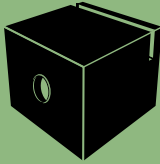


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C I C A N T

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**CHARLES THURSTON
THOMPSON AND
HIS PORTUGUESE
PROJECT:**

**THE REAL WORLD
UNDERSTOOD AS MATERIAL
FOR EXHIBITION**

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Abstract

Charles Thurston Thompson's work in Santiago de Compostela has occupied stage-front among all of his photographs. Probably for this reason, it is much less known that the Portuguese royal collections and a few Portuguese locations were the primary purpose for his travelling to Iberia. Santiago was an unforeseen interruption. John Charles Robinson, as principal voice behind acquisitions in the South Kensington Museum, was the background *Eminence* in these enterprises. Here, I piece together the sojourn in Portugal and interrelate – technically, methodologically, and stylistically – the Iberian photographic work with the broader corpus by Thurston Thompson.

Keywords: Museum photography; J.C.Robinson; Necessidades & Ajuda palaces; Coimbra; Batalha; Santiago de Compostela

Charles Thurston Thompson and his Portuguese Project: The Real World Understood as Material for Exhibition¹

I became interested in Charles Thurston Thompson over 35 years ago, when I was permitted to shuffle through all of his work that was housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London. I was in the process of studying the Museum's entire stock of early photographs that had Iberia as their subject. That interest happened to coincide with a request from an entity in A Coruña, Spain, for me to give a lecture there in summer 1985. For this, I chose the subject of Thurston Thompson, but not with the intention of speaking on the work for which he is most known – namely, the photographs of Santiago de Compostela – rather, on his photographs of precious objects. These photographs constitute various books through which the Victorian throne could boast its great interest in various crafts and artistic styles, at the same time flaunting the wealth of Great Britain in those areas. In effect, I was focused on the detailed attention to objects, more than on the photography of monuments. At the close of that lecture, just as I did toward the close of the book that I subsequently wrote, concerning the Compostela project, I felt obliged to point out the – let's say – less obvious aspect of my argument: the identification between the object depicted in the photograph and that object in reality – a desired identification, whether supposed or hypothetical, but never fully realised since a photograph is not, strictly, a repetition of the thing represented. It is, instead, one more object, now added to the store of objects in the real world.

Nevertheless, underlying the purpose of most very early photography was the presumption that a photograph could in fact be a repetition of a thing that existed in reality. As a corollary, I should like to begin by establishing a premise: that the earliest photography had as its most fundamental purpose to lend order to a world seen as chaotic; at least a world that was perceived as if it were chaotic. In retrospect, we know that we are living a great irony: that in the end photography contributed to visual chaos, filling the world with an infinity of images, especially in our own day, when there is such demand for digital imagery. At the very start of photography, the only purpose might have been the possibility that photography should uncover details that were imperceptible were it not for that new photographic technology. I affirm that premise above all for the case of England, the atmosphere in which Thurston Thompson made his start. And this, precisely, was the philosophical underpinning of the Museum of South Kensington, in which he was employed. In fact, its two most immense viewing rooms, called "the cast courts" (salons housing massive works created through castings), are the heart of that Museum, although they may be, today, some of the spaces least visited. The pretence was that what had been cast, then reconstituted therein, was the equivalent of the object copied: a thing from without, exotic, now possessed by the British throne, but with the aim that it be studied in order to improve the crafts of Great Britain. For the object reproduced for the cast courts could not easily be admired (let alone contemplated) in its place of origin.

The ordering of a world in chaos was the challenge that England accepted – the bull to be taken by the horns – and England did so to its immense benefit. To wit, the 1851 international

1. The present text is my English translation from the original version that I presented in Spanish. I did so in mid-June 2019, at the remarkable Mosteiro da Batalha, Portugal. The visuals that appear here, accompanying the English version, are some of those that I showed to illustrate the version in Spanish.

exposition, celebrated in the Kensington of a young Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, Albert, wound up in such a way that many of the objects that had been shipped to London for the occasion remained in London, held in “the stores” on the site that would become the Museum of South Kensington, today the V&A Museum. Without doubt, the *raison d'être* of this Museum has always been to appropriate and exhibit that exemplar that is supposedly the best of its ilk that one can find; the supreme representative of an identifiable artistic style of a specific genre of art. (It is not a “design museum” – the term often used erroneously to describe it, although there are many design museums – rather a museum of the history of the most exemplary or most definitive designs.) South Kensington distinguished itself also for having been the second museum to employ its own photographer; the first having been the British Museum, with Roger Fenton as its photographer.² These two museums and the country in general wished to lend a certain logic (order) to the objects of all cultures; ideally, to register every item, with the aim of accumulating them all and retaining all, in London, supposed hub of the civilised world.

Of course, Thurston Thompson began as a photographer of relatively small objects, of gems owned by the elite, and it was the assignment in Portugal and Santiago for which he came to be a photographer of more monumental things. In fact, his photographs made on Portuguese soil would represent both objects and monuments. To be more specific, even more monuments than objects, but even when he was photographing structural things, he showed great concern for architectural

details, as we will see. And this indicated two things: he never relinquished that early interest in the miniature object, nor did he forget his undeniable connection to his basic task at the South Kensington Museum – to secure, to register, and to determine a place (in London) for the most exemplary object that represented a particular genre of craftsmanship. Thus, to photograph was almost to possess, above all when one conceived of a possible equivalence between the photograph of an object and that same object in the real world.

Similar to (early) Fenton in his museum, Thurston Thompson in his museum presupposed a world of things on exhibit and, out of doors, a world that held objects for exhibition. Since the time of his earliest photographs – those which he made with Bingham at the universal exposition in Paris (1855) – one can perceive his interest in things of museum potential.³ Even before that, he had assisted in arrangements of the London exposition of 1851. One perceives also his capacity, however rudimentary, for things architectural. Thurston Thompson's photography was scarcely ever divorced from the ambiance and needs of the museum. Nor could that museum world be thought of as divorced from the powerful British mechanism that was known as the Science and Art Department, whose function was intricately linked to the aims of the incipient South Kensington Museum, which were, too, the aims of its fond backer, Albert, Prince Consort.

That museum atmosphere was also connected to the most admirable of publications. All told, those publications were

2. See p. 28 and n. 4 of my *Charles Thurston Thompson e o proxecto fotográfico ibérico*. A Coruña: Xunta de Galicia, 1996.

3. R.J. Bingham of Chausée d'Antin, 20, Paris. See p. 30 of *ibid*.

exhibitions of objects.⁴ They belong to the kind of book that we call today “photo-book”, with photographs attached to the page, and with scant text or none at all. Thurston Thompson would make the photographs for such publications, and that probably rendered some amount of income. As freelance photographer he could sell his products, for it was not until April 1859 that he was named official photographer for the Museum. He had already photographed the Raphael sketches that were housed in Windsor, and in the following year he carried out his first breathtaking work: the photographic reproductions of the immense cartoons of Raphael, which were housed in Hampton Court, palace of Henry VIII. Because photographing objects in the interiors of some buildings involved technical difficulties—difficulties that persisted in 1866 when he was photographing in Portugal and Santiago de Compostela – the Raphael cartoons had to be lowered, one by one, and only on days when the weather looked promising.⁵ They were photographed from a tall, foldable ladder, and using a special lens that had had to be ordered from Paris the year before. Assisting in the manoeuvring of the immense cartoons were military sappers, who assisted also in the making of these negatives and positives. These wet-collodion glass plates measured one square metre and were 2/3 of a centimetre in thickness.⁶

In all of those book exemplars one could foresee the fundamentals of what was to become his great work in Portugal and Santiago – in the book (1862) depicting details of Italian sculpture during the Middle Ages and the *Risorgimento*; in the book (1865) of miniatures; in the book (1862) of the exemplary objects lent for the purpose by the cream of British society.⁷ And let us not overlook the motive behind exhibits and publications of this kind: an implicit boasting about acquisitions from foreign lands, secured by persons of note in Great Britain. In the half-year that the Great Exposition of 1851 lasted, it was visited by 900,000 people. England was establishing itself as the repository of the best of the best, with Prince Albert’s London as focal point. Thurston Thompson must have been considered the technician designated to concretise that, through the diffusion of his photographs. Two years prior to the journey to Portugal, he had already documented about a thousand art objects, including over a hundred in Paris’s Louvre.⁸

There is no doubt that John Charles Robinson acted as the impulse behind the photographic enterprise in Portugal and Santiago.⁹ Robinson made three trips to Iberia: in the autumn of 1863, in the summer and autumn of 1865, and in the autumn of 1866. On the first trip, it had been his intention to stop in

4. The obsession with documentation was evident not only in the Museum itself, but also in the publications of Thompson’s photographs of art works from museums. For example, the 1862 publication by Chapman and Hall, depicting the works of Italian sculpture in the South Kensington Museum, affords a single page for each object “exhibited” (that is, each page an exhibit unto itself).

5. See p. 28 and n. 5 of *ibid.*, p. 30.

6. The plates, astounding to view even simply as glass objects, exist today, conserved by the V&A Museum.

7. A copy of *The Art Wealth of England* is at the Humanities Research Center (Austin, Texas), and it is the near equivalent of what is registered in the Science and Art Department catalogue of Thompson’s photographs, as “A Series of Fifty Specimens in the Special Loan Exhibition at the South Kensington Museum in 1862.” The Center has, also, the 1868 Santiago de Compostela publication by the Arundel Society and *A Series of Portrait Miniatures Selected from the Loan Exhibition at the South Kensington Museum in 1865*, with 49 mounted photographs.

8. This happened around the time of, but before the photographing of works in El Prado.

9. I have read all the “Robinson’s reports (to the Jurors)” a number of times. These exist in original script, as do the original Registry books that show date of entry, price paid, and which objects entered the South Kensington Museum.

Lisbon, but due to his falling ill in Sevilla, he did not. Furthermore, someone (?) had commented to him that in Lisbon there was little or nothing of interest. In the following year (1864), Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton—son of the famous novelist, Edward George—was named consul in Lisbon. In the course of Robinson's second journey (summer-autumn, 1865), he met with Bulwer Lytton in Portugal, and the latter informed Robinson that the Marquis of Sousa-Holstein (son of the Duke of Palmela) was the key person in the administration of all Fine Arts affairs in Portugal. By October 1865, Dom Fernando de Saxe-Coburg, King Consort of Maria II, had already given permission to Robinson that someone should photograph "a certain proportion" of the art objects in his private collection.¹⁰ With that, Robinson wrote to South Kensington, thus initiating Thurston Thompson's plans to travel to Iberia for that purpose. In other words, it was Portugal, not Santiago, that was the primary motive behind Thurston Thompson's trip to Iberia. But because of the thousand cases of cholera that were ravaging Madrid in 1865 (and others in Portugal), the Museum responded that the photographer would not be travelling just then. By mid-November 1865, the same Marquis of Sousa-Holstein had informed Robinson: "that any and every work of art in Portugal is entirely at the disposition [of Kensington] for reproduction in any manner." Whereupon Robinson, always prepared to aggrandise himself presumptuously in the eyes of the Kensington "Jurors", to whom he periodically reported, commented that he himself in the short span of a month sketched and "noted down everything of importance in this respect", held in the private and public [!] collections of Portugal. He said that Dom Fernando

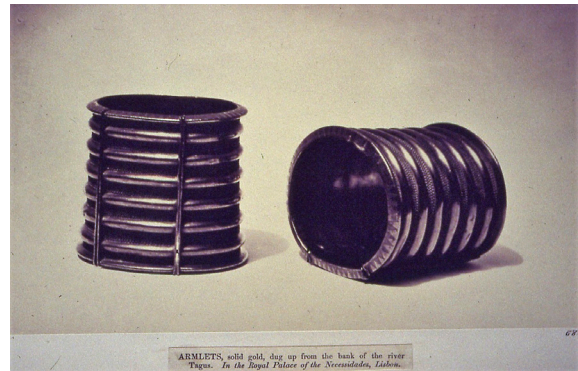


Fig. 1 Necessidades Palace. Armlets of solid gold, dug out of the banks of the River Tagus. 15.5 x 24.75 cms. V&A Museum #58501.

himself hoped that some designated photographer would go there to carry out this task (Fig. 1).

We do not know with certainty the route that Thurston Thompson took nor the exact date when he photographed in Portugal, but calculating on the basis of Robinson's reports, I venture some thoughts in this regard. I believe that he arrived in Lisbon by boat, and that he spent the months of August, September, October, and a portion of November 1866 in Iberia. Santiago de Compostela was an *interruption* that occurred during the work in Portugal, specifically in Lisbon, where he must have worked for several weeks, until mid-September. He began photographing not the monuments and structures of Portugal (with the possible exceptions of Sintra and Belém), rather objects in the Palace of Necessidades, in which Dom Fernando resided, and in the Palace of Ajuda, in which King Luis I resided (Figs. 2 and 3).

10. Maria II was already deceased (1853).



Fig. 2 Necessidades Palace. Covered bowl, used for letters and other items. V&A Museum.

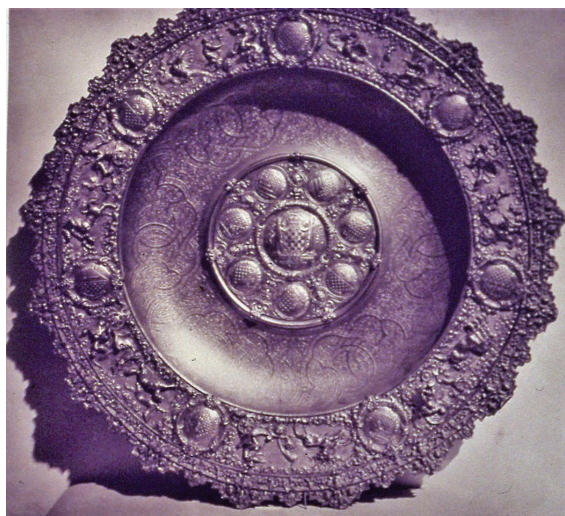


Fig. 3 Ajuda Palace. Silver charger with gold laminate, c. 1470, in Gothic style. V&A Museum.

In Belém he focused on the cloister of the Monastery, both from close-up and from a distance, thus capturing the delicate details of its arches; and in passing, the irresistible shrubbery and pots for plants (Fig. 4). His interest in architecture led him to photograph the rib-work of the domed ceilings in its passageways. I cannot swear to this, but I do believe that when the Frith establishment published its images of Portugal, it must have taken into account the views made by Thurston Thompson. (I have four of these by Frith, and they appear to want to share information about the same details.) Later I shall make similar remarks much of the same concerning Batalha. For now, I would suggest, simply, that one might study the discrepancies between the photographs made by the Frith establishment and those by Thurston Thompson,



Fig. 4 Belém. Cloister Arches. 33.25 x 38 cms. V&A Museum #58414.

with the expectation of arriving at some conclusions on the basis of that comparison.

On September 3, 1866, Robinson sent a telegraph to both Lisbon and Santiago (because he did not know in which of the two the photographer was at that time). This tells us something about Thurston Thompson's agenda. On September 12, Robinson asked the photographer for a favour in Lisbon, and this causes me to think that around that date the latter interrupted his work in Portugal and headed north, although I do not know if by boat to Vigo or by land. A boastful Robinson remarked to the Jurors of the Museum that Thurston Thompson had not sufficiently established relations with the Marquis of Sousa-Holstein in order to photograph in places such as Braga and Guimarães. So, Robinson did not want the photographer to engage in that during his return from Santiago to Portugal. Nor did he want him to photograph in Évora or Viseu, for the same reason. I suspect that this is the reason why we have ended up with so few photographs of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Oliveira, in Guimarães, and of the Monastery of Tomar.¹¹ I note that the view that the firm of J. Laurent (Madrid) made of Tomar is nearly the same as that by Thurston Thompson, although Laurent's is later, as evidenced in some repairs that had been made to the walls of the building.

I interrupt myself at this point to make some observations about relative quantities of photographs. When I wrote the book about Thurston Thompson's Santiago de Compostela project, I found that that city owned a (supposedly) complete set of 86 photographs of Santiago, while the Victoria and Albert Museum owned only 60. The book that was published in 1868 contained only 20 photographs (tipped-in).¹² Although one might suspect that the Museum would have the complete collection, it appears not to, oddly enough, because the Museum Registry books show that on March 18, 1868, the complete set of 86 indeed arrived. The images of Portugal that I am using are a part of the Museum holdings, and I believe I have at my disposition the majority that figure among those belonging to the Museum, but it is perfectly possible that there exist more photographs made by the photographer in Portugal. Those that I use amount to 59, and I suspect that they entered the Museum on May 2, 1868. *From this group*, 12% represent objects found in Lisbon. Again *from this group*, Batalha and Coimbra represent 37% and 38.5%, respectively. These figures seem to match up well with the directives that Robinson tried to impose on Thurston Thompson. He advised the photographer that once he completed his work in Lisbon, he should focus only on Coimbra, Oporto, and Batalha.¹³

11. As to the latter, I should add that around 38 years ago, I saw an album of the Mosteiro de Tomar, but I do not recall whether it was made by Thurston Thompson or J. Laurent. I saw the album in the United States, and it occurred to me that it might be by our photographer, but colleague Carlos Teixidor informs me that in the Laurent archives pertaining to Spanish patrimony there exist nine photographs of Tomar. As for the photograph of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Oliveira in Guimarães (owned by the V&A Museum, #303-1931), I am uncertain that our photographer in fact made it.

12. The book appeared very shortly after the death of the photographer.

13. I know of no Oporto photograph by him.

Robinson noted that our photographer should hasten his return to southern Portugal (from Galicia), because if he did not he might find himself without the (Spanish) guide who customarily accompanied Robinson.¹⁴ He warned that northern Portugal was a territory that was almost barbaric. Indeed, any study of Robinson and/or Thurston Thompson must necessarily take into account not only the exaggerations on the part of the former, but also his resounding presumptuousness concerning his having discovered and assessed objects for the Museum of South Kensington. This characteristic pose of his was unsurpassed when he had the audacity to dictate to the photographer not only a list of things to photograph, but also the point of view from which to photograph. For example, the very first directive for photographing in Santiago: a “general view of the cathedral and its adjoining buildings, from betwixt the 9th and 10th tree at the roadside.” For Santiago de Compostela, Robinson gave no fewer than 50 directives for the 86 photographs that were made. It is nothing less than astounding that the non-photographer, almost a year absent from the subject in question, should have indicated to the professional photographer, who was already *in situ*, what and how to photograph. Because, if we stop to think about it, this procedure calls into question all of our most basic suppositions concerning photography as *an art*; as the result of some inspiration; as something personal. It obliges us to think of it, instead, as something routine and purely technical (unless, of course, one can conceive of technique as a basis for art – a stance that is, on occasion, legitimate).



Fig. 5 Monastery of Batalha, general view from the old coach road. 21 x 27.5 cms. V&A Museum #59587.

In that same spirit of foreign “travelling servant”, I venture to devise a more or less consecutive jaunt through Batalha and Coimbra. As regards Batalha, we must ask ourselves if the photographer had in mind that first directive from Robinson when he indicated what and how to photograph in Santiago. Since the Batalha images might have been made after the project in Santiago, it is probable that Thurston Thompson applied a similar procedure, supposing that that was what Robinson would have ordered.¹⁵ The view of Batalha from afar is captivating, and it stands out for its notable amount of context (Fig. 5). Then one arrives at the main door; next, a perspective of the entrance to the cloisters, from below then from above (Fig. 6). We focus on the exemplary arcade, then there is the arresting back-lit fount. After capturing the panorama of the cloister arches, the photographer made the

14. Robinson referred to this person as “a travelling servant.” He customarily employed a courier, Matías Balcón (of Calle de los Negros, Madrid), who now had to return to Madrid just before September.

15. The Museum’s numbering of the images does not indicate the sequence of when these photographs were taken.

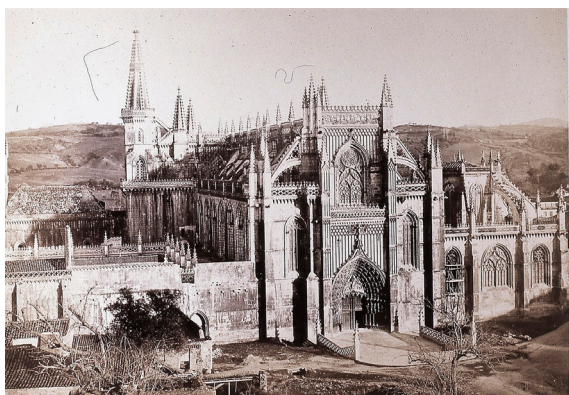


Fig. 6 Monastery of Batalha, west front and the Chapel of the Founder. 27.5 x 38.75 cms. V&A Museum #59588.

images of the tracery in the individual arches of the cloister. I had mentioned that I have two Frith photographs of the same, so I would remark here that the photographs by the Frith establishment are much less contextual and more close-up than those made by Thurston Thompson. The matter of contextuality is pertinent, because earlier on Robinson had charged our photographer, when he was in Santiago, with taking photographs of the particular aspects that one found either contiguous with, or in context with the Pórtico de la Gloria itself. In spite of the fact that the photographer fulfilled such an order concerning securing context, in theory this went against the strictest representational documentation. That is (in theory) the photographic document would have been closest to the object in the real world – that is, most documentary, aesthetics notwithstanding—when the photographer eliminated that object’s context. When representation is the chief motivation, we want to look *through* the photographic medium, toward the object represented by

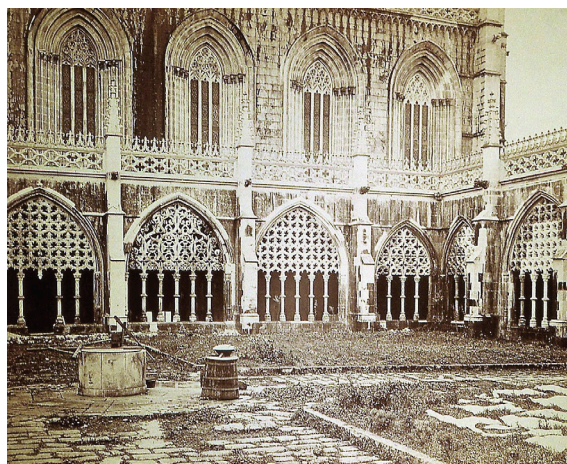


Fig. 7 Monastery of Batalha, view of cloister from the north. V&A Museum.

this medium, without that object’s having to define itself contextually, nor creating a situation such that the photograph appeals to us as artistic object per se.

Thurston Thompson rarely missed a chance to fix for us photographically the different aspects of a cloister. From an architectural viewpoint, it seemed to be what most fascinated him (Fig. 7). His photograph of the tower is demonstration of that observation. In effect, the Monastery of Batalha was no exception to the rule. The curious thing is that a third of the Batalha photographs are of the Capilla Imperfeita. These eight images are exteriors, although they may not seem that at first glance. Admittedly, it is possible that the manifest insistence on the detail of this chapel could have been because the photographs in fact were exterior views (Fig. 8). Parallel efforts in interiors did not work so well for him.



Fig. 8 Monastery of Batalha, fount in a corner of the cloister.
29.25 x 23.5 cms. V&A Museum #59594.

What surprises us about the 22 photographs Coimbra is that 12 represent the Convent of Santa Cruz, 6 the cathedral, 2 the University, 1 the Church of Santiago, and 1 a magnificent door. I am struck by the relative discrepancies among these numbers, which is not to diminish the great beauty of the Convent of Santa Cruz, so indicated by the fact of a dozen photographs made there (Fig. 9). I am tempted to speculate that for Thurston Thompson what was of purely historic significance may have held less importance – at least in the instance of

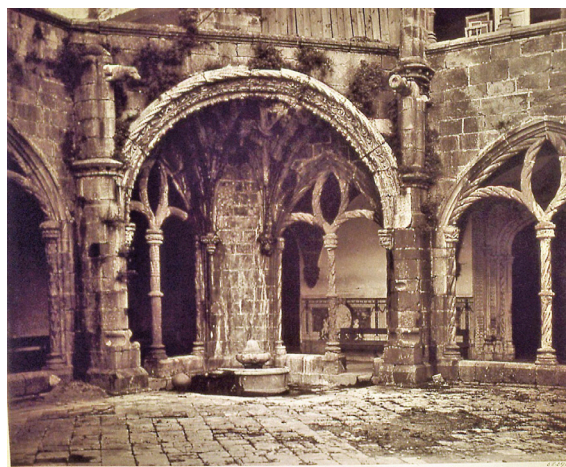


Fig. 9 Coimbra, Convent of the Santa Cruz.
Arch in an angle of the cloister. V&A Museum.

Coimbra – than what was aesthetic and decorative. This would have been in perfect keeping with the purposes of the London museum where he worked, if we stop to think about it. As in the case of Batalha, the photographer captures the marvelous perspective of the arches and the terrace above. He then approaches, in order to secure once and for all, in photographs, its details. Then he ends inside the passageways to take stock of the rib-work of the architectural framework of the cloister.

As for the cathedral, the photographer circles it, almost certainly because photography of interiors (cloisters are not interiors, strictly speaking) yielded less than ideal results (Figs. 10 and 11). Robinson himself had taken into account this fact, when he suggested to Thurston Thompson that he not go to Burgos to photograph the cathedral there, following his time

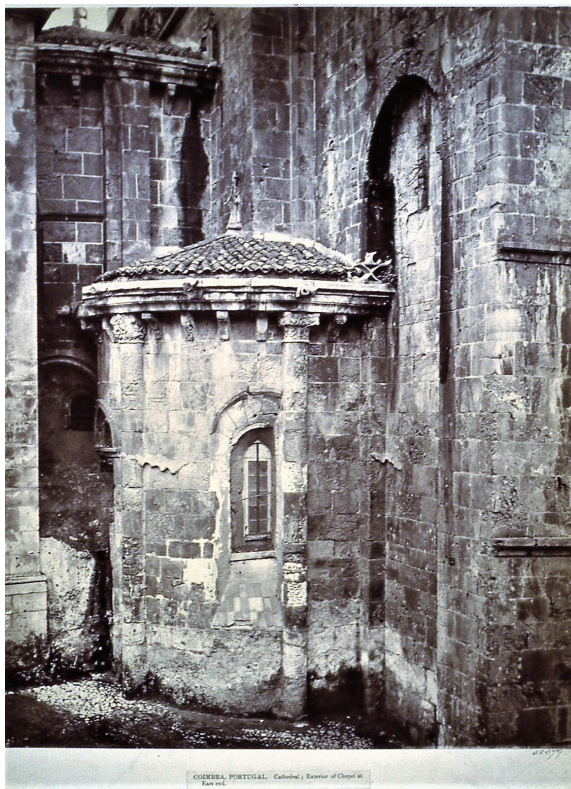


Fig. 10 Coimbra, cathedral. Exterior of chapel on far east side.
39.5 x 32.5 cms. V&A Museum #58379.

in Santiago, because Robinson believed that the attraction of Burgos rested principally in its interiors.¹⁶ (Truth be told, Charles Clifford also achieved inferior results when, in 1852,



Fig. 11 Coimbra, cathedral. General view of south face.
38.75 x 33.25. V&A Museum #58380.

he photographed both the cupola of the Burgos cathedral and the interior of the Cordovan mosque.) The outcome was

16. Robinson (December 18, 1866) wrote: "Burgos would be the next place that I should recommend that Mr Thompson be sent to, and I could furnish an exact list of the photographs & points of view required to be taken there – but nearly all would be *interior* views; in the Cathedral, churches, convents & of the city – all of these edifices, however are so *dark*, that I apprehend photos could only be taken by *the aid of artificial light*".

that Thurston Thompson customarily used photography in places such as cloisters, sunny terraces, partly externalised entryways, etc. Here, I ought to note in retrospect that when he photographed the objects in Lisbon, he did so without removing them from their respective interiors, and this was quite successful because he would rely on the natural light from windows. (In contrast, when Jane Clifford, in 1866, in Madrid, photographed the so-called Treasures of the Dauphin, these were carried outside of El Prado. This is analogous to what Thurston Thompson had to do in 1858, when he photographed the Raphael cartoons.)¹⁷

It has long seemed to me a great irony that the reconstruction of the Pórtico de la Gloria inside of the V&A Museum resulted in being able to see a grand exterior from within a building. Our photographer never got to see that reconstruction, which was accomplished using the molds directed by Brucciani.¹⁸ Our photographer died at age 52, during the first months of 1868, and that reconstruction had still not been quite complete in May. There exist three photographs of the reconstruction in process, though not by Thurston Thompson, rather by Mrs J.A. Cowper.¹⁹ These were entered in the Museum Registry books on May 22, 1868. I think that they tell us a great deal.

Their museological context – window panes, written information on the wall – render an ironic contrast with the relatively pure Gothic implicit in the Pórtico de la Gloria. This is, in the end, the anomaly of the imperialist effort: anachronism and a cultural *volte face* from the Pórtico de la Gloria. On the other hand, the three photographs reaffirm how inseparable were the arts from the sciences, the rubric of the South Kensington Museum and the Department of Education that was its support and gave it direction: the logic that the Museum signified, the wall-tags, etc. In the end, it implied a foundational classicism; the bedrock that served as premise for the vast majority of its work. That is, bedrock stratified in the following way: 1) admiration, 2) imitative and documentary reproduction, then, the icing on the cake that was 3) the well-ordered exhibition of the copy of what existed in the external world. Only photographing the monument in its place, and the admired objects in their places – the case of the royal treasures of Portugal – contradicts the British impulse at mid-nineteenth century, which was the acquisition and consequent exhibition of the physical object. Because thus, by means of photography, one avoided the fragmentation of the real world and its dislocation... excepting, of course, the ironic fact that photography also fragments our world, at least in some degree.

17. These were not the first times when museum objects were photographed out of doors. John Hannavy (*Roger Fenton of Crimble Hall* [Boston: David R. Godine, 1975], pp. 40–41) describes how, in the summer of 1857, Fenton was photographing museum busts out of doors, ingeniously dusting them with dry clay powder in order to remove harsh highlights.

18. Domenico Brucciani, located in Covent Garden, was London's most recognised name in paster-casting. On the Compostela project, he was assisted by George Mould, a supervisory engineer on the first railroad project in Galicia (Lee Fontanella, *Charles Thurston Thompson...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.)

19. Isabel Agnes Cowper was the sister of our photographer, also of Richard Anthony Thompson, Superintendent of the South Kensington Museum. Widowed in 1860, she apprenticed with her brother Charles, then took his place upon his demise.



Fig. 12 Beech tree in Albury Park, Surrey (England).
24 x 29 cms. V&A Museum #32967.

Before 1864, that is before the Iberian project, Thurston Thompson had made at least 20 photographs of trees.²⁰ These become of interest now, insofar as they relate to his other photographic activity. On the one hand, they fit within one of the eminently utilitarian limits that Robinson always set down in a strict manner: avoid photographing anything that others might be able to photograph for themselves. The trees that Thurston Thompson photographed grew on the private grounds of his brother-in-law, Henry Cole, in Surrey.²¹ On the other hand, those photographs represented a rather early time in his photography, when he dared to make images that were neither prescribed nor documentary on the purely

utilitarian level. Apparently, they signify a moment when the photographer set out to create images on his own and for himself. That said, 20 images of trees were included in the 1864 catalogue of photographs that the Department of Sciences and Arts offered for sale. By what reasoning were these photographs included there, and why were they made in the first place? I suspect that the answer rests on the fact that the photographer saw in these trees the rudimentary elements not only of the detailed treasures that he was already in the process of photographing, but also elements of the structures that he was going to be photographing in Iberia a little more than two years hence. The tree was the analogue to the Gothic architectural framework: its branches as the rib-work and the Gothic cross-work that we see in the arches of the passageways in the Portuguese cloisters; or its branches as a parallel of architecture as rudimentary as that which we see in the construction of the rail fences that bordered the Cole estate (Fig. 12). In other words, before undertaking his photographic assignment in Portugal and Santiago, Thurston Thompson bore instinctively that potential for the photography of structures and for imagery that did not depend on the directives of a Robinson – an instinctive capacity for photography that was artistic creation, while at the same time it might have been consummately documentary, even to the point where it could pretend to be the re-presentation of the object in the real world by way of the photographic medium.

20. We know this, partly because in the early "Price List" for photographs of the Museum's objects, the studies of trees appear, oddly enough. Unlike almost every other item in the Price List, the photographs of trees are not listed and described individually, making comparison to extant photographs in the V&A Museum's holdings difficult on a one-to-one basis, if not impossible.

21. Charles Thurston Thompson married the sister of Henry Cole (1808–82).

