

## ***Carte-de-visite*: the photographic portrait as ‘social media’**

Patrizia Di Bello  
Senior Lecturer, History and Theory of Photography  
Birkbeck, University of London  
p.dibello@bbk.ac.uk

### PART ONE – SOCIAL PLAY

Photographs from the 1860s often show women holding photographic albums. In this *carte-de-visite* in Lady Filmer's, two sisters present themselves to the camera, one sitting with an album on her lap, the other standing, turning its pages. Their gazes seem to invite the viewer to join in an activity, looking at an album, presented as social, feminine, and even sisterly.

Unlike Lady Filmer's, the album they are holding is of a type designed specifically to collect *cartes-de-visite*, a format used in commercial portrait studios from the late 1850s. This allowed six or eight small portraits to be taken onto one plate, making each pose faster and cheaper.<sup>i</sup> The negative was then printed on albumen paper, cut into individual poses and usually mounted on card, embossed with the studio's name, each the size of a visiting card. The format, easy to exchange, send around and collect in series, boosted the market for photographs.

If the Daguerreotype followed the aesthetics of the miniature portrait, focusing on the face of the sitter and emphasising the relic-like qualities of photographs, the *carte de visite* showcased socially constructed identity, located in the presentation of the whole body. In the studio, sitters arranged themselves for the camera to demonstrate how well they could perform gender, class and status, and perhaps personalise the standardised poses and studio settings through nuances of dress, posture and props. Status, beauty and success were celebrated, signalled as aspirations, or simply made up for the camera.

The carte-de-visite made the sale of portraits to the general public, rather than to the people who had sat for them, one of the most lucrative branches of the photographic business, as a vast array of portraits of people from the worlds of politics, entertainment, the arts, and fashionable Society, were displayed in the photographer's shop-windows. Portrait studios became a feature of every high street as fashionable places to see and be seen, attracting people from different strata of society – even the penniless could stop and look at the pictures on display.

Owning a carte-de-visite of a famous person could imply knowing them well enough to exchange photographs, a gesture associated with a degree of intimacy, or simply knowing where to buy their picture. In a society preoccupied with suggesting, demonstrating, or even exaggerating gentility and connections, part of the fun of looking at albums was guessing the relationships implied by the images. Conversely, one of the pleasures of being photographed was the fantasy of being seen “in those wonderful books which everybody possesses, and [where] strangers see you there in good society”, mingling with other celebrities in a social game that blurred distinctions between private persons and public characters.

In another page of her album, Lady Filmer depicted herself as a collector of photographs, standing by her drawing-room table, close to her albums, pot of glue, and paper knife. Even before photography, the skills involved in album-making were valued female accomplishments, particularly in upper-class circles, where they functioned not only as private, personal or sentimental collections, but also as public-relations tools, defining and consolidating networks of like-minded people.

Drawing rooms are a recurring motif in the photograph albums made in the 1860s and 70s by women of the English aristocracy [Viscountess Frances Jocelyn,

Georgiana Berkeley]. The drawing room was the most feminine, but also the most public, room in a house. Its style and arrangement showcased the hostess's accomplishments at a time when a woman's touch differentiated a tasteful interior from one that was merely expensive and showy. The room and its contents would be seen beyond the hostess's circle of family and friends, by a range of visitors keen to assess the status achieved by the woman of the house through her management of the family's cultural and social capital, which was an indication of the value of frequenting her. The ability of visitors to "read" a drawing room and its contents, including its albums, would have depended on their knowledge not only of the hosts but also of the signs that would identify people as belonging to a particular level and set of Society (fast set, religious set, musical, literary etc).

Lady Filmer would have been proud of the social life suggested by her drawing-room album: her visitors are dressed in the latest fashions; her husband, sitting on a chair, looks suitably distinguished; and her most important guest, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, appears with a perfect mixture of elegance and informality. Anyone viewing Lady Filmer's album would have appreciated the significance of a visit from the Prince of Wales, especially for the wife of a baronet (the lowest rank in the aristocracy). The prince was the leader of fashionable Society and a highly sought-after guest: a visit from him was an enormous boost to a hostess' social standing. At the same time, photographs of the Prince of Wales were available for sale and could be bought by anyone. Lady Filmer's guests may or may not have been aware that she was in fact receiving photographs from the Prince of Wales personally, on an almost daily basis, and reciprocating with some of hers, some of which ended up in his wife's album.

The use of photocollage to create an interior group portrait (technically difficult at the time) emphasizes this uncertainty, even if the photograph's scale suggests that it was not a standard carte-de-visite available in the shops. By placing the prince next to her albums, as if he has been interrupted while viewing them, Lady Filmer suggested that they played an important role in her social success, as well

as her connection with him (flirting over album was a standard motif in novels and illustrations of the time).

While displaying her skills in staging a photographic “At Home”—when a hostess let it be known that she would be at home to receive callers—she also highlighted its constructed nature by including the tools of her cut-and-paste technique on the table beside her.

In another page, Lady Filmer turned a photograph of the Prince of Wales into a stamp on a letter. This was another recurrent device in photocollage albums, emphasizing the importance of women’s roles in keeping up the network of correspondence and visits that held the fabric of Society together. Here the inclusion of the prince’s portrait on a stamp could suggest more - Queen Victoria’s death or abdication. Lady Filmer is turning him into a king and at the same time into a small, everyday object, kept in a private space, handled and even licked with a casual intimacy. In her album, mechanically produced photographs might be given an aura of uniqueness and exclusivity by their hand-painted borders, yet this loss of uniqueness is highlighted as the same prints appear more than once in the album or even on the same page, unceremoniously cut up to fit the album-maker’s scheme of things.

The photographs no longer function as literal representations of people or make metaphorical comments that have a clear, stable meaning once they have been deciphered or decoded. People themselves seem to be losing their aura, as they become but the originals of their own mechanical reproductions. This is particularly relevant for the Prince of Wales, at a time when the role of Royalty was in the process of being simultaneously reduced and elevated to that of national celebrity.

On another page in the Filmer album, the photographed heads of several men are collaged onto the body of colorful moths caught in a spider web. The spider

has no photograph identifying its features, but if the sticky web is an apt metaphor for the album, the spider is Lady Filmer herself. Spider webs were another recurrent motif in albums of the time. Like spiders, album makers were always keen to catch more prey within their nets. As the *Saturday Review*, complained

“The demand for photographs is not limited to relations or friends. It is scarcely limited to acquaintances. Any one who has seen you, or has seen anybody that has seen you, or knows anyone that says he has seen a person who thought he had seen you, considers himself entitled to ask you for your photograph.”

The verses in this hand-painted carte-de-visite

“Yes, this is my album, / But learn ere you look: / That all are expected  
/ To add to my book. / You are welcome to quiz it / The penalty is, /  
That you add your own portrait / For others to quiz”

highlight the culture of reciprocity and exchange in which albums circulated, through social interactions in which looking and making oneself available to be looked at were not enough: quizzing over the images and allowing one’s own image to be questioned were just as important. The “web” pages are a visual equivalent of the poem, suggesting that the viewer is also becoming enmeshed in a web of people, ready to be quizzed.

This is also the suggestion made by the album pages where text is used not to caption the photographs but to challenge the viewer to decode the connections implied by the juxtapositions, introducing a note of humor which questions not just the images but the nature – real or fictional, personal or social, proper or improper – of the connections that are supposed to be embedded in and celebrated by the albums. The realism of photography, its indexical connection to the people it portrays, is subsumed to the web – at once real and fictional – spun by the spider-woman presiding over the album.

Hand-painted borders are not just decorative devices but also emphasize how people were supposed to be placed and connected through the very fabric and structures of Society, at a time of change and uncertainty brought about by an influx of new goods, new money, and new individuals climbing the social ladder. Sets of people were visualized as objects that come in sets, as if to emphasize their belonging to a distinctive group defined by common uses and tastes.

Luggage; vases; the leaves of a fan; jewelry; and playing cards seem to visualize familial or social bonds as unequivocally legible, but also highlight that they are but a fantasy, or at best a temporary configuration. Packs of cards are divided into sets, like people; within each set, individuals are given more or less value, according to rules that are fixed by the game, yet also arbitrary and liable to change with the circumstances and the game being played. People, social groups, roles, and values can be shuffled, exchanged, hoarded, bluffed over, or triumphantly displayed in a game that might mean nothing or, to the high-stakes player, everything.

## PART TWO SOCIAL TORTURE

The ways in which studios procured portraits varied. As owners of the negatives, they could display and sell reprints from any portrait they had taken. Margot Asquith, for example, took it for granted that photographs of her relations, male and female, appeared in many of the London shop-windows just because they were good-looking and well-connected (a sort of made in Chelsea). Actresses could become famous in advance of any actual performance by featuring in photographs; and once famous could demand royalties from photographers, who would beg to photograph anyone famous or infamous for the almost certain profits to be made.

Sitters' reactions varied. The sculptor Mary Thornycroft occasionally attached a free carte-de-visite of herself with her work to the bills she sent to her patrons. Many artists were happy to oblige photographers as public visibility stimulated

interest in their work; and politicians apparently enquired about the sale of their portraits to gauge their own popularity. Some, however, were not so keen. Elizabeth Thompson, later Lady Butler, regretted having been photographed when, after the success of her painting *The Roll Call* at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1874, a quarter of a million of her carte-de-visite sold within a few weeks. After that, she found herself recognised at exhibitions by people who would stare at her rather than her paintings. John Ruskin described as 'visible libel' the circulation of a photograph of him taken by William Downey, and *Punch* illustrator John Tenniel tried to stop John Watkins selling a portrait he thought unflattering. This however was not easy to do, as 'Patsy' Corwallis West, or rather, her husband, discovered.

'Patsy' Corwallis West was one of the much-photographed socialites and 'Professional Beauties' of the 1870s, happy to pose for the photographers in a variety of studio settings, costumes and poses. As the gossip-magazine *Town Talk* wrote in October 1879, in an article on 'Mrs Corwallis West at Home', she was being photographed so often that she was making

quote 'a public exhibition of herself [...] in our fashionable shop windows', selling her photographs 'at a price ranging from one penny to two shilling and sixpence'. unquote

These photographs were

quote 'purchased principally by "cads," who show the likeness about to their friends and boast that they were given to them by [the lady] herself' unquote.

The anonymous writer went on to describe how the Cornwallis West's London town-house had been turned into a series of photographic studios, where Mrs West would receive the young men from quote 'Fradelle and Marshall or the Stereoscopic Company' unquote, running from studio to studio while changing her outfit at speed.

quote ‘Sometimes she is taken with a grin, occasionally with a leer [...] Having been taken 15 times in as many new positions, the photographers are dismissed for a time’. unquote

Her afternoons are spent going around photographic shops ‘to collect her commission on the carte-de-visite that have been sold during the previous day’. Eventually,

quote ‘Returning home late at night she is met by one of the young men from Mr Mayall’s, and is taken in evening costume by magnesium light’. unquote

*Town Talk*’s critique of celebrity culture sounds familiar:

quote ‘If Mrs Cornwallis West had done any act to make herself known as a good or great woman, if she were a heroine or even a murderess, there could be some excuse in this traffic’. As she is not, she is ‘in the same street’ as the other ‘harlots [...] sold from the windows of our fashionable shops’. unquote

In response, Mr Cornwallis West sued Adolphus Rosenberg, publisher and proprietor of *Town Talk*, and in a packed Central Criminal Court was able to prove that there were no photographic studios in his house. As to photographs, all he could say was that quote ‘So far from allowing my wife’s photographs to be sold, I and my solicitors have taken every step to prevent that being done’. The case thereafter hinged on whether it was indeed impossible to stop the sale of one’s photographs to the public.

The copyright of photographs had been protected since the 1862 ‘Fine Arts Copyright Act’ which for the first time gave

quote ‘the authors of Paintings, Drawings, and Photographs [...] the sole and exclusive Right of copying, engraving, reproducing, and



multiplying such Paintings or Drawings, and the Design thereof’  
unless the Copyright was ‘sold or disposed of’.<sup>unquote</sup>

The Act had been prompted by a flood of illegal reproductions of works of art and pirated copies of celebrity photographs onto a market that had become potentially very lucrative. The law did not make it clear whether, in the absence of explicit agreement, the copyright stayed with the artist, or went with the object – painting or photograph – to the person who had paid for it. So, in 1878, a Royal Commission had to clarify that copyrights

<sup>quote</sup> ‘should go with the picture and belong to the buyer, unless  
the seller explicitly contracts that they be reserved to him’.<sup>unquote</sup>

This seemed to contradict Corwallis-West’s case: if the portraits had been paid for, he as the copyright holder would have been able to stop their sale. If not, as might have been the case with Mrs West, the copyright belonged to the photographer and the libel suit was weakened.

In court, however, Watkin Williams QC argued that

<sup>quote</sup> ‘any person who had their photograph taken had no power  
whatever to prevent the photographer from publishing the  
photographs’

This was because “the copyright was in the photographer” as the price paid by the client was for prints, not the negative, and this is the ‘original photograph’ that gives photographers the right ‘to multiply and sell copies’.

The judge agreed that <sup>quote</sup> “the only the way to stop the publication in future is for the person photographed to purchase the negative itself”<sup>unquote</sup> and the publisher of *Town Talk* was found guilty. The editorial in *The Times* reflecting on the outcome of the case regretted:

<sup>quote</sup> that in 1862, when legislators first busied themselves with photography, they [...] did not anticipate that it might be made into an instrument of social torture.

END OF QUOTE, AND OF MY PAPER TODAY.

Further reading:

Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian Britain: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Ashgate 2007)

Patrizia Di Bello, 'Photocollage, Fun and Flirtations' in *Playing with Pictures: the Art of Victorian Photocollage*, ed by Elizabeth Siegel (Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press 2010), pp. 49-62.

Patrizia Di Bello, 'Elizabeth Thompson and "Patsy" Cornwallis West as *carte-de-visite* Celebrities', *History of Photography* 53:3, August 2011, pp. 240-249.

---

<sup>i</sup> Lady Eastlake, "Photography," *Quarterly Review* 101 (1857), p. 442. [less than one shilling]