

2005 Research Forum / Conway Library Project
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 photography of works of art: photographs of contemporary figurative sculpture and photographic representations of famous ancient sites.

Surveying the Conway Library's holdings, I 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 is experienced. Such practice infused Rosso's works with a sense of 'reproducible uniqueness' that is removed from ancient sculpture's persistence through copies of lost 'originals'. Furthermore, Rosso's personal use of photography enhanced the anti-classical effects of his Impressionistic carving. After his death, however, more conventional reproductions have classicized Rosso's sculpture. This is particularly evident in the black-and-white illustrations to the sculptor's catalogues that were written during the Fascist era. 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.

Contemporary photographs of ancient architecture show a similar attempt to modernize traditions established in classical antiquity. At the second Conway workshop, we looked at original photographs of the Roman Forum and of the Acropolis of Athens to highlight the romantic approach of early photography to these newly-excavated sites. 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 living landmarks of modern Western values, such as democracy, nationalism and bourgeois productivity.

Despite the Conway Library's study function, and the documentary employment of art photography in the early stages of the medium's life, photography inevitably betrays its modern origin when confronted with the past. Whether undermining or highlighting the classical qualities of figurative sculpture, or presenting the classical world as a background to its modern inhabitants, early photography was used to interpret classical (and anti-classical) art, not as a scientific tool to document it.

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