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Transcending the Label: Photographs as Objects in the University of Aberdeen's George Washington Wilson Photographic Collection

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Abstract

The abstract. This paper will examine photographs as objects and their role within a museum context. Drawing upon the repository of images in the University of Aberdeen's George Washington Wilson collection, this paper will analyse how photographs and memory together transcend the perfunctory label and enrich the human presence in the people, places, or events that they depict. It is through memory that we can relate to photographs, despite the fact that they were taken over one hundred years ago and the fact that some photographs in the collection give the impression of timelessness, which clashes with a contradictory sense of the present.

[Keywords] : Photography; Museums; Objects; George Washington Wilson; Memory; City

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era bore witness to the rise of the arts and to the museum. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert championed socio-economic reforms and were patrons of the arts. From its inception in the early 1840s, Queen Victoria became fascinated by photography and was known to have many photographic albums in her collection by the time of her death in 1901. The Museums Act 1845 gave town councils of larger municipal boroughs the power to establish museums in England and Wales. Having been established in 1807, the oldest Scottish museum in existence, the University of Glasgow Hunterian Museum, pre-dated the Museum Act. In 1851 the entire collections of The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (1780) passed into public ownership. These collections would eventually form what is now the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Photographs as museum objects were born out of the development of the post-photographic museum.

The University of Aberdeen's George Washington Wilson photographic collection comprises a rich repository of images, which provide an insight into the Victorian and early Edwardian past spanning the length and breadth of the British Empire. Aberdeen-based pioneer photographer, George Washington Wilson (1823-1893), captured city spaces such as Aberdeen for posterity, bequeathing a unique 'image-world' (Sontag 1977: 11) into city life. The collection totals around 38,000 glass plate negatives taken by Wilson and his photographic company GWW & Co from the early 1850s until the company was dissolved in 1908. Wilson and subsequently those employed by his photographic firm captured images from as far afield as South Africa and Australia. In Wilson's cityscapes, his panoptic, all-encompassing vision was not to survey, instead he sought to extoll and to instil in the public a sense of pride of place. Focusing on two images of the city of Aberdeen from the collection, taken by Wilson in the 1860s-1870s, this paper will examine how these photographs transcend their perfunctory labels.

The Development of the Post-Photographic Museum

Historically, museums are stewards of culture, history, and memory, bearing witness to the passing of human triumphs across all disciplines as well as some difficult histories. Most importantly, museums and their collections offer knowledge and the chance to either further develop already-

known knowledge of the individual or to help them to learn something completely new. Museums began ‘as human society’s equivalent of cultural memory banks’ (Dean 1996: 1). The cultural impact of photography was astounding, and within a decade of its inception, it had gone global. Subsequently, within a generation of its inventions, ‘photography had become a leading avenue for distributing images overwhelming in quantity and breadth of distribution, all images made in the history of humanity’ (Walsh 2007: 23). Facilitated by photography, a new kind of art museum was born: the post-photographic museum. Its aim was not to simply house and curate an existing collection, but to create one. Through this model, ‘photography not only influenced art that came after its invention, but also the entire history of art that came before it’ (Ibid: 24).

Early examples of a pre-photographic museum would be institutions such as the Ashmolean and the British Museum, whose foundations relied on existing collections accrued by private collectors often belonging to the elite within society. The function of the post-photographic museum was primarily educational. The V&A Museum in London (formerly the South Kensington Museum) is regarded as the prototype of the post-photographic art museum. Inspired by the Crystal Palace exposition in 1851, the “brainchild” of Prince Albert, the V&A sought to “elevate public taste through the influence of great art” (Ibid: 25). Significantly, the Great Exhibition also boasted the first public display of photographs in Britain and signalled the commencement of the permeation of the photographic art throughout nineteenth century society.

Photographs as Objects

According to Edwards & Hart (2004: 1), photographs are one of two things: images and objects. In taking a photograph, the resulting image is ‘caught up in the moment’, whereas a photographic object has ‘temporal and spatial duration’ (Urry & Larson 2011: 155). As objects in a museum, they transcend representational status, because they retain their temporal and spatial duration. By definition, a photograph is a material trace of a person, place, and time. It exists ‘as chemical deposits on paper, as images mounted on a multitude of (...) cars (...) drawing their meanings from (...) frames and albums’ (Edwards & Hart 2004: 1). Some photographs give an impression of

timelessness, which ‘coincides with a strange temporality and contradictory sense of the present’ (Baer 2005: 11). This impression of timelessness clashing with the reality of the present can be applied to many of George Washington Wilson’s photographs of cities. For instance, viewing Wilson’s photographs of Aberdeen from a contemporary perspective gives the observer a sense of timelessness and a realisation of the slow progress of change to the city’s façade. Thus, these photographs reveal a shared ordinariness of the cities’ inhabitants.

Since the nineteenth century, museums have been the repository through which the general public have been introduced to objects and exhibitions. Previously, museums consisted of a privately exhibited cabinet of curiosity which often belonged to special collectors. These curiosities would likely be of one type of object and were seen only by the wealthiest in society. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was open to all classes of society and introduced new worlds of art and science to those previously excluded from such exhibitions. Ultimately, the opening of museums to the working classes was ‘just as essential to a display of power as had been (...) the spectacle of punishment’ (Bennett 1995: 72) in previous centuries.

Photographing the City

Frederick Scott Archer’s invention of the wet collodion process in 1851 allowed photographers to be liberated from the confines of their studios and to expand their enterprise into landscape, travel, and tourism. Benefitting from the expansion of the railway networks, photographers like George Washington Wilson could travel further than was previously possible. According to Urry & Larsen (2011: 161), the act of photographing distant cities and landscapes ‘taught the art of gazing at the world with touristic curiosity’. Subsequently, Scotland became a desirable tourist hub, especially the Highlands, which were popularised by Queen Victoria after the lease of Balmoral Castle in 1848. Even before the Queen’s interest in Scotland, the Highlands became the subject of romantic novels and landscapes by writers and artists.

One of the most influential figures in the romanticising of the Scottish Highlands was Sir Walter Scott. According to Womack (in Padget 1993: 178), there was a period from 1745 until 1810 where the ‘mythologization of the Highlands and Islands as capitalism’s other’ was evident in

contemporary thought. The Highlands existed as a pre-industrial state, preserving the natural beauty of the region. The Highlands became a popular tourist destination for holidaymakers and photographers alike. George Washington Wilson explored and photographed many popular sites including the Trossachs, Balmoral, and Loch Katrine. By royal commission, he documented the reinvention of the new Balmoral Castle and photographed the Royal family at their new home. Wilson's photographs transcend both the historicity of the uncivilized nature of Scotland as well as the brutal aspects of Victorian society, such as crime, disease, and poverty. Wilson's sense of pride of place was rooted in the evolving desire to make Scotland distinct from England, contributing 'to the advancement of a separate landscape identity' (Morrison 2003: 78). Wilson's photographs evoke a stature of place, which can also be seen in his depictions of cities. Where Charles Dickens notably wrote about the poverty and depravity permeating Victorian society, Wilson, by contrast, wanted to display the city ostentatiously.

When viewing Wilson's photographs from a contemporary perspective, the individual may not be aware that Wilson chose not to confront the viewer with the socio-economic issues prevalent in every Victorian city. In whichever way an object is displayed in a museum or gallery, the individual will often be triggered by that object or image which invokes a memory of a time past or another distant memory that somehow relates to that particular image. As Carr (1995: 251) points out, memory transcends 'the bland narrative and the perfunctory label; it deepens and extends the human presence in things'. Sometimes, when viewing an old photograph of a particular location, the individual is nostalgic for the place that is familiar to them in the present, but unfamiliar to them in that specific image. For example, the photograph of *Castle Street and Municipal Buildings* (MS3792/E1568XA) is a familiar scene to the residents of the city of Aberdeen, yet it was taken in an unfamiliar time. The photograph was taken by Wilson between the years 1878-1884 and features the Mercat Cross on Castlegate looking down past the Municipal Buildings towards Union Street. The Mercat Cross was moved to its present location in Castlegate in 1822 and has remained there ever since. The Castle Street area itself appears almost unchanged, excepting a few modern moderations. The Old Records Office was situated where the Salvation Army Citadel now stands and a few of the medieval buildings were demolished during the Victorian era. Visually, the majority of Castlegate space has retained some of its Victorian aesthetic.

In the University of Aberdeen's George Washington Wilson collection, there are several photographs of Castlegate taken from around the 1860s until 1908, when his photographic firm, GWW & Co, collapsed. As time has progressed, the historic significance of Castlegate has reduced. It was once a place to go to market, witness executions, hear proclamations, not to mention the site of a castle and garrison. These buildings and place functions have now fallen into obscurity. Arguably, the Victorian era was the last point of time at which this space was significant to the city as a whole.

With regards to this retrospective point of view, several questions come to mind. For example, how did Wilson interact with his subjects? Were the people featured in his photographs made aware of his commercial intentions? For example, in the photograph of *Castle Street Looking East* (MS3792/E1570), which was taken in 1878, there are people gathered in the space of Castlegate, including two girls in the foreground selling fish, a group of boys, and policemen. With the exception of a cab driver, who features in the left foreground of the image, all of these people appear to be aware of the camera's presence. The answers to these questions will most likely remain unanswered, but some speculation can be made considering what is known about Wilson and his photographic style.

Conclusion

Once the centre of the city of Aberdeen, Castlegate is a part of the city's ancient and historic façade. In viewing these images from a modern perspective, 'we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before' (Berger 1972: 16). As museum objects, the photographs in the University of Aberdeen's George Washington Collection provide an exceptional insight into some aspects of city life in the Victorian and early Edwardian period. In the two photographs referenced above (MS3792/E1568XA and MS3792/E1570), there is both a contradictory sense of reality and a timelessness that stimulates the viewer to relate to that image. These images not only contradict the reality of the present, but also that of the past.

Overall, the photographs in the University of Aberdeen George Washington Wilson collection transcend their perfunctory labels while also bridging the gaps between the centuries. It is clear that

Wilson captured moments of daily life in Victorian Aberdeen, yet he negates some of the pressing socio-economic issues that were familiar to most cities during this time: poverty, crime, and disease. Both photographs mentioned in this paper are images which romanticise the city of Aberdeen by showcasing its innate individual features with city spaces. Wilson emphasised stature of place by showcasing the city space and capturing its inherent atmospheric qualities for future generations.

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