

Collecting Canada: Selections from John Hartman's Photography Collection

By John Hartman

My first purchase of a vintage photo was by accident. I had just bought a 1913 edition of Henry Adams book *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*. Hidden inside the front cover I discovered two gelatin silver prints of the Battery in St. John's harbour by the late nineteenth century Newfoundland photographer Robert Holloway. I'm not sure now if I even read Adams' wonderful book but the Holloway photos piqued my curiosity, and set me on a course of collecting documentary photographs. The rocks and headland of the Battery have not changed from the Holloway photos but the fish stages along the shoreline have been replaced by docks for oil service tugs and by homes further up the hillside. I was curious to know what the other places that I was currently painting looked like in the past and what changes had led to the present. The idea that the things people build on the land are constantly changing, that the Canadian landscape is shaped and reshaped by the people who live and work on it, and that the land in turn shapes these same people is a central idea behind almost all of my art. I am delighted that I have been able to put together a collection of photos that has this same idea at its core.

When I studied the history of photography in a very limited way at art school, it was the history of "art photography." I was unaware as a young artist of the documentary tradition in photography, a tradition that included much of the first fifty years of photography and a significant portion since. These early documentary photographs caught my curiosity and attention. They looked like the photos I take to document a place, only better. On more than one occasion I have discovered that Holloway set his tripod up mere feet from where I stood to sketch a view of the same Newfoundland outport, both of us after walking about looking for the best viewpoint, both unaware of the other's work and separated by one hundred years. This is only to say that photographers and painters in recording the landscape often use identical compositional conventions.

In 2001 I began to collect in a dedicated way. This collection starts with photos of the mid-1850s, very close to the beginnings of photography, and it ends at the present time. It documents the landscape of Canada, including its towns and cities, during the period of westward expansion and settlement. This was also a period when photography itself went through many rapid technical changes, especially in the period from 1890 to 1910. So the collection incidentally documents these different photographic and printing techniques. The symmetry of putting together a collection of photos of a landscape in change, in a medium that was in change, truly appealed to me.

During the middle of the twentieth century painting moved inexorably toward abstraction and largely gave up story-telling and documentation, first to photography and then to film. To understand the look and feel of people and places in the twentieth century we now turn to photographers in the documentary tradition, rather than to painters. None have been more surprising and moving to me than the photos of Edith Watson, an American photographer who spent months each summer recording women's work in rural Canada. Part of my fascination with Edith is that she worked in areas where I have also spent a lot of time sketching. Her intimacy with the places and people she photographed and her intuitive understanding of the possibilities of the the newly invented hand held cameras she used all led to a remarkable body of work. Edith's photo of the young woman mail carrier at the steering wheel of the mail boat, shot in Pte. au Baril in the 1920s, is a superb example of Edith's genius. My first reaction is to the story being told: here is a young woman who is clearly loving her work and who has such knowledge about the place where she is living and working that she can move graciously and with confidence in that landscape. It is only later that I am aware of how artfully Edith has composed this image. She dropped her camera down to waist level. This allowed her subject's white work dress, which moves diagonally through the composition, to be framed by the dark interior of the boat cabin while her head, which is darker and in shadow, is framed by the white of the boat cabin window. Looking at this photo it is impossible to stop constructing a story in my mind or imagining this woman in her home landscape.

By the 1980s many painters were reclaiming narrative in their work, once again painting representationally, recording the world around them and telling stories in the kind of way that visual art can do. We are fortunate that this tradition was kept alive and fresh by photography.

Considering a Collection: John Hartman's Historical Photography Collection

By Emily McKibbin

I have always been very interested in photography. I have looked at far more photographs than I have paintings. Because their reality is stronger than reality itself.

—Francis Baconⁱ

Electrical lines snake over the skyline and steam dissipates slowly in the breeze raking the docks. We see a modern city, but echoes of its long past are clamorous: rooftop ladders make passage easy for chimney sweeps on older houses, while these houses cluster around the photographer's lens in an imperfect huddle. This isn't some lens-bending camera trick: cities were often once imperfectly gridded, human errors that disappear as cities remake themselves in a race to a more uniform future. This is the bustling Quebec City port that once served as conduit to a young Canada, captured in the early twentieth century by the British Colonial Press. Despite the photographic credit, captured on the print verso, very little about this image appears as orderly as its provenance suggests. Why the tip-tilted perspective on this bustling city? The space condenses without the intervening streets visible to suggest distance; it is a building-up city, and it is anxious with it.

Photographs are mutable things. Critic John Berger writes, "all photographs are there to remind us of what we forget. In this—as in other ways—they are the opposite of paintings. Paintings record what the painter remembers. Because each one of us forgets different things, a photo more than a painting may change its meaning according to who is looking at it."ⁱⁱ Senior Canadian artist and painter John Hartman has been seriously collecting photographs since 2001, largely historical, although contemporary photographs sneak in. As in any collection, it is the collector that is the common thread and it is he who is revealed in aggregate. In searching through these photographs, however, what emerges is something more complicated than one might expect. If one looks to find evidence of Hartman's painterly eye, or concerns related to his ongoing practice situating human narratives in the Canadian landscape, other motifs might recede.

A woman leans back on her bench, one hand resting on the uppermost handle of a small boat's wheel. She is casual, confident: her hair is tousled in the wind, and protecting her dress is a light-coloured pinafore. Taken from inside the wheelhouse, the interior is richly shadowed and the windows a bleached white foil for this woman's pure profile. Titled *The Mail Carrier at Pointe au Baril, Georgian Bay*, this undated photograph is by Edith Watson (American, 1861-1943). Watson's oeuvre is marked by such casual shots of working women in the early twentieth century, complicating our understanding of gender and labour in the late Victorian era. If the photograph of Quebec City is tautly urban, this photograph breathes its subject's loose-limbed confidence, her untroubled captainship of its small craft.

Consider William Notman's *West End Calgary* (1884). This albumen print captures the peculiarly flat topography of Alberta's prairies, the burgeoning city built low along, and scattered sparsely over, the banks of the Bow River. When looking at this photograph, Hartman noted its resemblance to the work of *New Topographics*-inspired photographers, most particularly Robert Adams.ⁱⁱⁱ This photograph, presented under the byline of the Notman Studio in Montreal, was likely made by William McFarlane Notman (Canadian, 1857-1914), the son of the studio's founder and preeminent Canadian photographer William Notman (Canadian, b. Scotland, 1826-1891). One part of a larger two-part panorama, this scene is a departure from the more commonly reproduced images William McFarlane Notman made while travelling Canada on the newly finished CP Railway. Take, for instance, *Lower Kicking Horse Canyon, Near Golden, on the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1889), also in this exhibition. The precise geometry of the railway tracks crisscross the river valley of the pass, a testament to the engineering feat the railway's completion represents. The precision of the large format dry-plate negative renders the harshest details of the Rocky Mountains improbably clear, while its slower exposure smooths and softens the water churning over the rapids below. Within this mountainous landscape is a very real human drama—the lore of the Canadian frontier, which led to the rapid colonization of the Canadian west once the railroads opened up the area for settlement. This foundational myth is in *West End Calgary* as well, albeit in a drier, more critical, fashion. This is the landscape of bureaucrats, of merchants, of small-scale family farmers; this is the Western landscape that supplanted the sublime as a field of investigation for contemporary photographers in the 1970s. In Hartman's collection, there is room for both.

Important collectors of photography have often worked from published accounts of photography's origins as a means of building a cohesive collection: Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* (1937) quickly became a go-to resource for collector Helmut Gernsheim,^{iv} who later published his own *History of Photography* in 1955. A comprehensive history of Canadian photography, however, has yet to be written. As a result, there isn't an agreed-upon set of photographs to collect for those interested in this subject. There are giants of Canadian photography, of course: William Notman, whose Montreal studio was the nexus of his internationally renowned practice, and Alexander Henderson (Canadian, b. Scotland, 1831-1913), a Montreal-based friend and competitor of Notman, are two. But there is work to be done, and this collection offers points of departure for those engaged in this type of investigative work. Edith Watson is only one example of a critically under-researched photographer within Canadian photographic history whose work is represented here. In collaboration with her partner, writer Victoria Hayward, Watson produced a remarkable body of work documenting Canada, published in *Romantic Canada* (1922). Watson's oeuvre was saved from obscurity by Toronto-based writer Frances Rooney, whose *Working Light: The Wandering Life of Edith Watson* (1996), was the first major publication to critically position Watson's work. Collecting without a guidebook can be challenging, but there's exhilaration here, too: Hartman's collection is an important one, helping to gather the raw material for this major, necessary project.

If photographs are mutable things, collections are transient ones. When considering our relationship with objects, we imagine ourselves the agents upon whom their survival depends. But things have the stubborn ability to outlive us, something collectors know quite well. In a quixotic twist of fate, it is the collector who becomes a part of an artwork's provenance—the piece's biography—a notch on a lifeline several times longer than any great age we might hope for. Walter Benjamin, in *Unpacking My Library*, writes that those who collect maintain “a relationship with objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate.”^v Here the collected objects maintain a power over the collector, their permanence lending weight to an otherwise evanescent life. This is not to say that a collector doesn't have power, but that the power is one of ordering: “For what else is the collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?”^{vi} The order in this collection comes from John Hartman, his eye the through line that brings harmony from chaos. To consider this collection a stage is to hope for some glimpse of the logic that coheres it, to see its meaning somehow performed on the gallery walls. What we take away from this collection is significant: we can learn a lot about Canadian photography, about how this nation's visual culture was coded in its earliest days. What we glean about this collector, we catch in glimpses. The person recedes, as changeable as a photograph itself.

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ⁱ Quoted in Francis Giacobetti, “Frances Bacon: I painted to be loved,” *The Art Newspaper*, 137 (June, 2003): 28.

ⁱⁱ John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Vintage International, 1991)

ⁱⁱⁱ New Topographics refers to the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated by William Jenkins, first presented at George Eastman House in October 1975. A watershed moment in American landscape photography, it launched the careers of the eight, mostly young, mostly American, participating photographers—including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Nicholas Nixon and Stephen Shore. Adams' work comprised photographs of tract housing and mobile homes in Colorado, complicating notions that many still maintained about the “unspoiled” American West.

^{iv} Helmut Gernsheim was one of the most significant collectors and scholars of photography in the twentieth century, although aspects of his scholarship have recently come under criticism. His most significant possession was the alleged “first” photograph of 1826, Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras*, considered missing from 1905 to 1952.

^v Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 60.

^{vi} Ibid.