

# Photography, Sympatheia, and Canada's Visual Heritage

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*"Photography .... is the art of the sensitized surface."*  
*Frederick Summer*

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## A Passionate Engagement

Photography within and outside the museum is marked by a particular kind of viewing and significance. To understand photography's function and contribution to Canada's heritage as a country rich in a diversity of peoples we need to understand how the reception of photographic images is a part of the process of creating photographs.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote of "plunging" into the image, Roland Barthes of being "pierced" by the image. These are two complimentary descriptions of a passionate bodily engagement with photographs—a gesture to our carnal imaginations when viewing photographs. Together, these descriptions show the reciprocal encounter of photograph and person in a somatic embrace. This reciprocity occurs when we are interior to the photograph, when we see its parts from within it and when we experience its affect within ourselves; that is when we are not separating ourselves from the photograph by looking at it as an object.

With this passionate engagement, we see from within the photograph and we also locate what is coming into vision through the image. That is to say, the viewer of the photograph experiences not only what is corporally present, but also what is physically invisible, but existentially present. The word invisible is a term we give to a felt presence that is not locatable in what is materially before us; yet it is something which influences our relationship with what we are seeing. The invisible inheres in the reciprocity of viewer's body with what the image reveals. The possibility for this reciprocity is found in the progression of the very process of photography itself.

## The Trace

Photography begins with a circumstance that Jacques Derrida calls the trace. This is a moment of experience found within and selected from an unceasing flow of life by the photographer. In photography, the trace exists not in time or in place, but only as an occasioned selection by the photographer when it is removed from the continuation of that flow. The trace is an original inscription made with light, and it is also a copy that permits other copies. The "original" of the photographic trace is likewise itself a trace: as the source of the photographic image the trace is but a contingent space of biography, culture, and historical context connecting photographer and subjects to be photographed. The origin of the photographic trace is the "meta", the "beside" of what is physically, identifiably present. Whether the photograph is staged, posed, or spontaneously "found", its so-called source, its conjunction of biography, culture, and historical context connected in its spacing is always a bundle of perceived signs and resonances of affect. It is photography that gives this conjunction a physical presence and a place in memory (biographical and familial memory) and history (the national story). It is the bundle that we try to unpack when viewing. With the quiet meditative presence of the photographic print we can find more in what is present at the atemporal and spatial moment of its extraction from the flow. This is why we are continuously surprised by what photographs offer; it is also why we discover what we did not notice in the occasioned moments of photographing, yet find in the photographic image of those occasions. Though we

often refer to the photograph as self-evident, it is illusive as a fixed representation and, as Barthes has noted, it is simultaneously what has been and will be. The photograph conceived as trace is demanding of its meaning, its identity, its signification, its timeliness, because it exudes the absence of all of these. It is because photography holds so complicated a relationship to the material reality of the here and now that the photograph necessitates its meaning in terms of time and place. We feel obliged to assign its time and place, We continually try to prevent photography's paradox of offering atemporal, aspatial images, We seek its identity as we would seek a fingerprint of a person, and we continually demand a priority of the real over the representation. We read the photograph as a journal of our lives and our society. Photographs possess a potential for finding our heritage.

The creating of the trace is a consequence of the sensitized operator of the camera who sees within the landscape, person, occasion, site, what is essential and emerging, but not yet visible. The trace is always irrupting and coming into view. That is why photographers have their own so-called style or signature. They each find a particular potential which is yet invisible in relation to the manifest materiality of the person or place. Photographing is an act of revealing what has been "veiled" from us by personal anticipations and cultural judgments, The photographic process is subject to chemical and physical constraints, but what it yields goes beyond ocularity to offer us what we do not yet see. The full bodily engagement informs us about a presence not perceived by the organ of the eye. As such, photography introduces shifts in our perception and in our feelings about what we can see. This medium offers an opportunity to discover dimensions of ourselves and others through continued sensitized receptiveness. For example, our understanding of perspective as a natural, geometric system of receding distance is altered by photographs that break that mode of visibility. Such images offer us systems of perception that call into question the relationship of depth, size, and distance. In this way, we move beyond culturally prescribed "laws" of seeing to recognize a world that is otherwise; yet it is a world plainly in our midst as photographic image. And with regard to social conditions, documentary photography opens our eyes to the pain and suffering that is often within our neighborhoods and city, conditions immediate to us, yet somehow hidden from our daily view. And, as well, we find that those with whom we anticipate our greatest life-style differences, they too (as found, for example, in the book *Rich and Poor*), confront the same anguish in their daily lives. We realize through photography how much we share with those that we find physically different from ourselves. Through a passionate engagement with photographic images we experience shifts in our perception and alterations in our interpretations that lead us to conclude that what has been distant and strange is proximate and known to us.

The photographic process includes the sensitized surface of film receiving the trace of an occasion and the dark room practitioner's act of transmitting the film's trace onto a sensitized paper (or other material support). It is in the subsequent viewing of photographs, a viewing from within another sensitized somatic source, the viewer, that the Image's potential becomes actualized and, thus, fulfills the initial engagement of photographer and subject. Museums can offer conditions for this type of viewing, and in so doing permit a receptivity that we call *sympatheia*. These conditions are outlined in the final section of this paper.

### **Sympatheia and the Essence of the Communal**

*Sympatheia* is a condition and mode of perception with poetic, perceptual and cognitive functions. *Sympatheia* aspires to a reciprocity of all that is possible, Photography offers an opportunity to exchange moments of experiential truths between person and person and between people and people, The photograph creates a pause in the flux of an occasion and the resulting image is a trace of a moment lived that, in its subsequent viewing, may become a part of biographical and cultural memory. In the progression of the trace from its (always unknown) "origin" to image to viewer we recognize that the image offers an intimation of the "invisible self" of the subject within the image. This so-called "invisible" quality is what the viewer finds and attempts to interpret and to know. The invisible is not a function of a lack of familiarity with a print. The invisible remains palpable after a number of viewings. That is why we return to the photograph, again and again, never satisfied, never finished in our longing to know what is present. The invisible is always in a state of coming-forth-for-recognition because it holds the very essence of what is communal. For heritage photographs the communal

may be of the family, or the village, or the city or it may be of a tradition of a people with historical and geographical identities. The communal dimensions of photography offer an opportunity for a reciprocity between image and viewer. This is an opportunity to recognize and understand our differences and our similarities. Film and television direct our viewing toward a future. The photographic image materially is a residue of the past, as described here however, it is continuously atemporal, thereby permitting the viewer to consider what is existent now, in the past, and in the future. Thus, the atemporality and aspatiality of image as trace permits the assignment of time to a photograph through the viewer's interpretation. This is particularly significant for Canada's heritage photographs, The entrainment of traces, of lives then and lives now, of the past into the present, of our maternal roots to the land and sea and to the labor that connects us all are encountered through our plunge into, and our in-sight from, the photograph.

The passionate viewing of photographs, the reciprocal falling into the image and the image falling within us, is the way in which *sympatheia* registers its significance upon our lives. *Sympatheia* is found only in the occasional opportunity of the presence of a reciprocity between image and viewer. The museum is particularly suited for *sympatheia* as it offers the viewer an opportunity to engage photographs for their communal features. How museums select, print, and mount their exhibits of photographs, particularly early historical photographs, will play a part in either enhancing or impeding this reciprocity.

## **Two Dimensions of Historical Photographs**

Historical photographs are recognized in two ways; the viewer identifies features of the image that are related to place, people, society of a former period of time; secondly, the viewer responds to particular kinds of tactility of the print.

With regard to the first of these two features, features of life style, clothing, activities, architecture and social gestures are used to identify a photograph historically and nationally. Examples of this are found in the form of styles of clothes of the subjects, their poses, and the kinds of activities that they are engaged in. The Gore Bay Museum contains the Joseph Wismar collection. Many of the photographs in this collection contain recognizable features of people and activities at the turn-of-the century in the life of people of Manitoulin Island.

Important in this regard is the Museum's effort to show the richness and variation of Manitoulin life, and to display not only differences from family to family and village to village, to display not only a contrast to the past as against the present, but to show as well, the underlying communal similarities. The museum exhibition of photographs offer an opportunity to discover similarities among people, similarities created through the environmental connections of land and labor, and through the material conditions they confront. Historical photographs offer an opportunity to discover the diversity of the peoples and their cultural variation--not only differences, but to underscore as well what is consistent and persistent among us: from culture to culture and from past to present.

This possibility is contained within the process of *sympatheia* that we described earlier. Through *sympatheia* we enter photographs to learn of our different outlooks and also to learn that these differences are born out of the commonalties in which we all participate. The image of a woman in fine dress and with hands made rough from farm labor signals our own experiences of material struggle and the potential of the "habit"--clothing that displays the relationship to self and others. A destroyed lumber mill notifies us of climatic dangers and the fragility we all share in facing their force. The historical photograph tells of "then", and its conjunction with "now". The visual manifestation is a potential for our contemporary circumstances. The second characteristic by which we recognize historical photographs is its perceptual quality, This is a less salient feature to that of identifiable activities and attire associated with former times, but it is nevertheless consequential to how we understand and what we learn from historical photographs. The perceptual quality of historical photographs is that of atmospheric tactility. To properly describe this quality we need to distinguish two kinds of tactility within photography. Kinetic tactility is the visual sense of feeling objects within the print as the eye -bumps up-

against the surfaces of those objects. The opportunity for kinetic tactility is present in prints that highlight the presence of objects. This is found in the presence of the historical printing-out processes of albumen and in silver chloride gelatin prints. We are most familiar with his presence of kinetic tactility in the appearance of contemporary silver gelatin bromide prints. Contemporary photographic processes feature separate objects in space by a limited tonal range and by the silver gelatin overcoat of commercial paper. Constratingly, atmospheric tactility is a pervasive haptic presence that offers a sense of surface of the print that often appears "soft" to the touch. This kind of quality is especially found in platinum, palladium, gum bichromate. and carbon printing processes. Atmosphere is a non-informational, pervasive surface feature of historical photographs, Thus, with the exception of albumen and silver chloride gelatin prints, historical photographs offer a different perceptive quality that calls attention to the totality of the whole print rather than parts of the image. With atmospheric tactility, it is not objects within the world that are proximate to our visual sense of touch, but the world itself, the overall surface of the world that fuses its parts Into an encompassing haptic field.

### **The Museum's Responsibility to Canada's Visual Heritage**

The chain of the trace, the ability to continue the meditation of an invisible presence offered by the photographer relies on the integrity of photographic processes being maintained by museums and archives. The communal essence of what was found and extracted a century ago by the photographer depends an the identifiable presence of the content of a print, and equally Important, on the perceptive quality by which the trace is offered. For viewers to come in contact with what historical photography offers, to fully recognize photographs of Canada's heritage, printing processes appropriate to the creation of the image must be kept. That is not the practice today among the vast majority of facilities in Canada. Photographs that were first created through platinum, palladium, gum bichromate, or carbon are being reproduced with contemporary processes of commercially made silver gelatin paper. This has the consequence of changing the form of tactility of the photograph from haptic to kinetic. This is to say, the affective meaning of Canada's past is being changed. What is lost in this alteration is the perceptual sentiment that was once associated with a social and physical environment. This earlier affective relationship of Canadians to nature and to an outlook on life is not being preserved. We are taking an image that represents a holistic synthesis of its parts and converting it into bits and pieces of information. The content is present in historical negatives printed with contemporary materials, but the realization of how those images were received, felt, and responded to by their photographers and their viewers is lost. The museum's responsibility in supporting the chain of the trace, the entrainment of the invisible of the past into our time is to offer a photograph authentic to the period and processes of its creation. Hopefully, other museums and archival institutions will follow Gore Bay Museum's leadership in conserving Canada's visual heritage in this way.