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John Thomson Photograph Collection

Digital

1863

1 oversize box (1.5 linear ft.)

Call no.: PH 2



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The Scotsman John Thomson is considered one of the fathers of social documentary photography and a pioneer in the photography of southeast Asia. Between 1861 and 1872, he traveled extensively in Asia, documenting the scenery and people of modern day Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, and China.

The collection includes eight albumen prints from wet-plate collodion negatives taken early in Thomson's photographic career. The images of Penang, Malaysia, are all signed by John Thomson, with five dated November 1863. Subjects include Malay people, a native infantry regiment, sugar mill, temple, and Thomson's widely reproduced image of tree ferns.

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Background on J. (John) Thomson

A photographer, chemist, and son of a tobacco farmer, John Thomson is considered one of the fathers of social documentary photography. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, he traveled to Singapore in 1861 to visit his brother, beginning what would be the first of several Asian excursions. In 1863, camera in tow, Thomson returned to southeast Asia, spending ten months in Penang and Province Wellesley in British colonial Malaysia, before visiting Singapore once again.

Much of Thomson's early photographic work reflects a formal training, with stiffly posed natives depicted in studio-like settings. He soon shifted to a more documentary style, however, focusing on more naturalistic subjects, and particularly subjects of ethnographic and topographical interest. The images he took proved popular fare with British colonists, earning his first photographic laurels: election to the Bengal Photographic Society in 1864. For a brief time he and his brother William ran a studio together, but by 1865, the company was sold and Thomson was off on a six month trip to Bangkok, Thailand. After photographing the King of Siam and his court, his work was cut short by a bout of malaria he contracted in Cambodia in 1866, and after a brief period of recovery in Singapore, he gathered a selection of his work and headed home.

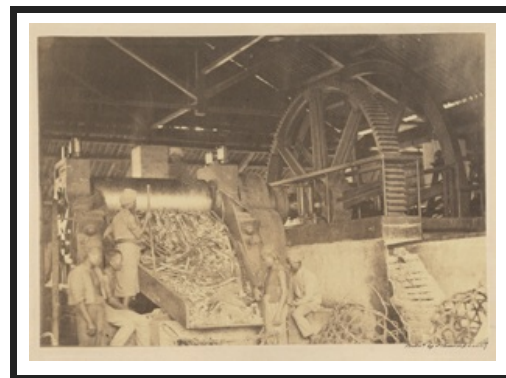
Although he spent barely a year in England, Thomson made the most of his time, teaching photography, publishing his first book, *The Antiquities of Cambodia* (1867), and earning election to the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Ethnographical Society. By July 1867, however, he had returned to Asia, settling in Hong Kong with his new wife, Isobel Petrie. His second book, *Views on the North River* (1870), was published in Hong Kong about the same time that his wife grew tired of life in China. Taking their young child, she returned to England, leaving Thomson once again to travel on his own. Inspired by Canton, he made several visits during the next year and in 1871, spent time in Shanghai and Peking. When he made the decision to return to England for good in 1872, he chose to bring with him fewer than twelve hundred negatives, leaving the rest behind in China where they were frequently reprinted.

Back in Britain, Thomson concentrated on publishing a series of popular illustrated books on his journeys, including *Foochow and the River Min* (1873), *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1873-1874 in four volumes), *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China* (1875), *The Land and People of China* (1876), *Through Cyprus with a Camera* (1878), and *Through China with a Camera* (1898). His *Street Life in London* (1877) is considered a pioneering work of social photography in England, depicting the lives of the lower classes. In addition to his own publications, Thomson worked on numerous other book projects including translations, photographic illustrations, and collaborations, including an 1875 project with Walter Woodbury, *Treasure Spots of the World*. In 1919, Thomson placed his glass plate negatives on deposit with Henry Wellcome in London, where they remain as part of the Wellcome Library. Thomson died in 1921.

Scope of collection

The Thomson Collection consists of eight albumen prints from wet-plate collodion negatives taken early in Thomson's photographic career. The images of Penang, Malaysia, are all signed by John Thomson, with five dated November 1863. The subjects include Malay people, a native infantry regiment, sugar mill, temple, and Thomson's widely reproduced image of tree ferns.

Inventory



Caledonian sugar mill



22nd Bengal Native Infantry, Penang

1863

35.5 x 40.5 cm.

Box 1: 1



Caledonian Sugar Mill, Province Wellesley, Penang

1863

20.5 x 28 cm.

Box 1: 2



Malays resting

1863 Nov.

27 x 20.5 cm.

Box 1: 3



Opening of Port of Province Wellesley From the Gt. Hill, Penang

1863

35 x 40.5 cm.

Box 1: 4



Quedah [Kedah] Hills From Batit Mangtagan

1863 Nov.

20.5 x 27 cm.

Box 1: 5



Buddhist Temple, Penang

1863 Nov.

35.5 x 40.5 cm.

Box 1: 6



Tree ferns, Penang Hill

1863 Nov.

35 x 40.5 cm.

Box 1: 7



Tree ferns, Gt. Hill, Penang

1863 Nov.

27 x 20.5 cm.

Box 1: 8

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

The W.E.B. Du Bois Library holds a copy of John Thomson's *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China, and China* (Call no. DS507 .T49 1875a) inscribed to Frank L. Wilson "with love from S.H.C." The handwriting in this volume appears to match that on the images, although the initials change to S.H.W., perhaps as the result of a marriage.

This collection was originally housed with the Woodbury (PH 3) and Beato Collections (PH 4), which suggests that all may have been acquired by S.H.W. and family while they lived in Indonesia.

Processing Information

Collection was processed by Meghan Fahey.

Digitized content

Digitized versions of the images in this collection have been added to SCUA's online repository, Credo.

Bibliography

Thomson, J., *Through China With a Camera* (Westminster: A. Constable, 1898). Call no.: Du Bois DS709 .T45

Language:

English

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