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Joseph August Lux: Theorizing Early Amateur Photography—in Search of a “Catholic Something”

MARK JARZOMBEK
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Amateur photography came into its own in the first decade of the century, largely due to the introduction of a relatively inexpensive camera made by Kodak that had been first introduced in 1888. It was made of jute board and wood, and as it cost only one dollar, was a major break-through in affordability and ease of use (Fig. 1). The camera was a huge success and within the first years of its production, hundreds of thousands were sold. Soon thereafter other manufacturers stepped in, especially in Germany. Camera clubs and journals sprang into being, exhibitions and competitions were staged, and lecture series took place. The reason for the success of these cameras is not hard to understand. Conventional professional photographers required expensive equipment and complicated chemical procedures. Furthermore, they were more often employed to record archaeological sites, buildings, and scientific projects than they were to photograph a holiday vacation.

Despite this, an aesthetic of spontaneity was slow to emerge. Instead, pre-World War I amateur photographers continued to look to the conventions of art photography for sources and inspiration. Alfred Stieglitz, of course, played a dominating role in this respect with his journals *The American Amateur Photographer* (1892–96), *Camera Notes* (1897–1903) and *Camera Work* (after 1903), which were read by anyone interested in the subject. But while there were many who were writing about amateur photography from the point of view of its aesthetics, one of the first to write about amateur photography from the point of view of its cultural potential was the Austrian art- and architectural critic, Joseph August Lux (1871–1947).\(^1\) By 1908, when his article *Künstlerische Kodakeheimnisse* (Artistic Secrets of the Kodak) appeared—later to be made into a book—he had already made a name for himself as a prolific defender of some of the leading architects of the age, including Hermann Muthesius, Peter Behrens and Joseph Hoffmann.\(^2\) Lux saw himself as a cultural pedagogue trying to elevate the taste of a new generation of consumers not only in respect to the recent developments in architecture, but also in regard to furniture, fashion, and the decorative arts. In this effort Lux was not alone. From the late 1890s onward dozens of ‘how to’ books appeared that aimed to teach everything from how to make flower arrangements on the dining table to what kind of room layout one would want in one’s new house. Lux wrote numerous articles in this vein and, in fact, in 1904 founded a journal *Habe Warte* (Lookout Tower) that covered a range of topics dealing with bourgeois life and art.

Underlying Lux’s writings, however, was an assumption that objects and entire landscapes possessed a metaphysical presence that had been built into them through human action over time. Lux used the word *genius loci* to describe this temporal coefficient.\(^3\) The term had expanded from being a relatively esoteric concept that cropped up in Romantic-era poetry to become a code-word for the conservative-modernist position, allowing Lux to differentiate himself from the more conservative anti-modern *Heimatschutz* movement while still seeking the “spiritualization” (Vergeistigung) of modern life.\(^4\) This, in his view, was best accomplished by studying Austrian barns, German villages, and Dutch vernacular building techniques. Metaphysical presences could also lurk within farm tools, old fences, village fountains and majestic trees. Though seemingly fragmentary, these elements were for Lux part of a culture’s syllabic substructure, part of what he called a “treasure chest of icons” (*Seelenbilder,* literally, pictures of the soul), that have survived despite the onslaught of rationalism and industrialism.\(^5\) Lux’s own drawings and photographs of chimneys from Austrian barns and houses was his personal attempt to add material to that treasure chest (Fig. 2). The power of these *Seelenbilder,* he argued, draws from the fact that they indicate the link between the “external picture of life” (*äußeres Lebensbild*) and an “internal spiritual state” (*innere seelische Verfassung*).\(^6\) They are part of “the spirit of the ancestors” (*der Geist der Vorfahren*) and the “traces” (*Spuren*) of the past that speak out to the modern world and that, when recognized, can help heal the “break” between past and present to create the groundwork for a true revelation (*Offenbarung*) on which art can ground itself.\(^7\)

Lux’s attachment to the work of the emerging mod-
ernist architects as well as to pastoral ambiances led him to try to fuse the modernist and conservative positions. Each, he argued, needed to accept the advantages that the other brought: freedom from dogma, on the one hand, and those ephemeral “traces of the past,” on the other. In the 1920s, looking back at his ideas from before he war, he admitted that though he saw himself as a modern, his thinking had the unmistakable cast of “a Catholic something,” as he phrased it. It was an honest assessment not only because his metaphysical arguments drew so obviously on the idea of grace, but also because the Catholic tradition, especially as preserved in the rural environment, was in his estimation an important exemplum of health in the rapid modernization of European society. One could also say that there was an “Austrian something” to the argument, since Lux, born in Vienna, made it clear that in his opinion Austria, though technically not as advanced as Germany, possessed an attachment to these spiritual concerns that the Germans— and the Protestants in particular—had lost.

In making these arguments, Lux should be placed in proximity to a train of thought known as Catholic Modernism, which had emerged in the late 19th century as an attempt to resolve differences between the modern and the spiritual. The movement presented itself in many formats, with some Catholic moderns working from within the church, others connecting it to politics and some even attempting to synthesize it with socialism. Artists and writers, however, tended to be attracted to symbolism and to the simple values of country people while at the same time opposing the strictures of dogma and clericalism. Though Catholic Modernism, in all its various shadings, was particularly strong in Austria and Czechoslovakia, it had its champions in France, too. The writings of Firmin Loisy (1857–1940), for example, were quite influential as were those of his forerunner Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882), whose theory about Place, Work and Family influenced many, including Patrick Geddes. From the point of view of Church history, Catholic Modernism came to an end in 1908 when Pius X excommunicated Loisy and others. But the basic principles were still very alive in bourgeois culture. In that very year, 1908, for example, the German Rudolf Eucken received the Nobel Prize in literature for a philosophy that argued that a spiritual dimension was not incompatible with modernity. Though not part of the general ambience of the Catholic Modernists, the argument was similar, and clearly impacted Lux.

The most important figure for Lux in this respect was, however, Richard von Kraik (1852–1934), with whom Lux would become close after World War I. Kraik presented the case that a renewal of the European spirit would have to be based on the foundations of the Christian past, with the Catholic Church playing a major role in this because it could help protect European culture against the downward slide into rationalism. Before the war, Lux was less overt in espousing beliefs like this, emphasizing the modern, if you will, over the Catholic. After the war, it was to be the other way around. He “converted” in 1928 after a private audience with Pope XI, noting that he had been raised a Catholic, but in name only.

An important part of Lux’s pre-World War I theoretical system hovering between alliances to both modernism and his “Catholic something” was to show that the “little man,”
as he was sometimes called by Lux, shares with the great artists of the day a struggle against the encroaching "inconsequentiality of existence." To solve the question of how a broad segment of the population could be induced to follow this pedagogical track, Lux authored several books that outlined the approaches that the public should take, including Der Geschmack im Alltag: ein Buch zur Pflege des Schönen (Taste in Everyday Life: a Book on the Nurturing of the Beautiful, 1908), which has a chapter entitled "Artistic Secrets of the Kodak." For some of Lux's readers, the chapter might have come as a surprise since Lux was ambivalent about the new media of photography and film. The camera, in his estimation, had elongated the earlier culture of portraiture. "We let ourselves be photographed," he notes, and as a result become nothing more than "empty vessels."14

We go into a large photography shop... and order a "portrait." [We are brought] to a pretty backdrop, decorated in a sweet and flattering way, as if we were not human, but porcelain puppets. But the people expect it, and it is modern... For the same money one can acquire a good portrait.15

And to top everything off, because of the low quality of the film, "in a matter of a few years the photograph is faded, unrecognizable... a caricature." But rather than reject the camera completely, as was to become popular among conservative aestheticians, Lux argued that the camera was not just a "blind mirror," but something that both receives and perceives.16 In a clever comparison, he held that the camera which has a single focus allows the photographer to find his own "single spiritual center." But to activate the camera's inner philosophical power the operating instructions spelled out "in black and white" will be of little use. Photography must go beyond the technical to challenge forth unknown or unobserved qualities in the photographed subject.

Once photographers start using the camera with the "mind's eye," they come to realize that they do not need to literally "spell out" every detail in the photograph. In fact, a certain vagueness in the photograph increases the numinous quality of the object. This aesthetic, Lux maintains, was not meant to wash away the particular, but on the contrary, to bring us closer to the objects both physically and in our consciousness. And for subject matter we should start with things in our immediate environment that are often ignored or taken for granted, everyday things such as "an artfully braided fence, a carved door, a flower window, a rose bower, an architectural view of a garden segment."17 The assumption is that if photographers can trust their "inner picture" then the elements that they focus on will begin to form an integrated whole that allows them to be modern and yet respectful to both history and time. Lux should thus be differentiated from the standard conservative critics of his age who saw in the Kodak nothing but cheapness and triviality. Lux, though clearly favoring a conservative viewpoint, saw a remarkable alliance between the primitive box of the camera and the majestic simplicity of a rarified life. Thus, instead of seeing the Kodak as technically unrefined in comparison to the professional, he saw its lack of focus as an indication of a higher order of vision. It was the nature of the Kodak's "secret." The professional makes a composition that is "sweet, genre-esque and unartistic," (Fig. 3) while an amateur keeps the figures in the foreground and "brings a new artistic life into the photograph" (Fig. 4).18 Amateurs were thus, for Lux, important foot soldiers in the fight against the technocratic mind-set of the modern world. They were not passive consumers of modernism, but were set to the task of using modern equipment against its own inner logic. Far from being seduced by the camera's open-endedness, the amateurs could use it to document their environment and in this way prepare the ground for the great artists of the time who would build on that wealth.

Though the mission that Lux outlines is different from

3 An example of "a conventional professional photograph." Source: Joseph August Lux, Der Geschmack im Alltag: ein Buch zur Pflege des Schön (Dresden: Gerhard Kühmann, 1908), p. 330
that of art photography, the aesthetic was similar. Lux would certainly have known the work of Stieglitz, Edward Steichen and August Kotsch. He also most certainly knew his fellow Austrian Heinrich Kühn, who lived in a house in Innsbruck designed by his friend Joseph Hoffmann. Lux and Kühn also shared as friends, the architect Koloman Moser. Kühn’s photographs with their soft illuminations of humble settings seem to be perfect examples of the Luxian aesthetic (Fig. 5). In “Artistic Secrets of the Kodak,” however, Lux mentions only the Belgian Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), whose paintings were well known to the Viennese Secessionists. Khnopff had traveled to Vienna in 1898 to help with the hanging of his paintings for the Secession Exhibition of 1900, and was received there with great warmth. Quotations from his writings grace the entablatures of the exhibition buildings along with those of Ruskin and Wilde. Khnopff was also close friends with Hoffman as well as with the painter and art critic — and at the time a friend of Lux — Schultze-Naumburg. Though Khnopff was a painter, what Lux noted about his technique was his figures are often partially cut off by the frame, as if taken by a snapshot photograph (Fig. 6). And indeed, Khnopff made extensive use of the camera. Unlike many artists of the time who


5 Heinrich Kühn, Glas, ca. 1900 22.6 x 16.3 cm. Source: Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich (Bad Ischl: Verein zur Erarbeitung der Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich, 1983), p. 196.

did so stealthily, Paul Cezanne, for example, Khnopff not only had his own camera equipment, but worked eagerly and openly with it. He would pose a subject, make a photograph and touch up the photograph in preparation for a final sketch. Instead of arguing that photographers should think like painters, as amateurs were commonly exhorted, Lux admired Khnopff because he was a painter who was thinking like an amateur photographer.

It should be pointed out that today we might have a name for Lux’s general argument, namely phenomenological aesthetic, given its various and complex origins in 20th century philosophical speculation and its various infiltrations into art and architectural discourses from the 1970s onward. Nonetheless, Lux certainly belongs to a unique category of critics who tried to shift the debate away from the aesthetic status of the photograph to the philosophical status of the instrument. It was for Lux the inescapable dilemma of an age in which the technological for better and worse had become inextricably embroiled with the sociological. Technology, rather than the enemy, was part of the solution, but only when viewed in the right way.

Appendix

Artistic Secrets of the Kodak (1908) by Joseph August Lux

The amateur no doubt wants to have a relationship to art. Is that not why he bought himself a Kodak? And he would like his instructions, black on white. For the art of photography depends, as we all know, on the ability of the amateur to approach the task technically as well as artistically. But exactly for that there exist no instructions. All that can be done is to properly adjust the mind’s eye with good conscience.

We perceive of an amateur photo as artistically successful if it imparts to the subject an unusual characteristic by means of interesting light and shadow effects. The gradations of light and shade—the subtlety of their nuances—are the means by which we can see to it that the absent coloration. The purpose is to bring the characteristics into focus. It is not the commonplace that interests us but the characteristic elements of the photographed object. It is not a generic ‘dog’ that is of interest to us but a specific dog with its particular beauty or ugliness. We do not want to show nature in its customary form but we want to surprise it at one of its interesting unpredictabilities, that is novel to us and original and offers an unexpected aspect of the otherwise so blatant commonplace of persons or objects. Only this will augment the treasure chest of our iconic imagery and offer us relief from jaded habits.

Our Kodak is the means by which we can penetrate into this unknown land of surprises, those wonderful and rare flashes of insight, of amazing visions that mysteriously deepen our life. And indeed our Kodak accidentally succeeds to reveal many a fortunate insight, so that on occasion we almost do not trust our eyes.

But our Kodak shall not have better eyes than we do, for that would put us into the position of the hunter who hits his game only accidentally. We cannot offer surprises if we, like the average professional photographer, force together men and things into an unnatural pose. We have to emphasize that arbitrary groupings will in all likelihood result in absolutely conventional genre scenes. Artistic amateur study photos (and photographs are always only studies) of course also strive for a pictorial effect, which means one chooses a main subject on which one concentrates all attention and one avoids in its vicinity everything that does not enhance it or that could weaken its characteristic.

The pictorial derives from a unity of effect and this unity is due to a single spiritual center in the picture, for two such centers would forestall unity and they would cancel each other out. This spiritual center can of course also consist in a multitude of things, in an activity or in a plurality of persons. The superimposition or subordination of objects, within the full scope of their natural freedom, is a special skill that often leads to mistakes. The properly proceeding amateur will grasp nature where he encounters it in its intrinsicality and immediacy without forcing it to submit to his will.

The true amateur knows how to grasp the right moment. His task is the difficult art of seeing. Beyond that, a second but no less indispensable demand on him is to realize his photographic vision by rendering what he saw by employing the technical means at his disposal. Bad photographs are like blind mirrors that fail to do justice to the object. Of course, there are no instructions. We have seen feebly illuminated photos that were nevertheless artistically perfect despite the fact that weak illumination is usually a consequence of a faulty light source and exposure and we would normally not expect that a technical defect of this sort would yield artistic results. But we cannot assert that a sharply illuminated photo or a weakly illuminated one is by itself better or worse. What is good or not good depends entirely on the situation.

In consideration of these given we must attempt to bring the object to be photographed as much into the foreground as possible, totally into the foreground. If we carry out this principle consequently we can achieve monumental effects even on a small picture plane, provided the object is made as large as possible. This of course means that we must not try to bring too much of the surroundings unto the plate. Largeless and simplicity is the rule.

The amateur might do well to study the works of modern painters such as for example the pictures of Fernand Khnopff.
In one of his paintings the artist goes so far as to let the upper half of the forehead of an upright figure disappear from the picture frame altogether, not to mention the lower parts. In spite of the small format, such artistic renderings appear large-scale. Similarly impressive are the medallions and coins up to the eighteenth century or the woodcuts from the times of Dürer. The reason for their monumental artistic effect is, up to a point, the same. We will always find that in these instances the represented object has been very much simplified and has been so enlarged that it fills the foreground and seems to spill over. There is barely a trace of perspective. The old portraits until the eighteenth century are also marked by that characteristic. There are even a few artistically-felt photographs that have taken the hint. But to most amateurs this rule seems unknown.

One will understand what this means in respect to portrait photos how impressive and lively a head appears that takes up the entire picture plane. Agreeable also because all disturbing details are omitted. The photo may appear veiled, an accent that can under circumstances considerably enrich the artistic effect. We must not have every petty detail clearly spelled out in front of our eyes. Especially in a portrait photo that brings the face as large as possible into the foreground, a certain amount of vagueness stimulates the fantasy of the viewer to complement what he sees. We might then say, the picture is telling, it is mysteriously animated or spirited. In other words, what speaks in reality is not the picture, but the stimulated fantasy that complements it with life or spirit and which, as it finds breathing space, transmits atmosphere or soul into the interpretation. In this we see one of the greatest secrets of art which to a degree, even the amateur photographer can learn to master. The master of style is not created by what he declares but by what he omits. The well-known procedures of the highly evolved amateur photography that aim for simplification of tone, fading out of confusing details, softening of transitions of the black-white contrast are all based on this law of artistic effect.

Above all, the amateur must never forget that his photos are only studies. They must never attempt to be paintings. Amateur photos therefore assume a role right next to sketches. If the amateur always keeps this in mind he will not make any mistakes. One only needs to bring to mind, for example, what painters enter into their sketchbooks. Here it is a characteristic head, there a hand, sometimes an interesting stone marker or a section of artfully braced fence, a carved door, a flower window, a rose bush, an architectural view of a garden segment, an ancient vestibule, an antique piece of furniture or a chimney corner, etc. The material is endless and only limited by the ability of the amateur to see.

The difficult art of seeing is the product of education and derives from a multiplicity of intellectual and artistic interests and can by no means only be achieved by the photographic activity itself. It is far from indifferent how we photograph a garden segment or a house. If the photograph is to be significant, then not only is the accidentally encountered illumination is of importance, but also the artistic consideration of the material characteristics which in turn depend on a large degree on the specific point of view. It is decided by our sense of the architectural. But this is a matter that belongs into a different category.

Suffice for the moment the hint that for the amateur, and especially for the beginner, there is no better approach than to start with details. Let us once more compare amateur photography to sketching. The sketch serves the purpose of setting out from the confusing abundance of things one interesting part, one detail, as described above, and to feature it as large and as penetrating as possible. We don't want to pile as many details as possible into the picture but, on the contrary, we want to choose one detail as the main subject and treat it much as has been suggested in the above lines on amateur photography.

The comparison with the sketch is very informative. One could, of course, raise the contradiction that a sketch is only preparatory to a painting and thus only a means to a larger purpose while amateur photography is an end in itself and, therefore, needs to obey different laws. But this would not be right. For, first of all, the sketch, as a branch of the graphic arts, is nowadays also often an end in itself and demands, just like other types of reproductions, such as the lithograph or the woodcut, the same simplicity and monumentality that we demanded above from the photograph. Secondly, amateur photography has indeed become in some instances a means to an end insofar as it frequently serves the painter, much like a sketch, as a preparation for the higher art of painting, be that as a support for his memory or to correct his visual recall. Furthermore we should not overlook that a great part of our modern naturalistic paintings, regardless of their format or technique, are in reality of the order of a study.

Amateur photography can contribute much of value to today's culture standing as it does in the service of folk art and local history provided it obeys these limitations. Generalized views, comprehensive landscapes, panoramas, all give us nothing. Rather, we must remember that in the world of appearances, at least to the extent that it is man-made, the small and the singular must be filled with beauty and art down to the last detail, if we wish the entire and the large to be in order. There is no true insight to be gained if one only views things in a generalized way. When we admire the beauty of old cities or villages, everything must interest us, from the sidewalk to the chimney. Let amateur photography be the expression of this newly awakened interest. It will offer spiritual and artistic nourishment if it renders all these details well and as large as possible.

But there is as of yet much amiss. If this purpose were not as of yet so generally misunderstood, we would have a better postcard industry. It too, should follow the general trend of the time and take a higher view of the photographic culture and comprehend that nobody is served by generalized views and boring genre scenes, and that in their stead we need something else. What we need are beautiful, characteristic details, taken from close-up. Nature, life, the arts are full of them, we only have to open our eyes.

Translated by Mark Jarzombek
Notes


6. "Geschmack im Alltag," p. vi. The word Verfassung, or constitution, is used to show once again the link between an outer reality and an inner state-of-being.

7. For use of the word "tectonic," see: Lux, Joseph M. Oliver, (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1919), p. 79 and Ingensio-Aesthetik (Munich: Gustav Lammers, 1910), p. 11. Though the term is allied to the word "tectonic" from Karl Böttcher's famous book *Die Technik des Hauses*, which was published between 1843 and 1851 and which influenced the writings of Gottfried Semper and others, Lux associated it less with the ambition of high art, than with a vernacularist sensibility rising unconsciously through the ages. If it was Greek architecture that was at the heart of Böttcher's idea of the tectonic, it was, for Lux, the farmhouse, with its fence and its huge tree in the front yard. He writes, for example, that "those who are used to seeing Nature" will have noticed how strong the landscape. *Landeschafleiß* influences "the architectonic" sensibilities in human work [Lux, "Der Garten am Haus," *Hofv. Warte* (1906/7), p. 131. It should also be pointed out that the word "tectonic" was a widely used word. It often referred to study-sketches, which also conformed to Lux's idea about the need to monumentalize our understanding of the past.


9. The Catholic church fostered several varieties of social thought in Austria. Chief among these was the emergence of Christian socialism as disseminated by Karl Baron von Vogelsang (1818–1896). For a general discussion, see: Michele Ranieri, *The Catholic Modernists: A Study of the Religious Reform Movement, 1864–1907*, translated by Isabel Quigly (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); M. G. Reardon, *Roman Catholic Modernists*, edited and introduced by Bernard M. G. Reardon (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970). The topic of Catholic modernity has not been well studied in the history of aesthetics. Bruce Berghlund, in a paper given at the "East European Art and Architecture Conference" (Cambridge: MIT, October 6, 2001), has explored the situation in Czechoslovakia where there were a great number of artists who saw themselves as both modern and Catholic. See: "Building a Church for a New Age: The Search for a Modern Catholic Art in Turn-of-the-century Central Europe," *Centro* 3/3 (September 2003). In the article he studies the work of Joseph Plecnik, among others. Another architect in that vein was Rudolf Schweizer, an urban designer, who tried to bridge Catholic theological principles with modern design practices. For an study of Schweizer, see: Paros Mantzarou, *La ville-paysage. Rudolf Schweizer et la domination des villes* (Dissertation: Université de Paris VIII, 2000). In the United States, the movement evolved into an attempt to unify Catholicism and phenomenology, which has many champions to this day. The critical history of phenomenology as an intellectual-aesthetic movement in twentieth century architectural theory has so far not been written.

10. Lux took over the Králík Gesellschaft upon Krafilk's death. Given Králík's reputation it must be assumed that Lux was well aware of his position early on, certainly already in the first decade of the century. For Králík, a renewal of the European spirit would have to be based on the foundations of the Christian past.

11. Lux writes that even though he was raised Catholic, his parents led a completely secular life. In 1922 he "converted" officially to Catholicism. But in keeping with his dislike for dogmatists, Jesuits and "system-builders," he was drawn to the humble spiritualism of the Franciscan brothers. Possibly, he even became a lay member in that order. He was for a while the president of the Austrian Association of Catholic Writers.


13. Lux wrote several pieces on cinema. See, for example, "Über den Einfluss des Kinos auf Literatur und Buchhandel," *Film und Lichtbild* 1 (1914), 67–68.


15. Ibid.


20. In 1901, the Gallerie Keller and Reiner held a one man show of Knoepfl's work. The exhibition was designed by Knoepfl's fellow countryman, Henry van de Velde.

21. Knoepfl wrote an important and favorable article on Hoffman in *The Studio* 22/98 (1901), 261. He also consulted with Hoffman about the interior design of his house.

22. *Geschmack im Alltag*, p. 76.


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