

Renate Dohmen - The Pilkington Album

I'm Renate Dohmen. I'm a lecturer in art history. And I'm interested in global art history and visual culture. And within that field, I'm particularly interested in British Empire and contemporary art and aesthetics. And you will see this reflected in the object I want to present here today, which is a 19th-century commonplace book, also called a scrap album.

It's a leather-bound album. It's got 29 leaves. They're quite thick. It's cardboard. And it's housed in the archive of the South Asian Centre of Cambridge University. Once we open the album, we'll find a lot of pages which has beautiful arrangement of combinations of photographs, watercolours, and ephemera. And we are going to look at one page in the album with quite a lot of detail just to give you a sense of the flavour and also of how this album was created.

In our age of digital media, we don't really think about albums very much anymore. But in the 19th century, album making was a real craze. Everybody did it, men and women. But what we're looking here in particular is a female tradition of album making. And what we have to remember that in the 19th century, women weren't allowed to go to art school. And so these albums really provided a creative outlook for these women. And they took great pride in it.

And another reason for making an album is that it was a status symbol, because if you had time to produce such a beautifully crafted object, it meant you had leisure. And also, it was important to present this skill of being cultured and to have taste. So the albums really fulfilled quite an important function in the lives of these young women. They would be displayed in the Victorian living room, which was a very important social place where visitors would come, friends would visit. And often, the album maker would show the album, present herself really, through this album.

So it's really a very close parallel to what we know now of how we use Facebook. This album was created by a young lady who travelled out to India in the late 19th century. And it tells her story of the trip and also how she saw India. She's introduced herself on the front page of the album. Her name is Millicent Pilkington.

In the right-hand corner is a photograph of her. She's beautifully framed it with a watercolour. And then the other corner, you see a newspaper cutting, which announces her arrival and the ship she came in with. And that really gives us the ingredients of this album.

What we find inside is photographs, watercolours, and what we call ephemera and it's really about the skill of arrangement that is important here. But in this case, in this very unusual album, we also have handwritten passages. So it doubles up as a sort of diary as well. And that makes it easier for us today to interpret the album, because it gives us more clues.

So what you see is this combination of photographs and watercolours, for example, here. And these watercolours are different. Some of them are painted directly on the album page. And some of them are actually glued into the page. And you can see it here in the top left-hand corner, because you can see these cards, which are sort of shoved in between the watercolour and the album page, which tells us this is glued on. And you can also see that it's dated in the corner of

the watercolour. And it tells us where she was. She was in Ooty, which is a hill resort in southern India.

This little card, this sort of oblong one is a dance card. This is what 19th-century women would have. So if you go to a ball, the young men who want to dance with you would sort of book you for certain dances, which can tell us now that she was pretty much in demand. Except for two dances, she was constantly on the dance floor. And the other one is an invitation to a dinner by Lord and Lady Wenlock. And they were governors of Madras. So this is definitely an invitation card you would want to keep hold of. And, you know, you're proud of this invitation so you want to show it off.

So why would she have painted watercolours, and why would she have watercolours stuck onto the album page? And this is where we're getting into how this album was made. This album was probably to a great extent produced when she was back home. And it would be based on photographs and sketches she had collected.

And we can see an example here, for example, of an early stage of creating a page like this. And we're very lucky she actually made two albums. And this is a page of the second album, which she didn't finish, which is very lucky for us because we can actually see how she went about making the album. So you can see she started out with selecting the photographs, arranging them in the centre of the page. She's drawn a frame around it, a very thin line. You can also see the precision with which she has cut out these photographs.

And then you can see she started filling in the surrounding areas with watercolours which are painted onto the album page directly. You can see the same principle here in this page of how she's going about arranging this page. She decides on the elements, puts them together in an arrangement. And in this case now, we also see this really careful and very detailed frame she's painted around the photograph but also the watercolour.

And if you look closely, you can see she's created a little frame above the photograph which isn't filled yet. So she obviously intended something else to go into this empty space, which leads us now to the next question. So we've looked at how this album was created. We can see that a lot of skill has gone into it.

But the question really is, the fundamental question is, why would we look at it today? Why should this be of any interest to us? And also the question is, I'm an art historian and this is a scrap album by a young British woman who was not an artist, not a famous person. So why would I be looking at this? So this interest really reflects a shift we had within the humanities and within art history of looking at what we call visual culture, which goes beyond high art.

And if you take a visual culture perspective, an object like this becomes extremely interesting, because it tells us a lot about cultural worlds of the past and how visual images and the visual on the whole can tell us about history, about how people lived, what they thought, what they thought was important. And this is really the interests behind looking at an album like this.

So in our case, we have a young lady, she's is 21 years of age. She travels to India, spends a year there. And what kind of image does she present of India? And the question also then will give us obviously a personal take. But the argument would be it will give us a larger perspective that is representative of attitudes at the time.

And if we look closely at the image, I think you'll agree with me that apart from that little figure in red in the corner, we wouldn't actually know that we're in India, because the rolling landscape is pretty green, you don't see any exotic plants, the buildings are thoroughly European. And that's a conundrum, isn't it? Or it's certainly a question worth raising and something worth looking at.

And what this actually points us to that the British in India really try to live as British a life as possible. And they actually pretended to be in Britain, certainly in these what we call hill resorts or hill stations. And it gives us also an indication that they considered themselves as exiles when they are in India. And this is what we find represented on this page.

But also, it actually is a theme throughout this album that she really presents her life with her relatives, with her friends in rather grand and lavish houses. And the fact that she's in India doesn't really come into her album terribly much. It's really more in the margins of the album. So what an album like this can really give us access to and really illustrate very beautifully is, for one, a cultural tradition which we've now lost, which is the album culture of album making by women specifically. But it also tells us something about an idea of British identity in relation to empire and very specifically British India.