

Reflections on an Exhibition

by ANN THOMAS

Traditionally archival institutions have presented displays rather than exhibitions. More often than not photographic images, and I use this term advisedly, rather than photographs, have functioned as purely illustrational adjuncts to the more important manuscript material. Occasionally, the photographs used for such purposes are originals — cabinet portraits, tintypes, or cartes-de-visites — scattered unceremoniously like trinkets, in display cases. More frequently, grainy, cropped, and generally indifferent modern prints or copy photographs are substituted for the originals, the former perhaps being considered to render greater impact or have more effective design properties than the originals themselves. On other occasions, photographic images attached to moveable panels are used to form backdrops to displays of historical materials. Such display practices, as they affect photographic images, may well enhance the nostalgic ambience of the other material being displayed, but do nothing whatsoever to promote the real artifact and historical value of the photograph. By not paying attention to the descriptive labelling of these photographic objects — the identity (known or unknown) of the photographer or photographic studio, the process employed (and whether the photographic image is a vintage or modern print or copy print) — the importance of the photographs is not simply dismissed, but undermined. Photographs thus treated remain largely incoherent. They may function in an indifferent way as illustrations of an historical theme, but as documents with a syntax, a content, and a history of their own, they are, in this context, subordinated.

The use of the display method for manuscript material is entirely appropriate (western culture does not participate in the Oriental passion for calligraphic masterpieces), given that most viewers share the understanding that the true worth of the manuscript lies in its attentive reading and interpretation outside of the display case. It is, however, not a satisfactory way of showing photographs. What you see in the photograph — in its original print form, in its presentation, as an individual work with its original caption or text accompaniment, in its context with other images, and in its relationship to an entire exhibition — is, as the saying goes, more or less what you get. Historians, cultural anthropologists, and archivists have been paying increased attention to photographs as historical documents in the last decade and discovering in the process as much about their artifice as about their authenticity as source materials. John Kouwenhoven, celebrated historian of American culture, in his essay “Photographs as Historical Documents,” approaches this topic with a discerning eye and mind, but also raises a few contentious issues:



1. Installation of the Fifth Canadian International Salon of Photographic Art, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 8 November 1938. Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada (5-XII-79).

To insist, as I have done, on the reliability of photographic images would be misleading unless a distinction were made between the photographer's negatives, positive prints made therefrom and photomechanical prints reproduced from positives in magazines and books whence most of us derive our knowledge of old photographs. As historical documents the negatives are unrivalled, because from them only can we get an unchallenged record of the forms and textures recorded thereon by the unbiased objectivity of reflected light.¹

There are several points with which one could take issue; possibly the most critical is the emphasis he places on the photographic image as providing a purely informational function from the historian's point of view, thus attributing to the negative a superior value. As Peter Robertson's article, "More than Meets the Eye,"² appropriately illustrates, all photographic documents must be questioned as to their reliability, indeed, as one would question the reliability of all documents. While the visual examples that Kouwenhoven uses to support his argument are undeniably persuasive, a more historically valid position would have been, in this writer's opinion, to equate the unrivalled importance of the original negative *and* the original print. The information contained in the original print must not be underestimated;

1 John A. Kouwenhoven, "Photographs as Historical Documents," *Half a Truth is Better Than None: Some Unsystematic Conjectures about Art, Disorder and American Experience* (Chicago and London, 1982), p. 192.

2 Peter Robertson, "More than Meets the Eye," *Archivaria* 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 33-43.

the careful or otherwise technical processing of the prints, the importance placed by the photographer on the production of the print — such surface effects inform us of cultural/aesthetic values being adhered to and the processes employed. Much can be gleaned from the appearance of the original print as to how the photographer intended the information to be read by viewers.

This is one of the areas in which the Public Archives of Canada exhibition, “Private Realms of Light: Canadian Amateur Photography 1839-1940” makes an important contribution. By selecting original prints to represent the photographers in the exhibition, the exhibition’s organizers allow the viewers to gain a vivid understanding about the pictorial conventions of the time. One exception which must be questioned is that of John Boyd, whose fascinating records of hunting, fishing, and daily life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ontario, are represented by lack-lustre modern prints rather than by the finely printed originals housed in the Provincial Archives of Ontario.

“Private Realms of Light” is an exhibition of photographs and not a display: it sets out to make a complex statement about the two-hundred-odd photographic images which comprise the exhibition. The research and mounting of an exhibition such as this accords with the expansion of the National Photography Collection’s mandate to include “the documenting of the history of the photographic medium and its impact on Canadian life as a medium of communication and expression.”³ The earlier and more traditional focus of their collecting activity was directed toward the documentation of “the history and environment of Canada through photographs.”⁴ A recent acquisitions policy statement defines the present direction in the following terms, underscoring the didactic functions of the department:

By recognizing the dual nature of photography in its acquisitions policy, the National Photography Collection is becoming a centre for the comprehensive study of the nation’s photographic historical heritage, seen either as documentation or as medium, from its oldest to its most recent manifestation.⁵

Earlier exhibitions organized by the National Photography Collection, such as “Into the Silent Land” and “City Blocks, City Spaces,” have already indicated this direction, as has the collecting pattern and a number of monographic and survey publications authored by members of the staff. The most ambitious of these undertakings is the exhibition under review and its accompanying publication by the same title.

The didactic role of this exhibition is made apparent by the organization of the works into six specific conceptual and chronological categories: The Early Years, 1839-1885; the New Amateur, 1885-1900; Art Ascendant, 1900-1914; So Few Earnest Workers, 1914-1930; Salon Crescendo, 1930-1940; and The Appearance of Colour. Each section, clearly demarcated by a title and physical arrangement, and accompanied by a substantial introductory text, contains approximately thirty to forty photographs. The photographs are uniformly matted and framed, and the

3 “Acquisitions Policy Statement,” National Photography Collection, Public Archives of Canada, January 1983.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*



2. Alexander Henderson, "The Trout Brook," 1860-1865, Albumen silver print, 21.6 x 16.9 cm. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-28608).

photographer's identity and active period, the date of the work, the process used in making the print, and the state of the print (whether it is vintage or modern) are all described in the accompanying label. The manner in which the photographic works are organized and presented on the walls accords with contemporary exhibition installation practices and ideology rather than with the style of exhibition typical of the period during which the works were produced (Figure 1). In addition, artifacts and memorabilia such as medals, diplomas, Christmas cards, and notebooks, as well

as catalogues and periodicals, are displayed in cases. Several displays of camera equipment are also included. Given that the structure of this exhibition offers a level of commentary superior to that of the average display, what is the viewer intended to learn from this orderly arrangement of photographs, and the combination of photographs and the printed word?

By dedicating a great deal of its human resources and years of concentrated effort to the research and organization of this exhibition, the National Photography Collection obviously perceived a serious need to address the issue of Canadian photographic practice as it existed in the latter decades of the nineteenth century until the period before the Second World War, the inclusion of the first section, The Early Years 1839-1885, being, so to speak, something of an afterthought.

Indeed, the Era of Canadian Pictorialism, although touched upon in general surveys of the history of photography in Canada, has remained largely unexplored. Rightfully acknowledging this hiatus in their decision to mount this exhibition, the organizers have, however, unfortunately tended to undermine their own serious efforts to elucidate this period by subsuming two hundred photographs made over a period of more than a hundred years under the questionable rubric of "amateur photography."

The word "amateur" is renowned for its ubiquitousness and its loose associative value in its nineteenth-century usage. The usage of the word "amateur" in English can be traced back to the eighteenth century, but it is certainly the early nineteenth-century (1803) use of the word, that of "a person understanding and loving or practising the polite arts of painting, sculpture, or architecture, without any regard to pecuniary advantage,"⁶ which was intended both in the framework of nineteenth-century photography and here in the exhibition title. A glance at the publications which appeared under this title by anonymous amateur authors in the nineteenth century, as they appear in the National Union Catalog of Pre-1956 imprints, confirms this: *Amateur: A Quarterly Magazine of General Literature and Miscellaneous Amusements*, *Amateur Poacher*, and a tract printed for "private circulation" in 1885 under the title "An Amateur Flagellant."

One of the earliest applications of the word in relation to photography appears in the *Art Union* of 1848 where reference is made to the establishment of a Photography Club described as having been formed by a "party of gentleman amateurs."⁷ The gentleman amateur was clearly drawn from a leisured and titled class, with a run-down of members of the Amateur Photographic Association in Britain in 1862 resembling a short list of entries from Burke's Peerage and Baronetage:

A meeting of the council of this society was held ... the Earl of Caithness in the chair. The Prince of Wales was unanimously elected President ... and several noblemen and gentlemen were added to the list of vice-presidents. Viscount Ranelagh inquired whether professional photographers were eligible as members, and was answered by the secretary in the negative.⁸

6 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, volume I, A-B (Clarendon Press, 1970).

7 "Photographic Club," *The Art Union* 10 (1848), p. 130.

8 "Amateur Photographic Association," *The Art-Journal* 14 (1862), p. 178



3. *William Ide, "The Watering Place," c. 1896, Carbon print, 7.5 x 11.5 cm.*
 Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-125108).

In short, the word "amateur" seems to describe, more than anything else, a nineteenth-century state of mind made possible by the social and economic climate of the times. That most of these photographers represented in the exhibition chose to work under the banner of the "amateur photographer" and subscribed to periodicals and clubs which incorporated the rubric does not ascribe a self-evident meaning to the works. The word "pictorialism" would have indicated a particular set of values and aesthetic aspirations for the period around the turn of the century; indeed, a broader concern with pictorial conventions would have been a major point of access to the photographs.

Furthermore the absence of any discussion or of any visible products of the amateur's counterpart, the professional, in this exhibition makes the relationship between the photographs and the title particularly unhappy one. It does not enjoy the spark, for instance, that the term "cubist" would in relation to a body of visual objects. In this context, the linkage of title to the photographs is theoretical rather than explicative, yielding a sense to the modern viewer which is both awkward and unclear. By predicating the entire structure and meaning of the exhibition on the concepts of the amateur and the "private realms" of his or her field of activity, and thus implying an unquestioning acceptance of the usefulness and significance of these terms, the viewer has been left in a somewhat private realm of darkness, facing two hundred photographs of exceedingly different pictorial approaches.

Heavily represented in this exhibition are pictorialist photographs, made by photographers Sidney Carter, Harold Mortimer-Lamb, C.E. Saunders, Albert Van, and others. One of the intriguing contradictions about this work is the self-avowed claim by the pictorialists that the photographic images were made "for their own



4. Beresford Pinkerton, "Forest Landscape," n.d., Sepia-toned, gelatin silver (?) print, 15.6 x 5.6 cm. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-121504).

sake" and "as ends in themselves," all the while operating within a framework of public convention by subscribing to given pictorial orthodoxy of the time and by avid participation in annual local, national, and international salons. Conformity to a particular set of aesthetic norms was reinforced by the dictates of camera clubs and the juries who confirmed standards imposed by salon participation.

The adoption of the word "salon" by camera club aficionados and pictorialists to describe the setting in which their works were judged, selected, and hung, attests to the self-conscious attempt that was made to situate photography within a fine-art picture-making tradition. The imagery itself employed processes and techniques which enhanced the gestural, hand-made aspect of photography and suppressed its mechanical properties. These photographs did not signal new perceptions about the nature and potential of two-dimensional image-making, but tended to fall back into a revival of pictorial patterns already long exhausted by painters. Similarly, the concept of the salon as the occasion of a public exhibition, instituted in France in the seventeenth century, had experienced its demise well before the photographic salons were instituted.

It is, however, also true that the richness of the material selected for this exhibition provides the viewer with an unparalleled opportunity to witness the range of work produced by many of Canada's major practitioners and to view the progression of pictorial conventions and the constantly changing syntax employed by the photographer in Canada over a period of a hundred years. The earliest example in the exhibition of an operative pictorialist aesthetic is Alexander Henderson's photograph, "The Trout Brook," 1860-65 (Figure 2), which appears in the section, "The Early Years;" the studied composition and selection of subject matter are reminiscent of Barbizon school painting. While it can be viewed as a precursor to William Ide's "The Watering Place," c. 1896 (Figure 3), and Beresford Pinkerton's "Forest Landscape," n.d. (Figure 4), the former located in the "New Amateur" section and the latter appearing in "Art Ascendant," it relates strongly in its treatment of subject to the landscape aesthetic that emerges later in the work of practitioners such as C.E. Saunders. Linkages and tracings such as this, while not revelations in themselves, can be made on many levels, informing us of the manner in which pictorialist visual imagery was self-generating and self-referential. For example, Roche's "H.M.S. Sattelite," 1858-1860; the striking view of Abitibi River by an unidentified member of the Moose Factory Group, 1865-1870; and Horetzky's "Moose Factory from the Flats," c. 1865 — or a much later example, Robert Scott's "In a Formal Garden, Saratoga Springs," n.d. — are less easily located within the framework of pictorial conventions of the time but, like snapshot photographs such as James Ballantyne's "Charlie in Chair," September 1896, recall concerns of a more recent photographic aesthetic.

The catalogue, which I have only seen in its prepublication form, will be richly illustrated with works from the exhibition and microscopically detailed photographs of various colour processes. As such it will not only function as a valuable reference book for historical information pertaining to the period, but will also serve archivists and museum curators alike for assistance in process identification. Despite certain reservations about the titling and hence structuring of this exhibition, "Private Realms" makes a major contribution to an uncharted field in the history of Canadian photography. The Public Archives of Canada and in particular the

National Photography Collection are to be congratulated and encouraged for making a contribution of this standard and depth to the history of Canadian photography.