Historic London Architecture Explored through Exhibition of Early Photographs

ART IN FOCUS: RELICS OF OLD LONDON
March 30–August 14, 2016

NEW HAVEN – Lost architecture of preindustrial London resurfaces through an evocative series of haunting photographs exhibited from the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art. The short-lived Society for Photographing Relics of Old London, the brainchild of the antiquarian scholar Alfred Marks, commissioned the work between 1875 and 1886. The society sensed that rapid urban redevelopment throughout the nineteenth century ran the risk of obliterating the splendor and charm of London’s architectural heritage. The works in Art in Focus: Relics of Old London convey a permanent pictorial archive of buildings resonant with memory and history. The society’s endeavor is a significant forebearer of the historic preservation effort in the United Kingdom and of institutions that continue to fight for architectural preservation today.

The project was initially a response to the imminent destruction of one of London’s oldest remaining galleried coaching inns, the decaying seventeenth-century Oxford Arms. This structure lay in a tangle of streets in the shadow of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Marks and a group of preservationist-minded friends commissioned from photographers Alfred and John Bool a set of six views of the inn shortly before its demolition. The photography studio of Henry Dixon & Sons printed the Bools’ glass-plate negatives using the carbon process, prized for its subtlety and remarkable permanence, and sold the prints by subscription.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm for this photographic campaign, Marks continued to issue sets of photographs of endangered or notable buildings every year. He eventually hired the Dixons (Henry and his son Thomas James) to take the original negatives as well. By the end of the series, the project had produced 120 prints that documented an “Old London” rapidly vanishing in the wake of social and economic transformations.

Focusing on the city’s built heritage, rather than its shifting social fabric, Relics of Old London presents London’s history through its endangered architectural past: ramshackle coaching inns, disintegrating as the growing railway system eclipsed their vital role...
in Britain’s transportation networks; the Inns of Court, imposing Gothic sites of legal
tradition; abandoned sites for early modern leisure and entertainment; gloomy medieval
lanes, churches and shop fronts frequented by anonymous Londoners; soot-covered
monuments and gateways; and the city’s last remaining wooden buildings, survivors of
the Great Fire of 1666.

Marks’s accompanying printed texts offered a scholarly excavation of each site’s layers
of history, describing their many pasts. Yet even in looking backward, the society was
also undeniably modern in its outlook. Photography was the most innovative of visual
technologies of the time, and the occasional choice of unconventional vantage points even
push some of the images to the very edge of modernism.

About half of the sites pictured remain standing today, which makes the cityscape in
the *Relics of Old London* at once familiar and unrecognizable. For example, Christopher
Wren’s Temple Bar is pictured in 1878 at its original location, where Fleet Street becomes
the Strand, shortly before it was dismantled. It has since been restored and now stands in
Paternoster Square, near St. Paul’s. Another photograph from 1883 shows a dilapidated
house on St. Mary Axe, where today’s visitors find the skyscraper known as the Gherkin,
one of the most iconic sights in the city’s skyline. The exhibition explores this tension
between old and new: the antiquarian impulse to preserve remnants of the past and the
role of the developing technology of photography in realizing new forms of public history
and visual record. These photographs remind us that Victorian London, a city consumed
by visions of progress and modernity, was also haunted by multiple pasts.

CREDITS

*Art in Focus: Relics of Old London* is being curated by Yale undergraduates in the Center’s
Student Guide Program. Now in its ninth year, *Art in Focus* is an annual initiative for
members of the program, which provides curatorial experience and an introduction to
all aspects of exhibition practice. Student curators select objects for exhibition, write text
panels and object labels, and make decisions about installation under the mentorship
of Center curators and staff. In researching and presenting this exhibition, the students
are being guided by Chitra Ramalingam, Research Associate and Lecturer in History;
Linda Friedlaender, Senior Curator of Education; and Jaime Ursic, Assistant Curator
of Education. The student curators are Rose Davis, BR ’18; Zoe Dobuler, TC ’17; Claire
Goldsmith, ES ’18; Sergio Infante, CC ’18; Austin Johnson, PC ’16; Caroline Kanner, JE
’17; Anna Meixler, ES ’16; Nicholas Stewart, JE ’18; and Ari Zimmet, CC ’17.
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