

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Anne Howeson, drawing as alchemy: historical representations of Kings Cross

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## ABSTRACT

In this practice-based contribution, using a language more poetic than academic, I discuss my drawings that reimagine found material – prints, drawings or photographs – and reflect on how historical images can be transformed, in a process both alchemical and mysterious, into personal stories or commentaries on contemporary life and politics. The Museum of London invited me to collaborate with their prints and drawings archives after seeing my exhibition Remember Me, commemorating architectural transition at King's Cross (Guardian Media, London). Researching in their Archives, I chose urban figurative prints of King's Cross and St Pancras, depicting ghosts, graveyards, death, health spas, foundling children and the built environment. Using these as starting points for my own stories about the passing of time, while erasing and re-drawing theirs, I became fascinated by a sense of walking in the earlier artists' footsteps. This led to my exhibition Present in the Past, 2015 (Collyer Bristow, London, 2015). Photographic sources then replaced engravings as source material for Feet of Angels (Carey Blyth, Oxford, 2023), using mostly Fox Talbot photographs from the Talbot Catalogue Raisonné, Bodleian Libraries. This exhibition, while still exploring time and memory, used these historical photographs as a conduit to new narratives of war, dystopia and mortality.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 11 June 2024; Accepted 3 April 2025

**KEYWORDS** Drawings; archives; photographs; stories; time; memory

## Introduction

I had no plans to work with archives. It came about because a curator from the Museum of London visited my exhibition Remember Me at the Guardian Media, about architectural transition at Kings Cross, and asked if I'd like to collaborate with the Museum's paintings, Prints and Drawings archive. This has led to several sets of drawings over the years that re imagine the past through historical research.

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My first visit to the archive was difficult. I followed the curator through the double doors at the back of the Museum entrance hall into a lift that opened onto a long narrow 1960s style corridor, lined with brown doors. Entering a bland room, almost empty except for a table covered in solander boxes, he asked me to put on a pair of white cotton gloves and stood behind me while I looked through the drawings and engravings in the boxes. Many of them showed St Pancras Church and graveyard, where people in historic costumes wandered among tombstones, exercising little dogs. The material didn't seem promising, but I took some photographs anyway, choosing mostly black and white eighteenth century prints which had a linear graphic quality, rather than the nineteenth century water colour paintings – many of which also depicted churches. The content was mostly topographical and literal, in contrast to the Remember Me drawings, which aimed to document and commemorate the vanishing industrial architecture and imagine a fictional future in King's Cross.

That day at the Museum, it was hard to imagine what I could say in response to the archival engravings of churches and churchyards. Looking through the photographs later, considering the content more carefully, I noticed the figure of a man with raised pickaxe in the background of a churchyard, preparing a grave for a burial and a different way of interpreting the images came to mind. I remembered the grave digger scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stanley Spencer's painting of the Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard, and began to use the archival images as a springboard to my own narratives.

While exploring archives – first the Museum of London, then the London Metropolitan Archives – I discovered a wider selection of images and stories featuring spas, wells, hidden rivers, buildings and other structures, for example, the fortifications of St Pancras during the English Civil War and the interiors of the great railway stations St Pancras and Kings Cross, during their construction and after the grand openings of the nineteenth century. I collected a group of images that resonated personally and began to use them as reference material for linking history and contemporary life.

In my early life as an illustrator, I became used to dealing with the restriction of commissions and discovered that constraints can stretch you beyond what you already know. Similarly, my initial resistance to the archival prints disappeared, and they began to inspire unconscious associations – an incentive to invention and new work.

The title of this piece uses the word 'alchemy' to suggest a sense of mystery in the way the drawings emerge, but it could also be applied to my overall approach to research, where associations and connections occur almost unconsciously. As an academic at the Royal College of Art (I retired in 2022) I became involved with the University's research culture with mixed

feelings, because although a curious person, I am not especially logical or methodical.

The German writer and academic WG Sebald, in an interview with writer and lecturer Joe Cuomo, describes the process well:

I never liked doing things systematically. Not even my Ph.D. research was done systematically. It was done in a random, haphazard fashion. The more I got on, the more I felt that, really, one can find something only in that way — in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he is looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this. (Cuomo 2001).

The Irish writer William Trevor makes a similar point: 'You can't apply academic rules to art of any kind. . . . It's a mystery how it's done, even to the person doing it. If you think you know, you're in deep, deep trouble . . . . Just get going, that's the important thing' (Caldwell 1990, 44).

My practical method with found historical imagery is to significantly enlarge and digitally print the original onto heavy, off white 290gms Hahnemühle paper, then to work intuitively, rubbing out parts of the image with a specialist Faber Castell pencil eraser: Perfection 7058, or adding a wash of colour in gouache. Without planning the content, I draw repeatedly over the image with mixed media materials such as crayons and conté, until much of the original has disappeared. The resulting images become a visual conversation between past and present, time and memory.

The exhibition 'Present in the Past' looked simultaneously at life today and across history in the railway lands of Kings Cross. After completing this work, I applied the same methods to other contexts such as landscape and water. In two recent series: 'War' and 'Volcano', nineteenth century photographs of Italian landscapes have developed into backdrops for drawings exploring dispossession and autobiography. In these 'conversations' with photographs, practice and research are inextricably linked in unexpected ways. I might start with no knowledge of how and where a piece will progress, but the drawing, mingling with the photograph in a process of osmosis, seems to know the direction it wants to take.

This is the first engraving I chose from the Museum of London Archives. It shows a peasant and his spaniel in 1797 collecting firewood next to a thatched cottage in the boggy scrubland near Battle Bridge, Pentonville Road. I remember my amazement that this twenty-first century urban setting could have looked so primitive such a short time ago. My interventions into this print ([Figure 1](#)) seem tentative to me now, I was just beginning to experiment with ways of 'revisioning the past', by placing the future Kings Cross Station in the background distance, leaving the peasant figure stranded in the transformed landscape of the twenty-first century.



**Figure 1.** Battlebridge 1797.

Historical and contemporary allusions are combined in this drawing about mortality and time (Figure 2), set in the nineteenth century St Pancras churchyard and inspired by the ancient Egyptian Festival ‘Celebrations of the Dead’. The Shard (in reality nowhere near the churchyard) looms in the background: a twenty-first century London emblem which always reminds me of the Eiffel Tower – Apollinaire’s<sup>1</sup> ‘Shepherdess of Paris’ (Apollinaire 1913). Future inhabitants of King’s Cross walk their dogs in the foreground, accompanied by the souls, dead and alive, of previous centuries. The Vision of St Eustace and the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden by fifteenth century Italian painters Pisanello and Massacio were other influences. After *Celebrations of the Dead*, I made 20 or so drawings from prints and engravings in the Museum of London Archives, British History Online and the London Metropolitan Archive. These drawings became the exhibition *Present in the Past* at Collyer Bristow, London, 2015.

This image was taken from an atmospheric engraving of tunnels under Kings Cross Station (Figure 3). The drawing went through two stages. In the first intervention, I half erased the figure of a workman with a wheelbarrow, added colour and worked into the tunnels to give them more depth. The angels appeared and the horse disappeared in the second stage. By this time, I’d started to work with photographic imagery in other drawings, rather than engravings, and was reading non-fiction books about WW2, Auschwitz and





**Figure 2.** Celebrations of the Dead 1.



**Figure 3.** Angel.

the Holocaust. These subjects seeped into the next series of drawings, mixing with unsettling thoughts about Brexit and the Pandemic. Conscious of the repetition of living through politically unstable and secular times, like many people I feel the need for a world less material, more mystical. William Blake (1794) was also on my mind, with his references to the power and protection of Angels.

There's a mystery, an alchemy, in the act of turning a photographic image into a drawing that is connected but has a different meaning. Photographs unlock ideas intuitively – a buried obsession, a meeting between the sacred, the historical and the political or a collision between the past and present. My drawings on photographs seem to 'emerge' in a mysterious, alchemical way – not unlike the way photographic images appear while being developed in a dark room. Some of the Talbot drawings retain aspects of the original photographs, while others have no traces left. The important thing is the effect the photograph has had on the imagination: whether triggered by an incidental subjective detail (as in Roland Barthes' 'Punctum' (Barthes 1980)) a powerful atmosphere or an association sparked by personal memory, the final outcome becomes something different.

This photograph, set in King's Cross and discovered in the London Metropolitan Archives, was the first photograph I used. I believe it was taken in the 1940s or early 1950s. In the foreground of the original image, a large dark locomotive train engine waits on the platform, while a group of firemen on the left seem to be involved in a firefighting operation. I erased the engine, added trees, smoke, another train in the background and a group of people running away from something (Figure 4). The underlying theme for me was political instability, authoritarianism and COVID, but the drawing could be interpreted in other ways.

I first discovered William Henry Fox Talbot's photographs as a schoolgirl, drawn by their powerful sense of place and my fascination with the stiff figures of Talbot's long dead family and servants living out their domestic lives on the Lacock estate, dressed so strangely, yet somehow intimate and alive. Working with them recently, using the Fox Talbot Catalogue Raisonné archive at the Bodleian Library,



**Figure 4.** Burning books.



**Figure 5.** Spade and Broom.

Oxford, I chose images that offered settings for a new cast of characters, with sources found variously in the Catalogue's search files of 'seated women' and 'standing men', or inspired by paintings, films (the woman on a swing in Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (Renoir 1936) for example) or articles in newspapers reporting on current events. In this way, it's possible for an artist to reference or hide behind a historical original image, turning it into a springboard to something that excites and connects them with thoughts from their own life.

The Talbot photograph that informed this drawing (Figure 5) depicted simply a ruined wall, a spade and a broom. Talbot was interested in the science and technique of photography and in using it to experiment and record. He probably set the items up in this way to test the light and shadows falling on them, but for me they became mundane objects abandoned by time. The background historical figures were sourced from the Talbot Catalogue Raisonné and placed in front of Talbot's 'ruined wall' to represent ghosts, mortality and time.

My exhibition *Feet of Angels*, at Carey Blyth Gallery, Oxford, in April 2023 used William Henry Fox Talbot photographs as a source. The exhibition coincided with *Bright Sparks* at the Bodleian Library Oxford, which celebrated the Bodleian Libraries' acquisition of the archive of Talbot, the British inventor of photography.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Anne Howeson** lives between London, Cornwall UK and Fontecchio, Italy. She completed her MA at the Royal College of Art in London where she was a tutor between 1985 and 2022, promoting drawing as a process, outcome and a way of thinking. Her solo exhibitions include: Feet of Angels, Carey Blyth Fine Art, Oxford, April 2023; Present in the Past, Collyer Bristow, London (2015); Imagining King's Cross, Cross Street Gallery; London, UK (2015); Remember Me, The Guardian News and Media, London, UK (2009). Group exhibitions include: ING Discerning Eye (2020, 2016, 2011); Motive/Motif V&A East (2019); Bunka Gakuen University, Tokyo (2019); Buckingham Palace (2018); Ruskin Prize, Millennium Gallery Sheffield (2017). Her work is included in public collections at The Museum of London, The Guardian News and Media, St George's Hospital London, Imperial College London. Anne Howeson is a Jerwood Drawing Prize winner.

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