

Photography and Architecture

Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939. An exhibition presented at the National Gallery of Art, Ottawa, 14 September — 11 November 1984, and organized by the Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

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Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939. An exhibition presented at the National Gallery of Art, Ottawa, 14 September – 11 November 1984, and organized by the Centre Canadien d'Architecture/ Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

Catalogue: *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. By Richard Pare with an introduction by Phyllis Lambert and catalogue entries by Catherine Evans Inbusch and Marjorie Munsterberg. New York, Callaway Editions, 1982. 282 pp., 147 illus., \$75.00. (cloth). A soft cover edition was also available during the exhibition. The French language edition, 1984, is distributed by Éditions du Méridien, Montréal.

Twice since its foundation in 1979, the Canadian Centre for Architecture has given audiences in this country the opportunity to view the wealth of architectural books, drawings, and photographs it is actively collecting. The first exhibition, entitled *The Villas of Pliny and Classical Architecture in Montreal* has already been reviewed by Yves Deschamps in a previous issue of *RACAR* (x/2, 203-206). Then in 1984, for the second consecutive autumn, the cca made its presence felt with an exhibition, which previously circulated to Cologne, Chicago, to New York's Cooper Hewitt Museum (where it was beautifully installed), and to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Although Canada was the last stop on the itinerary, *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939* had lost none of its freshness, nor its ability to stimulate viewers to a new level of awareness.

The exhibition comprised 183 works of art, the cream of a mere ten years' collecting by the cca's Founder/ Director, Phyllis Lambert, and Richard Pare, Curator of Photographs (both of them are photographers in their own right, not surprisingly). In that decade they have put together an impressive array of some 30,000 images, covering the entire period from the invention of photography in 1839 right to the contemporary avant-garde. The cut-off date of 1939 chosen for the exhibition does not, therefore, fully reflect the scope of the cca's holdings. Some critics have found this cut-off date a hindrance. But as it stood, the content was certainly rich enough and the pre-World War II masters gave plenty of hints about what was to come.

Some years ago in the Canadian periodical *Archivaria*, Phyllis Lambert wrote: 'Photography can be both an art form and a documentary technique ... One may enhance the other by combining the record and certain aesthetic qualities ... The visual record of buildings also conveys information at a symbolic level. Collectively, buildings are a formal expression of society's needs, values and aspirations. While structural soundness and functional suitability are requirements of any good building, the ordering of the materials and the means of construction also, consciously or not, represent abstract concepts ... At times, the architectural vocabulary of one civilisation becomes the metaphor for another' (*Archivaria* 5, 1977-78, pp. 68, 71). This statement permits one to infer the criteria that have been employed in assembling the cca's photographic collection. Artistic quality, technical mastery and state of preservation are considered paramount. At the same time the historical importance of the individual building or buildings represented is taken into account. The cca has fused the notions of photographs as artistic expressions, documents of the time in which they were produced, and records of physical appearance at a given moment in history. Collecting policy also stresses that works interrelate to other objects in the collection. Thus Roger Fenton's masterful view of Hungerford Suspension Bridge (Fig. 1) is supplemented by books and drawings of bridges – one of the strengths of the cca. Finally, Phyllis Lambert outlines a mission for the cca as regards promoting architectural literacy at all levels of twentieth-century society. Hers is a kind of manifesto for the future cca: to collect and conserve; to study and analyse; to exhibit and diffuse with a view to influencing the direction of architecture.

The last of these goals is achieved by an exhibition such as *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. Its opening in Ottawa was timed to coincide with the beginning of the academic year, when students and teachers are at their freest and freshest. A whole series of events revolved around the show. Richard Pare gave a public lecture which provided an overview of the collection, as well as demonstrating his curatorial eye for technical excellence and poetic photographic composition. On a subsequent occasion, Claude Bergeron, one of *RACAR*'s founding editors, also delivered a talk. On September 29-30, a symposium was held which was open to the public. A dozen speakers from the United



FIGURE 1. Roger Fenton, *Houses of Parliament under construction*. London, 1858(?) (Photo: Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal).

States, Canada and France spoke on various topics: the photograph as part of the popular myth-making process; as a useful tool in architectural restoration and archaeology; and as part of recent campaigns such as the DATAR project in France, heir to the original 1851 Mission héliographique. Apart from simple problems of audibility due to the noise level of the simultaneous translation, the tone of the proceedings tended to be one of experts and initiates addressing one another rather than the general audience. One would have liked more discussion like John Szarkowski's about what constitutes 'good' architectural photography. Szarkowski contrasted the serendipitous 'Sunday' photographer of buildings with the professional whose 'Monday' shots are all in a week's work. Such an understanding – no doubt in part intuitive and oversimplified as presented by Szarkowski – was either not referred to at all or somehow taken for granted. Such issues so basic to an emerging area of scholarly interest must be continually defined and redefined. Nevertheless, the National Gallery is to be commended for the symposium and for distributing a sheet describing the technical photographic terms that can be so confusing to a novice. The glossary was available free of charge to visitors in the galleries.

The exhibition space itself was painted in restful greys. The large vitrine in which were encased a number of small daguerrotypes, displayed on black velvet like miniature crown jewels, presented the only drawback. The positioning of it at the entrance tended to block easy access to the galleries beyond. Some visitors remarked upon the fact that certain key quotations

appearing interspersed on the walls, where not sufficiently cited as to source, or cross-referenced to the catalogue, of which copies were made available for consultation in the exhibition space. The initial galleries focused on the architecture of Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages which preoccupied many early masters of photography. As one proceeded, the subject matter became more exotic and more modern in date. Attractive features of the Ottawa installation included several display cases containing the type of photographic albums from which came some of the single images hanging on the walls. Felice Beato's Lucknow Album of 1858, to which I will return, is a case in point.

Throughout the exhibition I was frequently impressed with a sense of respect for the enormous difficulties overcome by the early photographers and by their rigorous efforts to unify single images into grand schemes. The campaign of the French Mission héliographique, for instance, was carried out in conjunction with surveys of the Commission des monuments historiques. The Englishman Roger Fenton, a painter by training as were many pioneer photographers, recorded the pinnacled skylines of English cathedrals, or their modern counterparts such as the Houses of Parliament, seen under construction behind Hungerford Bridge (Fig. 1). In Fenton's composition the scaffolded Big Ben tower seems to act like a third pylon rising dead centre from the main span over the Thames.

Vedute and the production of architectural drawings as souvenirs had characterized the Roman art market in the eighteenth century. It is therefore little wonder that in the next century the Eternal City should have become



FIGURE 2. Auguste-Rosalie Bisson, *Roman Forum and Church of SS. Luca e Martina*. Rome, before 1864 (Photo: Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal).

the focus of much photographic activity. A view by Auguste-Rosalie Bisson (Fig. 2), taken across the Forum Romanum to the Baroque façade of SS. Luca e Martina, is dense with historical information. It is as multi-layered in a horizontal sense as the archaeological strata shown descending vertically in the foreground of the composition. A zigzag overlapping of the colonnades and triumphal arch with the background forms an open invitation to explore the depths of the image – amazingly ‘legible’ right down to the proclamation nailed to the church door. Similarly, on the Athens Acropolis, the American William James Stillman recorded the north porch of the Erechtheion in the manner of a painting by Paolo Uccello. The way the beams form perspectival orthogonals into the picture plane reminded me of Uccello’s *Battle of San Romano*. But thanks to the new wet-collodion glass plate technique, Stillman could develop sharply etched tonalities of grey richer than any Renaissance grisaille. The cut-off marble beam ends have an almost palpable, brain-like texture to them. Excellent though the reproduction in the catalogue is (pl. 65), it is no substitute for the experience of entering into the silvery sheen of Stillman’s original albumen print. Here is what I take to be an exemplification of art historian James Ackerman’s definition of an ideal architectural photographer: ‘He should love buildings more even than he loves photography’ (*Art Bulletin*, XLIII, 1961, p. 75).

If the foregoing analyses tend to suggest that *Photography and Architecture* had a dated, sepia cast to it, let me choose another example for contrast (Fig. 3). It is twentieth-century in date, shows an interior rather than an



FIGURE 3. Werner Mantz, *Villa, Maarenburg, Cologne*. 1928 (Photo: Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal).

exterior, and was photographed by Werner Mantz, a living representative of the Pantheon of great photographers included in this retrospective. Mantz takes a head-on viewpoint in keeping with the rectangularity of his International Style subject matter. How deliberately different from the ‘painterly’ compositions of a Bisson or a Fenton! Mantz’s picture looks deceptively simple. A wry sense of humour draws attention to the incongruous Venetian glass chandelier hanging in the middle of the stark white room. The cacti along the window box fit in better with the modernist aesthetic because of their



FIGURE 4. Felice Beato, *The Dilroosha Palace, Lucknow*. 1858. (Photo: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/ Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal).

geometric, 'primitive' shapes. They were among the favourite house plants of avant-garde architects. One sees them on the ledge of Walter Gropius' own living room in the Bauhaus complex at Dessau. What possible meaning can be attached to these spiky plants in such spartan settings? Obviously photographs can lead to interesting speculations that touch on social or psychological issues.

Further to the points just made, I would like to conclude with a little discovery made thanks to Felice Beato's Lucknow Album. For a complete change of place it takes us to the Orient, as do many of his photographs, some of them astonishing panoramas several feet in length. Historically the album is significant because it shows the Indian city of Lucknow after the siege of 1858 by the British. Afterwards many of the damaged buildings vanished forever. So we have an instance of the photograph as irreplaceable record. Seeing the image of the pock-marked Dilroosha Palace (Fig. 4). I was immediately reminded of Sir John Vanbrugh's early eighteenth-century house at Seaton Delaval on the Northumberland coast of England. When the Dilroosha Palace is studied alongside the engraved plate of Seaton Delaval, which was its probable direct inspiration, the resemblance appears remarkably close (Fig. 5). Obviously the design underwent a seachange en route to India, where pitched gables were no longer so necessary as in England, but where fanciful scaly roofs on the projecting turrets were a gesture to exotic, local tastes. Such an example of exchange of ideas bears out Phyllis Lambert's contention that 'the architectural vocabulary of one civilisation becomes the metaphor for another.'

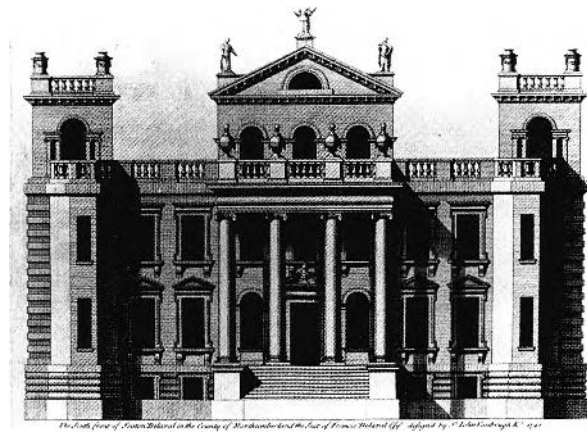


FIGURE 5. Nicholas Hawksmoor, *Seaton Delaval, Northumberland*. Engraving from C. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*. London, 1725 (Photo: Author).

To an architectural historian like myself the photograph in question is a precious piece of evidence. More than that, thanks to *Photography and Architecture*, I became increasingly aware of the intellectual and artistic importance of architectural photographs, not only historically, but for their future implications. Seen in this perspective the exhibition has been a milestone event of rare beauty and compelling fascination.

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