

Persistence of Antiquity

Silvia Loreti's report

My research within the project Persistence of Antiquity focused on the conundrum presented by two early types of 'documentary' photographs of works of art: photographs of contemporary figurative sculpture and photographic representations of famous ancient sites.

Surveying the Conway Library's collection, I first considered the ways in which modern sculptors photographed their works to define their aesthetics in relation to the classical tradition of their medium. Particularly striking in this respect is a set of reproductions of Medardo Rosso's sculptures. Presenting them at the first Conway workshop lunch, I argued for Rosso's original and anti-classical use of photography as opposed to later photographic representations of his works. The Italian sculptor, trained in Paris under Auguste Rodin, is almost as renowned for his innovative use of photography as for his revolutionary casting methods. Carefully determining the photographic reproduction of his work, Rosso envisioned a new presentation of sculpture that allowed the artist to maintain control over the ways in which his work was experienced. Furthermore, Rosso's personal use of photography enhanced the anti-classical effects of his Impressionistic carving. This practice infused Rosso's work with a sense of 'reproducible uniqueness' that contrasts markedly with ancient sculpture's existence as 'copy'. After his death, however, more conventional reproductions classicized Rosso's sculptures. This is particularly evident in the black-and-white illustrations to the sculptor's exhibition catalogues that were written during the Fascist period. Placed on pedestals, polished to look like marbles and shot frontally against indistinct backgrounds, Rosso's sculptures were given the motionless abstraction of ancient Roman statues.

Early photographs of ancient architecture show a similar attempt to appropriate classicism. At the second Conway workshop, we looked at early photographs of the Roman Forum and of the Acropolis of Athens and discovered that, far from limiting itself to record new excavations, early photography contributed, paradoxically, to romanticise the sites further. Presenting the ruins of pivotal monuments of ancient Greece and Rome as backgrounds to staged portraits of contemporaries, early photographs turned the Acropolis and the Forum from archaeological grounds into breathing landmarks of modern Western values, such as democracy, nationalism and bourgeois productivity.

The interpretative outcomes of early photography's documentary ambitions demonstrate that, from its inception, the medium was bound to project modern expectations into the re-production of the past. Undermining or highlighting the classical qualities of figurative sculpture, or presenting classical ruins as the founding stones of Western civilisation, early photography served more as a

romantic mirror to modern projections than as a scientific tool to document the art of the past.