
Usage of photography by the biologist Wilhelm Giesbrecht – scientific instrument or documentation device?

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Abstract

Arriving in Naples in 1881, the German zoologist Wilhelm Giesbrecht first worked as a guest researcher at the Stazione Zoologica before becoming a permanent assistant there. Until now Giesbrecht has been best known for his fundamental research on the taxonomy of copepods. Both in exploring methods of microscopy and inventing fishing devices, he demonstrated remarkable innovation; his scientific drawings remain of crucial importance in today's research. In addition to this scientific heritage, Giesbrecht has left us with six photographic albums. We might expect these to be mainly visualizing photos taken within the context of the Zoological Station. But examining this collection-consisting of 1800 visual documents-the biologist reveals as a portraitist of Neapolitan life rather than as a biologist using the camera as a research instrument. In light of both Giesbrecht's scientific work and the optical and photographic methods used by biologists at that time, the question emerges of why Giesbrecht did not use photography as an instrument in his research: what role, if any, did the Station's research environment play here, and were there ideological or empirical factors? Focusing on a group of photographs taken in the Station's context, I will argue that Giesbrecht's use of photography nevertheless involved documentation of specific steps in his research. My broader aim is thus to discuss, with the help of visual examples, the role and nature of scientific photography in contrast to scientific drawings, and to outline the main core of the discourse prevalent at the Stazione in this period.

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