

Victorian studios the background

What do the cartes reveal? In previous articles, using the information taken from cartes de visite and cabinet cards, we have looked at the product, how it was marketed and at what the studios looked like from the outside. Time to open the door and look inside.

ONCE past the reception and display area, and in the bigger studios the ladies' dressing rooms, the door would open into the studio itself with its camera and the much-maligned head rest. To construct his studio set, the first thing the Victorian photographer needed to organise was the background which consisted of anything from a plain wall to a simple cloth to a magnificently painted canvas.

In front of the background would be arranged the props (balustrades, fences etc.), the furniture (chairs, tables etc.) and the accessories (photo albums, toys, flowers etc.). These are not discussed here and will be looked at in more detail in a later article.

As with all types of business, the quality of the different studios varied enormously. Consequently it is helpful to look at studio backgrounds from two very different angles -

- *Socially, from the humble to the high and mighty, and*
- *Chronologically, from the 1860s to the early 1900s.*

From the humble to the high and mighty

Victorian studios can be broadly categorised as itinerant (the humble),



A humble cabinet by an unknown itinerant photographer. Created backdrop with brick wall visible.

mass market and high society (the high and mighty).

The Humble: The itinerant or travelling photographer catered for the

cheap end of the market and had to set up the studio and take it down in short order. Therefore the background often consisted of no more than a piece of cloth or a bed sheet which was pinned up to a convenient surface, and it was not often ironed at that. It is not uncommon for this

type of back-cloth to be seen in combination with brick walls, rough grass or dirt floors.

Although some travelling photographers did produce photos that appear to have been taken in a static studio - complete with painted background and other suitable props - these are the exception rather than the rule.

The Mass Market: This second category encompasses the huge majority of photographers who worked in static studios, although many did also offer home visits e.g.

to photograph 'gentlemen's residences', 'the sick and elderly', 'groups at home' etc.

Most people, if asked today, would



Mass market - cabinet showing two nicely painted backcloths.

describe their vision of a Victorian studio as having a big camera and a painted backcloth so, whilst researching for this article, I was surprised to discover just how few Victorian cards of the era actually showed a backcloth - less than 20% when averaged throughout the period although this varied considerably from decade to decade. Many studios embellished their images solely by using drapes, props and furniture.

Early cartes de visite had plain backdrops, sometimes incorporating draped curtains to hide the base of the head clamp stand. By the mid 1860s it became more common to place the sitter in an attractive setting to enhance the photograph, the photographer and, thus, the self esteem of the subject. Many of the earlier studio photographers had worked as artists and many others used artists to hand colour their photographs.

Therefore, the availability of artistic skills led easily to the production of painted backdrops, often in the grand style of the scenes in the oil paintings of the period.

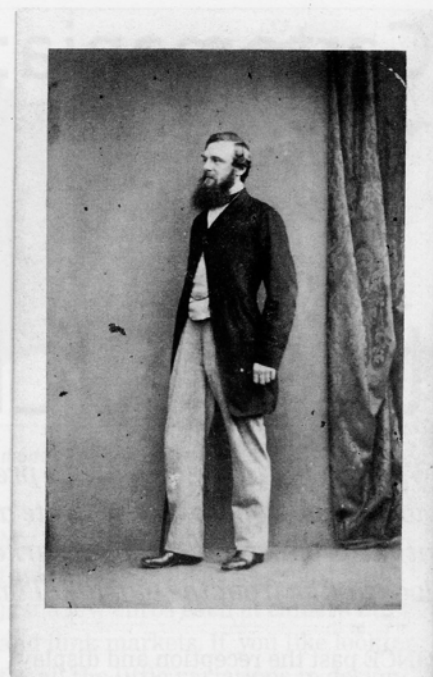
The earlier painted backdrops often depicted an interior scene, with bookcases being commonly evident, or they showed an open window with an attractive or interesting view beyond. Initially, the style of studio backgrounds tended to be fairly similar from one studio to the next but later, especially in the 1880s and the 1890s when the cabinet card was in its prime, they became much more diverse and individualistic. This could have been partly because of the explosion in the actual number of studios and partly because, as prices dropped to within the reach of most families, the social range of the photographers' clients widened and tastes became more diverse and less demanding.

Of course, painted backdrops were not always necessary. In good weather, the popular photographer occasionally took pictures out of doors, often in the grounds of the studio, using a suitable doorway or an ivy covered wall as an interesting setting.

The High and Mighty: Both London (Silvy, Claudet and Disderi) and Edinburgh (Moffat, Crooke and Ayton) had more than one high class



CdV with typical painted bookcase, Dated 1867



CdV with plain background. Dated 1859

photographer of national or international renown.

Most other big cities and towns just had one firm that was recognised as being the esteemed leader in the area. Places that seemed to attract particularly good photographers included Scarborough (Sarony), partly because of the upper class tourist trade, Leamington, Tunbridge Wells (H P Robinson) and Dublin (John Chancellor).

These highly regarded photographers were superb artists with superb studios and, consequently, with superb backgrounds - and other props to match. Obviously the better photographers tended to have better sets, presumably because they could afford the best artists, and their photos confirm that they had a much wider range of backcloths as well.

Interestingly, some famous photographers, including Frank Meadow Sutcliffe whose genre work is so stunning and Friese-Greene who was known as the 'father of the cinema', had rather modest studios and produced studio work of a very ordinary quality.



CdV from W & D Downey's Newcastle studio showing a painted Newcastle Cathedral through the window c1870.



CdV with exotic scenery. c1875



CdV with woodland scene, and furniture to match c1875

From the early days to the end of the era

Now let's look at the backgrounds chronologically. It is interesting to see the development in style which can, along with other clues, help to date a photo.

The overall period of the carte de visite (including the larger cabinet card) ranges in the main from about 1860 to 1905 and examples have been selected here to illustrate the changing styles of the studio backgrounds used throughout that period. Using photographs from the mass market studios as a guide, (and not those by top photographers like Camille Silvy of London) the following patterns emerge.

Initially, backgrounds were very plain. However, it was not long before draped curtains were brought into use and by 1863 painted backcloths became more common, usually depicting classical columns or simple book cases which, presumably, were intended to ennoble the studio and the sitter - most sitters at that time

being of the richer and more noble variety.

By 1865 it was becoming more common to paint a view through an open window, sometimes showing actual local landmarks. Full size scenic backcloths were also introduced and these were generally nicely painted



CdV with seascape. Dated 1882

views of stately home gardens, exotic trees, lakes or mountains. A large percentage of the cartes de visite of the 1870s showed little or no backcloth but by the beginning of the 1880s the painted background came back into its own again, being particularly effective in the larger cabinet photographs that were so popular at the time.

Some studios continued to use painted interiors but scenes of woodlands were by far the most common and seascapes were popular, particularly in the coastal resorts like Blackpool and Douglas in the Isle of Man.

One interesting factor which particularly affected background design was the pose of the subject. As plates and lenses got faster and as artificial lighting was introduced, the photographer was able to get closer and closer to his subject. Hence earlier photos nearly always showed only full length people but by 1870 three quarter length portraits and seated portraits started to appear and remained common throughout the period. Also in the 1890s the head

shot was often presented as a vignette with all extraneous detail (including the background) excluded from the final image.

To summarise, Victorian studio backgrounds ranged from plain walls to draped curtains to no background at all; and from superbly painted, artistic scenes to those more akin to a pantomime stage; some even looking as if they might have been painted by the photographer on a bad day.

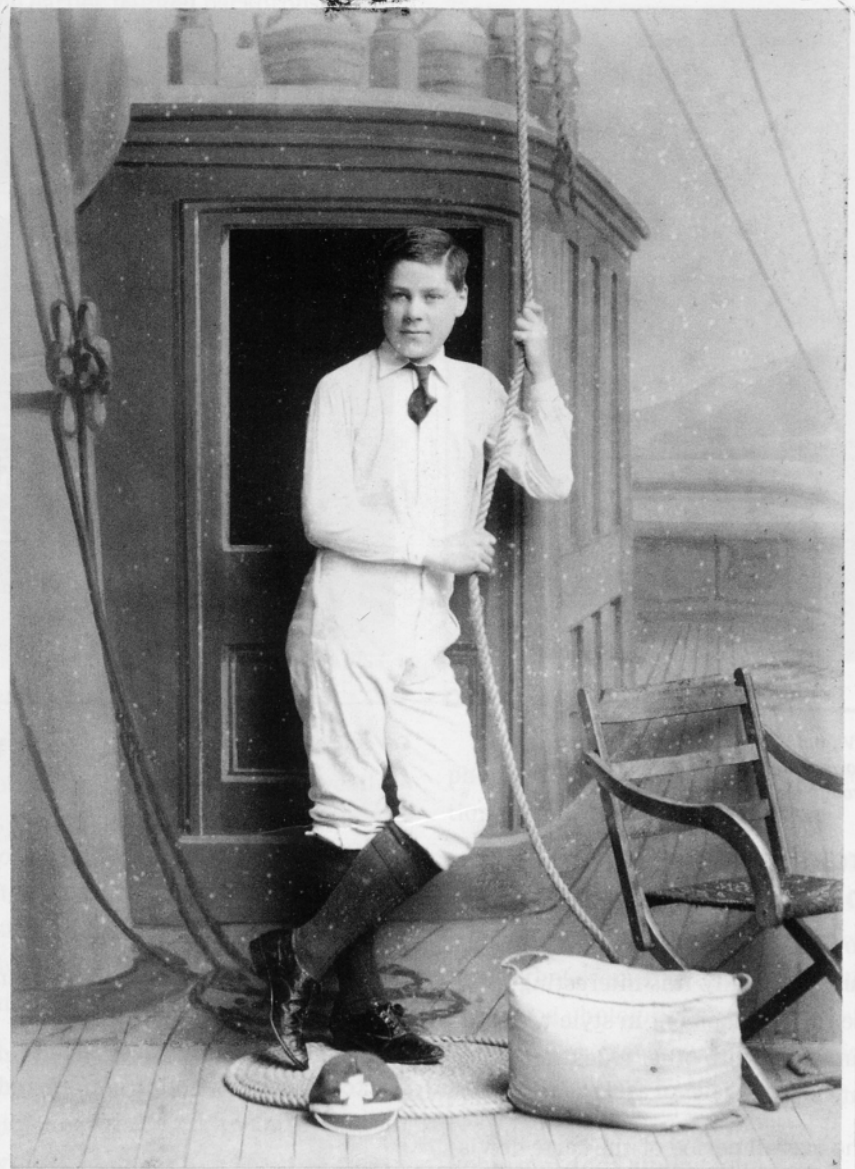
Painted backcloths were often works of art in themselves and there must have been thousands of them in London alone - so, where are they all now? Does anyone know of a genuine, original example? If so do contact me via www.victorianimagecollection.com as I would like to investigate further.

Right: Cabinet card showing an unusual subject - a beautifully painted scene of a ship's deck c1881

Below: Detail of a cabinet photo with crudely painted urn and flowers. Note the bottom of the rolled up backcloth on the floor. c1895



Guide to the Styles of Painted Backgrounds in Victorian Studios. Dates are indicative only as fashions were not followed by all photographers at all times



Cabinet

J. ADAMSON & SON



Portrait

HEGAY N.B.

Date (approx)

Style introduced and popular

Pre 1860

Plain background and some draped curtains

1863-1870

Draped curtains, painted columns and bookcases.

1865-1875

Scenes showing through a window or full scenic vistas

1880 onwards

Outdoor scenes revived and woodlands popularised

1882 onwards

Seascapes and other nautical themes appear

1890 onwards

Amateurish backgrounds more apparent

1890 onwards

Vignettes were common with no background used