Photographs, Mounts, and the Tactile Archive

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The way that images make meaning has been couched largely in relation to theories of representation. However, there has been an increasing amount of work on photography and the multisensory image, largely coming out of anthropology and material culture studies. Such work addresses photography and touch, photography and sound, and the embodied experience of looking.[1] Albums, for example, demanded handling in a certain way: they project information and elicit affect in certain ways which is determined by their material qualities, formats, styles of mounting, and their tactile demands — turning pages, handling mounts, touching image surfaces. Additionally, as Patrizia Di Bello has demonstrated, photographs themselves portray subjects handling photographs.[2] Consequently, one can argue for photographs as having a form that is a sort of nested haptic which firmly positions them in the realm of the tactile.

I want to address here the ways in which photographs were mounted and presented in public libraries in the long nineteenth century. I became interested in the haptics and tactility of knowledge within libraries as part of my work on the photographic survey movement. The object, which serves as both focus and springboard in this short article, comes from the Surrey Survey in 1904, one of many hundreds of such

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[1] See, for example, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of the Image*, ed. by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (London: Routledge, 2004); Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs and the Sound of History', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 21 (2006), 27–46; Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Christopher Wright, *The Echo of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[2] Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 139–51.

cards in Croydon Local Studies and Archives (*Fig. 1*). Measuring 23 × 28 cm, it is a composite object that has been self-consciously put together in ways that have their own tactilities. It comprises a double layer of brown, slightly mottled, and grainy 'vandyke' art paper (one can see the paper fibres). On it are pasted a label and a photograph, and the tactile act of making up the card — of trimming, positioning, and gluing or dry-mounting — define the object.

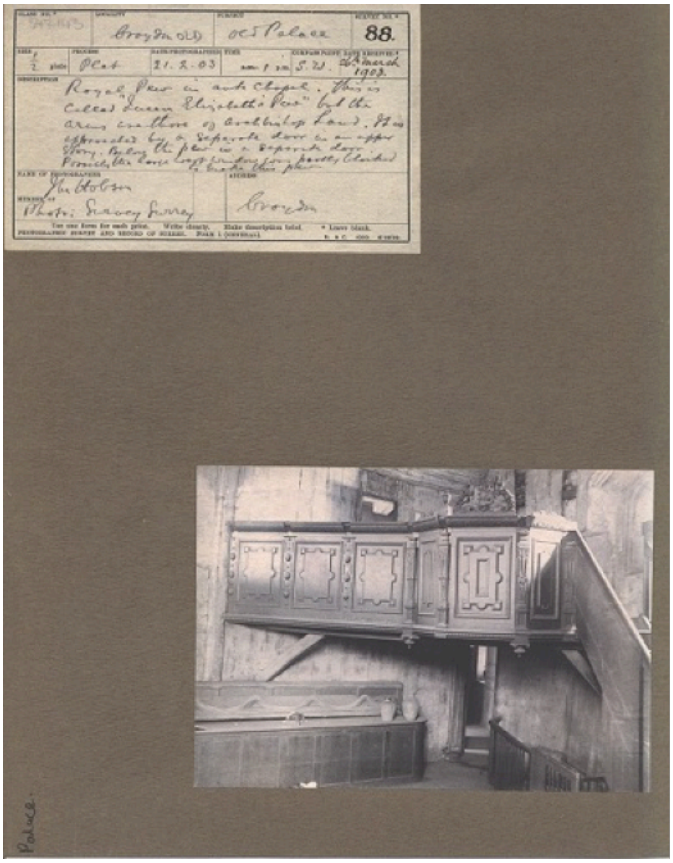

Fig. 1: Photograph and label of the Royal Pew, Old Bishop's Palace, Croydon, photographed by John Hobson, 1903, on library mount. Image courtesy of Museum of Croydon.

The label is in the top left-hand corner. It is a preprinted label, filled in in black ink, a material accretion again haptically bestowed, to which a later hand has added in pencil the word 'OLD'. The label pinpoints the photograph. It gives a description, and thus assessment, of its

content, declaring it to be a thing of a certain kind of significance: a late sixteenth-century Royal pew in the Old Bishop's Palace in Croydon. The label also names the photographer, John Hobson, the date of making and of deposit, and a note of photographic processes — a half-plate printed in platinum. In the bottom right-hand corner is the photograph itself. And in the left-hand lower corner someone has added the word 'Palace' in blue ink, when the card came, at some point in its biography, to be stored horizontally in the filing cabinet where it still resides in Croydon.[3]

We are helped in broadening our thinking about why this brown piece of card, with a photograph and a label pasted to it, actually matters — how it might become a marker of what Emma Rothschild has called 'a large micro-history'.[4] For the Surrey Survey has done us the favour of articulating their thoughts on the subject of mounts. In 1916 members of the Surrey Photographic Survey published a book, *The Camera as Historian,* a vade mecum for the survey movement which itself had had its origins in a lantern slide lecture — itself a profoundly embodied experience — and which was given around the church and village halls of Surrey some ten years earlier.[5]

To summarize this context briefly: between about the late 1880s and the First World War, a loosely articulated and partially coherent photographic survey movement encouraged local amateur photographers to make photographs of old buildings, pastimes, scenes, and customs of 'historical interest' which could be deposited in some suitable institution for the public good.[6] The exact details of these and their unevenness need not concern us here. But there are sizeable collections in Croydon, home of my object, the Warwickshire Photographic Survey undertaken by members of Birmingham Photographic Society deposited in Birmingham City Library, the Norfolk and Norwich Survey in Norwich City Library, Exeter in Exeter Library, and a small collection in King's Lynn's Carnegie

[3] For an illustration of the mounts originally filed vertically in a filing cabinet, see H. D. Gower, L. Stanley Jast, and William Whiteman Topley, *The Camera as Historian: A Handbook to Photographic Record Work for Those who Use a Camera and for Survey or Record Societies* (London: Sampson Lowe, Marston, 1916), p. 86.

[4] Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 8, 269.

[5] Croydon Local Studies Library, Photographic Survey of Surrey. Minute Book 1, meeting, 4 November 1907.

[6] Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination 1885–1918* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Library, for example. This card is thus part of a network of similar objects doing similar social and cultural work.

In the management of these collections, one sees the tactile archive clearly at work. The amount of thought and energy that was expended on questions of materiality and accessibility, which combine to make looking at photographs an embodied experience, is extraordinary.[7] Mounts and their arrangement in library spaces were seen as fundamental to public access, and are concerned with the tensions between the preservation of information and what was described as '*legitimate*' handling, a concept which raises important questions about the role of touch in libraries (Gower, Jast, and Topley, p. 55). Mounted photographs, captioned by labels, attached to the surface of the mount, constituted the formative units of the archive, presenting image and data together. Of course, captions frame images, as a multitude of commentators have noted.[8] They have a symbiotic relationship, in that they not only make content itself visible but also make it more visible in certain ways. But this relationship is not merely concerned with the linguistic control and translation. Materiality, in which image content, presentational form, and labelling work together, are mutually constituting in the production of meaning. They illuminate precise textures of social relations in privileging certain kinds of information to contain the meanings of photographs and their anticipated performance, literally, in the hands of users. Furthermore, given the realistic view of photography as a record that underpinned the surveys, it could be argued that the photographs acted as a sort of 'holding of history in the hands', an affective tactile engagement with the trace of the ancient, the historical, and the significant.

Mounts were used to protect photographs from handling, and at the same time to make handling possible. Initially, photographic collections drew their forms largely from the connoisseur's portfolio: images that could be handled, rearranged, ordered, passed from hand to hand. Cut window mounts, with bevelled window edges, framed the photograph in a specific way. This centring of the photograph with quasi-aesthetic practices meant, however, that text had to be on the reverse,

[7] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photography and the Material Performance of the Past', *History and Theory*, 48 (2009), 130–50.

[8] See, for example, Robert Harriman and John Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London, Reaktion Books, 1999); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976).

which in turn meant that to 'read' the photograph in the way intended, as an historical trace, the object had to be manipulated and turned in the hand.[9] Indeed, the important captioning, which gave the image its informational efficacy, could be materially elided entirely simply by not turning the card. Thus, the only way in which information could be apprehended was through touch, handling, and haptic manipulation. This material separation of what was conceived of as the visual impact of integrated information militated against the immediacy of impression that was so important to the apprehension of these photographs. Further, there was a concern that such mounts, while aesthetically pleasing, would not withstand handling. As *Camera as Historian* noted, they would not 'stand the handling to which survey prints must be expected to be subjected, the legitimate handling of their use' (Gower, Jast, and Topley, p. 55).

The concept of legitimate handling is very important, because it implies a regulated yet direct engagement with the object, and a set of reader practices and institutional structures in which the tactile plays a major role. The Surrey Survey, with its strong public library ethos, came up with another material solution: the use of flat cards on which was a regular placement of image and text. The card had to be firm enough to withstand handling, without bulking storage. So there were tensions between the embodied engagement with photographic knowledge and the demands of the space of the library. Flat cards, in green or brown two-ply art card were advocated, stored flat or in filing cabinets. Indeed, there was much debate about how to store photographs. Should they be bound in albums, placed in filing cabinets, or in portfolios? While this is beyond my immediate concern here, it should be noted that it is part of the same debate about tactility, about access, and handling.

As in the card I described earlier, the photograph and label were to be juxtaposed on the same plane on the mounts, enabling historical information, visual and textual, to be integrated in one embodied visual act, in ways that resembled a library catalogue card:

> The label is pasted in the upper right hand corner of the mount [...] and *on the front* where it *meets the eye at the same time as the print, where reference may be made from the label to the*

[9] Edwards, 'Photography and the Material Performance of the Past', p. 144.

> *print, and vice versa without turning the print over, or even removing it from the file*.[10]

This is crucial because this arrangement of image and label was designed specifically so the card, held in the hands or leafed over in the file, would deliver photographic and textual information within one act of looking and one act of holding. In other words, it was designed specifically to enhance tactile and haptic efficiency in the apprehension of images. Further, these mounts could accommodate different sizes of photographs which cut the amount of 'labour' in consulting a collection (Gower, Jast, and Topley, p. 63). Indeed, the weight of collections and ease of handling was a major concern — a member of the Manchester Survey in the 1890s bemoaned the fact that the photographs had been mounted on great thick heavy cards that took up a huge amount of space and were difficult to handle.[11] These comments point, I would argue, to the weightiness of corporeal experience, as touch here is entangled with surfaces and volumes which make up the space of photographic encounter.[12]

Beneath this discussion, played out on the material manifestations of the photographic image and its mount, was a debate about the desirability of photographic knowledge as embodied knowledge. The desirable transmission of knowledge was premised on controlling acts of holding and turning. Thus, the material forms involved in presenting and preserving the photographs were not merely serendipitous, but, in the way that Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley argue, were emergent from, and constitutive of, the shifting sets of social, cultural, and economic relationships through which the photographs were produced, and of which they themselves were productive.[13]

However, this is only half the story because this desire for photographic access to history expressed materially through the literal 'holding of history' in the hands must be understood in terms of a broader embodiment of knowledge through reforms in the public library system. It is significant that the photographic survey movement emerges at precisely

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[10] Gower, Jast, and Topley, p. 77, emphasis added. In fact, all the cards have mounted the label in the top left-hand corner, the more normal way of leading the eye in western cultures, but the principle remains.

[11] Manchester City Library, Manchester Amateur Photographic Society, Council Minutes, 9 April 1902, MS 34/1/2/2.

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 149.

[13] Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley, 'Editors' Introduction', *Journal of Material Culture*, 1 (1996), 5–14.

the same historical moment as the open-access public library, the first of which, in Britain, opened in May 1894 at Clerkenwell in London. Although there had been earlier experiments with reference stock, it changed libraries from 'bonded stores' to 'efficient everyday workshops'.[14] With the exception of rare or very valuable materials, readers were given direct, embodied, spatial access to collections of books enhanced by the organization of open-access shelves according to the Dewey Decimal or Universal Decimal Classification, which produced what was called 'close classification', and which brought books on a topic together. As one handbook for librarians put it, 'it is an education for a man [...]. The effect of access to the shelves has a tendency to convert mere "readers" into students' (Brown, pp. 142–43). Even within the more closely monitored 'special collections', photographs were absorbed into such systems which must have only encouraged 'legitimate handling' and the confidence of access.

Detailed instructions were issued on the mounting of images and part of the discussion was about how certain forms of mounting shaped the way knowledge was apprehended literally in the hands of the user. And the idea of 'legitimate' handling entangled with a massive debate about the control and management of bodily behaviours in library, and indeed museum, spaces.[15] Opponents of open-access libraries pointed to the dangers of 'noise and disorder' that is the disarranged body.[16] Indeed, induction for readers into the practices and moral behaviours of the open-access library included 'the correct way of handling books' — this doesn't say anything about photographs but it is a reasonable assumption that similar instruction was provided.[17] It is significant that three of the librarians who did much to facilitate photographic survey and took the photographs into their care, were reforming librarians and early exponents of

[14] Alistair Black, Simon Pepper, and Kaye Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 211; James Duff Brown, *The Small Library: A Guide to the Collection and Care of Books* (London: Routledge, 1907), p. 139.

[15] See, for example, Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[16] Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw, p. 219. Those 'disorderly, uncleanly, or in a state of intoxication' were to be excluded from the library; 'smoking, betting and loud conversation or other objectionable practices' were also forbidden (Brown, p. 144).

[17] James Douglas Stewart and others, *Open Access Libraries: Their Planning, Equipment and Organisation* (London: Grafton, 1915), p. 203. Suggested library rules prohibited the tracing of illustrations (another tactile engagement) of any sort — presumably including photographs (Brown, p. 145).

open-access libraries, at least in the reference division: George Stephen in Norwich, Tapley Soper in Exeter (although by all accounts he was not keen on anything as frivolous as general fiction in his library), and Stanley Jast in Croydon (one of the co-authors of *The Camera as Historian*). Croydon was not only innovative in its thinking about photographic survey, but was the first library to adopt an extensive and expansive open access, more than 100,000 volumes.[18] It was also the period when local studies and visual collections in public libraries were in the ascendancy. In Norwich City Library, for example, George Stephen saw its local history and visual collections as one of the strengths.[19] Indeed, the 'custodial role of the public library was epitomized by its local history department, which stressed a respect for the endeavours of citizens ancestors' (Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw, p. 171). It was here, as I have noted, that survey collections and mounted photographs were often deposited (Edwards, *The Camera as Historian,* p. 140).

What is relevant to my argument here is that the access of knowledge took on a new embodiment. Rather than request specific titles from the librarian, the reader could browse the shelves, handle the books and photographs, put their own narrative together, and 'select books by actual examination and comparison' (Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw, p. 218). That is, books were encountered, possibly with a finger running along the shelf, taken down from the shelves as the reader stands in front of them in the space of the library, held in the hands, opened and perused, replaced, or perhaps tucked under the arm to take to the library desk. While we cannot be certain how 'open' boxes of photographs were, they were seldom commented upon, and the implication is that access, the direct handling of the mounted photographs, was paramount.[20] Boxes of photographs were opened and laid out, turned in the hand, compared, reordered, and placed back again. Croydon Reference Library, which held many brown mounts and photographs, was 'free to any respectable per-

[18] Edwards, *The Camera as Historian,* p. 226; Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw, p. 225.
[19] T. A. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain* (London: Library Association, 1977), p. 171.
[20] The illustration in *The Camera as Historian* (1916) mentioned in n. 3 above suggests that the cabinets were in a room with closed/glass-fronted bookcases and with pictures hung on the walls. Croydon Reference Library included '15,000 books and Illustrations'. It is likely that survey photographs, and thus the card, were among them. In terms of access, the Reference Library was open twelve hours a day. See *Reader's Index: Bimonthly Magazine of the Croydon Public Libraries*, 9 (1907), n. p.

son, who may have books for reading (on the premises only) by the simple process of writing his name and address in a visitor's book on passing the barrier' (*Reader's Index*, p. xvi). As Stanley Jast put it, 'open access' brought the reader *into* the library 'in place of relegating him to the forecourt of the treasure house'.[21] This was part of a broader system of the democratization of knowledge giving a wide section of the community access to knowledge that had previously been hidden in the spaces of the private collection where only the rich had tactile access to history.

Mounted photographs, prepared for 'legitimate handling', were integral to this concept. Their material disposition was designed specifically to enable that tactile engagement and apprehension of history without damaging the trace of the historical itself, the photograph. In information design, mounted photographs, 'the way in which people viewed, read, understood and interacted with information' is dynamic and shifting.[22] These shifts in library practice constituted staged materialities of the institution which constitute these objects and their haptic requirements.

Photographs and their material forms are part of this, because they dictated the ways in which knowledge was translated and internalized through the body and through touch, holding in the hands. Material practices, spaces, and haptic practices were also responsive to the quasi-agentic or prescriptive demands of the kinds of information in circulation. Thus, photographic mounts were not simply about physical support and storage systems. They were integral to the tactile demands of the library space in the making of knowledge, for, as Gillian Rose has argued, the haptic regulation produces the body of the user in certain ways.[23] On this register one can argue that the entanglement of photographs and their mounts with the emerging politics and praxis of the open-access public library made the mounts symbolic forms through which access to knowledge, and its physical prescriptions, was performed.

[21] Stanley Jast, *Library and the Community* (London: Nelson, 1939), p. 62.
[22] Toni Weller, 'Conclusion', in *Information History in the Modern World: Histories of the Modern Age*, ed. by Toni Weller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 201.
[23] Gillian Rose, 'Practicing Photography: An Archive, a Study, Some Photographs and a Researcher', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 20 (2000), 555–71.