

Prices of Photographs

Average charges for images in Victorian photographic studios 1841-1891

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It is quite common today to hear photographers expressing surprise - either in delight or alarm - at the asking prices for Victorian prints at auction or in galleries. Yet current "high" prices for pictures from the past only seem outrageous in comparison with the lack of worth, reflecting both ignorance and disinterest, shown for Victorian photographs until comparatively recently.

It might come as an equal surprise that current prices for average Victorian portraits and landscapes are very comparable to the value of these photographs when they were first made. It is important to emphasize that throughout this article I am talking about *average* prices by unidentified or lesser-known photographers of typical subject matter. Of course, prints by famous names or of subjects with special appeal will command high, even stratospheric, prices on the principle that something is worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. That was true then, as it is now.

But back to the average prices of photographs in the Victorian age, with a few notes on current values. . .

The following information resulted from collecting as many prices as possible and averaging the figures in order to provide a rough guide to 19th century print values in various processes.

Before we analyze these prices, however, it is important that we are able to relate the 19 century charges to today's currency values. The most useful guide for comparing costs in different centuries is to note the price of a product as a percentage of average incomes. [For non-English readers, one pound=20 shillings; one shilling=12 pennies; one guinea=1 pound and 1 shilling).

Let us take the year 1867 as typical of the period because it falls at midpoint between the years under discussion and represents a peak time for photographic portrait studios. In that year:

The average weekly cash wage for an agricultural worker in England was 11-15 shillings; for a skilled worker at the high end of the income bracket the average income was 30 shillings per week. A good wage for a semiskilled worker - such as an assistant in a photographic studio - was 1 pound (20 shillings) per week. This figure did not change appreciably throughout the remainder of the century. In 1899 it was estimated that the minimum weekly cost of maintaining a couple and three children was 1 pound 1 shilling and 9 pence; 40 percent of the population lived within this amount.

Daguerreotypes:

The first practical and popular process for photographic portraiture was the daguerreotype. And its most businesslike exponent was Richard Beard. He opened his first studio in London in March 1841 and soon had a chain of daguerreotype studios across the country. Beard had paid 800 pounds for the daguerreotype patent rights in England. This was a colossal sum in the currency of the day - nevertheless it was a shrewd investment. Beard is said to have realized between 25,000 pounds and 40,000 pounds *in one year* from the sale of licenses and from his own daguerreotype studios. (1)

Let us attempt to place these figures in perspective. The higher amount (which is probably closer to the truth) represents *the total wages of a British semiskilled worker of the 1840s for well over 1,000 years*. And this was in a decade of economic slump known as the "hungry forties". By comparison, Queen Victoria paid only 26,000 pounds in 1845 for her palatial holiday retreat, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight.

But this article is concerned with prices for individual portraits rather than with a photographer's total income.

In the initial enthusiasm for the "new art" of photography Beard charged 2 guineas per daguerreotype portrait. (His profit on this cost was 14 shillings. (2)

This figure is comparable to the prices first charged by Antoine Claudet in London during the 1840s. His daguerreotypes were sold "at prices varying from 1 to 4 guineas and upwards, according to their perfection, and the expenses attending their production. . ." (3)

"Extra" daguerreotypes from a portrait session with a celebrity fetched higher prices - pictures of a famous actress, for example - than a regular likeness for the customer alone.

In England, the daguerreotype process (and all other photographic processes) were

practiced only under severe patent restrictions. It was not until 1854 that photography became free-for-all, and at that point the boom in portraiture began with heavy competition and price cutting. By then, other processes had largely supplanted the daguerreotype. Due to the patent restrictions, England did not experience severe competition among photographers and prices remained relatively high. A sixth-plate daguerreotype, for example, cost about 1 pound throughout the daguerreotype period from 1841 to 1854.

By contrast, the daguerreotype was never patented in America. In the first wave of enthusiasm for the daguerreotype a portrait was not cheap; a sixth-plate daguerreotype cost about \$5. 00, a week's wage for the average American worker in the 1840s. Within a few years, the cost of a daguerreotype had halved, to around \$2. 50, a price which was maintained by the better studios until the introduction of the collodion/ albumen process. But by 1851 the public demand for daguerreotype portraits was so great that thousands of picture-factories sprung up across the USA and their operators waged price wars among each other. Quality plummeted along with prices. Daguerreotypes could be bought for \$1. 00, then 50 cents, and finally advertisements proclaimed that "first rate, artistically finished pictures may *now* be had at the rate of 37 1/2 and 25 cents. " Some studios produced daguerreotype portraits -which were undistinguished at best, pitiful at worst - at the rate of "two for a quarter". (4)

The effect of England's patent restrictions in maintaining the high prices for daguerreotypes can be vividly reflected in the numbers of practicing photographers. In 1851, there were only daguerreotypists in London (5), whereas there were 127 operators in New York City (6). Incidentally, none of the better class photographers in Britain deigned to make ambrotypes, which were considered cheap substitutes for the daguerreotype. Ambrotypes cost from a few shillings to as low as 6 pennies.

Calotypes:

Henry Collen, a miniature painter, opened the first calotype portrait studio in London in 1841. Within one year he had abandoned the studio and returned to painting. In July 1844 Antoine Claudet purchased a calotype license and offered his customers a choice between the metallic daguerreotype and the paper print. The calotype was abandoned two later. Thomas Wyatt paid an exorbitant amount of money for the sole rights to make calotype portraits in the Manchester area. The business failed and Wyatt died a pauper.

As these facts indicate, the calotype was not a popular process for portraiture. Just for the record, Claudet charged 1 guinea for a portrait "on a half sheet of letter paper", size 4 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches, with 7 shillings and 6 pence demanded for every additional copy.

A quarter-sheet cost half a guinea, and 5 shillings for extra prints.

Calotypes had a much bigger market when used as book illustrations or issued in albums, an advantage of the paper print over the one-off daguerreotype. But these picture books were always expensive. For example, the albums of calotypes produced by D. O. Hill and R. Adamson cost from 40 to 50 pounds (7).

As we have seen, this price represented the *annual* wage of a British worker. Only the wealthy bought photographic books.

Albumen prints:

In 1854 photography in Britain was freed from its repressive patent restrictions and portrait studios proliferated. Cashing in on the initial boom for photographs, studios with good reputations asked for, and received, a price of around 3 pounds for a whole-plate portrait. The "high-water mark" for portrait prices at this time was represented by the work of Anthony Samuel Adam-Saloman, the doyen portraitists, who charged the equivalent of 4 pounds for an 8 x 10 inch print.

In London, Valentine Blanchard, probably the most successful portraitist during the 1860s, charged 4 guineas for a 15 x 12 inch print. Van Der Weyde's "large heads" cost 3 guineas, which was typical of the better studios. In the provinces, prices tended to be lower. For example, the studio of W. H. Midwinter in Bristol charged 15 shillings for "large heads". But there was no uniformity in prices - then, as now, the studio charged whatever it felt the market could bear, depending primarily on the reputation of the photographer. Even in Largs, Scotland, John Fergus could charge 3 guineas for "large heads", with 5 shillings for each additional print. Marshall Wane, of Edinburgh, had a scale of prices depending on size, ranging from 2 pounds 10 shillings for an 8 x 10 inch portrait to 8 guineas for a 20 x 24 inch portrait. In all cases, additional charges were made for coloring and framing, and often for the extra members of a family group.

These prices were exceptions. By the mid-1860s the average price for a whole-plate portrait from a respected, but not world-famous, photographer was 1 pound.

This was also the price charged for a whole-plate albumen view, as opposed to portrait. Vast profits were made during the 1860s by photographers specializing in scenic landscapes and townscapes, such as Francis Frith, George Washington Wilson, Francis Bedford and James Valentine. Depending on the size of the print, and the exotic nature of the subject, these photographers charged from 3 to 10 shillings for a small view, with the average being 1 pound per print suitable for framing. Some measure of the profits earned can be gauged from the fact that, in its heyday, Frith's stock of unmounted views for sale exceeded 1 million prints, all of which bear the initials F. F. and Co. , no matter

who had made the original negatives.

Particularly profitable for these photographers were orders for book illustrations when hundreds or thousands of prints were required from the same negative.

Frith, for example, issued one set of his Middle East tour in 25 monthly parts, each containing 3 views for 10 shillings. This was a very reasonable price in comparison with the usual print costs of the time, but his profits were immense due to the quantities of images sold. He made over 2,000 copies of the complete series which meant producing over 150,000 prints. The income from this one project (the Middle East views were issued in other sizes and presentations) was 25,000 pounds. Francis Frith's illustrated Bible was issued in a limited edition of 170 copies at 50 guineas each, a year's wage for the average worker.

Although the average price of 1 pound for a single view was maintained by the best known photographers, others charged a lot less, especially in response not only to increased competition from colleagues in Britain but also to price cutting by foreigners. In 1868 an editorial bemoaned the fact that "To such a ruinous extent has an unhealthy competition in views brought our art in Venice that. . . fine views of a size about 15 x 12, are sold for a sum equivalent to fifteen pence. . . ." (8)

This was about one-tenth the price charged by British photographers. Matters became worse as the years rolled by. In 1888, the same magazine was singing the same sad song about Italian views, "and good ones too", which were being sold for 3 to 5 pennies, with a liberal discount for a dozen or more.

By the 1890s the market had almost disappeared for albumen views, due to the influx of hand cameras and the ubiquitous amateur, and also to advances in photomechanical reproduction which led to the printed postcard industry.

Stereoscopic views:

Exactly the same trend in prices can be seen in the history of the stereoscopic view.

The London Stereoscopic Company was founded in 1854 by George Swan Nottage. Within two years the firm had sold half a million views and offered a choice of 10,000 stereoscopic images. By 1858 the firm's stock had leaped to 100,000 different views. Nottage demanded "No home without a stereoscope" and he largely succeeded - if the sentence is amended to "No *middle class home* without a stereoscope". Stereoscopic views were not cheap. Initially each image cost from 1 shilling to 1 shilling and 6 pence. The early 1860s marked the peak of the stereoscopic craze and business declined with

the onset of "cardomania", never again to retrieve its earlier popularity.

Cartes-de-visite:

"Cardomania" was begun in 1854, by Adolphe-Eugene Disderi (in France) and soon spread like wildfire throughout the world and dramatically affected the business of photography. Disderi's idea was to produce small portraits pasted onto mounts measuring 4 x 2 1/2 inches, similar to common visiting cards, hence their name. With a multi-lens camera, 8 or 12 poses could be made on one plate, printed, cut up and pasted onto individual cards. Such mass production led to enormous sales and huge profits.

Disderi, for example, was reported to be the richest photographer in the world, with an income during the peak year of the carte-de-visite of 48,000 pounds from his Paris studio alone (he also owned studios in Toulon, Madrid and, later, London). In England John Mayall had an income of 12,000 pounds per year, followed by Oliver Sarony who was reported to earn 10,000 pounds per year, largely from cartes.

Between 1854 and 1860 a well-respected "name" photographer could charge 2 guineas for 12 cartes-de-visite. Within a few years competition had reduced the top prices to 1 guinea per dozen. Some of the best known and most sought-after photographers were able to maintain this price until the early 1880s. For example, W. and D. Downey, Hills and Saunders, Valentine Blanchard, Van der Weyde, William Mayland, Oliver Sarony, John Mayall, Alexander Bassano were all selling sets of cartes for a guinea. In the provinces the first class studio prices were slightly lower, from 10-18 shillings per dozen.

The less popular photographers were not so fortunate. During the 1860s prices were dropping rapidly due to price wars and the "ruinous competition". Articles in the photographic press dealing with the decline in prices, and profits, became increasingly frequent and the business prospects of the average studio became grim indeed. In 1870 The British Journal of Photography ran a lengthy article on "Emigration for Photographers" whose "financial prosperity is at the very lowest ebb. "

Prices for a dozen cartes-de-visite continued to drop during the remainder of the century. By 1897, 12 cartes could be bought for 2 shillings and 6 pence, almost one-twentieth of the cost 30 years earlier. The average studio barely made ends meet, yet the carte-de-visite remained the photographers' major source of revenue, outnumbering all other work by at least 4 to 1.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the social status of the photographer fell rapidly along with his reduced income. The early photographers (prior to 1860) were the

darlings of society but in the closing decades of the 19th century they had become mere tradesmen, the social equivalent of the high-street butcher or baker. And so it remained until very recent decades.

Fine Art photographs:

Sales of individual photographs as fine art had occurred throughout the 19th century. Oscar Rejlander's monumental "Two Ways of Life", 1857, was bought by Queen Victoria as a gift for Prince Albert at a price of 10 guineas. One of H. P. Robinson's most admired combination prints, "Bringing Home the May", 1862, was sold for 20 guineas. Even at this high price, orders were so numerous that Robinson made a copy negative of the 40 x 15 inch original and sold half-size prints at 1 guinea each. One of the most successful art pictures of this type was made by Robert Slingsby, titled "Alone", depicting a lady in summer costume standing on the seashore. A critic of the day asserted that "no picture produced by the camera has ever brought its originator such substantial reward, the sum already paid being more than that fetched by many a clever painting exhibited at the Royal Academy." (9) By 1882, Slingsby had already earned over 450 pounds from copies of that one image.

Apart from such isolated examples it was in the 1890s that photographers formed themselves into fine art groups, as a secession movement away from the tradesman image of the commercial studio photographer and from the hordes of amateurs now invading the medium. The exhibitions, or salons, of these photographic artists often included the prices of the prints. In 1901, for example, you could buy original photographs by J. C. Warburg, Bernard Moore and W. Gill for 1 guinea each; by Horsley Hinton for 3 guineas; by Percy Lewis for 1 pound 10 shillings; by Edward Steichen for 5 to 10 guineas; by Hugo Henneberg for 9 guineas; and by Gertrude Kasebier for 20 pounds, the most expensive work in the show.

Apart from the later high priced art prints, it is clear from this brief survey of 19th century prices that the average cost of a good quality print in the peak years of the medium, the 1860s, was around 1 pound. This was the average income of a typical worker for one week.

Work out the average weekly wage of a British worker today and the conclusion is clear: Contemporary prices for 19 century photographs have not changed very much.

References:

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