

Stephen BANN (ed.), *Art and the Early Photographic Album*

Rachel Verbin



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3250>

ISSN : 1777-5302

Éditeur

Société française de photographie

Référence électronique

Rachel Verbin, « Stephen BANN (ed.), *Art and the Early Photographic Album* », *Études photographiques* [En ligne], Notes de lecture, Décembre 2011, mis en ligne le 14 décembre 2011, consulté le 20 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3250>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 20 avril 2019.

Propriété intellectuelle

Stephen BANN (ed.), *Art and the Early Photographic Album*

Rachel Verbin

RÉFÉRENCE

Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, 2011, 288 p., 131 colour & 63 b/w ill., \$70.00

- 1 *Art and the Early Photographic Album* (National Gallery of Art/Yale University Press, 2011), edited and co-written by art historian Stephen Bann, is comprised of twelve essays originally presented at a symposium of the same name held at the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) in 2007. The publication features texts by an inspiring roster of international scholars: Benedict Leca, Pascal Griener, André Gunthert, Mark Haworth-Booth, Elizabeth Anne McCauley, Anthony Hamber, Philippe Jarjat, Austen Barron Bailly, Martin Bressani, Peter Sealy, Frederick N. Bohrer and Michael Charlesworth. With the support of a 'Preface' penned by Elizabeth Cropper, Dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Bann and his colleagues examine the photographic album's influence on, and place within, the historiographies of fine art, architecture and archeology.
- 2 With the photographic album's status within museum and library holdings once again at a crossroads — due to an ever-growing emphasis on digital records — Cropper's 'Preface' cautions against allowing digitization to obscure access to the rich 'materiality' of these historic works. *Art and the Early Photographic Album's* nearly 200 illustrations largely reflect this object-based methodology. Featured album reproductions embrace weathered and decaying covers and spines, yellowed and stained photographs and mounts, intricately detailed page borders, typographic and calligraphic captions, torn pages, institutional stamps and penciled-in cataloguing numbers.
- 3 As the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts in 2005, Bann, who wrote the book's 'Introduction' and opening essay, 'The

Photographic Album as a Cultural Accumulator,' set out initially to research the collection of reproductive photographic prints held in the National Gallery of Art Library. His interest in the museum's collection of nineteenth century fine art photographic albums — originally acquired as reference material for conservators — altered his course of study. *Art and the Early Photographic Album* is thus predicated on Bann's questioning, 'Why did photographic albums matter in the later nineteenth century, not indeed, "as art," but as generative factors in the historical development of art history and its related institutions?' Bann's essay utilizes a selection of pre-half-tone process albums held at National Gallery of Art Library, including Robert Jefferson Bingham's posthumous Paul Delaroche album/catalogue raisonné (1858) and Franz Hansfstängl's *Die vorzüglichsten gemälde der Königlichen Gallerie zu Dresden* (1860), to examine the medium's power of impact on: the development of nineteenth century art historical study; the album's success as a purveyor of public access to museum collections; and the album's role as a facilitator, a 'catalyst,' to the development of the modern-day art institution and its canonical icons. As explained by Bann, the history of nineteenth century photographic albums (and of fine art reproductions) is not linear: fusions of various reproductive mediums were used. Bingham's Delaroche album, for example, melded original photographic reproductions with those taken after preexisting engravings and sketches after Delaroche; Hansfstängl's *Die Vorzüglichsten [...]* featured albumen prints photographed after earlier lithographs, themselves prints after the works in the Royal Gallery of Dresden. Notably, the nineteenth century reproductive photograph, though narrow in spectral sensitivity in its early years, and thus hardly more precise than the line engraving, proved with the Delaroche album its ability to document and disseminate 'for prosperity' the artistic oeuvre of a painter largely forgotten at the time of his death. However, as discussed in Benedict Leca's chapter 'Before Photography: The Album and the French Graphic Tradition in the Early Nineteenth Century,' photographic reproductions, considered as mere 'tracings,' remained less esteemed than French burin engravings, which were hailed as creative and artistic.

- 4 Philippe Jarjat's 'Michelangelo's Frescoes through the Camera's Lens: The Photographic Album and Visual Identity,' also examines the nineteenth century reproductive photographic album's ability to create visual icons. Jarjat retraces the history of photographic representations taken of Michelangelo's Sistine frescoes, such as those published by Adolphe Braun et Cie in the late 1860s. Braun et Cie's dissemination of photographic reproductions, which selectively captured details of this colossal artwork, created a visual language that remains attached to Michelangelo today. For example, the detail photographs of 'Creation of Man [Creation of Adam], Detail,' taken by Braun et Cie in 1869, formed precisely the canonical images still associated with this piece almost a century and a half later — iconic representations not generally associated with photography, but which exist largely thanks to Braun et Cie's photographic albums.
- 5 The power of the photographic album as historical myth-builder is, furthermore, explored by André Gunthert in 'The Mystery of the Album of the Société héliographique.' In this text, Gunthert questions the so-called 'disappearance' of the 1851 album of photographic prints compiled by the Société héliographique. Though announced in the pages of *La Lumière* in 1851, no trace of this album has been found to date. Regardless, it remains a coveted reverie to collectors and historians. Gunthert asks whether this album in fact ever really existed? Did this myth erupt out of confusion with the Regnault album, another album from the same period by a different maker? Assembled by scientist/

photographic Henri-Victor Regnault, the Regnault album features early experimental photographic processes on paper; the Regnault 'Album b,' held by the Société française de photographie, is missing its counterpart, 'Album a,' which may indeed be the missing album in question. Gunthert's astute reexamination of the Regnault album — his going back to the original object as a source — may well have debunked this long-standing mystery.

- 6 Anthony Hamber's 'Facsimile, Scholarship and Commerce: Aspects of the Photographically Illustrated Art Book (1839 - 1880)' is another stark reminder of the importance of the original object to the study of history. Hamber recounts the twentieth century's unfortunate casting away of the nineteenth century's (often less than technically optimal) photographic reproductions. The medium's early technical deficiencies made nineteenth century reproductions less desirable to the twentieth century conservator who preferred photographs taken with twentieth century panchromatic film. Nineteenth century albums were deaccessioned, even discarded, from institutions that no longer saw their value. It was not until the 1990s that interest in these albums regained in strength. Are we once again throwing away important analogue photographs, this time in favour of digital reproductions?
- 7 *Art and the Early Photographic Album* leaves one dreaming of unfiltered access to the original objects discussed in this timely publication, which reconsiders the ill-fated history of the photographically-illustrated fine art album — a medium that has long been sidelined by the history of art. The reproductive photograph has held a generally unfortunate, and largely undeserved, status as a lesser-than genre of the photographic medium, even though much of photography's earliest and most significant experimental history was rooted in this type of documentation. These historically valuable objects gain academic ground within *Art and the Early Photographic Album*, although the book's somewhat ambiguous title does not adequately reflect Bann's prudent selection of detailed, analytical texts, which re-assess the early photographic art album's effect on the institutional development of art history during the nineteenth century — and thus its influence on the formation of artistic canons still adhered to today.