

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *John Møller: mirrored, portraits of Good Hope*, by Inuuteq Storch (2021). Copenhagen: Rouse Roulette. 312 pp. ISBN 978-87-97324-20-2.

The photobook *Mirrored, portraits of Good Hope* presents roughly 160 of more than 3000 works by John “Ujuut” Møller (1867–1935), Greenland’s first professional photographer. The images originated in the years 1889–1935. Inuuteq Storch, another Greenlandic photographer, compiled the photographs.

The volume begins with a foreword by the eminent geologist Minik Rosing. Following the images is a short biography of Møller by Kirstine Møller (of the Greenland National Museum & Archives/Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu) and, lastly, an index with the photograph captions. The two texts and the index are given in Greenlandic, Danish and English, which invites readers beyond Greenlandic and Danish borders. Another excellent decision was to forego image captions underneath each photograph and instead to gather them in the index at the end of the volume. Uninterrupted by text, the visual experience is intensified.

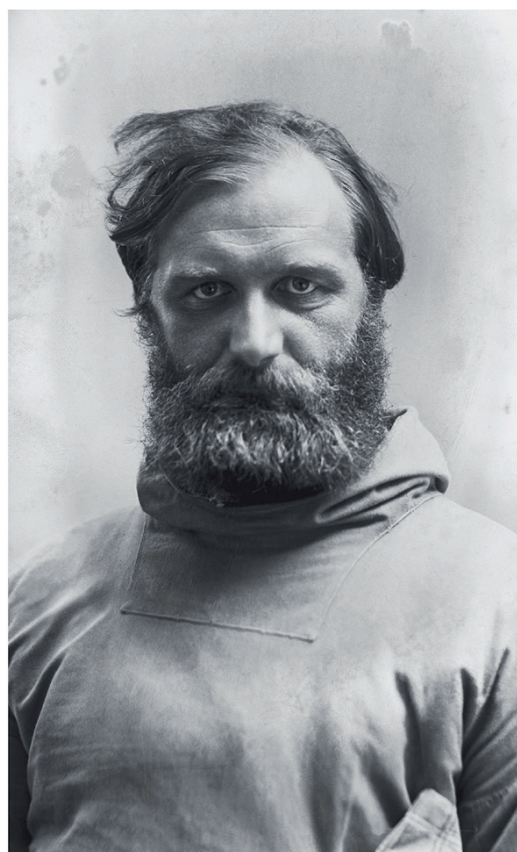
Storch, a graduate of the International Centre of Photography in New York and of Fatamorgana, the Danish school of photography in Copenhagen, has handled the images with great care. Most of them were in bad shape, some partially damaged, but Storch restored them adroitly and carefully. He forewent digital enhancement, including colourization. The original black and white mode might have been—at some point—Møller’s conscious choice after colour photography had begun to take its hold in the early 20th century.

The volume consists to a large degree of photographs of married couples and parents with their children. Images of larger groups, such as ship crews, are included but less frequently. The main social unit presented here is the family. “Family is a fundamental institution in Greenland,” Rosing writes in his foreword. It is not entirely clear whether he refers to the Inuit or to the Danish or both. But the images depict primarily the Danish, suggesting that the book commemorates the Danish family and its history. However, there is an uneasiness to this interpretation because the volume, ultimately, presents the life of colonialists through the lens of an indigenous person. The reader must be aware that the Danish men presented here were often not merely

Correspondence

Anna Gielas, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER, UK. E-mail: amg203@cam.ac.uk

Inuuteq Storch
MIRRORED
John Møller



husbands and fathers but also colony managers and inspectors.

Though Møller’s photographs were commissioned by the Danish, Storch’s volume can be interpreted as a critique of the colonialists, whose preoccupation with stylized appearance borders on vanity and self-aggrandizement, which *Mirrored* throws right back at them. The mostly stern, serious faces that look straight into the camera, and the general absence of smiles, laughter and colour—as was common in photography at the turn of the 20th century—add to the impression of self-absorption and pretentiousness. They also echo the ethnographic photographs taken by colonial scientists around the globe, including the Arctic, in the same period. However, the fact that each photograph title is provided in the index at the very end of the book turns the volume into less of a collection of categorized and catalogued ‘specimens’ and rather into an uninterrupted visual pleasure.

The images are portraits of Danes “seen from a Greenlandic perspective,” Storch explains.



John Møller, self-portrait. © Greenland National Museum and Archives.

The book description informs the reader that, for Storch, “the book is part of a larger effort to put a new focus on Greenlandic self-presentation and postcolonial awareness of national pride and identity.” All the more puzzling is the low visibility of the Inuit themselves in his volume. This collection includes just a handful of photographs of the indigenous Greenlandic population. Even Møller himself—the Greenland National Museum and Archives has a wonderful self-portrait—is missing from the volume. Møller took numerous photographs of his fellow Inuit. These were often not carefully composed but were

seemingly opportunistic pictures of people going about their daily lives, the subjects apparently unconcerned with the presence of the photographer. Sometimes they do not even look towards the camera, as in Møller’s images of the backs of Inuit fishers. These images (which would have made a striking contrast with the posed, almost stilted, Danes) have been left out of the book. Without any prior knowledge of Greenland’s history, the viewer of this volume might wrongly assume that Greenland was predominantly populated by the Danish. The volume’s strongest affirmation of Greenlandic identity is arguably the prominence of the indigenous language in it.

Indirectly, the volume highlights the relevance of using visual materials for decolonial historiography and discourses. In the last few years, disciplines such as visual sociology and visual anthropology have explored the ways in which the historical production and consumption of images can offer new access to the colonial past. Visual framing of colonial, cultural and social hierarchies must be handled with care, not merely enjoyed as an aesthetic experience. After all, these photographs are artefacts made under the conditions of structural violence and are its visual legacy. The photographs in this volume experience a narratorial beautification, leaving colonial horror aside. Møller’s photographs are mesmerizing and Storch has skilfully brought them before the public eye. Nevertheless, the lack of deeper engagement with imperial iconography and historiography means that the volume does not live up to its full potential. Without careful contextualization, Møller’s photographs run the risk of reassembling colonial constructions of personal and national identities.

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