

Photography and the American Civil War

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Educator Workshop | Tuesday, February 4

New Orleans Museum of Art

Exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Photography and the American Civil War by Jeff L. Rosenheim

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OVERVIEW

Photography and the American Civil War does not attempt to catalogue a history of the Civil War but rather sets out to explore the role of the camera at a watershed moment in American History.

During the war years (1861-1865) the medium of photography was rapidly evolving and what survives from the period includes a range of photographic processes. The exhibition features daguerreotypes, vintage albumen silver prints, original collodion-on-glass plate negatives, in cased ambrotypes and tintypes, stereographic scenes, and cartes-de-visite.

During the Civil War approximately a thousand photographers worked separately and in teams to produce hundreds of thousands of portraits and views that were actively collected during the period. These photographs reveal the complex social and political dynamics of a nation's changing view of itself. In the creation of this vast treasury of photography – a national library of sorts – the camera played a key role the opposing armies and their leaders could not: it defined and perhaps even helped to unify the nation through an unrehearsed and unscripted act of collective memory making.

The images range from heroic portraits of soldiers to devastated landscapes, wounded soldiers, and fields strewn with the dead. They give us a personal look into the Civil War, capturing the experience of soldiers, slaves, women and children, alongside historical figures such as President Abraham Lincoln and Sojourner Truth. They are a testimony to the toll the Civil War took revealing the pivotal role that photography played in shaping public opinion.



Unknown artist, *Captain Charles A. and Sergeant John M. Hawkins, Company E, "Tom Cobb Infantry," Thirty-eighth Regiment, Georgia Volunteer Infantry*, 1861-62, quarter-plate ambrotype with applied color.

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THEMES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

- Manipulating Photography During the Civil War
- Civil War Portraits
- The African American Experience
- Counting the Dead
- Roles of Women
- Photography and Medicine
- Devastated Landscapes

CONSIDER

- How can photographs be used as historical documents and not simply as illustrations?
- What can a photograph reveal about the motivations of the photographer or the people it depicts?
- How might it have been different to view these photographs during the Civil War?
- How has the role of photography in society changed since the Civil War and how has it stayed the same?
- How do these photographs shed light on the larger social and cultural significance of the war?

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MANIPULATING PHOTOGRAPHY DURING THE CIVIL WAR

From almost the moment this new medium of photography was developed, it was manipulated to serve various purposes. Photographers were unable to alter photographs as easily as today, yet they still manipulated their images in various ways to serve their own purposes. Every photographer makes decisions even at the most basic level including what to photograph, how to crop an image, what to include and what to leave out. Jeff Rosenheim, the curator of *Photography and the American Civil War*, makes the argument that this period in the development of photography was a defining moment in American democracy. The accessibility of photography to the masses made it possible to control one's own image and share a point of view.

The portrait of Abraham Lincoln taken by Matthew Brady (see the following page) was taken with a soft focus making Lincoln appear more handsome as the wrinkles in his face are obscured. Later in his life, Brady claimed that he had taken the photograph that made Lincoln president. Lincoln himself conceded that Brady had "got my shadow and could multiply copies indefinitely." Even today political campaigns can be made or destroyed by one flattering or unfortunate image. The common adage that a picture is worth a thousand words was as true during the Civil War as it is today.

The manipulation of imagery was a physical process as much as a photographic one. It happened in the staging of the dead on the battlefield and even through the choices of what people wore while sitting for these portraits. Frances Clayton was a woman who served in the Union army by disguising herself as a man. In a popular carte-de-visite collected by soldiers at the end of the war, she poses as Jack Williams and suggestively holds the handle of a cavalry sword between her crossed legs. The facts of her life story and military service are difficult to confirm, but it is believed that she served in the Missouri cavalry (or infantry) beside her husband, who died at the Battle of Stones River in late December 1862.

George Barnard's stunning panoramas of the devastation inflicted on the landscape by the Civil War were created using multiple negatives. While the technology of photography itself continued to evolve throughout the Civil War, getting the correct exposure for both the landscape and the sky in one negative was impossible at the time. Working from multiple negatives allowed George Barnard to insert ethereal skies over vanquished landscapes conveying the epic nature of the toll this war had taken on America and its people.

DISCUSS

- What role does photography continue to play in political campaigns?
- Is photography crucial to democracy?



Samuel Masury,
Frances Clalin Clayton, 1864-66, albumen silver print (carte de visite).



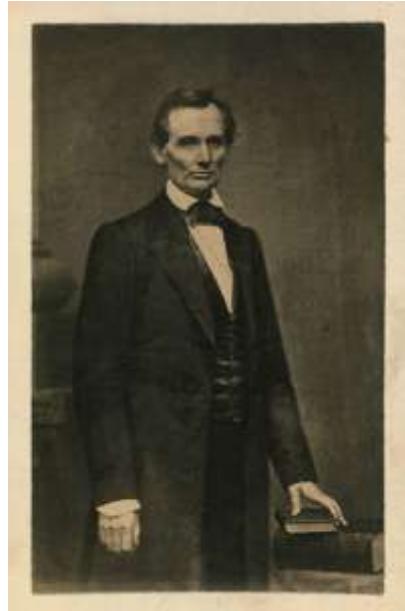
George N. Barnard,
City of Atlanta, Georgia, No.2, 1866, albumen silver print.

CIVIL WAR PORTRAITS

The Civil War defined an era when photography transformed portraiture from a luxury good to a necessity: at ten cents to two dollars an image, a portrait of one's self and one's friends, of regimental commanders and fellow combatants, was affordable for virtually every citizen, North and South. The low price and relatively high quality of the images, however, cannot alone explain the total saturation into the culture of the carte-de-visite, the ambrotype, and the tintype. The very fact of the war and the real threat of severe injury—or death, for one in five soldiers—drew tens of thousands of men and their families to photography studios. In these Civil War portraits, a picture of American society emerges—an entire nation of faces searching for identity and looking at the camera to find its way there.

There are numerous portraits in the exhibition. Consider the experiences of many different types of people: women, children, soldiers, former slaves.

Abraham Lincoln A prairie lawyer from Kentucky and a former Illinois congressman, Abraham Lincoln won the November 6, 1860, presidential election by defeating his chief rival, Stephen Douglas. The vote was essentially split along the North-South divisions of free and slave states. Photographic likenesses of both candidates played an important role in the election, as the four political parties distributed the world's first photographic campaign buttons to the populace.



Mathew B. Brady, *Abraham Lincoln*, February 27, 1860, albumen silver print (carte-de-visite).

WRITE

Have the students select one of the sample portraits. Ask the students to write about the following when they look at a portrait:

- What image of themselves were the people in the photograph hoping to convey?
- How did they do this?
- What did they choose to include in the photo?
- What did they choose to wear?
- What about their identity did they assert through their portrait?

RESEARCH

Joan Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1847-1900*

Mary Niall Mitchell, "Rosebloom and Poor White or So It Seemed," *American Quarterly* (2002)

Nell Irvin Painter, "Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *Journal of American History*



Unknown artist, *Woman Holding Cased Portraits of Civil War Soldiers, 1861-65*, sixth-plate tintype with applied color.



Unknown artist, *Private James House, Sixteenth Georgia Calvary Battalion, Army of Tennessee, 1861-62 (?)*, sixth-plate ruby glass ambrotype.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The seamless photographic national portrait being created by individuals across America for a host of different reasons and purposes would also help delineate the lives of the country's most disenfranchised and invisible from the cultural record: African Americans.

In his July 4, 1861 speech on the anniversary of the country's independence, Lincoln affirmed his understanding that the American government was responsible and that the contest was being fought for the rights of all men, black and white: "This is essentially a People's contest... to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." The medium of photography, in very real ways, would serve this noble cause. The photographs taken during the Civil War provide some of the earliest images of African Americans.

RESEARCH

- Look at two recruitment posters available from the National Archives, one from the Union ("To Colored Men!") and one from the Confederacy ("Wanted: 200 Negroes!")
<http://docsteach.org/activities/21/detail>
- Using "To Colored Men!" consider the plight of black soldiers fighting for the Union during the war.
<http://docsteach.org/activities/14765/detail>

DISCUSS

- How do the two recruitment posters give insight into African Americans North and South how they were photographed during the war?
- What roles did they play?

RESOURCES

Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (2008)

Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012)

Andrew Slap, "The Loyal Deserters: African American Soldiers and Community in Civil War Memphis," in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges*

Freedmen & Southern Society Project: primary documents related to black wartime labor: <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/sampdocs.htm>



Gayford & Speidel, *Private Christopher Anderson, Company F, 108th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry*, January-May 1865, albumen silver print (carte-de-visite).



Attributed to Andrew Joseph Russell, *Laborers at Quartermaster's Wharf, Alexandria Virginia, 1863-65*, albumen silver print.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POLITICS

Carte-de-visite portraiture during the Civil War era offered ordinary Americans, and the picture-makers who courted them, an unprecedented amount of graphic and political freedom. The results are images of the times showing more diverse types of men and women than had ever been depicted in any medium. Portraits such as the *Slave Children from New Orleans*, *Sojourner Truth*, and *The Scourged Back* were purposefully selected to convey a political message.

Sojourner Truth Born Isabella Baumfree to a family of slaves in Ulster County, New York, Sojourner Truth sits for one of the war's most iconic portraits. She used her carte-de-visite to promote and raise money for her many causes. The imprint on the carte-de-visite features the sitter's statement in bright red ink as well as a Michigan 1864 copyright in her name. By owning control of her image, her "shadow," Sojourner Truth could sell it. In so doing she became one of the era's most progressive advocates for slaves and freedmen after Emancipation, for women's suffrage, and for the medium of photography. At a human-rights convention, Sojourner Truth commented that she "used to be sold for other people's benefit, but now she sold herself for her own."

The Scourged Back Perhaps the most famous of all known Civil War era portraits of slaves, the photograph dates from March or April 1863 and was made in a camp of Union soldiers along the Mississippi River, where the subject took refuge after escaping his bondage on a nearby Mississippi plantation.

On Saturday, July 4, 1863, this portrait and two others of Gordon appeared as wood engravings in a special Independence Day feature in *Harper's Weekly*. McPherson & Oliver's portrait and Gordon's narrative in the newspaper were extremely popular, and photography studios throughout the North duplicated and sold prints of *The Scourged Back*. Within months, the carte-de-visite had secured its place as an early example of the wide dissemination of ideologically abolitionist photographs.



Unknown artist,
*Sojourner Truth, "I Sell
the Shadow to Support
the Substance,"* 1864,
albumen silver print.



Attributed to McPherson
& Oliver, *Gordon, a
Runaway Mississippi
Slave, or "The Scourged
Back,"* March-April
1863, albumen silver
print (carte-de-visite).

Slave Children from New Orleans Not all the emancipated slaves brought from New Orleans as part of an education fundraising campaign appear to be African American. The anti-slavery tour organizers believed that by showing Northerners photographs of “white” children who had been slaves, they would stir the emotions of the widest possible audience of viewers against the cruelty of the slave system.

Frank, Frederick & Alice After the Battle of Gettysburg, a Union soldier was found with no form of identification other than an ambrotype of three children clutched in his hand. But, it became a piece of propaganda after he fell on the battlefield and the unidentified portrait of his children was found and published. After the Battle of Gettysburg, J. Francis Bourns, a Philadelphia physician saw the ambrotype of the three children that had been found in the hands of the dead soldier. He subsequently bought the photograph with the intention of locating the soldier’s family.

Newspapers throughout the North republished the article and ultimately it was seen by Philinda Humiston, the mother of the three children. She had not heard from her husband, Amos, a soldier in the 154th New York Volunteer Infantry, since before Gettysburg. She positively identified her children. While the original carte-de-visite was never returned to her, Francis Bourns raised enough money from a charitable gift and sales of copies of the carte-de-visite to open the National Homestead at Gettysburg, a widows and orphans home. Humiston herself went on to remarry and relocated in Massachusetts.

DISCUSS

- How did these portraits compare with personal portraits?
- Did the sitter have much influence on how they were photographed?
- How did the sponsors of these images try to appeal to a broad audience?
- What kind of message were they hoping to convey?
- Why would someone purchase one of these photographs?
- Why was the carte-de-visite such an effective medium?

DEBATE

- How is photography used to shape public opinion today?
- As technology continues to evolve, is photography more or less believable?
- What strategies can you employ to be a more savvy media consumer?



Charles Paxson, *Our Protection. Rosa, Charley, Rebecca. Slave Children from New Orleans*, 1863, albumen silver print (carte-de-visite).



Wenderoth, Taylor & Brown, *Frank, Frederick, & Alice. "The Children of the Battle Field,"* 1863, albumen silver print (carte-de-visite).

COUNTING THE DEAD

The probable death toll for the Civil War was recently revised from 600,000 to between 750,000 to 850,000. The difference between the two estimates is large enough to change the way we look at the war. The new estimate suggests that more men died as a result of the Civil War than from all other American wars combined.

Approximately 1 in 10 white men of military age in 1860 died from the conflict, a substantial increase from the 1 in 13 implied by the traditional estimate. The death toll is also one of our most important measures of the war's social and economic costs. A higher death toll implies that more women were widowed and more children were orphaned as a result of the war than has long been suspected.

Dedicated photographers worked almost exclusively with fragile and cumbersome collodion-on-glass (wet-plate) negatives, which required delicate and laborious procedures even in the studio. When a photographer was ready for action, a sheet of glass was cleaned, coated with collodion, partially dried, dipped carefully into a bath containing nitrate of silver, then exposed in the camera for several seconds and processed in the field darkroom tent—all before the silver collodion mixture had dried. Given the danger of their situation and the technical difficulty of their task, frontline photographers rarely, if ever, attempted action scenes.

RESOURCES

J. David Hacker, "Recounting the Dead" *New York Times*, Disunion blog, September 20, 2011.

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/recounting-the-dead/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Art of Dying," *Journal of Southern History* [attached]

Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*



Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 1863*, albumen silver print.

ROLES OF WOMEN

Social customs in the 1860s greatly restricted the number of public roles for women in American society.

Gentle Anna Among the rarest of Civil War occupational portraits are those of nurses, such as Anna Etheridge who served in the Second and Third regiment of the Michigan Volunteer Infantry. Known as “Michigan Annie” or “Gentle Anna,” she enlisted as a nurse in 1861 and was present at Bull Run in Gettysburg, and thirty other battles. Daniel Crotty, the colored sergeant of the regiment described her as “the heroine and daughter of our regiment... She is along through storm and sunshine, in the heat of battle caring for the wounded, and in the camp looking after the poor sick soldier.” She was beloved by all who saw her on the battle field retrieving the wounded even under enemy fire. Pinned to her blouse is the Kearny Medal, a Union combat decoration awarded to soldiers of overwhelming bravery, which she received on May 27, 1863. Unfortunately it took Congress until 1887 to recognize her meritorious service and award her a veteran’s pension. Etheridge lived until 1913 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Patriotic Young Woman Holding Flag Behind the front lines, many women North and South devoted themselves to humanitarian or charity work with wounded soldiers, widows, and orphaned children. They also converted their homes into small “factories” filled with like-minded needle workers who dedicated themselves to producing quilts, blankets, and socks for their local regiments. Many even worked outside the home in armories and ammunition factories. This young woman is likely an actress in a regional or traveling theatrical company that put on short patriotic plays.

DISCUSS

- Look at the illustration from *Harper's Weekly*. What was the illustrator saying about the changing roles of men and women?

RESOURCES

Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds. *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (1992)
Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War (2006)
Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996)



Unknown artist, *Anna Etheridge*, 1863-65, albumen silver print (carte-de-visite).



Unknown artist, *Patriotic Young Woman Holding Flag*, 1861-65, albumen silver print (carte de visite) from glass negative.



“Our Watering Places – The Empty Sleeve at Newport,” *Harper's Weekly*, August 26, 1865, page 532.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEDICINE

The medical portraits of the wounded and sick from the Civil War are among the most extraordinary of all late war photographs. 570 cartes-de-visite form a unique medical teaching album created between 1864 and 1865 by Dr. Reed Brockway Bontecou from fourteen months of photographing of his patients at Harewood Hospital in Washington, D.C. By any terms, the portraits in this album, as well as the period “teaching” enlargements seen here, are devastating—shocking for their humanity and their aesthetics.

Reed Brockway Bontecou, M.D. An army physician, Reed Brockway Bontecou mustered into service on May 14, 1861, in the Second New York Infantry in Troy, New York. By October 1863 he had accepted the appointment as head of Harewood General Hospital in Washington, D.C. It was there that he made his mark on the history of photography and medicine. In May 1864 Bontecou started to photograph his patients with a carte-de-visite format camera when they arrived from the field, before and after their surgeries, and upon recovery—or the opposite. He also meticulously recorded complete patient histories of all the soldiers he photographed. There is no precedent for these stunning portraits of the shared inner sanctum of patient and doctor.

DISCUSS

These photographs were the first time photography was used to document a patient’s medical condition, creating the earliest medical records.

- How has our relationship to medical records changed?
- How the experience of wounded war veterans changed with advances in prosthetics?



Reed Brockway Bontecou, *Private Samuel Shoop, Company F, 200th Pennsylvania Infantry*, April–May 1865, albumen silver print.

DEVASTATED LANDSCAPES

Photographers such as Andrew Joseph Russell and George N. Barnard attached to army regiments and captured the destruction caused by the Civil War battles. In early September 1864, when Union Major General William Tecumseh Sherman took Atlanta, Barnard traveled to Georgia to make a photographic survey of the extensive engineering of the Confederate defenses that ringed one of the South's largest cities. After witnessing and making photographs of Atlanta's almost total destruction, Barnard traveled in late 1864 and 1865 with Sherman's army to Savannah and then to Charleston, South Carolina.

The effects of the war on the southern landscape, in particular, were dire. But the ruined towns and cities of the South quickly became tourist destinations, both for locals and Northerners. Soldiers also preserved mementos of the destruction in their private collections.

DISCUSS

- What might these images of the ruins convey to members of the northern public who did not experience the destruction of their own towns and cities?
- Why would tourists want to visit these ruins?
- What they document about the effects of the war upon the South?

COMPARE

George Barnard's landscape photographs hint at the environmental effects of the war as well. Compare these "ruins" with those of the built environment (buildings, railroad lines). What effects did each have on the residents of the South?

RESOURCES

Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (2012)—esp. “Empty Sleeves and Government Legs: The Ruins of Men,” and “Our Own Pompeii: Ruined Cities”



Andrew Joseph Russell, *Rebel Caisson Destroyed by Federal Shells, May 3, 1863*, albumen silver print.



George N. Barnard, *Ruins in Charleston, South Carolina, 1865*, albumen silver print.