CLOSE UP & PERSONAL: VICTORIANS & THEIR PHOTOGRAPHS

Introduction

The advent of photography in 1839 catapulted Victorian society into a new age of science, art and leisure. Previously only the wealthy could possess a painted portrait. Photography introduced a cheaper way to own a likeness, democratising this privilege.

Close Up & Personal explores some of the ways in which early photography was consumed by a society that became obsessed. A variety of forms emerged including the daguerreotype, the carte-de-visite, family photograph albums and stereoscopes. The industry boomed, the celebrity was born and leisure in the drawing room was never the same again.

The Rise of the Celebrity

As photography developed it became possible to create multiple prints from one negative image. The most popular example was the carte-de-visite. Designed to be the same size as a traditional calling card, it allowed people to exchange and possess an image of anyone they desired.

Copyright law stated that if the sitter did not pay for their portrait, the photographer owned the image. As a result, studios were able to print large volumes of photographs of famous figures and distribute them easily. In 1861 when Prince Albert died, 70,000 photographs of him were sold in one week.

The obsession for collecting became known as cartomania. The carte-de-visite allowed famous figures to be displayed in homes alongside relatives. Through photography, scientists, artists and actresses became as recognisable as the royal family. Photography introduced the celebrity into our homes.
Victorian celebrities

Photography created celebrity culture as we know it today. The new technology allowed far more people to become recognisable faces. Celebrities became a kind of currency, as their carte-de-visite images were collected and exchanged.

New portraits of the leading celebrities were constantly being made, feeding the huge demand. The actress Ellen Terry (the first wife of George Frederic Watts), for example, was one of the most photographed women of the nineteenth century. Each of Terry’s roles required a new portrait for promotion in Britain and abroad. In 1894 it was reported that ‘Miss Ellen Terry’s photographs are in almost every window’.

Wilkie Collins, author of *The Woman in White*, wrote of the ‘various states of photographic suffering’. Although the process of being photographed might be agonising, he found the results compelling. In reaction to the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1857 he declared: ‘If this be portrait painting, how much preferable are the daguerreotypes in the shop windows’.

*Wilkie Collins*  
1874  
Napoleon Sarony  
Carte-de-visite

*Ellen Terry as ‘Juliet’*  
c.1879  
Window & Grove  
Cabinet Card

*William Morris*  
1877  
London Stereoscopic Company  
Cabinet Card
The Royal Family

Photography was at first treated with caution by the upper classes, as there was uncertainty over whether it was a science or an art, socially acceptable or uncouth. Any fears over the respectability of photography were ended by the Royal family’s embrace of the medium. In 1860 the photographer John Jabez Edwin Mayall was given permission to photograph Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their children. The result was the Royal Album, a set of fourteen cartes-de-visite which became a great best-seller. The Royal family had joined the new culture of celebrity.

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‘Four Generations’ (Queen Victoria with the future kings Edward VII, George V and Edward VIII)
1894
W. & D. Downey
Carbon Print

Alexandra, Princess of Wales
1866
W. & D. Downey
Carte-de-visite

Grand Duchess Marie of Edinburgh
1876
Sergey Lvovich Levitsky
Carte-de-visite
Photocollage

In the 1860s and 1870s it became a popular pastime to create ‘scrapbook’ albums using images of family members and celebrities. People could use photographs as raw material from which to create their own worlds, enhancing them with colourful watercolour motifs and borders.

Comparing and admiring these collages in the drawing room created a new form of leisure and entertainment. The theatricality of the photocollage made it a social performance, creating fictional relationships and situations.

Some people frowned upon the manipulation of photographs, which were prized for their factual accuracy. The photography critic A H Wall praised the creation of scenes in front of the camera using models and different lenses, ‘but not scissors and the paste pot!’

Photograph album, decorated by Mary Fraser Tytler c.1865-67
Mary Fraser Tytler (later Mary Watts) (1849-1938)
Digitised album of photographs with additions in watercolour with pen and ink

This album is the earliest surviving work attributed to Mary Watts. She created these witty and imaginative watercolour settings between the ages of 15 and 18. Mary used a combination of family photographs and collected cartes-de-visite of notable figures, including Tennyson and Queen Victoria. Her early artistic skill can clearly be seen in the ways in which she uses architectural features and perspective to change the appearance of the original photographs.
The Photography Studio

In 1851 there were a dozen photography studios in London. By 1861 there were over 200.

When you visited a studio you would wear your best clothes; the portrait would most likely be given to loved ones or taken as a celebration. The studio would often resemble a greenhouse, with skylights to allow in as much natural light as possible. Artificial lights were not generally used until the twentieth century.

The studio would be furnished as a respectable middle-class drawing room, with drapery, paintings and plaster busts. You would be seated in front of a backdrop, often of a landscape. You might be presented with props that reflect your occupation. The photographer would settle you in a chair with a headrest. This was to ensure that your head did not move, as the exposure time would last several minutes in the early years of photography. In the next room, studio staff would be hunched over desks retouching the prints to ensure that you are satisfied with your purchase.

This Victorian engraving shows a portrait session from the point of view of the photographer. The scene is lit only by natural light, admitted in large quantities through windows and skylights, and controlled by blinds and reflectors. To ensure she remains still, the sitter’s head is braced by a neck-clamp attached to her chair. A backdrop with landscape imagery forms the portrait’s background, while other furniture and props suggest the atmosphere of a middle-class drawing room.

Unknown female of the Dalziel family
c.1880s
Lock & Whitefield
Cabinet card

The Misses Dene – Dorothy, Elizabeth Ellen, Kathleen Blanche and Isabelle Helene
1893
W & D Downey
Carbon print
Traditional portrait painting placed great emphasis upon the sitter’s social standing. This was achieved through architectural settings, elaborate props and formal costumes. Photographic portraiture dispensed with most of these elements, although simple objects, such as books, might be used to suggest a professional status.

The photographic portrait emphasised the sitter’s human uniqueness, opening up endless possibilities for the expression of a more individualised society.

‘Things one would rather have left unsaid’
George du Maurier
Punch cartoon, 5 May 1888

Carte-de-visite portrait photographs became so popular that it could seem difficult to avoid them. A writer in All the Year Round, a weekly magazine edited by Charles Dickens, complained in 1862: “If we are public characters (and it is astonishing how many of us now find that we are so), we are actually obliged at last to get accustomed to the sight of ourselves in the shop-windows of this great metropolis.” The feeling that photography had become impossible to control is turned to humour in this Punch cartoon of the 1880s in which an older lady is still finding the new technology rather vulgar.

As well as advertising in their windows, photographic studios also promoted themselves using decorative motifs on the front and reverse of cartes-de-visite. This meant that as the cards were exchanged the studio’s name was spread further.
Keepsakes and Albums

Early photographs were often placed in small cases, especially daguerreotypes which would tarnish if exposed to air for too long. These cases were small, intimate and portable and came in many designs, initially in wood or leather and often lined with velvet. From the 1850s an early form of plastic was used to mould different shapes.

Photographs became part of people’s personal costumes. Queen Victoria led the fashion for wearing jewellery with photographs inset, and even included locks of hair in memory of the sitter.

Collecting and exchanging images implied an intimacy with the sitter. It became fashionable to create albums combining images of family members and celebrities, particularly the Royal Family. A family photograph album became a feature of a respectable home, forming part of drawing-room entertainment. Albums came in all shapes and sizes and would reflect a family’s social status. These became as elaborate and as treasured as the traditional family Bible.

Albert Durer Lucas
1845
Photographer unknown

In a note to accompany this photograph, Lucas explains ‘My shirt collar is dirty and the reason is that I had that morning been removing from the screen from the models of the Parthenon during the closed week of the [British] Museum in Dec 1845. A D Lucas.’ Lucas’s father was reconstructing his theory of the original arrangements of the Parthenon.

Two seated children
1875
From the family collection of art critic F G Stephens
Stereoscopes

The Victorians were not only experimenting with how to capture photographic images, but also how to see them in three dimensions. In the 1830s it was realised that two drawings of the same subject, taken from slightly different angles, could create a single 3D image when viewed together. Charles Wheatstone invented a simple viewing device called the stereoscope which was soon adapted for use with photographs.

Stereoscopes became important features of home entertainment. People were able to laugh at amusing comedy scenes, understand the latest news, or travel to foreign lands, even the moon.

The 1850s was the golden age of stereocards, the first mass-produced photographs, which were so popular that the London Stereoscopic Company coined the slogan ‘No home without a stereoscope’.

All objects on loan from The Brian May Collection

Travel photography

Photography in its early years presented multiple challenges, the biggest being portability. Numerous chemicals and plates and a cumbersome camera meant that taking photographs ‘on the go’ was not an easy option. Photographs of distant places were therefore all the more valued and resembled an early form of postcard.

Once the photograph was taken, the image could be transported anywhere. Louis Daguerre’s invention of the daguerreotype was praised for making the world mobile:

‘... he took the entire towers [of Notre Dame] with him, from the tremendous stone foundation they rest upon, to the thin and light spire they carry up to the sky.’

Lunar Photograph
Warren de la Rue, enlarged and published by Smith, Beck & Beck, London
Photographed in 1858 and 1859. Printed in 1862

Italy, 143. The Leaning Tower, Pisa
Gaudin brothers
Tableaux vivants

Tableaux vivants are a form of entertainment in which costumed actors arrange themselves into living pictures. They typically depicted notable historical or literary scenes, sometimes works of art. The entertainment was popular from theatres to drawing rooms. As photographs could take several minutes to expose, tableaux vivants were an ideal subject as the actors were practised at holding still.

*Broken Vows, after the painting by Philip Calderon*
1858
James Elliott

*Mary, Queen of Scots, compelled to sign her abdication*
1857
James Elliott

*Stereoscope with stand*
Date unknown
French

*Stereoscopic Camera*
1860s
London Stereoscopic Company

*Stereoscope with decorations*
Creator and date unknown

*Stereoscope with brass oculars*
Date unknown
Antoine Claudet, 107 Regent Street, London
Assisting Art
William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) first associated photography with art when he dreamed of a tool to capture images on paper. His experiments succeeded and he called it ‘photogenic drawing’.

Talbot suggested that photography could be used for cataloguing – creating an historical record of vulnerable objects and buildings. Artists also used photography in many other ways, such as collecting images of models, places or objects to later form compositions.

Because photography was not yet generally accepted as an art form in its own right, artists were often wary of openly discussing their use of it. As a result, it took over a century for individuals who experimented with photography, such as Julia Margaret Cameron, to be appreciated as artists.

Photography enabled artists to instantly capture their compositions. These photographs show the artist Henry Holiday with models mimicking his earlier painting *Dante and Beatrice*. Holiday used the model of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence to help construct the composition. *Dante and Beatrice* was recreated in Liverpool in 1896 as a *tableau vivant* (living picture) for the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union to demonstrate the more beautiful and healthier costumes of earlier centuries.
Frederick Hollyer took photographs of many of the paintings of G F Watts, forming a visual catalogue of them. The prints allowed the global distribution of Watts’s most famous compositions. Watts was, however, concerned that his subtle colour schemes did not translate well into black and white. As he wrote to his friend Jeanie Senior: ‘pictures do not photograph well unless painted in a colourless manner... My pictures as a rule come out badly, as I always aim at internal colour’.

These two photographs of pictures by Watts have been retouched with paint, presumably by Watts himself. They seem to show the artist exploring the boundaries between painted and photographic images.
A New Art Form

In comparison to photographers who earned an income from studio portraiture, those who experimented with techniques and equipment were often considered amateurs. It took over a century for photography to be accepted as an art form equal to painting or sculpture.

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) only took to photography in 1863 when her daughter gave her a camera as a gift. Cameron developed a very distinctive style of costumed portraiture, pressing friends and neighbours into service as models playing historical and literary roles. Although passionately committed to having her work taken seriously, Cameron’s style was well outside the Victorian mainstream. Her compositions, focus and printing were vastly different from the products of the studios.

G F Watts encouraged Cameron throughout her career. In 1864 she compiled an album for him which she inscribed: ‘To the Signor, to whose generosity I owe the choicest fruits of his Immortal genius, I offer these my first successes in my mortal but yet divine art of photography.’ For years afterwards, Cameron regularly sent Watts her latest productions for his opinion, and on occasion used him as one of her celebrity models. Underneath a print of *The Dream*, Watts wrote: ‘Quite Divine’.

*The Angel at the Sepulchre*

1869-70
Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879)
Sepia silver-nitrate print

Photography has become a household word and a household want; is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice; is found in the most sumptuous saloon ... and in the glare of the London gin-palace – in the pocket of the detective, in the cell of the convict, in the folio of the painter and architect ... and on the cold brave breast on the battle-field.


Anyone who has ever seen you, or has seen anybody that has seen you ... considers himself entitled to ask you for your photograph ... The claimant does not care about you or your likeness in the least. But he or she has got a photograph book, and, as it must be filled, you are invited to act as a padding to that volume.

‘Fashions’, *Saturday Review*, May 10, 1862