2

PORTRAIT PROPS AND POSES

DURING THE 1850S, as the increased light sensitivity of photographic emulsions made the medium more suitable for portraiture, supporters sang the praises of the exact likeness, whether made with the new collodion on glass plate technique or the older daguerreotype method.[1] As one advertisement enthused, "The best index of the mind is a daguerreotype of the face."[2]

However, not all portraits succeeded in representing their subjects' characters, despite the exhaustive cataloging of facial features. A popular French treatise, excerpted in American journals, accused these portraits of "having *too strong* a resemblance; they are a sort of permanent mirror, where self love does not always find its expectation [emphasis added]."[3] Overly objective images revealed too much, especially those "defects" of complexion that portrait painters had long artfully improved.[4] One journal explained, "Photographers generally, with educated eyes, demand much sharper pictures than their customers, while it is known that the best portrait painters constantly censure photographers for producing *too much sharpness*, and that some of the first photographers practiced throwing the picture just a little out [of focus]."[5] The sharply focused pictures by photographers eager to display their technical skill were at cross-purposes with the grace and dignity expected from portraits. The American photographer Levi Hill complained, "We daily see likenesses which, though marked by every peculiarity of feature in the person represented, are yet entirely devoid of that essence, or predominant trait of character."[6] These highly detailed pictures failed to capture the sitter's true character, that ideal emanation of spirit to which Victorians aspired.

The most talented photographers were capable of "calling up" the best aspects of the sitter's personality, so that the expression on her face might match the character she sought to exude.[7] This theoretical advice translated into practical recommendations that included conversational topics appropriate for the studio, as well as high-backed chairs, sturdy props, and posing apparatuses, which allowed sitters to relax during the long exposure times. Awkward poses and strained expressions betrayed the challenge of sitting still for several seconds or more, as was common through the 1860s. "It is not possible to give a picture the character of easy calmness, while the hands are firmly clasped or pressed down upon the knee, or if resting on a stand or pedestal, grasped tightly across the edge," chided the photographer E. K. Hough.[8] Napoleon Sarony, a New York–based photographer known for his celebrity portraits, even patented a moveable rest that supported sitters in several pre-set poses. **[See also Chapter 46, "Selfie."]**

The British photographer Henry Peach Robinson was an early critic of such stock poses. In an article for the *London Photographic Times*, reprinted in the United States in 1858, Robinson wrote, "A person unacquainted with photography . . . on looking over the specimens of many portrait photographers, would suppose there was only one position in which a sitter could be placed, namely, the one elbow on a little round table, with the hand twisted as near the body as possible, the other hand placed on the knee, with the elbow stuck stiffly out at an angle, the legs crossed and turned flat to the camera to satisfy the exigencies of focus."[9] The need for absolute stillness, coupled with the distorting effects of short lenses (preferred because they required less light), resulted in homogeneous poses that presented the body frozen in one focal plane.

SHEET 1

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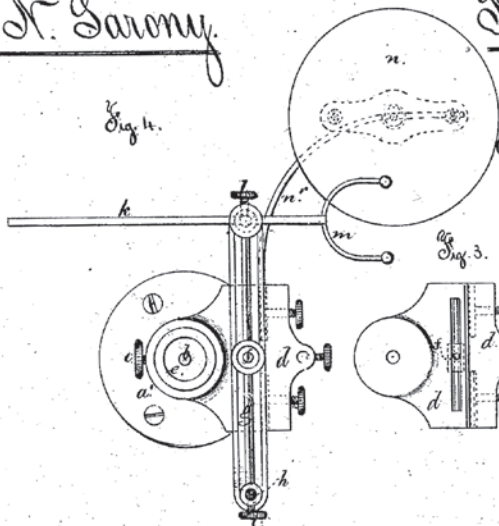Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.
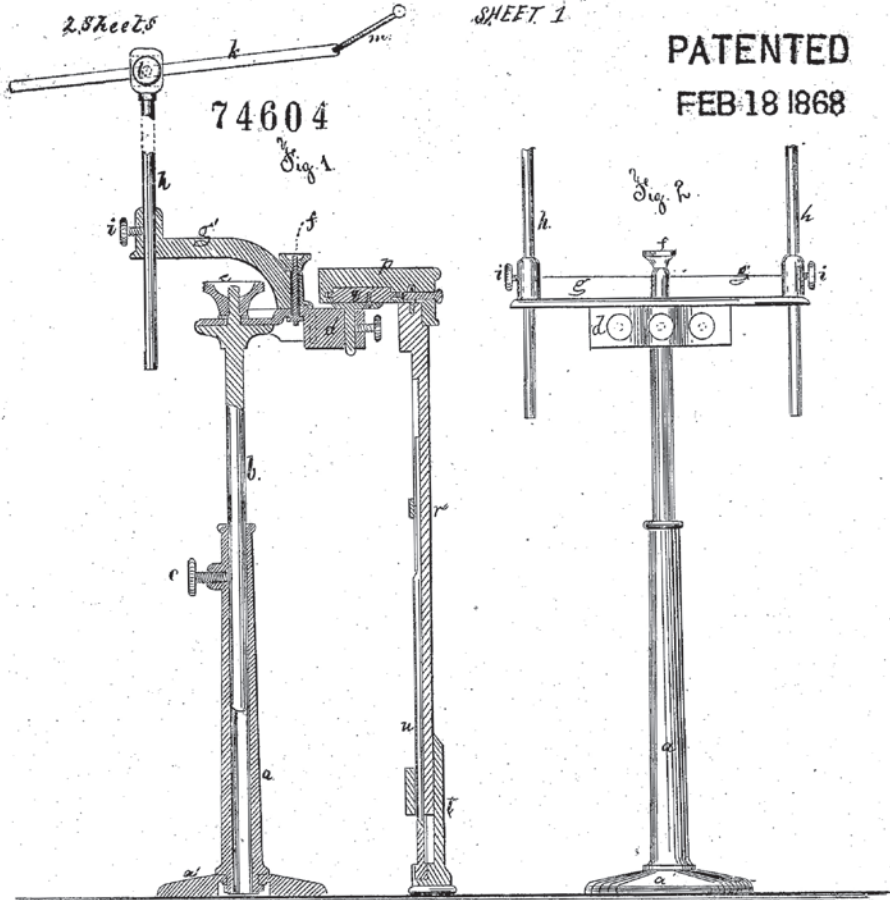
N. Sarony.

Photographic Rest.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 3.

Witnesses
Chas H. Smith
Geo D Walker

Advent of the carte-de-visite by André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri in 1854, and its global popularization by the close of the decade, changed portrait standards radically. The carte-de-visite format consisted of a small albumen paper print affixed to heavy cardstock. A four-lens camera on sliding rails allowed photographers to make as many as eight different exposures on a single negative plate; the resulting images were cut apart and mounted separately after development and printing. Although the process streamlined the darkroom work, it introduced new challenges in the studio. Photographers needed to move their sitters quickly from one pose to the next because the collodion negative plate had to be exposed while the chemicals were still wet. The aspect ratio of the 2¼″ × 3 ½″ carte-de-visite image, mounted on a 2½″ × 4″ paper card also invited full-length poses, which photographers claimed were even more lifelike because they captured the whole body's posture. The new lenses required to adequately expose the tall, narrow plates were typically longer in focal length than those used by daguerreotype studios earlier in the century.

FIGURE 15. Photographer unknown (American), "Untitled [Boy Holding Cap, Resting Arm on a Column]," ca. 1840s. Daguerreotype.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The eventual adoption of these longer lenses for all portrait work was an unintended and beneficial consequence of *cartomania*, as the fad for cartes-de-visite was dubbed by the press.[10] In comparison to the faster, shorter lenses used previously, the carte-de-visite lens created less distortion, making portraits appear increasingly true to life. **[See also Chapter 12, "Retouching Cabinet Cards."]**

With the standardization of this size also came redundancy. Even the new poses and accessories quickly became clichéd, especially as their visibility increased in the larger 4½″ × 6″ cards that were introduced in the late 1860s. In his well-known guide, the American photographer Marcus Aurelius Root wished the many "fancy backgrounds, curtain, &c. be rigorously banished."[11] Another photographer mocked still more typical elements: "The pose, invariably stereotyped; here the inevitable little table, the irrepressible columns, chairs, hanging curtains."[12] Robinson, the English photographer, also found these images overcrowded with accessories. He counseled, "Vases of flowers, elaborate patterns on table covers, books, and the great variety of trifles sometimes seen, are all very well when surprise is intended to be given by the minute detail afforded by the lens; but the time for all this has passed . . . we now look rather for fine expression and a good pose."[13] The strategies originally established to highlight technical accuracy gradually retreated during the 1870s, as photographic portraits were increasingly judged for their ability to suggest character, rather than their representation of the highly detailed, observable features of the face.

FIGURE 16. Photographer unknown, "Untitled [Mr. and Mrs. E. Walker, March 6, 1863]," 1863. Albumen silver print, 8 13/16″ × 6 7/16″.

Source: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.