

Cheap Portraits in Low Dens

19th century studios at the "wrong" end of the social scale

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There was a lot of money to be made in the early years of photographic portraiture. Richard Beard of London, for example, is said to have realized between 25,000 and 40,000 English pounds *in one year* from his daguerreotype business, in an age when the average wage was around 50 pounds per year. For some photographers, portraiture remained a lucrative business well into the collodion era and its mania for the *carte-de-visite*.

In 1861, Andre Adolphe Disderi, who had introduced "cardomania", was reputed to be the richest photographer in the world, with an income of 48,000 pounds from his Paris studio alone (he also owned studios in Toulon, Madrid and, later, London). Disderi, however, died bankrupt. Other photographers also earned handsome incomes, and managed to keep them. John Mayall was one of the richest photographers in England with an annual income of 12,000 pounds, followed by Oliver Sarony who was reputed to earn 10,000 pounds per year. This was an income 200 times the national average, which will provide some guide to the equivalent income in today's values.

Similar profits were obtained by photographers in America. Jeremiah Gurney, of New York, made \$120 in one day from daguerreotypes taken entirely by himself. As Gurney had a large establishment and employed other operators, the total income per day must have been much higher. Even at this figure, Gurney's income must have been around \$40,000 per year when the average wage was around \$300. The society photographer Mora took in \$100,000 as late as 1878, which was not a prosperous time in America, or for the business of photographic portraiture in general.

As might be expected from the availability of huge profits, the photographic studios of the most successful portraitists were lavishly furnished. Perhaps the most elegant studio in England was the one owned by Oliver Sarony. His "palace" was 120 feet long and customers entered up an imposing flight of stairs. Inside, the studio itself was furnished in Louis Quinze style, "the embodiment of good taste and costly elegance."

But it was in America that the photographic studio reached an epitome of luxury and

grandeur. An overwhelmed European visitor to these studios wrote:

They are palaces worthy of comparison with the enchanted habitations which the Orientals erect for their fabulous heroes. Marble, carved in columns or animated by the chisel of the sculptor, richly embroidered and costly draperies, paintings endorsed by sumptuous frames, adorn their walls. On the floor lie rich carpets where the foot falls in silence. There are gilded cages with birds from every clime, warbling amidst exotic plants whose flowers perfume the air under the softened light from the sun. This is the American studio. Everything is here united to distract the mind of the visitor from his cares and give to his countenance an expression of calm contentment. (1)

Gabriel Harrison, a successful painter and actor as well as photographer, opened a lavish new studio in New York in 1852. His Exhibition Room (the room in which customers waited for their turn in the studio while examining specimens of the photographer's work) was 45 feet long and 25 feet wide and 14 feet high, octagonal in shape, "and elegantly painted in fresco, with Crocus Martis tint, white and gold, Elizabethan in design," with "doors of brilliant stained glass." The Operating Room was even larger "and frescoed in a quiet, subdued tint" with the massive skylight "of the best English white plate glass." Even the Ladies Dressing Room was "fitted up in the most chaste and beautiful style with salmon color and marble-top furniture. Toilet always kept in order, and of the first quality."

Other studios were more individualistic, if not downright eccentric. The studio of Napoleon Sarony, Oliver's brother, looked like a "dumping ground of the dealers in unsaleable idols, tattered tapestry, and indigent crocodiles", said one visitor. A stuffed crocodile did indeed hang from the ceiling and the studio entrance was guarded by an Egyptian mummy. The studio was a cluttered junk shop, including a Russian sleigh, jungle plants, Chinese gods, ornate furniture and drapes, suits of armor and stuffed birds.

Such elegance, and eccentric extravagance, was typical of the portrait studios of the rich and famous. And these are the photographers who comprise the history of the medium. All the written histories are, in essence, a succession of names of the most prominent individuals. Of course there is some justification for this approach to history. The best portrait photographers, by definition, produced the best photographs; the best photographs reflected on the reputation of the photographer; this photographer would be more frequently patronized by wealthy clients; this patronage would bring the photographer wealth. Hence, history is about famous photographers, who were usually the most successful financially. These photographers represent the peak of the iceberg, the bulk of which is hidden. The history of photography, too, has its hidden, undisclosed areas which lie below the threshold of the textbook.

It is important to reveal these aspects of the medium for several reasons. First, the rich and famous could not exist without the poor, the failures and the infamous, if for no other reason than they provide a standard of comparison against which the better and the best can be ascertained. Second, they act as a counterbalance to the notion that any history is the story of a privileged class. Third, and most important they exist; the poor and the infamous comprise the vast bulk of the names in any medium, and any attempt to deny this fact, if only by neglecting to deal with their presence, distorts history. Conveniently ignoring them does not "tidy up" history; it creates bad history. This is not a plea to write essays and monographs on photographers whose work has no redeeming aesthetic or social value. Distortions of history are not remedied by deliberate perversity. The point is that the majority of individuals working in any area, at any period in history, were then, and remain, nameless, faceless and unknown, and that is as it should be. *But* their activities, as a whole, form an important and integral part of any medium and cannot be ignored.

In the context of this article, the cheap portrait photographers, working out of back street attic dens, are rarely mentioned in the histories of photography yet their attitudes to the medium, and their style of working, was far more common than those by the rich and famous, working out of elegant studios in the fashionable areas of the city. A few facts about the "seamy side" of photographic portraiture in the 19th century will provide a social contrast to the studios already mentioned.

The public's demand for portraits in the early years of the medium, and the profits available to those who supplied the need, inevitably attracted a lot of unsavory characters into photography.

'Many of them were professional failures, those who had already attempted a succession of menial trades, not one of which had been more successful than the previous efforts. They were the drifters and the itinerant tradesmen who did not care a penny what they did, or sold, as long as it filled in the days and provided a meager living.

A daguerreotypist was one of the principal characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's well-known novel, The House of Seven Gables, published in 1850. This daguerreotypist had been a country schoolmaster, a salesman in a country store, the political editor of a country newspaper, a peddler in cologne water, a dentist and a lecturer on mesmerism. Hawthorne wrote "His present phase, as a daguerreotypist, was of no importance, nor likely to be more permanent, than any of the preceding ones. It had been taken up with the careless alacrity of an adventurer... and would be thrown aside as carelessly."

Often the photographer plied several of these trades simultaneously. One witness to the time stated:

It was no uncommon thing to find watch repairers, dentists, and other styles of business folk to carry on daguerreotypy "on the side! I have known blacksmiths and cobblers to double up with it, so it was possible to have a horse shod, your boots tapped, a tooth pulled, or a likeness taken by the same man. (3)

For some inexplicable reason photography and dentistry were often combined, but few photographers were quite so multitasking as Lorenzo Russell, who was also a professor of singing and music, miniature painter, phrenologist, taxidermist, mesmerist and picture framer.

Photography was often employed in barbers, tobacconists, ice-cream and roast-chestnut shops, shrimp rooms, hatters, patent-medicine stores, as well as dentists and physiognomists. These transient and uncommitted photographers were decried by the photographic press which abhorred "the mere mechanics, dabsters, or whatever you are pleased to call those operators who jump from the stable, the fish-market, the kitchen, or the poultry-yard into the operating room of the Daguerreotypist, and after cleaning two or three plates, and seeing as many images produced upon them - and without even sufficient knowledge of the art to make a judicious purchase of their apparatus - set themselves up for Daguerreans." (4) The problem, according to the editors, was widespread: "Thousands of people not worthy the name of artists scour the country and the cities, and palm off their imbecile attempts at fifty cents each." (5)

The last few words reveal the real motive for such disparaging remarks by the establishment journals about the itinerant photographic tradesmen - they were undercutting the prices of the society studios. But the frequency of attacks also attest to the numbers of cheap photographers who were plying their trade.

The most vicious and sustained attacks were aimed not at the itinerants but at the rogues and charlatans who inhabited back street studio "dens" and whose unsavory business brought the whole medium into disrepute.

As the Daily Telegraph wrote in 1861: "When we find photography associated with the lowest ruffianism and blackguardism, and made the medium of imposture and extortion, we are apt to grow somewhat out of patience with the proprietors of popular cameras and the manipulators of "portraits for the million." (6) This article continued with a scathing indictment of these cheap portrait studios. The most revealing inside look at the business of photographic portraiture in these back street "dens" was published in London Labour and the London Poor, one of the earliest and most important social surveys of the

Victorian age. Its author was Henry Mayhew who was a minor playwright, humorist and one of the original proprietors of Punch magazine, in 1841. Mayhew was also "a photographer of considerable experience and success" and a pupil of Oscar Rejlander (7), which means that he would have been familiar with the activities of a portrait studio. In his monumental work of social reporting, he devoted seven pages to the poorest photographers in his section on "Street Artists" (8). His visits to various studios in the back streets of East London provide an incomparable picture of the background, business dealings and customer/photographer interactions in these dingy dens of low trade. The most engrossing part of Mayhew's conversations with these back street operators is the life of an unnamed photographer who must be the most endearing rogue in photographic history. His biography acts as a perfect counterpoint to the biographies of the rich and famous who monopolize the textbooks. Let's call him Bill.

Bill and his friend Jim were buskers at night, playing the banjo and tambourine and dancing in pubs, and drag-pitching by day, setting up their act in small courts, alleys and cul-de-sacs. It was not much of a life - long hours for a meager income - but Bill was ambitious. He began saving his money; sometimes a shilling, if he had a good day, one shilling and sixpence. Extra money was put aside by sending his wife out to work at boot-binding during the day, and dancing at night, at a penny an exhibition. "You see", said Bill "when first photography came up I had my eye on it, for I could see it would turn me in something some time".

One day, Jim and Bill were busking outside a chemical works in Stratford when Jim remarked that Bill would "soon learn about them portraits if you get among the chemicals." Bill agreed, and signed on with the company as a regular laborer for 10 shillings per week, sharing the wage with Jim, of course, because "when we chum together we always panka each other bona" which means, translated from the mummer's slang used by roving street players, that they took care of each others needs. Bill would "nanti panka his nabs snide" or never act in a nasty way to his best friend. In the evenings Bill and Jim would meet up again, and continue their busking, making on average an additional two shillings each per night.

After a year of long hours and hard work, Bill had not only learned a lot (of doubtful value photographically) about chemicals, but managed to save the princely sum of two pounds five shillings. Unfortunately, a camera outfit for portraits cost five pounds five shillings. At this rate he would need to work another 18 months before he could become a photographer. He took the expensive way out, and borrowed three pounds from a professional loan business, which meant that he owed four pounds three shillings.

With his five guineas Bill rushed off to the photographic dealers, Gilbert Flemming, in

Oxford Street, and bought a complete half-plate camera outfit - and opened for business the next day, a Tuesday. A customer arrived before Bill had a chance to test his new equipment. Undeterred Bill presented the customer with a blank, black piece of glass, and told him that the picture would "come out bright as it dried," who went away quite delighted.

On the first Sunday after opening, the new business took in one pound five shillings and sixpence, and everybody, said Bill, was quite pleased with their spotted and black pictures. He was not yet competent at making portraits but he sent the customers away with the same assurance that the pictures would come out as they dried. By the next week, the makeshift studio was full of disgruntled customers, who were photographed again because by now Bill was a little better accomplished and sent them away with middling pictures. "I didn't know anything about photographs then, not a mite," said Bill, but "I'm a very determined chap, and when I take a hidea into my head I always do it somehow or other."

One of the initial problems was that Bill had no concept of exposure. When he bought the camera, the dealer demonstrated its use and because it was a dull afternoon the exposure time was 90 seconds - so Bill assumed the exposure was always 90 seconds, in any weather, at any time of day. Of course, on bright days the plates were "quite white" with over-exposure but as the evening grew darker, so the picture improved. Referring to the sixpenny book of instructions, Bill saw his mistake and made rapid improvement. By the end of the first month he could take a "tidy" picture.

Business was steady that first winter and Bill made a profit of 30 shillings per week, taking portraits at one shilling a time. A chance at larger profits was missed when he moved his studio to a room and garden in the Old Kent Road, which was a religious neighborhood and condemned Sunday trading, the most profitable day of the week just after the workers had been paid. Bill reckoned he could make three pounds on Sunday alone, if he was allowed to open, but the rest of the week only brought in two pounds.

This problem of Sunday trading was a sore issue throughout the 19th century, with the rich and the righteous constantly advocating stricter and more often enforced penalties for those who worked on the Sabbath. Even in the late 1890s amateur photographers were often abused and attacked if they were seen making pictures in public when they should have been in church. The next best day for business was Monday, with the rest of the week providing scant pickings as the customers were broke until the next pay day. The studio folded.

Next Bill became a manager at a back street studio, one of a chain of at least 11 similar

studios owned by one man throughout the East End of London. Bill would take between 60 and 100 portraits a day for a wage of two pounds. After four months he decided to work for himself again, and opened a studio in Southwark where he made a profit of two pounds in a good week and at least 25 shillings in an average week. There was no longer any problem in photographing on a Sunday, when he averaged an income of 15 shillings; other days income dropped to three or four shillings.

When business was slow, Bill and Jim offered various inducements to their customers. They were more like scams, although our heroes called them "dodges." If nothing else, they revealed a high degree of imagination.

- There was the Patent American Air Preserver. (It was originally called the London Air-Preserver, but the "American" name was more successful). This was any old piece of card which the photographers had collected - old tickets, soap wrappings, old paper from shop sweepings, even plain brown paper - which Bill told the customer had been "chemicalised" and, without it, the picture would fade. They were avidly purchased at 2 pennies each.

- Another dodge was to take a full-length portrait, show it to the customer and say that for the normal price of 6 pennies the background and legs would be cut off. The price for the complete picture was double. About half the sitters paid the extra price.

- A splendid dodge, "although it wants a nerve to do it," said Bill, was the brightening solution - which was nothing more than plain water. If the portrait was badly exposed the customer might be disgruntled so the photographers dipped it in water, wrapped it up and told the sitter it would brighten up in a few hours. If they returned to the studio with a complaint then they would take another portrait - for an extra charge.

- After a portrait was taken, the photographers might suggest that the sitter be mesmerized by the camera, and the charge was only 2 pennies. They were told to stare at the lens, "till their eyes begin to water, and then they complain of a dizziness in the head. " Of course, it never works but the sitter is satisfied: "Well, it certainly is a wonderful machine, and a most curious invention," proving, said Bill, "What fools people is".

- Bill also removed warts for customers, at a penny per wart, by touching them with nitric acid. "My wart patients seldom came twice," opined Bill, "for they screams out ten thousand blue murders when the acid bites them. "

- Another photographic chemical which brought in extra customers was silver nitrate and its propensity for staining everything black. So, for 1 shilling, customers could have their

whiskers and mustaches dyed. Unfortunately, if the nitrate solution dropped onto the skin, this too was stained black. For an extra 3 pennies, the photographer's carelessness could be remedied by rubbing the stains with potassium cyanide!

- Perhaps the most fascinating dodge, from a historical perspective, concerned window specimens of their work, which the photographers would take of any willing sitter as samples of their abilities. If for any reason, the customer's portrait was a complete failure, they would merely hand him/her a specimen from the stock in the window. This led to some strange, and humorous, mistakes. For example, a young woman was handed a specimen which included a child. "Bless me! There's a child: I haven't ne'er a child!" exclaimed the customer; Jim convinced her that the woman in the picture was indeed herself and the child happened to be passing behind her. "She...took the portrait away highly delighted. " "The fact is," said Bill, "people don't know their own faces. Half of 'em have never looked in a glass half a dozen times in their life, and directly they see a pair of eyes and a nose, they fancy they are their own."

It was estimated that there were 250 such back-street portrait studios in London alone at the beginning of the 1860s. All of them employed similar scams in order to squeeze a few extra pennies from the customers. No wonder that the medium, once the prerogative of the learned and the rich, was quickly falling into disrepute. This is the decade in which many of the finest photographers - such as Roger Fenton, Gustave Le Gray and the Bisson brothers - were abandoning photography because it was becoming swamped with cut-price, low quality portraits. The social impact of this trend cannot be overemphasized: within a decade or two the status of photography would fall from the apex of the social pyramid to its base.

The medium struggled to reverse this trend for another 100 years

References:

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3. James F. Ryder, Voigtlander and I in Pursuit of Shadow Catching, 1902, Chapter 1.
4. The Photographic Art-Journal, August 1851, p.100.
5. The Photographic Art-Journal, September 1851, p.188.
6. Quoted in The Photographic News, 16 August 1861, p. 389.
7. The Amateur Photographer, 21 August 1885, pp. 305~306.
8. London Labour and the London Poor, Enlarged edition, 4 vols. , London 1861-62. Vol. 3, pp. 204-210. All the following quotations are taken from these pages.

