

CARTOMANIA

Victorian posing chairs

By Ron Cosens

When we look at studio portraits, we nearly always concentrate on the subject (the sitter), the clothes and sometimes, if prominent, the props (e.g. books, brollies, toys etc.). But there are lots of other interesting, but less obvious, gems to be seen in some photographs if we look closely.

ONE OF THE aspects that has always fascinated me is that the furniture, and more particularly the posing aids, can be really well designed - both aesthetically and functionally. But where are they all? When did you last see a Victorian studio chair for sale? It is also clear that some of the chairs were beautifully designed for posing and perching but were most uncomfortable for relaxing in (see Fig. 2) - so they probably ended up on the tip instead of in someone's front room.

So, to discover a little more about their design and construction, we have to rely on the occasional, and often accidental, glimpses on cartes de visite and cabinet cards. Sitters used chairs in three ways - to sit on, to kneel on and to lean on (see Fig. 1 which shows two of the three uses simultaneously). We can look at posing aids in three main groups - Domestic Chairs, Adjustable Chairs and Posing Curiosities.

Domestic chairs

Many studios, particularly the more modest ones and those belonging to itinerant photographers, used ordinary domestic chairs. In some cases these chairs had padding added to

the top of the chair back so that the customers could lean on them without too much discomfort - this addition can be fairly crudely done (see Fig. 3) or can be artistically crafted (see Fig. 4) - or anything in between.

One particular type of chair used in its original form by some better class studios was the prayer chair which was designed with a low 'seat' for kneeling on and a long elegant back topped by a pad for resting one's elbows on when praying (see Fig. 5 which shows a man of



Fig 1: One of the most popular posing chairs shown here being used simultaneously from the front (kneeling) and the back (leaning) - note the adjusting screws on the chair back.



Fig 2 (left): Two different, beautifully made 'chairs' but unsuitable for sitting on for any period of time.

Fig 3 (right): A domestic chair with a padded platform 'plonked' on the top.

Fig 4 (below): A domestic chair with an artistically designed and fringed addition on the top of the back.



religion using it, but only as a prop).

Adjustable chairs

To cope with different shapes and sizes from small children to extra large adults, it was necessary to make adjustable chairs.

Adjustments were of two main types, height and angle of tilt. In almost all photographs it is impossible to see how these adjustments worked. Either the sitter obscured the mechanism or it was hidden intentionally by a fancy fringe on the chair, or the chair was in its original position (i.e. not adjusted/extended). However, one occasion that tended to reveal chair adjustments was when children of different sizes from the same family had their portraits taken separately, but at the same photo session. The chair was adjusted for one child and then re-adjusted for another (see Fig. 6).

Adjustment mechanisms ranged in quality from DIY (see Figs. 7 & 8) to specialist design and manufacture. In fact, the famous photographer Oliver Sarony from Scarborough was complimented roundly by the RPS and the press at the time for his contribution to studio furniture



Fig 5 (right): A prayer chair used as a prop by a religious gentleman.

design - especially his posing chair.

Adjustment mechanisms consisted usually of extension rods secured by knurled knobs (see Figs. 9, 10, 11 & 12), slots and pins (see Fig. 13) or, in one example I have seen, a substantial winding wheel (see Fig. 14). Some specialist chairs also appear to have a tilting top to accommodate

the specific poses that the photographer wanted his customers to adopt (see Fig. 15).

Posing curiosities

Columns, balustrades, adjustable tables and even a pair of stacked photograph albums were often used to get the poses right, make the sit-



Fig 6 (above left): Two brothers - with the chair adjusted to accommodate their different heights.



Fig 7 (above): A Heath Robinson DIY attachment which maybe doubled as a head rest - used by itinerant photographer C. Banyard.



Fig 8 (above right): A domestic type chair with two sliding rods to raise the height of the back - also used by C. Banyard.

Fig 9 (left): Two different adjustable chairs raised on sliding rods.



Fig 10: The most popular chair raised to accommodate a tall lady.

ters comfortable and help them to keep still. But four particular aids caught my eye and are worth a particular mention.

Firstly, someone (manufacturer unknown) made a magnificent posing stand - with a tilting top. Photos of it turn up now and again from studios in various parts of the coun-

try so I can only assume that these stands were manufactured in the UK and distributed country-wide (see Fig. 16). These heavily carved and upholstered props are very specialised and would appear to offer no scope for alternative use - they will have almost certainly been disposed of when no longer required.

Secondly, there was a period when rustic furniture and backcloths became very popular. One particu-



Fig 11: Another example of the same chair raised to suit a standing girl.



Fig 12: Two views of the same chair but from two different studios. The back/arm rest raises up on rods secured by screwed knobs.



Fig 13(left): Two similar chairs with rising heads. One clearly showing a slotted adjustment and another with holes and pins.



Fig 15 (left): A chair with a tilting head mechanism secured by a wing nut (just visible).



lar example of a chair is so extreme that it is hardly recognisable at all (see Fig. 17).

Thirdly, a curiosity that could actually be a camera stand - but is being used to support our canine friend as

well as to keep him in one place long enough to take his photograph (see Fig. 18).



Fig 14 (below): Two more brothers. The image of the taller one exposing the wheel mechanism on the back of the chair.

Fourthly, a chair made especially for posing which had a back but only one arm to rest on (see Fig. 19).

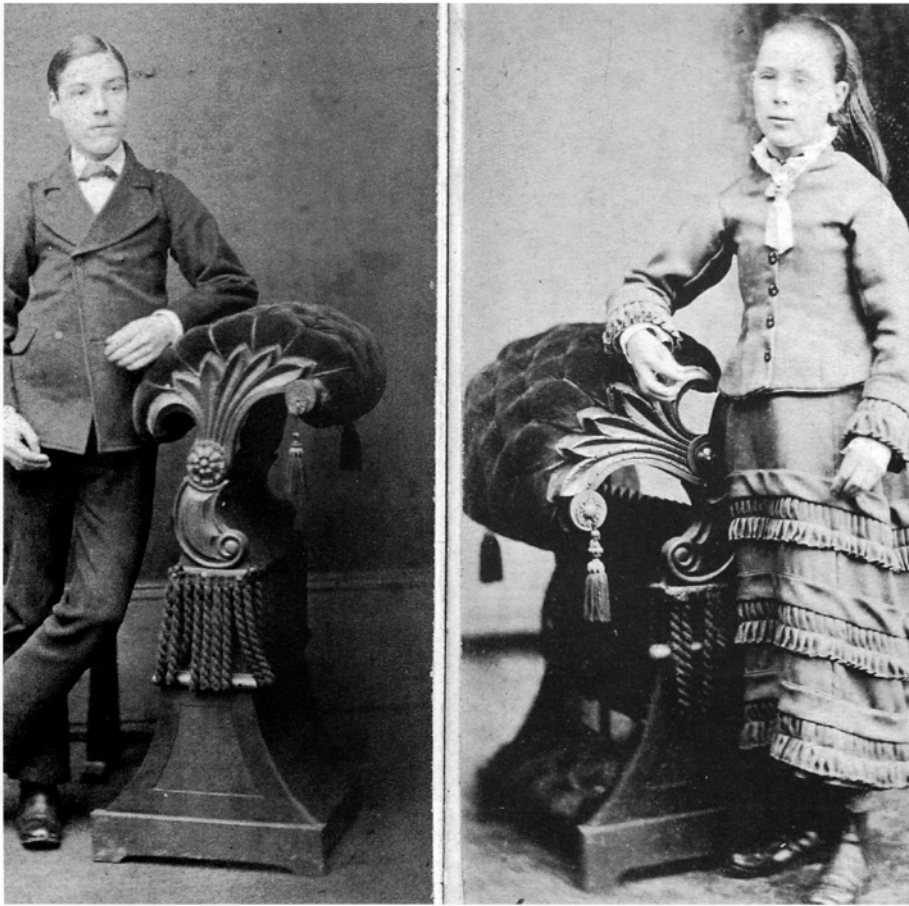


Fig 16: Two examples of the same posing stand but from different studios. Note the different angles of the upholstered top.

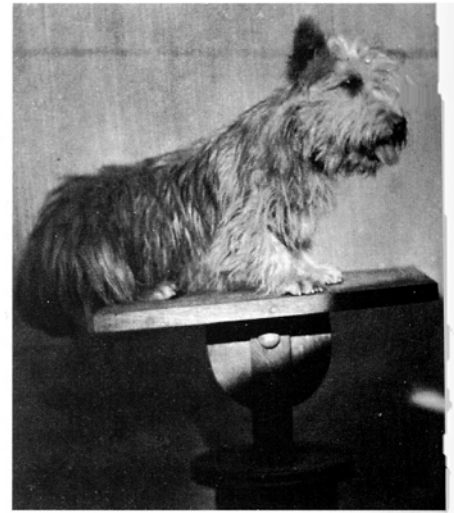


Fig 18: Is it a dog poser? (or a camera stand?)



Fig 19: A one-armed posing chair from the 1880s.



Fig 17: Is it a chair? Yes.

Interestingly, there is at least one company in the USA that still manufactures today a 'Victorian Wicker Posing Chair' which has one arm.

Conclusion - help!

Actual examples of studio furniture are hard to find and collect nor is

there is a lot of literature freely available. I have also found that our good friend Google struggles to find anything particularly relevant so - can you help?

For further research, can you point me in the direction of any

- Actual examples
- Catalogues from manufacturers or retailers
- Information/ articles on studio furniture
- Any further photographs?