

## SUSAN LONG

# Now we know you are there: 19th to mid-20th century professional women photographers in the Pictures Collection

The images in State Library Victoria's online Pictures Collection catalogue are eclectic in subject matter and varied in photographic skill and execution. The visual material runs the full spectrum of photography and speaks of its omnipresence in people's everyday lives. Housed within this wealth of vernacular photography is the work of commercial women photographers, many of whom are unfamiliar or unknown to researchers and library users, and therefore not discoverable.

From its inception, photography was democratic by nature and driven by commercial profit and innovation. It attracted individuals from all walks of life: entrepreneurs, inventors, retailers, artists, public institutions, and those seeking gainful employment. As researcher and journalist Barbara Hall wrote in her introduction to *Australian Women Photographers 1840–1960*,

To think and write about photography as an art form within the specific terms of conventional art history is unrealistic. The origins and continuing development of photography distinguish it from painting and similar mediums. Photographic historians deal with an awkward medium, which, from the beginning, has equally been a tool for scientists, the police, the military, business interests, artists, and ordinary people.<sup>1</sup>

Elliott & Co., Studio portrait of woman, three-quarter length, seated, full face, wearing striped dress with mandarin collar, numerous buttons, photographic print on cabinet card: albumen sliver, 17 x 11 cm, c. 1888–1890, H2005.34/1184.



*Elliott & Co*

As an emerging technology unencumbered by the historical conventions of other creative disciplines, photography offered women the opportunity to gain financial independence and to express themselves creatively in their work. Because photography was not considered primarily a 'female' occupation, it also offered women the likelihood of higher pay than positions like typing, domestic work or nursing. This was appealing at a time when women were paid half or less on average than male wage earners.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the opportunity offered by the profession, it was by no means open to everyone, and women who did take up a camera struggled against social and artistic conventions. Unsurprisingly, the field of photography was not immune to class distinctions, racism and gender inequality. Unless related to the domestic sphere, women's creative work generally went unacknowledged or was overshadowed by the priority given to a husband's career. There was also a line drawn between 'amateur' and 'professional' practitioners.

Women who did enter the field were often taught photography by male family members. Many progressed to study photography at the Working Men's College (today RMIT) and from there graduated to apprenticeships and self-employment. By 1890 women made up 40 per cent of those enrolled in the Working Men's College night school photography classes.<sup>3</sup>

By 1900, numerous women ran photographic studios as proprietors and managers and many freelanced as photographers and camera operators, like their male counterparts. This is primarily evidenced by the frequent advertisements placed in Victorian newspapers, gazettes and commercial directories of the period, including *The Argus* (1848–1957), *The Australasian* (1864–1946) and *Sands & McDougall Directories* (1860–1974).<sup>4</sup>

### Rediscovering 'unnamed' women photographers

The principal sources of information on early women photographers are *Australians Behind the Camera*,<sup>5</sup> *The Mechanical Eye in Australia*,<sup>6</sup> *Australian Women Photographers 1840–1960*,<sup>7</sup> and the contemporary online resource *Photoria*.<sup>8</sup> All these sources thoroughly list, describe and provide clarification regarding the female photography workforce of the 19th century to mid-20th century. As wide-ranging as these titles are, they understandably do not name every woman who worked behind the camera, and many of those recognised are not held in the Pictures Collection. Simultaneously, the online Pictures catalogue holds work created by women photographers who are not acknowledged in any of the above reliable sources.

The task remained to identify the 'unknown' women behind the camera(s) – there can be only so many 'Jane Does' in a collection. I threw the net far and



**Top left** Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co., unidentified woman, *carte de visite*, albumen silver photograph, 11 x 7 cm, c. 1865–1886, H86.109/1/129. **Top right** Mr & Mrs Nicholas, unidentified woman, *carte de visite*, albumen silver photograph, 11 x 7 cm, c. 1858–1880, H2005.34/2043. **Bottom left** Miss Rosenthal's Photographic Studio, unidentified man, *carte de visite*, albumen silver photograph, 11 x 7 cm, c. 1860–1869, H2006.58/52. **Bottom right** Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co., unidentified man and woman, *carte de visite*, hand-coloured albumen silver photograph, 11 x 7 cm, c. 1865–1886, H2005.37/148.

wide and although I was interested in the period from 1850 to 1955, I did not limit the search to this period. It was important to have a wide catchment. I knew from referring to photographic sources that photographers flourished during certain periods and these dates are approximate. Records with 'circa' dates, while broad, can have earliest and latest dates that will limit what appears in a search.

It was during the search that the 'Elsie Factor' materialised – I searched the catalogue using popular 19th- and 20th-century women's first names as keywords. I refined the search further by sorting the list by oldest date first. From here, the hits just kept coming. Other keywords that helped return records and images from the catalogue included Miss, such as Miss M. Scott, and Mrs, such as Mrs Albert Brown. All those wonderful female diminutives also generated results. To name but a few: Minnie, Francie, Nell, Annie, Lizzie and Elsie. Misspelling of a family name could also deliver some joy, for instance 'Martini' for 'Martin'.

### The photographers

A work in progress list of commercial women photographers appears at the end of this article. The following photographers are highlighted for interest.

To date in my research, three *cartes de visite* portraits by **Miss Rosenthal**, Mr and **Mrs Nicholas**, and Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co. are the earliest photographs by women that are held in the Pictures Collection. *Cartes de visite* are photographic portraits mounted on small cards, initially produced as calling cards, approximately 11.4 x 6.3 cm in size. The French photographer A.A.E. Disderi patented the *carte de visite* in 1854 and the photographs became enormously popular from 1860 onwards. The verso of the *carte* was typically printed with the photographer's details including an insignia. *Cartes* became a global phenomenon and were traded and collected in Victorian photograph albums. Further research could reveal earlier female photographers, as many *cartes de visite* are held in bound albums and photographers' names are not noted in those catalogue records.

*Cartes de visite* photographs were first introduced to Sydney in 1859 and most probably to Melbourne in 1860.<sup>9</sup> All three pictures can be roughly dated on this basis, and by their visual appearance. The more minimal the *carte de visite*, the earlier its date of production – studio settings were sparse, lacking the later accoutrements of painted studio backdrops, drapery and impressive props. This leads me to speculate that the earliest photograph could well be Miss Rosenthal's portrait of an unidentified man with a flower in his lapel. This image has square corners, no backdrop and a simple photographer's stamp on

**LADIES' PHOTOGRAPHIC GALLERY, Miss Elliott, 139 Bourke street east, opposite Cole's Book Arcade. Cartes, 8s. 6d. dozen.**

**MRS. ABBEY'S PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIO, 52 Bourke street east, opposite the Albion. Children taken instantaneously.**

Top Advertisement for Ladies Photographic Gallery, *Argus*, 18 February 1880, p. 3.

Bottom Advertisement for Mrs Abrey's Photographic Studio, *Argus*, 13 March 1876, p. 1.

verso, indications of an early *carte de visite*. Later *cartes de visite* have rounded corners (to facilitate housing in photo albums), decorated borders and thicker card mounts. Miss Rosenthal does not appear in any of the photography history resources or directories.

In 1864, **Emily Florence Kate O'Shaugnessy**, previously with rooms in Carlton, entered into partnership with Henry Johnstone & Co., forming Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co. The studio specialised in low-cost *cartes de visite*, hand-coloured photographs and larger format black and white prints. Significantly, Emily's involvement in the studio's output went chiefly unrecognised; her first name was never registered with the company name in any listings and Johnstone was the photographer with the entrenched reputation. Emily's surname was often rendered with variant spellings (O'Shannessy and O'Shaugnessy), making her more elusive in the catalogue. Barrie's *Behind the Camera* lists 'O'Shaugnessy, Mrs E.F.K.', with a 'see also Johnstone & O'Shannessy'.<sup>10</sup> In the *Sands & McDougall* for 1868, Emily finally appears under the alphabetical listing of 'O'Shannessy, Mrs (of Johnstone, O'Shannessy and Co.) Fitzroy-Street St. K.'<sup>11</sup>

**Florence Elliott** worked as a photographer and studio proprietor from 1879 to 1895, advertising her services under several business names. She traded as the 'Ladies Photographic Gallery' in 1880<sup>12</sup> and later established Elliott & Co. at 297 Chapel Street, Prahran in the late 1890s.

**Mrs Abrey** is known only by her married name and is listed in the 1876 *Sands & McDougall's* in the trade directory, under 'Photographers'.<sup>13</sup> As evidenced in the pictured advertisement placed in the Melbourne *Argus*, dated 18 February 1880, it appears Mrs Abrey also had a tactic for photographing fidgety children.

**Eliza Martin**, also known as Mrs Harrison Martin, was a photographer, studio manager and proprietor, working professionally from 1876 to 1900

in the studios of renowned Collins Street photographers Foster & Martin. Searching for Eliza Martin rendered no success in the Pictures catalogue until I typed in 'Eliza Martini'. Her name appears in the summary of the record of four portraits of a 'Mrs Siddons', stating that copyright was registered with the Victorian Patents Office Copyright Collection (VPOCC) 1897, by 'Eliza R. Martini and Charles W. Foster, 55 & 57 Collins Street East, Melbourne'. It is reasonable to assume that Martin contributed to the output of the Foster & Martin Studios during this period.

**Lizzie Chapman**, of Learmouth St, Moonee Ponds registered copyright for 'Jealousy and revenge' with the Victorian Patents Office in May 1897, at Melbourne Town Hall. These comedic photographs were pasted into the Patent Office scrapbooks and are still adhered to an original backing page.<sup>14</sup>

Registering photographs for copyright is reliable proof of a commercial photography operation and an intention to protect one's photographic product. Chapman does not appear in any of the major references relied upon for this article; however, the Victorian Patents Office Copyright Collection (VPOCC) 1897 is evidence not only of Chapman's commercial photographic practice but also of her humour and interest in the lives of female domestic employees. The first photograph depicts the flirtation between one maid and a policeman whilst another maid looks on angrily from a window above. In the second photograph, the second maid throws a bucket of water over the unsuspecting bobby.

The '1907 First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work' at Melbourne's Exhibition Buildings saw 65 women photographers from all states exhibiting more than 200 photographs in amateur and open classes.<sup>15</sup>

The work of **Alice Mills**, a prominent Melbourne photographer, was featured in an individual showcase. Initially Mills was in business partnership with her husband, painter Tom Humphrey. However, from 1904 onwards, she solely occupied a studio at 82 Elizabeth Street and became known for her expertise in all branches of photography, including sepia platinotypes, and exhibited water-coloured photographic portraits. An unsigned *Table Talk* review remarked that Miss Alice Mills's exhibition of July 1906 'revealed to many the clever and successful effort now being made to utilise natural tints in connection with the camera'.<sup>16</sup>

Alice Mills' success was indicative of the times, for if the 19th century had seen many women photographers working in partnership with studios and husbands, by the beginning of the 20th-century female photographers were now independently running up-and-coming city studios and were at the forefront of creative photography. During this time (1900–1920) there were



**Top left** Mrs Abrey's Photographic Studio, unidentified young girl, *carte de visite*, albumen silver photograph, 11 x 7 cm, c. 1876–1877, H2005.34/322. **Top right** Foster & Martin, Mrs Scott Siddons, cabinet card, albumen silver photograph, 16.5 x 11 cm, 1876, H96.160/2688. **Bottom left** Alice Mills, *Portrait of Winifred Craig*, photographic print: cyanotype, 1913, MS 13111/3/1431-1434. **Bottom right** Francie Young, *Woman with flowers*, hand-coloured gelatin silver photograph, 20.7 x 15.4 cm, c. 1915, MS 13111/3/1648.





Lizzie Chapman, *Jealousy and revenge*, albumen silver photograph, each 17.2 x 8.1cm, H96.160/526 and H96.160/527.

more female photographers than in decades to come, and if they had business partners, they were more likely to be other women photographers or often their sisters. Alice Mills sold her enterprise to former employees Stella and Francie Young,<sup>17</sup> and Ruth Hollick acquired the studio of Mina Moore.

**May and Mina Moore** were originally from New Zealand and opened a studio at 167 Collins in 1913. Despite the photographs being co-signed, the sisters ran separate studios for all but two years, with Mina leading the Melbourne concern and May the Sydney rooms, where she employed only women, except in the darkroom. Mina concentrated on theatrical studies



May and Mina Moore, *Gwen Burroughs*, gelatin silver photograph, toned, 19.7 x 13.7 cm, c. 1910–1913, H38782/135.

and portraits and soon had a large clientele. At one stage she worked with a female journalist, combining interview and portrait sessions. The Moore sisters continued to work as married women; however Mina, like many other women of the time, retired after the birth of her first child in 1918.<sup>18</sup> Despite the changing attitudes to ‘working women’, countless women withdrew from photographic practices once they married or had children.

The dominant creative photographic style from the 1890s onwards was pictorialism, which accentuated the beauty of subject matter, tonality and composition over realistic documentation. It was a conscious strategy to elevate



Pegg Clarke, *Sunset on the Yarra*, gelatin silver photographic print, 17.3 x 24 cm, c. 1930, H25299.

photography to a form of artistic expression and aesthetic value, as compared to the then pervasive commercial and domestic applications of photography. 'Photographic artists' considered themselves to be 'picture makers' rather than 'picture takers'.<sup>19</sup> This symbolist and impressionist imagery filtered into the work of a circle of professional women photographers, namely Ruth Hollick, Dorothy Izard and Pegg Clarke.

**Ruth Hollick** and **Dorothy Izard** were privately in a relationship and publicly partners in Hollick's Studio, with rooms located in the Auditorium building in Collins Street during the 1920s. Hollick eventually expanded the business to include an entire floor of the building next door, and it was here that Izard devised and built an ingenious shuttle, that ferried plates and prints from the Auditorium to the new studio and reception rooms.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Hollick had a national and international reputation for her innovative and stylish portraits, Izard had a low-key profile. Dorothy exhibited pictorial work with the Melbourne Club and entered photographic competitions, receiving occasional appraisal of her work in photographic journals, such as the February 1912 issue of the *Australasian Photographic Review*,



Top Ruth Hollick, *Quentin Cain*, transparency: glass lantern slide, 8.1 x 8.1 cm, c. 1910–1930, H93.500/98. Bottom Dorothy Izard, *Cloud over hills and paddock, Upper Murray*, gelatin silver photograph, 17 x 23.5 cm, c. 1910–1930, H93.501/6.



Pearl Freeman, *Mrs Traill* who was married in November...formerly Miss Greta Lindley of Preston, Queensland, Australia, gelatin silver photograph, 16 x 11 cm, c. 1942, H98.106/154.

where the editor remarked that her series of European images demonstrated ‘a very clear understanding of art principles... [and] a direct strength of purpose, only obtainable by a knowledge of composition and tone values.’<sup>21</sup> The dates of Izard’s practice are unclear; however, as Hollick retired in 1958, we could conjecture that her career travelled a similar path.

**Pegg Clarke** shared her studio with her life partner, the painter Dora Wilson, at ‘Rosebank’, 437 Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn. Unlike Hollick, Clarke had not attended the National Gallery Art School; however, she was a member of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors. Clarke’s reputation was comparable to that of Hollick’s and her studio was sustained by social, fashion and architectural photography. The library holds several of Clarke’s architectural pictures (H2006.169/1–12).



Nancy Weir

Patricia.

Nancy Weir, *Patricia*, gelatin silver photographic print mounted on cardboard, 15.1 x 10.6 cm, c. 1920–1929, H2014.1134/2.



During the 1920s Clarke received Melbourne commissions for the quarterly *The Home*, launched in Sydney in 1920, photographing stately homes and their owners. Her photo piece on the seaside home of Brigadier-General and Mrs Grimwade demonstrated her ability, cleverly arranging stiff figures reclining in a garden landscape.<sup>22</sup> Clarke exhibited during the length of her career and her solo shows were regularly reviewed in the Melbourne press. Her exhibition 'Camera Pictures' in 1930 received high praise from Arthur Streton, referring to her photographs as 'art' while commenting that her prints were 'pure photo-graphs' and in no way attempted to mimic painting.<sup>23</sup>

Clarke kept working close to the time of her death, which was sometime between 1956 and 1958.<sup>24</sup>

Nancy Weir's photograph of 'Patricia' quietly arrests the subject's returned gaze to the camera, contrary to the busy background wallpaper and the distraction of the classic 1920's fashion. Interestingly, Patricia is not smiling. The presentation of the print, its size, the art paper mount and the ink cursive title imply 'an eye' with artistic focus. I found no verification of Weir's



Elsie Dicker, detail, *Swanston Street Melbourne Coles staff of about 80 men and women Store No. 6*, gelatin silver photography, 12 x 46 cm, c. 1930–1940, MS13468/5; COLES016.

photographic practice; however, the *Sands & McDougall* 1925 directory lists a Mrs C. Weir art studio at Camberwell, which may be a possible connection.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of her career, **Elsie Dicker** specialised in panoramic group portraits. Dicker does not appear in any of the trade directories until 1945, when she is listed in *Sands & McDougall* as a portrait photographer.<sup>26</sup> The knack of the panoramic portrait, to capture a large group of people in an instant, provides the viewer with a varied landscape of subjects, presenting a parade of unpredictable facial expressions and poses. The effectiveness of the panoramic picture is in the viewing; the eye scans the image, and the idiosyncratic details of the sitters are exposed.

**Pearl Freeman's** portraits of Australian military nurses who served in England during World War II are held in the *Argus* newspaper collection of war photographs. Although no biographical information could be found on Freeman, we can presume that she was employed by the Melbourne *Argus* to photograph the nurses for a newspaper article of the time. While some pictures were taken on streets and in barracks, several are studio shots.





Mona McLeod, *Bairnsdale saleyards*, gelatin silver photograph, 11.4 x 15.9 cm, c. 1929, H19112.

**Mona Catherine McLeod** was a regional photographer and made her livelihood from photography for over 30 years. Barrie's *Australians Behind the Camera* notes that she was 'Apprenticed to Howard Bulmer' of Bairnsdale, who had been practising in the East Gippsland area since 1908.<sup>27</sup> In her teens, McLeod would have entered the profession as a camera assistant, eventually advancing to the position of photographer.

In 1931 and in her early twenties, McLeod set up her own studio in Bairnsdale, Victoria and continued the concern until her retirement in 1959. McLeod had a diverse practice, shooting photographs for local newspapers and the bread-and-butter work of portraiture and photo finishing. She photographed the terrifying Black Friday bushfires of January 1939, published as post cards (H22877–H22882), and apparently was not averse to climbing up a lamp post to get the best shot.

Like many of her peers, Mona's first encounter with photography was the gift of a box brownie as a young girl, an experience that made her determined to become a photographer.



Mona Mcleod, *Self portait*, gelatin silver photograph, 14.5 x 9.6 cm, 1944, H2014.1016/1.

### Women photographers in the Pictures Collection

Ada Dower (AJ Dower)	Janet Jevons
Alice Hughes	Judith Fletcher
Alice Mills	Leah Brown (The Thelma Studio)
Alice Reeve	Lillian Dean
Amy Morgan	Lizzie Caswall Smith
Amy Edith Reed	Lizzie Chapman
Amy Reed	Lucy Archibald Marie Dean
Annie Gabell	Mabel Russell Sutherland (Sutherland Studio)
Annie Vine (Vine's Studios)	Marie Cecilia
Augusta Zetterling	Marietta Malmgren (Marietta Studio)
Charlotte Rudolph	Mary Campbell
Clara Bawden	Mary Laffan
Clara Birkin (Vandyck Studio)	Mary Snowball
Clare Lewis	May Moore
Dorothy Coleman	Mina Moore
Dorothy Susan Izard (Ruth Hollick Studio)	Minnie Ella Smith
Dorothy Wilding	Miss Bowman's Studio (Bowman)
Eileen Lawson (The Daheim Studio)	Miss M Scott
Eileen O'Connor	Miss Rosenthal
Eliza Martin (Foster & Martin)	Mona Catherine McLeod
Eliza Shroeder	Mrs Abrey
Elizabeth Greenwood	Mrs Albert Broom
Elizabeth Nash-Boothby (Nash- Boothby Studios)	Mrs Cora Fraser (Fraser)
Elsie Dicker	Mrs Nicholas (Mr & Mrs Nicholas)
Emily Florence O'Shannessy (Johnstone & O'Shannessy Co.)	Mrs EF Schroeder (Edward F Schroeder)
Florence Elliott	Nance McKinnon (Brooklyn Studios)
Francie Young	Nancy Weir
Hilda Mitchell	Ursula Powys-Lybbe
Inez Hicks	<i>To be continued</i>
Isadore van Berckelaer	