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English and Art History
Representations of Women in Early New England Photography
Abstract

This summer, I will be researching an archive of photographs housed at the Atwood House & Museum in Chatham, Massachusetts. Specifically, I will investigate the representations of women in the earliest materials available, focusing on the first few decades of photography (the second half of the 19th century). My research will be location specific - looking into how women appeared in images of a society that alternately welcomed wealthy visitors and housed workers and families supported by the fishing industry. Additionally, these photographs were taken at specific historic moments, which my research will also reflect. An investigation into this particular archive of images should enliven the greater discussions occurring around how women have been photographed and depicted throughout history.
Biographical Sketch

I grew up in Northern Virginia, close to all of the art museums and historic houses a curious young mind could hope for. I always held a particular soft spot for the stories of historic women, those queens and artists and writers who reminded me of what I could do. As I got older, the stories of the unsung women of history began to hold as much sway as those who’ve been talked about for centuries; the ones who, instead of having books written about them, may only appear in a footnote.

As I got to Cornell, I was lucky enough to be enrolled in a freshman writing seminar that combined many of my interests - feminism, writing, and art. I realized my fascination for analyzing these different creative pursuits, which led me to declare my majors in both English (with a concentration in poetry) and Art History.

At Cornell, I am involved in my a cappella group, the Callbaxx, and my sorority, Kappa Delta. I also work at the Johnson Museum of Art as the Intern of Public Programming, which has piqued my interest in the intersections between communities and museums. I hope to work in museums after I graduate and be able to inspire a love of art and history in others, particularly those who see art and history as inaccessible for them. I also want to tell the stories of those whose stories may not have been told as often or as loudly as others, but who are nonetheless important and fascinating.
Statement of Purpose

This summer, I have been given the opportunity to intern at the Atwood House & Museum, a historic house museum in Chatham, Massachusetts. The Atwood House & Museum is run by the Chatham Historical Society. The Atwood House itself was built in 1752 and was purchased by the Chatham Historical Society in 1926. As a part of my internship, I will be exploring an archive of 6,000 photographs in the museum’s collection, focusing on the presence of women in the earliest decades of photography (the latter half of the 19th century). In particular, I will use my experience and interest in visuality, feminism, and history to analyze the photographs and answer questions about how women were depicted in this time, especially in the specific region where these images were taken. The study of photography, even specifically female representation in the medium, is not a new field. However, the impact that I am hoping to make is in looking at this particular archive that may not have had much exposure or visibility prior to now.

Cape Cod, off on a isolated peninsula (technically an island), has very different dynamics that work throughout the year and even throughout different communities within the towns. In summer, it is hyperpopulated with families from around the country and around the world coming to spend the week at the beach. In the winter, many businesses close and streets are deserted, with only the few people who actually have their homes on the Cape still remaining. In the 19th century, the dynamics of the town of Chatham were most likely similar, with vastly different women populating the area at different times. The women who visit would have been socialites, or women from well-to-do families who had the disposable income to have or rent a
second home as well as the freedom to actually not work for a week or longer. The women who lived in Chatham year-round may have been more generally fishermen’s wives, or women belonging to a different social milieu. I hope to be able to see some of these dynamics playing out within this set of images, to be able to decode the differences between those who summered and those who stayed.

Photography (arguably) began in 1839, with the simultaneous inventions of Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot of different imaging techniques. Talbot’s would prove to be more easily used for multiple printings which increased its popularity later, but Daguerre’s “daguerreotype” provided the first spike of interest in photography. They both required long exposure times and specialized equipment and provide a fascinating glimpse into some of 19th century America. In particular, early photography co-occurred with the Civil War, which allows some of the drastic effects of that conflict to be seen through images. In this archive, I will explore the variety of representations of women that can be found, with particular interest in the effects of historic situations, like the Civil War, as well as local industries like fishing. Although there were not battles that occurred on the Cape or in Chatham specifically, the Civil War still had drastic consequences past the visibility of violence that should be able to be seen in these images, like the absence of men and shifting economic and domestic priorities.

One of the first classes that I took at Cornell was my freshman writing seminar. We looked at images of women reading, and discussed why such a composition would be so prevalent over all of art history. Particularly, we questioned why women could act as such an evocative image. Many different archetypes of women show up in the field of art history, from the precocious young girls to the mothering older ladies, to women who represent the differences
between innocence and seduction. I find myself looking at how women are portrayed through these different lenses wherever I go, in art museums and photography but also film and television. I am excited by the prospect of analyzing primary materials on my own and discovering connections and conclusions that may help foster more questions and explorations in the field of historic photography.

I am currently enrolled in two courses that should also assist in my research. The first, 19th Century American Novels, discusses American literature from the same time period in which these photographs were taken, which will help to provide a historical context. The second, Introduction to Visual Studies, (along with my other art history courses) gives me the analytical tools necessary to examine the photographs and glean as much information as possible out of them. This background should help to guide my questions as I research and explore these images.
Bibliography of Sampled Relevant Sources


