

The Carte de Visite and Domestic Digital Photography

Stephen Burstow

Introduction

Entombed in the forbidding leather covers of forgotten family albums, the carte de visite was largely ignored or derided for much of the twentieth century. As the most popular form of photograph from the 1860s to the 1880s, art historians portrayed it as the ubiquitous product of shallow commercialism. Carte de visite portraits, in particular, with their stock studio settings and stereotyped poses, were seen as devoid of individual expression, while for others their social function was confined to the rising middle class's visual display of status.¹

From the beginning of this century, however, the carte de visite, along with other forms of nineteenth-century photography, has received sustained reappraisal by historians and cultural theorists who have conducted fine-grained explorations of the social practices around the production, exchange, and collection of cartes. The porosity of the public and private has been a particular focus of this research. Markers of status became disconcertingly democratised with portrait cartes of royalty, statesmen, and clergy jostling for space in the print seller's window with those of actresses and sportsmen.² These mass-produced celebrity cartes were then placed in carte de visite albums alongside portraits of friends and relatives, together with cartes of sentimental scenes and exotic landscapes and peoples. This visual curation of a world extending from the domestic parlour to the

¹ John Tagg, "A Democracy of the Image: Photographic Portraiture and Commodity Production," in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

² John Plunkett, "Celebrity and Community: The Poetics of the Carte-De-Visite," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 8, no. 1 (2003).

Egyptian pyramids has prompted several authors to make comparisons between cartes de visite and domestic digital photographs: in both carte albums and on social media platforms, images of family and friends are arranged contiguously with images gleaned from the wider world.³

These nascent comparisons have prompted the approach for this study of the carte de visite, one with an awareness of the qualities associated with domestic digital photography: ephemerality, proliferation, and the affordance of self-performance and social communication over and above memory. The affordance of memory is a particular focus as it is routinely claimed that while domestic digital photography and related online image sharing platforms serve the needs of immediate social communication, the domestic photographs of the pre-digital era were made and collected primarily for posterity.⁴ This article questions this portrayal by investigating countervailing practices: while twenty-first-century subjects are availing themselves of the expanding mnemonic functionality of social media platforms such as Facebook, nineteenth-century portrait sitters and album compilers are shown to have given great importance to the immediate social utility of the carte de visite.

This article examines cartes de visite through their full temporal life: from production to dissemination and collection in albums and then finally to their fate beyond the first generation of their origin. Before proceeding, two orientations are required. Firstly, the relationship of memory to the carte de visite and domestic digital photography is placed in the context of a wider discourse on memory and photography. Secondly, as this article relies on carte de visite albums as primary sources, a brief summary of the related scholarship is useful to contextualise the focus of this survey of carte de visite albums in Australian collections.

³ Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 156–160; Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography* (New York: Springer, 2011), 37–42.

⁴ *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*, 133.

Photography and Memory

On 4 February 2016, Facebook celebrated its twelfth birthday by placing short “Friends Day” videos on users’ Timelines. Accompanied by music and text (“Here are your friends/You’ve done a lot together/Your friends are pretty awesome”), the videos presented a sequence of photographs of users with their Facebook friends. Paula Young Lee, a columnist with the online magazine *Salon.com* commented: “As we sift through images of our curated experiences on Facebook, we do not relive our past so much as we recreate ourselves out of selected memories. Thanks to our willing collaboration, Facebook is creating an alternate reality we like better than the kind that wrinkles and ages.”⁵ Lee’s experience of having her authentic memory obstructed, even supplanted, by photographic images, echoes a critical tradition that can be traced from Charles Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century polemics against photography to texts by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin written in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶ This understanding of memory and photography contrasts the memory images that attain their strength through subjective affections and repressions, with photographic images that are merely objective collections of externalities. When Benjamin surveys the portraits in a nineteenth-century family album, the faithful recording of appearances reveals nothing but a series of “foolishly draped” figures posed in ridiculous studio sets.⁷ Kracauer, looking at a family portrait of his grandmother taken when she was a young woman, also finds the indexicality of photography of little assistance in establishing a mnemonic connection: “All right, so it’s grandmother; but in reality it’s any young girl in 1864.... Likeness has ceased to be of any help.”⁸

⁵ Paula Young Lee, “Thanks for Nothing, Facebook: #Friendsday Is Our Latest Reminder That Curated Selves Are Becoming ‘More Real Than Real,’” *Salon.com*, http://www.salon.com/2016/02/04/thanks_for_nothing_facebook_friendsday_is_our_latest_reminder_that_curated_selves_are_becoming_more_real_than_real/.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, “Salon of 1859,” in *Art in Theory, 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: NLB, 1979).

⁷ “A Small History of Photography,” 246.

⁸ Kracauer, “Photography,” 48.

Benjamin's and Kracauer's sense of alienation from these family portraits contrasts with the experience of the subjects and the immediate collectors of nineteenth-century studio portraits for whom the direct trace of a loved one's presence held fetishistic power. As art historian and journalist Lady Elizabeth Eastlake commented in 1857:

What indeed are nine-tenths of those facial maps called photographic portraits, but accurate landmarks and measurements for loving eyes and memories to deck with beauty and animate with expression, in perfect certainty, that the ground-plan is founded upon fact?... Though the faces of our children may not be modelled and rounded with that truth and beauty which art attains, yet *minor* things—the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other—are given with a strength of identity which art does not even seek [emphasis in original].⁹

What is particularly significant about Eastlake's text is that establishing the veracity of representation is only the first step in bringing the depicted loved one fully to mind: the viewer's "loving eyes and memories" are required to transform the photographic portrait into a memory image. For all its indexicality, the portrait is only a map, an outline that must yet be adorned with beauty and expression. For the personal portrait to retain some of this mnemonic potency beyond the first generation of its production requires its continued integration into the rituals of family oral history. And as Martha Langford has shown through her study of Canadian family photograph albums, these once-treasured artefacts easily vanished from ongoing family narration.¹⁰ For Benjamin and Kracauer this was clearly the case: in two generations the family carte album had become a dusty relic filled with empty curiosities. This anti-mnemonic perspective has been challenged by recent scholarship that has investigated the social practices surrounding the emergence of the carte de visite in the 1860s. As Elizabeth Siegel observes, at this time "family

⁹ Elizabeth Eastlake, "'Photography,' Reprinted from *Quarterly Review* (London) 101 (April 1857)," in *Photography: Essays & Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 94.

¹⁰ Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 199.

photograph albums were the height of novelty; their contents were emphatically of the present and acted as daily reminders for the living.”¹¹

This attention to nineteenth-century social practices surrounding the production, exchange and collecting of cartes shifts the focus from the memory that sustains family narratives across centuries and generations to the recent memory required for everyday life—a zone of memory that is also pertinent to domestic digital photography. For most Facebook users, the “Friends Day” videos posted to their Timelines would have reached back no further than ten years, reflecting the much-observed temporal shallowness of online social media. Yet as Paula Young Lee’s commentary indicates, the curating of this memory is vigorously disputed. The intention of this article is to bring this twenty-first-century experience of memory as an unfolding, contested affordance of photography, to the consideration of the carte de visite.

Carte de Visite Albums

The carte de visite album, as a site of curation and display of individual sensibility, familial bonds, and wider cultural awareness, is crucial to this study. Although the carte album’s importance was noted by Beaumont Newhall and Elizabeth Anne McCauley, more recent historical scholarship has offered detailed descriptions and analyses of particular albums: Patricia di Bello examines albums of two upper-class English women while Lara Perry considers an album compiled by the English Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. Martha Langford singles out a small number of albums from the collection of Canadian McCord Museum for more detailed commentary and Elizabeth Siegel conducts a more general survey for her history of the nineteenth-century American photograph album.¹²

¹¹ Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 146.

¹² Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present (1949)*, 5th ed. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 49; Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *A.A.E. Disdéri and the Carte De Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 46–48; Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England*; Lara Perry, “The Carte De Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness,” *Art History* 36, no. 4 (2012); Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*; Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*.

This article employs a survey of forty carte de visite albums from the collections of three Australian public libraries.¹³ This sample size was chosen as being large enough to identify patterns that would extend and critique particular analyses made by di Bello and Siegel on the staging of carte portraits and practices of album organisation and annotation. From the above scholarship, this approach is most closely aligned to that of Siegel's study of American albums, although in my study there is no attempt to argue for the distinctiveness of albums based on their association with the Australian colonies.

Production

How a subject performs a self has become an inescapable focus of the study of domestic digital photography. As Nancy Van House observes: "making, showing, viewing and talking about images are not just how we represent ourselves, but contribute to the ways we enact ourselves, individually and collectively, and reproduce social formations and norms."¹⁴ The ease of image-making using camera-phones, together with the increasingly public online circulation of personal images, has accelerated the constant recalibrations and changes of register required of the subject in representing the self within these shifting social formations.

The performance of the self in carte de visite portraiture, by contrast, can appear determined and static, evidenced by a stable repertoire of poses, costumes, and studio settings. Elizabeth Anne McCauley, for example, in her pioneering study of French carte de visite portraiture, concludes that the carte de visite "represents an early step toward the simplification of complex personalities into immediately graspable and choreographed

¹³ Carte de visite albums were viewed from the collections of the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales and the State Library of Victoria. The forty albums surveyed represent all of the intact carte albums in these libraries' collections. In these albums carte de visite albumen prints predominate, but the albums also include tintypes, ambrotypes, and colour lithographs, as well as the larger cabinet card albumen prints. Albums from the late 1860s often contained apertures for both cartes de visite and cabinet cards. The carte de visite print was mounted on a card measuring sixty-five by 107 millimetres and the cabinet card measured 107 by 168 millimetres: Alan Davies, *An Eye for Photography: The Camera in Australia* (Carlton, VIC: The Miegunyah Press, 2004), 20–22.

¹⁴ Nancy A. Van House, "Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual," *Visual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2011): 131.

performers.”¹⁵ Yet the substance of McCauley’s book demonstrates that this portrait choreography was dynamic and contested territory. She pays particular attention to the complex relationship between photographic and painted portraiture, charting the crucial argument as to which medium was best able to portray the mind, soul or character of the sitter rather than mere appearance.

This struggle for authenticity informed the related discussions about appropriate poses, costumes, and settings for carte portraits. As the carte de visite industry grew, many middle-class patrons ventured into a portrait studio for the first time and experienced the social and psychological challenge of arriving at a pose. Consequently, much presentational advice was published for the benefit of both photographer and patron. The renewed popularity of physiognomy, with its promise of transparency between appearance and inner self, led commentators such as American physician and author Oliver Wendell Holmes to caution: “The anxiety which strives to smooth its forehead cannot get rid of the telltale furrow. The weakness which belongs to the infirm of purpose and vacuous of thought is hardly to be disguised, even though the moustache is allowed to hide *the centre of expression*” [emphasis in original].¹⁶

Pronouncements on the futility of dissembling when posing for carte portraits were supported by the Victorian concern with the education of feelings or sentiment. Even utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill was concerned that, especially in England, an obsession with commerce and industry could lead to an absence of “high feelings” and to conduct that was “always directed towards low and petty objects.”¹⁷ The antidote, derived from the popular Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth, was the contemplation of nature and the study of art and literature. As Patrizia di Bello comments in her study of Victorian women’s photograph albums:

¹⁵ McCauley, A.A.E. *Disdéri and the Carte De Visite Portrait Photograph*, 224.

¹⁶ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Doings of a Sunbeam,” in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981), 70.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography with an Introduction by C.V. Shields* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 38.

Romanticism and the cult of sensibility were crucial in establishing the private sphere as the setting for the true realisation of personal interiority, through activities and interactions based on authentic feelings rather than performances put on for fashionable considerations and in the interest of social ambition.¹⁸

The importance of this cultivation of “personal interiority” can be seen in a trope of portrait poses where the sitter is shown reading, doing embroidery, or contemplating an artwork or flower arrangement. Although the settings for most carte portraits make reference to the domestic parlour, these portraits of interiority create a heightened sense of intimacy for the viewer as the subject is observed engaging in a private activity, rather than presenting themselves to the camera.

The surveyed albums also present an even purer form of the introspective portrait: one that has no visible object of contemplation. The sitter gazes off into space, but not in order to present a noble profile to the camera—rather the attention is directed inwards with eyes downcast and the face averted from the camera. While the portrait of the Reverend W. Vetch (figure 18) was perhaps intended as a more spiritual variation on this theme, it shares with other introspective portraits the communication of depth of character and sentiment through inward focus.

¹⁸ Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England*, 40.

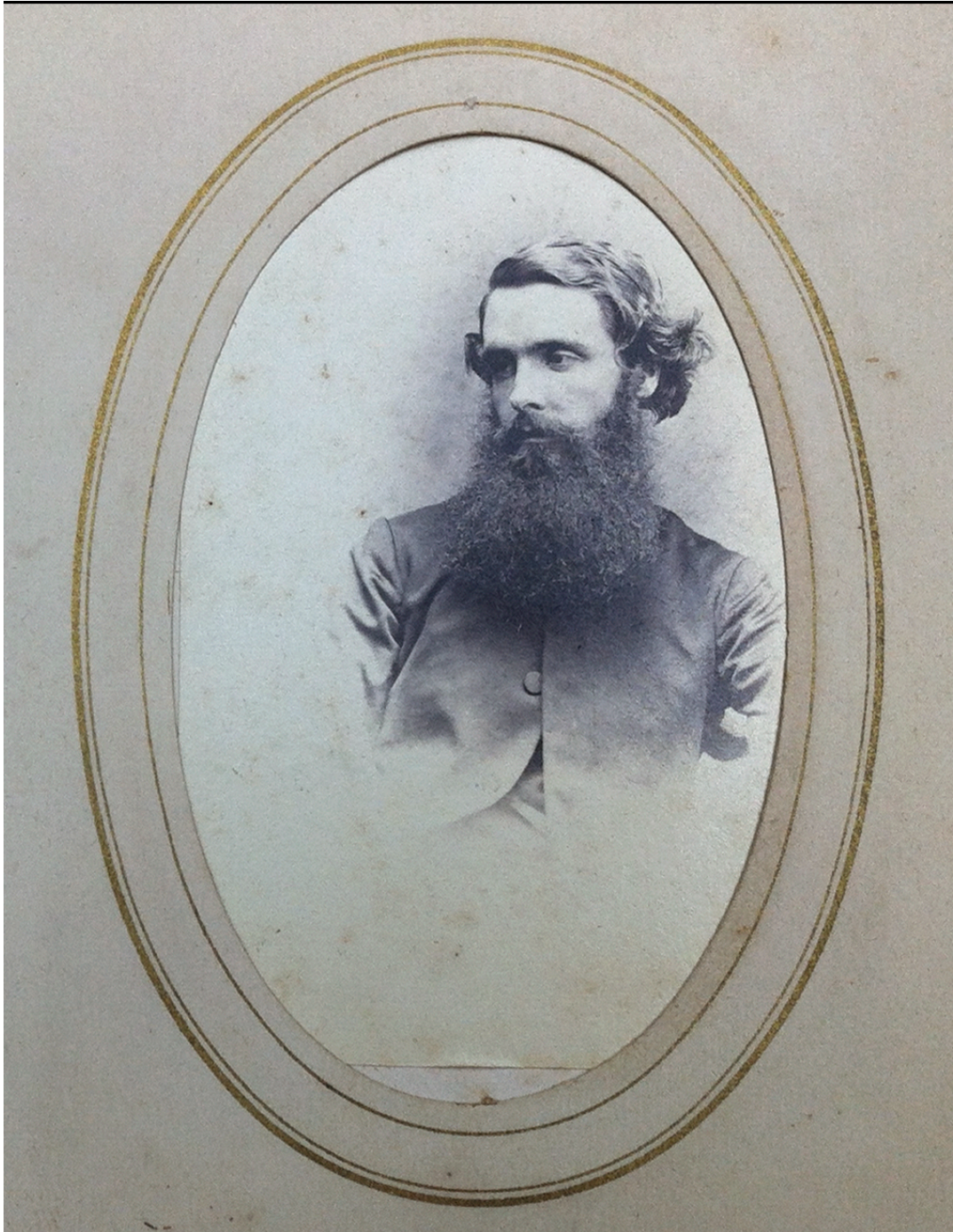


Figure 18. Albumen carte de visite photograph. Portrait of Reverend W. Vetch mounted in album. Brearley and Bray families' collection. State Library of New South Wales, PXE 1525.

Despite the dangers of inauthenticity expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes above, most commentators on the practice of posing for a carte portrait advised sitters to adopt a posing technique, as simply presenting oneself to the camera lens in a transparently neutral pose gave unacceptable results. An anonymous author, writing in a British weekly journal in 1862 about his own experience of carte portraiture, felt that the portrait resulting from simply “presenting a tolerably favourable view of my features and limbs to

the fatal lens” was “so tame and unimposing a picture that I determined on the next occasion to throw more intellect into the thing.”¹⁹ At the next portrait sitting the writer fixed his gaze on a curtain and “blasted it with the energy of my regard.... That look has, I am happy to say, been reproduced faithfully, and no one could see the portrait without giving its original credit for immense penetration, great energy and strength of character, and a keen and piercing wit.”²⁰

The range of commentary and advice available to the portrait subject indicates that carte portraiture was a contested practice where the sitter could exercise considerable agency. As portrayed by the author above, this agency was enhanced through the process of trial and error permitted by the technology of the carte de visite.

When portrait subjects sat for their carte portrait, it was possible, using a four-lens studio camera and a moving negative plate holder, to expose four portrait images at a time. The negative plate could be moved to the other side and, with the sitter holding the same pose, another four images could be exposed. After development of the plate and production of the albumen print, eight near-identical portraits could be cut from the grid and pasted onto cards. This was the best approach if the sitter wanted multiple prints of a single pose. However, some uncut carte de visite prints have survived that show patrons pursuing other strategies: for example, a sheet of uncut portraits of Princess Gabrielle Bonaparte shows her opting for five different poses across the eight images.²¹ Cartes collected in albums also give insights into the conduct of studio portrait sessions. In several of the albums surveyed, different portraits of the same person, that are clearly the product of the same studio session, have been collected together as a series.²² Within a particular session, the set, the pose, and the framing can all vary. Carte portraiture

¹⁹ “The Carte De Visite,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1862, 8. Patrizia di Bello cites this article as being published in the British journal *All the Year Round* (1862): 165–168. Elizabeth Siegel quotes the same article being reprinted in the *American Union*, Boston, on 16 August 1862 and it appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 October the same year. This circulation points to the international relevance of social commentary on the newly emergent carte portraiture.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Oliver Mathews, *The Album of Carte-De-Visite and Cabinet Portrait Photographs 1854-1914* (London: Reedminster Publications, 1974), 9. The photographer exposed individual areas of the glass negative by uncapping one lens at a time.

²² An example is found in the carte de visite album, State Library of Victoria, PCLTAF 854 H85.70/72.

permitted photographers and patrons an expanded field of experimentation with the knowledge that, because of the carte's negative/positive process, individual portraits could be selected later from a proof sheet for multiple printing.

With the arrival of the carte de visite, the possibilities for self-performance that were available within a single studio session then opened out across time as patrons made return visits with diverse motivations for commissioning a new set of portraits: dissatisfaction with a previous portrait, a marriage, growing children, a change in career, or a new outfit. For Oliver Wendell Holmes, notwithstanding his earlier-quoted belief in physiognomy, encountering a series of portraits of an intimate enabled novel understandings of personal identity:

We have learned many curious facts from photographic portraits which we were slow to learn from faces. One is the great number of aspects belonging to each countenance with which we are familiar. Sometimes, in looking at a portrait, it seems to us that this is just the face we know, and that it is always thus. But again another view shows us a wholly different aspect, and yet as absolutely characteristic as the first; and a third and fourth convince us that our friend was not one, but many, in outward appearance, as in the mental and emotional shapes by which his inner nature made itself known to us.²³

Holmes here intimates a strikingly modern understanding of the self. His sequential encounters with different "views" or photographic portraits of "our friend" facilitate a re-evaluation of the subject's mental and emotional constitution. While not destroying continuity of character, each of these portrait encounters requires a revision and a complication of the previous understanding. For Lara Perry this consideration of the series becomes crucial: "How the individual image gives meaning to the series, and how the series gives meaning to the individual image, is the dynamic of likeness that was exploited in the culture of the carte de visite."²⁴ Emerging from this portrait series is an expanding

²³ Holmes, "Doings of a Sunbeam," 70.

²⁴ Perry, "The Carte De Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness," 731.

inter-subjective consciousness that also challenges the poverty of the initial understanding based only on face-to-face encounters. It is significant that Holmes is describing his perceptions of a friend and not a distant public figure, the implication being that the mediation of social relationships through photographic images was already significant in the 1860s.

If the carte de visite represents the point at which photographic portraits began to signify “as part of a set or series rather than as unique objects,” domestic digital photography seems to have reached the apogee of series production: who now ever takes a single photograph?²⁵ Yet much of the heat that is generated in public commentary on contemporary private-gone-public photographs occurs when individual images are subjected to scrutiny, rather than being understood as moments from the image-making stream. This escape and appropriation of digital images from databases both private and public now appears so commonplace that it is useful to consider related effects that emerged with the mass production of the carte de visite.

Dissemination

Perhaps the most distinctive quality of digital domestic photography lies in its ease of circulation. These images can have unlimited parallel lives: shared face-to-face on a smartphone, posted to a photo blog, annotated on a social media platform, printed in a photo book, or perhaps even incorporated into a memorial audio-visual presentation at the subject’s funeral. Each of these instances of the image offers different contexts for interpretation and there is considerable public concern about image creators losing control both of the context and the image file itself.²⁶

By comparison with the recent experience of personal photography from the snap-shot era, the dissemination of cartes de visite can potentially offer more useful analogues for this experience of digital domestic photography. As Sarvas and Frohlich observe, while

²⁵ Ibid., 747.

²⁶ Martin Hand, *Ubiquitous Photography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 180–181.

there was no technical barrier in the negative/positive technologies of the “Kodak Path” to the production of unlimited prints from any photographic negative, in practice reproduction of domestic photographs was highly circumscribed: for example during the snapshot era, photo-lab customers might order a second set of prints for distribution to family and friends, while some families had multiple prints of portraits made to send with Christmas cards.²⁷ Personal carte de visite portraits, by contrast, were usually purchased by the dozen, with the explicit intention of exchange, while most photographic studios held the negatives on file for reorders.

Prior to the carte, painted portraits, whether on canvas or as miniatures, were commissioned for specific recipients and exhibition settings. The portrait miniature, in particular, was part of a culture of gift exchange and letter writing amongst intimates that provided an agreed interpellation²⁸ The daguerreotype portrait followed this highly directed mode of distribution and display. However, as Lara Perry observes, the carte de visite “escaped these boundaries and found itself in multiple and possibly unpredictable interpretive contexts.”²⁹

Many carte portraits of celebrities, from royalty to statesmen and wealthy industrialists, were produced with the same aesthetic as the portraits of any middle-class patron, using similar studio sets, props, and styles of attire. Consequently, there was no formal way to distinguish between a portrait given by a bourgeois portrait subject to friends or family, and the celebrity portrait that could be purchased from a photographic studio or print seller. Anxiety about potential confusion that could arise from the conflation of these portrait categories resulted in cautionary tales appearing in the photographic press. Elizabeth Siegel mentions a story published in the *American Journal of Photography* in 1863 that related how a portrait subject, having become newly famous through success on the stock market, is shocked to find his carte portrait being sold everywhere by print

²⁷ Sarvas and Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*, 95–96.

²⁸ Marcia Pointon, “‘Surrounded with Brilliants’: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 1 (2001).

²⁹ Perry, “The Carte De Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness,” 739.

sellers.³⁰ He discovers that the portrait given only to members of his family has been traded by his son to an unscrupulous travelling photographer who copies and markets it as a celebrity carte.

In the nineteenth century, with the expansion of the urban middle class, social communications that would previously have remained within family networks were finding their way into the public domain. While facilitating this process, the carte portrait could easily be transformed from an image of private affection into one of public notoriety. Lara Perry observes that although advertising in newspapers for potential marriage partners was still a somewhat controversial practice in the 1860s, these ads “often invited respondents to include a carte in their reply, or suggested an exchange of cartes de visite.”³¹ Perry then lists a series of incidents, reported in the press, that were used to illustrate the potentially deleterious consequences of the practice. A young “Adonis” is found to have accumulated more than a hundred cartes of unsuspecting young women, while other advertisers were lured into meetings where they were publicly humiliated.

Within just a few years, cartes de visite had proliferated globally and escaped the bounds of their initial use within elite social circles. Although we are now accustomed to the ease of digital file dissemination, the materiality of the carte de visite provided little barrier to this appropriation. As a highly mobile, standardised commodity, carte portraits easily slipped the leash of their intended functions to then take on ambiguous and potentially disturbing new meanings.

Collecting

Our experience of the twenty-first-century photo album is of its dispersal. The centrally curated family album of the last century has lost its dominance as everyone amasses individual collections that are also shared and annotated online. In this way, the visual

³⁰ Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*, 56-57.

³¹ Perry, “The Carte De Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness,” 740.

basis of memory is paradoxically becoming both more individual and more communal. This mnemonic potency has been downplayed in much of the analysis of domestic digital photography: “personal photographs may be becoming more public and transitory, less private and durable and more effective as objects of communication than of memory.”³²

By comparison, the carte de visite album, a substantial bound volume taking pride of place in the domestic parlour, appears to offer durability and longevity, its collection of carefully curated family photographs calling forth rituals of remembrance for generations to come. Although an analysis of carte de visite albums reveals two contrasting paradigms of collecting and organisation, neither supports the imperatives of dynastic memory.



Figure 19. Albumen carte de visite photographs. Portraits of HRH Duke of Edinburgh and O. H. Brierly mounted in album. Brearley and Bray families' collection. State Library of New South Wales, PXE 1525.

³² Van House, “Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual,” 125.



Figure 20. Cabinet card and cartes de visite mounted in opening spread of an album. Left page: albumen cabinet card photograph, reproduction of painting. Right page: two cartes de visite; colour lithograph religious image and albumen photograph unidentified portrait of child. Ramsay family's collection. State Library of New South Wales PXE 1165 box 2.

From the surveyed albums, two carte albums in the collection of the State Library of New South Wales provide immediate contrasts in both content and organisation. The first album for consideration comes from the Brearley and Bray families' collection of papers and photographs: an album with ninety-three images, displaying two cartes per page. The first four images are carte portraits of celebrities: on the first page (figure 19) are the Duke of Edinburgh (1844–1900) and O. W. Brierly (1817–1894, a marine painter who travelled widely in the Pacific), followed on the second page by a medical doctor and a clergyman. Each is identified in Gothic text written on the mount. The next two portrait subjects, both men, are identified in their own hands. The opening hierarchical taxonomy is clear, with royalty then leading to a survey of prominent professions. The remaining unidentified portraits, presumed to be either of family or friends, appear to be organised according to the age of the sitter, with the elderly, children, and young women grouped together across the double page spreads.

This album exemplifies a paradigm that is based on the expression of status and the assembly of a virtual family. In some albums, this is reflected in the selection of royal portraits followed by portraits of family and friends, while in other albums of this type the

hierarchy begins with the portraits of the family patriarch and matriarch.³³ These are the albums where the desire to assert familial bonds can be most strongly felt. As Susan Sontag observed, the demands of commerce, war, empire, and migration in the second half of the nineteenth century were dispersing the members of many middle-class families and the carte album permitted their virtual reassembly.³⁴

To what extent were the curators of such albums compiling these collections for posterity, for future generations? Elizabeth Siegel recounts a publishing project by a Dr. A. H. Pratt, who, concerned about the lack of family documentation following the chaos of the American Civil War, produced a carte album with many templates for the inclusion of personal, physical, and genealogical data.³⁵ Some Australian commentators also predicted that the carte album would replace the family genealogy preserved in the front of the family bible.³⁶

The survey of Australian carte de visite albums, however, does not support these visions of the carte album as a genealogical resource. Despite some albums including an index page, none have any entries: in only one of the surveyed albums is there a genealogical listing that could potentially be contemporaneous with the compilation of the album.³⁷ And while the subjects of celebrity cartes are frequently identified by hand-written entries on the mounts, family members and friends are rarely identified contemporaneously. This lack of identification suggests that although compilers of these carte albums hoped to stitch together a virtual family through photographic representation, they did not see the carte album forming a genealogical database as envisioned by Dr. Pratt.

The second album, exemplifying a contrasting paradigm for collecting and organisation, comes from the Ramsay family collection and has thirty-seven images that include both

³³ An album that begins with a royal portrait (Queen Victoria): National Library of Australia Pic Album 359 ID 1585489. An album that begins with the family patriarch and matriarch: "Page and Wood family album of cartes-de-visite," State Library of Victoria PCLTA 1378 H2011.14/1-42.

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 8-9.

³⁵ Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*, 104.

³⁶ Davies, *An Eye for Photography: The Camera in Australia*, 22.

³⁷ National Library of Australia Pic Album 349 ID3044249.

cabinet cards and cartes de visite. The opening spread (figure 20) has a cabinet card reproduction of a painting showing a dog, standing on a small iceberg with its paw on a broad-brimmed hat. It gazes forlornly to the heavens. On the facing page are two cartes de visite: a colour lithograph of a devotional image, and a child's portrait. Through the rest of the album, cartes of sentimental etchings of dogs are interspersed with family and celebrity portraits including those of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray. Status and hierarchy appear almost absent from this album as systematic forces of collection and organisation. Instead, there is a strong sense of the affective meaning of each carte, whether a sentimental scene gifted by a friend or a commissioned family portrait, determining its inclusion in the album with little thought for image sequence or juxtaposition.

Although Elizabeth Siegel, in her study of American carte albums, concludes that a "wide variety of arrangements" is the result of album organisation being an "intensely personal activity," there are antecedents for this ad hoc mode of album curation.³⁸ An important precursor to the carte album was the sentiment album, which was owned by young women and circulated by the owner amongst her circle of friends and acquaintances.³⁹ Handwritten contributions of epigraphs and verses were intended to convey appropriate feelings while revealing the fineness of the contributor's sensibility, or perhaps, in the case of a potential suitor, a desire to outdo a rival. Carte albums that were influenced by this social dynamic of the sentiment album depict an evolving social circle through the collection of fashionable and affective images. These heterogeneous collections resisted prescribed methods of organisation, affording the expression of sentiment and taste rather than the building of visual genealogies for future generations.

³⁸ Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*, 10.

³⁹ Andrea Kunard, "Traditions of Collecting and Remembering," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (2006).

Cartes in the Twenty-first Century

William Darrah, in his survey of the carte de visite, claims that: “In England alone 300 to 400 million cartes were sold every year from 1861 to 1867.”⁴⁰ How have cartes survived into the twenty first century and in what context? Darrah’s book, published in 1981, is an indication of cartes beginning to attract attention beyond a small group of collectors. Now, cartes have become part of the collecting mainstream: on eBay.com a search for “carte de visite” gave 37,236 results with many of these auction lots containing multiple cartes.⁴¹ As befits the first form of photograph to be easily shipped around the world, cartes de visite are now part of a global online marketplace. The vast majority of surviving cartes have been separated from albums: an eBay.com search for “carte de visite album” gave 409 results with only thirty-five albums advertised as containing some cartes and thirty-six albums described as empty. Museums and libraries hold a comparatively small number of carte albums. In Australia, some of these albums have passed into public collections as part of the papers of politically prominent families but many have been collected with little or no provenance, coming, for example, from the Public Trustee wishing to dispose of unclaimed deceased estates. Individual unidentified cartes have also been collected by public institutions and thousands circulate through private collections.

Although unidentified family snapshots are routinely curated into new public contexts as “found photography,” nineteenth-century studio portraiture has been immune to this kind of appropriation, being far removed from the living memory required for nostalgic fetishism and devoid of the quotidian frisson of the amateur. Consequently, art museums have searched for other themes to present this photography to a twenty-first-century public.

A recent exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Australia and the Photograph* (2015), curated by Judy Annear, is the first major survey of Australian photography to seriously represent cartes de visite, both as individual images and as collected in albums.

⁴⁰ William C. Darrah, *Cartes De Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg PA: W. C. Darrah, 1981), 4.

⁴¹ eBay.com accessed 7 August 2015.

While historical scholarship is present in the curating of the exhibition, the contextualising of the carte de visite through a catalogue essay proposes that the subjects of these carte portraits should not be abandoned to the Victorian world of rigid convention. Martyn Jolly, in his catalogue essay on the photograph album in nineteenth-century Australia, instead emphasises the dynamic social currency of carte portraiture by quoting from the article, cited earlier, that was reprinted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1862:⁴²

you have the opportunity of distributing yourself among your friends, and letting them see you in your favorite attitude, and with your favorite expression. And then you get into those wonderful books which everyone possesses, and strangers see you there in good society, and ask who that very striking looking person is.⁴³

The “good society” here could refer either to the portrait’s context in the carte album or to the people gathered in the ambiguously private/public space of the domestic parlour. For Jolly, this nineteenth-century account of self-performance has unmistakable parallels with Facebook profile circulation.⁴⁴ Our contemporary experience of domestic digital photography has opened up the possibility of a new rapport between us and these Victorian portrait subjects and album compilers. They can now be portrayed as brave pioneers, revelling in the opportunity to articulate themselves and their social world through the photographic image.

Memory: the Carte de Visite and Domestic Digital Photography

Having traced the life of the carte de visite through production, dissemination, and collection, it is appropriate in conclusion to return to the question of how cartes functioned as resources for memory. This relationship of memory to the carte de visite is then employed to briefly interrogate the mnemonic functionality of domestic digital photography.

⁴² Martyn Jolly, “Delicious Moments: The Photograph Album in Nineteenth-Century Australia,” in *Australia and the Photograph*, ed. Judy Annear (Sydney, NSW: Art Gallery of NSW, 2015).

⁴³ “The Carte De Visite,” 8.

⁴⁴ “Delicious Moments: The Photograph Album in Nineteenth-Century Australia,” 235.

With the arrival of the carte de visite came many proposals for the production of familial photographic archives. As noted earlier, Dr. A. H. Pratt envisaged the creation of physical and genealogical records through the use of his annotated carte album. Recent scholarship has provided a significant corrective to this male dynastic imperative by fleshing out the social domains imbricated within carte portrait production, distribution, and collection: domains where women were crucial actors. Through this scholarship the photographic studio joins the domestic parlour as a site for the performance of an individual sensibility and the expression of rank and social standing while the carte itself, as a slippery mass-produced commodity, escapes the confines of intended distribution and precipitates novel social encounters. The largely female curation of the carte album is proposed as a dynamic, creative act, “poised between a reading practice and a writing practice.”⁴⁵ This perspective emphasises the functions of social communication and self-expression over that of memory.

Elizabeth Siegel, in her attempt “to see what these [carte de visite albums] meant at the time of their first use,” places the albums “within the context of sentiment rather than memory.”⁴⁶ This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the nineteenth-century commentary on memory and the carte de visite. Marcus Aurelius Root (1808–1888), author and proprietor of one of North America’s busiest photographic studios, argued for prescience with regard to family photographs, proposing that carte portraits of all family members should be taken as soon as possible, while the subjects were in good health. Yet the benefits of this documentation are clearly for the current generation: “In this competitive and selfish world of ours, whatever tends to vivify and strengthen the social feelings should be hailed as a benediction.”⁴⁷ This remembrance is tethered strongly in the present, with the carte portraits affording daily reminders of loved ones, whether present, absent, or recently deceased.

⁴⁵ Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England*, 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁷ Marcus Aurelius Root, “The Camera and the Pencil (1864),” in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 149.

There is a further argument against the orientation of carte album collectors towards creating mnemonic resources for future generations: a lack of written identifications. As discussed earlier, in the Australian surveyed albums, very few family members are identified within the albums. Some friends and celebrities may have been asked to add their autographs below their portraits, as this authenticated the personal nature of the gift, but clearly it was considered unnecessary to identify other friends and family members in writing. As both Laura Perry and Elizabeth Siegel have observed with regard to carte portraiture, there were many nineteenth-century commentators who claimed that prior knowledge of the subject was crucial in order to complement the inadequate impression supplied by the portrait.⁴⁸ Oral album-based storytelling was not simply commentary but provided essential identification. As Siegel points out, studio carte portraits lack the “moment and setting that would become the hallmark of the snapshot,” and therefore required even more comprehensive contextualising: a knowledgeable first-generation narrator was assumed.⁴⁹

What emerges from this consideration of the social functions of the carte de visite is a present temporality and a facilitation of memory through social communication and self-representation. This more integrated understanding of memory and the carte de visite provides a useful perspective to question the marginalising by some scholars of the mnemonic affordances of domestic digital photography.⁵⁰

Several studies of domestic digital photography have shown a bias towards the immediate sharing of images over their organisation and purposeful archiving.⁵¹ Photo streams promote a sense of temporariness with any image being easily replaced by another. Online applications such as Snapchat and WhatsApp, by featuring a short lifespan for exchanged images, have also emphasised this quality of ephemerality. Yet as online storage of personal photographs has expanded exponentially, social media platforms and

⁴⁸ Perry, “The Carte De Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness,” 731-732; Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*, 145.

⁴⁹ *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums*, 145.

⁵⁰ Van House, “Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual,” 125.

⁵¹ Sarvas and Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*, 107-111.

photo storage services have begun to understand the potential of these images to hold users' attention. New applications and features have been developed to exploit this "digital past." In 2011, Facebook launched its Timeline feature, what its press release announced as "a new kind of profile that lets you highlight the photos, posts and life events that help you tell your story."⁵² In the same year the online application Timehop appeared, offering a way of aggregating personal photographs from various sources, based on the anniversaries of the photos being posted online. In 2014, when Timehop was attracting a million users, a technology journalist compared its mnemonic functionality to existing services: "it's about resurfacing old memories that might otherwise be relegated to the depths of your Facebook Timeline or Instagram profile."⁵³ Following Timehop and other services such as Dropbox's Flashback, Facebook launched a feature in 2015 called "On This Day" that places selections of image- and text-based posts in the user's newsfeed, focused on the user's Facebook relationships as well as the anniversaries of posts.⁵⁴ As discussed earlier in relation to the "Friends Day" video project, Facebook is also exploring various ways of structuring these image posts, in this case into narrated slideshows.

It is significant that these recent developments in social media facilitate particular mnemonic excursions rather than the building of life story databases such as Facebook's Timeline. This instigation of memory through self-performance and social communication was anticipated by the carte de visite where the photographic stimulus for recall and reminiscence was intimately connected with the strengthening of social bonds and the opportunity for self-representation. A carte portrait of a loved one could always become incorporated into ritualised life storytelling. Yet, as has been demonstrated, many carte albums evince an ad hoc, contingent structure that arises from affective responses to particular images and occasions rather than overarching narratives.

⁵² Slater Tow, "Timeline: Now Available Worldwide," news release, 15 December 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/timeline-now-available-worldwide/10150408488962131/>.

⁵³ Ellis Hamburger, "Throwback Thursday Is the Secret to Timehop's Runaway Success," *The Verge*, 15 May 2014.

⁵⁴ This feature uses introductory text such as "Stephen, you and x became friends on Facebook 7 years ago today. We thought you'd like to look back on some of the memories you've shared together." "Introducing on This Day: A New Way to Look Back at Photos and Memories on Facebook," news release, 24 March 2015, <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2015/03/introducing-on-this-day-a-new-way-to-look-back-at-photos-and-memories-on-facebook/>.

As noted earlier, the circulation of personal digital images through multiple personal collections has resulted in memory becoming simultaneously more individual and communal. Individual practices of image tagging, annotation, and organisation are channelled through the common affordances of social media platforms. The carte de visite also anticipates this phenomenon with the provision of personal and public images in a standardised format. Through the portrait cartes of intimates, together with cartes of celebrities, artworks, and scenes, an individual album compiler was able to express an idiosyncratic sentiment and taste while still representing their family and social circles within the acceptable bounds of rank and status.

Twenty-first-century scholarship has effected a liberation of the carte de visite. What was previously seen as an artefact imprisoned by stultifying Victorian conventions has been released into the world of modern visual culture. Any carte can now evoke a dynamic life story, whether purchased from the print seller's window, passed hand-to-hand, or sent to a loved one on the far side of the globe. It is this scholarship's insight into the way images gain meaning through movement that offers further mutual insights into the domain of domestic digital photography.

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