'Persistent images: photographic archives in ethnographic collections'

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From its beginnings, photography has been envisioned and utilised as a purveyor of vicarious experience equivalent to presence. Possession of a photograph was regularly confounded with possession of its subject, and it is not surprising that the camera was almost immediately turned on the new worlds and peoples amongst which Europe and the United States were building empires. As early as the 1850s, photographers were going out from the centres of photography's invention to capture what they perceived as the exotic and savage and bring it back for study and sale in the places where anthropology was in its infancy. It is no coincidence that photographs, which, by their de-contextualising nature, encourage the perception of specific and individualised subjects as generic types, played a significant role in anthropology's construction of the cultural Other, its definitive subject matter.

Not only photographs made with ethnographic intent, but commercial novelties, pornography, travel souvenirs, military documentation and amateur snapshots were collected, catalogued and conserved by museums of anthropology, ethnology, natural history and folklore. Photographs, along with collections of objects and the written texts of travellers, missionaries and, somewhat later, field researchers, became the stuff that the sciences of the Other were made of - indeed were constructed into the Other itself.

By the 1920s, anthropology had accrued sufficient products, both narrative and pictorial, made by its own, to supersede the texts and photographs with which the discipline had been invented. Non-scientific texts were simply dismissed from the canon, and no longer read or studied, in favour of the official anthropological descriptions manufactured by those certified as being able to produce them. Collections of photographs, however, existing as archives of objects in museums, could not be disposed of simply through the act of forgetting, but for much of this century they were effectively ignored. At best they were seen as relics of a proto-science, so crude as to be useless today in terms of ethnographic truth. At worst, they were understood as racist and imperialist trash, indications of the embarrassing roots of a now more correct discipline.

In the last decade, a disparate group of artists and scholars concerned variously with the histories of art, photography, anthropology and colonialism, have met, as it were, in the often dusty photo files of the world's ethnographic museums and collections, recognising that these early images hold important information about their respective disciplines and our culture as a whole. These photographs are documents of culture contact, They are a product of interaction between subject and photographer which hold a variety of meanings to subsequent consumers in which we may find sources of contemporary understanding, practice and ways of seeing.

This short paper offers a brief survey of several collections of photographs which, despite the variety of
their type, subject, format, initial use and individual histories, have been preserved since the nineteenth century under such similar rubrics as ethnology, anthropology, ethnography, folklore and natural history. It refers to the early uses of these images, both as archives of information and as systems of control of the people and places they depicted and touches on their significance today as documents in the histories of the sciences listed above, and of the history of colonialism to which they relate. Finally, I will discuss several recent attempts by museum workers and others in many countries to re-examine these historical holdings in light of changing ideologies and intentions.

Even a cursory examination of historical collections of photographs in museums that study human cultures reveals that the collections exhibit a number of similarities. Indicators such as studio stamps, prices, the use of popular formats such as carte-de-visite or gold-edged cabinet cards, and generic, exploitive titles such as Harem Girls or A Dusky Belle reveal the commercial intent behind the making of many early prints absorbed into ethnography. Factual errors are common. As Scherer, Lyman and others have demonstrated, it is common to find images of subjects wearing inappropriate costumes, or associated with objects from times and places they do not inhabit. These "untrue" images can be revelatory of the "truth" of the dominant culture's stereotypes and are today seen as an increasingly significant area of historical inquiry.

Within most collections, few, if any, photographs have been accessioned, that is, treated like significant, unique museum objects. More than simply lacking an identification number, these fragile pieces of emulsion-coated paper often lack the records of source, acquisition and use that characterise typical documentation of the masks, butter churns, costumes, paintings and religious objects museums own. Details such as maker, date, and materials, which are considered essential to understanding and interpretation of other fragments of material culture, seldom appear in institutional catalogues, even when the information is boldly incised into negative or print. Rather, images are lumped together under headings such as North America: Hopi: Dwelling or Tonga: Woman, and are often trimmed, glued to cardboard, or otherwise altered. A corollary of this second-class status is that many nineteenth century photographs, even in excellent museums, are poorly cared for. Prints are often kept loose in highly acidic folders or open dusty boxes in uncontrolled climates, casually available to the public, leaving them at risk of inadvertent damage, deliberate vandalism and theft.
Some of this treatment must be attributed to the often overwhelming number of photographs which are held by ethnographic museums. Collections numbering in the hundreds of thousands are not uncommon, and the costs of photographic conservation are high. In addition, because these photographs are often seen as irrelevant to contemporary science, or even as racist reminders of a past best forgotten, they are often not kept as part of the active or important holdings of the institution and their preservation is not a high priority. By far the most typical current use of such nineteenth century images is as reproductions, either as generic published illustrations in contexts quite separate from that in which they were made or, similarly, in exhibitions, where they are often greatly altered in size, serving as decorative design elements which contribute a spurious impression of contextual information to the collected artifacts for which they serve as backdrops. As Christopher Pinney has suggested, these changes are mis-informing, since it is essential to a proper understanding of a vintage photograph that it be presented as an original, unaltered in size, unretouched, and with the additional information normally part of the object such as handwritten captions, the gold edge of cabinet cards, or the photographers' studio imprints, intact and visible (60). For this reason, Elizabeth Edwards, of the Pitt-Rivers Museum, working from 1911 negatives for a recent exhibition on the field photography of Diamond Jenness, chose to have the final prints cleaned up as little as possible, letting both original imperfections and the marks of time stand as reminders to the viewer of the photographic and historic nature of an image's fuller meaning (Edwards "Jenness") Similarly, the viewers' sense of a photograph's totality is enhanced when it is accompanied by supplementary information such as biographical data about its maker, objects which document its economic history such as catalogues, price lists and advertisements, and the remnants which suggest its ongoing uses, such as printers' crop marks and anthropologists' classificatory headings. This has rarely been the practice of museums, however. The need for new contexts and uses, abetted by the ease with which photographs can be de- and re-contextualised, has generally proven more pressing than any concern for a particular object's inherent information.

An extreme example of such recycling is evidenced by recent research into De Buschmanner, a popular travelling exhibition organised by the South African Museum in Capetown, for exhibition in several European cities. Peter Mesenholler examines the use of photographs made in 1906 and 1923 to construct murals which divide and decorate a 1976 exhibition of Khoikhoi artifacts. The effect on the viewer, whether or not consciously intended, is to place the indigenous people in a timeless world. Eternally fixed in sepia, the Khoikhoi are shown to inhabit an "authentic" pre-contact past which has little to do with the present of the dominant, picture-making culture, culturally shared technological change, or current political and economic realities. In much the same way, and to similar effect, photographs of Native Americans, ranging from the 1870s to the 1920s, and probably used originally as souvenirs or commercial novelties, are enlarged for use as room dividers and exhibit backdrops in the Denver Art Museum's Hall of the North American Indian. The photographs are presented as graphic elements, without labels, so the information about when, where, by whom, and for what purpose the image was made, usually accorded to artifacts or works of art, is not available. The huge size of the images creates a major change in meaning from that of the original hand-held objects, and discourages any sense of particularity in either form or
Not all museums use photographs in such a way as to ignore or obscure the histories of their meanings and uses. The Museum voor Volkenkunde in Rotterdam, is exceptional for its treatment of its photographs on their own terms, yet the manner in which the museum and its photographic holdings were developed is typical of nineteenth century ethnographic museums in several countries. The Dutch institution was established in 1883, with what were primarily donated collections of exotic artifacts acquired by merchants, missionaries and other non-scientific travellers, accompanied by related images and literature. The Museum had acquired most of its current holdings in photography, numbering in the tens of thousands of images, before 1920. Filed by geographic or tribal area, the collection as a whole was divided amongst several departments, poorly documented and carelessly stored. Because photographs were products of European technology and culture, they were not accessioned as part of the ethnographic collections, with the revealing exception of the well known American Indian portraits by photographer Edward Curtis. These prints, seen at the time of their acquisition as being of both artistic and monetary value, were treated differently, being registered and catalogued, and stored in frames, albeit on office rather than gallery walls (Groeneveld).

The museum continued to acquire a limited number of photographs into the 1950s, mostly documentation of field work by Museum staff, and to exhibit contemporary commercial documentary treatment of exotic lands, with popular success, but even the administrative re-organisation of the picture collection into the museum library system in 1975 did not bring any change in the philosophy or practice of photographic use. The photographs, isolated from their objective history were catalogued without maker's name or acquisition details and used curatorially as generic illustrations for publications and shows. A major change in use began in 1981, when an art historian joined the staff and undertook an ambitious and popularly successful series of photographic exhibitions which addressed early images from both aesthetic and historical perspectives. At the same time, the museum's collection of unbound images was re-defined as an "iconographical collection" with its own curator, a circumstance that permitted serious research concerning photographers, donors, and the general history of photography in the cultural areas the Museum sought to interpret, as well as the establishment of new indexes and registration systems. Thus, photographs were no longer confounded with their subjects, but could be read as objects in their own right through an interdisciplinary approach that combined art historical sensitivity to symbol, style and maker's motive, with anthropology's scientific methodologies for the study of objects as material culture.

In 1986, the Museum launched Images of the Orient the first of ten planned exhibitions and accompanying catalogues intended to showcase its photographic collections. To date, the series has included Burton Brothers: Photographers in New Zealand, Odagot: American Indians Photographed, and Toekang Potret: One Hundred Years of Photography in the Dutch Indies, and Photography in Surinam 1839-1939. All have been produced by interdisciplinary project teams made up of anthropologists with regional expertise, specialists in European culture, historians, art historians and historians of photography.

The historical coherence of the Rotterdam collection makes it a particularly appropriate case for a self-reflexive study. Other exhibitions of similar photographs drawn from disparate institutions have been less successful, in part, because the new context which must inevitably be assigned to the images in the course of curating is subject to a number of misreadings. In the last decade, one of the most ambitious of these survey shows has been Der Geraubte Schatten: Photographie als ethnographisches Dokument [The Stolen Shadow: Photography as Ethnographic Document] produced in 1989 and 1990 by independent curator, Thomas Theye, for the Munich Stadtstumuseum, Haus Im Kultur der Welt, Berlin, and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Volkerkunde, Cologne. Containing more than 800 photographs, and such supplementary artifacts as nineteenth century view cameras and vintage Luis Vuitton luggage in addition to a 536 page catalogue, the exhibition presented a wide range of early photographs, primarily drawn from German ethnographic collections. It was seen by nearly 50,000 people.

The curator's stated intent for the exhibition was 'to criticise colonialism and former ways of ethnographic fieldwork' (Theye). Parts of the exhibit, such as a combination of anthropometric photographs, measuring tools, and a human skull in a Kubus Kranioqhor, were highly successful at conveying the de-humanising
context in which some of the photographs had been made, but the very impact of this introductory section discourages analysis of other kinds of images, such as privately commissioned family portraits and commercial souvenirs, presented later. In these cases, the power relationships between photographer and subject are more ambiguous, yet all the photographs are subsumed under the rubric of 'stolen' images, thus denying the instances of sophisticated understanding of the camera on the part of the colonised, and reinforcing in the present the idea of helpless passivity in the face of Western superiority that was essential to the colonisers' understanding of themselves.

Even more problematic was the final section of the exhibition, an elaborately constructed "voyage around the world" which placed the viewer on the deck of a Gilded Age luxury liner, with stops at eleven "ports" which surveyed more than thirty ethnographic picture collections. The new contexts created for these photographs presented them grouped together under simplistic geographic headings, thus eliminating their meaning as part of a collection, and obscuring significant information regarding source, date and previous use. The placement of the viewer, without comment, in a position analogous to that of the privileged, voyeuristic, and aloof image-maker is hard not to read as a romantic staging of the colonisers' comfortable life rather than as a critique of it. Finally, these images, affirmative of the visual cliches by which each place has been known, and functioning as the exhibition's coda, raise serious issues about how these images are read today. We must consider the possibility that the exhibition of such stereotyped historical images reinforces the same stereotypes in current thought, or encourages a smugly uncritical "That was then and this is now" attitude that exacerbates the denial of present-day racism.

It must be noted here that this exhibition engendered controversy when it was shown. It was leafleted by a group objecting to '... turning the bodies of ... enslaved people into pornography', while the Berlin tageszeitung demanded 'the total abandonment of looking at those documents, or, even better, the complete extermination of the ethnographic photoarchives'. Others decried the 'mueslis' outrage, as a denial of their own ethnocentricity (Theye). There is only anecdotal evidence of the response to the show by members of Germany's African and Asian communities, none of whom were involved in the exhibition's conceptualisation and planning.

In 1986, the same year that the Museum voor Volkenkunde mounted its ground-breaking exhibition series in The Netherlands, the United States National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution were adding a previously unheard voice to the interpretation of a conventionally assembled collection of photographs. The program, begun that year as outreach to American Indian communities, has developed into a successful ongoing pattern of use and interpretation of ethnographic photographs by descendants of their subjects. Unlike the casual donations which initiated the Rotterdam holdings, it was government records, specifically those of the United States Geographic Survey, and the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, established in 1879, which were the beginnings of today's N.A.A., established in 1968. Despite this difference, the historical collections are similar, containing a mix of commercial studio portraits, tourist souvenirs, and early attempts at scientific documentation. Although the Archives hold images from all over the world, its strengths reflect the early interest of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the indigenous people of the lands controlled by the U.S. government. Over 200,000 photographs of native Americans, organised by tribe, including Daguerreotypes and other images dating to the 1850s as well as later acquisitions from non-government sources, are now stored in Washington, where they have recently been made available to the descendants of their subjects. This program has been designed and implemented by N.A.A. Director JoAllyn Archambault, herself a Native American, and involves the recruitment of Native American interns who spend several months in Washington to identify and research photographs of relevance to their people and return with copies of them to their tribe. As discussed above, a great deal of information is lost when an image is copied, but for pragmatic reasons, the decision to capitalise on the ease with which photographs can be reproduced makes this grass-roots project possible. Clearly, accessibility is enhanced when an object does not require the proscriptive conditions of Museum storage or exhibition. The indigenous curators of the print selection will have worked extensively with the original, and the historical coherence and integrity of the collection as a whole remains for further study. To date, representatives from the Commanche, Crow, Mohave, and Zuni people have participated in this project. As planned, Washington makes no restrictions on the way these images are to be used, although the actual return is accompanied by appropriate ceremonies to mark their significance. The Zunis have
organised an exhibition, The Pueblo of Zuni and Its People as Seen Through the Eyes of Early Pioneer Photographers from 1879 to 1904, which acknowledges the context in which the pictures were taken but reclaims them through an interpretation designed for tribal education. The often passive nature of ethnographic photography's subjects and their usual generic presentation is refuted when the descendants of the imaged are empowered through taking possession of the image. As the photographs are slowly absorbed into tribal life, we may expect ongoing reinterpretation of them as "the voice from the other side of the lens" grows stronger. If we are to begin a reading of these images as documents of culture contact rather than either a one-sided depiction of an ethnographic reality or a hopelessly biased invention of no current use, we must also consider the meanings, changing over time, which may be found in them by people who have not yet been included in the conversation, not only the descendants of the photographed peoples but also those who may bring to the work tools other than those employed by anthropologists or historians.

An Australian example of such an alternative voice 5 is found in the work of Leah King-Smith, an aboriginal artist who works with cibachrome, re-photography and a variety of contemporary manipulative techniques to 're-place' (her words) the Koori people pictured in early photographs, now held at the State Library of Victoria, in an Australian landscape of her own creation.6 Through a sophisticated and visually complex use of colour, composition and symbolism, King-Smith forces the viewer to unpack and reconsider the stereotypes of the last century, while controlling the images' present meaning in a format that grants a dignity the original circumstances of making did not.

As we reconsider the photographs held in ethnographic collections, as well as the meanings of the collections themselves, we expand our understanding of such contemporary concerns as cultural identities, the futures of anthropology and the relationships between historical visual vocabularies and present day knowledge. The institutional models, both negative and positive, described in this paper indicate directions for further exploration and ongoing action, in museums and academia, but also in the larger world which contains them. Recent emphasis on interdisciplinary readings of these images allows us the tools of the art historian and the visual artist in addition to those of the social scientist. The voices of representatives of the depicted cultures in the interpretation and presentation of these pictures offer a similarly fresh and important perspective. The most inclusionary reading of these images is the most useful one; it affirms that there are many histories inherent in these fragments of our colonial past, present and future.

Notes
1. Much of this paper's information on current practice is derived from presentations made at Eyes Across the Water: The Second Amsterdam Conference on Visual Sociology and Anthropology, June 24-27,1992. Participants included: Session Chair, Alison Devine Nordstrom, Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, Florida, U.S.A.; Paula Richardson Fleming, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Elizabeth Edwards, Pitt-Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, U.K.; Anneke Groeneveld, Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Peter Mesenholler and Werner Wolf, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Volkerkund, Cologne, Germany; and Thomas Theye, independent curator of Der Geraubte Schatten. I am grateful to them, both for their original participation and their helpful comments on this paper.


3. This description and brief analysis is not, unfortunately, based on a first-hand experience of this exhibition. I have however, spoken extensively with the exhibition curator and viewed slides of the Berlin installation on two occasions. The information about audience response to the exhibition is extracted from Thomas Theye, "Two Years After: Some Thoughts on The Stolen Shadow", unpublished paper presented at Eyes Across the Water.

4. See for example: Christaud M. Geary, "Images from Bamum: German Colonial Photography from the Court of King Njoya, Cameroon, West Africa, 1902-1915" (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 1988), and my discussion of Samoan use of commissioned photographs of themselves for such conventional purposes as gift giving and the commemoration of a wedding in "Paradise Recycled: Photographs of Samoa in Changing Contexts".

5. See also the work of Native American artists Zig Jackson and James Luna.

6. Much of this information is derived from King-Smith's statement in "Patterns of Connection: Photocompositions by Leah King Smith", a catalogue produced by The Victorian Centre for Photography to accompany an exhibition of the same title, April 4-May 3, 1992.

Works Cited


