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Unknown woman
Maull & Polyblank, ca. 1855, albumen print, 200x146mmm
National Portrait Gallery, London
NPG P106 (19)

How had the identity of this sitter come to be forgotten? In trying to develop an account of this unknown sitter, my immediate response was to construct possible histories for this person, to imaginatively flesh out her life story. I wanted to invent a name. Charlotte seemed okay for a Victorian woman. Emily, Alice or Sarah would have worked just as well. Possible names increased exponentially. But hang on: inventing a name would only distance her image from her identity, muddying everything by piling pure fiction on to rough guesswork. I decided to stick with P106[19]. Here are two sets of responses, starting with my thoughts about the blurred copy, followed by the original print in the photograph archive of the National Portrait Gallery.

Blurred Web Copy Of P106[19]

I wondered if P106[19] had children when this photo was taken. Perhaps she was the stereotype of a Victorian matriarch, popularised by Thackeray, Dickens and old British TV soaps like *Upstairs Downstairs*? This same portrait might even have made her children cry after her death, in the way that Roland Barthes describes his reaction to a photograph of his mother in his famous text on photographs, *Camera Lucida*. But I reckoned her children could not have seen this photograph that much later in their lives, otherwise we would know her name, perhaps written in pencil on the back of the photo. Maybe her family did not imagine a future in which she would be unrecognised? Perhaps they were just not interested? I wondered how she had looked in the many other photos her children had seen of her.

What might explain P106[19]'s anonymity is that photographs themselves were a long way from becoming familiar objects in 1855. Besides their unfamiliarity, photographs were not thought of as art in the same way that oil on canvas was.

In the 1850s even the best photographers (essentially technicians) produced affordable photo portraits for the general public, while oil painters (academically trained artists) made expensive portraits in the tradition of centuries of aristocratic patronage. A photograph would have been new and different. Furthermore, painted portraits were conventionally displayed in gilded frames in large houses, or in prestigious public exhibitions of art. Although the first ever recorded public exhibition of photographs took place at London's Royal Society for the Arts in 1852, three years before P106[19]'s portrait, photography remained a spectacle, a 'magic technology' outside fine art practice.(1) By contrast, photo portraits were mechanical domestic images made by technicians: small, intimate and easily recognised by the viewer.

Photography has been described as a 'magic technology'. The term describes machines about which most users do not understand the mechanics. Good examples of today's magic technologies would be the Internet and DVD players. Radio, television and telephones are older magic technologies. In the 1850s the predominant (perhaps earliest) magic technology was photography, meaning that photo portraits needed no additional identification. Being a magic technology, a photo portrait looked identical to the sitter, instantly recognisable. The photo portrait was not for general view, or necessarily for posterity: it was a domestic keepsake. Who else could the photo on the mantelpiece portray but the subject herself: their daughter, wife, mother or employer? The 'magical' perfection of the photograph left no doubt as to its subject.

After 1855 techniques of photography improved, becoming easier and cheaper, and there would have been many more photos of P106[19]. Let's assume she lived to old age, at a time when around ten percent of women in Britain died during childbirth (a gruesome statistic when you consider that before modern analgesics many women died from overdosing on laudanum or opium while giving birth). If she had lived to old age (putting her death around 1900), her portraits would have remained as stiff and earnest as this one. If she had been born into her children's generation she would have appeared in more casual photos, when the rapid pace of technological advancement provided shutter speeds fast enough for a chance shot with a portable camera. By the 1900s

affordable equipment meant photographs were not commissioned from professionals but taken by family and friends - putting many studios out of business. But she was not born into that generation, and photography stayed in the hands of professional studios throughout her life (apart from a miniscule group of wealthy amateurs). A portrait photograph would therefore have been rare, entailing carefully selected clothes and poses. So it is probable that one mid-1850s evening she prepared clothes for the next day's sitting. The following day she sat for this portrait, perhaps attempting a way to express herself within the social constraints of Victorian society, perhaps not; the photo reveals little. A 'mail order bride' being photographed for a net-based marriage agency surely weighs up similar issues today.

I thought more about why P106[19] stood in front of a professional photographer that day. While significantly cheaper than a painting by a trained artist (the most desirable being from painters at the Royal Academy on Piccadilly, in the same road this photograph was taken), a portrait photo was still expensive enough in the mid-1800s to need a comfortable income. I thought about who paid for this image. Perhaps her father? This could easily be a portrait commissioned by a professional man to show off his daughter to prospective husbands. He would have wanted to emphasise her family-building potential: good health and looks, a stable background and a devotion to continue invented traditions of security and nurture (forged at an unstable time of widening social polarisation and rapid change). Her portrait checks all the right boxes for these criteria. But is this woman really so well to do? Perhaps the answer lies in the environment selected for this portrait?

Apart from P106[19] herself, the portrait only features a chair. This simplicity echoes age-old conventions in portraiture, going back to renaissance and classical painting in Europe, and much further back in Asia. Stark surroundings stressed the importance of the person shown, although austerity could double as a sign of the sitter's supposed humility. But what does P106[19]'s chair signify here? Not humility. It is styled in a Medieval design, but is likely to have been an industrially produced, ersatz mediaeval chair, evoking a fantasy of majesty: mediaeval kings, queens, princes, heroes and magicians. It is odd that Britain,

the world's most hi-tech society in 1855, often masqueraded as a mediaeval fairy-kingdom. An example of this confused identity is still seen at St. Pancras station in north London. From the front it appears to be an ornate gothic palace, but its façade hides an advanced iron construction, in reality a terminus for the world's most modern rail system at the time. Victorian Britain presented the most modern society in the world as its opposite, an ancient, enchanted realm enthralled by a mythic past. To be respectable meant accommodating this myth, expressed here by a fake historical aesthetic in a simple item of furniture. That a Victorian woman of P106[19]'s status should subscribe to the whimsical conceit evoked by this fairytale chair seems perfectly natural for her time and her social status, whether or not she was being presented for marriage. This chair is precisely the type of industrially produced furniture promoted four years earlier at the 1851 Great Exhibition, the British Empire's greatest peace-time display of industrial might.

This concludes the thoughts I had after seeing the blurry copy of P106[19]'s photo.

The Original Print

After the grainy pixilated copy I went to the National Portrait Gallery's photograph archive to look at P106[19] again. This time she was shown in a beautiful albumen print, about 30 by 23 centimetres. The image must have been astonishing to Victorians who grew up before mechanical images were possible. Albumen prints were a recent innovation, and photography was beginning to change people's experience of themselves and their world. I was excited by how the larger size and clear resolution of the original 1855 print made me re-assess my guesswork.

The first revelation was an 'exotic' paisley pattern on P106[19]'s dress. The history of the paisley pattern starts with Kashmiri designs. This reflects the cultural exchange (however grossly imbalanced) between the British Empire, of which our sitter was a chief beneficiary, and its most important colony, India. Imperial Britain liked to adapt and adopt pleasant aspects of its colonies' cultures, particularly from India. This is perfectly displayed by P106[19]'s paisley dress.

But who produced the dress? With the world's most advanced techniques of mechanised production, British cloth manufacture was at its peak. In a trading pattern that was to reverse only after the First World War, nineteenth century India was a lucrative, protected market for British produced fabrics and clothes. These were cheaply produced, with immense suffering for the machine operators in mills and factories in Birmingham, Lancashire and Leeds. Cloth was shipped from Britain to its colonies for sale in markets tightly controlled (and duly patrolled) by the world's most powerful navy. It is certain that the cloth for P106[19]'s dress was also produced in one of these industrial centres in the midlands and the north. However, her dressmaker would probably have been in London.

I could see that a small area around the shoulder of P106[19]'s dress was blurred due to some movement: a nervous twitch, or a cold studio? Maybe this photograph was rejected by P106[19] because of the blurry 'leg 'o' mutton' puffed sleeve? That could easily explain her anonymity. That's it, I thought, the photo stayed as an unlisted reject in the studio for years until she was forgotten.

The chair's role became clear. I could see she was supported by the chair so that she could stay still for the camera's slow exposure. The camera would have been manually opened and closed by the photographer or his assistant. Although it acts as a steadying frame, the chair's design is still important to the portrait's message. It projects the paradox of fairytale fantasy merged with an industrial superpower.

Then I noticed her jewellery. She was wearing a wedding ring (a simple gold band) and a prominent brooch. This was definitely not an advertisement for marriage. She really was, on balance, an imperial matriarch. She also seemed a bit older than I first thought, certainly approaching thirty. It was beginning to seem that here was the wife of a wealthy society figure who had probably had his portrait taken ten minutes earlier. If his portrait exists today, I wonder if it is unidentified.

P106[19] did not look directly at the camera for this image, but gazed in to the middle-distance, turned to the viewer's left. I wonder if she chose to do this, or

if the studio photographer asked her to. There is a very different atmosphere when a portrait sitter looks directly at the viewer than when they gaze at something outside the picture frame. A distracted gaze can give a portrait a wistful quality. It certainly does here. This pose makes P106[19] look passive, docile and domestic. Perhaps she did not wear her finest dress after all. She might have worn a dress to harmonise with the notional virtues of modesty and duty that her inert gaze symbolises. The clarity of the original print shows that her dress is expensive enough to display economic status, yet restrained to show appropriate virtue.

I found out, without much surprise, that the studio where P106[19] posed was well established and very elite. So elite that it possessed two addresses, one on Gracechurch Street in London's financial district, and another on Piccadilly, near Buckingham Palace. London could not offer a more prestigious mix of addresses: the symbolic power of imperial monarchy combined with the genuine power of colonial finance. Maintaining these prestigious sites would have been considerably expensive. The Maull and Polyblank studios were sufficiently successful at this time to have been selected to photograph the prominent writer Charles Darwin, also about 1855 (roughly four years before publication of *The Origin Of Species*). This makes it possible that P106[19] knew Charles Darwin, provoking more speculation than I can accommodate here. In the 1860s, Maull and Polyblank became famous for Photographic Portraits of Living Celebrities, collectible volumes showing photos of eminent contemporaries. Therefore P106[19] was surely in a wealthier household than I first imagined, among the wealthiest in Britain. But people's interest in her has been lost. It is easy to accept this happening with ancient portraits. The few paintings of Roman faces that survive from Pompeii are mostly anonymous, as are many friezes showing Roman patricians posing for portraits on their living-room walls. But at the height of industrial Britain, how could this wealthy woman's name have fallen through the cracks?

Ultimately, how important is an investigation of P106[19]'s life? Why should her history count for more than those women who worked in colonial fields to source raw materials for her dress? How does their miserable employment compare to the wretchedness of our subject's compatriots (mostly women and children),

whose brutal working conditions and starvation wages led to a wide range of raw textiles and toxic dyes becoming attractive paisley cloth for her dress? There was barely any chance of an enduring document of any of their lives in 1855, aside from brief parish records and a cursory census every decade.(2)

On the other hand, there is the irony that today's historians probably know more about the tailors in whose London workshops rolls of paisley cloth from the north were skilfully assembled into lovely dresses than they can ever know about P106[19]. These tailors were certainly men, artisans whose income qualified them for all sorts of official documentation and references from which P106[19], as a bourgeois married woman and probably without an independent income, was excluded.

In the end, I am aware of how average I imagine her to have been. Perhaps she was not average: she could have been a genius like Ada Lovelace, the woman who invented an early computer called the Analytical Engine in the 1840s (see *Zeros and Ones*, Sadie Plant, 1998). She might have been anyone. The truth of this portrait is that it reveals barely anything of the subject.

Endnotes

1 Although the first ever recorded public exhibition of photographs took place at London's Royal Society for the Arts in 1852, three years before P106[19]'s portrait, photography remained a spectacle, a 'magic technology' outside fine art practice

2 The first modern census is considered to be the 1841 census when each householder was required to complete a census schedule giving the address of the household, the names, ages, sexes, occupations and places of birth of each individual residing in his or her accommodation. Source: The History of the UK Census http://www.amlwchdata.co.uk/census_history.htm

