

Alison Nordström The Pictorialist Object

*Lecture on November 21, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
“Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered”*

The context of this paper is a reconsideration of Pictorialism, a turn-of-the-last-century art movement that we historians of photography seem to reconsider on a regular basis, with each reconsideration bearing a reflection of its own times, particular interests, ideologies, and concerns. Today, our times are characterized by an enthusiasm for multiple perspectives and multiple points of view in photographic studies. Today, as was perhaps not the case at the turn of the last century, or even a generation ago, there is no singular aesthetic manifesto, not one dominant journal, no towering leader whose favoritisms and fallings out are legendary. I am just as happy to be moving forward without relying on a solitary arbiter like a Stieglitz, a Newhall, or a Szarkowski in what is today a larger, infinitely more diverse photographic community, but we must acknowledge their influences on how we were trained, and how we think about photographs, especially Pictorialist photographs.

I am not an art historian; my work on Pictorialism reflects my training and interest in the discipline of cultural studies, specifically the study of material culture. I have spent my career working in museums, and my research and teaching have generally been with collections' objects rather than with images viewed on a computer monitor, as projections on a screen, or on the printed page. It goes without saying that I think of photographs as things. I know from my own experience as a collections manager that they take up space and must be moved and handled in order to be used. This paper, then, will model an approach that emphasizes the understanding of each work as a unique object, paying somewhat less than the usual attention to the images the objects bear. This is not a radical approach. I dare say all of us pay attention to the material culture of the photograph, consciously or unconsciously, whenever we can, though I recognize that museum workers and gallerists tend to have the advantage here as original photographs are more likely to literally pass through our hands. (And I must acknowledge here the irony that this paper on the materiality of photographs is accompanied by a selection of digitally copied images that do not at all convey the object-ness I am encouraging us to consider.)

My interrogation of photographic objects is developed from the protocols established by Winterthur's F. McClung Fleming for describing and analyzing decorative arts and has also been influenced by the writings of Thomas Schlereth, Elizabeth Edwards and Geoffrey Batchen. It grew from a need for a way to approach a diverse group of nineteenth-century photographs from Polynesia housed in an ethnographic museum at a major American university. Little was known about these photographs, and less had been written, leaving me with almost nothing to go on but the objects themselves, encouraging an almost forensic approach that considered smears of paste, samples of handwriting, and registrars' records of the objects' movements.

The photographs in question were particularly “slippery”: they had shifted from being tourist souvenirs to scientific documents to aesthetic objects, with their materiality essentially unchanged, despite accruing signs of their various uses, changes in location, and their numerous changes in meaning over time. Since then, I have found that other kinds of slippery photographs, including advertising, legal, and scientific, as well as photojournalism, and snapshots, have encouraged this approach. For these kinds of photographs the language of art history – tonality, composition, artistic intent – seems insufficient at best and is at worst confusing and misleading.

Pictorialist photographs are hardly slippery at all. They were made with the language, aesthetics, and philosophy of painting and its criticism in mind. Made as art, exhibited, collected, and discussed as art, they continue in this mode today, assertively “Art” on the Art-Not Art continuum, though Pictorialism’s place on the Good Art-Bad Art continuum has moved from one extreme to the other at least twice in the last 130 years. This supports an argument against total reliance on reading exclusively through an aesthetic lens even for work made to be understood that way and for bringing some other ways of looking into the mix of our understanding. It is for this reason that I wish to consider a selection of Pictorialist photographs – well known and lesser known – from the standpoint of their existence as things that were made a certain way, used a certain way, moved from place to place, and occupy a particular place today.

Pictorialism is known for its wide range of processes. It has been argued that the labor-intensive, handcrafted processes favored by the artists of the Linked Ring and the Photo-Secession were prized not only for their distinctive look and painterly appearance but for their very difficulty. In a newly Kodak-ed world in which photography had suddenly become accessible to all, the technical virtuosity required by such processes as cyanotype, platinum, and gum bichromate automatically separated its practitioners from the suddenly ubiquitous Kodak Girls and Camera Fiends. It must also be noted that each of these processes offered a distinctive look and a range of aesthetic choices that differed dramatically from the glossy machined flatness of the Kodak print.



Elias Goldensky, Untitled, platinum print, c. 1900

What sets Pictorialist prints apart visually from contemporaneous vernacular photos has as much to do with their physical appearance as it does to the content of the images they bear. Both platinum and cyanotype render an image that floats within the paper rather than on the surface as it does when a baryta layer of light-sensitive chemicals suspended in an emulsion is present as a surface on top of the paper.

Gum bichromate, worked with a brush as the light-sensitive compound hardens, can in skillful hands permit the creation of a richly textured three-dimensional surface that offers the expressive possibilities of painting. While I am generally challenged when forced to use the methods and vocabulary of painting criticism to consider the photograph, here I think it would prove useful. The brushstrokes in the work of someone with the training and finesse of Gertrude Käsebier deserve serious – perhaps microscopic – study. Very difficult to reproduce through re-photography, they require observation of the unique object. It goes without saying that there are no duplicates in gum bichromate, even if multiple prints are made by the same hand from the same negative.



Gertrude Käsebier, *Road to Rome*, gum bichromate print, 1903

The autochrome, a color process beloved by the Pictorialists, has been pushed to the margins of photographic history in part because of the challenges inherent in the reproduction and exhibition of its physical objects. Composed of dyed grains of potato starch between glass plates, the images, which required long exposure, were moody, pointillist, and strikingly colored. The process was enthusiastically adopted by such Pictorialist luminaries as Stieglitz, Steichen, and Kühn, but many plates did not survive into the present day. They are extremely difficult to photograph, and even direct digital scans require a great deal of manipulation to get the color closer to what the eye, rather than the camera, sees. They were rarely reproduced in books, since color was expensive to print,

and it is probably not a coincidence that the autochrome's disappearance from the history of Pictorialism occurred at the height of an aesthetic that favored the monochromatic prints of Adams and Weston.

At the time of their making, autochromes were difficult to use, singular objects that required backlighting to view. Today, their exhibition is further complicated by our awareness of the instability and light sensitivity inherent to the process. The objects themselves, being made of glass, are also fragile and difficult to transport and store. It is, of course, for these very reasons that the autochrome must be returned to its place in the history of Pictorialism. We must add autochromes to our Pictorialist inventory; consideration of these singular non-reproducible objects, made of glass rather than paper, and in full color, must change our discourses about Pictorialism but also about modernism, photographic art, and the aesthetics of black-and-white versus color.



Edward Steichen, *Mary Steichen with Russian Nesting Dolls*, autochrome, c. 1910

Process continues to be understood as a key aesthetic choice of the image maker and remains an element today in most serious considerations of Pictorialist photographs and photographers both aesthetically and technically. Aesthetically, the recent appearance of significant amounts of new writing on Pictorialism and the production of several encyclopedic exhibitions has encouraged close observation and comparison of particular prints of the same image. The publicity in 2006 surrounding the \$2.9 million sale of Steichen's *Moonlight, The Pond*, a platinum print with hand-applied watercolor, may have also encouraged a materials-based connoisseurship. Technically, advances in materials analysis, specifically XRF examination, allow us to determine with some certainty the exact

make up of a particular print, leading to better care of it but also in many cases also contributing valuable information regarding authenticity, date and place of making, and the like.

Even without this advanced technology, the optical devices we were born with can reveal a great deal of information if we use them, and simple physical examination of any photograph under consideration must be seen as essential to its analysis. Most Pictorialist photographs are made of paper. As such they have both a front and a back, and because the back provides a blank page permanently associated with the image-bearing front, it quite naturally became a repository for notes of all kinds. There is always the possibility that a photograph will be inscribed, dedicated, dated, or titled verso, while it is also not uncommon to find examples of the photographer's printing or other production notes conveniently kept forever close to the image they describe.

It may go without saying that most photographs have both a front and a back and that the backs can be revealing and informative in many ways. The Pictorialist practice of participating in salons and other exhibitions internationally may also yield a precise exhibition history in the labels and studio stamps on the original backboard. It is worth noting that the ease and economy with which simple paper prints could be moved around the world by mail – compared, for example, to painting or sculpture – must have contributed significantly to the widespread adoption of Pictorialist styles and subjects around the world, from Australia to Japan to Eastern Europe.



Salon stamps

It should be noted too that Pictorialism existed as prints that tucked easily into luggage to travel with individuals and that international travel, not an uncommon practice in the social classes with which Pictorialism is associated, was key to the sharing and spreading of Pictorialism's ideas. Stieglitz, although American born, had strong family ties to Germany and was educated there between 1881 and 1890. Steichen, born in Luxembourg but brought to the United States as an infant, lived in France, as a painter, in the 1890s. Coburn, born in 1882, removed permanently to Britain in 1912 and died a British subject. All

of these men moved comfortably in international circles and spoke and corresponded regularly with artist friends around the world.

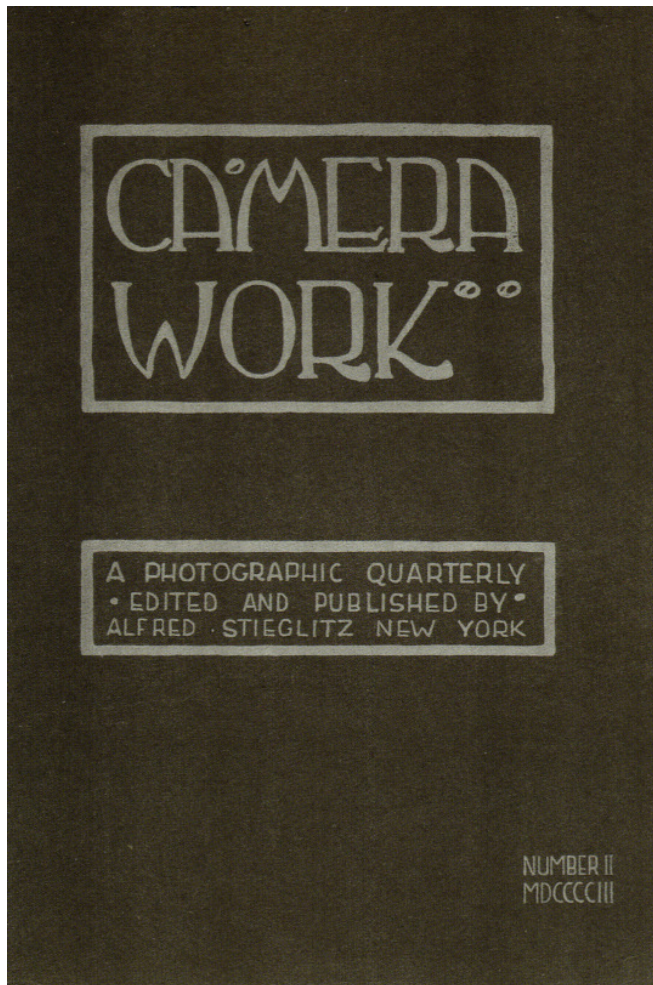
It was of course the image that inspired the artist, and it is usually the image that attracts us today. But despite this primacy it is clear that many Pictorialist artists understood their work holistically, considering all aspects of their presentation formats, from signatures to frames to the decoration of the galleries where the work was shown and that these elements deserve our study today as much as the images themselves do.

In the period of Pictorialism's beginnings as a style, commercial photographers, especially portraitists, routinely identified their work with the elaborate backs common to most cabinet cards. Some of the more commercially oriented Pictorialists such as Elias Goldensky, of Philadelphia, followed this practice, though it must be noted that commercial aspirations seem to have been the cause of many fallings out with Stieglitz, including Goldensky's. The gentleman artists who made handcrafted singular art objects generally chose to sign their photographs by hand, on the photograph itself or on the mount, as prints and paintings often were at that time. It is extremely rare to see signatures or even claims of authorship on vernacular images of the period.



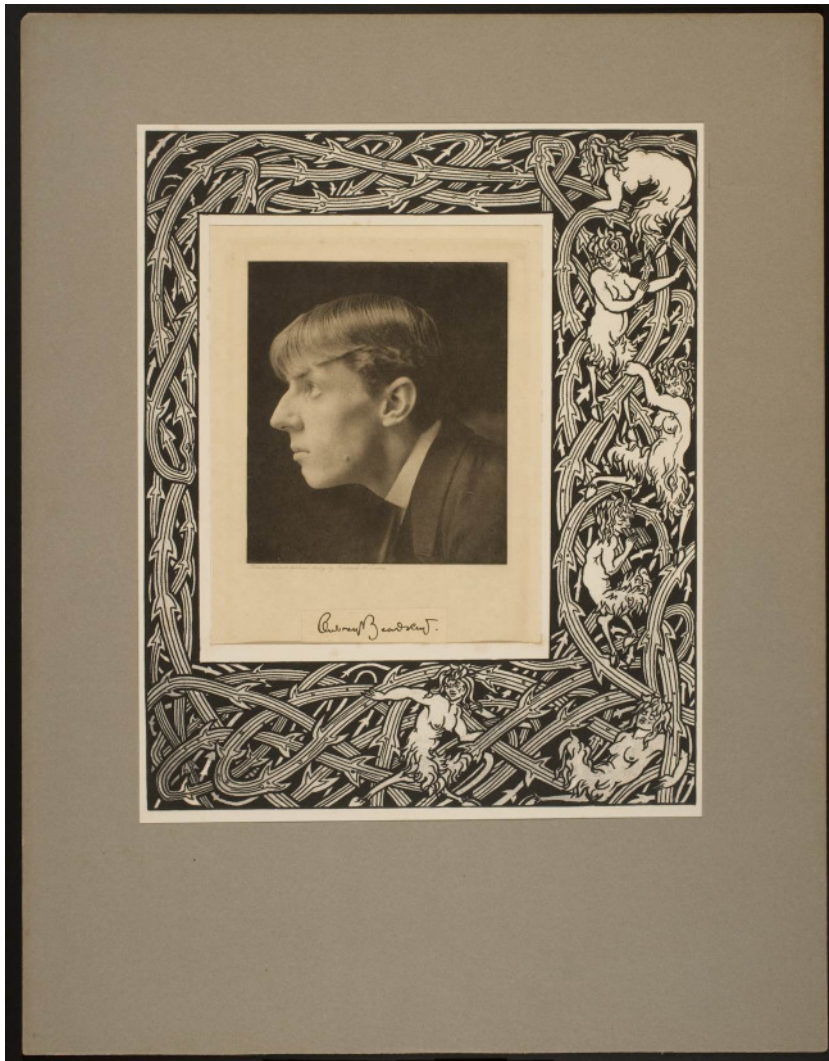
Signature of Gertrude Käsebier incised in gum

Another extremely important characteristic of photography's materiality is its reproducibility. Stieglitz's seminal publication, *Camera Work*, often featured actual photogravures, produced in runs of one thousand (later five hundred) and tipped in by hand, sometimes by Stieglitz himself. Since photogravures were also exhibited as original works of art framed on gallery walls, often the only differences between the two kinds of objects were their location and their presentation format. Compare this to the appearance of a reproduction of a painting through photography and half-tone. *Camera Work* could be easily mailed and was intended to be saved, shared, and revisited. It circulated widely, appearing in both Australia and Japan in its first months. It re-located Pictorialism, both examples of it and its various statements and manifestos, to sites around the world where it was adapted and modified, growing into established genres of its own.



Camera Work

As artists and aesthetes, the Pictorialists were concerned with every aspect of their work's consumption. As recent research by Alana West confirms, there is every evidence that the decorative mats, borders, and backboards that Frederick Evans regularly used in the presentation of his photographs were understood by him and his audience as integral to the work. Furthermore, different styles of decoration were employed depending on Evans's intentions for the piece. Prints for sale were often minimally decorated while those made as gifts or for competitive exhibitions show more evidence of effort. Regardless, most of us first knew Evans's work as a slide or a printed reproduction in a book, almost invariably as an isolated image disassociated from the elements that constituted the whole in the artist's mind.



Frederick Evans, Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley on decorated mount, 1894

The same can be said for the frames that firmly situated these prints within the conventions of the high art of the time. F. Holland Day utilized remarkable frames for his self-portraiture, linking the work to both high art and the arts and crafts movement. Similarly, the galleries where Pictorialist art was exhibited served to establish and reinforce the newest conventions of progressive style. 291, Stieglitz's authoritative temple to new art of all kinds featured the drapes, paneling, flowers, and art pottery that clearly asserted the artistic sensibilities of the day. Today they communicate something quite different, ironically, I think – an old-fashioned fussiness – but we must remember that in 1910 these fittings were as unnoticeable as the alleged neutrality of today's white cube.



The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (291) New York, 1906

Two key questions in a material culture-based study of any object are “Where has it been?” and “How and why was it moved from where it was made to where it is now?” We have already considered the early easy movement of pieces of photographic paper through the mail, as published pages, through the systems of international competitions, publications, and indeed the movements of individuals.

Part of the cultural history of these Pictorialist objects is their dramatic fall from popularity at the beginning of the 1920s. Stieglitz’s shift towards the sharp abstractions of modernism in the last issue of *Camera Work* (dedicated to Strand) does not mark quite the abrupt change of channel that is often presented, but there is no doubt that critics and institutions had become interested in the sharply focused modernism of straight photography and that such institutions as New York’s Museum of Modern Art championed the unmanipulated style of artists like Walker Evans. Stieglitz and Steichen had evolved with the times, continuing to produce fresh work that was increasingly abstract, but traditional Pictorialism was aggressively rejected as ugly, old-fashioned, fussy, and even dishonest. The new photography was intended to look as much like a photograph as possible. The sharp all-over focus and asymmetrical, abstract compositions of Group f/64 included such notable members as Imogen Cunningham, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Though all three started photography in a distinctly Pictorialist style, their move towards modernism produced images that stood as a direct rebuke to the earlier emphasis on an image’s painterly qualities.

Indeed by the 1940s the modernist antipathy to Pictorialism was so extreme that Ansel Adams would refer to William Mortenson as the anti-Christ, saying, “The retouching, etching diffusing, coloring, fussy mounting – in other words, the consistent departure from the principals of the medium – disturbs the serious worker and serves to break down any standards of photography which the public at large might possess.” Significantly, his criticism is of the means by which the image was made as much as of the image itself.

It is worth noting that this is the decade when Beaumont Newhall was developing what would become the seminal history of photography. His own training in modern art with Paul Sachs at Harvard had made him a champion of so-called “straight” photography as practiced by the likes of Charles Sheeler and Walker Evans. It appears that his information on Pictorialism and the examples of it that he reproduced came primarily from the pages of

Camera Work, a narrow selection reflecting Stieglitz's taste and sensibilities as well as the printing technologies of the times.

This shift in favor and fashion caused many of these objects to end up where they did. In 1947, when Eastman House opened its doors as a museum dedicated to all aspects of photography, Pictorialism was at its nadir in critical opinion, scorned as derivative, old-fashioned, overwrought, and elitist, the antithesis of clear-eyed photographic modernism as practiced by Group f/64. Examples of Pictorialism came to Eastman House, often because it was not wanted elsewhere. Coburn and Evans personally and Käsebier's heirs donated entire archives to Eastman House, at least in part because more conventional art museums were not interested.

But times have changed. Today, I believe we can safely say that Pictorialism has been rehabilitated. Within the complex and less didactic attitudes surrounding photography today, vehement disdain for Pictorialism has lessened. It is again exhibited at major institutions and re-considered at conferences like these, and we can see it as part of a continuum that includes both modernism and postmodernism. We can expect that our understanding and appreciation of Pictorialism will continue to change. The objects Pictorialism has left behind will outlive us, and it is our responsibility to care for and preserve them for the investigations of future generations.

Alison Nordström is an independent scholar and curator of photographs based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is the former Senior Curator and Director of Exhibitions at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. During her career, she has curated over two hundred exhibitions and published numerous books, monographs, chapters, and scholarly articles, the most important for the symposium being *TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845–1945* (2008), a catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the same name. Alison Nordström holds a Ph.D. in visual and cultural studies.