



**Candida Höfer, Biblioteca Angelica Roma II 2003, Rena Bransten Gallery, Aug 2016**

I like this photograph very much. My personal prejudices have a strong influence.

It is large and creates an illusion that I can step into the space depicted. It is an inviting space. As a minor bibliophile, libraries, especially old ones, sing me a siren's song. While the image appears as we think we would see it, it is not. I respect and admire the skill needed to create illusionary images that look so normal yet that defy the effects of camera lenses and the affects our own visual system: the uniformity of the light, the convergence in depth but not in height, the overall focus, the perception of depth and space, etc. The design of oblique and parallel vertical lines is masterful.

The picture is very big, slightly larger than 5 feet wide by 6 feet high. Bigness implies importance. It is hung in a very well-known gallery which implies importance. It is accompanied by biographical information describing a lustrous European career and many important teachers and colleagues. All this implied importance may reflect actual importance, after all, established galleries are knowledgeable about art in addition to the art-business. One cannot be an expert in

everything and must at times fall back on the opinions of authorities (the trick is to pick the right authorities).

Setting aside these partialities, is this a photograph worth our time? This is a document of a place most of us will never see. It clearly demonstrates the age and wealth of the institution, rich carpets, three stories of ornate carved wood shelves, heavy wooden chairs with blue leather, marble bust, and ladders that OSHA would never allow. The only hint of modernity is the flexible electrical conduit hanging down under the tables to provide power for the table lamps. The appearance of the place is of unchanging stability, scholarship, authority, and a long legacy; the antithesis of our rapid changing technological world. The photograph is realistic and depends on our assumption the photography has a special relationship with the real world.

As technology keeps us in front of our computers and the tourists industry defines the "sites" we see in comfort and luxury, locations such as this fall into obscurity. The gallery's text includes ... "Höfer captures the psychological residue left behind in empty public and institutional spaces." This text is referring to the fact that the image is empty of people, but I suspect that it regularly has a small population as it does not have high entertainment value.

Cultural institutions are using digital scanning and internet technology to make their vast resources available with a few key strokes. It is one of the wonders on our world that we can carry on much more information gathering without being restricted by our locations and monetary means. As this information becomes more available institutions are making their back rooms off-limits, places that recede from our consciousness. The information from primary sources is becoming more accessible while the actual sources are becoming more remote.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the early photographers fanned out across the world to bring pictures of exotic places back to the masses. Viewers in London wondered at lantern slides of the Pyramids. Parlors in New York were stocked with stereo-cards of America's wild-west. In retrospect we now see these entertainment artifacts as historical records of what was depicted and the human endeavors needed to produce them. Will Höfer's work someday show us a class of institutions we have lost?