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Imagining a Nation's Capital: Rome and the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879

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Abstract:

This study focuses on a collection of photographs taken between 1864 and 1879 under the direction of John Henry Parker, a British editor and dilettante archaeologist, to provide a multi-perspective panorama of Rome around the time the city became capital of Italy in 1870. Emblematic of the nineteenth-century impulse to collect, document, and catalogue information about contemporary society as well as the past, the Parker Collection has long been praised as a “valuable” illustration of the early history of Rome. Yet the value of this imagery as an illustration of Rome’s modernity—the construction, demolition, beliefs, and ideals that accompanied the city’s emergence as the Italian capital—has yet to be discovered. This interactive research platform and essay use digital technology to investigate the Parker Collection as a set of data about late nineteenth-century Italy, revealing not only the interests and ideologies that shaped Rome into a modern, capital city, but also how digital media can spark new approaches to art history.

Digital Humanities and Art History

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Imagining a Nation's Capital: Rome and the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879

by Lindsay Harris

and Luke Hollis, with Emily Pugh, Lavinia Ciuffa, and Maria Sole Fabri

Introduction

In 1864, John Henry Parker (1806–1884), an editor and dilettante archaeologist from Oxford, England, who in 1870 became the first keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, set out to illustrate, in his words, “the early history of the city of Rome” through photography.^[1] When his catalog was published in 1879, it included some thirty-three hundred images taken by Parker and seven photographers he commissioned, all but one of whom was Italian. The photographs, referred to here as the Parker Collection, represent not only Roman antiquities—Parker’s original intention—but also early Christian churches and catacombs, medieval art and architecture, and, for the first time, the painting and sculpture collections of the Vatican Museums and Alessandro Torlonia, 5th Prince of Civitella-Cesi, a member of one of Rome’s most powerful noble families.

Prints from the Parker Collection were sold commercially in bookshops in Rome and London. Parker gave complete bound sets to the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford; the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), both in London; and the Bodleian Library, also in Oxford. He left a set of prints and the original glass plate negatives with the British and American Archaeological Society of Rome, a group Parker founded in 1865.^[2] The majority of this set of prints is currently housed at the British School at Rome, while the surviving 240 glass plate negatives are part of the Photographic Archive of the American Academy in Rome. This study of the Parker Collection focuses on the digital images made from the American Academy negatives in 1997.^[3]

The Parker Collection is well known among historians of archaeology in Rome who have, since the 1880s, acknowledged Parker’s efforts to illustrate the city’s ancient remains, although some have questioned his theories about their dates and significance in antiquity. Since the 1960s, historians of photography have valued this series as an example of the nineteenth-century impulse to document, compile, and catalog visual information through photography, particularly in the service of archaeology, anthropology, and other emerging disciplines of the period. Yet, in spite of the long-standing interest in these photographs, little attention has been given to the remarkable timing of the collection. Created between 1864 and 1879, these photographs offer a window into Rome and its transformation at the precise moment when the city was wrested from the Papacy and established as the Italian capital in 1870.

This study uses digital mapping, tagging, and data analysis to investigate the Parker Collection as a set of data about the construction, demolition, beliefs, and ideals that accompanied Rome's inception as a nation's capital. A web application tags each photograph based on a set of characteristics and maps them onto a period plan of Rome, encouraging users to explore the collection through multiple perspectives: chronology, topography, typology, or by photographer. A scholarly essay focuses on one photograph from the collection to demonstrate how digital technology casts new light on both the interests and ideologies that shaped Rome into a capital city, and the photographs that recorded this transformation, in the late nineteenth century. The project is thus a specific study of photography and modernity in Italy as well as an experimental model that shows how interactive digital media can inspire new approaches to art history.

Several components of the study allow a more thorough understanding of the forces at work during this pivotal moment in Rome's history. In addition to the scholarly essay, the web application provides rare virtual access to high-resolution images of the Parker Collection photographs, with captions, in the American Academy's archive; a high-resolution scan of Rodolfo Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae*, published between 1893 and 1901, the most accurate and acclaimed map of different strata of Rome's history created during this period; and links to other digital research initiatives that establish a new direction in the history of photography to which this study contributes.

This digital scholarly work consists of the following components:

[Scholarly Essay](#)
[Web Application](#)
[Project Narrative](#)

Lindsay Harris is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor-in-Charge of the School of Classical Studies at the American Academy in Rome. Her publications and exhibitions explore how photographs both document and shape perceptions of modernity from the nineteenth century to today. These include, for example, her first book, currently underway, *Photography and the Myths of Primitivism in Italy, 1904–1954*; an exhibition she organized in 2014 at the American Academy in Rome, *History Recast: Photography and Roman Sculpture in Contemporary Art*, and her catalogue essay, "Before the Eyes of Thousands: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the Shaw Memorial in Twentieth Century Art," for the National Gallery of Art exhibition, *Tell It with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial*, held in 2013. This study is part of her research at the American Academy in Rome, which investigates how interactive digital technology can fuel new approaches in art history.

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Notes

[1] John Henry Parker, *A Catalogue of Three Thousand Three Hundred Photographs of Antiquities in Rome and Italy* (London: Edward Stanford, 1879), iii.

[2] The group was initially founded as the British Archaeological Society of Rome but soon changed its name to include reference to its many American members.

[3] The Parker Collection at the American Academy in Rome was digitized in 1997 with the support of the Getty Grant Program. That same year, photographer Lorenzo Scaramella produced a set of 220 modern acetate film negatives from Parker's original collodion glass plates. In 2013, seventy-eight additional images from the collection were digitized. The collection's holdings are accessible on the [academy's Photographic Archive website](#).

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