

Photographic Societies and Camera Clubs (London, 25 May 23)

Birkbeck, University of London, May 25, 2023

Deadline: Feb 6, 2023

Dr Jason Bate

Photographic Societies and Camera Clubs. Birkbeck College, University of London, in person.

International photographic societies and camera clubs burgeoned in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The mutual support and collaboration amongst individual members along with the practical and educational undertakings of these self-reliant photographs is a fitting focus for the recognition of photographers who could assert themselves and see themselves as a community of practice of their own making.

The educational projects of photographic societies and camera clubs were shaped by an infrastructure that enabled collaborative forms of communication; products of socio-technical networks that fostered new relationships of learning between the individual and the collective. From the late 1870s, the number of clubs and societies began to soar: the fourteen groups recorded in the *British Journal of Photography Almanac* in 1877 had grown to 365 by 1910. Almost weekly the pages of the photographic press reported the foundation of new clubs and societies. At a time when the number of amateur photographers themselves was expanding, and club life was seen as a respectable social occupation, the cooperative ethos on which these 'local schools' were built was considered by contemporary commentators as a 'culture of rational exchange' and fostering an 'ideal of sociability identified with liberal education, eloquence and good fellowship' (Sawyer, *Photographic News*, 1883: 286). These organisations ranged from amateur groups that emulated learned societies to less socially exclusive and formal, and to camera clubs based in hospitals, workplaces or mechanics institutes. There were national societies, such as the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, the National Photographic Association of the United States, the Société Française de Photographie, the Japan Photographic Society, and a plethora of album clubs and postal camera clubs exchanging prints or lantern slides for aesthetic critique.

Historical accounts of clubs and societies are sparse, because many of these groups, considered to be minor, were not listed in the photographic annals and the greater numbers of their collections have been broken up, dispersed, and even lost. Yet, club life from an understanding of how people learnt (or should learn) photography, allowed its membership to receive by various ways a collaborative and efficient training and, through group participation, to escape some of the technical pitfalls which beset many photographers who proceeded to work alone.

This one-day workshop opens a critical conversation about the under-researched emergence and decline of these clubs and societies, outlines new ways to research, theorise, and interpret their educational projects, and asks what this reveals about the values and meanings that members attached to these practices and of how photography consolidated and strengthened the bonds

amongst those groups.

To this end, we invite papers for 15 minute presentations from students, academics, practitioners, and museums and archives professionals at all career stages working in research areas such as photographic history, visual and popular culture, media and communication studies, medical humanities, social and cultural history, history of art, material and design cultures, archives and records management, and any other related fields of research.

What roles have the learning communities of photographic societies and camera clubs played in the histories of photography and visual culture? How did club life, at times recognised as popular and progressive, fraternal, instructive and sociable, cement cooperative strategies for growing bodies of amateur and professional photographers to learn from one another? Were these clubs and societies mostly 'fraternal' male groups? How did this space intersect with narratives of gender and subtexts of brotherhood in its educational and entertainment uses for female groups? Did any stand out for their female or children's membership?

Proposals may explore, but are not limited to:

- Global histories of the camera club and photographic society (from any historical period)
- Photographic societies and camera clubs as supplementary schooling
- Amateur groups emulating learned societies
- Launch of the Amateur Photographer in 1884 and the rise in popularity of Amateur Societies
- International, national and regional differences in the organisation of both photographic societies and camera clubs
- The role of periodicals in drawing together societies and clubs and consolidating communities of practice
- Education, sociability and instruction within the practices of clubland culture
- Society networks and intersecting communities of learning
- The RPS and female 'Colour Group' members
- The relationship between gender and clubland
- Camera clubs specifically for women or children
- Collaborative education to enhance members' active participation
- Scientific, medical, colonial photographic committees, societies or clubs
- The material culture of clubrooms, exhibitions, soirées, meetings, lantern evenings
- The social and cultural roles of exhibitions of societies and clubs
- The relationship between the RPS and affiliated provincial camera clubs
- Power relations in the clubroom
- The legalities of club life and presidents, secretaries and officials, especially in small self-regulated clubs
- The relationship between postal, microscopical, album or lantern slide clubs and modern communication technologies in urban and non-urban contexts
- Amateur photographers and the survey and record movement
- Links with other types of bodies that sponsored photographic societies such as field, naturalistic and archaeological societies, companies
- Photographic federations, unions, associations, and inter-society arrangements
- The rise and decline of clubs and societies
- Researching societies and clubs in archives and special collections

Paper proposals should be submitted as one Word or PDF document to Dr Jason Bate

j.bate@bbk.ac.uk by Monday 6th February 2023.

The document should include:

- Your full name
- Email address
- Institutional affiliation (when applicable)
- Paper title
- Proposal of no longer than 250 words for presentations of 15 minutes
- Short biographical note (100-150 words)

Event format: The event will take place in the History and Theory of Photography Research Centre at Birkbeck in London (UK) in person, and we will be able to accommodate fifteen presentations, and offer £50 towards travel expenses for up to four PhD students.

Keynote speaker: Dr Michael Pritchard, protohistorian and Director of Programmes for the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain.

Reference:

CFP: Photographic Societies and Camera Clubs (London, 25 May 23). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 21, 2022 (accessed Aug 2, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/37978>>.