Egg For A Memorable Moment
Visit of Queen Victoria to Queen Margaret College

Technical Art History | Archives & Special Collections

Albumen printing is a photographic print-out process based on silver chloride with egg white (albumen binder) on thin paper. This technique was dominantly used between 1860s and 1890s until it came to be replaced by silver gelatin. Due to its good quality of detail, fine density and contrast, albumen prints were adopted by a variety of photographic formats ranging from cabinet card to professional photograph albums. A single mounted photograph titled Visit of Queen Victoria to Queen Margaret College (Fig. 1) collected in the Archive Services of University of Glasgow is a good example to demonstrate this type of printing technique.

Technical Analysis
Warm golden yellow characterizes albumen photographic prints. The surface is semi-glossy under raking light. Paper fibers, glass-like top layer, its transparency (Fig.4), and the fragility and thinness of the print (Fig.5) are clearly discernible through microscopic observation. The main deterioration of albumen photograph are general yellowing, detail loss, scratches and cracks happened in albumen layer due to lack of humidity. Dark environment, lux and temperature below 50 and 18°C respectively are recommended for storage.

Historical Investigation
The photograph was taken by a British photographer Thomas Annan on the 24th August of 1888 when Queen Victoria was visiting the college with an address by Mrs. Jessie Campbell. (Fig. 2) Mrs. Campbell was the wife of the benefactor of Queen Margaret College (1886-1901) - James Campbell. She presented herself in the middle of the group portrait photograph, and was wearing a bracelet that appears in many of her other portrait photographs (Fig.3), which proposes another potential study about its personal meaning and historical stories.

Methodology
Both macroscopic and microscopic observation were applied for analysis. Three different lighting – standard, raking, and accent – as well as UV light and magnifying glass (Fig.6) were used for surface examination. The acidity of the support cardboard and mount paper were identified by PH test pen. Occasionally, the acidity of support paper can accelerate the degradation of the photographic print. Regarding microscopic assessment, portable digital microscope Dino-Lite AM4000/AD4000 (Fig.7) was the dominant instrument. Comparative research was the main approach for studying the historical context.

Egg can be food, and can also be material for photographic prints. The photograph Visit of Queen Victoria to Queen Margaret College not only records a memorable moment, but also offers a good example for studying albumen photographic printing technique, which was immensely popular and used for documenting many significant moments in the latter half of the nineteenth century on account of its comparatively fine image expression.

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