

Catherine Troiano - Henry Irving, Sycamore in Summer and Winter

CATHERINE TROIANO: Hi, I'm Catherine Troiano, and I'm assistant curator of photographs here at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. We're standing in the prints and drawing study room, which is where the museum's whole collection of prints, drawings, paintings, and photographs can be viewed by the public.

The objects I'm going to be talking about today are two photographs by Henry Irving depicting the same sycamore tree in winter and in summer, and they were made about 1900.

Henry Irving returned to exactly the same standpoint to photograph this tree in the summer and in the winter. These images are part of a much larger group of botanical studies that Irving made between the 1890s and the 1920s. This larger group of images depicts trees, foliage, and bark. But as you can see here, we're focusing on the tree as a whole.

The V&A purchased 183 photographs from this larger group of botanical specimens made by Irving. They purchased directly from him between about 1901 and 1904, and at the time, they were collected by the museum's library. Although the V&A has been collecting photographs since 1852, there was no dedicated photography section until 1977. So at the time that these photographs were purchased, they were stored and kept by the library.

In the library, they were classified as studies for artists and they were used as a resource for fine art students of painting and drawing who were learning to paint and draw the natural landscape.

Although they were stored by the library as studies for painting, these images actually had multiple functions. They were also published as illustrations in books about botany, which shows the more scientific approach to the work that Irving was doing. They were also exhibited as works of art in their own right. And although Irving was never a member of the Royal Photographic Society, they were included in eight exhibitions that were staged by the Royal Photographic Society between about 1899 and 1922.

In the images, we can see a really wide range of subtle grey tones and this is something that is very typical of a platinum print, which is what both of these photographs are. Another hallmark of a platinum print is a very high level of detail, which, as we get closer to the image, we can see. Here, below the tree, we can see saplings fading into the distance as they get further away from the camera. We've got branches clearly standing out against the background.

We can see the detail in this summer image of the leaves and the foliage. And in this, we can really see Irving's skill at revealing the architecture of trees.

These images, when looked at together, show us something really interesting. They imply the passage of time and they show us how the natural world changes with the seasons.

Now these photographs are sycamore trees in Hampton Court. However, other trees from this series include chestnuts, elms, and ginkgos, almost every tree you can think of in locations around Kent, Surrey, and London.

We can see these photographs are very matte, which is also typical of the platinum process. To make a platinum print, you coat a piece of paper in a solution that is a combination of platinum salts and iron salts. You need the iron salts because it makes the paper sensitive to UV light.

During the developing process, the chemical reactions that take place encourage the iron salts to dissolve and they are replaced with platinum salts. This platinum, which is a very expensive metal, more expensive than gold, is embedded into the paper, which results in this very matte finish. It's different to many other kinds of printing process, which normally involves an emulsion that lies on top of the paper and gives a slightly glossier finish.

Platinum printing was popular until about the 1920s. In the 1920s, the price of platinum soared, as it was discovered as being very useful to making explosives and so it became too expensive to use for making photographs.

For a short period of time, the metal palladium was used instead of platinum. However, the price of palladium also soared in the 1930s and this style of printing went quite out of fashion. It's experienced a revival in recent years, since about the 1970s, in which fine art photographers use it as an exceptional process because of these things that we were talking about earlier, like the matte finish and the exceptionally high level of detail. Platinum prints are also very durable, as the platinum metal is particularly resistant to degradation by light.

These photographs are rather small images. They measure about 22 by 28 centimetres. However, platinum prints are made by contact printing with the negative. This means that these photographs were developed in direct contact with the negative that they're made from. So the negative is exactly the same size as the print.

So while these photographs are rather small on a general scale, the negatives would have been much larger than we tend to think of negatives today. Normally, we think of negatives as a roll of maybe 35 millimetre film.

These photographs are still stored here at the V&A, although now they're part of the photographs collection rather than the library's collection. They're stored with the rest of our photographs collection in a newly refurbished store that's carefully climate controlled to about 12 degrees centigrade and a low level of humidity. This is to make sure that the photographs stay undamaged for as long as possible.

They're important to study because these images really highlight the dual complexity of photography in the 19th and early 20th centuries. That's photography as science, as well as photography as art.

A large group of photographs by Henry Irving will be going on view here at the V&A towards the end of 2017 in a display titled *Into The Woods: Trees in Photography*. This display is in

support of the Charter for Trees, Woods, and People, which is being launched on November the 6th of 2017, and it's really trying to influence policy and future legislation relating to trees and woodlands in the UK.

I think it's really interesting that even though these photographs were made over 100 years ago, they're still relevant today with issues of environmental concern.