



The Thomson Album: A Collection of Art & Memories

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Introduction

This work placement looks at a 19th-century Victorian album owned by Jane Nicholson Thomson (1825–1899), wife to renowned Scottish architect Alexander "Greek" Thomson (1817–1875), and is now in the collection of the National Trust for Scotland. The focus of the project was to investigate and analyze the album and its contents, to assess their connection to Alexander "Greek" Thomson. The examination aimed to determine the authorship of the artworks within the album and develop a catalogue detailing physical descriptions, the materials, and the condition of each page and item. This poster presents how the album can also serve as an example of the private sphere of women's leisure activity and collecting in the 19th century.

Methodology

Before performing non-invasive technical examinations, a protocol for handling works of art on paper needed to be established. Cataloguing the album assisted in the initial comparative visual analysis of the items within. Utilizing a magnifying lamp and optical stereomicroscope made it possible to identify various stylistic techniques of the drawings, the penmanship of signatures and captions, and physical damages. Employing transmitted light allowed for the internal structure of the paper, i.e., the watermark, to be revealed, which helped indicate where the paper was sourced and possibly purchased. A reference database via the National Library of Scotland was consulted to learn more about the Thomson family in the mid-1800s and to create an estimated timeline for the album's creation.



Figure 1. Stereomicroscopy analysis of Thomson album.
Photo: Therena Baptista Medeiros

Collection

The album consists of 40 individual pages with gold-edge detail, seen when the book is closed. The pages are sewn and glued together by a deteriorating leather binding. The front and back covers are made of black enamel on thick boards; the front is decorated in floral motifs and gold gilding (fig. 2). Inside, the type of contents includes pamphlets, excerpts, cutouts, hand-made valentines, sketches (on-page), and inserts (prints, drawings on board or paper, letters, botanical painting). The theme throughout the album is Jane's family, children, husband, love, and art contemporary to her time.



Figure 2. Thomson album front cover, c. 1840s, enamel on board and gold gilding, 305 x 226 mm. National Trust for Scotland.
Photo: Therena Baptista Medeiros

Analysis of Women's Leisure & Collecting

Memorabilia albums were private handicraft objects kept at home and were primarily made by women. They were modes of individualistic expression and the accumulation and the curation of keepsakes. Albums were a medium which women could freely demonstrate artistic or literary skills, knowledge and appreciation for cultural arts.

The earliest date associated with the album is 1845, two years before Jane married Alexander. Based on visual observations, multiple stained pages, blank pages with slits to hold inserts, and various loose contents suggest that the album was an evolving project over a period of time. There is no order to the album, but complementary romantic elements can be seen (figs. 8 & 9). Jane compiled a collection of items and imagery that exude an intimate nostalgia for her courtship and domestic lifestyle.



Figure 3. "J. Whatman, Turkey Mill," watermark on paper. Page 9 (right).
Photo: Therena Baptista Medeiros

Contents

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Figure 4. [Detail] 3/4 Portrait of Teen, graphite and gouache(?). Page 11 (right).



Figure 5. Side Profile Portrait of Infant, graphite and gouache(?). Page 5 (right).



Figure 7. David Craig, Botanical study, watercolor. Page 7 (right).



Figure 6. "Tom-" Cat Portrait, graphite and gouache. Page 9 (right).



Figure 8. W.H. Egleton (after painting by Edward Corbould), *Spanish Lovers*, print. Page 12 (left).



Figure 9. Letter to Jane Nicholson, 3 April 1846, embossed paper. Page 13 (right).

Further Investigation & Conclusion

There has been no previous analysis conducted on the album; therefore, the technical examinations, catalogue, and condition reports could assist in future conservation. Further imaging techniques using ultraviolet or infrared radiation could also aid in identifying paint material in figures 4 & 5. Although little is known of Jane Nicholson, this album offers a lens into what she seemed to care about: her family, love, and art.

References

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