

AN ORAL HISTORY OF KINGSTON CINEMAS

INTERVIEWEE: Professor Stephen Barber, Professor at Kingston School of Art, Kingston University

Place of Interview: Kingston Museum

Date: May 27th 2022

Interviewer: Liz Chettur, Summariser: Alison Brennan

Muybridge was born and died in Kingston, (1830-1904). He went to the USA when he was 20 and lived there for 44 years, initially working as a bookseller in New York, Boston and New Orleans.

10 years later Muybridge took up photography, quickly becoming expert and successful. His San Francisco Panorama and Yosemite landscapes were well known and admired. In the 1860s Muybridge specialised in urban and landscape photography but started studying the movement of animals. He experimented with multiple cameras to capture sequential movement. The tycoon Leland Stanford commissioned Muybridge to answer the question: Did a galloping horse take all its legs off the ground simultaneously? By the end of the 1870s Muybridge's experiments showed the answer was "Yes". The experiments' results were well-publicised and people who saw the still images were very impressed. Muybridge's reputation increased exponentially by the early 1880s, after he invented and gave talks and shows using his Zoopraxiscope, a moving image projector. Muybridge designed the Zoopraxiscope and engineers built it. The machine used plate glass disks containing the images of moving animals and humans. The Zoopraxiscope was used to rotate the disks at high speed so that when projected they give the impression of continuous movement. Muybridge lectured while his projectionist operated the machine.

Muybridge's patron Leland Stanford began to minimize Muybridge's role in these achievements which resulted in a falling out between the two men. So, in 1883 Muybridge took up a commission from the University of Pennsylvania to study and portray the movement of human beings. He was given good facilities and support and made thousands of images of humans and animals.

In 1891 Muybridge, at the peak of his fame and success toured the Zoopraxiscope (he only ever had the one machine) round Europe, showing in large venues to packed houses. He had great charisma, captivated audiences and newspapers gave extensive coverage. He became a celebrity. During this time, inspired by Muybridge, others (e.g. Max Skladanowsky and the Lumiere Brothers) were experimenting with projection, beginning to use celluloid film. Their successes started to eclipse Muybridge's achievements and after the first permanent picture house opened using celluloid, and later as venues became standardized and permanent, interest in the Zoopraxiscope diminished.

After Muybridge returned to Kingston in 1894, he did a final gruelling projection tour of 100 venues. He and his projectionist travelled by train, carrying much heavy equipment.

Muybridge's last home was in Liverpool Road, Kingston, not far from Richmond Park. He buried his negatives deep in the garden, where he also installed pools and palm trees.

From 1860, Muybridge archived his work compulsively, eventually bringing 3,500 items back to Kingston although he left many items behind in U.S. (including at the University of Pennsylvania). He gave his Zoopraxiscope and archive including scrapbooks to Kingston Museum which has the principal collection of Muybridge's work.

Muybridge influenced many artists, including Marcel Duchamp and Francis Bacon, experimental filmmakers, and performance artists who record the human body. When Kingston's first purpose-built cinema was opened in 1910 Muybridge was celebrated by the Mayor as the Inventor of Cinema.