

Mapping Amateur Photographic Clubs and Societies (London/online, 26 Nov 26)

Online / Birkbeck, University of London (UK), Nov 26, 2026

Deadline: Jun 29, 2026

Dr Jason Bate

Globe-spanning Networks: Mapping Amateur Photographic Clubs and Societies in Local, National, and Transnational Contexts.

What is a photographic society or club? How do photographic clubs and societies foster community, educate, and serve as social networking bodies?

Assessing amateur photographic communities as a phenomenon is more urgent than ever because many of these minor groups were poorly documented at the time, and the majority of their collections have been broken up, dispersed, or lost. These amateur groups show the unrestricted flow of photographic knowledge, often through exhibition, unimpeded by geography or language, and made possible by the efficacy of print communities. Some amateur societies and clubs were founded for specific specialisms, concerns, and aesthetic preferences in a variety of locations, while others evolved from learned societies and earlier forms of education.

The earlier trend of forming clubs and societies for scientific and associational activity reflected broader developments in national and global trade economies. The variety of local photographic clubs and societies, as well as the benefits they provided, served as a vector for new ideas, new values, and new kinds of social alignment, as part of a larger surge in new forms of national, regional, and local identity inspired variously by, for instance, learned societies, Victorian arts and crafts organisations, or medieval guild influences.

Yet, much of this associational world can be traced back to British culture in ways that have not previously been considered. However, these networks and influences cannot be contained within ideas of 'national traditions'. To recover these voluntary associations and practices requires more to be done to map and research the impact of transnational networks on British amateur communities, and a shared history, not only with Euro-American networks, but also with global south countries like South America, Asia, and Africa, especially in the postwar years following rapid decolonialisation. It would seem timely to examine the culture of sharing ideas through the rich written world of photographic publishing; the work of foreign correspondents; the circulation of lantern sets and prints; and the mobility of photographers and artisans through transnational exchanges and rigorous theoretical and historical reflection. This will allow us to rethink the role of British culture in the development of amateur clubs and societies, and their wider historical relationships across national boundaries.

This hybrid one-day event builds on a one-day workshop at Birkbeck in May 2023 and opens a critical conversation about the under-researched origins and evolution of photographic clubs and societies around the world, and outlines new agendas to research, theorise, and interpret the variety of historical amateur circles that brought together technology, science, and art to enable a constituency of dedicated non-professional individuals to learn from one another.

We invite papers for 15 minute presentations that investigate this global network in relation to class, gender, race, and imperial legacies in the global south, including Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as the origins of this associational life in Britain's medieval guilds, freemasonry, arts clubs, and learned societies.

What can mapping clubs and societies tell us about how people experience nationalistic and patriotic sentiment? How did the intensely local desire and sense of local distinctiveness translate to the national or transnational level? What approaches might we use now to analyse the sociability of these networks which emphasise local forms of belonging while connecting practitioners across geographical borders? How long did it take a photographic innovation to circle around the world? What were the well-established and less-travelled routes for exchanging photographic knowledge?

Proposals might explore, but are not limited to:

- The history of learned societies or arts clubs in Britain
- Early photographic clubs and societies in Britain between the 1840s and 1860s
- Links with other types of bodies and emerging disciplines that sponsored photographic sections such as literary and antiquarian, geological, natural history, medical, and archaeological societies, companies
- the rise and fall of national and provincial clubs and societies in Britain, Europe, and the United States between the 1870s and 1930s
- The role of periodicals and books in drawing together societies and clubs and consolidating imagined communities
- Amateur circles in schools, universities, workplaces, and colonies, among others
- Localism demonstrated through flourishing local clubs and societies, and local learned journals
- The rise of early clubs in East Asian countries like China and Japan, and in Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, Taiwan, and Vietnam after World War II
- The evolution of clubs in South America, India, and Africa between the 1950s and 1980s
- The relationship between class, gender, race, or imperial legacies and clubs, societies, and associations

Paper proposals should be submitted as one Word or PDF document to Dr Jason Bate j.bate@bbk.ac.uk by Monday 29th June 2026. 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
- Indication of whether you would be presenting in person or online
- Short biographical note (100-150 words)

Event format: The event will take place at Birkbeck, the University of London (UK) in hybrid form, and we will be able to accommodate fifteen presentations. Eight speakers have already confirmed their attendance, including keynote speaker Professor Elizabeth Edwards, Professor Peter Buse, PhD student Sandrine Chene, Dr Sara Dominici, Dr Carolin Görgen, Dr Oh Soon-Hwa, Dr Michael Pritchard, and Dr Alise Tifentale.

Importantly: Selected speakers will be invited to contribute extended versions of their papers to an edited volume.

Reference:

CFP: Mapping Amateur Photographic Clubs and Societies (London/online, 26 Nov 26). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 14, 2026 (accessed May 28, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52212>>.