

## 2005 Research Forum / Conway Library Project

### *Persistence of Antiquity*

#### Katharine Higgon's report

##### First Seminar: *Martin Conway and the Persistence of Antiquity*

The photographic collection of Lord Martin Conway forms the core of the Conway Library and his distinctive cards are still available in the open shelves, in the red boxes which he believed were the best means of storing his material. For the *Persistence of Antiquity* seminar these cards were examined with the intention of discovering Conway's stance on antiquity and how this was expressed through his habits of collecting.

It is simple to spot a Conway mount from amongst all the others in the red boxes. They are on a lighter coloured card, paler beige, and are always larger in size than the modern cards so that they must be folded at the top to fit into the box. As a result many become fragile and worn at the edges. Above all they will be covered in Conway's messy handwriting. He did not simply label the image with a caption as might be expected, but created visual essays; with long passages of notes, sketches, and smaller images all stuck onto the same piece of card. This was clearly demonstrated by the images presented at the first *Persistence of Antiquity* seminar; for example Conway's mount of a *Decorative Detail from the Mausoleum of Theodoric*, which has on the reverse a clipping from an article, several small sketches and handwritten notes. This mount comes from the collection of Ravenna material, of which Conway collected a great deal. His interest in Ravenna was connected with the theme of the persistence of antiquity, for the larger amount of material covering this town, and other Byzantine cities such as Venice and Constantinople, revealed Conway's interest not in the heights of antiquity but in its decline. He was curious about the formation, transmission and continued use of architectural forms and decorative motifs; and remarked upon the fusion of Byzantine and Roman elements in the architecture of Ravenna. Much of this interest centred on the figure of King Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who Conway regarded as 'one

of the few really great men who snatched from falling Rome the torch of civilization she had borne so high, and availed for a short span to keep it burning' (*Country Life* article, July 1915). Another mount displayed at the seminar regarded Conway's identification of a capital from Ravenna, bearing the monogram of Theodoric, which he had located in the Home Counties garden of Mr Harold Peto and subsequently brought to the attention of *Country Life* readers (October 1913). His mounts on the subject contain his own sketches, photographs and text from the article, and various notes. For Conway this capital represents a 'Byzantinised composite', where antiquity was reworked according to a different taste. This for Conway was the persistence of antiquity – the reuse and adaptation of antique motifs by later generations.

### Second Seminar: *The Objectivity of Photography*

The second *Persistence of Antiquity* seminar had as its theme the manner in which photography can manipulate the subject according to the agenda or desires of the photographer or their patron. To finish the seminar this theme was examined from the perspective of the collector, in this case Martin Conway. Conway believed that photographs were extremely important research tools for an art historian. They enabled the creation of a 'virtual museum' in one's study, they allowed more considered and careful scrutiny of a work without reliance on memory or notes which may be inadequate, and they allowed immediate comparison of works which in reality might be many miles apart. Conway wrote that 'nothing is more illuminating' than a collection of photographs arranged in historical sequence: 'no student nowadays attempts to solve a problem in art-history without at least the assistance of photographs' (letter in the *Morning Post*, March 1904). For this reason he constantly urged others to take up the collection of photographs, and was himself always engaged in active pursuit – the hunting language not misplaced, since Conway in 1914 wrote a volume entitled *The Sport of Collecting*. His photographs came from various sources; most obviously from books, journals and catalogues which he chopped into pieces before gluing

the images onto cards. Conway also thought that second hand photos were an invaluable resource. He called for second hand booksellers to create a market for such photos by carrying them in their shops. Many early photos reproduced works which were now irrevocably altered, lost or even destroyed. Some examples of such photographs were shown at the seminar. On one, an image of S. Maria della Spina in Pisa, Conway has noted that it was taken before restorers 'ruined' the building in the 1850s. The others included very a rare salt paper print of the Tomb of Cecilia Metella in Rome (Castel Sant'Angelo) which were annotated by Conway's daughter Agnes, implying that he had trained her to recognise a rare image and purchase it immediately. A series of photographs by Robert Macpherson, taken between 1855 and 1860, were also shown. These pictures of Roman scenes provide a fascinating insight into the state of the Forum prior to large scale excavation, with cattle grazing amongst the columns. These photographs all came from the collection of another enthusiast, for they are all numbered and labelled 'Hackley'. There is no clue as to who Hackley might have been, but it seems that Conway purchased his collection of Roman photographs after Hackley's death, not unusual, for he recorded buying the miscellaneous papers of antiquarian Romilly Allen at an auction and spending years sifting through the material. Such pictures as Hackley's would already have been fifty or more years old when Conway bought them, and captured memory which was now lost – the Forum, the Appian Way, the Vatican museums in a different state of repair, with details which might now be lost. The objectivity or otherwise of such images – the agenda which George Anderson may have had when taking them – is unimportant for Conway. If it was something he considered he did not write about it, preferring instead to consider his photographs as objective tools for the benefit of the art historian, as free from agenda as a geologist's rock samples or a botanist's crushed leaves. This is why he considered it so important for the young scholars of the future to have access to a photographic library, and why he was so eager to hand over his collection to the Courtauld Institute on its foundation.