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Picturing the family

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Intellectual property

Contents

Introduction

Most of us today take photographs for our family albums. The lucky ones among us have also inherited family photographs from the past. These photographs provide another type of record that can offer insights into our family history. But what can they tell us? How can we elicit the information they hold? And how do we analyse or evaluate that information? The purpose of this course is to suggest how to approach the interpretation of the photographic record.

Please keep referring to your own family photographs as you work through the course. This will help you assimilate the information and assist in the analysis of your own photographs.

Don't assume that once you have studied a photograph, you will have garnered all the information there is to be found. I am constantly surprised at how much I fail to see when I look at photographs. I have given talks using the same images to different audiences. Frequently somebody seeing an image for the first time will point out details I had not previously registered.

In addition, of course, an insight you discover about an image in your collection may have repercussions for others. So the process is one of continuous reading and reappraisal. Bits of the jigsaw gradually fall into place.

This course looks at some of the ways photographs can reveal, and sometimes conceal, important information about the past. It will teach the skills and provides some of the knowledge needed to interpret such pictorial sources.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand that photographs are shaped by a set of conventions based on ideas and practices which are not immediately apparent
- understand that photographs, like other documentary records, are partial and biased
- understand that photographs, like other documentary records, require critical analysis and careful interpretation
- understand the importance of contextualisation in analysing photographs.

1 How to avoid damage when handling photographs

Remember to treat your photographs with the consideration demanded by their age and fragility. Careless handling and storage will cause damage.

- Handle photographs at the edges: the skin carries chemicals which cause deterioration (professional archivists wear cotton gloves).
- Hold a photograph in both hands or support an unmounted print with a piece of cardboard to avoid unnecessary handling.
- Never write on a photograph with anything other than a soft lead pencil (2B or 3B recommended). It is good practice to write a unique identity number on the back of a print and then make notes separately on paper.
- Never do anything to a photograph that cannot be undone without causing damage. Store photographs in a dark, dry, cool place.

The Bibliography section at the end of this free course contains books that provide more detailed information on the handling, storage and conservation of photographs.

2 Background history

2.1 Styles of photograph

Let's briefly examine the various styles of photograph that are commonly found in family albums.

Image 1 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Unknown woman, 1840s.

Image 2 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Unknown woman with opera glasses, 1850s.

Practical photography was invented in 1839. The first photographic portrait studio opened in Britain in 1841. During the first 20 years photographic portraits were bought as one-offs

in the shape of the daguerreotype in the 1840s and the wet collodion positive in the 1850s. Both formats came cased or framed and were designed to be carried on the person or displayed in the home.

2.1.1 Card mounted photographs 1860–c.1914

Image 3 Photographer/Painter: Anon.

Image 4 Photographer/Painter: Anon.

In Britain, standardization and mass production in photography came with the introduction of the carte de visite from c.1860. A larger version known as the cabinet appeared in 1866. Cartes and cabinets were paper prints of a standard size mounted on cardboard mounts of a standard size. They retailed by the score, dozen or half dozen and were housed in purpose-designed albums that appeared on the market at the same time.

2.1.2 Postcards c. 1902–1950s

Image 5 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Unknown male in kilt.

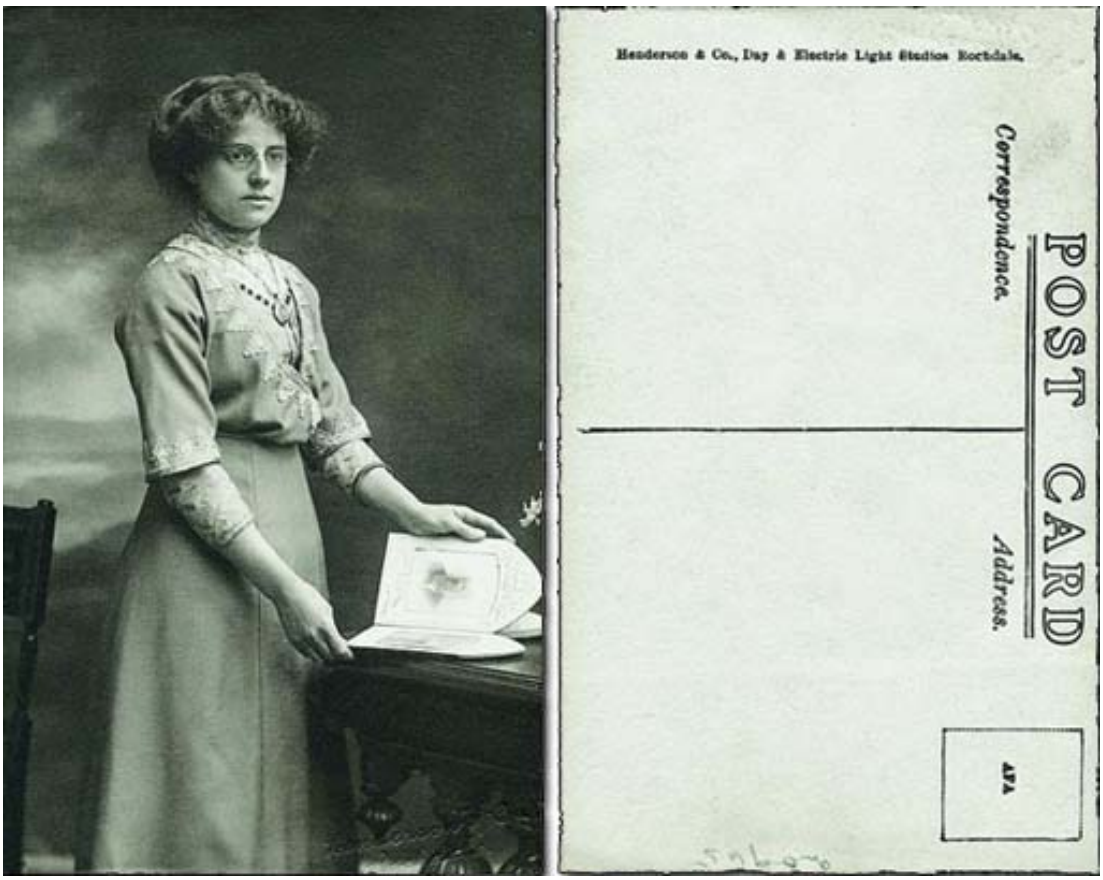

Image 6 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Unknown lady with album.

Although postcards were used for pictorial views in the late 19th century, the postcard format was not used for portraits until c.1902. It remained popular until the 1950s.

2.1.3 Amateur snapshots 1880s–

Image 7 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Audrey in pushchair, 1950s.

Image 8 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Arthur at his garden gate, 1990s.

Before the First World War, most family photographs were taken by professional photographers. In the 1880s, however, amateurs began to buy ready-made negatives over the counter and either undertook their own developing and printing or farmed this work out to commercial concerns. The amateur market expanded steadily, encouraged and sustained by commercial companies such as Kodak. By the second half of the 20th century most family photographs were taken by amateurs.

Photographs in the family album can therefore be divided into 2 distinct categories:

- **portraits** commissioned by the family and taken by commercial photographers for a fee
- **snapshots** taken by amateurs, usually family members or friends.

This course concentrates on the period when the professional was dominant, for the following reasons:

- Studio portraits are too readily dismissed as uninformative simply because people lack the necessary visual analysis skills.
- Studio portraits were produced to a formula which offers a congenial paradigm for developing skills of visual analysis and interpretation.
- These skills can readily be transferred to the later tradition of snapshot photography.
- Equipped with a knowledge of the practices of early professionals, we can make comparisons between then and now. This enables us to identify areas of continuity and change. We can then assess how far the 19th-century studio tradition continues to influence the snapshots we take today. We shall return to this question throughout the course.

But before we start to analyse the studio tradition in detail, let's consider the nature of the photograph as a source of evidence in historical research.

2.2 Photographs as primary sources

As a primary source of historical evidence the still photograph remains largely unexamined and unexplored. Many academic historians remain wedded to the written word and are often mistrustful or dismissive of the still image. Photographs continue to be used merely to prettify or to provide necessary breathing space in dense texts. In fact, the task of finding 'illustrations' is often only considered *after a* book is written. What could indicate more clearly that the photograph has never gained legitimacy as a historical record that can inform and mould authorial thinking and argument?

Photographs require as much scrutiny and critical analysis as written records. It is easy to think of them as 'truthful' and 'objective' because they are produced by a machine that reacts to light falling on the actual scene or subject. However, all photographs are created by human agency and photographers legitimately seek to influence viewers' perceptions. A photograph does not present the subject 'as it was', but as the photographer wanted the viewer to see it.

Since 1839 various distinctive applications have evolved – portraiture, art photography, reportage, fashion, documentary and so on. Photographers working within these disciplines shared a common set of ideas about the nature and purpose of their work. They adopted practical procedures that enabled them to express these ideas in their photographs. Ideology and methodology worked together to shape the typical, generic image. We can learn about these ideas and practices from contemporary publications that offered advice to photographers.

Of course, there was cross-fertilization between the various applications and of course ideas and practices developed over time. But to explore the meaning conveyed by an image to its contemporary audience, we must try to understand the ideas and practices that shaped it. Our subject is domestic photography and the family album and these obviously belong to the portrait tradition. So in this course we shall identify the ideas underpinning the portrait tradition and investigate how these ideas translated into working practice.

2.3 Photographs as artefacts

Bear in mind that photographs are artefacts. This means that they are more than just images. The photographer, the process and the packaging all add something to our understanding of the role of the photograph. So, for example, the mount can indicate its purpose (exhibition wall, domestic display, album and so on) and the significance attached to the article in its time. The physical properties of a mount, such as the quality of the card or style of printing, can distinguish top-of-the-range products from the functional. These and other qualities such as thickness, texture, colour, style of decoration and any written information, printed or manuscript (i.e. hand-written), can assist in dating. I shall refer to the artefactual nature of the photographic record at various points in the course.

2.4 National variation

Relatively little research has been undertaken by photohistorians in the field of domestic photography. However, we should be aware that photography developed in different ways in different countries. So, for example, in Britain the daguerreotype remained a luxury

article, as high prices restricted sales to the comfortable classes, whereas in America, because of early mass production techniques, studios could offer 4 daguerreotypes for 1 dollar.

Photography was, however, a European invention. Western practitioners exported not only the technology but also European traditions of portraiture.

3 The portrait tradition: ideology

3.1 Introducing ideology in portraiture

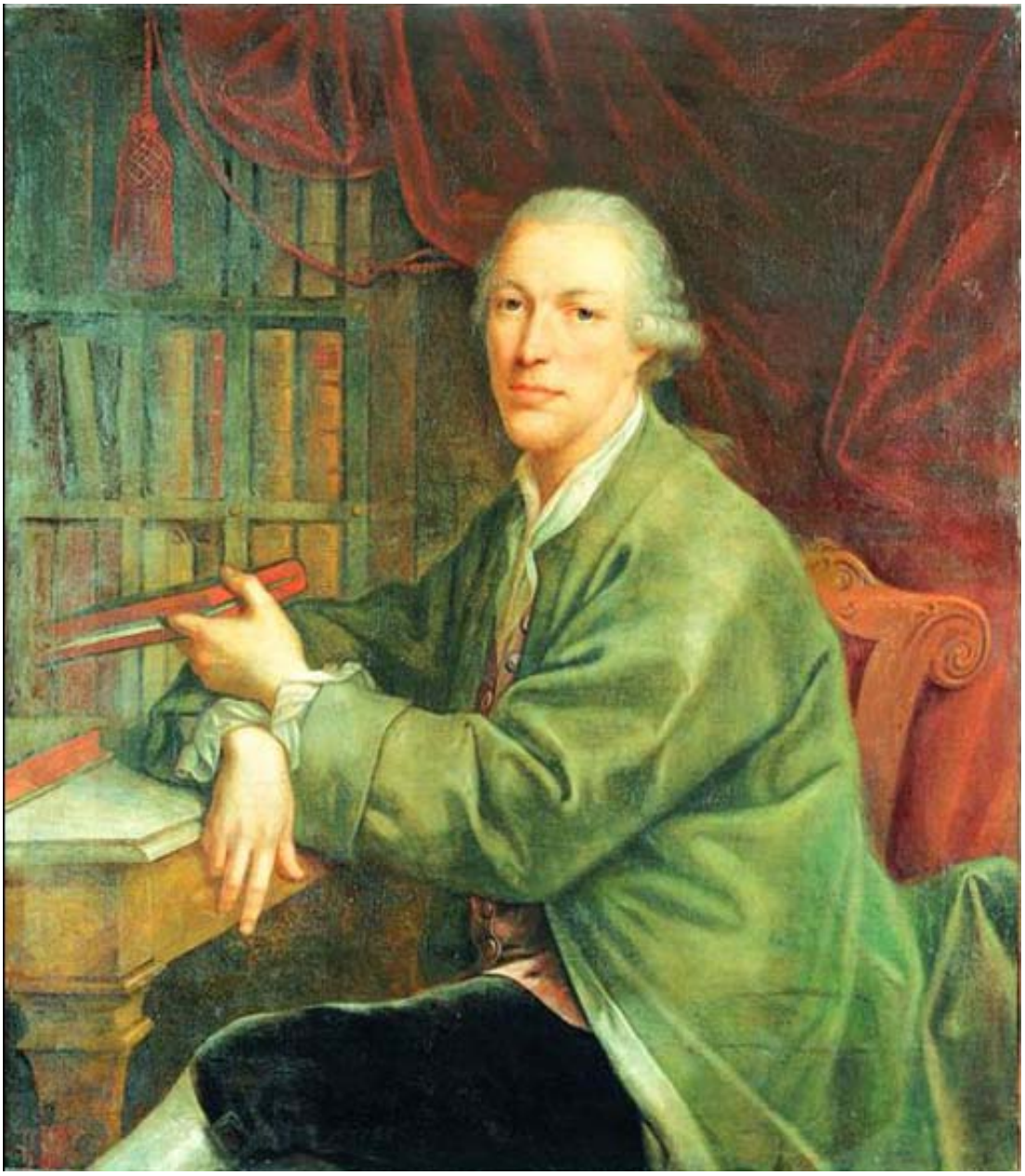

Image 9 Photographer/Painter: French School. Subject: Portrait of a nobleman seated at a desk, c.1750.

Portraiture emerged as the first major commercial application of photography because the camera could mechanize an established and profitable market in hand-crafted likenesses. By the early 19th century, most sectors of society had acquired the habit of buying portraits. Working people purchased penny profiles or silhouettes cut from black paper, the comfortable classes acquired miniatures of watercolours on ivory, and the rich

commissioned their portraits in oils. Portrait photography retained this leading position until the end of the century.

The tradition of hand-painted portraiture in Europe dates back at least as far as the Renaissance. By 1839 painters had evolved a sophisticated professional rhetoric about the role of the portrait and the nature of the artist's interaction with the sitter. Clients, too, had expectations and attitudes based on existing practice. In mechanizing the likeness trade, early photographers were confronted with a ready-made set of ideas about the portrait and its purpose. Let's explore how photography responded to these ideas.

3.2 Idealisation

There were fundamental principles of painted portraiture that affected every element of the portrait, from expression and pose to background and lighting. The first imperative was the need to idealize the sitter.

Activity 1

Click on 'View document' below to open and read part of Audrey Linkman's article on 'Photography and art theory', then answer the questions.

View document

Activity 1a

How did portrait painters acquire an appreciation of ideal beauty?

Answer

Painters studied nature but also placed considerable emphasis on making drawings of Greek and Roman statues. This discipline was known as ‘drawing from the Antique’. It gave painters a familiarity with the shapes and proportions used in classical sculpture that were greatly admired and respected by later artists.

Activity 1b

How did they resolve the dilemma between representing ideal beauty and accuratelikeness?

Answer

Equipped with this knowledge of approved proportion and form, painters were expected to subtly modify those features of the real-life sitter that were considered inferior to the classical model. Such modifications were of course easier to make for the painter than the photographer.

Activity 1c

How did photographers respond to this notion of ideal beauty?

Answer

The new technology had the ability to reproduce appearance in accurate detail. In spite of that, photographers felt obliged to create a portrait which shadowed, concealed or excluded those physical attributes in the sitter which were regarded as defects, and to highlight features perceived as attractive according to the tastes of the time.

3.3 Limited positive characterization

The painted portrait was, however, perceived to be more than a mere ‘map of the face’. It was also meant to reveal aspects of the inner as well as the outer being.

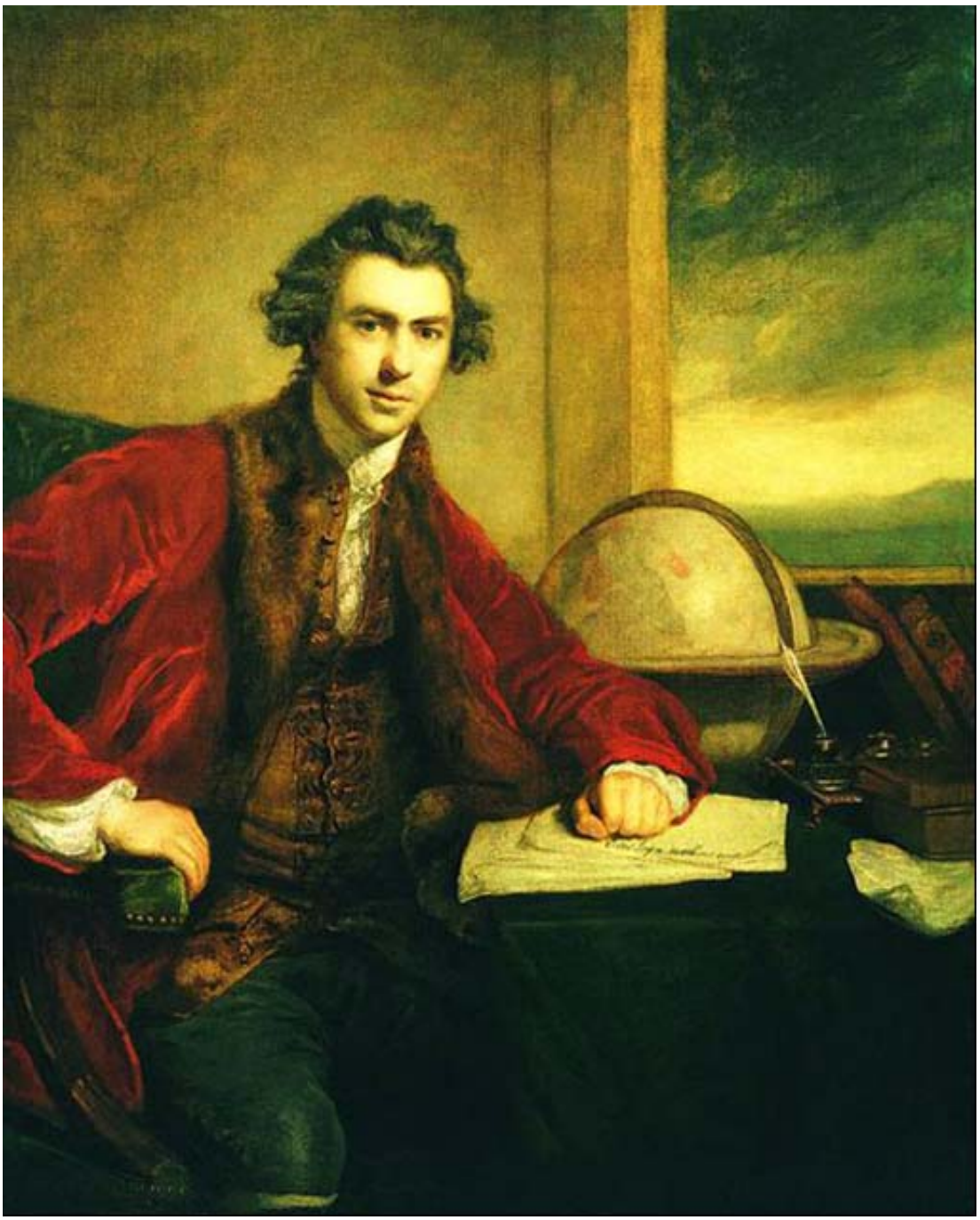

Image 10 Photographer/Painter: Sir Joshua Reynolds. Subject: Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), 1771–3.

Activity 2

Click on 'View document' below to open and read the remainder of Audrey Linkman's article on 'Photography and art theory', then answer the questions.

View document

Activity 2a

What was regarded as the most important element of the portrait?

Answer

The portrait was perceived as more than a mere map of physical features. Its purpose was to reveal the inner soul and true character of the sitter. This added a moral and spiritual dimension to the portrait. It also conferred prestige and status on a profession that could claim the ability to fathom the inner recesses of the mind and reproduce character on canvas.

Activity 2b

How did the theory of idealization affect this important element?

Answer

Only positive qualities that reflected credit upon the sitter could be portrayed in the painting. The depiction of base qualities would conflict with the need to idealize the sitter. Consequently any attempt to portray character would be limited to the depiction of virtuous qualities. (I shall subsequently refer to this practice as 'limited positive characterization'.)

In addition, it was thought that the viewer would be corrupted by the depiction of faults and vices in a painting. By looking at virtue in others the viewer might be inspired to moral improvement. In the early 19th century few people questioned the belief that the purpose of art was to inspire and ennoble.

3.4 Characterisation and sexual stereotyping

In attempting to characterise their sitters, 19th-century commercial photographers did not intend or attempt any serious psychoanalytical exploration of individual character such as we perceive it today in our post-Freudian world. They sought instead to stereotype by age and sex within a narrow range of positive virtues, which had previously been approved, within the conventions of painting: modesty, simplicity and chastity for women; dignity, strength and nobility for men.

3.4.1 Control of the sitter

Image 11 Photographer/Painter: Studio of Richard Beard. Subject: Jabez Hogg photographing W.S. Johnston, early 1840s.

Photographers proved eager to model themselves on previous practice in another aspect of their approach to portraiture. The painter potentially enjoyed total control over the portrait: pose, background and expression were all determined by each application of the artist's brush. The painter, in effect, controlled the sitter. It therefore became important in terms of their own professional rhetoric that photographers, too, should be seen to exercise similar control over their subjects.

Virtually every 19th-century manual on photographic portraiture had a chapter on managing the sitter. The photographer's role was to direct; the sitter's only response was to acquiesce. Sitters who expressed ideas of their own became, by definition, ‘difficult’.

Image 12 Photographer/Painter: Anon. Subject: Photographing the first born.

Photographers were warned against allowing their own superior judgement to be influenced by the sitter.

> In the studio all men are not equal; all men are inferior, for the time, to the artist: but unless he would awe, he must conceal this power by tact and affability.
>
> (Anon, 1884, p.388)

Activity 3

Various stock types of difficult sitter recur in the literature. Painters, of course, posed the biggest threat. Other difficult customers included those accompanying sitters: the gentleman with the lady, the mother with the child, the owner with the pet.

Activity 3a

Why did painters pose the biggest threat?

Answer

Painters could challenge a photographer's authority because photography had usurped the rhetoric of painting. Painters could therefore challenge a photographer's artistic judgement because they were familiar with the arguments and the attendant practical difficulties. Painting was also perceived as a superior art form because painters worked from the imagination.

Activity 3b

What's the significance of the gentleman, the mother and the pet owner in this context?

Answer

These people were, in contexts outside the studio, normally seen to be in control of the sitter. They were, potentially, more likely to challenge the photographer's decisions in order to maintain their position of control within the studio.

Early photographers were concerned with achieving recognition for their ‘mechanically produced portraits’ and social status for their ‘profession’ by conforming as closely as possible to the existing rhetoric of painted portraiture. Photographers incorporated existing ideas about idealization, characterization and sexual stereotyping into their own professional rhetoric. They also attempted to represent themselves as able to exercise total control over the sitter in order to establish authorship of the photograph.

Let's now turn from the ideology of portrait photography to examine the practices employed by photographers to carry these ideas into effect. You'll look at the specific elements that constitute the portrait – facial expression, pose, background and lighting – and explore how notions of idealization and characterization influenced their treatment.

4 The portrait tradition: methodology

4.1 Facial expression

Facial expression was considered the most crucial element to success in painted portraiture. It was the vehicle through which intangible qualities of mind and soul were conveyed. In painting the idea was to achieve the ideal expression, a synthesis of character and the spiritual essence of being. Although cameras could portray any number of expressions with relative ease – an advantage of the machine over manual practice – early portrait photographers continued to believe in the ideal expression which could epitomize an individual's character and experience.

Dedicated photographers attempted some originality of expression in portraiture and art work intended for exhibition. Commercial photographers, however, adopted the convention of a formal, unsmiling expression. You may be familiar with the standard explanations for the absence of smiles and laughter in Victorian portraiture, namely long exposure times, which meant that sitters could not hold a smile, or the theory about concealing bad teeth. Let's see if these explanations hold water.

Activity 4

Look carefully at Image 13, a portrait of the artist, writer and critic John Ruskin. What qualities do you read into his facial expression? It may be helpful here to compare Ruskin with the smiling expressions (‘Say cheese!’) we adopt in front of the camera today. Note down your ideas; we shall return to them later.

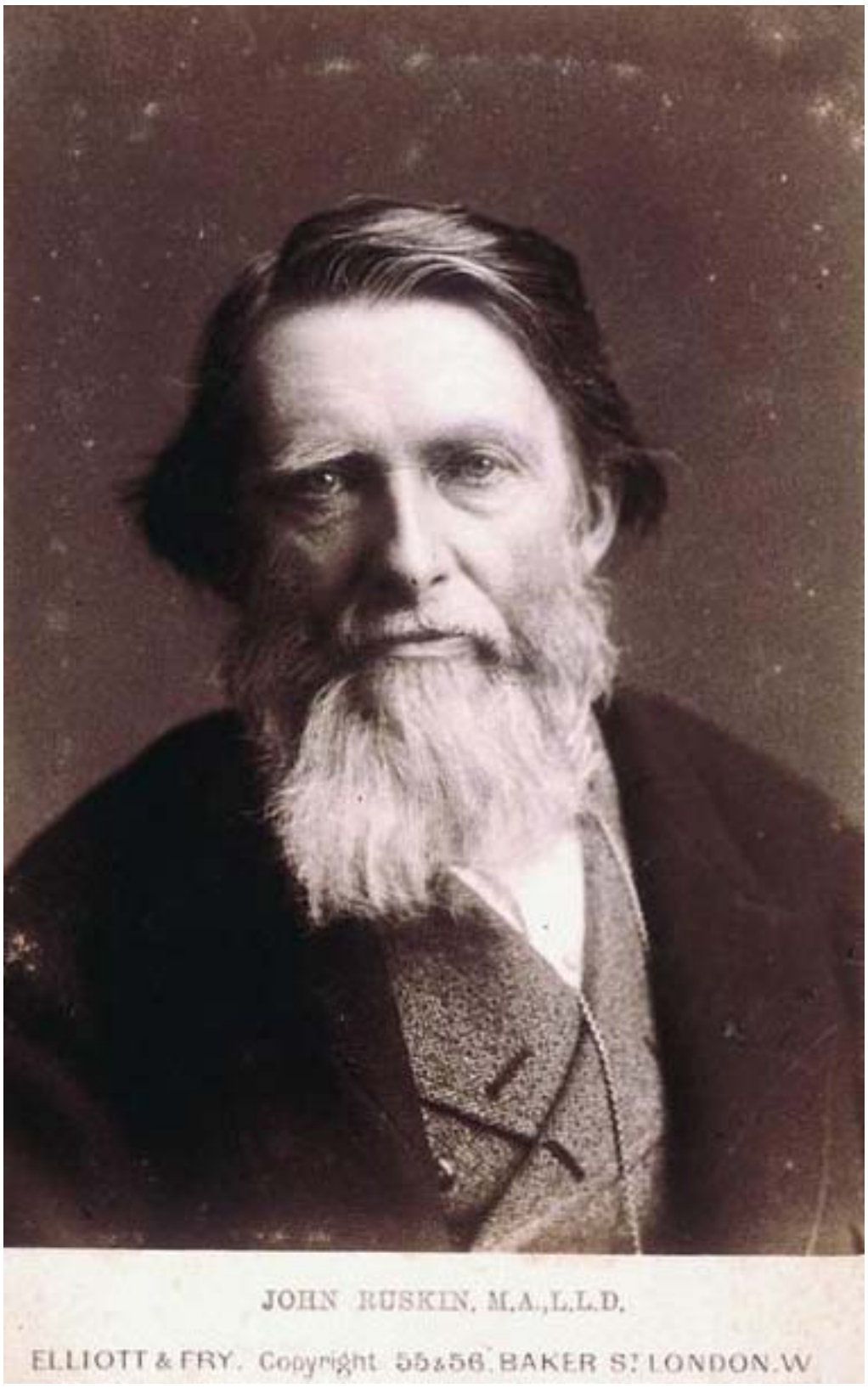

Image 13 Photographer/Painter: Elliott & Fry, London. Subject: John Ruskin. M.A. L. L.D.

Cartes de visite and cabinet portraits of celebrities – royalty, politicians, church ministers, actors and writers, for example – retailed in print shops, fancy goods outlets, stationers'

and photographers' studios in the 19th century. They were placed in family albums alongside the portraits of relatives. Many of these celebrity portraits carried no identification of the sitter. From 1862, manufacturers could attempt to protect their rights in the work by registering the image at Stationers' Hall. The word 'Copyright' on the mount can indicate that the image was so registered though this is not always the case. Photographers paid a fee and filled in a form which usually (though not always) carried a copy of the image. These copyright records are held today in the Public Record Office at Kew. This splendid resource is unfortunately difficult to access as it is organized only by date of registration.

Activity 5

Click on 'View document' below to open and read 'The anatomy of expression in painting' by Charles Bell, 'The photograph and artistic colouring' by Alfred H. Wall and 'The studio and what to do in it' by H. P. Robinson. These are extracts from 19th-century manuals and articles giving artists and photographers advice on expression in portraiture. Answer the question below.

View document

What qualities did laughter and smiling convey to artists and photographers in the 19th century?

Answer

Bell (Item 31) is very clear about the expression he regards as unacceptable. Broad laughter was vulgar and ludicrous. Smiles could convey various meanings. But the preferred expression, variously described as 'a certain mobility of the features' and 'an evanescent illumination of the countenance' was 'more enchanting than the dimpled cheek'.

For Wall (Item 32), a smile, once fixed and permanent in a photograph, appeared as a 'piece of affectation' or 'mere grin'. And grinning was objectionable.

Robinson, too (Item 33), regards broad laughter as intolerable when fixed in a photograph, though beautiful in life because of its transience. He quotes at some length the attitudes of the sculptor John Gibson. This is a way of giving his own preferences added authority. Gibson regards smiles as frivolous and favours a serious and calm expression as it represents 'men thinking, and women tranquil'. Gibson's distinction between the sexes reveals evidence of sexual stereotyping. This is extended in Robinson's approval of a 'cheerful' expression for ladies and a happy expression for children. The notable absence of any reference to men in this context suggests that the Victorians regarded smiles as frivolous and lightweight.

Activity 6

Now return to your notes from Activity 4 and compare your ideas of the qualities you read into Ruskin's expression with the qualities that Victorians might have read into it.