

Exhibition Curated by Yale Center for British Art Student Guides Explores Historic London Architecture through Late Nineteenth-Century Photographs

ART IN FOCUS: RELICS OF OLD LONDON

May 11–August 14, 2016

NEW HAVEN (May 10, 2016) – Each year, the Yale Center for British Art’s *Art in Focus* initiative provides select Yale undergraduates with the opportunity to research, curate, install, and present an exhibition of works under the guidance of Center curators and staff. Debuting at the Center’s newly conserved and renovated building, the program’s 2016 exhibition, *Art in Focus: Relics of Old London*, explores a pivotal decade in preindustrial British history through a haunting series of rare nineteenth-century photographs of London’s architecture.

On view in a special gallery on the Center’s second floor, the exhibition presents the extraordinary record, drawn from the Center’s Paul Mellon Collection, of a photographic campaign commissioned between 1875 and 1886 by the short-lived Society for Photographing Relics of Old London – the brainchild of antiquarian scholar Alfred Marks. Members of 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. Under Marks’s direction, the society began a campaign to document endangered structures. In many ways, this project presaged the historic preservation effort in the United Kingdom and echoes the sensibilities of institutions today that are championing the fight for architectural preservation.

The Relics of Old London project initially arose as a response to the imminent destruction of one of the city’s oldest remaining 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 photographers Alfred and John Bool to shoot 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



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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 printed texts that accompanied the society’s photographs offered a scholarly excavation of each site’s layers of history, describing its 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 pushes 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 exhibition 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 Cathedral. 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 suggest 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 curated by Yale undergraduates in the Yale Center for British Art’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 the installation under the mentorship of Center curators and staff. In researching and presenting this exhibition, the students were 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; Emily Feldstein, PC ’16 (Head of Art in Focus); 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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ABOUT YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), the collection reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center’s collections include more than 2,000 paintings and 250 sculptures, 20,000 drawings and watercolors, 40,000 prints and 35,000 rare books and manuscripts. More than 40,000 volumes supporting research in British art and related fields are available in the Center’s library.



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Images: From *Relics of Old London* (London: Society for Photographing Relics of Old London, 1875–1886), carbon print mounted on card, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection: Henry and Thomas James Dixon, no. 77, “Old Houses, Aldgate” (detail), 1883; Henry and Thomas James Dixon, no. 50, “King’s Head Inn Yard, Southwark” (detail), 1881; Henry and Thomas James Dixon, no. 111, “Great St. Helen’s” (detail), 1886; Alfred and John Bool, no. 17, “St. Bartholomew the Great and Cloth Fair” (detail), 1877; Henry and Thomas James Dixon, no. 79, “The Golden Axe, St. Mary’s Axe” (detail), 1883; Alfred and John Bool, no. 1, “The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane” (detail), 1875; Yale Center for British Art, photo by Richard Caspole.