

H-France Review Vol. 11 (May 2011), No. 112

Mark Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy: Photographer of Modern Life*. London and Los Angeles: National Portrait Gallery and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010. 160 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$40.00 US (hb). ISBN: 978-1-60606-025-4

Review by Margaret Werth, University of Delaware.

"Before my talent was my luxury, today it is my capital." Camille Silvy

With this volume, Mark Haworth-Booth has brought the work of an extraordinary nineteenth-century photographer to the attention of a broader public. *Camille Silvy: Photographer of Modern Life*--the catalog for an exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and National Portrait Gallery, London in 2010--marks the centenary of the photographer's death and offers a comprehensive introduction to his career in the years 1857-1867. The volume includes an abundance of high quality illustrations and is enriched by newly discovered documents and previously unpublished works from a private collection.

Silvy was a French lawyer and diplomat who, while on a state commission in 1857 to draw the architecture and scenery of Algeria, began making photographs he thought were better suited to providing "exact views" (p. 22). On returning to France he studied with the amateur photographer Count Olympe Aguado and produced photographs of the landscape around his family's farm. His first major photograph, *La Vallée de L'Huisne (River Scene, France)*, about which Haworth-Booth published a dense and valuable book in 1992, the first on Silvy, was exhibited in Paris at the Salon of Photography of the Salon des Beaux Arts of 1859.[1] In this beautiful panoramic view of a river Silvy carefully composed the landscape and figures and used multiple lenses, negatives, exposures, and printing techniques to create an impressive composite image.

From the beginning of his career, Silvy adopted a painterly handling of composition, light and shadow, and the disposition of figures, as well as an experimental technique that expanded his repertoire of photographic effects. He moved to London in 1859 where he took over a photography studio (the house had been built for the painter John Linnell) and turned to commercial studio portraiture, although he also made street scenes and was involved in reproductive photography as well (one wants to know more about these activities). Silvy's trajectory followed the general transformation in the 1850s from amateur gentleman to professional commercial photographer. In London he was well known for the cultured elegance and fashionability of his sitters and the high quality artistic portraits he made of them. Nadar characterized him as a white-gloved dandyish "charmer...with the air of a grand seigneur," whose studio was packed with "decorative treasures that filled galleries appointed in the most elevated taste in the most lavish style....The choice and arrangement of the objects...gave the astounded English a glimpse of Latin genius." [2] Silvy was adept at arranging his studio props into elaborate environments for his sitters. As a contemporary wrote, "(h)is photographic rooms are full of choice works of art in endless number: for it is his aim to give as much variety as possible to accessories in each picture." [3] There was even a special room in the studio reserved for the Queen, who never came to sit, but, as Silvy said, "it makes a good impression." [4] C.

Silvy & Co. was dedicated to serving the social elite—from royalty to the bourgeoisie—and Silvy himself, although from the provincial *haute-bourgeoisie*, passed himself off, it seems, as a French aristocrat.[5]

Haworth-Booth compares Silvy to Charles Baudelaire and Irving Penn for his double engagement with art and commerce and his interest in fashion, but Silvy is hardly the Baudelairean "Photographer of Modern Life," his *seigneur-isme* not Baudelairean dandyism either, and only the reference to Penn takes hold. Nonetheless these questions of art, commerce, and fashion are central to understanding Silvy's work. The photographer himself writes of the split between his identity as an artist and as "C. Silvy & Co, whose signature is legal tender" (pp. 73-74). After his highly productive and lucrative ten years of work as a photographer, Silvy ended up back in France, distinguishing himself in his military service during the Franco-Prussian war. But by the mid-1870s, he was ill, physically and mentally, and would spend the last thirty-one years of his life in a psychiatric hospital.

Silvy devised artful poses and inventive settings for his portrait sitters, whom he photographed full length, as was customary. He established a large, successful photographic company with studio, laboratory, and assistants that could produce both larger format portraits and quantities of small *carte-de-visites*, and he set out to raise the standards and prices of English photographic portraiture. His careful attention to detail, technical skill, and skillful diplomacy with sitters were features of his "luxury" studio. However, Haworth-Booth notes that Silvy himself saw photography as a mechanical, not a fine art, and at the height of his success the company was "handling one portrait sitting every twelve minutes" (p. 101). Haworth-Booth also points to the social currency of *cartes-de-visites* in the period. They were collected, exchanged, displayed in albums and viewed and shared as part of social rituals and encounters. Albums filled with *cartes* "offered ways of...constructing and exploring social identities. They were the social networking sites of their time" (p. 9).[6]

Silvy's portraits aimed to flatter his subjects, presenting them as imposing, dignified, cultured, elegant, at ease. Modeled on baroque painting, his honorific portraits often show sitters posed in graceful *contraposto* against sweeping draperies, rich tapestries, fine furniture, painting and sculpture, architectural fragments, *objets d'art*, and painted flats. Sitters are presented in a variety of attitudes: absorbed or receptive, regally detached or engaged in rarefied social intercourse. While sitting for, collecting, exchanging, and displaying *cartes* may have allowed members of the social elite to affirm their singularity and their connections—and in particular their social exclusivity—the *carte* was also a mass medium and "a form of mediation between the 'masses' and the 'well-known'." [7] As small format, highly portable multiples, *cartes* had the potential to exceed their intended social networks, and elite portraits were not fully insulated from theatrical, celebrity, or middle class *cartes*. Less about memorialization than performance and display, *cartes* contributed to the standardization and commodification of the signs of individual and collective subjectivity and identity in the late nineteenth century and to the increasing velocity of the circulation of such signs.

While Haworth-Booth argues that Silvy "presented modern people as themselves" (p. 93), and often achieved a "spontaneous" presentation of individuals (p. 67), one is struck by the high degree of artifice of many of his portraits. Early in his career Silvy made a large number of theatrical portraits and Juliet Hacking has argued that Silvy's theatrical portraits helped to promote the *carte-de-visite* format and encouraged his elite sitters to see themselves as actors in the theatre of society.[8] Theatrical portraits were particularly suited to the conventions of the commercial studio. The photographer was freer to fictionalize identity through costume, composition, pose, and expression, to be more extravagant, more self-conscious. Silvy was

particularly adept at such portraits, whether distilling a single character or a scene, and his subjects ran the gamut from comedy to classical drama to opera. In the theatrical portrait of Adelina Patti as Harriet in *Martha*, from 1861 (pl. 40), for example, the singer is presented between the hunting scene backdrop, a tree branch imported into the studio, and a stuffed hound.[9] Patti rests her left hand gracefully on the stub of a branch on the tree limb that in turn leans back as if co-extensive with the painted trees. No attempt is made to mask the flat uniformity of the strip of studio floor visible in the foreground. While Patti's pose and the inanimate hound are more than a little stiff, Silvy's factitious image achieves a balance between character and person, imagined decor and material detail. He seems at home in the full-throated artifice of the performer portraits.

Silvy's portraits also bring to mind the *tableau vivant*. Haworth-Booth reproduces a wonderful self-portrait from 1863 of Silvy in fancy dress as a *Seigneur à la cour de Henri IV* (pl. 43), complete with sword, imposing stance, and *trompe l'oeil* arch with classical columns behind him. A slightly eerie family group portrait is reproduced as well, with Silvy's seated family members arrayed across the stage of the studio-cum-drawing room and the artist proudly standing at the center. The studio is high and grand with light spilling down from the skylights, and the artist appears as the maestro of both studio and family. The decor of the studio attests to the taste and distinction of the photographer as discerning collector and curator of his collection, artistic and familial.

Silvy's sitters included royalty—Prince Albert's portrait (pl. 56), for example, was in Silvy's *Livre d'Or* or visitors' book—and aristocratic dukes, duchesses, countesses, lords, ladies, and captains. He made equestrian portraits, wedding portraits, and hand-painted miniatures. The roll call of elite sitters was sometimes punctuated by more diverse or less exalted individuals: *Queen Emma of the Sandwich Islands* (pl. 62), for example (this image was reproduced in large numbers and apparently copyrighted by Silvy)[11]; *Mrs. Herbert Davis's children and servant* (pl. 80); or the Africans *James Pinson Labulo Davies and Sarah Forbes Bonnetta* (pl. 61). Silvy's double portraits afforded an additional degree of complexity. He seems to have enjoyed the varied effects doubling made possible. *The Misses Booth* (pl. 84), for example, appear in wide-skirted dresses that fill the frame, holding hands, and crowned by an elaborately carved mirror behind them. One turns away so that her face is visible only as a dark reflection in the glass. *Dr. Max Behrend and Dr. L. Windecker* (pl. 67) are presented in formal dress but informal poses against a painted backdrop and hanging draperies—one lounges on a table with leg dangling—with their scientific equipment scattered about. In *Miss I. Campbell and Miss A. Campbell*, the two women pose side by side, echoing one another and the two tree-trunks rising behind them on the painted background.

The assembling of backdrops, furniture, and accessories is quite elaborate in Silvy's portraits.[10] The often sophisticated handling of lighting creates soft shadows and reflective surfaces, generating rich tonal and spatial effects and working to integrate the different components. Some pictures smoothly resolve his sitters into rich decors through subtle arrangements and lighting, but there are others where the composite, *tableau vivant* nature of the portrait obtrudes. Intriguing instances of the latter can be found among the portraits of children, for example, that constitute Silvy's contribution to that rich vein of Victorian visual culture. His images of privileged childhood appear at first as portraits of young individuals, of their imagination and freedom to reinvent the world in play. In a photograph of 1861 (pl. 77), the child's mobility, adventurousness, and playful spirit land him atop a high chair, balancing between a mantel and a sword as long as the child is tall. The fake bookshelves, real stuffed furniture and the rest represent the adult world the child imaginatively re-conceives. In another portrait from the same year (pl. 78), a child is sandwiched between a backdrop depicting a forest

woodland inhabited by a putto with trident and amphora and the studio props meant to connect the child to the natural world—a potted plant and an animal-skin-striped drapery cascading from a high table. In these two dense assemblages of images, objects, and bodies—whose seams are all too apparent—the children's relations to "culture" and "nature," respectively, are pictured as implausible concatenations, the child aloft amid the bric a brac of cultural signifiers and domestic decoration. Remove one element and the structure could collapse like a house of cards.

The lean of Silvy's sitters into these complex studio constructs is a leitmotif, common to photographic portraits of the day. Figures lean on hands, canes, chairs, backdrops, themselves, and each other—the human rubbing up against the studio's flotsam and jetsam, the visual and material property room of European culture, both genuine and ersatz.[12] Silvy generally intended to elevate his sitters, to endow them with dignity, gravitas, and presence through their composure and address to the viewer, their fashionable dress, and the suggestion of prosperous, ornate, or natural settings. But no matter how superior to the rented finery of other commercial studios, Silvy's cultured decor was an approximation of the actual rooms and spaces in which these people lived. While aiming for a distinguished tone that would individualize and ennoble his sitters, his portraits often end in stalemate, where, rather than coalescing, people, things, and representations remain separate, as exchangeable as a *carte de visite*. Rather than confirming high social status and unique individuality, they suggest that such values might be losing their specific gravity.[13]

Silvy also made a fascinating series of genre scenes, similar to works by the French photographer Charles Nègre and others in the 1850s. Silvy's photographs of itinerant musicians, street sweepers, and newsboys seem to have been at least partly intended as aesthetic experiments. He apparently titled them "Studies on Light" and, in some cases, used multiple negatives and photographic processes to create complex composite images. *Studies on Light: Fog*, also entitled *Les petits Savoyards*, for example, is a striking image that depicts two young itinerant hurdy-gurdy players posed at the tradesmen's entrance to Silvy's house and studio next to the house number and a sign that reads "Ring the bell." Their rough peasant clothing and foreign identity are set against an imposing wrought iron fence and solid brick wall that divide them from the house. The foggy background makes the picture atmospheric and poetic—indeed, the background is very like one of Silvy's painted backdrops, and the brick wall truncated by the frame like the pieces of balustrade he used in the studio set-ups, those tiresomely ubiquitous props in portrait photographs of the day. He poses and centers the boys as for a portrait, directly facing the viewer. Rustic types, they are also individuals with distinctive physiognomies and expressions: the seated boy squints at us intently, while the other, more relaxed, proffers a level stare and poses as if playing his hurdy-gurdy.

In another from this series, *Studies on Light: Twilight*, an even hazier view of a foggy London street, two dark velvety silhouetted figures—too distant to register much as individuals—are posed against a streetlamp as the street recedes behind them at a strong diagonal. Silvy used multiple negatives for the lamp, background, architecture, and figures to create a painterly, blurred effect. Haworth-Booth links this photograph to Baudelaire's idea of modernity as "the fugitive fleeting beauty of present day life," as well as Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* for the twilight mystery of London's foggy streets, but this double reference obscures more than it illuminates. What is notable is that, when he turned to street scenes, Silvy staged his social actors very much as he had in the studio.

While the volume's text tends toward the celebratory rather than the critical, it serves as an important resource and impetus for future study of Silvy and photography in the 1850s and 1860s. Haworth-Booth characterizes Silvy as a "master illusionist" (p. 25), and the fine quality

of his work--both technical and aesthetic--can be distinguished from the often hackneyed commercial photography of his day. Silvy's display of cultural, social, and economic capital--his own and that of his sitters--deflects to some degree the standardization characteristic of commercial photography. The catalog includes several photographs of the house and studio, populated by some of the many assistants who worked to make Silvy's business profitable (pls. 48, 50, 51). These pictures offer a glimpse into how the spaces and labor of C. Silvy & Co. were defined (we can see the printing frames in one of them). As a contemporary put it, "[Silvy] not only possesses photography as an art but as a manufacture; hence the scale and method of his proceedings...his house is at the same time a counting house, a laboratory, and a printing establishment" (p. 74). From the impressive receiving rooms, galleries, portrait studio, and Queen's room to the chemical baths and counting room, art and industry kept close quarters.

Silvy was committed to marrying his artistic and elite sensibility with commercial production, combining advanced photographic and industrial techniques with variety and sensitivity in the handling of pose, costume, composition, and lighting. The collective value and meaning of his portraits were dependent on their convincing realization of individuation and of the individual's inheritance of the cultural traditions that Silvy invoked. Mobilizing new photographic technology, industry, and marketing, Silvy's *carte* portraiture worked to preserve and adapt these cultural traditions in an emerging mass consumer society. The *carte* portraits instantiated but also produced elite identity, made it more visible--and visible in a new way--whether within such exclusive social groups or for others outside them. As technically mediated images, they both affirmed and commodified that identity. Silvy's studio portraits purported to portray individuals integrated into an imagined equivalent of their proper setting, with the illusion of their singularity and their connectedness more or less intact. Yet the composite nature of his photographic approach--whether technical or aesthetic--furthered a different idea of the individual and their sociality: as formed in a similarly composite manner, in a process that threatened to escape hierarchy and control, and bordered on insubordination. In our age of social media, we can appreciate Silvy's energetic negotiation with the mass production and circulation of portraits at an earlier stage in the reification of social relations.

NOTES

[1] Mark Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy: River Scene, France* (Malibu, California: Getty Museum Studies on Art, 1992).

[2] Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy*, p. 79.

[3] Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy*, p. 73.

[4] Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy*, p. 79.

[5] Haworth-Booth, *Camille Silvy*, p. 38; Juliet Hacking, "Camille Silvy's Repertory: The *Carte-de-Visite* and the London Theatre," *Art History* 33(October 2010): 865; 884, note 50.

[6] On the *carte-de-visite*, *carte* albums, and commercial photography in this period see Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), in particular pp. 87-91 on the critical discourse about Silvy's studio; Juliet Hacking, "Photography Personified: Art and Identity in British Photography 1857-1869" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London 1998); Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Aldershot, England:

Ashgate, 2007); Elisabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010); Andrea Volpe, "Carte de visite Portrait Photographs and the Culture of Class Formation," in Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Exploration in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 157-69; Anne McCauley, *A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Barbara McCandless, "The Portrait Studio and the Celebrity: Promoting the Art," in Martha Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abrams, 1991).

[7] André Rouillé, "The Rise of Photography," in Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny, eds., *A History of Photography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 39.

[8] Hacking, "Camille Silvy's Repertory," *Art History*, 2010. She offers a densely argued account of what she terms the hybridized nature of Silvy's photographic enterprise. His studio brought together French luxury and English high society, *beau-* and *demi-monde*, naturalism and artifice—and his society portraiture drew on West End comic theatre, another hybridized Anglo-French form. She concludes: "(t)he attempt to reconcile the polarities symbolized by London and Paris in the shape of the *carte-de-visite* was one agent by which an appreciation of artifice for its own sake was reintegrated in the field of mainstream contemporary culture in the second half of the nineteenth century" (pp. 863, 882).

[9] According to Haworth-Booth, 20,000 copies of the singer's *cartes* were produced (p. 64).

[10] Hacking has studied the sequence of pictures in the daybooks of Silvy's studio (there are twelve extant daybooks in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London, according to Hacking the most extensive single *carte* archive in the United Kingdom) to trace the shifts in the use of backgrounds, from illusionistically rendered outdoor scenes, to moveable painted flats of steps and pilasters, to backgrounds that suggest domestic interiors. Hacking, "Camille Silvy's Repertory," *Art History*, p. 869.

[11] Hacking, "Camille Silvy's Repertory," *Art History*, p. 883, note 22.

[12] According to Haworth-Booth, Silvy did not use a posing stand in his studio and his exposures were relatively brief (p. 38).

[13] Edwards has a fascinating, dense chapter on the critical discourse on backgrounds in English commercial photographic portraiture. Writers of the day were concerned with the incongruity, dislocation, and incoherence that surfaced when combining background, accessories, and sitters. While Edwards is primarily concerned with the less grand commercial studios, I would argue that Silvy's work does not escape this dynamic. As Edwards sums up the problem: "the tone of unease that runs throughout the writing on backgrounds indicates how difficult it was to make portrait photographs into pictures, to subdue the image and make it continuous with ideology. The 'monstrosity' of the photographic background, we might suggest, is that which confronted photographers with their own anxieties and fears." Edwards, *The Making of English Photography*, p. 293.

Margaret Werth
University of Delaware
mwerth@udel.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172

Notes de lecture. Mark HAWORTH-BOOTH, Camille Silvy Photographer of Modern Life. Compte rendu par Marta Braun.

Reference(s) Mark Haworth-Booth wrote his first book on Camille Silvy in 1992. He had fallen in love with the photographer's 1858 La Vallée de l'Orne when he saw it at a British Arts Council exhibit twenty years earlier. These portraits, as Haworth-Booth describes them, were not overtly original but they were authentic, staged in innovative ways to convey spontaneity and a sense of natural bearing as well as show off the latest fashions, for both men and women. Photographer of Modern Life 1834-1910 and exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in 2010.[4] He researched the Silvy Exhibition catalogue at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, as a Foundation Scholar in 2008.[5]. Inaugural Visiting Professor of Photography at the University of the Arts London (2002-2009),[6] he acted as a consultant on the BBC television series The Genius of Photography, aired in 2007 and again in 2009.[7]. Haworth-Booth lives in North Devon with his wife Rosie (née Miles), whom he married in 1979. They have two daughters.
Honours[edit].