UNPUBLISHED PORTRAITS

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Drawings by L. M. Glackens

We of today are supposed to have a great deal more time to our ourselves than the workers of the of the last century. We have our eight-hour working day (be it never so basic), regulation summer vacations, Saturday afternoons off, and, in a short month, eight or ten legal holidays. And yet, for all the fact that they must have been kept busier than we are, the men of that period seemed to have had a peculiar and inexplicable amount of leisure time in which to perform a rite which the man of this decade can perform but seldom. They were never so rushed or overworked or preoccupied but that they would drop into a photographer’s once or twice a week and have their pictures taken.

From the number of portraits, daguerreotypes, and cabinet photographs which are unearthed every time an anniversary comes around, or a man over fifty becomes famous, there is no other conclusion to be drawn than that it was the custom in 1860 for a man to kiss his wife and children after a hurt breakfast, dash to the photographer's and have his picture taken, snatch a quick lunch and look over the mail at the office, and then pound back to the studio for another sitting before the light got poor. And, even at that, he must have consented to have some flash lights (I know that they didn't have flash-lights then, but why be disagreeable about it?) taken at home during the evening or he never could have amassed such a collection of pictorial representations of himself as seem to have been in the possession of every grown man or his friends during the Reconstruction Period.

Every time February 12th comes around it is a backward magazine that can't run a frontispiece to its leading article of a "hitherto unpublished portrait of Abraham Lincoln." If some enterprising wag from the West could only comb the country for all the hitherto unpublished portraits of Lincoln and get them all out in book form in one crashing issue, he would not only make his fortune but would deal the February magazines for years to come a crushing blow. They would have to fall back on the Balkan situation again.

Edward M. Stanton, busy as he was in the War Department, is still on pictorial record as having devoted no fewer than 300 days out of a possible 365 to his daguerreotyper, while General Grant must ha'Ve had to have his meals brought to him at the entrance to his tent, so that the photographers could file past and get their pictures of him. It must have been a big relief to him when he became President and could go indoors to be taken.
And what makes this national movement toward the camera obscura still more mysterious is the realization of what an ordeal it must have been. It was none of your present-day sittings, where everything is done to make the patient as comfortable as could be expected. It was a thing to be prayed over and undertaken calmly, soberly, and advisedly. To-day, it is perfectly permissible to have your picture taken in a soft collar. It isn’t even necessary to shave, for in the more expensive photographs your face is always in the shadow from the fire-light, or averted from the camera and looking out at a dormer window, so that you could even wear a false beard and no one would notice it. In the modern photographs, if you get a good likeness of the high lights on the bridge of your nose and the general contour of one side of your face you are doing well.

But sixty years ago a man had to have every button buttoned and his lips all moist before he could have his picture taken, and the best suit he had was none too good. Furthermore, while the subject of to-day may rest his head on his hand if he is too weak to hold it up, and by draping his fingers along his cheek get away with quite a
temperamental effect, the sitter in the early days of photography must need submit to what practically amounted to an operation on the base of his skull in order that he might keep his chin pointed toward the camera without wabbling. He was bullied about by the photographer and told to wet his lips and smile and dry his lips and look serious again; his right hand was laid out across his knee and then flopped back into the front of his coat; he was tilted and tipped and ordered to look at the man’s left hand and then to subtract the number he first thought of, and then, just as likely as not, the thing wouldn’t come out right, and it would have to be done all over again.

The Subject of To-day May Rest His Head on His Hand if He Is Too Weak to Hold It Up

When you consider all this, and what it meant for a man with a family at home to support to have his picture taken, there is only one way to explain the apparently insatiable demand for photographs of one kind or another; it was an appetite, like the craving for drink or Camembert cheese. It was something that got hold of a man subtly at
first; perhaps he began by having his picture taken with a group, just to be sociable. He might fall in with a few friends, who would say:

“Come on, Eben; let’s have a daguerreotype taken.”

And, rather than offend or seem offish, Eben would go in with them and line up in front of the camera.

Then gradually he would get to dropping into the studio alone. Perhaps sometimes, in the middle of the work in his office, he would sneak down the back stairs and make for the nearest photographer’s and have a picture taken of himself holding a hoop, just to brace himself up for the rest of the afternoon’s work.
Doubtless he said to himself, “I can take it or leave it alone; I know when to stop.” but it would soon get so that he couldn’t pass a daguerreotypy’s place and hear the boys in there under the warm, enticing glare of the skylight without straightening his tie and saying, “Just one more picture,” and dashing, a nervous wreck, up the stairs to pose for one with his hand on his friend Ira’s shoulder, both patients wearing bowler hats during the ceremony.

With an appetite like this clutching a large part of the community, the present inexhaustible supply of hitherto unpublished portraits might, to a degree, be explained. But you couldn’t include the children in this pathological manifestation. They wouldn’t have had time to have formed such a habit. It must have been forced on the child by his parents, and on them the responsibility should rest.

But the children of the daguerreotypes seemed to realize the gravity of the thing more than their elders. Take a boy of three who was having his daguerreotype taken. He had on long trousers and red top boots, and was either curled up against an antimacassar, surprised in the act of reading a bound volume of speeches on the Kansas-Nebraska bill, or was standing in a not very spontaneous hoop-rolling attitude. But whatever his pose, his childish face showed signs of the strain he was under. He seemed to realize what was before him, the long years of slavery to the snap of the shutter, and his expression was grave. There was no “watch-the-birdie” glint in his eye. It was a stern look that said, “I may be only three years old, but I realize that before I am twenty-five I shall have had one hundred pictures taken, all of them hitherto unpublished.” What child wouldn’t look worried?

Of course, in those days the “camera obscura” was a novelty. That is, it was a novelty until it had been in operation for about a day and a half. It probably took a day and a half for every one to drive in from the outlying towns and have pictures taken. After that, sitting for a picture must have become a function, like the digestive process.

To-day it has lost whatever novelty it may have had. If a newspaper wants a hitherto unpublished picture of a prominent man now it has to send a photographer up to his house and catch him as he is shutting down his bedroom window in the morning. If he is prominent enough to be going up and down the steps of a capitol now and then, they can snap him at such times, preferably when he has one foot poised in the air and his mouth open. Of course, there are always a lot of prominent men at the speaker’s table at large metropolitan banquets, but the flashlights taken of such an assemblage always play up the table in the foreground at which the Class of 1913 is seated, all very wide-eyed and out of focus, while the speakers’ table is shown on the backdrop about three-quarters of a mile upstage, with the speakers easily distinguishable to the half-naked eye if you can remember their relative positions counting left and right from the toastmaster.

When newspapers and magazines of to-day have to content themselves with one or two pictures of President Wilson, taken when he was teaching at Princeton, or, at the latest, when he was trying to shinny up the side of the Mayflower during his first Administration, what will the periodicals of 1950 do for hitherto unpublished portraits of him? If he had been of a posable age in 1850 he would have had a picture taken every time he changed his expression, and they would have been distributed among his family, and friends of his family, and friends of friends of his family, until now the supply would have been increasing, as nasturtiums increase the more you pick them. But, as it is, the best the editors fifty years hence can do will be to run a hitherto unpublished print of President Wilson’s picture while he was an instructor at Princeton.
There is no doubt a lesson to be drawn from all this, but I can’t quite see what it is. It probably would have something to do with people having their photographs taken and its relation to our national rights.

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