

Move a Muscle and I'll Blow Your Brains Out

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In the first year of photography's introduction to the public, portraits were not possible due to the extremely long exposure times. Heroic attempts were made to capture a person's likeness, but the results were far from pleasing and the sitter's experience far less so.

Samuel Morse attempted to portray his wife and daughter who sat for "from 10 to 20 minutes, out of doors, on the roof of a building, in the full sunlight, with the eyes closed." ¹

Another poignant description of a sitter's ordeal states he sat:

for 8 minutes, with the strong sunlight shining on his face and tears trickling down his cheeks while - the operator promenaded the room with watch in hand, calling out the time every 5 seconds, till the fountains of his eyes were dry. ²

Instructions for portraits during these early months read more like torture techniques: "Paint in dead white the face of the patient (sic), powder his hair, and fix the back of his head between two or three planks solidly attached to the back of an arm-chair, and wind up with screws." ³ A contemporaneous cartoon shows a top-hatted sitter, head firmly clamped, staring into the camera lens. Only the hand of the photographer is visible and it contains a watch – significantly, the dial has no hands. The caption is: "The execution."

The photographic press had fun with such antics. Le Charivari mimicked the tone of these early portrait instructions:

You want to make a portrait of your wife. You fix her head in a temporary iron collar to get the indispensable immobility... You point the lens of the camera at her face, and when you take the portrait it doesn't represent your wife; it is her parrot, her watering pot, or worse. ⁴

Underlying these accounts of early experiments in portraiture is a feeling of despair that perhaps photography would never be able to depict a natural expression. In April 1840 J.F. Soleil remarked that "hopes that had been held for obtaining portraits have not yet been realised... I know that up to now no portrait has been produced with the eyes open and the attitude and face natural." ⁵

The pessimism was short lived. Within a year of this remark several improvements had been made in the process which meant that portraits were more practical. The sitter still endured the restrictions of a head clamp and back brace but the exposure times were now reduced to 30 seconds or so. Even this reduced exposure time meant that sitters with tics, or facial twitchings, or who were impatient and fidgety would never produce a pleasing portrait. Disgruntled customers, on seeing the blurred image, were bad for business so the photographer was under pressure to keep the sitter still. But few photographers, no matter how desperate, resorted to the following solution, reported in a photographic periodical:

We have read a story of an artist "way down south in Dixie," who adopted a novel expedient to keep his sitter quite. He had tried all sorts of suasions without success, when it occurred to him that the strongest of all human motives is fear. As soon as he has completed his adjustments, he suddenly draws a revolver, and levelling it at the sitter's head, he explains in a voice and with a look suggestive of lead and gunpowder: "Dare to move muscle and I'll blow your brains out." We have not seen any of the pictures produced by this process, but have no doubt that they present some interesting peculiarities. 6

This item appeared in 1861 - and, obviously struck a sympathetic note among photographers. It was not only reprinted in at least three journals at that time but also it resurfaced six years later, attributed to a photographer in Arkansas,⁷ and again in 1875, attributed this time to a photographer in Nevada.⁸ At least the latter portraitist offered his sitter an explanation for his violent act "My reputation as an artist is at stake, and I don't want no nonsense about this picture."

A photographer from Danbury reasoned that his sitters could not fidget during the exposure if they were insensible and he promised to revolutionise the business of portraiture by the introduction of a gas which rendered the client unconscious during the taking of the picture. He issued cards announcing: "Photographs in all styles without pain."⁹ Throughout the 19th century a visit to the photographer's studio was no more appreciated than a visit to a dentist. And gassing and drugging seemed eminently reasonable solutions to the victim's squirmings. I particularly like the following advice to a reader's query; undoubtedly the reply is facetious but there is enough truth in the suggestion to underline the point:

Laura - There are several methods of overcoming the difficulty arising out of a sitter's self-consciousness. Some are unpleasant, and others more so; but for my own part I have found laudanum one of the least disagreeable. A good dose will effectually prevent the sitters from being conscious of themselves, or of the camera, or of anything else. They become most delightfully tractable, and you can do anything with them under such circumstances. All such methods have their drawbacks, however, and in this case the procedure entails a certain loss of animation, although it is sometimes possible to classify the results as still life, should there be any life about it at all.¹⁰

Perhaps I should point out that laudanum is now known as opium.

To some observers, having your portrait made was so repellent that it constituted a lawful punishment to society's offenders. When two gypsies were charged with the unlawful possession of a pheasant, at Worksop in 1866, the Bench decided to dismiss the charge on condition that the accused agreed to have their portraits taken.¹¹ Similarly when the Under-Secretary of State for the colonies was asked to urge the substitution of photography for decapitation as a means of identification on the field of battle, Punch objected: "Those who have suffered at the hands of ... photographers oppose this idea on humanitarian grounds."¹²

My favourite description of a visit to the portrait photographer was published by an anonymous sitter in 1874. It accurately reflects, without too much exaggeration, the experience of the sitter in a typical mid-Victorian studio:

Having a photograph taken is one of the great events of a man's life. The chief desire is to look the very best, and on the success of the picture hinges, in many cases, the most important epoch in life. To work up a proper appearance time enough is used which, if devoted to catching fleas for their phosphorus, would cancel the entire national debit, and establish a daily paper. When you have completed your toilet, you go to the gallery and force yourself into a nonchalance of expression that is too absurd for anything. Then you take the chair, spread your legs gracefully, appropriate a calm and indifferent look, and commence to perspire. An attenuated man, with a pale face, long hair, and a soiled nose, now comes out of a cavern and adjusts the camera. Then he goes back of you, and tells you to sit back as far as you can in the chair, and that it has been a remarkably backward spring. After getting you back till your spine interferes with the chair itself, he shoves your head into a pair of ice-tongs, and dashes at the camera again. Here, with a piece of discoloured velvet over his head, he bombards you in this manner: – "Your chin out a little, please." The chin is protruded. "That's nicely; now a little more." The chin advances again, and the pomade commences to melt and start for freedom. Then he comes back to you and slaps one of your hands on your leg in such a position as to give you the appearance of trying to lift it overhead. The other is turned under itself, and has become so sweaty that you begin to fear it will stick there permanently. A new stream of pomade finds its way out and starts downward. Then he shakes your head in the tongs till it settles right, and says it looks like rain, and puts your chin out again, and punches out your chest, and says he doesn't know what the poor are to do next winter unless there is a radical change in affairs; and then takes the top of your head in one hand, and your chin in the other, and gives your neck a wrench that would earn any other man a prominent position in a new hospital. Then he runs his hand through your hair and scratches your scalp, and steps back to the camera and the injured velvet for another look. By this time new sweat and pomade have started out. The whites of your eyes show unpleasantly, and your whole body feels as if it had been visited by an enormous cramp, and another and much bigger one was momentarily expected. Then he points at something for you to look at, and tells you to look cheerful and composed, and snatches away the velvet and pulls out his watch.

When he gets tired, and you feel as if there was but very little left in this world to live for, he restores the velvet, says it is an unfavourable day for a picture, but he hopes for the best, and immediately disappears in his den. Then you get up and stretch yourself, slap on your hat, and immediately sneak home, feeling mean, humbled altogether, and too wretched for description. The first friend who sees the picture says he can see enough resemblance to make certain that it is you, but you've tried to look too formal to be natural and graceful. ¹³

If the ordeal of portrait making was arduous for the adult, and frustrating for the photographer, the problems associated with picturing babies were considerably greater, primarily because they would not sit still. Many suggestions were proffered in the photographic press for amusing an infant during a portrait session. Some were obviously impractical, others were cruel, but none were more ingenious than this piece of advice on "How to compose a child, six month's old, for an exposure." Having limited the body movements of the child with pillows:

*dip each hand of the little child in a pot of molasses (treacle), and afterwards the left hand in a bag of feathers. The child's attention is now riveted upon the plumed hand, holds it up in astonishment, and, taking courage, begins to pick each feather from the left hand; but each one taken off naturally adheres to the right hand, and thus the play commences repeatedly from the one hand to the other for an hour or two, slowly and deliberately, giving you ample opportunity to make an artistic exposure.*¹⁴

Punch had a few suggestions on "The Best Mode of Keeping Babies Still for the Photographic Sitting" which it made in its own inimicable manner. Chloroform was one of them, although 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."¹⁵ In a similar vein, a well-published anecdote had a photographer before the magistrate, for throwing a lens at a baby. The prisoner explained that he had been trying for two hours to take a picture "of that little imp – I mean little baby, your honour, and ..." The magistrate interrupted: "You are discharged. I used to be a photographer myself."¹⁶

Mothers of infants would take a hand in preparing the child for a picture. One woman entered a photographic gallery in New York and, prior to the exposure, subjected the infant to a vigorous spanking. The photographer interfered and was informed that she was "only trying to get up a fine colour in the child's face in order that it might be represented in the picture with blooming cheeks."¹⁷ Another mother had a different solution. She propped up her baby in a chair in a photographic studio in Columbus, Ohio, to have its picture taken, and then excused herself for a moment. "The photographer took the picture, and now he wants someone to take the baby."¹⁸

One reason why infants were so difficult to photograph successfully in the 19th century is that they could not be subjected to the normal head clamps, which kept the head still during the relatively long exposure times. One photographer, at least, could dispense

with such aids to immobility with another class of people: total abstainers. At the annual meeting of the Baptist Total Abstinence Association in 1877, the Rev. G.W. McCree related his experience of having a portrait taken by “a West-end photographer.” The photographer felt McCree’s head and remarked, “You are a teetotaler, sir.” “Yes, I am; but why do you ask?” said the sitter. “Because we never fix the heads of teetotalers. Our experience is that moderate drinkers need their heads fixed, but that the heads of total abstainers are always sufficiently steady without any support.”¹⁹ McCree told the Association members that this “scientific deduction” was a “valuable testimony in favour of total abstinence.”

Another photographer who dispensed with head clamps, and portrait posing aids of any kind, was Julia Margaret Cameron, as the frequency of blurs in her work testifies. This practice not only led to a high failure rate but was agony for the victims, cajoled into the picture by this indomitable woman. One anonymous sitter wrote of her experiences when faced by Cameron’s camera:

The studio, I remember, was very untidy and very uncomfortable. Mrs Cameron put a crown on my head and posed me as the heroic queen. This was somewhat tedious, but not half so bad as the exposure. Mrs Cameron warned me before it commenced that it would take a long time, adding, with a sort of half groan, that it was the sole difficulty she had to contend with in working with large plates. The difficulties of development she did not seem to trouble about. The exposure began. A minute went over and I felt as if I must scream; another minute, and the sensation was as if my eyes were coming out of my head; a third, and the back of my neck appeared to be afflicted with palsy, a fourth, and the crown, which was too large, began to slip down my forehead; a fifth - but here I utterly broke down, for Mr Cameron, who was very aged, and had unconquerable fits of hilarity which always came in the wrong places, began to laugh audibly, and this was too much for my self-possession, and I was obliged to join the dear old gentleman. When Mrs Cameron, with the assistance of “Mary” - the beautiful girl who figured in so many pictures, and notably in the picture called the “Madonna” - bore off the gigantic dark slide with the remark that she was afraid I had moved, I was obliged to tell her I was sure I had.

This first picture was nothing but a series of “wobblings” and so was the second; the third was more successful, though the torture of standing for nearly ten minutes without a headrest was something indescribable. I have a copy of that picture now. The face and crown have not more than six outlines and if it was Mrs Cameron’s intention to represent Zenobia in the last stage of misery and desperation, I think she succeeded.

No doubt the anguish would have been reduced by the use of a posing stand but even with the head securely clamped, the average portrait sitter found it difficult to avoid a frightened stare into the camera. How to induce a pleasant expression on the face of the sitter was a frequent subject for advice in the 19th century photographic press and photographers generously proffered their own methods to fellow professionals.

An American journal, *The Photographic Times*, stated in 1879 that English photographers avoid the strain on the sitters' eyes, "which usually results in a ghastly stare," by placing a large clock behind the camera.²⁰ The sitter is told to let his eyes follow the numbers around the clock dial. This rotary movement of the eyes presumably increased the image size of the pupil; the writer asserted that pictures by this technique "have a marked superiority over those previously taken."

C.W. Davis trained a canary to sing at his signal. 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. (all of which complaints are familiar to the photographer's ear.)"²¹ Photographic supply houses could supply mechanical birds for those portraitists who were not adept at bird training. The little bird sat on the top of a pole and when a pneumatic bulb was pressed the beak opened and a warbling sound was emitted. These gadgets were extremely popular and no doubt are responsible for the demand on the sitter to "Watch the birdie," which has passed into even current photographic language. They were also "highly useful in teaching birds to sing" – just in case the photographer decided to buy his own canary.

Under the incongruous heading "How to secure a pleasant expression," one journal reported a photographer who told his sitters not to look at a clock, or canary, but at a notice on the wall which bore the ominous words "Terms, cash!"²² Each photographer would have his own technique for encouraging a pleasant expression and the method used would range from the sublime to the ridiculous. I like this example of the more sophisticated approach:

Photographer (to Sitter). "I saw you at Church last Sunday, Miss Skeate." Sitter. "Oh, did you!" Photographer. "Yes; and also your friend Miss Brown. (If you could raise your chin a trifle. Thanks). And what an atrocious-looking hat she had on." (After a pause.) "There, Miss Skeate, it is over and I think we have caught a very pleasant expression."²³

In contrast, there is the experience of a lady who visited a frontier photographer in the American West "where there isn't much but prairie and wind."

He arranged me in the chair - an old wooden one - and placed my head in the rest, which was an old pitchfork, with the sharp ends of the tines broken off ... He fixed his old camera, and then took a huge quid of tobacco out of his mouth, threw it against the wall, higher than his head, and said: "Now look right at that, mum, hold still, and look purty."²⁴

For those sitters who did not approve of watching masticated tobacco dribbling down a wall, the portrait photographer of the 19th century could offer other diversions. An itinerant portraitist in New York trained a monkey to actually make the exposure. The animal "inspects the position of the person about to be photographed, burying his hairy

head under the cloth ... Then he stretches forward his long arm and removes the cap. For, perhaps, two seconds he holds it in his hand, while he frowningly stares at the subject. Then he covers up the lens, and the picture is taken.”²⁵ The New York Sun stated that this is “the first time that an ape has been responsibly engaged in the service of art.”

In England stuffed kittens were more popular than monkey operators. A Mr Spicer, of Birmingham, had a thriving business in constructing photographic stands featuring his art, and the demand was “practically unlimited.” Spicer took his work seriously: “A kitten is one of the most difficult animals to stuff ... It is very difficult to get just the right expression upon the little animals’ faces. To make a thoroughly artistic stuffed representation of a sleeping kitten is no easy matter. Stuffed cat’s eyes are generally staring.”²⁶ Another use for Spicer’s kittens was as decorations on photograph frames: The Photographic News did not approve: “What fun there can be in a couple of kittens popping up their heads from behind a plush frame containing a portrait is difficult to tell, and still more difficult when a stuffed mouse is on the frame at one side of the face, and a kitten pursuing it on the other!”²⁷

Even with the cooperation of the sitter, and these various aids to a pleasant expression, the unexpected could occur and ruin the exposure. A major problem in the portrait studio was flies “for not one sitter in a thousand can sit unmoved when a fly settles on his or her nose and refrain from brushing it off.” Frank Sutcliffe, the photographer of Whitby, was plagued by this problem until he hit upon the ideal, and unusual, solution:

For many years I had a studio where the windows opened over a place where my neighbours throw all their overripe pears, herrings, and the like, and many a time have I seen half a dozen flies crawling over my sitter’s coat, to say nothing of an occasional fly inside my camera, making strange marks as it walked across the plate at the time of exposure. How to get rid of these flies bothered me for years. I made friends with the spiders, as I did with a mouse who used to sit near my sink edge as I developed on a night; but there must be a limit even to the appetite of spiders, for my flies never seemed to decrease though the spiders increased so that I have seen more than one spider’s web inside my camera. Things began to be desperate, when a sitter one day said, “I wonder you don’t get an auralia or two in your studio. You would not have half as many flies if you had.” I asked if auralias were West Indian spiders, but was told that they were plants, with figlike leaves, which by some strange process banished flies from wherever they were. I got a nurseryman to send me two of the healthiest he had got, and in a few days not a fly was to be seen, and, except an odd one which comes in at the window by mistake, I have not seen one since.

Sutcliffe might have taken the advice of his peer, Thomas Gulliver, and used his photographic chemicals as plant food. According to an article by Gulliver entitled “Beautifying the Studio,” the used solution following mercury-ammonia intensification “tends to the superior growth and beauty of floral favourites.”²⁹

Beautifying the sitter was a more difficult, but not insurmountable, problem. The ugly client, the one for whom no amount of photographic skill could compensate, was a standing joke among photographers, and 19th century lay periodicals regularly published sketches and cartoons illustrating the frustrations of the photographer when faced with an unsightly sitter. In 1891 an advertisement appeared in the London newspapers which offered beauty aids to the visually unfortunate. An artificial nose could be supplied for 42 shillings; an instrument for pinning back outstanding ears was 1/2 a guinea; artificial busts were twice as expensive; kneecaps "for increase of height" were 7 shillings and 6 pence. Occasionally, the photographer would supply artificial limbs to replace the sitter's own. This amusing report appeared in *The British Journal of Photography* in 1892:

There is a photographer "out West" (it could not possibly be anywhere else) whose handsome house is said to be a monument to the prevailing vanity of women. The photographer is rich, and this is how he became so. Years ago he is said to have noticed that, when he got a lady sitter with a pair of small feet, she generally liked to place herself so that her fairy-like supports were just visible, while the lady with the large misshapen hoofs kept her feet out of sight. From this he inferred that the latter person would much prefer to have two small feet also, and, if she had them, she would want to display them; and then he conceived the inspiration of keeping feet on hand, and supplying them to customers who needed them. He has a dozen pairs of them - small wooden feet with adorable boots on them - and attached to each of them is about eight inches of leg, clothed in neat stockings, and with a hook about half way up. The lady with the generous extremities is planted in a chair, with her massive limbs and copious boots hidden as far back as they can go without dislocating her knees, and then the artificial legs are carefully hooked on to the inner hem of her dress. Consequently, she looks like a person reclining in an easy attitude, with her beautiful feet exposed by accident, and, if she can stand the strain, the resulting photograph is a beautiful thing to look at. If she can't stand the strain, her real feet come forward just in time to keep the unnatural attitude from wrenching her joints asunder and then she appears in the negative as a quadruped.³⁰

In 19th century portrait studios everyone suffered: the sitter, from strain and humiliation; the photographer, from the inconveniences of the process and the ignorance and anger of his clients. A certain sympathy is deserved by the photographer who was then abused, or even physically attacked, by an irate customer who, on seeing the final portrait, refused to pay for such a stiff, staring-eyed atrocity. In 1839, a French court painter was asked by Queen Victoria if he thought photography would become popular with the public. "Non, madame," he replied, "photographie can't flatter." But it tried...

Footnotes and References

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