

Summary

“It is not art, but it is history”:

Domestic architecture and the interwar amateur photographer

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Introduction

Amateur photographic literature in the interwar period recommended historic domestic architecture as a fitting subject for the aspiring photographer interested in the making of ‘pictures’, as opposed to souvenirs or snapshots. Using five found albums of keen amateur photographer Wilfred Sultan as a case study, this research explores the way that photography of the domestic environment might be approached by the ‘serious amateur’ in both theory and practice.

The photography of Wilfred Sultan

Sultan’s albums are a meticulously compiled document of photographic practice between the years of 1920 and 1941, with 3000-plus dated, annotated photographs accounted for in monthly and yearly tallies. Although Sultan photographed those he was closest to, the majority of his subjects are unpopulated landscapes and landmarks. Dominated by rural imagery, these photographs frequently emphasise a picturesque ‘timelessness’ characteristic of pictorialist style. Sultan depicted historic architecture and traditional agricultural practices in preference to modern buildings and industry, and his antiquarian leanings are evidenced most literally by his numerous photographs of antiques shops. Throughout the albums these subjects are juxtaposed with another recurrent theme: the exterior and interior of the photographer’s homes.

It is well documented that the central subjects for domestic photographic albums are high days and holidays rather than the daily life of the photographer and his or her immediate location. As Richard Chalfen has observed, there tends to be “a general neglect of daily life around the house.” Bucking this convention, Sultan photographed at least six of his homes, offering both interior and exterior views. All the houses were in Greater London suburbs, but one residence features in particular. Hanger Hill Garden Estate, near Ealing, was Sultan’s home from 1930-1935 and he lived here for longer than any of the other locations he depicts. Hanger Hill is also covered by three of the five albums as the years of Sultan’s residence coincide with the peak of his photographic productivity.

Hanger Hill Garden Estate was newly built at the time of Sultan’s residence and it is probable that the photographer and his family would have been the first inhabitants of their house. Designed by Douglas, Smith and Barley, the estate is made up of houses and flats in a half-timbered ‘Tudor’ style with leaded light windows, red clay-tiled roofs, black half timbered gables and white rendering above red brickwork. A house such as Sultan’s would have been advertised in the property pages of the *Times* as an “old Tudor”, “luxury”, “up-to-date home of character” in a “picturesque setting”, “surrounded by beautiful lawns and gardens, healthy and bracing air”.

Sultan’s photographs of his Hanger Hill home are taken with palpable pride. Approached from all angles, in long shot and close-up, the contrast of the estate’s black and white

timbers is captured particularly well by the black and white of Sultan's film. Sultan tends towards the panoramic in his numerous views of the area, frequently framing in landscape rather than portrait, incorporating foliage and concealing roads, cars and lamp-posts as well as people. Embedded between the meandering rivers and fields full of flowers that are Sultan's usual subject matter, the effect is to 'ruralise' his home. The surrounding presence of a large number of photographs of historic buildings and many shots of Tudor towns visually legitimate and historicise the Mock Tudor of Hanger Hill by seamlessly incorporating it into a visual flow of similar settings.



Figure 1.
Wilfred Sultan
View taken in Princes Gardens,
Hanger Hill Garden Estate,
9 April 1933
Collection of Annabella Pollen

Amateur photography magazine and the domestic subject

As a voice for pictorialist photography, interwar *Amateur Photographer* magazine addressed itself to “persons of taste” who saw themselves as separate from the “vast mass” of technically and aesthetically ignorant casual snapshotters. Pictorialism as an aesthetic movement from the late 19th century had been concerned with asserting photography's artistic potential in order to distinguish it from its scientific, documentary or commercial strands. Associated in its earliest incarnation with a painterly ‘fuzzy’ aesthetic developed through diffuse focusing, retouching and the use of print processes such as gum bichromate, its influence in the early decades of the twentieth century was more in the areas of photographic composition and subject choice rather than in print manipulation. In an *Amateur Photographer* article of 1922 entitled “What Pictorial Means” C. A. Burrell outlined necessary aesthetic qualities such as the decorative qualities of lines and the interplay of light and shade, but also spoke of appropriate subjects. During the interwar years, historic architecture was promoted as a worthwhile focus by *Amateur Photographer* and “beautiful chequered fronts” of half-timbered buildings were frequently singled out for their pictorialist compositional qualities, for example, from 1922: “Bars, vertical and horizontal, angles and curves, mingle curiously but always elegantly, with the numerous gables breaking the skyline”.



Figure 2.
Wilfred Sultan, *Anne of Cleves House, Ditchling*, 15 May 1937
Collection of Annabella Pollen

The importance of selective framing for depicting an appropriately timeless and poetic mood was also regularly detailed in the magazine. In 1919, a competition judge complained: "I am constantly receiving pictures of otherwise pleasing landscapes, and the like, which are ruined by telegraph poles or distant factory chimneys or what not."

On the photography of one's own house, less ink was spilt. Some technical pages described approaches that might be taken if one wanted to make a Christmas card or find a tenant, but in the critical pages on pictorialist style, the subject was variously described as "commonplace", "trivial" and "unsuitable" for competition entry. As one *Amateur Photographer* writer put it in 1919, "We have no complaint against the man...who likes to immortalise in blunt, straightforward fashion the places he has visited, the house he lives in, the group of friends with whom he picnics. But these amiable souvenirs are for the private album. The bigger sort of photography demands the bigger sort of themes, the less parochial vision." In terms of pictorialism, one's own home, then, was of limited aesthetic worth, although it may be valued for different reasons. As the same author put it: "is not art, but it is history".

Conclusion

What interwar *Amateur Photographer* considered "humdrum", "ugly", and "unromantic" subjects encompassed everyday and modern objects and practices, and included depictions of one's own house. Subjects deemed suitable for pictorial treatment were those held to be "intrinsically" beautiful or historically valuable. By applying pictorialist principles to the "banal" subject of his own home and surrounding the images with examples of authentic antiquarian domestic architecture, Wilfred Sultan effectively distanced photographs of his home from what *Amateur Photographer* called the snapshotting of the "average man", whose lack of aesthetic care produce works that are "utterly ordinary."

Further reading

Bourdieu, P.(1990). *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Cambridge: Polity.

Chalfen, R. (1987). *Snapshot Versions of Life*. Bowling Green University Press.

Seiberling, G., & Bloore, C. (1986). *Amateurs, Photography and the Mid-Victorian Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.