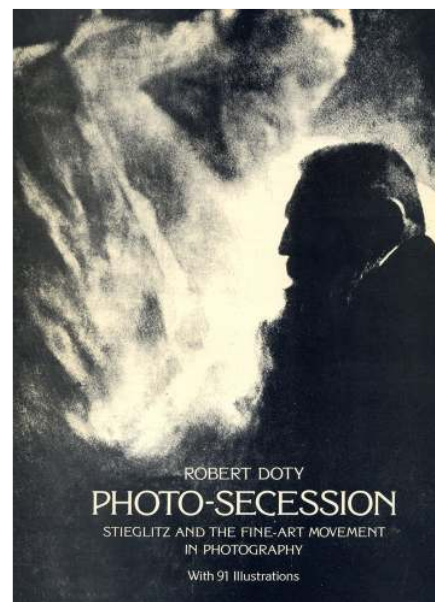


Australian photographer John Pollard FRPS died in 2018, leaving behind not just a grieving family and a substantial legacy of photographic work in public and private collections, but also an eclectic collection of books representing his varied interests over his life. In this on-going column I hope to stimulate interest and reflection on various aspects of photography based on perusal of John's collection of books. In the process I also aim to periodically shine a light on John's career and his practice.

Art or Science – The Photo Secession

In this issue we are concentrating on the book “Photo-Secession” by Robert Doty from the Pollard Collection; which John had marked-up with passages of interest to him personally, given that he was a member of the London Salon – the direct successor to the Linked Ring.

It's hard to imagine how acrimonious the debate became about whether photography was an Art or a Science, or indeed what constituted photographic art. Photography of course bridges the worlds of science and the arts.



Photography's 'birth' in the mid-nineteenth century was a collaboration between scientists, keen to discover a reliable process for fixing light on a flat surface as a means of examining the physical world, and artists searching for new ways to look at and capture nature's beauty and create a visual narrative. The original aim of the Photographic Society (now The Royal Photographic Society) was 'to promote the Art and Science of Photography' and there was a reasonably happy co-existence of the two in the early activities of the Society.

Inevitably there was more emphasis on technique, chemistry, equipment and so on, in the papers presented at meetings but the exhibitions and the Journal often reflected the commitment to the art of the discipline. At the very first council meeting of the society (where the launching of a Journal was discussed) it was recorded that the 'Council appeal with confidence to all lovers of this exquisitely beautiful art for their earnest co-operation to enable the success of the Journal.'

Photography as a means of objectively recording the world moved rapidly across a wide range of disciplines from astronomy to zoology and botany to engineering. Similarly documentary photography, such as Roger Fenton's work in the Crimea and Mathew Brady in the American Civil War demonstrated the value of the 'objective' photographic record. But whilst it was clear that the photograph had the ability to move, engage, inspire or sadden a viewer, there were decades of debate about whether photography was – or could be – an art. It also has to be remembered that around this time Kodak

had brought about a revolution in photography by enabling ordinary people to engage in the production of photographs – photography for all – and ‘serious’ photographers sought to distinguish themselves from the torrent of images produced by amateurs.

Things came to a head in the 1880s with two groups of eminent photographers – ironically both committed to the view that photography was truly an art – led by Peter Emerson and Henry Peach Robinson – starting a very public debate about the correct technique to create ‘photographic art.’ Emerson and Robinson were both respected, leading photographers in their day – and their images are still iconic today over 140 years later.



Peter Emerson: Gathering Water Lilies

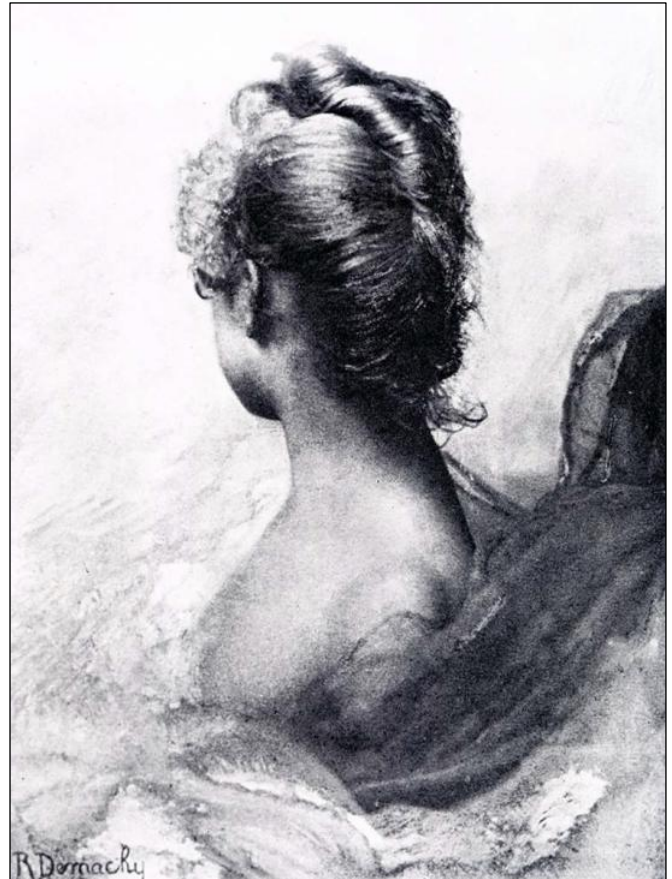


Henry Peach Robinson: Fading Away

Both published texts defending their positions. Emerson a doctor advocating the technical and Robinson a pictorialist leading the creative faction. By 1890 Peach Robinson had become increasingly exasperated by the influence of Emerson’s “Naturalistic” photographers on the council of the Photographic Society and the disproportionate amount of time devoted to

photographic technique. By 1891 the two factions of the society had become deeply polarised. Peach Robinson (the Vice President of the Society) and 15 other senior members left the Society, ostensibly over a dispute concerning selection of images for the annual exhibition (or Salon), and formed a new association that would promote the development and recognition of photography as a fine art. This schism has become known as the photo-secession.

Following this split one of the secessionists, Alfred Maskell, invited some selected photographers to meet with a view to creating a new organisation to act as “a means of bringing together those who are interested in the development of the highest form of Art of which photography is capable.” At its first meeting in May 1892 Peach Robinson, Alfred Maskell, Lionel Clark, George Davison and Hay Cameron created ‘The Brotherhood of the Linked Ring’ (the language and symbols – three linked rings – having distinctly Masonic overtones). Within a year many others had been invited to join, including Frank Sutcliffe, Frederick Evans, Robert Demarchy, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Clarence White and Alfred Stieglitz. Interestingly the young Stieglitz already had a good relationship with Peter Emerson, translating his “Naturalistic Photography” into German – a foot in both camps!



Demarchy: A Study in Red



Steichen: The Flatiron, Evening

The tendency to invite photographers from other countries proved to be a mixed blessing: it enhanced the *gravitas* of the Brotherhood but at the same time meant that the Salon entries were increasingly dominated by work from North America. The ill-feelings this caused the British led to F J Mortimer (the editor of ‘Amateur Photographer’ at the time) to organise an alternative Salon dedicated to the excellent British work that had been rejected from the Linked Ring Salon. With delicious irony it was called “Salon des Refusés.” The Salon rules were quickly changed to restrict the number of entries allowed from America and as a result Clarence White and Alfred Stieglitz promptly resigned. Internal strife within the Brotherhood led to its dissolution in 1909 – but the annual exhibitions under the banner ‘The London Salon’ continue to this day.



Clarence White: Winter Landscape

Stieglitz greatly admired the work of the British and European Pictorialists and whilst he recognised the leadership exercised by Peach Robinson, he wanted his own group within America. In parallel with the London Salons of the Linked Ring he organised the first exhibition of “American Pictorial Photography” at the National Arts Club in New York by “The Photo Secession.” The exhibition was a great success; many saw it as photography finally coming of age as an art form after a fifty-year battle. The photo-secessionists on both sides of the Atlantic set new standards for exhibiting photographs; they did away with the multi-layered, ‘whole wall’ approach of the 19th century art salons in favour of a single row of work exhibited at eye level. They also got rid of the pretentious practice of awarding Medals – selection for exhibition alone

was sufficient recognition – Art was not a competition. Stieglitz felt strongly that the Linked Ring were missing out on a chance to spread its concepts by not having a dedicated journal and he used the publication of *Camera Work* to effectively spread the gospel of the photo-secessionists. Stieglitz went on to become one of the most accomplished practitioners and influential figures in twentieth century photography, and Pictorialism thrived as a movement until the 1940s, as we shall find out in pondering other books from the Pollard Collection.

As a ‘retired’ scientific photographer aspiring to create work with some aesthetic value I’m happy with the advice of Albert Einstein who once said:

“The Best Scientists are Truly Great Artists.”