

Amateurism and Cultural Change

Photography in Germany and Austria (1880–1900)

Christian Joschke

Christian Joschke, temporary teaching and research assistant at the University of Strasbourg 2, is working on a dissertation at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, on amateur photography in Germany around 1900. He is the author of several articles on the subject, including "La photographie, la ville et ses notables, Hambourg, 1893" (*Études Photographiques*, 17, October 2005).

Between 1880 and 1900 the practice of photography expanded considerably and the difference between professionals and amateurs became more pronounced. While professionals' attention became increasingly focused on their commercial interests, amateurs were developing networks characterized by a great openness, in which ideas were exchanged and images circulated. Within these social contexts various specialized areas of photography were able to communicate with one another. The scientists relied on amateurs to publish their discoveries and spread awareness of their innovations outside the academic arena. Amateur clubs and journals provided a forum where the Pictorialists could show their works, publish their theories, and reflect the different tendencies of art photography, notably the "idealist" preference for blurred images and the "naturalist" use of sharp focus.¹ Interest in image technology and the existence of social structures for the spread of photographic practice combined to generate a cultural dynamic involving many fields of visual culture.

Amateurism, which is often associated with a "democratization" of photography symbolized by the emergence of the Kodak camera,² was seen by historians as a parallel process, separate from the artistic and scientific movements. The divisions between historical fields imposed different kinds of investigation according to whether the focus was on the relationship between photography and private life,³ photography and art,⁴ or photography and science.⁵ But to segment photographic practice in this way is to forget that the social space, climate of

competitiveness, and structures for the exchange and circulation of images were common to all fields. The different developments can all be linked once their function within society is revealed. Studying amateur photographers means above all studying a new technological culture promoted by a middle class that had been educated in the school of "realities," for whom it offered a crucial means of cultural legitimization, analogous to the introduction of science and technology courses into secondary schools.⁶

It is this social aspect that we shall consider here. Taking Germany and Austria as our examples, two countries differently affected by the second industrial revolution, we shall examine the social logic of amateurism at the time of its emergence.⁷ For new players were positioning themselves around this new object, and configurations on the cultural chessboard produce discourses. After examining these amateur discourses to identify their common cultural characteristics, we shall consider the two networks of Vienna and Berlin, revealing two very different logics of amateurism in its relationship to cultural change.

In March–April 1886 a series of discussions held at the Photographische Gesellschaft in Wien (Vienna Photographic Society) led to the definition of what was then understood by the term "amateur," and about a year later supporters of amateurism founded the Club der Amateur Photographen in Wien. The process was launched at the general meeting of the Photographische Gesellschaft in Wien on March 2, 1886 in an address by Carl Srna, an Austrian civil servant who had joined the Society a year earlier.⁸ In

Rudolf Dührkoop
Untitled, 1915
Detail (see fig. 72)

his "Lecture on the development of amateurism in Austria and Germany in the field of photography and its consequences for professional practice," Srna responded to concerns expressed by professional photographers, who saw amateurism as a threat to their business. Srna's primary aim was to dissociate amateur practice from that of professionals in order to reassure the professional landscape photographers. But the debate soon heated up when "reservations" were expressed by a professional worried that "some amateurs might put their photographs on the market and, since they neither pay tax nor work for the public benefit, serious competition might emerge to the detriment of professional photographers, and particularly landscape photographers."⁹ To this another "amateur," Lieutenant Oscar Krifka, responded in a lecture given on April 6, 1886. In his view there was no reason to worry, still less to limit the freedom of amateurs to take photographs, since it was this freedom that had guaranteed innovation in the sector. He invoked the great names of amateurism, inventors of the most celebrated photographic processes, figures who gave the still new history of photography its reference points. For Krifka the amateurs had long ago won their spurs.

Today it is hard to imagine that professional photographers faced any real threat from amateurs, or even that they believed they did. What is clear, however, is that certain self-styled "amateur" photographers used this complaint as a pretext to identify a set of amateur practices and to give cohesion to the social group formed around them. It was not for nothing that Krifka entitled his lecture "What is an amateur photographer?"¹⁰ His aim was first to identify a general phenomenon, and to this end he emphasized the generic suffixes of terms such as "Amateurwesen" (amateurism) and "Amateurschaft" (amateurhood). Secondly he described approaches characteristic of the new amateurs, including scientists, explorers, landscape photographers, and simple Sunday photographers. From whichever angle it was looked at, the debate seemed to be paving the way for a new form of social grouping and this group's new identity justified the establishment of a club to serve its new interests. In his lecture Krifka cautiously announced this project: a new club was to be set up "in the bosom of the Society, of which it will be an integral part."¹¹

Leaving aside the subtle differences perceptible in the spontaneous sociology expressed in these lectures—primarily differences of approach—the emerging group appeared very cohesive, as Krifka's rather convoluted explanation of amateurism stresses:

By the term amateur I mean a gentleman who, whether to ennoble and improve or simply to

entertain himself, cultivates a sport or art in his leisure time and expends all his energy in following its development and improving his practice by imitating models, or who strives to be of use to all through his disinterested willingness to communicate his discoveries, without hoping to make a living from them, since otherwise his aspiration toward the ideal would be transformed into a drive for profit, pleasure into business, and then he would exchange his right to the title of amateur for the right to a tax form.¹²

Here we can clearly sense the desire to exclude no one, to place the dilettante and the inventor on an equal footing. To this end Krifka emphasized two characteristics common to amateurs, the first being non-lucrative activity. For, as he went on to explain, the amateur was motivated by "a love of the thing itself." So, following the traditional definition of the amateur as one who loves, for Krifka one component of amateurism was that one gave of oneself. But, rather than seeing leisure and lack of financial interest as purely internal, secret motivations, Krifka gave them a social dimension, borrowing a definition from Victor Silberer, editor-in-chief of the sports newspaper the *Allgemeine Sportzeitung*, who had said that "it is the individual's motivations and not his social standing that should make him an amateur."¹³ This second characteristic enabled amateurism to ignore the social distinctions of an extremely hierarchical society such as that of Austria, whose every aspect was governed by titles and socio-professional categories. As Thorstein Veblen notes, the practice of leisure pursuits required ostentatious wealth, an endless outlay of time and money, and the selection of an activity judged to be worthy in contrast with unworthy activities.¹⁴ Amateurism reinforced one limitation—the visibility of leisure—at the expense of another—title or socio-professional category—enabling the middle classes to band together around a middle-class culture.¹⁵

These remarks made in response to the concerns of professional photographers justified the creation of many clubs and journals for amateur photographers in an area extending far beyond Vienna itself. On January 1, 1887, Paul Liesegang and Julius Schnauss published the first issue of *Der Amateur Photograph*, the German equivalent of the British journal. In his editorial, Schnauss also sought to ennoble the figure of the amateur, emphasizing his "love of the thing itself" and the social characteristics of amateurism. Amateurs, he said, are either people "who in reality belong to other professions and enjoy their hobby only in their free time" or "the happy minority of men who have nothing else to do but live on a private

income and [who] can devote all their energy *con amore* to our art and [who] will soon see it as more than a simple pastime.”¹⁶ Schnauss’s editorial is the first of a long list of articles in favor of amateurism to be published in the photographic journals. And while it is true that, as the number of amateurs and clubs increased, so a rhetoric of distinction emphasized various differences and specificities and criticized the mediocre work of amateurs who lacked ambition, the shared bases of amateurism were never challenged.

So the social characteristics of amateur photography lead us to qualify our picture of the spread of photography. We cannot really describe it as a gradual or uniform expansion, since the new hobby was taken up by a number of identifiable social groupings in Vienna, including state employees, engineers, and the military. Moreover, the practice of amateur photography tended to alter social configurations, setting aside the hierarchies imposed by socio-professional categories. There was a coherent network, identifiable by the social markers of a leisured class and the emergence of structures for the exchange of information and ideas. This makes it easier to understand the competitive climate in which the great names of Pictorialism were working. We now need to investigate the way in which these social forms provided a context for cultural production and the extent to which photography clubs were prepared to act as a force for cultural change.

In January 1894, seven years after it was founded, the *Photographische Rundschau*, organ of the Club der Amateur Photographen in Wien (which had been renamed the Wiener Camera-Klub in 1893), moved its headquarters to Berlin and Richard Neuhaus took over as editor from Charles Scolik.¹⁷ Scolik certainly did not have a poor record. In a few years the Viennese club had attained undeniable importance. A year after its foundation in 1888, it had organized an exhibition of amateur photographs at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Museum of Art and Crafts) in Vienna. Moreover, it enjoyed the valuable support of two members of the Rothschild family and a section of the Viennese aristocracy. The Club had the patronage of Archduchess Maria Teresa and its honorary members included her husband, Archduke Karl Ludwig of Austria, brother of the emperor and father of Franz Ferdinand, her son Otto Franz Josef, Ferdinand IV, Grand-Duke of Tuscany, his son Leopold Ferdinand, Don Miguel II, Duke of Braganza and son of King Miguel I, and Prince Philip of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Duke of Saxony. Their assistance and some sizeable donations (from Carl Srna, Federico Mallmann, and Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild) provided the association with a considerable amount of property in the form of its own premises, fully equipped laboratories, and a library enriched by the

purchase of Emil Hornig’s private library of around a hundred books and comprising 287 volumes and 58 Austrian and international journals in 1891. The Club’s membership had increased, rising to 285 in 1889, and its international network was already well consolidated, with a list of corresponding members in 1891 that included George Davison, President of the London Camera Club, Charles W. Hastings, editor-in-chief of *The Amateur Photographer*, and “Arthur” (*sic*) Londe (actually Albert Londe), vice-president of the Société d’excursions d’amateurs photographes in Paris. Alfred Stieglitz was on the list of ordinary members. Lastly the Club could pride itself on having organized the first salon of art photography, again at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Vienna in 1891. By exhibiting photographs from many countries and revealing two aesthetic “tendencies”—“idealism” and “realism,” or rather soft and sharp focus—it had taken a considerable step toward obtaining recognition for photography as a legitimate artistic practice.¹⁸

So the journal’s relocation to Berlin did not come about because the Viennese club had run out of steam. The report for the year 1893 contains a brief reference to the move:¹⁹ since the Club could no longer “cover the life of the Club to the extent that our interests required, several of its members decided to found their own organ.” And indeed in the same year F. Schiffner, a teacher at a professional school and author of articles on photogrammetry, took up the editorship of a new journal, the *Wiener Photographische Blätter*. The abandonment of the *Photographische Rundschau* was a positively motivated choice. For greater clarity we shall look again at the chronology.

The journal was founded in 1887 as the organ of the Club. After being funded for a year by Carl Srna and Federico Mallmann, in 1888 it found a publisher in Halle an der Saale in Germany. Wilhelm Knapp was an important scientific publisher whose brother Carl was directly interested in photography. So for five years the journal was written in Vienna by Club members, published in Halle an der Saale, and distributed in Germany and Austria. Its columns were filled with reports on the Club’s innovative activities, reviews of exhibitions, and a great deal of advice for amateurs, supplemented by a few more technical articles. But in August 1893, for unknown reasons, almost certainly at the publisher’s instigation, the journal grew another head when Richard Neuhaus in Berlin began sharing the role of editor-in-chief with Charles Scolik in Vienna. At the same time new names appeared on the editorial committee, including Bruno Meyer and Adolf Miethe. Franz Goerke, also from Berlin, published articles and reviews, notably of the major exhibition in Hamburg in October 1893.²⁰

The journal had opened its doors to a new network of Berlin photographers. But this was not the small circle that Alfred Stieglitz had known during his years in Berlin, grouped around Professor Vogel's Society for the Encouragement of Photography. Berlin now had new clubs, including the Deutscher Verein von Freunden der Photographie (German Association of the Friends of Photography) and the Freie Photographische Vereinigung (Free Photographic Union). Most of the people now involved with the Viennese journal were associated with this second group, which had been founded in 1889 by two anthropologists and physiologists, Richard Neuhaus and Gustav Fritsch.

The change of personnel corresponded to a change of editorial line. In the first issue of 1893 the address to readers emphasized the journal's new directions:

Looking back over the year that has just ended, we feel we must respond to the criticism leveled at us from all directions, according to which "the orientation of our journal has become too scientific." We concede that a reader might set aside a particular issue, disappointed to find too little practical advice, and we are certainly not saying that we meet the demands of those readers who turn away in horror from all that is not practical in nature. On the contrary, we always strive to deserve the esteem of all. A journal like ours pursues other, more noble ends than those that can be attained by invariably publishing advice and instructions. Its duty is rather to give space in its columns to the work of exceptional men of science who, directly or indirectly, initiate ground-breaking advances in the field of photography, opening up endless perspectives of work and success. We accomplish a second important task in making the artistic character of photography a question of general interest and in reflecting all that leads to new avenues in this area. Using all means available to encourage and cultivate photography as both science and art, following its movements and acting as its interpreter, these things seem to us to constitute a laudable undertaking, for which we are glad to work.²¹

Eighteen ninety-three marked a change for the journal, managed by its editors. In solemn, measured tones—"We concede ...," "On the contrary ...," "... these things seem to us ..."—of a quite different style from the complicated sentences of Oscar Krifka and Carl Srna, the author of this editorial (probably

Richard Neuhaus) set out higher ambitions, "other, more noble ends." The journal's function was not to supply ever more "advice and instructions" for idle camera users, nor even to strengthen the ties between the members of a small group around specialist knowledge and a select hobby. Its aim was to make the public aware of significant advances in science and even more to "initiate ground-breaking advances" through photography.

The reason for the journal's definitive move to Berlin is easier to understand. The photographers of the two capitals did not share the same vision of amateurism.²² For the Viennese members of the Club der Amateur Photographen, this socialized aspect of leisure photography was a way of legitimizing its artistic character. We should recall that the exhibition of 1891 sought to "present photography as art."²³ By enrolling the support of museums and critics and concentrating the club's activities around this single aim, they hoped to overturn the restrictive criteria of those with the power to confer artistic legitimacy.²⁴ To this end they had to separate the destiny of the arts from that of the sciences. But for the Berlin groups this separation gave photography too confined a role. They needed to build a shared culture, mixing science with art and transcending the divisions between the two domains. For them the network of amateurs offered the possibility of building a shared culture of images, fostered by the popularization of science and consolidated by a practice that paid attention to "advances" in every domain.

This "noble end" proudly proclaimed by Richard Neuhaus was to be the fruit of a productive encounter between the scientific and industrial élite and the network of amateur photographers. For the new élite the amateurs represented the hope of interaction with a new middle class. They were already working on several parallel fronts to establish a lay scientific culture, combating the influence of Catholic orthodoxy, fighting for the primacy of the natural sciences in education, establishing universities open to all, and actively working to ensure that women had access to work.²⁵ In this complex of cultural ambitions, photography offered a way of discussing the new horizons of science and art²⁶ with a wider public who had studied science and technology at school.²⁷ The natural sciences were becoming the reference point of a newly emerging culture that had photography as its most favored support. So it went against the grain to seek to separate the arts and the sciences; Helmholtz's optics had a right to a place in the list of criteria for aesthetic judgment, and the Berliners soon found a rational solution to the conflict between naturalism and idealism, drawing on the physiology of perception.²⁸

Amateur photography fulfilled the scientists'

hopes because they were seeking contact with the public.²⁹ In their desire to prepare the sciences for cultural hegemony—to ensure that all debates and every cultural innovation, in both arts and sciences, emerged in a scientific context—they had noticeably expanded the public space of science. Berlin's doctors, biologists, anthropologists, chemists, and astronomers had conquered the academic arena, and in so doing considerably amplified the influence of their debates. First, scientific controversies often found a clear echo in the journals and newspapers of the educated middle class,³⁰ particularly since the sciences were perceived—along with the science of history—as the main tool for conferring legitimacy on a class educated outside the élitist system based around the “humanities,” in other words philosophy and the ancient languages.³¹ Secondly, in the field of scientific research, the new élite had partially reduced the role of the universities and strengthened that of the learned societies. These societies admitted self-taught amateurs as active researchers, perceiving them as contributing to innovation rather than simply as a relay to the wider public. So, for example, the Berlin Anthropological Society saw itself as an inclusive public space, open to “non-scientists.”³²

Indeed it was two members of the Anthropological Society, Richard Neuhauss and Gustav Fritsch, who founded the *Freie Photographische Vereinigung* and decided to join forces with the amateur photographers' clubs throughout Germany. In subsequent years the *Photographische Rundschau* considerably increased the number of affiliated clubs (eleven in 1894, twenty-two in 1896, twenty-one in 1898, and forty-one in 1900). This strengthened the contact between a new “reality-based middle class” who had had a scientific education and the new scientific élite of doctors, anthropologists, astronomers, and chemists. Through this journal scientists could inform readers of the results of their discoveries and, at the same time, observe the consequences of amateur appropriation of technological and scientific innovation. For the scientists amateurism was a means of reinforcing what they termed the “community of intellectuals.”

Like scientific photography, the Pictorial movement benefited from a climate of competitiveness and a rise of amateurism that went largely unacknowledged by the illustrious men of the day. This rise provides at least a partial explanation for the fact that photography became the channel for debates about a new visual culture, in art as in science. The term “democratization,” unclear when applied to cultural practices, has proved inappropriate to characterize this competitiveness. The development of amateur photography came about according to a highly codified social logic, with an emphasis on the need for financial outlay and free time, and a distinction between worthy and unworthy tasks; in other words, the logic of a leisured class. But while this logic provided the common foundation for amateurism throughout German-speaking Europe, its cultural significance differed according to whether it was promoted by the Berlin circles or those of Vienna. The palette of cultural references initially seemed very different: in Vienna art became the reference point, to the detriment of the natural sciences, while in Berlin the sciences provided the bases of a twofold approach to visual culture, at once aesthetic and scientific. This first difference concealed another that was less explicit, concerning the conception of amateurism and its links to the authorities of cultural production. The Viennese amateur circles cultivated worldliness and aristocratic patronage, partially neglecting the culture of debate and the exchange of ideas. In the Berlin circles, by contrast, amateurism stood for the productive interaction between an élite and its public, and the hope of seeing the participation of all in the development of a common culture. In Berlin, at a time when political liberalism was already in decline,³³ the liberal ethos of the scientists continued to justify the consolidation of a public forum and the search for a cultural consensus around the production of images.³⁴ It was in reaction against this consensual basis, this academicism without academies, that the secessionist currents emerged,³⁵ criticizing the mediocrity of middle-class culture, condemning philistinism, and giving legitimacy to art photography in the eyes of precisely those authorities it thought to overturn.³⁶