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The Half-Life & After-Life of New Media

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The Half-Life and After-Life of New Media¹



Figure 1. Tommaso Cuccioni (1790–1864), an early large-format photograph of the Coliseum in Rome, 1859–1860 (58” x 27”), The Providence Athenaeum, Providence, Rhode Island.

It is fitting to think of the half-life of new media using the time-based metaphor of radioactive decay. As a metaphor, an object’s half-life can be a useful way to talk about the potent technological modernity of new media and, like Walter Benjamin’s well-known notion of the aura, call attention to an object’s performativity. However, Benjamin’s aura remains a constant reminder of irrevocable originality whereas remarking on half-life references a quality that changes over time. But what happens after the rhetorical impact of being new has run its course? What is the life expectancy of once-new media and what of its after-life? Both literally and figuratively, when (if ever) does new media become “decayed waste” and where should it go? What are the challenges contemporary archivists face handling decayed media?

¹ I would like to thank Michael Lotstein and the *JCAS*’s three anonymous referees for their helpful comments, as well as Marlyn Miller for editing. This essay develops research begun in 2010 when I guest-curated an exhibition on the rediscovered Coliseum photograph for the Providence Athenaeum. This project would not have been possible without the collegial support of Kate Wodehouse, director of Collections and Library Services, Providence Athenaeum; Christina Bevilacqua, director of Public Engagement, Providence Athenaeum; Holly Snyder, curator, American Historical Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University; Jordan Goffin, special collections librarian, Providence Public Library; Alma Davenport, professor emerita, History of Photography, University of Massachusetts; Lisa Long Feldmann, archivist, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Dr. Kathleen M. Coleman, James Loeb Professor of the Classics, Harvard University; Dr. Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, professor of Classical Studies, Wesleyan University; and Paul Messier, director of the Lens Media Lab, Yale Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (IPCH), Yale University.

This essay probes these dilemmas through a half-life case study. In 1860, a five-foot-wide cutting-edge photograph by the Italian photographer Tommaso Cuccioni (1790–1864) was donated by a young *New York Times* art critic based in Italy to a small New England cultural institution (fig. 1). At some point in the twentieth century the monumental photograph became no longer relevant and was entombed in an undocumented and unlikely storage location within the building; it remained buried there until a surprise rediscovery in 2010. This essay establishes the new media valence of Tommaso Cuccioni's large-format Coliseum print within the context of experimental 1850s photography and shows how the artist consciously participated in new media photography as a deeply disruptive cultural practice. The focus then shifts to a reception history of this one photograph within one institution from 1860–2015. It offers an exemplary case study illuminating the vagaries of reception and how decayed new media challenge the archives.

1850s Experimental Photography as Disruptive New Media

The term “new media” is deployed here to refer to 1850s experimental photography as well as any technologically advanced new aesthetic communication genre that is seen by its original public as culturally disruptive to existing practices. Also relevant are new media's associations with transformative democratizing possibilities and new notions of representation, scale, skill, and authorship. In 2015, new media's common contemporary reference is to disruptive new *digital* media and information and communications technologies (ICT). However, as a type of historical rhetoric, new media is self-defining as disruptively new, and more aligned than not with modernism's progressive trajectory and the benevolent heroism of the techno-scientific avant-garde.² Thus, the metaphor of radioactive half-life is a particularly relevant broadening way of discussing the problem of new media for the contemporary archive, precisely because the notion of half-life decay foregrounds the unsustainable part of the trajectory from disruptively new to safe-guarded troubled relic—or is it waste?³

Scholarship has established Tommaso Cuccioni (1790–1864) as an important early photographer working in Rome.⁴ This essay places the emphasis on his agency as an innovative new media

² For the historiography of “new media,” see Wendy Chun, ed., *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015), and Bill Kovarik, *Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2011).

³ On photography and cultural disruption, see Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51, and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For “disruptive innovation” as a theory of economic change, see the work of Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997); “The Great Disruption,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 2 (2001): 80–95; and *The Innovator's Solution* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2003). Christensen's recent work addresses disruptive change in the education industry and “nonconsumption” communities; for an overview, see “Disrupting How and Where We Learn,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 92, no. 4 (2010): 32–38.

⁴ For early photography in Rome, Tommaso Cuccioni, and the changing Grand Tour *vedute* trade, see Wendy M. Watson, *Images of Italy: Photography in the Nineteenth Century* (South Hadley, MA: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 1980), 65; Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, “A Perfect Ruin: Nineteenth-Century Views of the Coliseum,” *Arion* ser. 3, vol. 2, no. 1 (1992): 115–42; Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, “Rambles in Rome,” in *Britannia, Italia, Germania: Taste and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Carol Richardson and Graham Smith (Edinburgh: Varie, 2001), 6–22; Claire L. Lyons, John K. Papadopoulos, Lindsey S. Stewart, and Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, eds., *Antiquity and Photography: Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 18, 196, 200; William Vance, “The Coliseum: American Uses of an Imperial Image,” in *Roman Images*, ed. A. Patterson

practitioner helping to reshape public culture. In 1852, the traditionally trained Cuccioni redirected his career as a successful art engraver toward the still emerging and experimental medium of photography (figs. 2–3). This redirection to embrace new media can be interpreted as a simple market-based response to the rise of middle-class tourism and changing tastes. Or, we can thoughtfully consider one artist’s response to disruptive new technology and attend closely to what his work can tell us about moments of uncertainty and change. The take-away conclusion here is that Cuccioni memorably pushed the envelope of scale in architectural photography and participated internationally in exhibitions such as that sponsored by the Société Française de la Photographie (SFP)—an institution founded in 1854 to both advance the field of photography and document the medium’s history of innovation through the establishment of an archive.

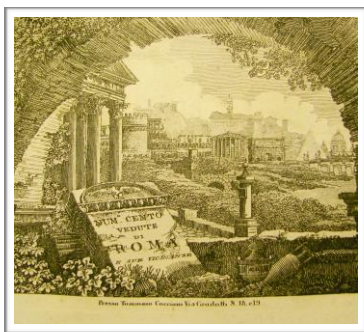


Figure 2, *above left*. In the 1830s and 1840s, Tommaso Cuccioni was known as a producer and dealer of engravings and prints near the Spanish Steps, first at Via della Croce and then 18–19 Via Condotti, Rome. Reproduced here is a small (10 x 24 cm / 3.9” x 9.4”) plate from a book of *vedute* (views of Rome) he printed in the 1840s. From Tommaso Cuccioni, *Numero cento vedute di Roma e sue vicinanze* [Rome]: Presso Tommaso Cuccioni, Via Condotti, n. 18 e 19, [184?]. (John Hay Library, Brown University) Figure 3, *above right*. In the 1850s, Cuccioni began an artistic conversation with the aesthetic possibilities of photography as new media. His artistic reinvention occurred when this traditionally trained engraver was in his sixties and seventies. (*View of the Coliseum*, c. 1858, gold-toned albumen print, 22.8 x 31.5 cm / 8.9” x 12.4”. Wikimedia Commons.)

From 1852 until his death in 1864, Cuccioni exhibited innovative large-format photographs at important international exhibitions in Paris (1855, 1859), London (1862), Edinburgh, and Dublin.⁵ In particular, Cuccioni’s views of the Coliseum were considered “magnificent” and “unique for their size and execution.”⁶ They were also extremely expensive, costing ten times as

(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 105–40; Pietro Becchetti, *Rome in Early Photographs: The Age of Pius IX* (Copenhagen: The Thorvaldsen Museum, 1977), 34, 42, 48, nos. 46–50, 106, 118; Pietro Becchetti, *Fotografi e fotografia in Italia, 1839–1880* (Rome: Quasar, 1978), 78; Pietro Becchetti, *La fotografia a Roma dalle origini al 1915*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Columbo, 1997): 293–94. For a concise reference biography, see Kathleen Howe, “Tommaso Cuccioni,” in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, ed. John Hannavy (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 1:354; Marco C. Antonetto, “Tommaso Cuccioni,” at http://www.luminous-lint.com/s01/photographer/Tommaso_Cuccioni/A/, January 20, 2008, accessed May 27, 2010.

⁵ Antonetto, “Tommaso Cuccioni”; Hannavy, *Encyclopedia*, 1:354.

⁶ *A Handbook of Rome and Its Environs*, 8th ed. (London: John A. Murray, 1864), section 21. Cuccioni’s large-format photographs “in 2 and 3 pieces which join perfectly” are available at his shop near the Spanish Steps.

much as other fine-art photography on the market in Rome at this time.⁷ For comparison, consider that the sale of one large-format photograph could have kept an artist in a studio in Rome for almost a year.

Significantly, Cuccioni participated in the 1859 Exposition de la Société Française de la Photographié (SFP) in Paris, held adjacent to the official 1859 Art Salon.⁸ This was the tipping point that prompted Charles Baudelaire to famously denounce photography as a most disruptive cultural practice, declaring: “If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude, which is its natural ally.”⁹ In contrast, an art critic writing for the just-founded *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* specifically praised Cuccioni’s large-format photographs:

The **huge photographs** [*les immenses*] taken in Rome by M. Cuccioni, representing the *views of the Coliseum and the Forum*, the *Laocoon*, and the *Arch of Constantine*, are as significant in their scale and their success as in the grandeur of the memories they arouse. . . . The *View of the Forum*, whose three joined parts form a whole of 1 meter 60 centimeters in length by 68 centimeters in height, presented—in taking the picture and in joining the proofs—difficulties which have been overcome with the greatest happiness.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

The half-life case study of the Providence Athenaeum photograph begins its radiant narrative with the controversial prestige of this international 1859 new media exhibition in Paris. For some, Cuccioni’s large-format photographs signaled a disruptive cultural practice that a critic like Baudelaire would experience viscerally, like a toxic malady. But for others, like the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* critic, Cuccioni’s work impacted public conversation precisely because of its new media engagement. *Here* was one of the new media heroes of modern life, fully exploiting the aesthetic possibilities of an emerging innovative technology that altered the relationship between the artist and his tools, and the artist and his publics.

⁷ See Alistair Crawford, “Robert Macpherson 1814–72, the Foremost Photographer of Rome,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 67 (1999): 353–409, and *A Handbook of Rome and Its Environs*, 5th ed. (London: John Murray, 1858), xix. Crawford suggests that Macpherson was possibly the most expensive photographer in Rome in 1857 because his selling prices began at one *scudo*, and this was higher than Cuccioni’s entry-level prices. However, Murray’s 1858 *Handbook of Rome* informs us that Cuccioni’s rare large-format photographs sold for five to ten *scudi*. To understand comparable market value at this time, Crawford provides relevant, helpful examples (Crawford, “Robert Macpherson,” 362).

⁸ Alain Jeanne-Michaud, “La Société Française de Photographié,” in *France Photographié*, no. 176 (April 2002). Catalogue annuelle de exposition de la SFP, 3. *Catalogue de la troisième exposition de la Société française de Photographié* (1859). See also Louis Figuier, *La Photographie au Salon de 1859* (Paris: Hachette, 1860).

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1859: The Modern Public and Photography,” in *Art in Paris, 1845–1862*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965). First appeared in *Le Boulevard* (September 14, 1862).

¹⁰ Philippe Burty, “Exposition de la Société Française de Photographié,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, May 15, 1859, 214. This important art journal was founded in 1859. See also Gabriel P. Weisberg, *The Independent Critic: Philippe Burty and the Visual Arts of Mid-Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Lang, 1993).

The Providence Athenaeum photograph is an early wet-plate collodion negative printed with silver and other metals added to achieve more tonal warmth.¹¹ The exposure time is a short 45 seconds to one minute.¹² The large-format photograph is composed by taking three shots on large glass plates, each about 55 cm x 70 cm, and then expertly seaming the prints together to achieve the illusion that only one colossal negative was used to create an image approximately five feet wide by 28 inches high.¹³ The dimensions of the Coliseum photograph sent to the Providence Athenaeum in 1860 (by an art critic) are almost identical to the *immense* photographs Cuccioni exhibited in 1859 in Paris at the Exposition de la Société Française de la Photographié. Was the Providence Athenaeum's Coliseum photograph purchased by the donor from the 1859 Paris Exposition? This questions awaits further research.¹⁴ Regardless, Cuccioni likely only created a very limited edition of these technically complex, large-format Coliseum prints and this is the only one known to have a documented date.¹⁵ In 1859, the large-format Coliseum photograph was experimental new media pushing the envelope.

Institutional Archives and the Iconography of a Gift

Institutional archival records prove conclusively that by October 1860 Tommaso Cuccioni's monumental photograph of the Coliseum was in the collection of the historic Providence Athenaeum membership library in Providence, Rhode Island.¹⁶ This archival documentation and provenance is important because it dates this specific photograph and allows a reading of it within the context of experimental new media developments of 1859–1860 and a critic's mediating translation of that context.

As a first example, consider how this documented early date amplifies the significance of the donor, who was an art critic, not a tourist. The Cuccioni photograph was donated by Albert J. Jones (1821–1887), a Providence native and emerging international art critic based in Europe (fig. 4).¹⁷ In 1859–1860, he leveraged his growing portfolio of writing as an independent art critic to become a *New York Times* correspondent and art critic, and for the ensuing two decades wrote about seventy essays on the American sculptors working in Italy during the seminal period of the 1860s and 1870s. In this body of work, Jones advocated successfully for public art

¹¹ Preliminary conclusions courtesy of Paul Messier, currently director of the Lens Media Lab, Yale Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (IPCH), Yale University. I would especially like to thank Paul Messier for his enthusiastic discussion of the Coliseum photograph during his August 10, 2010 courtesy inspection of the photograph on site at the Providence Athenaeum.

¹² Preliminary conclusions offered by Alma Davenport, professor emerita of Photography History, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, October 13, 2015.

¹³ Antonetto "Tommaso Cuccioni"; Messier interview, 2010.

¹⁴ Antonetto, in "Tommaso Cuccioni," states that the Italian historian of early photography, Pietro Becchetti, owns Cuccioni's account books, but the author of this essay has not had the opportunity to consult these records.

¹⁵ Messier interview, 2010.

¹⁶ *The Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the Directors of the Providence Athenaeum, to the Proprietors, Submitted Monday September 24, 1860* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1860), and J. Dunham Hedge, "Report of Donations to the Providence Athenaeum during the Month of September 1860" (October 1, 1860). (Providence Athenaeum Institutional Archives)

¹⁷ Nancy Austin, "The Jones Bequest Lawsuit and the Meaning of a Museum," in *Infinite Radius: Founding Rhode Island School of Design*, ed. Dawn Barrett and Andrew Martinez (Providence, RI: Rhode Island School of Design, 2008): 218–40; Nancy Austin, "Towards a Genealogy of Visual Culture at the Rhode Island School of Design, 1875–1900," PhD diss., Brown University, 2009.

commissions, the need to establish American design schools, and an American Academy in Rome.¹⁸

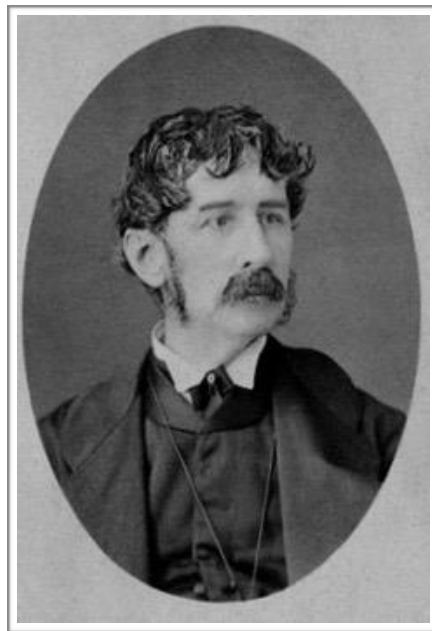


Figure 4. The emerging international art critic, Albert J. Jones (1821–1887), donated the Cuccioni photograph in 1860 to the Providence Athenaeum. Before moving to Italy in 1854 at age thirty-three, Jones had been an active board member at this membership library and cultural hub, located at 251 Benefit St. in Providence, Rhode Island near Brown University. (Albert J. Jones, 1871 Carte de Visite, Providence Public Library, Providence, Rhode Island)

Jones was a contemporary of the better-known American art critic, James Jackson Jarves (1818–1888), as well as John Ruskin (1819–1900), both of whom he knew. Like them, Jones sometimes wrote under a pseudonym, sometimes anonymously. In fact, Jones may be the first American sculpture critic to reach a national and international audience. Through this influence and his personal contacts, Jones was able to direct the outcome of many important American public sculpture commissions in ways that are still not appreciated.¹⁹

Before moving to Italy, Jones was a Providence Athenaeum board member at the beloved neighborhood library he had been shaped by since young adulthood.²⁰ In September 1853, Jones

¹⁸ Nancy Austin, “[Founding the American Academy in Rome](#),” *The American Academy in Rome Blog*, May 24, 2010, and “[Tracing the AAR’s First Twenty Years: The Villa Aurora](#),” *The American Academy in Rome Blog*, March 16, 2010. [www.aarome.org]

¹⁹ Nancy Austin, “Albert J. Jones: The New York Times’ Sculpture Critic in Italy, 1860–1876,” unpublished paper delivered at “City and the Book IV: Florence and the Americans,” The English Cemetery, Florence, Italy, October 12, 2008. See mention in the *Times Literary Supplement*: Christopher Stace, “Island of the Dead,” February 27, 2009, 15.

²⁰ Albert J. Jones is first listed as an Athenaeum proprietor in 1844 when he was twenty-three. This was two years after checking out his first books, which included the popular title *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* by Thomas DeQuincey. Jones served on the board as secretary from September 17, 1849, to May 1, 1854, when he left for Europe. Jones was succeeded on the board by John Gorham, the silver manufacturer.

joined Providence Athenaeum colleagues to participate in the inaugural American librarians founding gathering in New York City.²¹ The next year, in 1854, Jones moved first to Paris and then to Rome.²² He began writing about contemporary art immediately, and befriended artists across Europe. The evolving work of artists in their studios remained his focus for the rest of his life. At Jones's eventual death in 1887, after his efforts to establish an American Academy at his villa in Rome failed, he left a major bequest to the people of his native state. This gift led to the founding of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, the first public art museum in the state.²³

This evidence suggests that Jones's ambitions for art matched Cuccioni's, especially in 1859–1860.²⁴ Cuccioni was clearly reaching out internationally to position himself as an innovative artist pushing the new medium of photography. Indeed, Cuccioni, Jones, and the Providence Athenaeum were all culturally progressive practitioners in the 1850s. And so, just as the Providence Athenaeum had been sure to obtain a first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* at publication in 1855, so too would Jones want to send back to his home cultural center a look at the future of photography—an enabling technology of the future, like steam power or a new poetic rhetoric. Jones's 1860 gift to the Providence Athenaeum makes the Cuccioni the first large-format art photograph owned by a cultural institution in Rhode Island, or possibly, New England.²⁵ Thus, although the subject matter of the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph seems to be that of the popular touristic “perfect ruin” admirably discussed by Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, perhaps we should be alert and attempt to see the image anew.²⁶ How is the medium the message?

This brings us to the second example of why the Providence Athenaeum institutional archive date of 1859–1860 matters. In 1980, Wendy M. Watson curated a ground-breaking exhibition on nineteenth-century Italian photography at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, and it included an anonymously loaned and unattributed Coliseum photograph that she dated to the 1860s (fig.

²¹ George Burwell Utley, *The Librarians' Conference of 1853: A Chapter in American Library History* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1951), 48–49.

²² Albert J. Jones did not arrive in Rome without contacts; his lifelong Benefit St. neighbor in Providence, Rhode Island was Nicholas Brown (1792–1859), then consul to Rome (1846 to 1854). The sources often note that Jones went to Europe “with a valuable library,” raising further questions about Jones's connections to the Browns, including Nicholas's brother, John Carter Brown II (1797–1874), one of the most important book collectors in the 1850s.

²³ Austin, “The Jones Bequest,” 218–40; Austin, “Friendship at the Shack,” public lecture at the American Academy in Rome, February 23, 2011.

²⁴ Antonetto, “Tommaso Cuccioni,” states that the Italian photography historian, Pietro Becchetti, owns Cuccioni's account books, but this author has not had the opportunity to consult these records, which might clarify Jones's professional relationship with Cuccioni, and further narrow the date of the Providence Athenaeum photograph.

²⁵ In 1860s Rhode Island this group would include the Providence Athenaeum, Brown University, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Newport Historical Society, and the Redwood Library (Newport). To date, there are no known counter-examples. One of this essay's anonymous readers suggested the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph (1860) may be the first large-format photograph in *any* New England collection.

²⁶ Szegedy-Maszak, “A Perfect Ruin,” 115–42. Further, Rome was not a likely tourist destination at this time because of political instability and fear of impending war in the Papal States. See, for example, Pericles [Thomas Tefft], “Scarcity of Americans at Rome,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1859, noting most Americans and Englishmen have “hurried away on account of the war.”

5).²⁷ Watson knew that only two artists could have created the seamless pictorial unity of this five-foot-wide photograph. Either it was Cuccioni, who died in 1864, or his associate and successor, Giuseppe Ninci. Only these men had the “equipment and technology.”²⁸ Almost certainly this Mount Holyoke Coliseum photograph is a later albumen print from the same glass negatives that Cuccioni used to create the earlier Providence Athenaeum version.²⁹ Because of the secure Providence dating and provenance, we can compare the two versions and make further observations about formal choices made in the Providence version that were altered in the later printing.



Figure 5. In 1980, a Mount Holyoke College Art Museum exhibition included this anonymous loan as catalogue number 101 (as noted in upper right corner). The curator, Wendy M. Watson, dates the albumen print to the 1860s and attributes it to either Cuccioni (d. 1864) or his successor Giuseppe Ninci. (Mount Holyoke College Art Museum Exhibition Catalogue, 1980)

Watson gives the Mount Holyoke dimensions as 148.5 cm x 68.6 cm and these are almost identical to the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph, which measures 147.3 cm x 68.6 cm.³⁰ That is, the widths are each about two inches shy of five feet. However, many subtle tonal differences can be noted that affect the overall impression of the image. Most notably, the tiny horse and buggy located in the piazza between the Meta Sudans and the Coliseum is a distinctly dark and realistically legible motif in the later one whereas in the Providence version this motif is a semi-transparent ghost image (figs. 1 and 5–8).

²⁷ Watson, *Images of Italy*, 65.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Email from this author to Wendy M. Watson, August 17, 2010.

³⁰ As part of a 2011 conservation program, the Providence Athenaeum photograph was digitally scanned by the Northeast Document Conservation Center to provide a high-resolution study copy. Records give 147.3 x 68.6 cm as the dimension of the scanned image area.

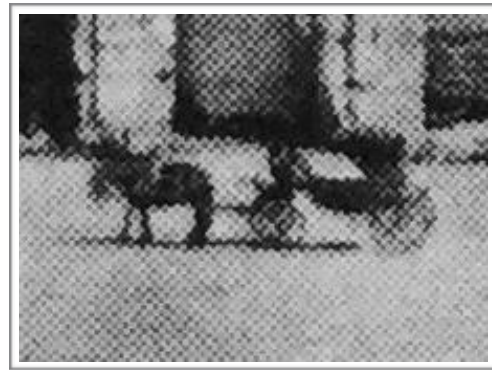
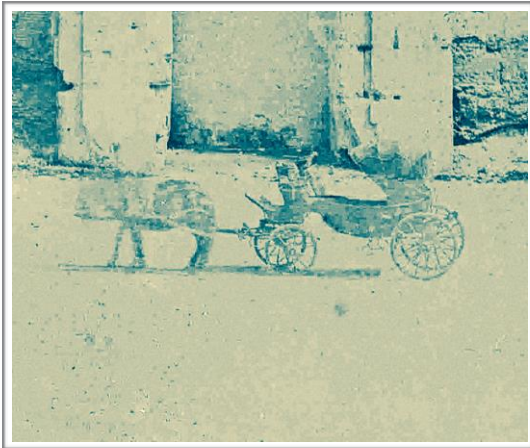


Figure 6, *above left*. Detail of horse and carriage in the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph by Cuccioni, documented 1859–1860. Figure 7, *above right*. Detail of horse and carriage in the Mount Holyoke Coliseum photograph by Cuccioni or Ninci, dated to c. 1860s. The two photographs were printed from the same glass plate and are the same size, but the Cuccioni Studio manipulated the plates differently during the material practice of printing. Thus, these two surviving prints from a series (estimated to be less than twenty) reveal significant formal differences in the details. The two photographs were almost certainly printed at different times; possibly the Mount Holyoke print was made after Cuccioni's death in 1864 by his successor, Ninci.



Figure 8. This is a close-up detail of the horse and carriage in the 1859–1860 Providence Athenaeum version. Note that the carriage bonnet is superimposed on the dark shadow line at the base of the building. This shows Cuccioni's complex manipulation of the printing process, possibly achieved by a double-exposure or through the use of a composite stamp.

What can we say about the inclusion of the horse and carriage in the composition to begin with? Clearly this nugget provides a human scale against the imperial ruins, a long-familiar compositional device in the *vedute* tradition.³¹ This inclusion also nods to the criticism that early architectural photography was austere of any sign of urban life—a condition

³¹ On the *vedute* tradition of tourist views of Rome, see Szegedy-Maszak, “A Perfect Ruin.”

necessitated by the long exposure times required by early photographic techniques. But this was changing with the introduction of collodion glass-plate negatives that permitted a shorter exposure time. A look at the tree movement (or lack thereof) in the Coliseum photograph suggests a short exposure time of perhaps forty-five seconds (fig. 9).³²

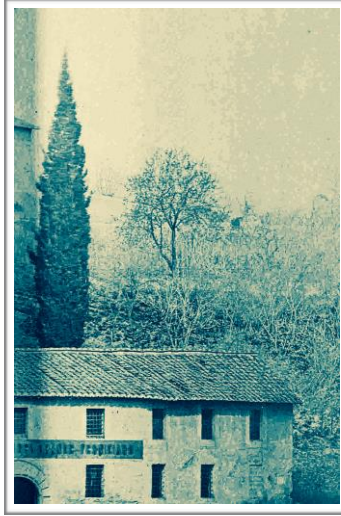


Figure 9. Glass-plate collodion negatives decreased exposure times to under one minute. This can be seen in the lack of tree movement in this detail from the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph, 1859–1860.

It is therefore all the more remarkable to discover the effort that went into Cuccioni's complex creative manipulation of the printing to achieve the image in the close-up detail of the 1859–1860 Providence Athenaeum photograph (fig. 8). The horse and carriage were introduced after an initial printing, either through a technically difficult and time-consuming double exposure or the use of some kind of photographically produced composite stamp. Further research will be needed to determine precisely how this was achieved. Most problematically from the point of view of photography's often presumed realism, the carriage bonnet was superimposed on the dark shadow line at the base of the building. Further, the shadows beneath the carriage are impossible, as is the perspective taken for the rear wheels relative to the front wheels. However, rather than interpret these qualities as regrettable mistakes, the context of the photograph's possible inclusion at the 1859 SFP exhibition in Paris, the donor as a *New York Times* art critic, and the progressive collecting profile of the receiving cultural institution suggests these visible (if ghostly) new media exploitations are purposeful. Even disruptive.

This close reading of the Providence Athenaeum's 1859–1860 photograph aligns with Érika Wicky's recent theory that 1850s experimental photography was seeking a new pictorial imaginary.³³ By exploring opaque layerings, the very fabrication of the image acted as a proxy

³² With deep gratitude to Alma Davenport, professor emerita of Photography History, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth for her close analysis and expertise on photographic technique. Interview October 13, 2015.

³³ Érika Wicky, "L'imaginaire pictural de la matière photographique (1850–1860): La cuisine de l'art, du peintre au photographe," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 40, no. 1 (2015): 85–94.

for the photographer as artist engaged with materials and making. But as disruption speeded up, this kind of performative investigation of a new media forced these 1850s photographers to attempt to heroically bridge different cultural and economic practices. Ultimately, their efforts to achieve a new pictorial imaginary were not sustainable in the face of the concurrent industrialization of photography. New media can have a short half-life.

Questions of realism and representation haunt new media, whether the medium of creative innovation is early photography, early digital explorations of virtual reality, or contemporary controversies about post-photography.³⁴ It is important to look closely and be mindful of historical context as well as some artists's inherent playful creativity given new technology tools. For example, in 1859–1860 a few creative practitioners were experimenting with composite photographs made by printing a careful collage of as many as thirty different negatives. The Société Française de la Photographie (SFP) in Paris forbade its members from exhibiting work composed this way precisely because it “endangered the consistent formal appearance of a picture.”³⁵ In 1858, the exhibition of Oscar Gustave Rejlander's composite photograph, *Two Ways of Life*, so scandalized the Photographic Society of Scotland that secessionist photographers formed an alternative organization. Yet by 1862, Rejlander was in London pushing the envelope of double exposure, photomontage, and other kinds of technical manipulation as a way of formally foregrounding the expressive possibilities of a new medium.³⁶ The commitment to conceptually explore and aesthetically exploit the possibilities of new media defines these photographers working c. 1859–1860 as much as it does those artists today who choose to exhibit at, for example, SIGGRAPH, a pioneering digital and interactive arts community formed in 1973.³⁷

The new media half-life case study acting as a prototype here can also serve as a cautionary tale. How many small cultural institutions have the resources to really assess if an archival object merits special attention because its medium was technically experimental at that moment when it was made? The example here highlights mid-nineteenth-century photography as new media, but contemporary archives face an analogous dilemma with the descendant march of electronic and digital media. The 2010 rediscovery of the Coliseum photograph excited independent research that furthered understanding of what the object was and how it might be assessed for new media relevance. But this process might never have gotten off the ground. The realism of non-profit staffing and budget constraints might well have led this big, space-consuming photograph to be gently written off on a busy day as simply an old relic, indicative of a changing tourist market for

³⁴ See, for example, the upcoming conference “After Post-Photography 2,” <http://conference.fotografika.su.en>.

³⁵ Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1974), 108–10. Citing, as examples of composite photographs: Oscar Gustave Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life* (1858) and H. P. Robinson's *Woman and Children in the Country* (1860).

³⁶ On the composite photography of Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875), see Stephanie Spencer, *O. G. Rejlander: Photography as Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985); Edgar Yoxall Jones, *Father of Art Photography: O. G. Rejlander, 1813–1875* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Daniel A. Novak, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁷ See, for example, the work of the New Haven pioneering new media artist, Cynthia Beth Rubin, at www.cbrubin.net and siggrapharts.ning.com. Her most recent work, such as “Hudson Waters” and “Plankton Portraits,” reveals cloud-network-fed, augmented reality video layered within the exhibited two-dimensional printed work on paper. Without the app, the work's technical cutting-edge investigation is lost on the uninformed viewer.

panoramic views and something understandably relegated for decades to deep storage. Instead, the Providence Athenaeum allocated funds for conservation, engaged its colleagues, and supported an ongoing community-wide conversation that began with an exhibition and series of public programs.³⁸ In 2015, this journal's call for papers prompted renewed research and new interpretations, and so the process continues. A half-life case study calls attention to the historically specific moment of experimentation that defines a new media object's creative context. Understanding each medium-specific context may require a different kind of tech-savvy cross-disciplinary advising team for the contemporary archive beyond the traditional partner disciplines of conservation and history.

In assessing the iconography of this new media gift, there is still yet a third example of why the documented intake date of September 1860 matters. At yet another level of relevance, Albert J. Jones most likely also sent the Coliseum photograph to the Providence Athenaeum in 1860 as a memorial to Thomas Tefft, a brilliant young Rhode Island architect and founding member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), who had died unexpectedly on December 11, 1859, during a trip to Europe. Indeed, Jones had attended to Tefft during his sudden illness in Florence at the home of the sculptor Hiram Powers.³⁹ A short while later, in February 1860, Tefft's body was exhumed from the Powers' plot at the English Cemetery in Florence and shipped back to Providence; once here, Tefft's remains were reinterred at Swan Point Cemetery (which Tefft helped design) in May 1860.⁴⁰ It is possible that the large Coliseum photograph was shipped from Italy in the winter of 1860 along with Tefft's coffin, extensive book collection, and other belongings.⁴¹ Presuming that the Coliseum photograph arrived at the Providence Athenaeum in late spring 1860, it is likely that the board waited until September to announce this gift.

How does the introduction of the Thomas Tefft piece of the puzzle impact the reception history of the Providence Athenaeum Coliseum photograph? Although this architect is not nationally well-known today, he was antebellum Rhode Island's most beloved and precocious young architect, and much was expected of him (fig. 10). A Brown University graduate, Tefft is claimed as Rhode Island's first college-educated architect and was one of the few architects invited to join the new American Institute of Architects (AIA). Tefft's output was impressively

³⁸ Nancy Austin, guest curator with public lecture series and walking tour, "Tommaso Cuccioni's Colossal Coliseum Photograph of 1859 in Context," The Providence Athenaeum Rare Book Room, September 2010. See EcologyOfCulture.blogspot.com.

³⁹ One source lyrically described Thomas Tefft dying in the arms of his companion, Albert J. Jones, who was left with the tragic responsibility to shut Tefft's eyes in death. See EcologyOfCulture.blogspot.com.

⁴⁰ Austin, "Albert J. Jones." Tefft's stone sarcophagus in Swan Point Cemetery has a more visible internment date preserved in a www.findagrave.com photograph. The stone reads: "His mortal remains were buried here May 14, 1860." See also Tefft's obituary: "Death of Thomas A. Tefft, Esq.," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1860.

⁴¹ Tefft's will was written in Providence on December 11, 1856, the day before he left for Europe. See "Thomas Tefft Last Will," Wills 19 of Providence, 28, Providence City Archives. Also, Edwin Martin Stone, *The Architect and the Monetarian: A Brief Memoir of Thomas Alexander Tefft* (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Brother, 1869), 54: "His activity in gathering the collection of pictures for the finest Art Exhibition which Providence ever enjoyed, and for his ardent desire for the instruction of the people in the fine arts, attested by his bequest of nearly all his property to the Rhode Island Art Association, must be gratefully remembered by all." Probate records document Tefft's architecture library. See also: Thomas Alexander Tefft Papers, Manuscript Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

prodigious for a building career that only lasted eleven years, from 1845 to 1856.⁴² During this time in Providence, Jones and Tefft were active arts organizers and critical to founding the Rhode Island Art Association (RIAA) in 1853–1854.⁴³ In fact, the RIAA inspired many of the young painters who gathered around that effort and went on to experiment with photography in the later 1850s and 1860s.⁴⁴ Thus, it is easy to imagine Jones (the art critic), Tefft (the architectural prodigy), and Cuccioni (advancing architectural photography) holding court together at the Caffè Greco in Rome.⁴⁵ A contemporary architectural photograph would be a fitting tribute to Tefft’s dreams for the contemporary Rhode Island Art Association.



Figure 10. In 1847, when he was only twenty-one, Thomas Tefft (1826–1859) designed the remarkable Union Railroad Station in Providence, RI. Members of the American Institute of Architects later voted it one of the best buildings of the nineteenth century. Albert J. Jones was with the architect when Tefft died suddenly in Florence on December 11, 1859, at age thirty-three. Jones likely sent the Coliseum photograph to the Providence Athenaeum in early 1860 partly in memory of Tefft and to spur the development of architectural photography in New England. (Providence Public Library)

⁴² Kathleen Curran, ed., *Thomas Alexander Tefft: American Architecture in Transition, 1845–1860* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1988).

⁴³ Austin, “The Jones Bequest.” In a later Rhode Island Supreme Court deposition, Jones’s sister explicitly connected her brother’s bequest to found an art museum with the earlier efforts of the RIAA in the 1850s, stating: “If you have ever read the life of Tefft, known of his exertions and my brother’s in starting the Art Association of 1853 and which languished, you would have seen his [Jones’s] intentions.”

⁴⁴ Nancy Austin, unpublished research on the artists who petitioned the RIAA for classes.

⁴⁵ Antonetto, in “Tommaso Cuccioni,” mentions that Cuccioni exhibited photographs in his own shop at 18 Via Condotti by members of the Roman School of Photography, a group known as the “Circolo del Caffè Greco.” This reference is to the neighboring artists’ gathering place, Antico Caffè Greco, at the base of the Spanish Steps. Tefft definitely lived in Rome for the six months from December 1858 to June 2, 1859. See also: Pericles [Thomas Tefft], “Departure from Rome,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1859; Crawford, “Robert Macpherson,” 389.

In 1859, photography was still an emerging medium and Tefft was exuberant about a progressive future shaped by new technology. Indeed, for him, embracing technological modernism was linked to a hopeful, progressive, democratic future. This is especially evident in the newspaper columns Tefft began writing for the *New York Times* in 1859. For example, after dismissively noting that the pope had finally gone out one day to bless a locomotive with holy water, Tefft launched into a celebration of steam power and its introduction into Rome during his time there. He wrote:

The Cardinals of the Roman Church system have not let steam power—the great enemy of darkness—into their dominions without a long and persistent struggle. Roman officials, however, could not stand the siege; a well-applied gold battery soon made them capitulate. . . . I thought of my indebtedness to the steam engine; it had carried me over continents and seas; by its aid I had seen in a few years more of the glorious works of nature than my ancestors have seen in a life-time. I thought of it, too, as the harbinger of good news to the benighted - as wherever it goes free Press, free speech, free ideas, must soon follow; and then how the petty tyrants and oppressors and blasphemous Divine-right Kings will all in time submit to its sway. I have no doubt that my blessing on the steam-engine was more sincere, and quite as acceptable to God, as that given to it by Pius IX.⁴⁶

By analogy, Cuccioni's 1859 photographic innovations in daring large-format views of the Coliseum during this time of conflict in the Papal States over Italian unification deserve to be considered as political commentary based on the new medium's threat to the established order. They should not be so quickly bracketed as market-driven souvenirs for a debased new stratum of middle-class tourists. Deploying new media in 1859 mattered and Tefft, a prototype social media blogger of his day, was building new publics.

Baudelaire may have lamented photography's impact on "the multitudes," but a rising generation embraced new media like photography as emblematic of new opportunities and different ideas about embracing risk in the search for new solutions. By saying yes to innovative technology, a progressive future might precipitate out of the fog of old customs. Documenting this creative class will require the ability to register the peak radiating moments of new media technology, even though the relic lies as a shell in the archive, depleted.⁴⁷

In antebellum Rhode Island, there were two historic membership libraries, and the Providence Athenaeum (in the more dynamically urban and industrialized Providence) became a base camp for just such a progressive class of men and women. Here they could gather and practice civic engagement in a changing America.⁴⁸ A quick glance might reinforce the expectation that the

⁴⁶ Pericles, "Departure from Rome."

⁴⁷ A related argument about progressive creatives embracing new technology is the subject of a forthcoming book by Robert A. Gross as presented in "Keynote Address: Henry David Thoreau and the Concord You Don't Know," at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, Concord, MA, July 11, 2015.

⁴⁸ The Redwood Library and Athenaeum founded in Newport in 1747 is the other membership library in Rhode Island. See Richard Wendorf, ed., *America's Membership Libraries* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2007), and Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence, RI: Providence Athenaeum, 2003).

1850s Providence Athenaeum was a familiar bastion of the tradition-bound, white male elite. However, institutional archives reveal a much more complex situation. In the mid-1850s the director's office was the staging ground for cultural initiatives intended to boost Providence's strength as a creative capital. In 1853, the Providence Athenaeum was the first gathering place for the core group that later went out into the community to rally support for an innovative new design school for both men and women, alongside an art museum. Included in this group were a teenage girl who in 1854 successfully spearheaded a Providence Athenaeum fundraising drive to secure the \$1200 needed to purchase the famous miniature painting, *The Hours*, from the heirs of Newport artist Edward Greene Malbone (1777–1807); a stone artisan was given a commission for a marble portrait bust that allowed him to travel abroad and eventually teach art in Brooklyn; the radical feminist Paulina Wright Davis circulated with other women on and off the record to foment radical opportunities for women and she held a salon that mixed whites and blacks, men and women.⁴⁹ In the 1850s, a new commitment to the public function of culture was being formed at the Providence Athenaeum. New media signaled new publics.

The failure of these efforts is instructive as well, as civic leadership left Rhode Island after the Panic of 1857. Tefft left for his first trip to Europe on December 13, 1856, as financial uncertainty shut down commissions he had submitted designs to build, including the Vassar College campus in Poughkeepsie, New York he had designed in May 1856.⁵⁰ Also denied him were important federal jobs. Tefft had sought the commission for the local Providence Custom House and Post Office building (built 1857), but it was given instead to Ammi Young (1798–1874), the first supervising architect of the United States Treasury. Young's office of the supervising architect provided architecture services for federal commissions such as the Custom House, instead of bidding the commissions out to local architects. Since Rhode Island offered no employment opportunities for Tefft in late 1856 as credit markets dried up, he relinquished his unpaid civic leadership roles and set off on a self-funded trip across Europe before meeting up in Rome and Florence with Jones and tragically dying three years later at thirty-three.

Perhaps Tefft's exemplary leadership and tragic young death left a more enduring mark than has been understood. It is worth noting that the architect Charles McKim (1847–1909) spent an enormous amount of effort later in the century to revoke the federal patronage system that had denied, for example, the Providence Custom House commission to Tefft. Also, McKim clearly knew of Jones's efforts in the 1880s to found an American Academy in Rome, and McKim himself stated that he initially established the American Academy in Rome in 1894 precisely to support young architects (such as Tefft) who were otherwise left to wander around Europe with little money, cobbling together their own connections.⁵¹ From its founding in 1894 until 1905, when the American Academy in Rome finally achieved a United States government charter under President Roosevelt, McKim worked tirelessly to establish a permanent home base for this cultural center.

In fact, McKim's initiatives were only completed after his death in 1909 because of the action of the financier J. P. Morgan (1837–1913), a complex figure who was committed to private

⁴⁹ Austin, "Tommaso Cuccioni's Colossal Coliseum Photograph," EcologyOfCulture.blogspot.com.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Thomas Alexander Tefft*, 178–79.

⁵¹ McKim Papers, Avery Architecture Library, Columbia University, New York.

philanthropy on a scale elsewhere achieved only by nation-state funding. It is to J. P. Morgan the American Academy campus on the Janiculum in Rome owes its existence. As a relevant side note, it is little known that J. P. Morgan's early career included a stint as a young banker in downtown Providence in 1856–1857. Thus, the nineteen-year-old Morgan would have known Tefft's Union Station building (designed when Tefft was twenty-one), his other successes and leadership roles, and also, perhaps, of Tefft's early tragic death.⁵² Curiously, Tefft left for Europe after designing on paper his most radical building, a Merchant's Exchange, and becoming convinced in 1856–1857 that he might transition to become an economist. Perhaps banking was the real new medium to follow in response to the concatenating disruptions caused by the Panic of 1857?⁵³

Jones's gift mattered in part because it showcased a new kind of media. Technological progress in itself would be representative of a new age, and acceptance of new media was a badge of belonging to an age that was all about reinvention, risk, and change. Yes, there was an edifying aspect to the Coliseum's pictorial representation of a middle-class Grand Tour destination in homage to the elite itineraries established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (This is the long-argued interpretation.) But this essays calls attention to the progressive ideology of the technically experimental medium as a message in and of itself.

As a further example, consider the generational and ideological differences that separate the 1860 gift made by Jones (b. 1821)—an aesthetic, non-college educated expatriate, likely homosexual, and budding international art critic—and the gift made in 1861 in honor of Tefft by an older, securely established Brown University professor, Dr. Alexis Caswell (b. 1799), who had traveled to Italy explicitly “to visit the chamber where [Tefft] had expired.” Dr. Caswell's returning gift to the Providence Athenaeum is a table-top reproduction of the magnificent forty-four-foot-tall solitary architectural column of Phocas on the Roman Forum, made famous by Byron. In truth, institutional archives are seldom forthcoming about the points of view held by their entire constituency. New media may need its own subculture decoding, for example, as it pertains to gender and masculinity in its many forms (fig. 11).

⁵² In 1856, Morgan worked at Duncan, Sherman & Co. in Providence, but in 1857 he left Providence to work in London for his father's firm. This Rhode Island brokerage firm was headed by the Scotsman Alexander Duncan (1805–1889), who inherited wealth after moving to Providence in 1839 by marrying Sarah Butler, the niece and heir of the Providence magnate and builder of the Providence Arcade, Cyrus Butler (1767–1849); Duncan moved permanently to England in 1863. J. P. Morgan died in Rome in 1913.

⁵³ Tefft's seemingly odd decision to suddenly pursue economics has often been understood as some sort of general consequence of the wrenching Panic of 1857 that denied him his livelihood. See Stone, *The Architect*; Barbara Wriston, “Thomas Alexander Tefft: Architect and Economist (MA Thesis, Brown University, 1942); Margaret Ruth Little, “The Architecture of a Lamented Genius, Thomas Alexander Tefft” (MA Thesis, Brown University, 1972).



Figure 11. The Providence Athenaeum's bust of Albert J. Jones (in front), the donor of the 1860 Coliseum photograph, and to the right, Dr. Alexis Caswell's 1861 gift in memory of Thomas Tefft—a tabletop reproduction of the forty-four-foot Column of Phocas from the Roman Forum.

Big Ideas in Small Places

Many meanings were layered into the Coliseum photograph that Albert J. Jones shipped from Italy to the Providence Athenaeum in 1860. What happened in the translation from here to there? The board's first documented response is about size: the photograph is immense.⁵⁴

Somewhat surprisingly, these leaders responded by creating a spatial narrative that goes like this: (1) the five-foot-wide Coliseum photograph is immersively large; (2) the only location within the building's roughly 50' x 100' footprint that is spacious enough to display such a large photograph is the small (13' x 18') director's office, an enclosed room off the main entrance into the top-lit, Greek temple-form interior; (3) this is where the five-by-eight-foot painting of America's founding father, George Washington, already hangs. And that painting is a Roman copy of the so-called Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington (1796) by Gilbert Stuart—a native Rhode Island artist. Thus, the Coliseum photograph sent back from Rome by Albert J. Jones is received as a next generation's new media pendant for a portrait of the nation's founding father—itsself an Italian-made, hand-produced copy of an original by a Rhode Island native son. This narrative seems to have been meaningful for the half-century from 1860 until around 1906, when interior renovations suggested to a later generation of architect-leaders that the portrait of

⁵⁴ "It will be suitably framed and hung in one of the ante-rooms of the Athenaeum, those being the only places in the upper part of the building where a picture of any size can be exhibited." The gift was announced in *The Twenty-Fifth Annual Report*, and Hedge, "Report of Donations." The intermediary delivering the photograph to the Board was Christopher Lippitt (1825–1898), a member of a prominent Rhode Island manufacturing family.

George Washington should be relocated and honored as the spatial culmination of a processional experience down the new staircase to the ground floor (figs. 1, 12–13).⁵⁵

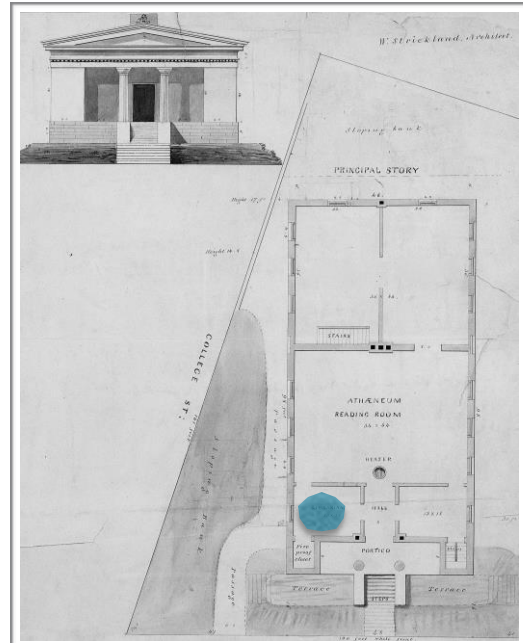
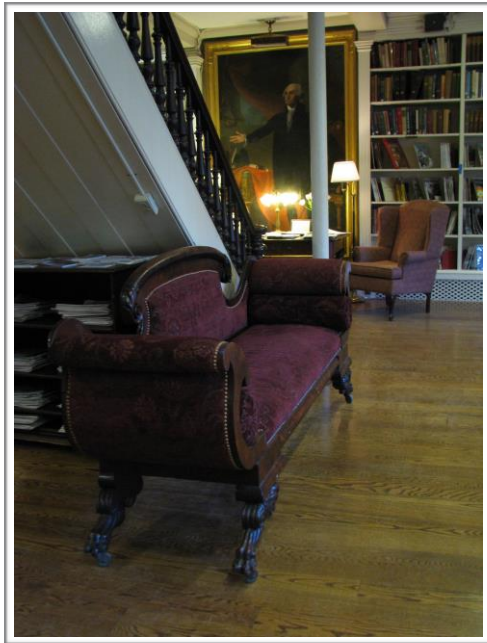


Figure 12, *above left*. The Providence Athenaeum's civic-minded art collection began with this life-size Roman copy of Gilbert Stuart's famous Lansdowne portrait of America's first president, George Washington. This oil painting, now located at the bottom of the staircase (as shown here) originally was hung in the director's office from 1837 to 1905.

Figure 13, *above right*. The director's office was the left anteroom off the entrance. The room is 13' x 18' (234 sq. ft.) and labeled "Librarian" in the original building plan by the architect, William Strickland. It is marked here for clarity with a dot. (Providence Athenaeum Archives)

The Coliseum photograph was taken on board as an art object and before it could be exhibited it needed to be "suitably framed." Cuccioni's large-format photographs are said to have been mounted on cardboard, but this photograph is mounted on canvas, like a traditional painting.⁵⁶ It was framed in Providence by the firm of Vose & Jenckes—gilders, framers, and suppliers of artists materials—for twelve dollars. The Coliseum photograph's documented framing in 1860 by Seth M. Vose, in partnership with H. C. Jenckes, is another view into the entrepreneurial business practices of the emerging profession of the American art dealer. The well-known Vose Galleries is still operating in Boston and they trace their history back to Joseph Vose and an 1841 founding date in Providence, Rhode Island. Joseph's son, Seth Vose, had joined him in Providence by 1850, and clearly went through a number of business models before the family

⁵⁵ See *The Twenty-Fifth Annual Report*. On the George Washington portrait's location and dates, see Lancaster, *Inquire Within*, 64, 126. The 1837 building footprint is 48' x 98' or 4,704 sq. ft.; each of the two anterooms off the entrance are 13' x 18' or 234 sq. ft. The two adjoining main rooms are 44' wide x 34' and 36' deep, respectively. It was a choice to place the art work in the director's room where the board met.

⁵⁶ Antonetto, "Tommaso Cuccioni." The Italian-language stenciling on the canvas suggests this mounting was done in Italy; the photograph was framed under glass in Rhode Island.

business moved to Boston in 1896.⁵⁷ How to endure as a business delivering traditional services to traditional clients still learning about new media?

Aurora: A Postbellum Pendant



Figure 14. In November 1866, after the Civil War, Mrs. Anna Richmond donated this companion five-foot-wide photograph of a famous Roman fresco of Aurora (the dawn) to the Providence Athenaeum. Possibly it is a Cuccioni as well and it may have been brought back by Albert J. Jones on his trip to Providence in the summer of 1866. The Coliseum and Aurora photographs were hung over the facing staircases to the mezzanine level on the right and left sides, as pendants. This can be seen in an interior photograph from c. 1930 (fig. 15).

In 1859, a large-format photograph was surprising new media and Cuccioni could relish the fact that his work was described as unique, surprising, and technically accomplished. Alas, this innovative edge was short-lived. By the end of the American Civil War (1861–1865), ongoing innovations in the medium of photography shaped viewer’s expectations in new and different ways. In particular, Matthew Brady’s photographic war journalism, with his fact-focused and chastening images of devastation wrought during the Civil War, had helped make photography a mass medium. By 1866, few in Providence were likely to remember the newness of first experiencing the Coliseum photograph. The metaphor of the half-life captures this quality of the unstable, ephemeral quality of “newness” inherent in new media. Perhaps the Coliseum photograph had already decayed by 1866?

However, in an apparent effort to reimagine the ongoing relevance of the Coliseum photograph in the healing postbellum period, a pendant five-foot-wide, large-format photograph of “Aurora” (the dawn) was donated to the Providence Athenaeum by Mrs. Anna Richmond in November

⁵⁷ VoseGalleries.com.

1866 (figs. 1, 14–15).⁵⁸ It depicts Guido Reni's celebrated fresco painting of the Aurora from the Palazzo Rospigliosi in Rome. It is possible that this is also a Cuccioni photograph since it is known that Cuccioni exhibited large-format photographs of frescoes from the Palazzo Farnese and other locations in Rome at an international exhibition in 1862 and that he sold all fourteen of them.⁵⁹ Further research would be needed to determine when Mrs. Richmond was in Europe or where she obtained it. Possibly Albert J. Jones brought the elaborately framed Aurora back with him to sell during his rare visit to Providence by May 1866.⁶⁰ There are other references to Jones's return trip during the spring and summer of 1866, where he was feted as "the lion of Providence." This is an emerging part of the story.⁶¹

Certainly the subject matter of Aurora, a new dawn, would be a welcome postbellum pendant to the Coliseum—now seen from the vantage point of a unifying modern Italy and the maturing medium of photography. But the Coliseum's medium per se is no longer the message. Possibly the photograph is still in dialogue with the Roman copy of Gilbert Stuart's Lansdowne portrait of President Washington, a dialogue now amplified by another oversize Roman-inflected representational art work celebrating the feminine Aurora—and donated by a woman.

With her gift, the donor, Anna Richmond, was continuing the collecting thread begun by the Rhode Island Art Association (RIAA) and cemented by Jones's gift in 1860. As a teenager, her son, Walter Richmond, had been deeply shaped by the formation of the RIAA, which Tefft and Jones had helped orchestrate. The young Walter Richmond continued in his creative career to become a professional artist and also a lifelong art collector. In an ironic twist, the bequest left by Albert J. Jones in 1887 to found an art museum in Rhode Island split the local community and the adult Walter Richmond joined the non-winning side. Upon Walter Richmond's death in 1911, his now nationally significant art collection was sold off despite local expectation that it would be donated to the local art museum and remain in Rhode Island.⁶² For her part, in 1873 Mrs. Richmond also donated the well-known public drinking fountain outside the Providence

⁵⁸ This photograph is about the same size, measuring 59" x 25". The donor, Anna Eddy Richmond (1810–1881) was the wife of George M. Richmond (1808–December 1866 and Phillips Exeter, class of 1823), an extremely wealthy calico printer who owned Richmond Manufacturing. Their son was the artist and art collector, Walter Richmond (1839–1912).

⁵⁹ Antonetto, "Tommaso Cuccioni": "In 1862 he exhibited fourteen large photographs in London, some showing the frescoes of Annibale Carracci of Palazzo Farnese and some additional views in Rome. He had the satisfaction, on that occasion, to sell all his works."

⁶⁰ Albert's mother, Judith Lyons Jones, died March 1866 and her son returned home to Providence for her memorial in North Burial Ground and to attend to legal matters. See, for example, "Notarized Quit-Claim Deed by Albert J. Jones, May 1866," Providence City Hall Archives; Richmond Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society. The Anna Richmond donation occurred in November 1866; her husband died December 1, 1866. See: *Thirty-Second Annual Report of the Directors of the Providence Athenaeum* (Providence: Hammond, Angell & Co., 1867), 8.

⁶¹ The close connection between the Coliseum and Aurora as possibly pendant large-format photographs was not made until October 16, 2015. They were discovered in deep storage together in 2010, but it was the Coliseum photograph that had been "lost" and therefore could be "found." Researching these newly made connections is an example of outcomes prompted by this JCAS call for papers. The Aurora is a seemingly much less interesting photograph and has never been examined closely to this day. What will be discovered?

⁶² Austin, "Towards a Genealogy"; Austin, "The Jones Bequest," 218–40.

Athenaeum and later took part in the activities of the 1876 Rhode Island Centennial Women who founded the Rhode Island School of Design.⁶³

More work needs to be done to assess the contextual meaning of the Aurora photograph. Possibly Anna Richmond's 1866 donation comments on Tommaso Cuccioni's entrepreneurial wife, Isabella, who ran the Cuccioni studio after her husband's death in 1864.⁶⁴ Also, the composition prominently depicts three women in a pose reminiscent of Malbone's *The Hours*, the famous miniature painting a young woman raised funds to purchase in the 1850s as another lasting legacy of the Rhode Island Art Association. By partnering the Aurora and Coliseum as pendant photographs, this pairing imaginatively reinvigorates the photograph of the "perfect ruin." Together, the Coliseum and Aurora framed photographs were paired from this time and on through to their burial together in deep storage.

Civic Virtue: The Spatial Rhetoric of Rome, Not Paris

Reception of the Coliseum photograph changed again from 1906 to the 1930s. Alfred Stone, a nationally prominent architect, was president of the Providence Athenaeum Board from 1897 to 1908 and during his tenure the building and its collection went through a major renovation. Not surprisingly, this architect created a different spatial rhetoric based around processional movement and encounters with key art works that functioned almost as civic monuments. For example, the renovation introduced a new central staircase from the entry level to the ground level, and at this time, in 1906, the portrait of George Washington was moved from the director's office (where it had been since 1837) to its current position as the focal point of a staircase descent.⁶⁵ In a similar way, the pendant photographs of the Coliseum and Aurora were placed over the first floor's matched facing staircases that led up to the mezzanine and the new art room (fig. 15).

⁶³ Lancaster, *Inquire Within*, 90–91; Nancy Austin, "What a Beginning Is Worth," in *Infinite Radius: Founding Rhode Island School of Design*, ed. Dawn Barrett and Andrew Martinez (Providence, RI: Rhode Island School of Design, 2008), 170–95.

⁶⁴ Antonetto, "Tommaso Cuccioni": "Tommaso Cuccioni died in Rome August 23rd 1864 and the firm is taken over by his brother while the life tenancy was left to his wife Isabella. . . . Isabella Cuccioni, who was a very active woman, continued with the shop and was assisted by the photographer Giuseppe Ninci, who had been her husband's assistant. Two years later Ninci opened his own photographic study and Isabella Cuccioni purchased many new negatives from other photographers of Rome including Oswald Ufer, Moscioni, Vasari, Verzaschi and Robert MacPherson. It is not unusual to find prints by these photographers with the blue wet stamp '*Negozio Cuccioni—Roma*.'"

⁶⁵ Lancaster, *Inquire Within*, 64, 126.



Figure 15. Interior view of the upper floor of the Providence Athenaeum, c. 1930. (This is the floor shown in the plan in figure 13.) Note the interior partitions of the main space have been removed, but what was the director's room is still enclosed and visible through the doorway at the rear on the right. On the mezzanine level, an art room was created in 1896 and the shuttered window into the art room is visible on the rear wall (flanked by portrait busts) over the main entrance door. The Cuccioni Coliseum photograph has been reinstalled over the entrance to the stairs leading to the art room and is partially visible in the top left margin of this image. The pendant photograph of Aurora is located opposite, with the bottom edge of its wooden frame visible above the foreground coat rack, in the bottom right.

This art room had resulted from Stone's earlier concern over the display of artwork. To address this problem, Stone created an enclosed and long narrow gallery "art room" at the far end of the mezzanine, where "pictures" and art books were displayed. As noted, the Coliseum photograph was not installed in the art room. It was used instead as a vital landmark in the processional path throughout the building, implying it still resonated as something more or other than a "picture." The monumental painting of President George Washington was the focal point of going down the stairs and the imposing Coliseum photograph marked an ascension. This reception is interesting, but the large-format photographic medium was not central to the architect's point in devising this spatial, processional narrative.

The interior view of the Providence Athenaeum in figure 15 also shows the first-floor bookcase end caps hung with edifying smaller architectural photographs. For example, nearest the Coliseum photograph and the staircase, it is possible to make out a photograph featuring the architectural detail of one of the west facade mosaic lunettes of St. Mark's basilica in Venice.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ This illustrates the upper register lunette to the right of the central portal.

By 1905, the role of photography in education and instruction was normative.⁶⁷ The classical tradition exemplified by Rome in particular (and Italy in general) resonated in this small, classic Greek Revival temple to American self-culture.

The interior installation's emphasis on the formative value of Roman architecture is important to note for another reason. The Providence Athenaeum board president, Alfred Stone, was not only a principal in the prolific firm of Stone, Carpenter, and Wilson. He also was active on the national board of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) from 1893 until his death in 1908, and national secretary from 1893 to 1898.⁶⁸ During this exact same time period, Stone was busily helping the architect Charles McKim (1847–1909) in his stubbornly quixotic efforts to establish and fully endow the fledgling privately funded American Academy in Rome discussed earlier.⁶⁹ Other architects were urging that such a post-graduate architectural experience should be centered in Paris, but McKim was deeply committed to having Rome be the reference for American architects. There were other immediate implications as well. The architects Stone and McKim (and others) worked hard to direct United States government policy toward action on the critical Tarsney Act, which was enacted in 1893 to allow for competition but repealed in 1913. They wanted to assure that professional architects, such as Tefft, would always be allowed to competitively bid on government building contracts instead of the path intermittently taken where a government bureau of in-house workers controlled the jobs.⁷⁰

Stone's emphasis on all things Roman during his reinstallation of the Providence Athenaeum should be understood as part of a national conversation over the role of creative professionals as civic leaders. Stone redirected meaning of the Coliseum photograph away from media and toward a message anchored on the civic virtue of art as exemplified by the classical tradition in Rome.

Decayed Media and the Honeymoon of Rediscovery

By the 1930s, tastes had changed concerning what qualified as art and what did not. In a noteworthy shift, the "original" came to mean there was only one, and it was very, very expensive in a new market for the "priceless" and the unique. At this time, older works that existed in multiples—including the entire typology of design but also extraordinarily well-executed antique sculpture plaster cast reproductions and high-quality photographic reproductions of global works of art—were deaccessioned from art museums and cultural collections. Dismissed now as "merely" reproductions, these typologies that had been carefully collected since the mid-nineteenth century simply fell out of favor. Now, even suddenly, they

⁶⁷ Maureen C. O'Brien, *Image and Enterprise: The Photographs of Adolphe Braun* (Providence, RI: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 2000).

⁶⁸ Stone was secretary of the national AIA from 1893 to 1898 and president of the RI-AIA at his death in 1908.

⁶⁹ Nancy Austin, unpublished research on founding the American Academy in Rome. The American Academy is the only national cultural academy that is not funded by the nation-state.

⁷⁰ Perhaps then in a long ago alternate historical reality, Tefft would have won the local Custom House commission and never left for Europe and an early death. Rhode Island's fate would have changed by not losing his civic and cultural leadership. Or perhaps new media is tied economically and ideologically to the "creative destruction" of unevenly regulated capitalism?

were removed from view almost all at once across much of America and simply destroyed. Many of the large-scale plaster casts of antique sculpture were deaccessioned and sent out as road fill.⁷¹

Most likely the Coliseum and Aurora photographs were removed from view at this time. (An older Athenaeum member and architect that this author has worked with in the past on oral histories firmly states that he does not remember ever seeing the Coliseum photograph since 1939, which is as far back as his vivid memory can reach.⁷²) This suggests that in the 1930s the Coliseum's half-life had degraded to the point where it was seen as a banal reproduction of a familiar monument, merely an institutional relic to warehouse in some way, and not in any interesting artistic sense an exploration of the photographic medium, let alone exemplary of a disruptive moment in the history of photography.

Current research suggests that sometime in the 1930s both the Coliseum and Aurora large-format photographs were removed from view and stored for safekeeping (or in despair?) in a storage pocket within the roof structure above the art room in the building's northwest corner. (In a sense, this roof entombment was like sending the decayed media "to heaven.") Regardless of the motivation, the end result was that the photograph's location became ever more steadily lost to institutional memory. Here the five-foot-wide framed Coliseum and Aurora photographs lay peacefully on top of one another for possibly over a half century, until May 24, 2010, when a workman made a surprise rediscovery (fig. 16).



Fig. 16. The Coliseum photograph was rediscovered by a workman on May 24, 2010, in a roof pocket, and brought down to the staff offices. It was a surprise to be confronted by such a large photograph about which little was known beyond its donation by Albert J. Jones and documented accession date in September 1860. Collegial research changed that within one week. (Author photograph, May 2010)

⁷¹ Austin, Introduction to "Towards a Genealogy." In October 2015, the Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island deaccessioned its plaster cast reproduction of the Dying Gaul. This work was originally commissioned from Paul Akers and Thomas Tefft in 1854 as part of the Rhode Island Art Association's efforts to create an Art Museum in the state. See Nancy Austin, "The Redwood's Dying Gaul—Commissioned for the Planned RIAA Museum?," EcologyOfCulture.blogspot.com.

⁷² Interview with Providence native William H. Claflin, and email correspondence with the author, August 27, 2015.

This unleashed a flurry of new research that centered solely on the Coliseum photograph. This author had been researching Albert J. Jones since the mid-1990s and so the staff at the Providence Athenaeum had been on the lookout for the Coliseum photograph for over a decade. Within weeks this author, who had collaborated with the Athenaeum on archive-based public programming since 2005, proposed to generate quickly a guest-curated exhibition whose subject would be the Coliseum photograph in the context of the emerging art world of 1850s Providence. It is worth remembering that in 2010 (only five years ago) the idea of a quickly generated pop-up exhibition was still fairly novel. Further, this effort was designed to showcase how archivists might collaborate with outside historians to bring new insights to a broader community. After discussion, in June 2010 the director of the Providence Athenaeum approved of testing this new idea and allowed staff resources to be allocated to support it, with the curator contributing her work on a volunteer basis (fig. 17).

The initial three-month research initiative on the Coliseum photograph culminated in an exhibition in the Philbrick Rare Book Room at the Providence Athenaeum for the month of September 2010, titled “Tommaso Cuccioni’s Colossal Coliseum Photograph of 1859 in Context.” It is remarkable what was accomplished in this short interval. The turn-around time from notion to execution put a particular stress on the part-time special collections librarian, Kate Wodehouse, who is solely responsible for all material in special collections and institutional archives; the exhibition would not have been possible without the patience and commitment of this dedicated professional. Also critical was the initial consultation generously provided by Paul Messier, a nationally known photography conservator.

The September exhibition was indeed a success, and a positive experience for all. Archivists from across the city donated works to the exhibition, and the local newspaper ran public interest stories about the rediscovery of a colossal antebellum photograph. Community outreach included weekly public programming and a companion walking tour. The author shared her research on two blogs, EcologyOfCultureRI.blogspot.com and EcologyOfCulture.blogspot.com, and these blogs have been viewed over ten thousand times in five years (fig. 18).⁷³

The archivist continues to collaborate with a widening range of community partners and pop-up exhibitions are now the norm. Further, the activity surrounding the Cuccioni rediscovery has continued to radiate to other items in the collection, as well. For example, the Aurora photograph was not part of the original scope of research and so was not considered interesting or important in any way until mid-October 2015. Indeed, it was only during the new research prompted by this article that the Aurora’s role as a possible Cuccioni pendant came into view.

⁷³ Google site traffic data as of October 19, 2015.

Drawing on the half-life metaphor, it might be said that the research and re-presentation of the decayed waste of the Cuccioni photograph were akin to cleanup of a newly discovered toxic site by an unfunded volunteer team—a task whose urgency was felt, and whose outcomes were positive, but which was not sustainable in terms of effort or resources required.⁷⁴ This unsustainable honeymoon was fun and exciting and full of sleepless nights as the archives were drawn into the public eye. And yet, despite the stress on capacity, most participants would likely vote to do it again.



Figure 17. From September 1 to 23, 2010, the Coliseum photograph was on view as the centerpiece of a guest-curated exhibition on Rhode Island's emerging antebellum art world. The exhibition was held in the Philbrick Rare Book Room at the Providence Athenaeum. This five-foot-wide photograph had been donated 150 years earlier, in September 1860.



Figure 18. *Left*, Kate Wodehouse, director of collections and library services (in foreground right) joins the author on a companion Coliseum exhibition walking tour program given on a windy rainy Gallery Night, September 16, 2010. *Right*, Christina Bevilacqua, director of public engagement, is a pioneering advocate of community collaborations in the archives as the basis for historically engaged salon discussions and other public programming.

⁷⁴ I would like to thank one of the anonymous review readers for this perspective.

The After-Life of Decayed Media

At the end of September 2010, the special exhibition built around the rediscovered Coliseum photograph closed. The honeymoon had ended and the storage question returned. What should be done to steward such a large object in a small building? The Providence Athenaeum concluded that there was simply no location where this five-foot-wide, light-sensitive photographic work on paper could be permanently exhibited within the building. Hence, archival storage would need to make space for this large object. Its importance within the institutional history was clear, but other planned-for priorities had to take precedence. This was especially true after the budget constraints brought on by the rippling financial crisis of 2008.

The issue of the medium returned at this point because the Coliseum photograph actually rebounded to the archives with the expanded space requirement of housing both the 1860 original and also a 2011 archival reproduction. This copy was made when the original (if limited edition) Coliseum photograph received stabilizing conservation treatment. At that time, the Cuccioni work was removed from its frame and a high resolution digital scan and 1:1 archival reproduction print was made. What returned to the archive, therefore, was the framed “original” photograph and a (now framed) full-size digital scan that could be used for study and exhibition purposes. A very high-resolution digital file of the digital scan accompanied this multiplying, as well, but this did not pose a physical storage challenge.⁷⁵ The special collections librarian arranged to have a beautiful archival storage box made for the historic original by Hope Bindery & Box Co. of Pawtucket, Rhode Island; locations were found for both of these objects, despite the limited space available (fig. 19).



Figure 19. *Left*, view into the Athenaeum rare books storage area where the framed digital scan is visible stored at the end of the row. *Right*, an archival box was fabricated to store the historic photograph in a climate-controlled stable new environment. (Photos courtesy of Kate Wodehouse, special collections librarian, Providence Athenaeum, July 2015)

⁷⁵ The longevity of electronic media is a separate issue.

Conclusions (in an Inconclusive World)

In the late 1850s, Tommaso Cuccioni's experimental large-format photographs exploded into view internationally with what might be considered a very public half-life. However, the innovative risk-taking quality perceived in the work exponentially decayed over a short period of time. In part, this happened precisely because Cuccioni's work was unexpectedly engaged in an actual, virulent moment of disruptive new media innovation. As Wicky has argued, the photographic imaginary sought by experimental photographers in the 1850s was overcome by the very process of disruptive new media innovation that they themselves were exploring.⁷⁶ In the 1860s and 1870s, after Cuccioni's death in 1864, the studio continued to print his negatives and maintain the "brand" as the enterprise shifted from cultural experimentation toward the business side of an expanding market in mass cultural tourism.⁷⁷ Later still, as the tourism photography market matured into its now-familiar commercial and profit-driven form, the Cuccioni business evolved to offer one-meter-wide photomechanical reproduction prints made from the original photographic negatives taken by Cuccioni and other experimental photographers active in the 1850s.⁷⁸

However, this trajectory could not have been certain in 1860. Indeed, it was simply not the context in 1859 when a large-format Coliseum photograph was exhibited at the SFP in Paris, praised by one emerging art critic, alarmed another precisely because of its disruptive capabilities, and shortly after was speculatively collected by a third European-based art critic and sent back home to America. For the connoisseur of new media, the object's claim on our attention rests on this narrative moment of formal artistic invention and validation; the aura was created in the making.

A half-life case study highlights instead the modern tension between *originality* prized as a quality "owned" by an object and *iterative innovation* understood as a contextual process within which an object might be better understood (figs. 6–8). A half-life case study traces the object through a time-based trajectory of change: the fast decay, recycling, warehousing as waste, and final content resurrection via *new* new media surrogates (figs. 1, 13–17, 19–20). As a side effect, this introduces a geo-location history function as a rich new way to interpret spatial rhetoric. And finally, in 2015, a half-life case study can engage current conversations about digital storage in the "cloud."⁷⁹

The Coliseum photograph has been on display for about half the time that it has been in the collection of the Providence Athenaeum; the other half of the time it spent in storage. What separated those two fates in the past was public engagement. Looking ahead, leveraging public engagement through (new) collaborations will remain key.⁸⁰ Like the ghostly horse and carriage overlaying the original glass plate negative, a virtual (digital) presence will likely help transport

⁷⁶ Wicky, "L'iminaire pictural"; Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*.

⁷⁷ Christensen, *The Innovator's Solution*.

⁷⁸ Howe, "Tommaso Cuccioni"; Crawford, "Robert Macpherson," 395.

⁷⁹ Data storage offsite in a networked "cloud" is a contemporary disruptive innovation less than a decade old as a consumer product. Nancy Austin, "Appliances as Performance Peripherals in the New Age of Cloud Computing," paper delivered at the Yale University Material Culture Lecture Series, December 4, 2008.

⁸⁰ This article was written in response to a call for papers on nineteenth-century photography put out by the New England Archivists to coincide with their annual meeting in Providence, Rhode Island on November 7, 2015.

public engagement into the future, (almost) seamless with the object, secure in the archive (fig. 20).

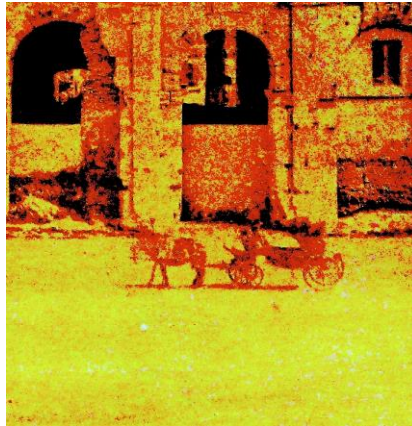


Figure 20. The digitized contemporary archive is not unlike the pictorial unity achieved with some finesse in the original Providence Athenaeum photograph of the Coliseum, 1859–1860.