

Infantry Tactics

Coping with children in the 19th-century photographic studio

Bill Jay

Contrary to popular assumption, there has been comparatively little sexual discrimination in photography throughout the medium's history. This assertion may cause some eyebrows to rise but, nevertheless, it can be demonstrated by historical fact.

At the peak of the Victorian Age when well-bred young ladies were encouraged to cultivate the arts of "Refinement" (which meant any activity which was singularly useless), women were nevertheless encouraged to enter the ranks of professional photography. The photographic press often carried articles by (male) writers urging women to open their own studios and one of them did not fear contradiction when he asserted that "the ladies now at the head of photographic establishments, and doing the operating themselves, give evidence of an ability quite equal to, if not surpassing, that of the best of masculine competitors." Another (male) writer attested that the profession of photography "is one in which there is no sexual hostility to their employment." "There is no adequate reason," he stated in 1873, "why the number should not be largely increased."

British census reports confirm this attitude in that females continued to enter the profession of photography in comparatively greater numbers than men throughout the 19th century. Between 1861 and 1871, a decade of energetic growth in the portraiture business, the total number of photographers had not doubled whereas the number of women photographers had quadrupled. In 1861 there was one female photographer to every 14 males; in 1871 the proportion was one female to every 6 males. By 1901 no less than one in every three professional photographers was a woman.

These are extraordinary and little-known facts which might, and should, alter our perception of the typical 19th-century photographer. A careful reading of the Victorian photographic press reveals that women commonly owned their own studios or were employed as camera operators by large studio chains.

There was a good reason why women were valued as photographers: by far the most frequent visitors to portraiture studios were ladies and babies. With both types of clients, the female photographer excelled. She was deemed better able to provide ladies with advice on hair and dress styles and she would be encouraged to physically arrange the

pose, adjust drapery and add finishing touches to the ladies' coiffure – all of which would have been considered impertinant if attempted by a male.

Baby photographs demanded an extraordinary amount of understanding, skill, tact and patience on behalf of the operator in a 19th-century studio. And women were considered to embody these virtues to a greater degree than men. At no stage of the process was patience more demanded than during the efforts required to keep the baby still during the tediously long exposure.

This was particularly true in the early years of the medium when the daguerreotype predominated and exposure times were often measured in minutes rather than fractions of a second. Adult sitters suffered through the seemingly interminable exposures with their heads rigidly clamped in order to prevent movement. Babies could not be brutalized in the same way, and sharp daguerreotypes of infants are relatively rare. It is often asserted, with some justification, that a sharp image of a baby in a daguerreotype means the infant was dead. Such post-mortem baby daguerreotypes were common, especially in America, when infant mortality rates were so high. Photographers prided themselves on posing the baby, often on the mother's lap, so that the infant looked asleep or even alive (by pinning open the lids and injecting the eyes with drops of glycerine).

From the early 1850s, the daguerreotype was giving way to the collodion or wet-plate process. But although exposure times were reduced they were still agonizingly drawn out, commonly 30 seconds. Head clamps were still required for adults, and still impractical for infants.

So how did the photographer obtain a sharp image of a restless, squirming baby during the exposure?

One photographic magazine suggested giving the sitter a good dose of laudanum, which was a tincture of opium (the Victorian's aspirin). The writer remarked that the opium "will effectually prevent the sitters from being conscious of themselves, or of the camera, or of anything else." "They become," he congratulated himself, "most delightfully tractable."

Punch magazine (1864) also contributed its own ideas on "The Best Mode of Keeping Babies Still for the Photographic Sitting." It suggested chloroform, which had recently become popular as an anesthetic.

Incidentally, the writer concluded that "if the mothers would only stay away, there would be no difficulty, as all babies were exactly alike, and a single type could be reproduced from an old picture." Like much facetious writing, there was a strong element of truth in this remark. In an age when clients were a lot less sophisticated about photography,

cheap-jack photographers did substitute a “stock” picture of a baby of approximately the right age if the actual one was a technical failure.

A few years later a photographer from Danbury took the idea to its logical conclusion. He reasoned that his clients could not fidget during the exposure if they were insensible, and he promised to revolutionize the business of portraiture by the introduction of a gas which rendered the sitter unconscious during the taking of the picture. He issued cards announcing: “Photographs in all styles without pain.” In an age when a visit to a photographer’s studio was no more appreciated than a visit to a dentist, these solutions of gassing and drugging seemed eminently reasonable.

Most portraitists, however, did not resort to such extremes. They relied on patience – and efforts to distract the attention of the baby. There are many suggestions in the 19th-century photographic press on methods which individual operators offered to their peers for the distraction of infants. Some seemed more time-consuming and impractical than the effort warranted, others were brutal; many were ingenious. A particularly clever idea was to dip the baby’s hands in treacle and then dip one of them into a bag of feathers. In theory, the child’s attention was riveted on the act of picking feathers from one sticky hand to the other, “giving you ample opportunity to make an artistic exposure.”

More practical was to amuse the child with a real, or mechanical, animal. An American portraitist trained a monkey to actually make the exposure and the New York Sun stated that this is “the first time that an ape has been responsibly engaged in the service of art.” A photographer called Davis trained a canary – not to make the exposure but to sing on command. When about to remove the lens cap from the camera, the bird “at once bursts forth in sweet song” and “the sitter forgets all about the headrest, the trying light, the wearisomeness of keeping a fixed position, etc.” For those photographers with less aptitude for animal training, photographic dealers could supply mechanical birds which opened their beaks and warbled when a pneumatic bulb was squeezed. These gadgets were very popular and no doubt led to the photographic cliché: “watch the birdie.”

Even less demanding of the photographer’s attention were the camera stands used, and distributed, by a Mr. Spicer of Birmingham. He was an expert in stuffing kittens and constructed not only stands but also picture frames featuring his art, for which the demand was “practically unlimited.” No doubt the animal-rights activists would object to a revival of such photographic props although they still seem more tasteful than the attention-getting technique of the photographer in the American West who would remove a huge quid of tobacco from his mouth and hurl it against the wall, higher than his head, and take the exposure while the fascinated child watched masticated tobacco dribble down the wall.

The difficulties, and frustrations, of attempting to photograph babies in a Victorian studio were legendary and scores of tales were told with which all photographers, everywhere,

could empathize. A typical anecdote concerned the photographer who had been trying for two hours to take a satisfactory picture, without success, and in his frustration hurled a lens at the infant. As soon as the magistrate heard the circumstances, he interrupted: "You are discharged. I used to be a photographer myself." Throughout the 19th century, as these anecdotes will indicate, babies were considered the supreme test of a photographer's mettle, skill and patience. It is significant that when George G. Rockwood of New York issued a booklet in 1874-5 (as something to read while the sitter waited for his/her turn in front of the lens) all the illustrations concern the frustration of photographing babies, culminating in the photographer stamping in anger on the final ruined plate. In light of these illustrations, and suggested by the booklet's title, Rockwood's Photographic Artillery Manual and Infantry Tactics, it would be reasonable to assume that the text dealt at length with the portraiture of babies. Unfortunately, it contains only one short paragraph on the subject:

Children should always be dressed in light colors or white, and should never be taken to the gallery after 2:00 pm. Never attempt to coerce a child to sit for its picture. If it won't sit willingly, it should be brought again at some other time. Never coax a child with sweetmeats or give it anything to play with during the sitting. With your child bring plenty of patience, and we will endeavor to exercise a becoming degree of that grace.

This would be reasonable advice even today, more than 100 years later.

Babies still comprise one of the most difficult subjects for photographers, in spite of the enormous increases in the speed and sophistication of our films and cameras, because the time-honored attributes of skill, tact and patience are still the essential prerequisites for success.

(This article was written for Sue Packer, one of Britain's best photographers. She had completed a wonderful project on babies photographed in a 19th-century style. The images were witty and wise. The above words were published as her book's introduction.)

Written as an Afterword for The Babies, by Sue Packer, Cornerhouse Publications, Fall 1989.