



## **BRADFORD: THE KODAK MUSEUM OF POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY.**

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The Kodak Museum which opened at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford in April aims to tell the story of popular photography. The exhibits are formed from the gift of the Kodak Museum Collection to the Science Museum. While the material making up the

exhibits is of great intrinsic interest, its arrangement leaves much to be desired and raises serious questions about displays that seek to be entertaining and interactive, and about the heritage industry in general.

The conversion of the gallery from an underground carpark gives low spaces entirely lit by artificial means. It is entered through a hexagonal room in which a massive lens slowly rotates. The sections of the gallery are divided into chronological periods starting with “Photography for the Few” (1839-1850) and ending with “Photography for All” covering 1945 onwards. The other sections are “Photography in the Home” (1850-80), “The Snapshot Era” (1880-1920) and “The Serious Amateur” (1920-45).

Although many fine pieces of photography are displayed in these galleries, including some delicate hand-coloured daguerrotype portraits of the 1850s, much of their impact is dissipated by poor lighting and decor. A Francis Frith glass negative of the Pyramids of El-Geezeh (c. 1858), which is beautifully backlit, is juxtaposed with a lump of material supposed to represent sand, and two plastic camels. An attempt to recreate a “period” atmosphere has governed the decoration of each section. In the nineteenth century galleries, ornately framed photographs hang crowded on patterned wallpaper, and in the section that deals with the interwar period a simulated Deco marble is interspersed by strident vertical white bands. Bad lighting and intrusive reflections further spoil the appearance of many images.

The display of photographs however is not the primary purpose of this museum. The emphasis is, rather, on the uses of photography. Great stress is laid on its origins as a pursuit for the amateur scientist, for instance on the early use of microphotography in botany. Many photographic accessories illustrate the diverse use of pictures from the ornate *carte de visite* holders to examples of

photographic jewelry and ceramics. Photographs are often shown as they appeared in magazines, rather than as isolated aesthetic objects.

Many items of photographic equipment are generally well displayed. There is, for instance, a sliding box camera of the early 1860s through which you can see the inverted image of the gallery focused on the ground glass screen. Some exhibits have plainly been made to amuse children: devices simulate the different viewfinder displays available on early cameras and allow the visitor to try and hit a target on a fairground figure using them. The figure is activated if you are successful. The use of this kind of interactive display goes beyond amusement, for it is difficult to understand the work of the photographers of any period without having some practical experience of the constraints of the equipment they were using.

Large sections of the museum are devoted to the development of the camera, displayed as a kind of natural history with ranks of specimens grouped by type and era, and sometimes juxtaposed with the pictures they are capable of making. They are obviously of great interest to those interested in the technical “evolution” of photographic equipment, although due to the relative lack of information about the models shown and their internal workings, some prior knowledge is essential.

Contextual historical information is included (in a literally marginal position) on boards high above the main displays. It consists largely of newspaper headlines, pictures (not necessarily photographs), cartoons and broadsheets. There is no attempt to specifically relate this information to the exhibits or to the practice of photography in general. As in the display of the cameras, a story or a historical account is hinted at by visual means, but is not spelt out.

Below this general historical information and mixed in with the exhibits there is material relating more directly to the industry. Included is some interesting early advertising and promotional material as well as good cartoons about photography, among them those dealing with the rigours of the early portrait studios.

Historical reconstructions of environments seek to give the visitor the experience of being a consumer of early photography, perhaps the best of these being that of a magic lantern show in a “church hall”. Of more dubious value are the domestic scenes that are evoked by the juxtaposition of old camera equipment and accessories with contemporary furniture, books, clocks and even food. An essentialist view of history lies behind both these displays and the general historical information. It is a view that at least suggests that we can understand something about a period simply by simulating its look through an assemblage of artefacts, whether they be pictures, objects or headlines. In suggesting that these objects have a common nature, it plays down differences within a period forming a homogeneous account appropriate to the heritage industry. This unifying aspect is illustrated by the characterisation of such diverse photographers as Margaret Bourke-White and Alvin Langdon Coburn as “pictorialists” which ignores the controversies between the proponents of the painterly and the objective image.

In many ways the section on contemporary photography is the most interesting, bringing into sharp focus the problems that underlie the approach of the whole exhibition. There is some criticism of the contemporary photographic industry here; of the chimera of the foolproof camera, of the colour variations in different brands of film all promising accuracy, of the advertising image, and of the camera as a fashion accessory. Relatively few modern snapshots are shown, perhaps because they lack any status as art objects, but it is surely these images that should form the basis of an exhibition of popular photography. There is some analysis of the types of subject considered appropriate to the snapshot: the 1981 Gallup poll on the popularity of subjects people photograph is cited: family subjects came first at 64%, closely followed by holidays at 61%, documentary was the least popular at 1%. This analysis however is stated only in very general terms. There is little consideration of formal conventions, and the implication is that technology imposes decisions on its users.

Perhaps part of the problem is that the whole notion of popular photography is not really thought out. "The Serious Amateur" section exemplifies this best since the amateur makes neither snapshots nor works of art. This group is briefly discussed and is defined largely by its spending habits. Although its male orientation is indicated, the effect this has on the subjects and the very vocabulary of amateur photography is not considered. The members of this group are distinguished from the snapshot takers by their iconography, by their use of particular techniques, by their exhortations to a limited creativity, and by the insistent repetition of works in well defined genres such as landscape and "glamour" which operate under quite strict rules. All this is ignored by the exhibition. Furthermore, the "heritage" attitude to history determines the arrangement of material in an attempt to tell a unified story of evolution, without conflict or lacunae. The attempt to "contextualise" the exhibits shown hardly goes beyond placing them in a visual environment. Although there are a few critical comments made about equipment and attitudes, they cannot compete with the narrative tenor of the whole show which is evident in the titles of the sections and in the display of equipment. The notion of the amateur does not readily fit into this account for it would entail an analysis of exactly who makes up the "all" that photography has now reached. It would have to look at the cénacle of the amateur world and at what Terence Donovan called the "tragedy" of every image taken by the unskilled on tiny negatives and unstable materials, images that in a decade or two will be no more than blank pieces of paper .

\* The Kodak Museum, Prince's View, Bradford, W. Yorks. Open 11am to 6pm, Tuesday to Sunday.