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Esson's Ontario A Photographic Exhibition Proposal For The Archives Of Ontario

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ESSON'S ONTARIO
A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION PROPOSAL FOR THE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO

By
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BFA Special Honours, York University, Toronto, 2009

A thesis presented to Ryerson University
In partial fulfillment for the degree of
Master of Arts
In the program of
Photographic Preservation and Collections Management.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada 2012

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ESSON'S ONTARIO: A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION PROPOSAL FOR THE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO

Master of Arts, 2012, Ashley Cook, Photographic Preservation and Collections Management, Ryerson University.

Abstract

This thesis constitutes a proposal for the exhibition, *Esson's Ontario: Celebrating James Esson's Stereographic Tour of Ontario*, which will be mounted in 2013 at the Archives of Ontario in their Reading Room display cases. Using the collection of 40 James Esson stereographs at the Archives of Ontario, the proposed exhibition will re-introduce Esson and his stereographs of the province of Ontario. A curatorial statement and a concept for the design of the exhibition will follow an introduction to James Esson and his life and work as a photographer and stereographer, and some of the assets and difficulties of displaying works in the Reading Room display cases will be addressed. The thesis includes appendices that outline the design of the exhibition, including the English panel texts, exhibition designs and checklists.

Acknowledgements

I am forever in debt to my family for their ongoing support and love throughout this time. I think this thesis has shortened my life by a few years, but their comfort and support may have evened the playing field a bit. Mom, Dad, Robyn, thank you.

I cannot begin to thank my fellow classmates enough for their support throughout the past months. I hope that my attempts to be a soundboard and provide moral support back to you all were just as helpful. I am also forever grateful to my roommate and friend, Crystal Fraser, for her grip on the English language and editing prowess.

My thanks to all of the staff at the Archives of Ontario, especially for putting up with the continuous questions I had for them during my time there. Specifically, Denise Psaila, Shannon Coles, Adam Birrell, Mark Epp, Serge Paquet, Stewart Boden and James Bower are to be commended for enduring my ongoing questions and conversations.

The information I gathered about James Esson throughout the months of research for this thesis is thanks to four individuals; Markus R. Boost of Cambridge Ontario, Joan M. Schwartz of Queen's University, Lynn Griggs, Assistant Archivist of the City of Cambridge Archives, and Neil Brochu, Collections Specialist at the Collections and Conservation Centre, Museum and Heritage Services, Culture Division for the City of Toronto cannot be thanked enough for their knowledge and expertise and kindness in showing me their collections and research.

Dedication

To Ol' Jimmy.
I hope I did you proud.

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Introduction

In 2009, the Archives of Ontario opened its new facility at the Keele Campus of Toronto's York University. The new space included something not seen in the over 100-year history of the institution: onsite exhibition space. As I was researching the collection there, I discovered that during this new, short exhibition history, the Archives had never had an exhibition purely focused on photography, or on one photographer. As I discuss below, I wanted to propose an exhibition featuring an Ontario photographer, James Esson, who was a self-advertised "photographer, publisher, portraitist and dealer in stereoscopic views."¹ Esson was photographing Ontario at a time when most photographers doing so were not from Canada, and he was also working with stereographs, a technology that was reaching its height of popularity in the United States and Europe during his lifetime.

After some research on Esson, I was struck by the quantity of stereographs that he produced, and the variety of locations he had photographed on a tour of Ontario he took in the late 1870s. The tour produced roughly 1000 stereographs of locations throughout the province of Ontario. Major cities like Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton and what was then the almost untouched lakes and landscapes of the Province were all part of Esson's stereographic focus. A cross section of Esson's stereographic work is represented in the Archives; the 40 of his stereographs in the collection feature a variety of cities, architectural landmarks, lakes and mountains in Ontario. My research also uncovered one exhibition of Esson's work that was held

¹ Joan M. Schwartz, "Double Vision: The Stereo Views of James Esson," *Photo Communiqué* 1, no. 1 (Mar-Apr 1979): 15.

thirty years ago at the National Archives (now Library and Archives Canada, also known as LAC). A selection of Esson's glass plate stereograph negatives from LAC's collection was exhibited as an *Aperçu* exhibition. The *Aperçu* exhibition series featured both historic and contemporary photographic works from the LAC collections, and was designed to showcase new acquisitions of historic work and individual artists from the collections. LAC had received a collection of 247 glass plate negatives of Esson's stereographs, and Joan M. Schwartz, an archivist in the Photography Acquisition & Research department, was assigned to catalogue and research this new acquisition. Upon the completion of that work, Schwartz felt there was enough information and material to propose Esson's stereographs as a subject for an *Aperçu* exhibition, specifically to introduce the acquisition of new pieces to the collection. The final selection of 57 reproduction stereographs that was made for the exhibition was predominantly influenced by the condition of the negatives themselves. Many negatives had cracked emulsion that would affect the image content when reproduced.² The LAC exhibition also focused purely on stereographs that were located in Ottawa, the Muskoka region, and the Thousand Islands in Canada, since these were the locations available in the entire collection. This selection of stereographs is noted as a way of introducing "one facet of the work of this prolific portrait and landscape artist" in the exhibition's catalogue.³ The works that I have chosen for the Archives of Ontario exhibition will feature more locations to highlight Esson's stereographic work in Ontario including several cities and lakes

² Joan M. Schwartz, in conversation with the author, Ottawa, September 3, 2012.

³ Joan M. Schwartz, *Aperçu: The Archives Looks at The Stereo Views of James Esson*, (Ottawa: Public Archives Canada, 1979), 4.

throughout the province. They will also show how Esson framed his photographs with fore, middle and background to emphasize the depth that made the stereographic image so desirable. Finally, the *Aperçu* exhibition only exhibited Esson's work; *Esson's Ontario* will give viewers a chance to view the stereographs that are exhibited in the way they were intended, in three dimensions.

In 2009, the Archives of Ontario moved to a new, custom-built building that included several venues for artifact exhibition. One of these areas was the Reading Room display cases. Prior to this new building, the Archives of Ontario did not curate or organize exhibitions, but works in the collection were occasionally loaned out to other institutions for their exhibitions. In the short exhibition history that the Archives now has, there has never been an exhibition purely based on an Ontarian photographer, or photography in general.⁴ Because the Archives of Ontario had never addressed this topic and Esson's work had been exhibited only once before elsewhere as an acquisition showcase, I believe that the exhibition at the Archives will serve to re-introduce this man and his works to the public, and make him a more prominent character within the history of photography of Canada. This exhibition will be focusing on a larger cross section of the locations Esson visited in Ontario and his stereographs. This idea will be further demonstrated by the chance for viewers of the exhibition to actually view the materials in three dimensions. This

⁴ One exception is *Assignment to Archives* curated by Vid Ingelevics, which focused on the works of several Government of Ontario photographers throughout the twentieth century. The exhibition focused on how these images no longer have their metadata, and have in essence, been abandoned at the Archives by the various ministries that originally commissioned them. Because of this, many of the photographers in the exhibition are unknown and un-credited.

aspect of the exhibition will aid the educators of the Archives, since they have requested more exhibitions with a hands-on aspect to them. The exhibition can be used for educational tours of the Archives that focus on archival material and how to make things accessible to the researching public.⁵

After expressing my interest in mounting an exhibition to the staff at the Archives, I discovered that their enthusiasm was matched by their concerns over the safety of the photographs that would be exhibited. As part of my thesis, I address their concerns while creating an exhibition that fits the mandate of the institution and satisfies the needs of the educators, archivists and conservators there. The Archives of Ontario is responsible for “promoting and preserving the documentary memory of Ontario,” and providing public access to archival information while ensuring these materials are protected for future generations.⁶ Its mission now also includes showcasing Ontario’s public and private archival records as a vital resource for study and interpretation, while encouraging the public to access the collection.⁷ Esson was an Ontarian, born and raised, who was photographing Ontario at a time when many of his contemporaries doing so were from the United States and Europe. With all of this in mind, and the knowledge that Esson’s work hadn’t been put on display previously at the Archives of Ontario, I gravitated towards Esson, his work and intentions as an exhibition subject.

⁵ Stewart Boden, conversation with the author, Toronto, May 20, 2012.

⁶ Archives of Ontario, “Code of Practice.” Last modified February 22, 2012.
<http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/about/code-of-practice.aspx>.

⁷ Archives of Ontario, “Archives and Recordkeeping Act, 2006.” Last modified February 22, 2012.
<http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/about/archives-act.aspx>.

In the 1870s, when stereography was booming as a form of entertainment, Esson was embracing this technology, and chose to work with it extensively in his portrayal of Ontario. Based on human vision, stereographs have two parallel images of the same scene taken either simultaneously or consecutively at slightly different angles. When merged together in a viewer, the two images create the illusion of depth, called “binocular vision,” much like how human eyes merge two separate views of the world into one in the brain.⁸ By photographing scenes with elements in the fore, middle and background (see image 1), Esson’s stereographs emphasize the depth of the real world, and as Margaret Loke suggests, “they give access to the past.”⁹ Painted and drawn stereographs became popular with the invention of the stereoscope by Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1838. With stereo photographs first shown at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 in London, the stereoscope became a form of mass-entertainment. Queen Victoria’s fascination with the technology further spurred the stereograph’s rise in popularity in Europe which then spread to North America.¹⁰ This was bolstered by the development of the handheld viewer in 1859 by the Americans Oliver Wendall Holmes and Joseph L. Bates,¹¹ which was far cheaper to produce and acquire in comparison to Wheatstone’s tabletop box.

⁸ Emily J. Wagner. “In All Solidarity and Reality: A Stereoscopic Exhibition Proposal” (master’s thesis, Ryerson University, 2009), 2.

⁹ Margaret Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921: A Photographic Portrait From The Keystone-Mast Collection*, (New York: Summit Books, 1980), 11.

¹⁰ Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 12.

¹¹ Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 12.

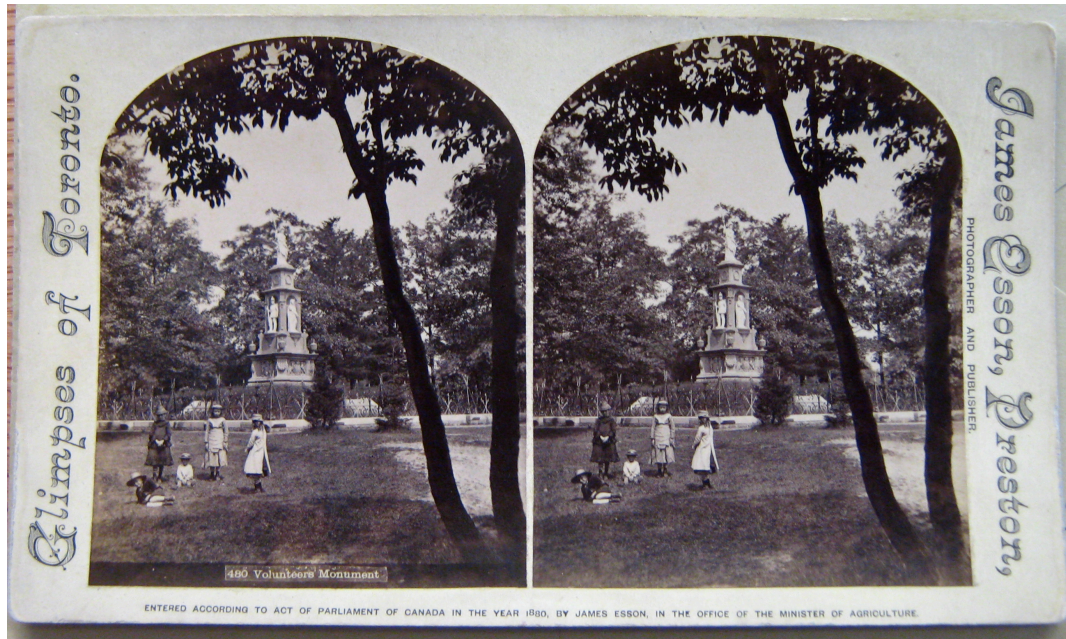


Image 1: Note how the trees are the foreground, the group of children creates a middle ground and the Volunteer's monument and surrounding trees are the background.

James Esson, ca. 1880, Glimpses of Toronto, Volunteer's Monument, Acc. 3964, ST 565, A-431, Archives of Ontario.

During this time, stereographers from the United Kingdom focused on panoramic sceneries, landscapes, studio poses and architectural studies.¹² Photographers were traveling throughout the United Kingdom and Europe to photograph as much scenery as possible.¹³ Esson's work focused on the landscapes and scenery of Ontario, rather than some of the subjects photographed by the many American photographers who focused on photographing natural and man-made disasters and the American Civil War to satisfy the curiosity the American public by documenting destruction.¹⁴ The stereographs he created on his tour are early views

¹² Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 16.

¹³ William Culp Darrah, *Stereo Views: A History of Stereographs in America and Their Collection*, (Gettysburg: Times and News Publishing Company, 1964), 9.

¹⁴ Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 16.

of sites in the province that would become landmarks, places like the University of Toronto, Parliament Hill and the Sault Ste Marie Canal. Esson's tour was at a time when the popularity of stereographs was high; they were flooding the market through mass production and distribution.¹⁵ Esson published his own stereographs, but it is unknown if he was the sole seller of them as well. I plan to emphasize his choice of taking stereographs on the tour by making a secondary set of the exhibited stereographs available for the public to view through a modern stereoscope, as the original audience would have done. These stereographs, and the ones shown in the exhibition itself, will show Esson's use of foreground, middle ground and background, and how he framed scenes and photographed them on an angle to further emphasize depth. Esson's stereographic works are excellent examples of the art of the stereographer, and create an illusion of buildings, lakes and people portrayed in three dimensions for the viewer. With this proposed exhibition, I hope to reintroduce Esson and his work, and highlight his choice of stereography, providing visitors to the Archives with a view of the Ontario's history through technology that will be a new perspective to the modern audience.

This thesis is made up of several components that will provide the context for the exhibition proposal for an exhibition called *Esson's Ontario: Celebrating James Esson's Stereographic Tour of Ontario*, to be mounted in the Reading Room display cases at the Archives of Ontario. The Archives has given me a tentative date during 2013 for the exhibition to be mounted, after the due date of this thesis.

¹⁵Darrah, *Stereo Views: A History of Stereographs in America and Their Collection*, 9.

Because of this, a description of the physical mounting of the exhibition will not be included in this thesis. The thesis begins with a survey of the literature on stereo exhibition and on the history of exhibitions of Esson's stereographic work. This will be followed by a short biography of Esson and a description of the stereographic work he created on his tour. The research here will help to provide some of the panel texts in the final exhibition design outlined in the appendices. I will then describe the preservation concerns with exhibiting artifacts in the Archives' space, and demonstrate how they can be addressed to ensure the artifact's safety in accordance with the regulations of the Archives of Ontario. This is because the Reading Room space in which I have chosen to exhibit the Esson stereographs in is a very specific space, with specific exhibition concerns that need to be addressed as part of the Archives' mandate to "preserve the documentary history of Ontario" in its collection.¹⁶ Finally, I will introduce the concept and design of my proposed exhibition through my curatorial statement. Exhibition checklists, images of the exhibition design and the text panels will be laid out in the appendices of this thesis.¹⁷

¹⁶ Archives of Ontario, "Code of Practice."

¹⁷ The Archives of Ontario requires that all exhibition texts be in both official languages, French and English. I have every intention of creating the French text as well, however for the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on the English texts.

Literature Survey

My thesis contains two areas of research; the first is on James Esson and his place in Canadian photographic history in order to provide the information needed for the text panels in the exhibition. The second, smaller area is the exhibition of stereographs and photographic objects in general. I chose not to highlight the literature on the history of stereographs in this survey, since this topic has been well documented by several theses prior to mine.¹⁸ When I began my research for this project, there were a very small number of available resources about James Esson within Canadian photographic history. In the few resources I did find, the research was based primarily on two sources, Markus R. Boost and Joan M. Schwartz. Boost, a researcher and writer based in Cambridge, Ontario has been looking into Esson for several years. He has found several original advertisements for Esson, as well as some of the series listings for the different stereograph series. Many authors credit Boost with compiling the known information about Esson's life. Schwartz was an archivist in Photography Acquisition and Research at the National Archives of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada, also known as LAC), and was the curator of the 1979 exhibition, *The Stereo Views of James Esson*. Schwartz also wrote *Aperçu: The Archives Looks at The Stereo Views of James Esson* for the exhibition and *Double Vision: The Stereo Views of James Esson*, an article published in *Photo Communiqué* about Esson's stereographic works. Schwartz's exhibition and accompanying articles were a way for LAC to introduce their holdings of Esson's work and

¹⁸ See, Emily J. Wagner's thesis, "In All Solidarity and Reality: A Stereoscopic Exhibition Proposal," Elisabeth Teresa Jessica Caron "William S. Sawyer Exhibition," and Rachel Goldberg "One Man's West: Photographs by Edwin Hendrie Grant. The Development and Proposal of a Photographic Exhibition."

demonstrate what was known about Esson at the time. The information provided by Schwartz's and Boost's research and publications at the time has since been updated by further work by Boost. Despite this work, many details of Esson's photographic tour are still unknown. Primary resources about Esson's business have been hard to find, and a full archive of Esson's photographic work does not exist because when he retired the glass plates in his studio were sold for refurbishment.¹⁹ During his research, Boost found that the building that once housed Esson's studio still had some photographic material, however the building's new owners tossed it all out in the 1990s.²⁰ What remains are prints and stereographs, like the ones that can be found at the Archives of Ontario.

Esson's life and work are documented and written about by researchers and scholars like Boost and Schwartz, but not to the extent of that given to other historic, Canadian photographers, like William Notman for example. When Canada is brought up in the history of photography, men like Notman are usually the ones mentioned and discussed. Unlike researchers or scholars in Europe or the United States, who can reference histories of photography, such as Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* or works by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, Canada's history of photography isn't well documented. Ralph Greenhill, a collector of photography, who researched and wrote about Canadian photographic history, is the exception. Well known for his vast collection early Canadian photography, Greenhill is the

¹⁹ Stanley J. White "Old Jimmy Esson: Honoured by The City of Cambridge." *Photographic Canadiana*. 21, no. 1 (1995): 11.

²⁰ White, "Old Jimmy Esson: Honoured by The City of Cambridge," 11.

author of *Early Photography in Canada*, published in 1965. He went on to publish *Canadian Photography: 1839-1920* with Andrew Birrell in 1979, as a second edition of *Early Photography*. Both of these books mention Esson as a portrait photographer and a stereographer, and include reproductions of his work. In both books, Esson is coupled in with other Canadian portrait photographers and stereographers from Ontario and Québec, including Louis Parent Vallée, James George Parks and William James Topley. Greenhill's short entry on Esson concludes with Greenhill referencing a resource that calls Esson the "Wilson of Canada," referring to the portrait artist, George Washington Wilson of Aberdeen, Scotland.²¹ We can assume that Greenhill was never entirely impressed with Esson, as he writes that he cannot measure up to the excellent portraiture work of Wilson.²²

In my research on the history of, and problems associated with the display of stereographs, I was directed to begin with theses from former students of the Photographic Preservation and Collections Management programme, that had dealt with such topics. Emily J. Wagner's 2009 thesis *In All Solidarity and Reality: A Stereoscopic Exhibition Proposal* included a proposal to exhibit stereographs in such a way as to preserve them from damage while still allowing the viewer to experience them in three dimensions. Wagner's thesis provided my starting point for developing ideas for the display design of a stereographic exhibition, in particular her outline of the efforts by museums and galleries to exhibit

²¹ WM Cochrane, *The Canadian Album, Men of Canada: or Success by Example, in Religion, Patriotism, Business, Law, Medicine, Education and Agriculture* (Brantford: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1893), 180.

²² Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell. *Canadian Photography: 1839-1920* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), 69.

stereographs. Another resource that helped to shape my design of the proposed exhibition was Larry Klein's book, *Exhibits: Planning and Design*. He gives examples of the importance of lighting, the placement of the objects and the layout of the labels to an exhibition. William Hayett's *Display & Exhibit Handbook* and the Canadian Conservation Institute's *Mount-Making for Museum Objects* follows in this vein by providing an overview of how to design mounts for specific objects on display. While *Mount-Making* didn't provide any examples of photography display, it is still a good resource on how to work through issues such as supporting the curve in the mount of several of the Esson stereographs.

Curatorial Statement

In 1875, Canada was a young country of only eight years, and Ontario was home to a young photographer, named James Esson. Over the next seven years, Esson would travel throughout Ontario on a tour to photograph the newly formed province, specifically in a format that produced a 3D result: stereographs. During this boom in popularity in stereography, Esson photographed more than a thousand images all over Ontario. Many of these sites are still standing today, like the Sault Ste Marie Shipping Canal and Parliament Hill. By framing the scenes with elements within them, such as trees and architectural details, and by having distinct fore, middle and backgrounds, Esson created depth in his stereographs. They are excellent examples of the art of the stereographer, a way of creating an illusion for the viewer. These stereographs are part of the visual record of one of the oldest provinces in the country, and now forty of them can be found in the Archives of Ontario collection of photographic works. Margaret Loke speaks to stereographs being fixed in time, and that they can give access to the past;²³ *Esson's Ontario* will showcase Esson's work to the public and give them access to his time and views of the province. Esson's work has been shown only once before in a 1979 exhibition that showed examples of a new acquisition at the National Archives. It is now time to re-introduce him and his work to the researchers and scholars who visit the Archives of Ontario through the holdings of the Archives' collection. This proposed exhibition will do three things; part of the Archives of Ontario's collections will be highlighted for the public to see, the chosen stereographs in the exhibition will

²³ Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 11.

demonstrate how Esson framed his work and created the illusion of three dimensions, and the viewer will get the chance to see the exhibited stereographs as they were intended, as a 3D image, something that is not done very often with stereographs.

James Esson was born in 1853 in Preston, Ontario, now part of Cambridge, Ontario. Having learned photography from his father George, James Esson took over his father's photographic studio and made a name for himself as a meticulous photographer of local events. At a time when many of Esson's contemporaries who photographed Ontario were from the United States, Esson did his own tour of the province and kept to the more English style of photographing panoramic landscapes and architectural scenes of the day. While not all photographers from the United States were photographing disasters and the American Civil War to please the American public, several were during this time, allowing Esson to further stand out from his American contemporaries. By mainly using stereographs, a technology known as a product of mass production and dissemination, Esson was able to share his province with a much wider audience, especially at a time when stereographers were trying to explore and photograph more of Canada for the viewing audience in and outside of the country.²⁴ With the exhibition I propose, the researcher and the public who come to the Archives of Ontario will get to look at the history of the province using the same technology. *Esson's Ontario: Celebrating James Esson's Stereographic Tour of Ontario*, will show examples of the monumental architecture

²⁴ Loke, *The World as it was, 1865-1921*, 11.

and urbanity of the cities before moving out towards the newly explored beauty of Ontario's almost untouched lakes and landscapes. The exhibition will be using a collection of stereographs from one photographer, rather than a medley of work, to show one man's vision of the province. It also gives the viewers of the exhibition the opportunity to use the stereograph's viewer, as was originally intended. The public can view reproductions of all of the exhibited stereographs, through the help of the Archives' staff.

Methodology

My main inspiration for the design of *Esson's Ontario* was the exhibitions I had seen at the Archives of Ontario during my nine months there as part of my program research. Many of the exhibitions I viewed were similar in their very simple layout and display. This allowed for the focus to be solely on the artifacts and the information provided by the text panels. I wanted to arrange *Esson's Ontario* the same way so the stereographs and the accompanying text panels can be clearly read, viewed and understood. The object labels for *Esson's Ontario* also follow in this tradition, and will follow the Archives' rules for object labels (See appendix B for examples). The selection of stereographs has been influenced by the quality of the available stereographs in the Archives' collection. Since physical damage like scratches and image fading can affect the 3D outcome, I have selected stereographs that do not have significant damage. The provenances of the stereographs that have been chosen for the exhibition are from two photographic collectors. Having been acquired from flea markets and antique shows where vendors might not have been

concerned with the safe keeping of photographic objects; some of the stereographs had been damaged prior to their donation to the Archives. The decision to use reproductions of the stereographs for this exhibition has been chosen due to conservation concerns with the original artifacts, as will be explained further in the thesis.

James Esson, 1853-1933

James Esson was born in 1853 to the Preston Daguerreotypist, George Esson and his wife Jane. George had opened his own studio in the family home just the year before James was born, and would eventually teach James photography to have him as an assistant to his practice.²⁵ James took over the business from his father in the early 1870s,²⁶ and he moved the studio to 113 Queen Street in 1875.²⁷ Esson had little trouble establishing a greater reputation than that of his father; his meticulous approach gained him fame as a photographer of local weddings and events. In 1878, the County of Waterloo Gazetteer and Directory carried an advertisement for Esson that read "James Esson Photographer, Publisher and dealer in Stereoscopic Views, C.D.V. Statuary, Monumental and Headstone Designs. Queen Street - Preston - Ontario." Within three years this advertisement was altered to include "portrait artist" amongst his titles.²⁸

In 1875, Esson embarked on a roughly seven-year tour of Ontario and the State of New York to produce stereographs. Researchers have almost no details about the tour itself, there has yet to be found any evidence of how Esson traveled, for how long, or how he even paid for the tour. Using Boost's research, my guess is that Esson went alone since he had no family and would not meet his first wife until

²⁵ Markus R. Boost "If You Have Beauty...." *Photographic Canadiana*. 25, no. 2 (1999): pg. 39.

²⁶ City Archives, "James Esson, Inducted 1995," Last modified 2012, http://www.cambridge.ca/cs_pubaccess/hall_of_fame.php?aid=16&cpid=0&scpid=0&did=2&sid=34&ssid=0&tp=0&grid=0.

²⁷ Boost, "If You Have Beauty....," 39.

²⁸ Schwartz, "Double Vision: The Stereo Views of James Esson," 15.

visiting New York on the tour.²⁹ Boost's research has been able to uncover most of the information that shows that the tour was seven years in total specifically because Esson grouped together the different cities and regions that he visited by year. This has become the accepted explanation of Esson's tour in regards to its length. Beyond Boost's research, there has never been any evidence to show the actual schedule of the tour. It is more likely that Esson only toured during the summer when the light was best and did so every summer for seven years. Esson photographed several landmarks, including Osgoode Hall and Allan Gardens in Toronto, and the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa.³⁰ During the tour, Esson arranged the stereographs into series according to their geographical location, larger cities centre like Toronto receiving their own dedicated series. Esson crisscrossed the province throughout the trip to create *The Scenery of The Northern Lakes of Canada* series, which included a wide range of natural scenes, lakes, towns and the construction of several landmarks throughout the province. The building of the Sault Ste Marie shipping canal (See image 2), steam ships in the Owen Sound Harbour and several lakes in the Muskoka region, like Comeau Lake for example, are included in this series. Once the tour was finished, Esson created a series of views called *Picturesque Canada*, including some of the best-known views of the each of the cities he visited, such as Parliament Hill in Ottawa and Osgoode Hall in Toronto. Researchers estimate that the stereographs from this tour number approximately 1000, however only a fraction of the negatives still exist. The few negatives that do

²⁹ Boost, "If You Have Beauty....," 40.

³⁰ Markus R. Boost, *James Esson of Preston, Canada: August 10, 1853 – January 29, 1949* (Cambridge, 1994).

exist from Esson's archives are spread out between private collections and Library and Archives Canada. Esson's stereographs are part of the work that gained him a reputation as a "prolific landscape and portrait artist."³¹ Again, so little is known about Esson's life and work, that no one is sure if he alone sold his stereographs locally from the *Atelier*, his studio, or more widely throughout Preston, the province or the country. Like many stereo photographers from his time, he likely had many of his stereographs sold locally at a retail level. After the tour, he returned to his studio in Preston and portraiture photography, continuing to solidify his distinction as one of the foremost photographers of his day.³²

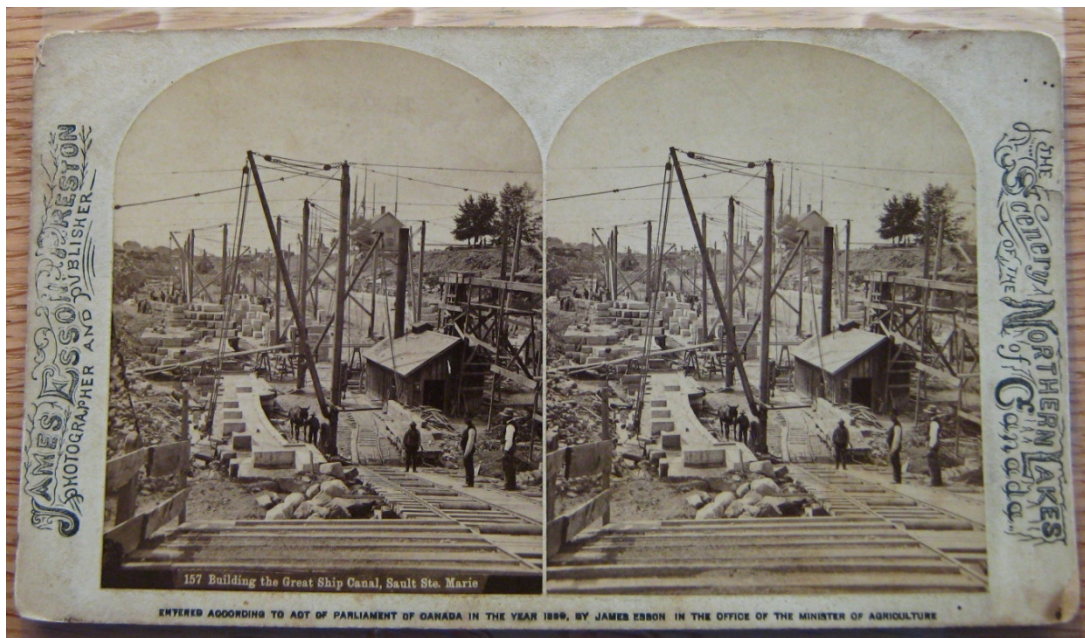


Image 2: James Esson, ca. 1880, Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Building the Great Ship Canal, Sault Ste. Marie, Acc. 13795, ST 1394, A-434, Archives of Ontario.

³¹ Schwartz, "Double Vision: The Stereo Views of James Esson," 15.

³² G. Gilson and H. C. Tugwell, eds., "James Esson: An Enterprising Photographer of Preston, Ont.," *The Canadian Photographic Journal* 1, no. 4 (May 1892): 85.

In the 1880s, Preston was a small township in Ontario with a population of just 1,400. This never limited Esson, whose clients came to him from far beyond Preston's city limits. The Marquis of Lorne, who was Canada's Governor-General from 1878 to 1883 and his wife Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's daughter, politicians, famous stage artists and prominent Canadian society figures were numbered among his clients, until a fall in 1916 forced Esson into retirement. After failed attempts at having his nephew, Elliot Law, photograph his clients while he maintained creative control, Esson sold the *Atelier* and moved to Toronto in 1920.³³ James Esson died in Toronto, at the age of 80 on 12 September 1933.³⁴



Image 3: James Esson, ca. 1880, Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, View of Suspension Bridge, Acc 2728, ST 144, Archives of Ontario.

³³ Boost, "If You Have Beauty....," 41.

³⁴ Boost, "If You Have Beauty....," 43.

Sadly, a full archive of Esson's work does not exist, possibly as a result of his own doing. When Esson retired and his nephew refused to continue the business, local advertisements in Preston advertised the sale of glass plates from Esson's studio. Some have been found in personal collections and some larger collections of negatives and prints can be found in Library and Archives Canada, the Archives of Ontario and the Cambridge City Archives. A local Cambridge photographer for example, found several of Esson's 8x10 glass plate negatives in an attic of a resident in Cambridge, Ontario. The photographer begged to print the negatives one last time before the resident planned on making a lamp out of them.³⁵ Until recently, the building that housed Esson's *Atelier* still contained some photographic paraphernalia; however researchers could never verify if the paraphernalia belonged to Esson since the material was "unceremoniously loaded onto a truck and taken to a dump" in the mid 1990s by the new owners of the building.³⁶

³⁵ John Mitchell, "Evidence That in Many Ways, in Over 100 Years We Have Made Little Progress." *John Mitchell Photography* (blog), March 24, 2011.
<http://www.johnmitchellphoto.com/blog/?m=201103>.

³⁶ White, Stanley J. "Old Jimmy Esson: Honoured by The City of Cambridge." *Photographic Canadiana*. 21. no. 1 (1995): pg. 11.

Preservation at the Exhibition Location

The Archives of Ontario Reading Room was designed as a space for researchers to access the records at the Archives. Services available in the Reading Room include the assistance of reference archivists and access to microfilm, microfiche, finding aids and reproductions of Archival material. The space is meant to be a comfortable place to access and study the Archives' records. However, human comfort does not always translate well into artifact comfort. The Archives of Ontario did not collect works with the intention to exhibit them; now that they do intend to exhibit objects from the collections, as a result of the creation of a new space in which to do so, the safety of those objects must be considered. The Reading Room is a large space, as shown by figure 1, with very large floor to ceiling windows. The full sunlight the windows let in is not good for photographic material. The Archives initially dealt with this problem by applying an Ultra Violet filtering screen and blinds to each of the windows. The blinds and filters can allow some light to enter the room, but help to shelter artifacts from any negative effects. Another problem created by the room's structure is the need to control temperature and relative humidity in the space. The room as a whole is controlled to a degree, but fluctuations can occur since the public and staff comes in and out frequently. This is where the display cases come into play as a way of protecting exhibited material.

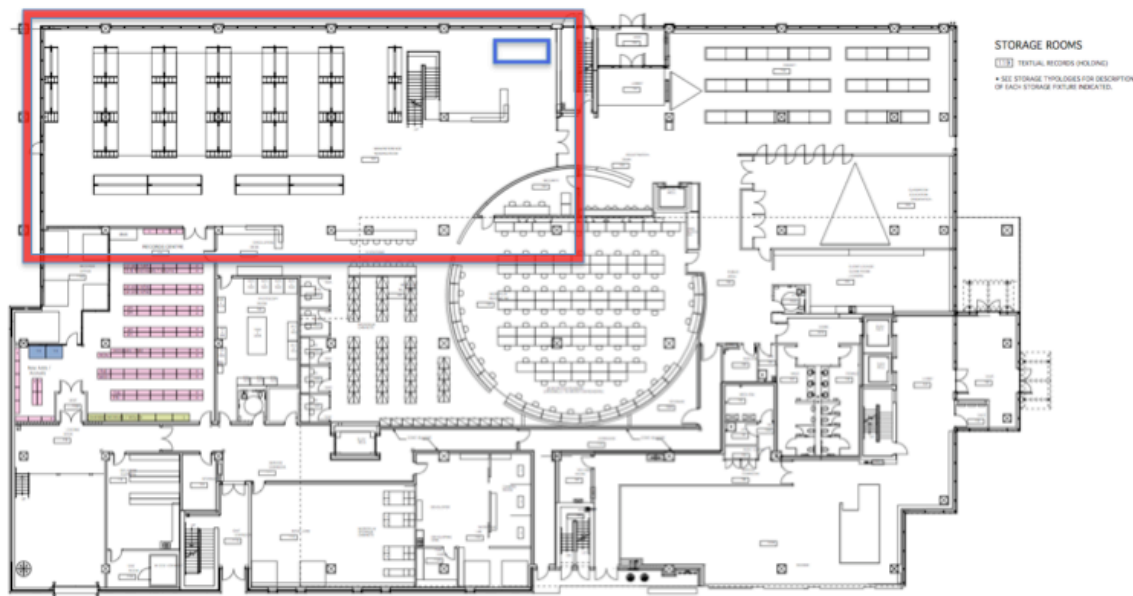


Figure 1: First storey floor plan of the Archives of Ontario. The red frame outlines the main space of the Reading Room, and the blue frame show where the display cases are located within that space.

Built by a company called Zone Display Cases, the cases are designed with conservation in mind.³⁷ The cases have an inner display area of 58 ½ inches by 34 ½ inches, and a height of 15 inches on the inside. The cases are airtight and can be controlled as a microenvironment, even providing a space where monitors can be placed within the case.³⁸ The microenvironment created by the sealed cases would help to eliminate a variety of environmental concerns, such as dust, humidity changes and public handling of the artifacts. This, coupled with the possibility of using reproductions in the cases will help to protect the artifacts when on display.

³⁷ Zone Display Cases, "Welcome." Last modified 2012. Accessed May 21, 2012. <http://www.zonedisplaycases.com/en/index.php>.

³⁸ Zone Display Cases, "Technology." Last modified 2012. Accessed May 12, 2012. <http://www.zonedisplaycases.com/en/index.php>.



Image 4: One of the Reading Room display cases, with an exhibition of reproductions of recent acquisitions from the Archives of Ontario.

There are times when the archivists will restrict the material allowed into the Reading Room. Generally, this applies to records and artifacts with known conservation concerns. Objects shown in exhibitions in the display cases are no exception to this procedure, since some recent exhibitions of acquisitions and genealogical records only use reproductions of archival material due to concerns over the originals. The procedure eliminates virtually all problems related to exhibiting archive material. The reproduction can even sustain damage without the concern of the loss of an artifact or the information it contains. There are three disadvantages to using reproductions for the proposed exhibition. The first is that digital reproductions, like the ones used by the Archives of Ontario, do not share the same visual texture or quality as the original stereographs, and therefore betray their identity as a reproduction. The second is that the physical shape of the stereographs in the Archives' collection, which are slightly curved, makes it difficult

to reproduce the stereograph's image content easily, though not impossible.³⁹ The third problem is one of cost. A high quality reproduction for use in an exhibition at the Archives is approximately \$25 for each,⁴⁰ and the total sum of the reproductions I intend to show in the proposed exhibition can seem like a lot on a prospective budget. However, when faced with the possibility of damaged artifacts as an alternative, there is no choice to be made. As a result, I intend to use reproductions for the exhibition in the display cases, and for the stereographs available to the public to view. The publicly available reproductions will be mounted on a thicker board so they can be handled by the public without the worry of breaking or bending from mishandling. The exhibition reproductions can be mounted on thinner board since the image just needs to be kept rigid, but does not have to be handled.

³⁹ James Bower, conversation with the author, Toronto, April 11, 2012.

⁴⁰ Stewart Boden, conversation with the author, Toronto, May 9, 2012.

Design of the Exhibition

Esson's Ontario will be mounted in two of the five display cases that are used in the Reading Room, and an interactive aspect of the exhibition will be available at the Reading Room reference desk (See figure 1 for display case location in Reading Room). Each case will have text panels inside, placed above and to the left of the objects, in English and French according to the Archives of Ontario regulations for exhibitions. Each photograph will have a personal object label below it with the full Archives descriptive label (See appendix B for examples). The first case will introduce the exhibition, James Esson and his work (See appendix C for case #1 text panels, design and exhibition checklist). This case will have a sample of three stereographs from the tour that highlight the way Esson composed them to emphasize depth. The second case will highlight the 1875 tour and show examples of the cities and landmarks that Esson visited during that time through reproductions of the original stereographs (see appendix D for case #2 text panels, design and exhibition checklist). The stereographs in this case are split into three categories; the first will feature the major cities and urban landmarks, like Toronto's St Lawrence Hall and Parliament Hill in Ottawa. The second category shows sites like the Sault Ste Marie shipping canal where nature meets the engineering talents of man. The third category will show the scenes of nature where Esson photographed the lakes and mountains of Ontario. Similarities in how Esson composes his stereographic work can be seen through the samples shown in the exhibition. The text panels in this case will also introduce the interactive aspect of the proposed exhibition; viewers will be prompted to go to the Reading Room

reference desk to pick up reproductions of the stereographs that have been exhibited and view them with a modern day stereo viewer (see appendix E for publically available sample stereographs).

Appendix A: Complete Exhibition Checklist for *Esson's Ontario*

The objects in the exhibition checklists are ordered according to the ST numbers that are assigned to the object by the Archives.

Cases and Samples Stereographs

Object Number	Title	Medium	Negative Date	Print Date	H X W
Acc 2728, ST 123	Glimpses of Toronto, Children in Front of University College	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc 2928, ST 196, A-430	Picturesque Canada, Mirror Lake	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 567, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, University, Toronto	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 568, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, Osgoode Hall	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 569, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, St. Lawrence Hall	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 614, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Owen Sound Shipping Harbour	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 630, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Chippewa Wigwams	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 3964, ST 631, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Cathedral Rock	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
ST 1032, B410502	Views of Hamilton, King Street East	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 13795, ST 1090, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Chaudiere Falls	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 13795, ST 1091, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Lumber Mills at Chaudiere Falls	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
ST 1193, B410502	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Romeau Falls	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm

Acc. 13795, ST 1394, A- 434	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Building the Great Ship Canal, Sault Ste. Marie	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm
Acc. 13795, ST 1437, A- 434	Ottawa Views, Capitol of The Dominion, Main Entrance Parliament Building	Albumen prints, mounted stereograph	ca. 1875	ca. 1880	8.4cm X 17.2cm

Appendix B: Examples of object labels

Example #1

“Osgoode Hall” ca. 1880.
Mounted, Albumen Prints.
Acc. 3964, ST 568, A-431, Archives of Ontario.

Example #2

“Chaudiere Falls: Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion”
Ca. 1880.
Mounted, Albumen Prints.
Acc. 13795, ST 1090, A-434, Archives of Ontario.

In previous exhibitions at the Archives of Ontario, the style and content of the object labels has varied. One constant in all object labels in every exhibition has been the inclusion of the object’s reference code. The archivist or curator includes this so that the public can call up the objects at a later date if they so wish. As a result, both of my label designs include the object reference code, which can be found on the last line of each design.

Appendix C: Case #1

Exhibition Checklist for *Esson's Ontario* Case #1

Object Number	Title	Image
Acc. 3964, ST 567, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, University, Toronto	 A black and white stereograph showing a wide view of the University of Toronto campus, featuring large classical buildings and a central courtyard.
Acc. 3964, ST 568, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, Osgoode Hall	 A black and white stereograph of Osgoode Hall, a large neoclassical building with a prominent portico and columns.
Acc. 13795, ST 1090, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Chaudiere Falls	 A black and white stereograph of Chaudiere Falls in Ottawa, showing the powerful waterfall cascading over rocks, with a person standing on the bank for scale.

Introductory Panel

In 1875, Ontario was not even 10 years old and the provincial borders were being changed again and again. In that same year, a young, Ontario photographer named James Esson began a tour of the province to take a special kind of photograph, a stereograph. A popular visual phenomena of the time, a stereograph allowed a viewer to see all the landmarks that Esson visited and photographed, but in three dimensions.

In 1875, Esson embarked on a seven-year tour of Ontario and the State of New York to produce stereographs. Beginning in the major cities of the time like Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton, and taking a winding route through the untouched lakes and mountains of the province, Esson photographed several landmarks and natural scenes throughout the province. This tour and the stereographs produced from it gave Esson a nationwide reputation as a photographer. A portion of the stereographs that Esson made during his tour of Ontario can be found in the Archives of Ontario's collection of stereographs.

Second Panel

Who was James Esson?

James Esson was born in Preston, Ontario in 1853. His father, George, was a photographer who specialized in Daguerreotypes, the earliest form of photography, and had his own studio in the family home. A young James worked as an assistant for his father's practice before he took it over in the early 1870s. Esson had little trouble establishing his reputation separately from his father's, since he had gained fame in Preston for photographing local weddings and events. James Esson did a little bit of everything, and made sure people knew about it! He had his own advertisements that listed everything he specialized in, including being a Photographer, Publisher and dealer in Stereoscopic Views, Portrait Artist, Statuary, Monumental and Headstone Designs.

Once the trip was finished, Esson returned to his native Preston to open a new studio, the *Atelier*, in 1884. His self-advertising on his stereograph trip resulted in high class clients like the Marquis of Lorne, Canada's Governor General at the time, and his wife Princess Louise, politicians, famous stage artists and prominent society figures. In 1916, Esson suffered a fall that forced him into retirement. Esson sold the *Atelier* and moved to Toronto in 1920, where he would die at the age of 80 on 12 September 1933.

Third Panel

What's a Stereograph?

Stereographs are two photographs or images positioned side by side. When a viewer uses a stereoscope, a device for viewing stereographs, the two flat images combine to create a single image that gives the illusion of three dimensions and depth. A Stereograph in a Stereoscope works much like human vision, since our eyes are positioned a distance apart; we see everything from two slightly different angles. Our brain then processes the two images into a single one that has depth and dimension. Thanks to Esson's use of a foreground, middle ground and background, his stereographs give the illusion of depth and three dimensions, in a 2D image.

Layout of Case #1


Inside display area is 34.5 inches by 58.5 inches. All objects within the diagram have been scaled accordingly. Each text panel shown in the diagram has the text in English and French.



Appendix D: Case #2

Exhibition Checklist for *Esson's Ontario* Case #2

Object Number	Title	Image
Acc 2728, ST 123	Glimpses of Toronto, Children in Front of University College	
Acc 2928, ST 196, A-430	Picturesque Canada, Mirror Lake	
Acc. 3964, ST 569, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, St. Lawrence Hall	
Acc. 3964, ST 614, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Owen Sound Shipping Harbour	
Acc. 3964, ST 630, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Chippewa Wigwams	
Acc. 3964, ST 631, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Cathedral Rock	

ST 1032, B410502	Views of Hamilton, King Street East	
Acc. 13795, ST 1091, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Lumber Mills at Chaudiere Falls	
ST 1193, B410502	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Romeau Falls	
Acc. 13795, ST 1394, A-434	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Building the Great Ship Canal, Sault Ste. Marie	
Acc. 13795, ST 1437, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capitol of The Dominion, Main Entrance Parliament Building	

First Panel

The Tour

Esson photographed several landmarks of the day, like the brand new Osgoode Hall in Toronto, and the newly built Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. The stereographs produced on this trip were arranged by Esson into series according to

their geography, larger city centres like Toronto receiving their own dedicated series. Esson left the cities and crisscrossed the province to create *The Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada* series, which included a wide range of natural scenes, towns and the construction of several landmarks throughout the province. The Steam ships in the Owen Sound Harbour were some of the last signs of civilization before the photographer left it behind to move towards the lake and forests of Ontario. Once this tour was finished, Esson created a separate series of views called *Picturesque Canada* and included highlights of each of the locations in Ontario that he visited. It's estimated that the stereographs in the eleven Ontario series from this tour numbers in the thousands. Little is known about the details of the tour, but the stereographs are the lasting legacy of Esson's tour.

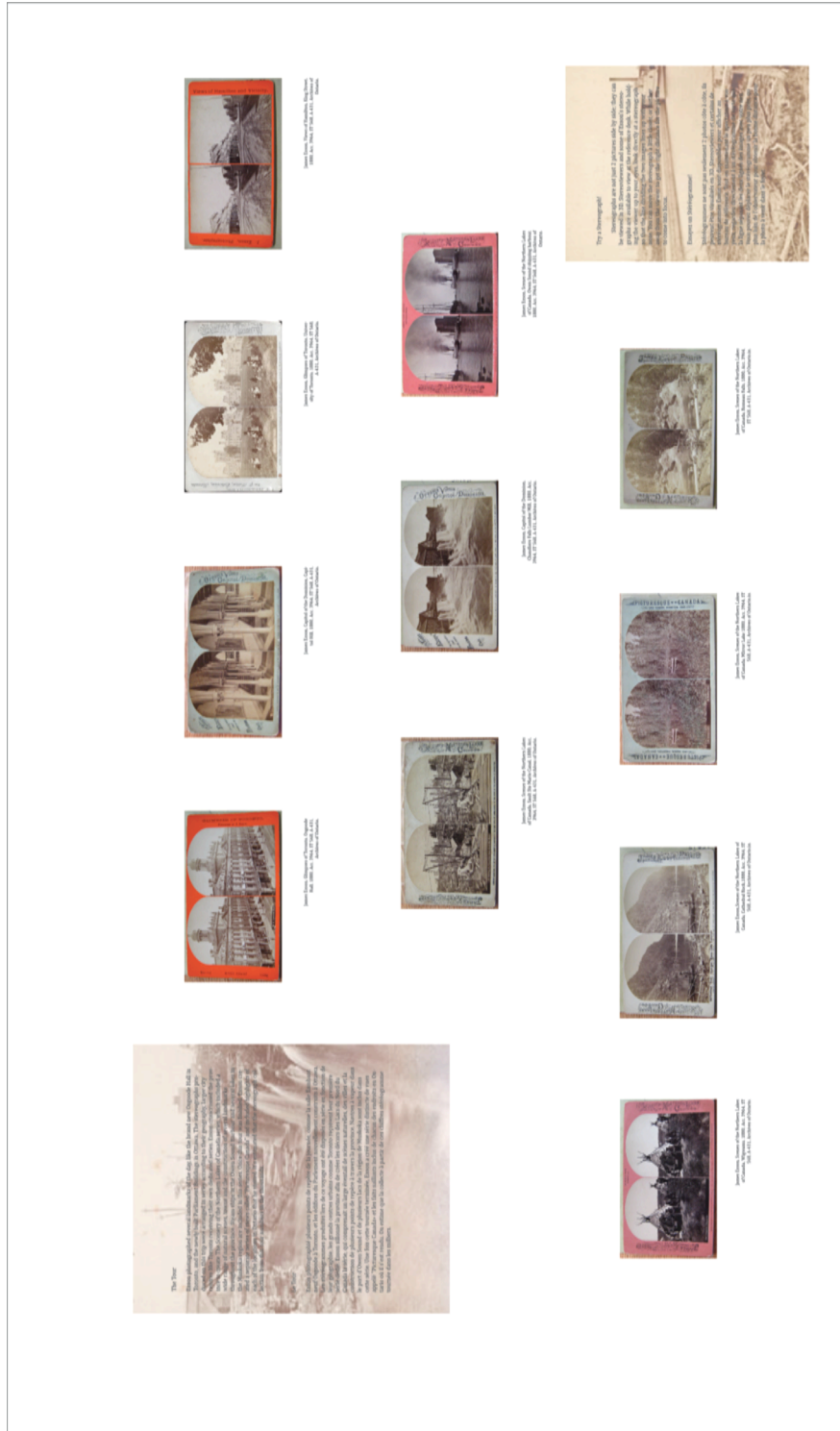
Second Panel

Try a Stereograph!

Stereographs are not just two pictures side by side; they are meant to be viewed in 3D. The reference desk has reproductions of all the exhibited stereographs that can be viewed with a modern day viewer. While holding the viewer up to your eyes, look directly at the stereograph so that the line dividing the two images lines up with your nose. You can move the stereographs a little closer, or further away from the viewer to get the right distance for the picture to come into focus.

Layout of Case #2

Inside display area is 34.5 inches by 58.5 inches. All objects within the diagram have been scaled accordingly. Each text panel shown in the diagram has the text in English and French.





Appendix E: Exhibition Checklist for the Publicly Available Reproductions

Exhibition Checklist for *Esson's Ontario* Sample Stereographs

Object Number	Title	Image
Acc 2728, ST 123	Glimpses of Toronto, Children in Front of University College	 A sepia-toned stereograph showing a group of children sitting on a grassy lawn in front of a large, multi-story building with many windows, identified as University College in Toronto. The image is mounted on a card with text on the sides.
Acc 2928, ST 196, A-430	Picturesque Canada, Mirror Lake	 A colorized stereograph of a serene lake scene surrounded by dense evergreen forests. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding trees. The image is mounted on a card with 'PICTURESQUE CANADA' printed vertically on the sides.
Acc. 3964, ST 567, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, University, Toronto	 A colorized stereograph showing a wide view of a large, classical-style building with a central archway, identified as the University of Toronto. The building is surrounded by trees and a paved area. The image is mounted on a card with a red border.
Acc. 3964, ST 568, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, Osgoode Hall	 A colorized stereograph of a grand, classical building with a prominent portico and columns, identified as Osgoode Hall. The building is set in an open square. The image is mounted on a card with a red border.
Acc. 3964, ST 569, A-431	Glimpses of Toronto, St. Lawrence Hall	 A colorized stereograph of a large, ornate building with a central dome and many windows, identified as St. Lawrence Hall. The building is situated on a street corner. The image is mounted on a card with a red border.
Acc. 3964, ST 614, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Owen Sound Shipping Harbour	 A colorized stereograph of a busy harbor scene with several large sailing ships and steamships docked at a pier. Smoke is rising from the ships. The image is mounted on a card with a red border and text on the sides.

Acc. 3964, ST 630, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Chippewa Wigwams	
Acc. 3964, ST 631, A-431	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Cathedral Rock	
ST 1032, B410502	Views of Hamilton, King Street East	
Acc. 13795, ST 1090, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Chaudiere Falls	
Acc. 13795, ST 1091, A-434	Ottawa Views, Capital of The Dominion, Lumber Mills at Chaudiere Falls	
ST 1193, B410502	Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Romeau Falls	

<p>Acc. 13795, ST 1394, A-434</p>	<p>Scenery of the Northern Lakes of Canada, Building the Great Ship Canal, Sault Ste. Marie</p>	
<p>Acc. 13795, ST 1437, A-434</p>	<p>Ottawa Views, Capitol of The Dominion, Main Entrance Parliament Building</p>	

Appendix F: Preliminary budget

Exhibition dates: One month, 2013

Reproduction costs

Stereographs	\$700
Text Panels and Labels	\$150
Title	\$25

Installation costs

Mounting	\$100
Viewers	\$35

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