

THE CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPH IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ANTIQUITIES

Looking at photographs of the past in general, and photographs of antiquities in particular, it seems that the last thing we examine is the photograph itself as a result of a subjective process. We attribute the value of the photographs to the subject, and to technical difficulties of depiction, values which attract part of our attention. The meaning of representation is often undermined as if the photograph is self-existent. This is understandable and quite natural when the past is distant or if the subject no longer exists or has been substantially altered so that the photographer's creative intent is obscured.

Thus, the different values created shift our attention away from the quality of representation, transforming the photograph into a simple document and undermining the subjective/creative content. Despite this, photography after the initially tentative steps, from the early 1850's begins a history of experiment and creative artistic effort by photographers to mark their personal view in the depiction of antiquities.

Some elements of this path of archaeological photography should be examined through similarities and differences of photographs of the same subject.

THE ESTABLISHED VISUAL ANGLE

Given that documentation dictates that photographs are taken on axis, in many photographs of the Parthenon, (fig. 1-6) the visual angle, the cropping and often the lighting are subordinated to that purpose. This results in an established depiction which has repeated itself for almost 150 years, where the creative intention is extremely limited.

However in the photographs of the Propylaea (fig. 7-8)



1. W. J. Stillman, *The Parthenon from the west*, 1869



2. Fred. Boissonnas. *The Parthenon from the west*, 1908



3. S. Mavrommatis *The Parthenon from the west*, 1982



4. W. J. Stillman. *The Parthenon from the east*, 1869



5. Fred. Boissonnas. *The Parthenon from the east*, 1908



6. S. Mavrommatis. *The Parthenon from the east*, 1998



7. Braun, Clement & Cie. *The Propylaia from the east*, ca. 1890

even though the principal axial photography remains the same, an effort to include another element – the landscape – reveals an artistic / creative intention. The general view of the monument becomes part of the monument and an additional image merges into the photograph, which is either primary or secondary depending on the view or the mood of the spectator.

THE DOMINANT ELEMENT IN THE ESTABLISHED VISUAL ANGLE

Photographs where the dominant element reigns while the secondary determines the visual angle. In the following photographs, the dominant subject seems to be the Herodeion while the Parthenon seems to be the secondary. It determines the visual angle, creating an



8. Fred. Boissonnas. *The Propylaea from the east*, 1919

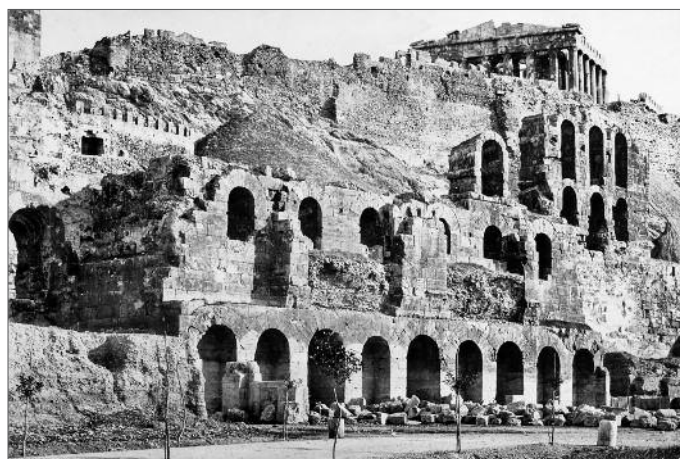
established visual angle, again for 150 years. In the three first photographs, (fig 9-11) documentation seems to be the principal aim whereas in the fourth one, (fig. 12) the photographer's eye has discerned a new image within the established image by changing the cropping.

As the cropping changes, a documentation photograph turns into a more abstract view, since we cannot see much of the environment, revealing creative intention.

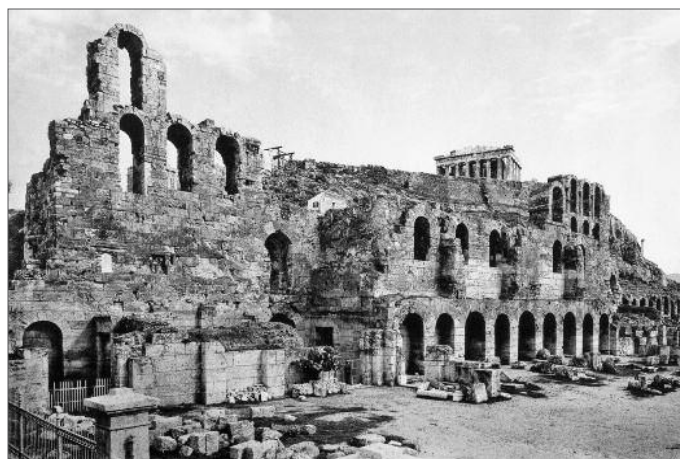
Photographers like Boissonnas and Walter Hege "meet" each other - in a distance of time - at the same place, at Sounion, (fig. 13-14) having an identical point of view and yet different perception and way of seeing. Boissonnas and Hege respectively are different, even though the subject and visual angle are the same. Their photographs seem to be the negative of one another; the photographer's eye reveals creative intention once again.



9. J. Robertson. *The Odeion of Herodes Atticus*, 1854



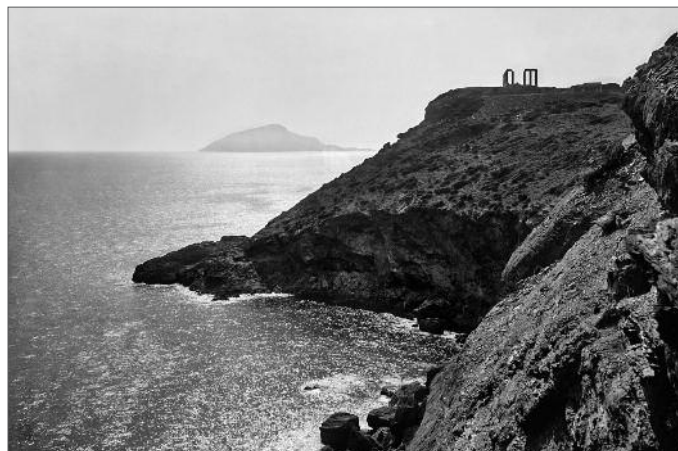
10. D. Konstantinou *The Odeion of Herodes Atticus*, ca. 1865



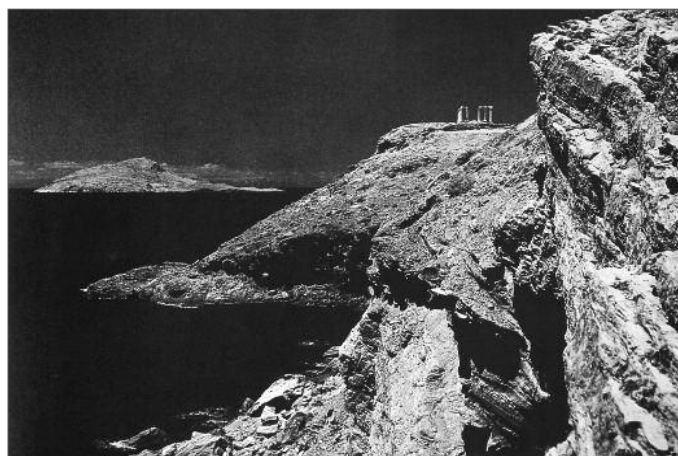
11. Fred. Boissonnas. *The Odeion of Herodes Atticus*, 1910



12. W. Hege. *The Odeion of Herodes Atticus*, 1928



13. Fred. Boissonnas. *The temple of Poseidon from the E*, 1919



14. W. Hege. *The temple of Poseidon from the E*, 1928

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE

Walter Hege in 1929 while he was on the Acropolis photographing block VII of the west frieze of the Parthenon, found it interesting to capture a rider's head (fig. 15, 16) while the shadows were changing gradually over the low relief by the sun's movement. Hege "discovered" and revealed a new image within the image. The creative process at its best.

In this photograph of the rider's head we can see, somehow, what Henri Cartier-Bresson will define much later (1952) as the "decisive moment" writing: "There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment."

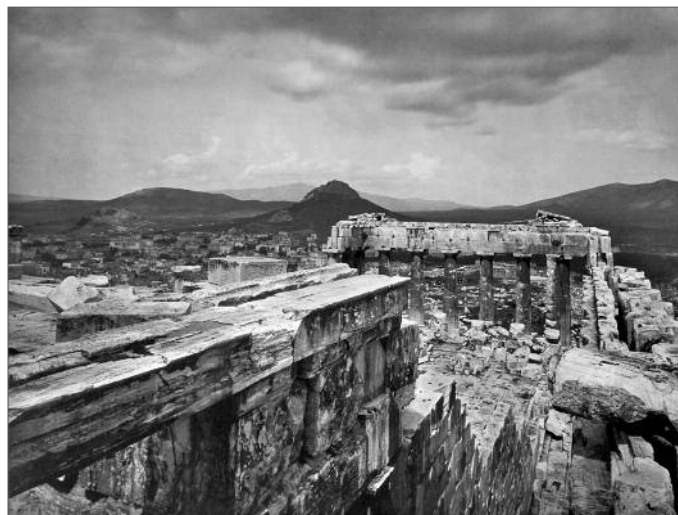
From Hege, we travel 60 years back to Stillman, at the

same place, on the same level – the Parthenon's west frieze. (fig. 17) An exceptional photograph, an extremely difficult accomplishment with the means of that time; a photograph which probably was not in his mind but suddenly appeared in front of his eyes during the process of documenting the west "pteron" from the south. (fig. 18) Here is an example of archaeological photographic documentation, which yielded a new photograph.

Stillmans' attempt was to record the west "pteron" of the Parthenon. From this location he "saw" the second image and by raising his camera 1 meter and turning it to the right, he created a second image placing the monument in the context of the Attic landscape, with the



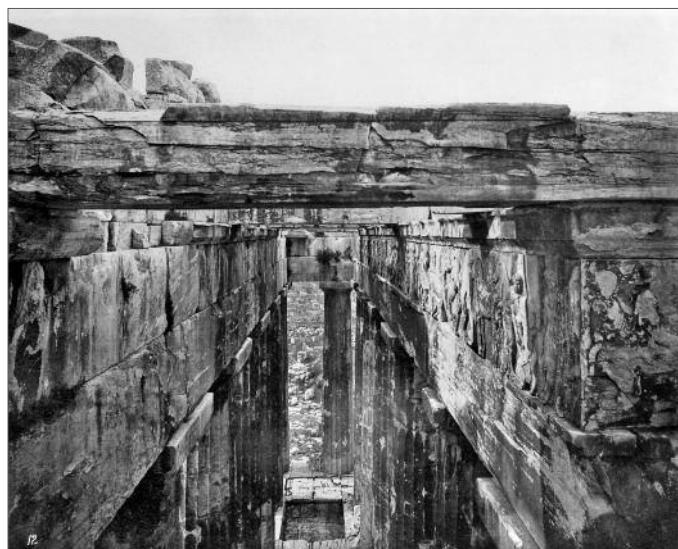
15. W. Hege. *The Parthenon west frieze, block VII*, 1928



17. W. J. Stillman. *The south frieze of the Parthenon from the SW*, 1869



16. W. Hege. *The Parthenon west frieze, block VII (detail)*, 1928

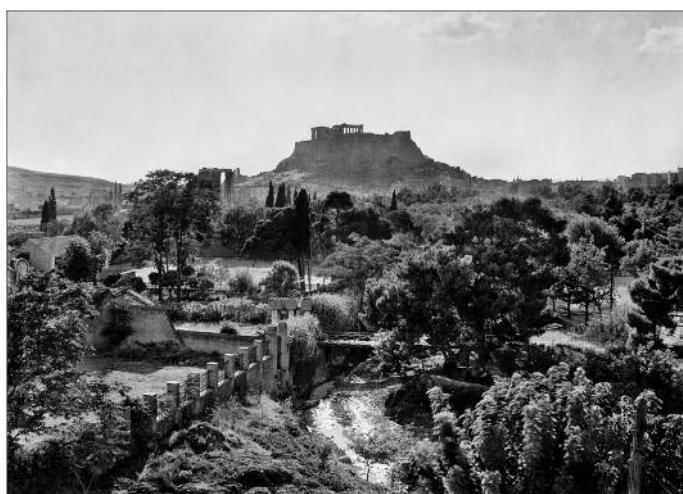


18. W. J. Stillman. *The west pteron of the Parthenon from the N*, 1869

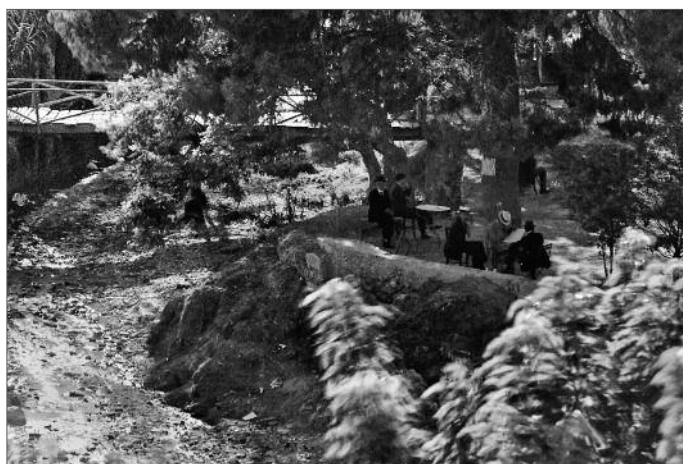
Lycabettus hill in front of the basin's skyline. While in Hege's photograph we see an image **within** the image, in Stillman we see an image **after** the image.

Similar creation of a photographic image **within** the image, we can see in Boissonnas and List, where archaeological photography and snapshot photography, merge into one stretching its limits. Boissonnas' photograph of an archaeological scene is enriched by the discreet group portrait of those seated under the tree next to the

river. (fig. 19, 20) In List's photograph the columns of Hadrian's library shift into the old lady's backyard and the young child's playground. (fig. 21,22) At the same time, the Acropolis monuments and sculptures manipulated creatively, also produced symbolisms in the photographs of Hege and List, creating a vivid dialogue. Following the trends in the inter-bellum period, they use the relationship of the elements in space, in an effort to transfer and merge the past with the present. (fig. 23, 24, 25)



19. Fred. Boissonnas. *River Ilissus, The temple of Olympian Zeus and the Acropolis in the distance. View from the NE*, 1919



20. Fred. Boissonnas. *River Ilissus, The temple of Olympian Zeus and the Acropolis in the distance (detail)*, 1919



21. H. List. *Athens. Hadrian's Library*, 1937



22. H. List. *Athens. Hadrian's Library (detail)*, 1937



23. W. Hege. *Erechtheion. The porch of the Caryatids*, 1928-29



25. H. List. *Island of Delos. Cleopatra's house*, 1937



24. H. List. *Corinth. Torso of a robed statue and the temple of Apollo in the distance*, 1937

THE QUESTION OF "MAKE" OR "TAKE"

The process of making a picture or taking a picture is not very clear and feeds the confusion of what is "made" and what is "taken", clouding consequently our perception of "artistic". Two photographs that answer the question of take or make, were created 80 years apart. (fig. 26, 27) The first one was "made" by Anton Silberhuber (1890) while the second was "taken" by the writer in 1968. Silberhuber's photograph was not known until 1988 when a collector found it in the flea market in Athens and sold it to the National Historical Museum of Athens. The similarities are therefore random. Both photographs include group portraits of travellers at the same spot one looking east and one looking west. The perspective is also the same, which shows that the same normal lens was



26. A. Silberhuber. *The temple of Olympian Zeus from the SE*, ca. 1890



27. S. Mavrommatis. *The temple of Olympian Zeus from the NW*, 1968

used. Two tourist shots of archaeological interest with pre-determined aesthetic value with definitive suggestion of scale, following once again the established depiction of subjects of this kind, erasing the question [as to] what is artistic and what is not. The question simply does not exist. They are what they are.

DE-DRAMATIZING IN THE DEPICTION OF ANTIQUITIES AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Creative photograph in archaeology is changing during the second half of the 20th century, combining the document with aesthetics, emphasized by the efforts of

Goesta Hellner to make an archaeological photograph look “simple” and easily understandable, imitating “natural” lighting. While he was working on the Acropolis as photographer of the German Archaeological Institute, Hellner changed the previous dramatisation of dark backgrounds and strong shadows, into a new approach in depicting sculpture. Clear and simple photographs, full of information and at the same time signed discreetly by the photographer’s preparation. A white cloth would be the background of the Caryatids. The process took place at night, with the use of artificial lighting, diffused by umbrellas; (fig. 28-30) a simple

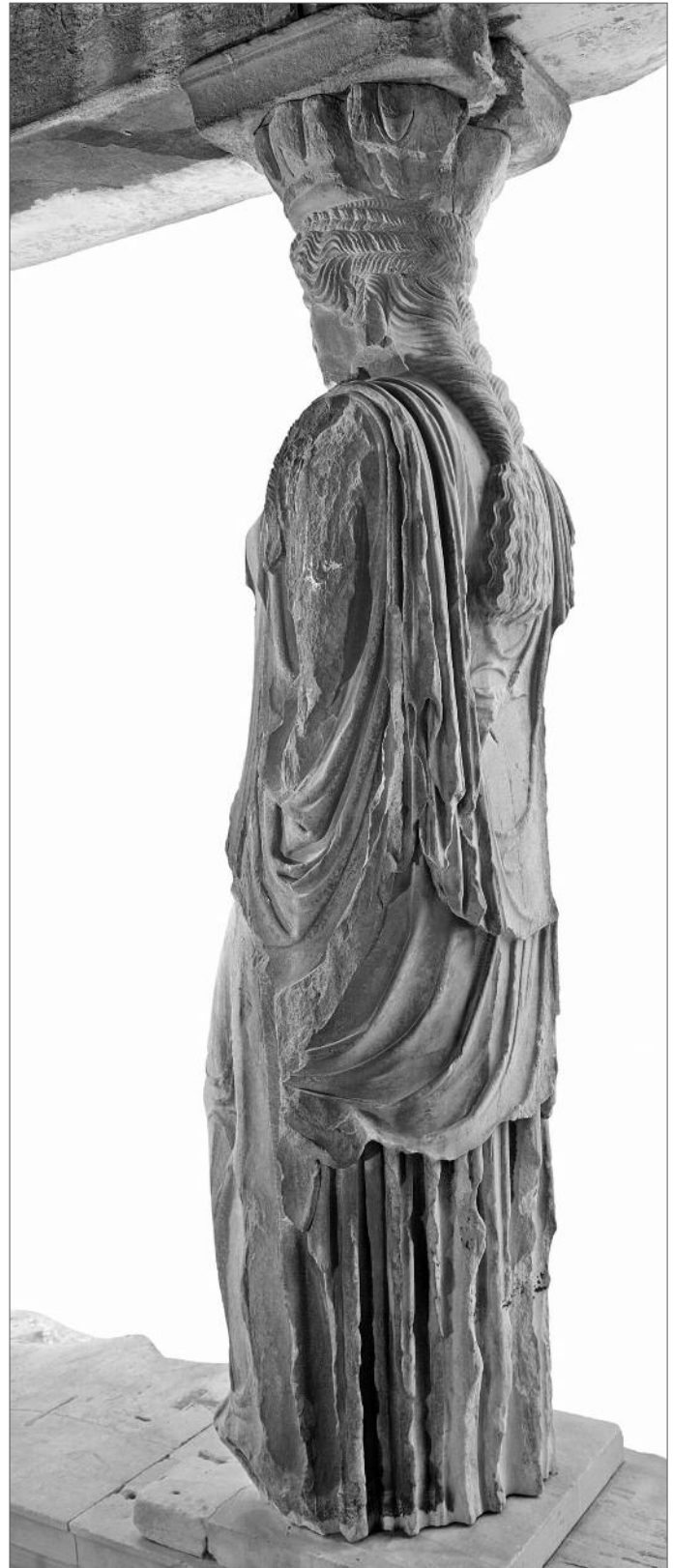
and “easy” photograph as a result of a difficult but wisely hidden process. The distinctive mark of Goesta Hellner enriched the way we see classical art and influenced our way of communicating notions.



28. *The photographic preparation at the porch of the Karyatids in 1966*



29. *Set up at the porch of the Karyatids by Goesta Hellner in 1966*



30. *Goesta Hellner. Karyatids, 1966*

The process inherent in the photographic depiction of antiquities comprises relatively common methods and ways of photographing, with subtle differences in the means, which are integrated in this creative approach. (fig. 31-35) Dangerous platforms and a safe environment for the same purpose, extreme ladders and safe light scaffolds along with cranes, the means always supported the intention of the photographers, no matter their differences or their dangers. The “will” comes first and the “can” follows.



31. *Frederic Boissonnas on a ladder ca.1910*



32. *Walter Hege photographing the Parthenon west frieze in 1928*



33. *Eva-Maria Czako-Stresow in Samos, 1959*



34. *Scaffolds and cranes during the restoration of the Parthenon, 1986*



35. *Using the crane for bird's eye views, ca 1987*

EPILOGUE

Archaeological photography follows a uniform path of documentation and creativity. Information coexists with the photographer's view. From the general archaeological landscape down to detail, description becomes analysis, getting closer to tangible matter and ancient craft. A sequence that characterizes the evolution of the creative photograph in archaeology and every so often forms a new vision, which bears the entire course of this historical narrative.

From the surprising photograph of a distant place we could not see, simply because we were not there, to the creative depiction of something we also could not see even if we *were* there, the adventure of photography has lasted over 150 years. From the simple recording of reality, to the faint communication of a feeling, photography marked our knowledge for over a century and a half.

Through its truth or its lies, photography transformed our mind to a mental "store room" full of images. Many of them stimulate our memories while others sting our senses. These are the creative photographs. Good or bad, simple or difficult, they are practically everywhere.

In applied photography and in particular, in archaeological photography, things were a little more complicated. Photographers of antiquities had to deal with art itself. They had to fit their own distinct presence into a frame along with great art.