the experiences of its elements were interconnected. The interconnectedness felt particularly acute due to the proximity of the screens in the Dark Tent and on the Light Wall, and the fact that the sound emitted by the Dark Tent films was only partially contained. Despite differences in intention, there were several consistencies across the gallery's screens,

which magnified some of the questions that arise when considering the expanded significance of photography in institutional ecosystems. Embodying James Clifford's notion of 'contact zones', discussed by Haidy Geismar as when 'old museum collections and new technologies come together', both the Dark Tent and the Light Wall drew upon object photography made in the V&A's on-site Photographic Studio, in the images of collections objects that featured in process films or comprised recreated projected slideshows and in the photographs of collections paintings that Umbrico used.[45] In both cases, these layers of photography were transparent, functioning to facilitate experience of an 'original' object. However, in Umbrico's work the studio photographs acted as raw material used to create a new original object, and her piece was presented with regular object label text and positioned within the context of individualised artistic practice. Thus, Umbrico's attention to 'non-collections' photography temporarily redressed the value systems presented in gallery spaces, by dismantling the barriers that normally separate documentation and interpretation from collections and curated content.

This was not the case with the Dark Tent films, where studio photographs functioned as reproductions, used to recreate an 'authentic' experience of collections objects, described by Yves Evrard and Anne Krebs as 'the direct and tangible confrontation with artworks … that is central for the identity of museums whose traditional missions are to present original artworks'.[46] Excepting the hypersensitivity of autochromes, other objects that featured in the films – such as lantern slides or 35 mm Kodachrome slides – could have been displayed in gallery showcases under controlled environmental conditions. However, limitations – for instance, in light intensity – would still have precluded their presentation in original slide projectors, imbuing the Dark Tent with an otherwise unrepresented performative capacity that rendered studio photography almost invisible. Sounds overlaid on films included the 'clunks' accompanying changes in slide imagery, imitating noises of historic projectors and emphasising the 'obsession with authenticity' that further eradicated the significance of the studio photographs delivering the actual Dark Tent encounter.[47]

The consistencies and discrepancies between the Dark Tent and the Light Wall embody how formal curatorial process impacts the positioning of digital photographic images. Umbrico's role as artist, facilitated by curator-led commissioning, elevated the content of the Light Wall to creative production, while the Dark Tent remained a learning and interpretation initiative. Beyond this distinction, there

was a broader separation between digital and non-digital photography within the curated content of the Photography Centre, embodied by the physical separation of screen-based content in Gallery 99 and the 'history of photography' display in Galleries 100 and 101 and heightened by the fact that Gallery 99 was named 'The Modern Media Gallery'. Although it was derived from a corporate donation, the fact that Gallery 99 housed all the digital content contained in Phase One implied a collective understanding – and silo – of screens as 'modern media', as opposed to historical collections. On a practical level, this cleavage was reinforced by the technical oversight of screens by IT departments rather than the curatorial teams responsible for corresponding galleries, as digital objects 'exist both on the screen, where we can interact with them, and in the back end, or inside the computer program'.[48] Separating technical from conceptual responsibilities in this way maintains a distance between digital content and the technologies through which they are realised, homogenising screen-based image content in contrast to individualised presentations of other collections objects.

Such a dynamic points towards deeper contradictions around how screens exist in wider museum spaces, and the inconsistencies with which they are implemented to fulfil art-based, interpretative, informative or practical functions on a single visitor route. For instance, a visitor might purchase an exhibition ticket on a screen at a museum entrance; make a donation by tapping a credit card at a different screen; and learn about the Prints & Drawings Study Room via a third screen, prior to entering the Photography Centre and encountering the Dark Tent and Light Wall. All of these screens would feature photographic imagery, with the visibility of photographic layers dependent on the source of implementation. As a general rule of thumb, the further photography travels from curatorial departments, the less visible it becomes. Images originating from the actions of photography curators, via collections or in other curated projects, such as Umbrico's commission, remain the most visible. The photo studio is one step removed, retaining a direct link to photography collections through collections management and access. However, images used to promote exhibitions on a sale screen, for instance, placed there by marketing or retail departments, are at a greater remove and carry almost no value in the Museum's value systems of photography. Here, photography is considered a mechanism of communication, implemented for its perceived outcomes, even though specific images are often the same photographs made by the Photographic Studio of collections objects found in galleries, the top of the institutional food chain. The construct

of these value systems is determined by the institutional emphasis on 'materiality, authenticity and aura', according to Nicole Meehan – terms of reference incongruent with digital objects.[49] The closer an image remains to something of perceived 'material' origin, in line with Susan M. Pearce's emphasis of an object's sensory use within a 'performative social dynamic', the greater its cachet.[50] However, as Juhee Park and Anouska Samms argued, this 'can be expanded through the application of media theory, and its different demonstrations of "digital materiality", illustrating the human–object engagement of digital objects'.[51] Park and Samms's argument allows for an acknowledgement of how different applications of photography work together across institutions. Such acknowledgement would not necessarily change the approach towards curated programmes, digitisation and retail imagery, or the division of labour with regard to these. However, it would recognise the cultural significance of each of these elements and how they relate to one another, reducing silos and positioning a greater range of digital practices in better stead to feature in curated, in-gallery programmes.

Acquisitions

Following the display on the Light Wall, *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885* by Penelope Umbrico was acquired for the V&A Photography Collection. It was the first digital-born object to be collected by the Photographs Section and posed various challenges regarding standard acquisitions and storage procedures. The V&A Photography Collection numbers some 800,000 objects, most of which are housed in a climate-controlled store on site at V&A South Kensington (figure 17.5), adjacent to the Prints & Drawings Study Room, where members of the public can access objects in the Art, Architecture, Photography and Design collections.

The Photography Collection is cared for by paper and photography conservators based in the Paper Conservation Section, with no in-house resource specialising in digital conservation. At the time of Umbrico's acquisition in 2019, there was no standard procedure to accommodate storage, conservation, access or display of digital objects in the Photography Collection. There were, however, precedents for collecting digital objects in other areas of the Museum, spearheaded by digital collections curators who were formerly part of the Digital, Architecture and Design Department, and the Digital Art Section of the Word and Image Department, whose earliest digital acquisition dates

Figure 17.5: Photography Collection store, 2017. Henry Cole Wing, V&A South Kensington. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

from 1969 (both departments now fall under the Department of Art, Architecture, Photography and Design).[52]

In curatorial areas like these, where there is a prescribed remit around digital technologies, there is an expectation of engagement with digital objects. For the Photography Collection, however, the acquisition of Umbrico's work was a departure from standard collecting practices. This unfamiliarity was epitomised by a suggestion, made at an acquisitions meeting, that the Umbrico piece might be more appropriately kept in the Digital Art Collection, despite its commissioning by photography curators around a photography-based brief and its site-specific destination in the Photography Centre. Such a suggestion implied that for curatorial disciplines where digital objects are expected, mainly by a titular specification, digital processes are accepted as on a par with ways of making represented by the broader collections. However, for the Photography Collection, whose international renown was largely couched in its historical, print-based holdings, reliance upon digital technologies incurred a lower position in institutional value systems.

Transparency and visibility remain key to perceptions of institutional value, concepts which tend to elude certain digital processes as well as types of institutional photography. Within the Museum's photographic ecosystem, the discriminator of perceived value is often mode of display, as an unequivocally visible manifestation of digital reliance.

Many objects among the V&A's print-based photography holdings have digital origins, such as being made in a digital camera, or are dependent upon digital processes, for instance in editing or post-production. But ultimately, if the final object is something that can be framed or showcased – that is, presented in a way that mimics archetypical modes of display from the Museum's art-driven, value-based history – then these origins become secondary. Where digital objects rely on digital interfaces, such as screens, for display, it becomes harder to maintain an intellectual distance between screen-based 'art' and other screen-based content used for marketing, retail or communications purposes. The value of screen-based digital objects is thus lowered, rather than benefitting from the increased visibility of screen-based content that could situate varied aspects of the photographic ecosystem within frameworks of creative production. Therefore, the recognition of expanded photography within curatorial practice, and the expanded significance of photography in institutions, depends upon basic shifts in thought processes around digital photographic images.

171 Clouds from the V&A Collection was acquired as a 9.27 GB .mp4 file, a simple format that allowed for relatively straightforward adaptation of the acquisitions procedure. As fundamentally administrative processes, accessioning and cataloguing of the work remained the same. However, the procedural focus on non-digital objects was evidenced in the Museum's collections management system (CMS), where the digital format of Umbrico's work was listed in a field titled 'materials and techniques' and a summary of the file's content was populated under 'physical description' (figure 17.6).

While standard procedures are explicitly geared towards non-digital objects, circumventions like these will implicitly position digital objects as anomalous and thus not within the central remit of the Museum's curatorial collections. From a photographic perspective, this reinforces the idea of nineteenth- and twentieth-century holdings as primary, and photography reliant on digital modes of display as incidental, hazy among a mass of digital images. The file itself is stored in the Museum's digital asset management system (DAMS) (figure 17.7), where it is cared for by the collections management team alongside some 1.75 million other image-based files. Images kept in DAMS range from object photography made by the Photographic Studio to images of exhibition opening events, pictures documenting learning activities and gallery installation shots. In other words, DAMS mainly houses digital image files that relate to the Museum's collections and its wider activities but that are not considered collections themselves. The
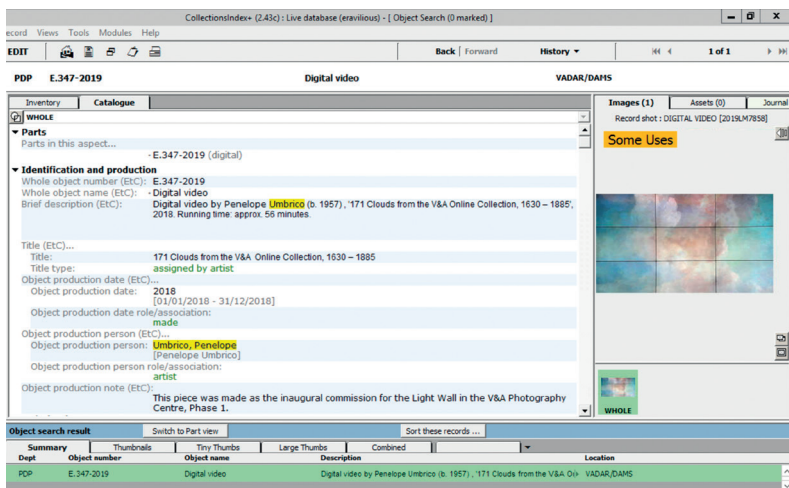
Figure 17.6: CMS record for *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885*, 2018, by Penelope Umbrico (author's screenshot).

exception, within which Umbrico's work is included, is the comparatively small number of digital objects, Museum-wide, which are stored in DAMS in lieu of dedicated digital object storage.[53]

At the time of the acquisition, there was no dedicated digital conservation specialist at the V&A. Thus, formally accessioned digital objects stored in DAMS benefitted from the wider technological care afforded through the database. But practical benefit is tempered by broader confusion caused by housing such a range of materials in one place. Juxtapositions of photographic material in DAMS *could* raise a similar awareness of wider image cultures and of photography in longer-term institutional trajectories to that seen in the phenomenon of intra-museal screens. However, the reality is that digital objects are instead diminished in their perceived seriousness in comparison to store-based collections. This general impression makes it difficult for digital collections curators to champion support from senior management around institutional commitments to digital research, acquisitions and exhibitions, which are essential to solving the 'challenge of developing sustainable, long-term systems to document and access [digital] knowledge'.[54] Such commitments are needed to re-evaluate institutional attitudes towards digital activities and reassess curatorial positions, informing the makeup – and intersectionality – of curated photographic programmes.

The breadth of material stored in a single database like DAMS can cause yet further disorientation. Alongside the .mp4 file, supplementary
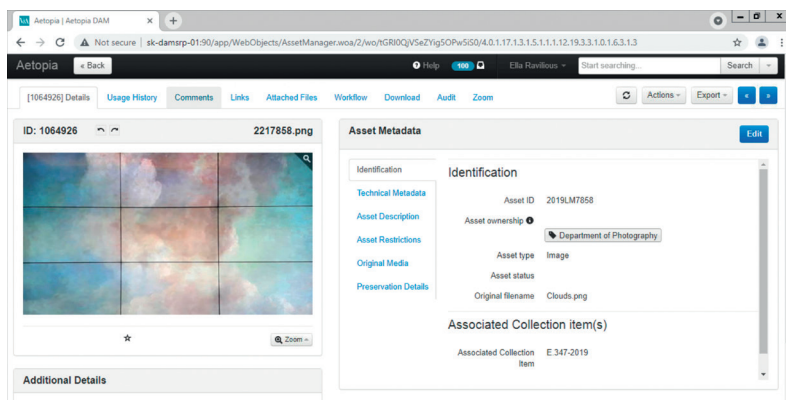
Figure 17.7: DAMS record for *171 Clouds from the V&A Online Collection, 1630–1885*, 2018, by Penelope Umbrico (author's screenshot).

material illuminating Umbrico's creative process was also acquired: original full-frame images with crop positions and frames conveying sequencing. It is not uncommon to include supplementary material in acquisitions of digital objects, where processes can be complex, but it was considered particularly pertinent in Umbrico's case, given the commission-based origin of the work and its direct relevance to the V&A. The result, however, is that located together in DAMS are: the original object photographs made by the Photographic Studio of paintings in the V&A collections, sourced by Umbrico using the publicly accessible browser version of 'Search the Collections', which are considered not to be collections objects; these object photographs overlaid with crop marks, provided to the V&A by Umbrico, considered as supplemental, artist-originating material acquired by a curatorial department in order to contextualise a collections object; the formally accessioned work itself, squarely considered a digital object; and the images from the Centre's opening where the work was debuted.

Homogenisation of content in DAMS flattens the nuances between different kinds of photography, and with it the capacity to understand knowledge economies of photographic images. This strengthens the earlier observation that rather than increasing visibility of the wider photographic ecosystem, digital media are marginalised with regard to primary photographic collections. From another perspective, it also highlights the emphasis still placed on artistic intention around photographic images, as identical images are considered with different categorisations – and values – based on framing and source. By the

time Umbrico had resupplied the project's supplementary material, the layer of photography undertaken by the Photographic Studio was supplanted, as images morphed from 'object photography' to 'artist raw material'. Such a shift also reveals an irony in how museums hierarchise formal interpretations of 'the object', while manifesting different ideas of digital objecthood in efforts to digitise and disseminate collections.[55] That is not to suggest, however, that digitisation is inherently un-hierarchised or immune to confusion around photographic cultures, as 'democracy through digitisation' has focused on user figures instead of 'how the discourse itself is created and mediated'.[56]

Transformation is an enduring theme in relation to digital acquisitions. The format of print-based objects is relatively stable after an acquisition at the V&A. Things like print size and frame design are either determined by the Museum's standard specification or specified by artists prior to acquisition, regulating expectations around display, public access or loans. Such expectations were not guaranteed for Umbrico's work, due to its file format and site-specificity. For instance, the experience of viewing *171 Clouds* on a standard-sized desktop computer in the Prints & Drawings Study Room is markedly different from seeing it on the Light Wall. Therefore, to prevent a commitment to obsolete technology in the future, pre-emptive agreement around file transformation and discussions around how the work could be shown on other screens in the V&A and elsewhere on loan were necessary. The Photographs Section did not initiate entirely new procedures on these fronts, drawing again upon the expertise of digital collections curators and open-source resources.[57] However, in the absence of Museum-wide frameworks around digital acquisitions, supported by workflows for CMS, conservation, storage and access, the approach to digital acquisitions will be overwhelmingly case-by-case. In eponymously digital departments, the availability of expertise and energy directed towards specifically digital collections renders this less of an issue. But in other departments that span centuries of material and specialisms and manage competing collections priorities, standard procedures are required to endow confidence and ease.

Concluding remarks

Cultural institutions have long been sites of photographic activity, and the longevity of the V&A's intersections with photography in particular are evidenced by numerous other chapters in this volume. From a

curatorial perspective, photography was relatively late in its ascendence to the institutional status of fine 'art', and the establishment of accompanying infrastructural support systems, such as formal curatorial sections, was also accordingly belated. For example, though the V&A has been collecting photography since the 1850s, the Photographs Section was only established in 1977. Consequently, the value systems that govern encyclopaedic museums like the V&A, where collections span diverse media and numerous centuries, prioritise photography because of its ability to slot into the art-based frameworks that uphold the museum experience as an 'un-mimicable', in-person phenomenon. These frameworks privilege perspectives that specify makers, dates and processes attached to individual objects, rather than the socio-behavioural cultures that connect images and the ways in which images function in extra-institutional life.

The unilaterality of these systems is decreasing, as expertise around digital technologies is becoming identified as key to aspirations of 'relevance' and intersections with 'contemporary' practices. However, digital expertise – and digital activity – are largely still siloed to explicit curatorial posts where such approaches are expected, and thus accepted. The importance of a general understanding and awareness of digitally mediated image cultures remains latent, even though these cultures condition the wider experiences of audiences as well as the social and cultural frameworks that museums operate within. This is not to challenge the importance of curatorial expertise or suggest that curatorial practice as it has hitherto existed is defunct; museums can remain places in which to learn about historic images and experience historic objects in gallery spaces, and there are undoubtedly valuable points of contact to be explored between historic collections and digital-based approaches. However, there should be an evolution of curatorial practice that recognises the roles of photography beyond the institution and allows for linkages to be made between photographic realities within and without the museum. The increasingly knowledge-driven and specialised positions that visitors bring to museums, upon which formally curated programmes attempt to build, can be acknowledged without disregarding the significance of specialist knowledge from institutional colleagues. I do not suggest dismantling institutional structures, but rather updating those structures to reflect the socio-cultural environments within which institutions work.

Thinking in this way can prompt a broader shift in thought processes across cultural institutions that would expand value systems around photography and activate the potential of the photographic

ecosystem. This does not require the dilution of curatorial sections or emphasis placed on collections, as recognition of expanded photographic significance does not rely upon all photographic output functioning within extant curatorial frameworks; that would be to simply reposition aspects of extra-curatorial photographic output within current significance models. But it would require accepting plurality around how institutions present photography, and the potential of such plurality to diminish the exclusivity of curatorial practice in favour of increasingly collaborative and pan-institutional ways of working. The inconsistency of institutional photography's value systems is a symptom of the change required for museums to be able to harness the reach and scope of the photographic ecosystem, to reconcile this with curatorial practice and to accurately represent the fuzzy edges between 'art' and image culture, and image culture and social behaviours, in the 2020s.

Notes

1   Evrard and Krebs 2018, 353.
2   Axelsson 2018, 67.
3   Examples include: crowdsourcing information via online platforms, such as the Library of Congress via Flickr: The Commons and the National Maritime Museum via Old Weather <www.oldweather.org> [accessed 12.02.2021] and Solar Stormwatch <www.solarstorm-watch.com> [accessed 12.02.2021] (see Colquhoun 2020, 67); Wikipedia edit-a-thons, including 'Art + Feminism' (annual, multiple museums), 'Asian Month' (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2017) and 'International Women's Day' (Design Museum 2020); and simulations hosted by the Photographers' Gallery, London, such as *Operation Earnest Voice* (January 2019) <www.operationearnestvoice.co.uk> [accessed 12.02.2021].
4   Bors 2015.
5   Edwards 2016; 2017; 2019.
6   Edwards and Morton 2015; Edwards 2019; Crane 2020.
7   The term 'digital-born' or 'born-digital' can be understood as 'a term derived from the field of digital preservation and digital heritage practices, describing digital materials that are not intended to have an analogue equivalent, either as the originating source or as a result of conversion to analogue form'. See Dekker 2010.
8   Crawshay-Hall 2021.
9   Axelsson 2018, 68.
10 Tifentale and Manovich 2015, 109.
11 Berry and Dieter 2015, 1.
12 L. Long, quoted in 'Penn State establishes Institute for Computational Science', Penn State News press release (2004). See: https://news.psu.edu/story/215150/2004/07/27/penn-state-establishes-institute-computational-science [accessed 12.02.2021].
13 This concept is epitomised in Katrina Sluis's visual essay 'Curate or be curated: a visual interlude'. See Sluis 2019c.
14 Paul 2006b.
15 Geismar 2018, xvii.
16 See Sluis 2020; Datta and Wang 2010.
17 Hui 2016, 3.
18 Sluis 2020.
19 Light et al. 2016.

20 Graham 2014; Walsh, Dewdney and Pringle 2014.
21 Geismar 2018, xvii.
22 Budge and Burness 2017, 137–8.
23 Dewdney 2014.
24 Paul 2015.
25 Kane 2020, 27.
26 Kane 2020, 27.
27 Krysa 2006, 16.
28 Light et al. 2016, 409.
29 Schweibenz 2019.
30 Walsh, Dewdney and Pringle 2014.
31 Sluis 2019b.
32 Park and Samms 2019.
33 Dewdney 2014, 1.
34 Berry and Dieter 2015, 4.
35 The inaugural photographs display in Gallery 100 (2011), and the subsequent three hangs, 'chronicle[d] the history of photography from its invention' (press release 2011). In 2015, these displays took on a thematic approach, with *A History of Photography: Series and sequences* (2015) and *A History of Photography: The body* (2016–17), and a hiatus for *Julia Margaret Cameron* (2015–16).
36 The camera-handling table was removed in 2019.
37 *The Latticed Window* by Floris Neusüss (2010) was on view in Gallery 99 when Phase One opened. This photograph was commissioned by the V&A for the exhibition *Shadowcatchers* (2010) and is a photogram of the latticed window at Lacock Abbey.
38 The RPS Collection was transferred by the Science Museum Group to the V&A in 2017. The collection transfer comprised approximately 270,000 photographs, a library of about 26,000 photographic books and periodicals and a technical collection of more than 6,000 cameras and related pieces of equipment.
39 Tifentale 2014, 4.
40 A selection of prints from each project was acquired for the Museum's permanent collection.
41 Gallery 99 as it opened in the Photography Centre's first phase was closed in 2021, resulting in the removal of the new acquisitions wall, the Dark Tent and the Light Wall. Gallery 99 is being redesigned as part of the Photography Centre's second phase and will reopen with the new spaces in 2023.
42 The processes and techniques films were about: Antoine Claudet and the daguerreotype; William Henry Fox Talbot and the calotype; Julia Margaret Cameron and the wet-collodion negative. The projected photography films were about: autochromes; magic lantern slides; and 35 mm Kodachrome slides. The film expanding upon the Project Space display featured participating artist Thomas Ruff and Senior Curator of Photographs Martin Barnes discussing the commission.
43 As stated on the label text in the display *Collecting Photography: From daguerreotype to digital* (V&A Photography Centre 2018–19).
44 On 9 February 2021, 'Search the Collections' was replaced with 'Explore the Collections': https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ [accessed 26.06.2022].
45 Geismar 2018, xviii.
46 Evrard and Krebs 2018, 358.
47 Jurgenson 2013.
48 Hui 2016, 2.
49 Meehan 2020.
50 Pearce 2010, xv.
51 Park and Samms 2019.
52 Park and Samms 2019.
53 DAMS operates as a functional, secure storage system for digital objects in the V&A collections. Digital collections curators have voiced ambitions for specialist digital conservation and dedicated digital object storage. However, the wider infrastructure such a 'lab' set-up would require is currently lacking.
54 Dekker 2010, 1.
55 Hodgsen and Poulter 2012, 265.
56 Taylor and Gibson 2017, 409.

57 Such resources include sample documentation templates available from the Time-Based Media Working Group at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See: https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/conservation-and-scientific-research/time-based-media-working-group/documentation [accessed 12.02.2021].

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Afterword

Duncan Forbes

My curatorial career, properly speaking, began at the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) at the birth of the new millennium. An escapee from academe, I commenced close work with its photography collections, split between the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA). I quickly discovered it was a highly contested 'collection', torn this way and that, requiring UN levels of diplomacy to get anything done. Among a small but well-informed circle in Edinburgh and Glasgow, much concerned with the origins of photography, there was an engaging Ur-narrative surrounding the collection which I also came to relish. It went something like this: sometime in the mid-1970s, a Scottish Office auditor wondered out loud to the staff of the SNPG about items of value that had so far escaped his attention. Someone (and this is the decisive action in the drama) pointed towards a nearby filing cabinet that contained several thousand uncatalogued calotypes by the early photographers Robert Adamson and David Octavius Hill. These had been retained by the SNPG over 80 years or so as authentic traces of Scottish 'worthies'. Who might be responsible for this aspect of the collection, the auditor asked? Flustered, the Portrait Gallery's Keeper nodded towards his nearest neighbour, who happened to be a print specialist, and the youngest member of staff. In this way a photography curator and a national photography collection were born.

I have no way of knowing whether this founding myth is accurate or not, but in closed circles it was often celebrated, and it certainly has the ring of truth about it. Spontaneously it seemed, with a single gesture, a long-buried national collection was brought to light. Of course, the reality was more complex, and interrogating

it over the years proved a vital lesson to this tyro curator. It revealed how deeply structured my work was by state and market alike, by the intricacies of government bureaucracy (not always disabling) and the assignation of monetary value to photographs. In this instance we might note the growing pressure on the Scottish Office to account for its cultural patrimony, a pressure (which would lead eventually to Devolution) that emanated from the heart of Scottish civil society. Its actors included, most likely, the civil servants themselves, although definitely not the exclusive, Anglo-centric rump that then governed the NGS. This rump loathed photography, and not only on aesthetic grounds – rather, its validation was seen as cultural nationalism in the making. We might consider, too, the burgeoning resale market for nineteenth-century photographs during the 1970s, something made scandalously apparent in Edinburgh when the Royal Scottish Academy disbursed D. O. Hill's photographic albums into the market in 1975 (Hill had been an early, energetic secretary of the Academy). As I came to discover, that single gesture in the mid-1970s was, in fact, an epiphenomenon of a contested and transitional field of power that would continue to structure my curatorial work in Edinburgh well into the 2010s.

If photography collections are deeply contingent, they are also, I came to understand, quietly subversive, in institutional terms at least. Fluid to its core, photography threatens to elude any established institutional territory or hierarchy of value. Dealing with the nuances of this in an art gallery was a daily torment, not helped by the fact that its complexity was easily reduced to an institutional war of position. For the Director of the SNGMA, a stalwart of 'international' (that is, Euro-American) modernism, the SNPG's Victorian photographic holdings were documentary, rather than art. For the Curator of Photography at the SNPG, its collections were the foundation stone of the fine art tradition of photography – and a peculiarly Scottish one to boot. Despite the grains of truth, I needn't convince this readership of how perverse this all was, and I built my career ducking and diving around these antinomies of bourgeois thought. If you'd asked me then what my lifelines were, I'd probably have said Allan Sekula's *Photography Against the Grain* (1984), Elizabeth Edwards's *Raw Histories* (2001), Steve Edwards's *The Making of English Photography* (2006), Russell Roberts's *In Visible Light* (1997) and, at a stretch, Geoffrey Batchen's *Forget Me Not* (2004). Beyond photography, I recall Michael Taussig's and Henri Lefebvre's writings being particularly sustaining. Needless to say, no senior manager I worked with at the NGS ever grasped how

to position its photography collections, although some made a better stab at it than others.

Auto-ethnography is cathartic, certainly, but I recite all this to affirm what this book proposes: that photography in the museum is always constitutive and always contested. As I turn its pages, I am struck again and again by the intricate layering of practices and histories of photography that the V&A, like other museums, contains – a complex interweaving of the production, circulation, classification and (increasingly) post-production of photographs. This interweaving is, at times, unruly. I recall my shock, shortly after I started at the Museum, as I stumbled across cardboard boxes of photographs stacked up in a desolate corridor, testimony to some distant reordering of technologies and taxonomies of the image. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised – most photography collections are at some level or another unruly. Photography curators know this in their bones, even as they battle against it.

However, while common to museum institutions, it is the scale of the challenge at the V&A that is so unsettling. This is at once a question of the vast number of objects and the institutional authority accorded to the photographic document across the history of the Museum, as well as the document's sheer mutability. The photographic document is the constantly mutating DNA of the V&A. It was, and is, essential to the Museum's evolution. Windross's and Lederman's chapters alone (Chapters 4 and 5) – separated in their subject matter by 150 years of history – reveal a dizzying array of skills and outputs embodied by what Lederman calls 'the practices of object photography'.

As befits an afterword as a reactive and indeed partial form, I want here, briefly, to suggest some next steps, a further expansion of the research horizons that this book so helpfully opens up. Particularly important is to pay further attention to key conjunctures in the history of the Museum, the moments when paradigms of photography collecting and image production begin to shift. I spot three, perhaps four, in these pages, although others will doubtless present themselves to readers. First is the Victorian compulsion towards universal object knowledge, the imperial project of recording and classifying conquered territories. This was to be supplemented by the circulation of images at home in order to bolster industrial design at a time of heightened inter-imperial rivalry. One way or another, these utilitarian logics inform most aspects of the V&A's early photography collections. The second conjuncture is marked by the breakdown of this project in the wake of World War I, and the emergence of a more distinctively modernist

sensibility focused on the authority of the maker. This was, at least in part, related to the increased specialisation of photographic practices, including, for instance, industrial and studio photographies (e.g. Cecil Beaton, Maurice Broomfield and Madame Yevonde). Third, and most obvious, we see the extensive reordering of the photographic collections in 1977 with the designation of the 'national collection of the art of photography', a decisive repositioning of photography in the Museum, sanctioned by the government's then Office of Arts and Libraries. There is also possibly a fourth conjuncture, which I take to be the subject of Troiano's criticism, namely the challenges faced by the V&A photography curators in adapting to the field of 'expanded' – that is, digital – photography since the 1990s (see Chapter 17). This is correct, I think, even if not uncommon in large museums, a symptomatic lethargy that deserves more attention than I am able to give it here.

None of these conjunctures is purely internal to the Museum, and future research might examine each of them more broadly. To take the 1977 reorganisation, for instance, I suspect the momentum towards it started well over a decade earlier as the photograph began to be interrogated in British art schools, and the V&A's Circulation Department responded to the possibilities enabled by lively external interest. Forces outside the Museum are often decisive, and we might note, too, the impact of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)'s energetic promotion of photographic modernism in Europe, and the influence of its curator, John Szarkowski. Even as late as the early 2000s, after at least two decades of critical interrogation of MoMA hegemony, two of Britain's leading photography curators were professed Szarkowskians – as they were more than happy to tell me! Nor should we forget the rising populism of the photographic image world during the 1960s, best embodied by the Sunday newspaper supplements. These latter had a profound impact on the wider understanding of documentary, for instance, while the plethora of community history publications discovered 'old photographs'. Aspects of this were doubtless attractive to Roy Strong, the V&A's youthful director from 1974, who faced large cuts in museum subsidies in the wake of the UK sterling crisis of 1976.

All this suggests the need to pay greater attention to what might be described as the political economy of the photograph in the museum, as well as its implication in modes of financial control, market influence and museum bureaucracy (including its technological forms) more generally. Curators today often spend as much time thinking about budget management, fundraising, market logics and organisational form (incorporating *inter alia* collections management, digital

dissemination and the dynamics of public access) as they do about the regime of the image. These questions are crucial to understanding the split between collections and non-collections, and the rationale governing their organisation. Interrogating them further would better elucidate divisions and their historical formation, as well as help problematise those divisions – a conceptual issue of some importance. I am sure I am not the only photography curator who finds the perpetuation of the art/document binary – still entrenched in British photographic teaching and criticism – a creative dead end.

There is a lot at stake in these more functional questions, and they appear ever more pressing. To cite just one example, it has become patently clear over the last three decades that the British state can no longer afford (or no longer wishes to afford) to archive its photographic heritage. This is in marked contrast, for instance, to other European states like Germany, which continues to explore the possibility of building and funding a national archive of the photographic image. Having worked in continental Europe and in North America, I can say that by comparison British museums are chronically underfunded, highly volatile spaces (and were so even before the impact of COVID-19), a reflection of the contemporary volatility of British social life more generally. I am not sure this is necessarily the fault of the institutions, although the steady expulsion of curators from executive-level decision making in museums has not made collections management any more rational. Like it or not, the collections/non-collections divide is deeply structured by the volatility of Britain's post-imperial financialised economy and its impact on museums. There is a lot more to say about this. It is also tempting to project this political economy back historically – my bet is you could map the transformations of V&A photography against its historical logics. All this points to the scope and complexity of the Museum's 'ecosystem' – inevitably extending far beyond the walls of the Museum itself.

The V&A's relation to Britain's imperial history also resonates throughout the pages of this book, a rethinking of the past that is still very much in its infancy. The Museum's photography collections form a significant colonial archive in their own right; there are decades of research ahead to open them up to analysis. In the current climate, we face a major struggle to support this research, although, as the German example suggests, coming to terms with Britain's imperial heritage in photography would potentially support the well-being of the wider body politic. Hints of this new history appear in the text, notably in Patel and Abdel Barr's essays (Chapters 8 and 11). These

again are but first steps; we need to progress much further in relation to photograph collections and the work of photographs. How is the photographic document implicated in the Museum's colonial mission, as well as its gradual waning across the twentieth century? Is there much evidence of decolonial exhibition and collecting practices at the V&A? Val Wilmer's 1973 exhibition *Jazz Seen: The Face of Black Music*, organised by the Circulation Department, is one outstanding example. While the decolonisation debate is alive and well at the V&A, emanating from above and below, an equally important question for the Museum today is perhaps that of deneocolonisation. As anyone who has been to an art fair will know, the art world is a potent neocolonial power; the photographic image – and not just in its artistic form – is a crucial totem (see, for instance, the many beguiling photographs of new museum architectures, not least in the Middle East and East Asia, as well as those of culture parks and free zones). These are tricky issues for a 'global museum' that aspires to be progressive. Local self-criticism and building solidarity with colleagues in the Global South are vital first steps.

However, without doubt the most important aspect of this book is its recounting and affirmation of labour in the Museum, described beyond the actions of the curator, which still dominate the museological literature. The burden of photographic representation turns out to be everywhere in the Museum. The interviews with V&A photographers especially, some of whom retired during the recent restructuring, reveal quiet dedication, professionalism and a passion for visual innovation. Their commitment over many years is moving – the photographic document has rarely been better served. Likewise, the work of those pursuing new histories on the job is striking – their research forms a feedback loop of knowledge that directly impacts the interpretation of the collections and their management. It is a model of creative work that should be encouraged by institutions. To date, museology has rarely dealt with museum labour adequately – contemporary artists, long engaged with the problems of precarity, have been rather more equal to the challenge. This needs to change, not least because museums are to an unprecedented extent the sites of labour struggle today – witness the burst of unionisation in the United States (including, for the first time, among curators) and the spiralling concern in the UK about questions of equity in relation to poor remuneration and barriers to access. Other thoughts that came to mind as I read the book are questions of deskilling in photography, and technological capture, both huge issues in photographic work

over the last two decades. This is unlikely to diminish as Artificial Intelligence becomes increasingly applied to the management of photographic archives. Labour is now front and centre when it comes to the discussion of both collections and non-collections.

In short, what is important about this book is its affirmation of the labour of research and innovation in photography across the whole museum, not just in its curatorial offices. If the V&A is a perfect stage for such a study, then it has wider implications, not least because major museums today form part of a global value chain of visual reproduction and knowledge (the worldwide licensing of museum photography is another important question here). In relation to my two decades of museum work, this feels like a decisive moment – the tectonic plates are shifting, and on a planetary scale, even as they expose a tremendous fragility at the heart of the museum and in society more generally. Perhaps the question is not only or simply what photographs do in the museum, but rather what collectively we might achieve for them in the future.

Index

What are photographs 'doing' in museums? Why are some photographs valued and others not? Why are some photographic practices visible and not others? What value systems and hierarchies do they reflect?

What Photographs Do explores how museums are defined through their photographic practices. It focuses not on formal collections of photographs as accessioned objects, be they 'fine art' or 'archival', but on what might be termed 'non-collections': the huge number of photographs that are integral to the workings of museums yet 'invisible', existing outside the structures of 'the collection'. These photographs, however, raise complex and ambiguous questions about the ways in which such accumulations of photographs create the values, hierarchies, histories and knowledge-systems, through multiple, folded and overlapping layers that might be described as the museum's ecosystem.

These photographic dynamics are studied through the prism of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, an institution with over 150 years' engagement with photography's multifaceted uses and existences in the museum. The book differs from more usual approaches to museum studies in that it presents not only formal essays but short 'auto-ethnographic' interventions from museum practitioners, from studio photographers and image managers to conservators and non-photographic curators, who address the significance of both historical and contemporary practices of photography in their work. As such this book offers an extensive and unique range of accounts of what photographs 'do' in museums, expanding the critical discourse of both photography and museums.

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Cover image:
X-ray by Nick Veasey of a Balenciaga
evening dress in the V&A's collection, 2017.
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