

SUSAN LONG

Self-representation in the nineteenth century

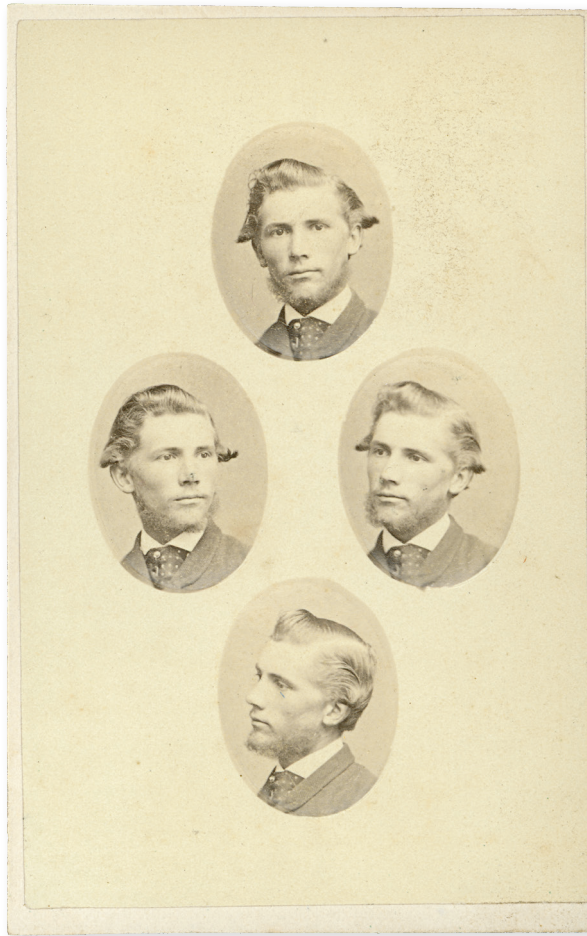
People have been sharing photographs of themselves with friends, family and strangers since the mid-1850s. At that time, *cartes de visite*, or visiting cards (now called, simply, 'cartes'), began to be produced in Europe and eventually spread to the Americas and Australia, marketed as 'portraits for the million' and indeed manufactured in uncountable millions and collected across all social groups.¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* described them on 12 May 1859 as

a novelty in the fine arts ... a new style of visiting card, on which is executed, with the most artistic taste and fidelity, a beautiful photographic portrait, possessing all the softness and delicacy of touch of the most finished miniature, whilst every line and feature is as clear and sharp as a first-class engraving. The idea is certainly novel, that a visitor, instead of leaving his or her name, on their calling card, should present their *vraisemblance*.

The cartes' massive commercial production and circulation, before their decline towards the end of the century, are reflected in the large collection, of several thousands, held by State Library Victoria, acquired primarily through generous donations. The *La Trobe Journal* asked librarian Susan Long to give us a brief history of the cartes and an introduction to the Library's collection.

C Hawkins, *Annie*, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1863–78, H86.109/1/5





Post Office Photographic Studio, four portrait photographs of an unidentified man's face from different angles, photographic print on carte-de-visite mount: albumen silver, black and white (hereafter 'carte de visite'), 11 × 7 cm, c. 1865–69, H2005.34/2206

L TJ: At the start of the 1850s, photographic portraits were created mostly as standalone copies by using a single-lens camera and a separate glass-plate negative for each pose. They were fairly expensive to produce – not widely affordable or sharable. What happened to change the situation?

In 1854, along came the French photographer André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri with a patent for producing multiple images on a single plate in just one sitting, made possible by his unusual camera, which had four lenses and a divided septum. This process reduced production costs, as several poses could be captured on a single plate at one sitting. Up to eight albumen photographic portraits could be made from one full-size negative plate measuring 20 by 20 centimetres, cut into separate images and made into individual cartes.

Each carte comprised the small photographic print, which initially measured 8.9 by 5.4 centimetres, glued onto a mounting card of 10.0 by 6.4 centimetres. It could be held in the palm of one's hand. Earlier albumen



Left: Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co., *J. Linton*, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1865–86, H2010.134/27



Right: Batchelder & O'Neill, unidentified man, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1857–63, H2013.364/15



Left: George William Perry, *Mrs. Henry Neil Warner*, photographic print on carte de visite mount: albumen silver, hand-coloured, 10.7 × 6.5 cm, 1860, H10276



Right: Charles Nettleton, unidentified woman, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1860, H2006.58/31



Left: George Willetts, unidentified woman and three children, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1860–96, H2005.34/2841



Right: RE Diederich, unidentified family group, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1855–1900, H2005.34/1050

photographs could not be carried around in a purse or breast pocket, and mailing wasn't the first thing that came to mind. But with the innovative cartes, for the first time, one's identity could be easily communicated by picture instead of text.

It took several years for Disdéri's photographic system to become established in English-speaking countries, but when it did, it was soon clear that it provided a commercial solution to the Victorians' insatiable appetite for photographic portraits. The cartes made it to Australian shores in 1859 and by the early 1860s were the dominant mode of photographic portraiture.²

In function, the cartes originally imitated printed calling cards, except that they bore the small photographic portrait of the caller rather than their name. The person, especially their face, was central to the image, as in the portraits of the sitters on page 51. In this regard, cartes changed how images were produced and circulated and are part of 19th-century media history. Cartes were used in the sharing and projection of the self, being primarily concerned with self-representation and self-expression.

Undeniably, studio photography was affordable only to the solid middle class. However, at the same time, cartes represented for many people their



Nicholas Michael O'Donnell



Mr. Patrick Barry & Mr. O'Hanlon
Glenview



Nicholas Michael O'Donnell (compiler), O'Donnell family photographs, album containing 57 photographs (7 cabinet cards, 50 cartes de visite): albumen silver and gelatin silver, 1817-83, MS 15198/PHO3



Davies & Co., *Lion & lioness*, carte de visite, 7 × 11 cm, c. 1860–69, H2004.55/36

first opportunity to have a photographic portrait taken and were a serious commitment. Consequently, despite cartes becoming more affordable over time, many families would still have made financial sacrifices to obtain their portraits.

People were usually photographed sitting or standing still. It was necessary for subjects to be motionless for several seconds – hence the formal, stiff portraits. It was also understood that a certain standard of neatness and, if possible, elegance optimised the photographer's results. On the occasions when families of humbler means sat for group portraits, the effort they made towards respectability is often in evidence. We can see this in the family portraits taken by the photographers Willetts and Diedrich on page 52.

The function of the cartes soon widened. Collecting was a popular pastime, and within a very short time there was a huge commercial collectors' market in cartes featuring all sorts of people. Queen Victoria is credited with starting *cartomania* in 1860 as part of the royal family's push to communicate with the masses, projecting to her subjects a relatable image of herself and her family. Victoria was also an avid carte collector. In addition, actors, magicians, musicians, circus performers and the well-to-do circulated their portraits for collection. The cartes were easily purchased by mail order or at photography



Davies & Co., Dr HS Lynn, magician, carte de visite, 10.7 × 6.5 cm, c. 1855–82, H88.50/5

studios. It was no surprise, then, to find the occasional headless magician or caged lion lurking in a family's collection, like the cartes shown above and left.

In England alone, around 300 million to 400 million cartes were sold between 1861 and 1867, and they were equally successful in Europe and the Americas. Photographic studios popped up everywhere. Even Australia's remoteness did not prevent it from being caught up in the craze, and in *The Argus* newspaper alone between 1860 and 1869 there were over 4000 advertisements placed by photographers. One Melbourne photographic studio boasted in *Hobart's Mercury* on 23 January 1864 that it had produced over 30,000 portraits in Melbourne during the previous summer.

Commercial competition and improved photo-print techniques eventually reduced the price of cartes from several shillings to less than sixpence for a dozen portraits. Seasonal and itinerant photographers also offered portraits at bargain prices, which put them within reach of many ordinary working people, although, sadly, low prices did all too often mean low-quality prints. Shoddy photography by amateurs was of ongoing concern to the photographic profession of the day, which was earnestly promoting its practitioners as photographic artists operating from private studios or rooms that produced high-quality portraits for discerning sitters.

LTJ: How did collectors store their cartes?

The introduction of the carte-de-visite album really cemented the carte craze. Albums provided the perfect way to store and display portraits, and many middle-class collectors possessed albums purely dedicated to carte collections. The carte album held social currency: who and what were collected were often perceived to reflect the owner's social status. The album was akin to a 19th-century social inventory.

The albums were quickly mass produced and distributed by photographic studios, gift depots and stationery suppliers. The pages were made of stiff card and usually held up to four portraits each. Initially, the albums were the size of a small paperback book; however, to meet the growing demands of consumers, their size was increased to that of a contemporary coffee-table book. Aesthetically, they varied from simple, plain and functional to highly decorative and ornate.

The carte album was the precursor of the family photograph album and provided a repository for the documentation of Victorian family life. Countless small moments of family and social activity were stored within albums' pages. Many portraits kept were of children, parents and family pets, as reflected in those on page 57 of Dr and Mrs Wyley, of Hamilton, the young girl with her pet sheep and the small boy resting his hand on a rifle for balance.

Women were major consumers of the cartes, as their collection and compilation in albums were considered both legitimate and ladylike pastimes. Some women contrived new meanings for their portraits through their selection, arrangement and sequencing in albums, which provided opportunities to drive the narratives not only of family stories but of their own popular culture. Albums embraced the identities and private worlds of their compilers.

LTJ: How long did the carte craze last?

Carte popularity peaked from 1860 to the late 1870s. Like contemporary platforms, which change and adapt constantly, over time the cartes saw some development. The standard mount size increased, to approximately 11 by 7 centimetres, with some variations accounting for customisation and studio production. More decorative pictorial and graphic mount styles appeared, and the square-cornered, thin card of the 1860s gave way to thicker card and vignette shapes in the 1870s.

As their production waned, the cartes were eventually replaced by larger versions called 'cabinet cards', whose format allowed more photographic detail and textual information. An example of a cabinet card is shown on page 59.



Left: George William Perry, *Studio photograph of Dr. and Mrs. Wyley, Hamilton*, carte de visite, 10.0 × 6.2 cm, c. 1863–72, H2016.361/1



Right: Bardwell's Royal Studio, *Lottie Angell*, carte de visite, 10.7 × 6.5 cm, c. 1875–91, H88.50/73



Left: Unidentified girl standing, with right hand resting on a sheep, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1880–1900, H2005.34/281



Right: London Stereoscopic & Photographic Company, unidentified boy standing on a chair, with left hand holding onto the barrel of a rifle, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1881–88, H41221/30



Left: Wherrett & McGuffie, unidentified woman, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1887, H2005.34/2817



Right: André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, unidentified woman dressed as Joan of Arc, carte de visite, 11 × 7 cm, c. 1848–89, H37449/10

LTJ: How can State Library Victoria's carte collection be accessed and used?

The Library's collection is global in content, housing cartes produced in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe as well as in Australia's regions, including Ballarat and Geelong, and capital cities of Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. Like the bold young woman returning the camera's gaze (above), in the collection there are thousands of unidentified people in the carte portraits, which exist as single items on the catalogue, free-floating entities, their history and meaning no longer anchored to family albums – anonymous, but resonating with personal histories that can only be (re)imagined. Other cartes are held in impressive albums, testaments to the passing of time and the cultural milieu of the last quarter of the 19th century. Examples include the Disdéri portrait of the unidentified woman posing as Joan of Arc shown above; its frame is indicative of the cartes held in an album of photographs collected by the actor Caroline EV Neild. And in an eclectic 'book of faces' compiled by architect William PR Godfrey, royalty and relatives rub shoulders; both the image of Annie looking at her reflection (page 49) and the cabinet card by Ghémar Frères (opposite) reside in Godfrey's album. The albums and cartes cover a diverse range of subject matter and were being produced into the last decade of the 19th century.



An example of the later cabinet card. Ghémar Frères, group portrait of five unidentified people, photographic print on cabinet card: albumen silver, 17 × 11 cm, c. 1860–90, H86.109/1/1

Digitisation has made the Library's cartes holdings easily accessible and free to download. They contain a wealth of pictorial information about the period – ranging from hair styles and clothing fashions to cultural tastes and norms – that can be used by researchers with wide-ranging interests. While the cartes are often limited to restrained and formal portraits conforming to bourgeois and imperialist values, their consumption in the Victorian era led to the democratisation of self-expression and has bequeathed a dynamic visual legacy to contemporary viewers.