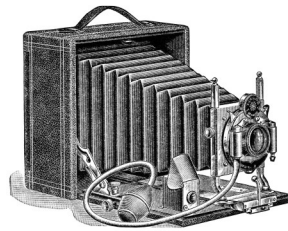


Of Ideas and Images:
Exploring Photographs at the San Diego History Center

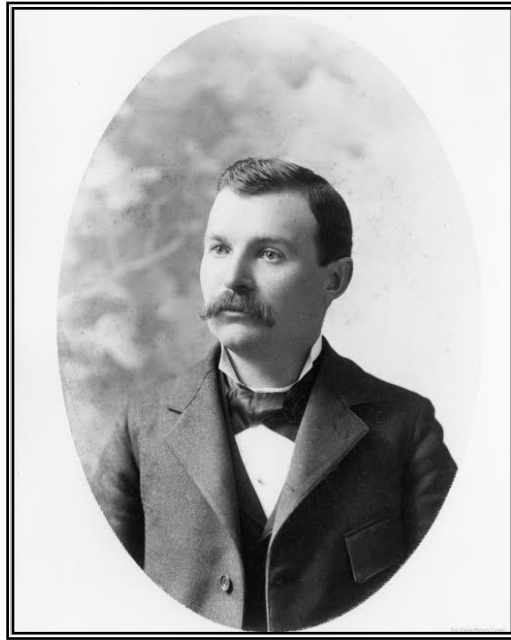
A.M. Palmer



Is a picture really worth a thousand words?

When I was a child, back in the 1970s, my mother and I took numerous rolls of film to our local Fotomat, after birthday dinners and family gatherings, excitedly awaiting the yellow envelopes we would collect a week or so later, hoping that our candid shots would be more than a blur of colors and that everyone had remembered to smile for group photos. Those were the days. As I recall, my father and grandfather were always fond of tinkering with cameras, so we took a great many pictures, at a time when development was something of a chore. Indeed, Fotomat was a significant part of our lives. After my parents passed away, and I was preparing to sell our home, I was delighted to find a number of those yellow picture envelopes languishing in drawers and hiding in the midst of old paperwork. As I rummaged through the remnants of our life, I would pause—sometimes for hours—to explore the many forgotten images of our family’s past; the great aunts and uncles who died while I was still a child; the family dog I had nearly forgotten; our many excursions to Yosemite and the far reaches of Colorado. Back in the 70s, such photos were little more than mementos of people and places that seemed all too familiar. A few decades later, however, I began to view these snapshots as bits of hidden treasure; they became my only record of beloved relatives and the years we shared. With this in mind, I begin my new exploration of the San Diego History Center. This time, I wish to focus on photographs and the stories they convey.

From previous visits, I remember seeing the many boxes that contain the photograph collection. An array of timeframes and subjects are captured for the ages, hundreds of images of people and places relevant to our city’s rich past. But what do I wish to investigate? Actually, I have something very specific in mind; I wish to bypass images of well-known locations and individuals to discover unidentified subjects, people and places who languish in nameless obscurity and pique our curiosity. When viewing an unnamed stranger, from the shadows of a previous century and a culture quite alien to our own, we move from particular questions—about the who, what, why, when and where of the image—to a more general appreciation of our shared humanity. We examine the subject’s eyes. We regard the setting and try to imagine ourselves in the environment; feeling the sunlight of long ago, perhaps sitting uncomfortably on frontier furniture or sweltering in layers of clothing. In short, old photos enable us to appreciate our predecessors and even empathize with them, to an extent. Let’s take a look at a few examples that illustrate my point.



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In searching for images, I had only a few criteria in mind; the subjects had to be unidentified, clear enough to see in a reproduction, and possessed of an interesting demeanor, something tangible enough to reach across the many years separating us. This photo seemed to fit the bill quite well. The quality of the image caught my eye immediately; a crisp set of gray tones fully accentuating details of clothing and facial features, bringing one face-to-face with the previous century, on an individual level. But who was he?

The first thing one notices regarding this photograph is the quality of it. The artist/technician behind it was well-acquainted with the technology of the day and highly skilled at using it. Such expertise would not have been inexpensive. This, combined with the fact that the man in question was splendidly attired, and bore no marks on his complexion to indicate heavy exposure to the sun—or the marring effects of poor nutrition—indicates that he was probably well-to-do. But these modest observations do little to reveal his actual identity. What is our next step?

When in doubt, it's best to consult an expert. I return to Natalie Fiocre, the photo archivist, for assistance in finding out who this man might have been—now that the question of identity has taken precedence over my original plan, which was simply to muse about old photographs and the ideas they evoke. Now, it's time to put a name to this face from the previous century, and review whatever information we can find regarding his biography. Natalie begins (and ends) by retrieving the envelop in which the photo had been presented to their department—a small brown bit of paper, clearly bearing the name of the man in question: Frank Lynch, a prominent San Diego industrialist. My original plan, of examining unidentified pictures from the previous century—to the exclusion of well-known historical figures—has necessarily been modified, granting me an excellent opportunity. It's now time to supplement my philosophical musings with a solid bit of research. Let's see where this portion of the journey leads us.

A letter from Frank Lynch's great nephew, Robert Lynch (dated May 5, 2008) provides us with an excellent place to begin our inquiry.

Frank Lynch went into the farm machinery business in Castleton, North Dakota in the late 1800s. He was very successful, but the severity of the North Dakota winters became too much for him and his wife, Georgia to bear. In 1909 Simon Benson of Portland, Oregon sold his interest in the Benson Lumber Company of San Diego to Frank Lynch. Obviously, that brought about the move (. . .)

Continuing, we note that Bea Evenson mentioned having spent a few days at the Shepard House in 1925, when she first arrived in San Diego, during the time that Frank and Georgia Lynch owned it. The full transcript of Evenson's interview can be found at the San Diego History Center. Information like this, in addition to the letter from Lynch's great nephew, gives us a fuller idea of who the man in the photograph was—and would become—as his life unfolded. Interestingly, pictures of Lynch in later years reveal a more determined gaze, with a bit less softness, an expression quite befitting a seasoned industrialist. With all of this in mind, let's return to the original topic and continue pondering our old photos.

As I go through the boxes of unidentified photographs, I am struck by the poignancy of the images; men and women wearing their best clothes, bearing earnest expressions, conveying stories that can be imagined but never fully known. Quite simply, these people remain mysterious. Although a few images bear witness to their lives, most information about them has been lost to the passing of time. And what about the details of a picture that truly remains unidentified? For a moment, I'd like to digress and reflect on a photo I held and thought about for awhile, and offer a few words of interpretation without showing you the image.

One can see a compelling bit of sadness in this man's eyes. Clearly, he has donned his best attire, been fully coiffed and assumed a pose reflecting the dignity he wishes to convey. However, his eyes hint at the possibility that he is humble rather than proud, and merely borrowing the elegance of a new suit rather than declaring his wealth and prestige. In so many portraits, it seems as though the subject is reminding us of his power and influence, or her great prominence, assuming the attitude of a grand life while sitting for a photographer. And perhaps this is why portraits are so fascinating; one reveals the truth of one's life and deepest self in the midst of posing for posterity. But the pose falls away as soon as the eyes are revealed. This is what really captured my attention about this photo of an unnamed man who looks rather sad.

And there are many additional images of this nature, pictures of people from every imaginable walk of life, all of whom passed through various phases of San Diego history; merchants, laborers, business owners, wives, mothers, children at play, crowds walking the streets, the list is vast. And this brings me to another observation; each one of us carries the details of our personal history through the cities we call home. Countless bits of conversation, paperwork, relationships and employment histories link us to *places* as much as they connect us to loved ones and associates. With this in mind, let's return once again to the nineteenth century, to study a photo—which remains unidentified—and consider what we find. Owing to the clarity of the image, in addition to the time period—the 1880s—I found this example to stand out quite a bit, the clothing and furniture being as far-removed from styles of the twenty-first century as one could imagine.



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Who were they? Unlike the previous subject, their eyes seem to convey a bit more in the way of purpose and confidence, as if they are presiding over an elegant home, with more than a little life experience attending them. The interior is alluring with an ornate rug, carved furniture and a nicely finished wall, bearing some sort of fabric covering, perhaps a textile of bright colors and subtle texture. This was not a sparse frontier home. Rather, it was an affluent residence of the 1880s, from which a successful businessman and his wife oversaw their affairs, raised their children and planned for the future—which included this image, a memento granted to posterity. That’s one possibility. However, the truth could be far more intriguing or even more mundane. For the time being, we simply don’t know.

Whereas Frank Lynch, the man in the first picture, looked rather humble and uncertain, one perceives assuredness bordering, perhaps, on a bit of coldness, with the subjects of this photo. Although the husband is seated, his eyes reveal a readiness to confront the issues of the day, a gaze of steely determination, matched quite well by his wife's demeanor of strong assurance. I selected this photo for its technical quality, in addition to the compelling nature of its subjects. Really, I find it quite moving to realize that this husband and wife, who took such pains to be remembered in a dignified manner, are all but forgotten today. True, we have their image. However, it invites speculation rather than promoting a genuine understanding of who they were—as individuals and members of nineteenth century society. Were they childless? Did they have so many offspring that they longed for a quiet photo session and an afternoon to themselves? Perhaps one day we will know. In the meantime, imagining their narrative—according to nothing more than the evocation of their eyes and the setting in which they posed—is interesting. It speaks to a number of important issues about nineteenth century society and human interaction, all of which fall outside the scope of this reflection. In short, they just seemed like interesting people from long ago. Hopefully, they will be the subject of further research. Next, let's move into the next century and take a look at an archetypal living room in all its suburban splendor.



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This unidentified Coronado home will likely look familiar to someone who sees this piece. Although it's a bit too bright, a great deal of detail is present in this photo, speaking clearly of its postwar context. Actually, it reminds me a bit of my own childhood home, which is probably why I selected it for this reflection. The setting is warm and gracious, but hints at the fact that living rooms of that era were more for show than actual living—furniture remaining pristine long after its purchase, curtains falling in measured folds, and decorations sitting undisturbed for the enjoyment of guests rather than family members. These elements belong to a bygone time. At any rate, I can look at this photo and imagine the care and labor that attended it. Everything that was intended to look charming and spontaneous was, in actuality, curated with the greatest precision—a true showplace. One finds it hard to imagine that the fireplace ever contained smoke and flames or that the carpet was ever marred by footprints. Carpet? In those days, hardwood floors would have been quite unthinkable. Yes, my mother would have felt quite at home in this unidentified living room from the past.

Considering the Analysis of Images:

The joy of writing reflections—rather than academic histories—has to do with the art of speculation. Moving spontaneously through ideas and *what if* scenarios, not with the structuring devices of a fiction writer or the romance of a poet, but merely by way of curiosity, likens one to a child discovering new surroundings. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit to the subject of interpreting images, formal methods which might lend an additional bit of depth to the photographs we have just seen. With that in mind, let's consider the analysis of images a bit more in depth. From there, we can return to the old question of whether or not a picture is indeed worth a thousand words. In preparation for this consideration, I wish to reference two books: *Understanding a Photograph* by John Berger and *The Rings of Saturn*, a novel by W.G. Sebald.

Photography Contrasted to Painting:

How does a collection of brushstrokes, skillfully executed on canvas, paper or even stone, contrast to the chemical (or digital) rendering of an image, a replica achieved in the blink of an eye? Drawing on a considerable body of work, including the writings of Walter Benjamin, Berger offers a wealth of ideas.

“Every relation between forms in a painting is to some degree adaptable to the painter's purpose. This is not the case with photography” (Berger, p. 25). In other words, a painting is deliberately transposed from the mind of the artist, and rendered according to his skills and choices, hence the title of fine art being ascribed to the work. A photo is different; it captures a scene—objects, people, landscapes etc.—to the extent that the device in use can replicate reality. It can be dry and factual, as in the photography employed by journalists or academics. Or it can be expressive and Avant Gard, as in the case of photos we consider high art. Here, I should note that I disagree with Berger, who feels that the photographer's labors should not be listed in the fine art category. I think that the choice of subject matter, and the skill by which an image is captured and presented, certainly qualifies photography as a potential expression of fine art, the fruits of which can stand confidently in the most reputable museums and art galleries. Nevertheless, the “mechanical reproduction” of an image may cause some to doubt its merit as art. Those issues aside, I find that I am impacted by a powerful photograph as much as I am moved by a brilliant painting. And yet, it is quite useful to contrast these art forms in order to appreciate their many distinctions.

As I look back on the pictures of our reflection, I realize that I would not find them nearly as compelling had the images been painted rather than photographed, the latter art form conveying a particular sort of atmosphere that the former often lacks, at least in my estimation. One feels that a conversation could easily take place with the people, and that an afternoon of tea and laughter could be enjoyed in the Coronado living room. Somehow, a painting, even composed of refined brushstrokes and exquisitely blended colors, would fail to intrigue me in the same way. By contrast, a photo is something of an invitation to life and shared experience.

In addition to reading Bergson, I also happened to be finishing a novel by W.G. Sebald, at the time of studying these photos. *The Rings of Saturn* is a work largely founded on the power of images, in particular, *The Anatomy Lesson* by Rembrandt, also referenced by Bergson in his insightful theorizing. Clad in gentleman's garb, examining a corpse for scientific study, the figures in the painting are stark and severe in their respective roles of audience and lecturer. The picture is jarring. Death is shown without the benefit of drama or subtext, providing no hint of who the man on the table was or how he expired. And this raises a question about the image: would it possess the same impact were it a modern photograph depicting an autopsy or the elements of a crime scene? One aspect of its allure has to do with history, the fact that we are seeing painted images of men who lived and died long ago. Attesting to how they differ from us, and are yet similar to the people of our own time, the figures speak volumes. Although old photographs can do something analogous, the particular arrangement of painted themes and images renders them timeless in a very different way. As Bergsen puts it, photos offer us a “play on time,” but paintings, in my estimation, offer a strange dissolution of it.

Continuing with *The Rings of Saturn*, I learn much more about the overall power of images, be they photographic or rendered in oils and acrylics.

The narrative unfolds like something of a dream; spontaneous and rather impersonal in its movements of form, color and texture. It's difficult to get a sense of the main character and his ever-changing surroundings, as Sebald narrates the man's story. And yet, we find that the many pictures the author includes in his text serve to connect us to the protagonist, very deeply. Not only does he show us photos of the images and events he is describing, but Sebald also employs a powerful prose style to tell his story. Consider the mood and atmosphere he deftly conveys.

That morning, as I closed the marbled cover of the log book, pondering the mysterious survival of the written word, I noticed lying to one side on the table a thick, tattered tome that I had not seen before my visit to the Reading Room. It turned out to be a photographic history of the First World War, compiled and published in 1933 by the *Daily Express*, to mark the past tragedy, and perhaps as a warning of another approaching (Sebald, p. 94).

The text is accompanied by a black and white photo of a sinking battleship. The image brings us into the fullness of the protagonist's experience and invites us to share his ruminations about life and the tragedy of war. But Sebald goes further; on the next page, as he continues his narrative about the horrors of war, we find a photograph of the tunic worn by Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the day he was assassinated. In the hands of a lesser artist, such devices might seem out of place or overwrought. However, Sebald manages to augment the power of his story with well-chosen photographs, images that reflect the mood of his narrative, without being so blunt as to depict the actual likeness and experiences of the protagonist. Such is the power of photography.

As I look back on the photographs examined in this essay, I think of them alongside the ideas of Berger and the narrative structures of Sebald. We find that the absence of painterly control over content and execution may limit the artistic merit of photographs, in some people's eyes. However, the sense of atmosphere and shared humanity conveyed by the photographic image cannot be denied or written-off as a mere duplication of reality. A photo reminds us of the sadness, hope, fear and joy of a moment long passed away into memory.

Now, back to the original question I had in mind, as I began this essay. Is a picture worth a thousand words? Looking back on my own family photos, culled from those yellow envelops of the 1970s, alongside a few beautiful images from San Diego history—and the writing of W.G. Sebald—I can answer in the affirmative. A picture is worth at least a thousand words, in addition to a great deal of thought, and, quite possibly, a few sighs, as we remember those who came before us.

If you wish to explore the photographs of the San Diego History Center, make sure to consult their helpful, knowledgeable archivists. Let them know what you are looking for, and they will guide you through the finding aids and the wonderful collection of photos documenting our city's history. I thank them for all of their assistance with this project.

For Further Research:

* Visit the Edmund L. and Nancy K. Dubois Library at the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts to explore their holdings. If you have an interest in monographs and exhibition catalogs, to name but two categories, the library will be of great interest to you.

* The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Photographs was established in 1992. You can read about its history, and learn something about the department's 25,000 works, on their website. If you wish to study the very beginning of photography, you will find, in their vast collection, a number of works dating from the 1830s, when the technology first emerged.

* The Library of Congress also has a great deal to offer in this area, as well. Check their "Prints & Photographs Online Catalog" to view their extensive collection of images, including roughly 700 daguerreotypes and nearly 7,000 Civil War glass negatives.

Suggested Reading:

Berger, John. *Understanding a Photograph*. New York: Aperture, 2013.

Coe, Brian, Paul Gates. *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography, 1888-1939*.

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