MANUAL: DATING AND INTERPRETING VICTORIAN PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS

DATING PHOTOGRAPHS FROM PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES and STUDIO PRACTICE

BASIC CHRONOLOGY

1840s and 1850s Daguerreotypes
Images printed on metal plates. Always cased.

1850 – 1875 Ambrotypes
Images printed on glass, using wet collodion process, with opaque black coating on back. Usually cased, often in fancy moulded thermoplastic cases

c.1855 – 1920s Tintypes
Images printed on thin iron plates. A speciality of seaside photographers 1880s – 1930s

Early 1860s –1900 Cartes de Visite
Images printed on treated paper from glass plates using wet collodion process. Mounted on card sized 2.5in x 4in.

c.1870 – c.1910 Cabinet prints
Same process as above, mounted on card sized 4in x 6.5in.

1902 –1940 Postcards
A cheaper, quicker format for producing prints, made photo portraits available to almost everyone.

1899 onwards Prints from roll film

DATING PHOTOGRAPHS FROM POSES AND BACKGROUNDS

1860s

Early 1860s most photographers' studios offered plain backgrounds, with possibly a column for the sitter to lean on, and a velvet drape on one side. This could be pulled across the back to hide the base of the posing stand – invariably used. Men and women were usually photographed at full length, standing, or occasionally seated. Children were posed standing on a chair seat, or leaning against a chair or table for support, and the base of the posing stand can often be seen. Babies, if not "in arms", were tied to a chair back by a sash to keep them upright.

Later 1860s more elaborate painted backcloths were introduced, depicting windows, archways, bookcases and other heavy, imposing-looking furniture, and balustrades.

1870s

The painted backcloths became more fanciful, with outdoor, parkland scenes, with fences and stiles. Fences as studio props were introduced, against which the sitter posed. Heavily padded, fringed and tasseled furniture features largely in studios, for the sitter to lean against or sit upon. Half-lengths and seated poses are more common.

1880s

The painted backcloths become more dramatic, and the props more elaborate and evident. The "outdoor" fiction of the backcloth is now brought into the foreground, with ivy-covered tree stumps and rocks for the sitter to sit on, clumps of grass and pebbles on the floor. Specialized sets are provided for seaside and holiday photographs, with sand, rocks, driftwood and sides of boats.

1890s

Studio settings now rely more on props and furniture to set the scene, rather than painted backdrops. Typical props are oriental screens, mirrors on stands, potted palms, and bamboo furniture of all kinds, the studio aiming to look like a high-class conservatory. The fashion for "close-up" portraits of the head and shoulders only, possible with the improved lenses of the 1890s, meant that the background was becoming less important. "Vignette" photographs are typical of the 1890s, in which the head forms an oval which fades into a pale blank background.

As a general rule, the closer the camera is to the sitter, the later in date the photograph is.

1900 - 1940

The studio settings for postcard format photos are usually simple, with plain backdrops and few items of furniture, a small table, a chair or a plant on a stand, all usually rather attenuated and delicate-looking, rather than massive and substantial. By the 1930s the fashion for studio props, influenced by Hollywood films, tended towards the "classical" with columns and podiums.

DATING PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MOUNT EVIDENCE

Carte and Cabinet photo mounts

1860s

Card mounts were thin and white, with right angle corners. The reverse usually only had the photographer's name and address, sometimes in a circle, cartouche or shield, and a reference number for ordering repeats.

1870s

Card mounts became thicker, and started to have rounded corners. There was more text and information on the back, and a wider use of decorative typefaces and ornamentation.

1880s

Mounts could have bevelled edges, and coloured card and inks began to be used. Photographers' puffs were prominent on the reverse, including references to royal patronage, medals won at international competitions, and facilities such as "electric light". Pictorial images of birds, plants, nymphs began to be included.

1890s

The early 1890s saw continuation of the trend towards great elaboration, with much use of dark-coloured card, particularly black or dark green, printed in silver and gold, and fashionable motifs such as cherubs, bulrushes, Chinese fans and swallows.
The later 90s and early 1900s saw a return to plainer mounts, often displaying a subtle elegance, with matt-finish card in cream or grey, printed in brown, silver or gold, with incised or textured lettering.

1905 onwards

Mounted prints began to have much wider, plain cream mounts, and the mounted photo was presented in a matching folder.
The practice of pasting of the photographic image to card was largely dropped after 1920, and mounts instead had slots cut in them into which the corners of the print could be inserted.

DATING PHOTOGRAPHS IN POSTCARD FORMAT

Photographs printed with postcard format backs, with the space divided between address and written message, cannot be earlier than 1902, as that year the Post Office made that format legal. Before 1902 the whole of one side had to be reserved for the address.

When this format was first introduced, it was only legal for mail sent within Britain, so for the next few years the printed instructions help with dating.

From 1902 to about 1906 the instruction ***"For inland postage only, this space may now be used for communications"*** was used.

From 1904 to about 1907 the wording was ***"Inland postage only"***

After 1907 the postage rules changed, and the instructions became more complicated, for example ***"This space may now be used for communications in the British Isles, also some colonies and foreign countries";*** or more simple, for example "***Communications"*** on one side, and ***"Address"*** on the other.

Postcards can also be dated by the postmark, if present and legible, and by the value of the stamps used.

Until 3 June 1918	postage a halfpenny (½d)
From June 1918 to June 1921	postage one penny (1d)
From June 1921 to May 1922	postage one and a half penny (1½d)
From May 1922 to the late 1930s	postage reverted to one penny (1d)

TYPICAL SPECIAL OCCASIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

In the second half of the 19th century photography was often used to record certain events and rites of passage within the family.

Babies were photographed either in the arms of their mother or nurse, or when they were old enough to sit unaided. Sometimes the problem of getting them to sit still was solved by tying them round the waist with a sash to the chair back, or by having holes in the backdrop for a mother to put her hands through to hold the child (the hands are sometimes visible!)

Small boys were sometimes photographed when they were first dressed in trousers, rather than the skirt of babyhood (usually around 4 or 5). This ritual was known as "breeching".

Teenage boys were photographed when they started their first job, around 13 or 14.

The telltale signs are a new-looking adult-style suit, and possibly the first watch and chain. If the boy is joining the Royal or Merchant Navy, (which was customarily about 13), he will be wearing his uniform.

Engagements were commemorated by photographs, sometimes of the couple together, or the girl on her own. If the photographer has posed the girl with her left hand in a prominent position and wearing a ring, then it is likely that it is an engagement photograph.

Wedding photographs were very popular, as they are still. However wedding photographs taken outside the photographer's studio were rare before the 1890s, except for weddings among wealthy and aristocratic families who could pay for the photographer to attend at the bride's home or reception venue. Studio portraits before 1900 usually only show the bride and groom. Because many brides wore a fashionable best dress and hat or bonnet, rather than a white or otherwise obviously "weddingy" dress, sometimes bridal couples are difficult to identify. As the photograph could be taken some time after the actual ceremony, the bride is not usually carrying flowers. Sometimes a clue is given with a prominent hand with a ring, as in the engagement photo.

Photos of wedding groups, often taken outdoors, with a garden backdrop (or in the case of lower class families, the backyard wall) become much more common from the late 1890s onwards. Studio photographs still were popular, and in the 1920s and 1930s could include quite a large wedding group. Photographs taken outside the church or wedding venue did not become fashionable until the 1930s.

Three-generation or four-generation photographs were a popular Victorian convention, in which the first grandchild, or great-grandchild, was photographed with its mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, who usually held the baby.

Silver and Golden Weddings were also occasions for family group photographs.

Many photographs survive (mostly in postcard format) of men in First World War uniform with their wives and sometimes a child or baby. These were presumably taken after the men had received their call-up papers, and before they were sent to the battlefields of Europe. Postcard-format prints also can be found of women dressed in the uniform of their new (and often groundbreaking) War roles, as members of the armed forces, nurses, VAD volunteers, Land Girls, and munitions workers, a valuable record of this emancipation and important change in women's status.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF HOLIDAYS AND OUTINGS

With the expansion of the railway system in the mid 19th century and especially after the introduction of Bank Holidays in 1871, the family holiday (or day trip, in the case of the working classes) became an institution and was commemorated by photography. Photographers' studios proliferated in popular seaside resorts such as Brighton and Torquay, and middle-class families went to have their photographs taken there, often against a backdrop painted to show a beach, and with real sand and rocks as props.

From the later 1880s when the wet collodion process became simplified and photographic equipment and developing chemicals etc became more portable, photographers took to the beaches and promenades in search of customers, with their "studio" in a handcart, so photographs of holidaymakers actually sitting on the beach (or visiting popular beauty spots) become more common. Often the photographs are tinplates (printed on very thin iron plates) which was a safer and quicker process than printing from glass plates when on location.

Photographers were also aware of the commercial possibilities of group photographs taken of outings, such as Church and Sunday School annual trips, and of the huge annual religious processions or "walks" that took place in many northern towns. Such photos almost all date from after 1900, and were produced in the cheap and affordable postcard format.

In the same way that photographers in seaside towns photographed their clients in a fictional beach setting, holidaymakers and travellers in the Swiss Alps could go to a studio in Zermatt and other climbing centres and be photographed in full alpine kit in front of a mountain background, whether or not they seriously intended to do any climbing. It is likely that the photographer had appropriate outfits and equipment for hire in his studio. These photographs appear to date from the mid 1860s to the 1880s.

Anthea Jarvis. 2009.

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