ARTHUR GOSS: Selected Photographs
Art Gallery of Ontario
October 10, 1998 - January 3, 1999
Curated by Peter MacCallum

Curator's Text for Exhibition Brochure

Arthur Goss was Toronto's first Official Photographer. From the time of his appointment in 1911 until his death in 1940, Goss was responsible for the photographing all aspects of municipal government, including public works, education, health, recreation, housing and transportation. The majority of the approximately 30,000 negatives he produced during this period have survived and are housed in the Department of Public Works (RG-8) Collection at the City of Toronto Archives.

Today, almost sixty years after his death, Goss can be appreciated both as an artist and as an archival resource. During his working life, he fulfilled the dual function of artist and career civil servant. Moreover, his identity as an artist encompassed the overlapping careers of a pictorialist and a documentary photographer.

Arthur Scott Goss was born on March 4, 1881, in London, Ontario. His father, John Goss was a journalist and editor who brought the family to Toronto in 1883. Arthur was enrolled in Rose Avenue Public School in 1889, but was withdrawn two years later following his father's death. Obliged to help support his family, he found himself employed as an office boy in the City Engineer's Office. He was to remain an employee of this department for the rest of his life.

There is no record of how Goss learned the basic photographic skills, but surviving negatives show that he was using a professional view camera for his personal work as early as 1903, the year he married Ethel Ross Munro. His photos of Ethel taken about that year are in a documentary style similar to his later professional work. By 1904, however, he had joined the Toronto Camera Club and had become seriously involved in pictorial photography.

The pictorialist movement vigorously asserted photography's right to be recognized as fine art. Its members favoured painterly subject matter, soft focus and delicate tonality achieved through complicated printing techniques. As a pictorialist, Goss received the only recognition he was ever to receive as a photographer in his lifetime. He won prizes, was favourably reviewed in Toronto and in Britain, and became respected as a leading Canadian artist in the field. His work brought him into contact with members of the Group of Seven, and this led him to formulate a new vision of Canadian photography:

I believe it will be along the lines adopted by a group of Canadian painters to paint our scenery in a Canadian way, that photographers must progress and that by a little more concentrated effort and study ... we will produce something worth while and characteristic of our climate and country.

Photograms of the Year 1920 (Journal of the Royal Photographic Society, London); page 16.

In 1911, the City Engineer's Office was re-organized and became the Department of Public Works under a new commissioner, R. C. Harris. Goss was working as a draftsman in the Street Improvements Section and had been photographing the city's works projects in an unofficial capacity. His qualifications as both a designer and a photographer made him the obvious choice to head the new Photography and Blue Printing Section of the department.

One of the key features of the Photography and Blue Printing Section was that its services could be commissioned by other city departments. Working within this system, Goss was soon able to make his section indispensable to the city administration. In his first year alone he made over 800 negatives and established 20 separate series of photos. Ultimately there would be 82 series.

The department head who most effectively employed Goss's talents as a collaborative artist was Dr. Charles Hastings. Appointed Medical Officer of Health in 1910, Hastings, commissioned Goss to establish the Health Department series. These photos dramatically illustrated "The Lodging House Evil" and "Unsanitary Privy Pits," thus making the living conditions of the city's poorest inhabitants visible to its politicians. Tuberculosis treatment and personal hygiene education were other major subjects of this major series.

The Health Department series invites direct comparisons between Goss and his American contemporary Lewis Hine. Although Hine was six years older, he and Goss both began their working lives in 1892 and had become competent photographic artists by 1903. Each made dramatic use of flash lighting to illuminate interior scenes. Both favoured direct, frontal compositions and represented their human subjects as individuals rather than symbols or archetypes.They both died in 1940, three years after the term "documentary" had been coined by historian Beaumont Newhall to describe the photographic style of which they are now considered to be early practitioners.

Although the term "documentary" has replaced Hine's own description of his work as "interpretive" photography, the documentary tradition remains a series of practices with no rigid rules. It could be said that the documentary photographer must represent reality in a straightforward way while maintaining a consistent point of view. Individual images must be grounded in a specific time and place, but will derive their fullest meaning from being seen as part of a larger narrative, which changes and develops over time.

Goss's varied assignments required a rough-and-ready technique suitable for any subject. For action shots of sports events, civic ceremonies, etc., he used the Press Graflex, a reflex camera that allowed direct viewing until the moment of exposure. For

architectural views and confined interior scenes such as lodging houses and sewer tunnels, he worked with a standard wooden view camera, a wide lens and magnesium flash powder that bathed the scene in a soft, even light.

The 5" X 7" glass plates Goss used were large enough to show all the details of a scene when contact printed. (In the earliest Works Department photos, a small easel displaying the date was inserted into the scene.) After development, the series, negative number, title and date were written backwards in India ink across the bottom edge of the negative When the negative was printed, its dual function as an artwork and an administrative record were fused in a single image.

During Goss's three decades as official photographer, Toronto experienced rapid growth followed by a period of consolidation and finally, stagnation through the years of the Great Depression. While he created the most complete document of this period of the city's history, his own life passed without being documented.

Ironically the only available account of Goss at work as a photographer is an entirely fictional one. In Michael Ondaatje's novel about Toronto in the 1930s, In the Skin of a Lion, the chapter called "Palace of Purification" opens with a description of a typical assignment:

In the tunnel under Lake Ontario two men shake hands on an incline of mud. Beside them a pickaxe and a lamp, their dirt-streaked faces pivoting to look towards the camera. For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent. Then Arthur Goss, the city photographer, packs up his tripod and glass plates, unhooks the cord of lights that creates a vista of open tunnel behind the two men, walks with his equipment the fifty yards to the ladder, and climbs out into the sunlight.

Work continues..."

In addition to the contrived description of Goss's lighting methods, Ondaatje presents an unlikely account of the artist's attitude toward the individuals he photographed. As the critic Adele Freedman pointed out in a 1980 review, Goss's camera eye not only stood in for the official middle class eye, but was a full participant in the city's efforts at self-improvement. It's obvious that Goss saw his photography as part of a larger scheme, and was eager to show the heroic contributions of construction workers, public health nurses, and others.

Some of the documentary photos Goss took during the period before 1915 seem to have been subtly affected by pictorialism's penchant for fantastic transformations. Standing amid debris removed from the city's water intake, a foreman becomes a happy sea creature in his underwater element as he holds a fragment of an animal's skull. A labourer posing at the workface of a sewer tunnel resembles an industrious gnome from

a children's story book, while an outdoor toothbrushing lesson for children takes on overtones of a pagan rite.

It is apparent that the first half of Goss's career was more productive than the latter half, although his compositions remained incisive. This is principally due to the increasingly technical nature of the subject matter he was required to photograph after about 1925. For example, while the early photos in the Sewers series include many portraits of workers, the later ones are mostly tightly composed details of roadways, sidewalks, and broken pipes.

The major work of Goss's final years, from 1936 until his death in 1940, was a survey of sub-standard housing in connection with the city's household loan program. The Housing series reflects similar concerns and documents the same conditions as the Health Department series on slum dwellings completed twenty five years earlier. This return of a major theme, combined with Goss's unchanging technique and point of view, gives his work over a thirty year period an unmatched sense of consistency. It was as though the whole epoch were a single moment in which the city's various triumphs and failures were frozen forever.

After Goss's death, the Photography and Blue Printing Section went into decline and was finally closed down in 1954. The negative files were stored cardboard boxes in the attic of the old City Hall. There they were subjected to extremes of heat and cold, water drips and pigeon droppings before being rediscovered in 1960 by the first city archivist, A. R. N. Woadden.

In 1965 Goss's surviving negatives were moved to new facilities in the New City Hall. Over the next five years the second City Archivist, R. Scott James, supervised their removal from acidic envelopes, identification, hand-washing and re-filing in separate envelopes under their original series titles. The surviving contact prints made by the Photography and Blue Printing Section were filed in the same way. Thus, the filing system devised by Goss as the original archivist of his own photos has been preserved along with the photos themselves.

The archives of the Arts and Letters Club contains some silent film footage taken in the 1930s by C.A.G. Matthews. For the most part, the scenes are of the more celebrated members of the club at work. Arthur Goss, who joined the club in 1920, only appears in brief cameos. In one shot, he enthusiastically paddles a canoe across a northern Ontario lake in which the cameraman, facing him, is the passenger. This portrait of the photographer expertly wielding a paddle, in action even as he poses, is an appropriate one considering the skill, enthusiasm and ironic humour he brought to his life’s work.

For me, learning about Arthur Goss has been a gradual process, starting with my participation in the exhibition, Spadina Avenue: A Photohistory in 1985. Curator Rosemary Donegan used several Goss photos in the exhibition, and when I remarked on their quality she told me where to find his work at the City Archives. I began reviewing the archival microfilm rolls, looking for photos of the industrial sites which were the subject of

own photography projects. In several cases, I discovered that I had unwittingly duplicated Goss's views of these sites taken a lifetime earlier.

In 1995, I documented elements of the city's water system for the Pipe Dreams exhibition curated by Michael McMahon at the Metropolitan Toronto Archives. In this exhibition, I again found my photos in the company of photos by Goss. I began to regard his work as a model of what a single photographer could accomplish in documenting a city.

For this exhibition, I have separated a few images by Goss from their archival context in order to emphasize the striking images he produced from the most prosaic subject matter. Most of the photos exhibited here have never been shown before, and unlike previous exhibitions this one doesn't concentrate on any particular historical or sociological subject. The subject is rather the art of documentary photography itself, and the brilliant way Arthur Goss practiced it.

Didactic Panel Text

William Arthur Scott Goss was born in London, Ontario in 1881. In 1883, his family moved to Toronto, where his father, John Goss was involved in several journalistic enterprises. Arthur entered Rose Avenue Public School in 1889, but was withdrawn following his father's death two years later. At age 11, he was hired by the City of Toronto as an office boy in the Engineer's Office. He remained an employee of this department for the rest of his life.

In 1911 Goss became the City’s first official photographer. He was made responsible for photographing all aspects of municipal government, including public works, education, health, recreation, housing and transportation. The majority of the approximately 30,000 negatives he produced until his death in 1940 have survived and are housed din the Department of Public Works collection at the City of Toronto Archives. This exhibition includes some of his vintage contact prints as well as modern enlargements from his original negatives.

Goss's career is unique in the history of Canadian photography. Widely recognized in his lifetime for his pictorialist photographs, he is now regarded as one of the most important documentary photographers working in Canada before the Second World War. His pictorial photos are now either lost or in private collections, but his official documentary photographs, rediscovered by the city’s first archivist in 1960, have become a treasured resource for historical researchers and artists alike.