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Unknown Woman 27
Hill and Adamson,Carbon print, 19.80 x 14.30 cm,
Scottish National Portrait Gallery PGP HA 2462

A portrait similar to that of Unknown Woman 27, the calotype of Lady Mary Ruthven (ca.1845), has been called 'the first fashion photograph, though it was clearly taken as a portrait.' (1) In her history of fashion photography, Nancy Hall-Duncan writes: 'There is still considerable confusion as to what constitutes a true fashion photograph and what is simply a portrait, because the wealthy figures in both were fashionably dressed.' Yet the situation is not as 'clear' as Hall-Duncan makes out. Produced in the 1840s, Hill and Adamson's images do date to the first decade of photography, but are they fashion photographs or portraits or both? Is it possible to distinguish the two at this period? Does the fact that the sitter in my image is unidentified rather than an aristocratic lady sitter tempt us to read the image through the equally anonymous lens of the fashion illustration, the fashion plate? As a dress historian examining this calotype of a woman seen from behind, I want to know how Hill and Adamson's image intersects with the culture of early Victorian fashion in Britain. What resonance might this culture have for the anonymous sitter they photographed in a distinctive but seemingly 'unrevealing' pose?

At first glance, this image seems to tell us little about its subject. We see a standing woman with her back to the viewer. The tools we usually use to 'read' portraits are denied us: neither her face nor her hands are visible. The mantle and floor-length skirt she wears cloak her body in further secrecy. Only the elaborate braided, looped hairstyle and the white flesh of the nape of her neck, where tendrils of dark hair have escaped the coiffeur's comb, offer us a glimpse of a more sensual femininity. Framed by a carved chair and a damask curtain suggesting a domestic interior, she directs her gaze off towards the right. Her gesture is ambiguous: has she turned away from us in coquettish shyness or have we surprised her as she pauses in a moment of reflection?

Why might the photographers have chosen to pose their subject this way and

what does it tell us about fashionable femininity in the 1840s? Art historians state that there is a long iconographic tradition of the figure seen from behind. Painters since Giotto in the fourteenth century have used these 'back-figures' or Rückenfiguren as stand-ins for the viewer. (2) They became especially popular in the Romantic period, where they invite us to contemplate the sublime or spectacular landscape that they themselves are gazing at. Trained as painters, Hill and Adamson no doubt knew of this pictorial convention, yet I believe that their choice has more to do with contemporary fashion than a desire to imitate painting in their photographs.

Hill and Adamson photographed men, women and children, alone and in groups, but only women turn away from the camera in this way. These images, of which there are six or seven in total, are usually one of a set of two images comprising a front and back view of the same woman. Most of the sitters in these images have been identified, and most of them are respectable, married middle or upper-class ladies. Can we assume the same of this sitter?

A quick reading of her dress would suggest that she was a respectably married and prosperous woman. While younger, unmarried girls tended to wear their hair down in ringlets, married women coiled and pinned up their long locks in intricate hairstyles. The cut and materials of her dress, which at first glance seem rather plain, do tell us that she was up to date with the fashionable trends of the 1840s, which one commentator has called 'the most static decade in nineteenth-century fashion.' She adds that 'Never before or since has Western women's costume expressed respectability, acquiescence and dependence to such a degree' as in this decade. (3) Simple, romantic or medievalising styles with sloping shoulders, cut close to the body, were popular, overtaking the bouffant mutton-chop or gigot sleeves and towering hairstyles of the 1830s. Dark colours like burgundies, deep greens, gray-blues and browns were the norm. Millinery and accessories like parasols and gloves could be more decorative, but even the most fashionable style of headgear reveals an emphasis on modesty. The poke bonnet, as it was called, shielded the face from prying gazes like a set of blinkers. Eveything about fashion in the 1840s suggested the rise of bourgeois models of femininity, which overtook more sensual and flamboyant aristocratic modes as the the young Queen Victoria came to the throne.

Despite its seeming drabness, women still found room for some personal expression in dress. Mantles like the fringed wrap cloaking this woman's shoulders were stylish, and the sheen of this particular garment reveals that it is made of silk, a more luxurious and expensive fabric than the simple cottons favoured for summer day dresses. It is impossible to decipher the material or motif of the printed cloth of her dress, but simple printed textiles were both popular and modish in the 1840s. Her wide, white collar was a key element in maintaining middle-class standards of propriety and cleanliness. Changed every day, starched, pristine white linen both protected her dress against bodily soils and marked her as a woman with servants to help her clean and maintain her wardrobe. Her uncovered head, along with the props in the frame, suggest an 'indoor' setting for the image, despite the fact that it would have been taken outdoors in order to ensure sufficient light for the photographers. Women of all social classes covered their heads when venturing outside of their houses.

Most importantly, this woman has been posed or has chosen to pose as a 'fashion plate.' Back views like this are common in nineteenth-century fashion journals, where they served a clear technical purpose. At a time when most dresses were hand-sewn by professional or amateur dressmakers, these images were invaluable for women wishing to copy the most fashionable Parisian modes. Often a fashion plate would show 'two' women wearing similar dresses from the front and the back. This mirror-image device imparted factual information about the cut and construction of a particular style, showing how a skirt was gathered into a bodice or how a shawl was draped over the shoulders, enabling the seamstress to copy it accurately for herself or a paying client.

The 1840s corresponded with a boom in fashion publishing, and both men and women would have been familiar with the somewhat limited repertoire of poses and postures depicted in fashion journals like *Ackermann's* and *the Petit Courier des Dames*. These poses, engraved and coloured, provided a template for elegant bearing and dress. They were often the most eagerly-anticipated part of a monthly journal subscription. Women shared them with friends and family, and in areas more remote or rural than Hill and Adamson's Edinburgh, they often proved a crucial

resource for those wishing to stay abreast of fashion. Middle-class women like this sitter would have been especially conscious of the need to master the codes of dress and etiquette promoted by these journals, in order to negotiate the social stage of their day.

Fashion was crucial as a marker of status amongst the Victorian middle classes. Even women on modest budgets were expected to adhere to rigid standards of dress and decency. Even more importantly, the 1840s were a time when outward dress was consciously 'read' as a barometer of inner character. *The Quarterly Review* of 1847, stated:

> Dress is a sort of symbolical language, the study of which it would be madness to neglect. To a proficient in the science, every woman walks about with a placard on which her leading qualities are advertised….Upon the the whole, a prudent and sensible man may safely predicate of the inner lining from the outer garment, and be thankful that he has this, at least, to go by. (4)

Therefore, to the period (male?) viewer of this photograph, the tidy and demure 'placard' worn by this anonymous sitter would have advertised her conformity to fashionable feminine virtues of the day.

Yet this view of dress as a direct link between inner and outer character leaves me unsatisfied as a contemporary scholar. Perhaps it is the medium which gives me pause. Photography is a direct imprint of light reflecting off of a body, even if that body lived almost two centuries ago. Even though they can be reproduced in multiples, photographs always contain a trace of an individual life. This direct link with the body makes me want to see beyond this pose based on a fashionable template, to discover something unique and individual about this sitter. Just how inscrutable is she? While we can never recover the responses of the original viewers of this photograph, we can imagine that her general bearing and body shape, though appropriate for a model of demure ladyhood, would also make her instantly recognizable to those who knew her well. The slope of her shoulder or the shape of her ear peeping from carefully-curled hair might evoke feelings of affectionate familiarity or respectful admiration. We can often pick close friends and family members out of a crowd simply by observing the set of their shoulders or distinctive tilt of their heads. The particularities and quirks of an individual body always deny a simple reading of them as 'perfect' fashion plates.

A period viewer might also be familiar with the actual garments worn by the sitter. Wardrobes were more expensive and limited than they are today and a friend might know that she was wearing a favourite mantle given as a gift, or identify her by the printed pattern of a dress she wore often. Photography lends itself to this kind of material recognition and memorialisation and early writers commented on this distinctive quality. Lady Charles Eastlake, who was herself photographed in the 1840s by Hill and Adamson, wrote in 1857 the London *Quarterly Review*: 'Every button is seen—piles of stratified flounces in most accurate drawing are there….while the dress has been rendered worthy of a fashion-book, the face has remained, if not so unfinished as before, yet more unfinished in proportion to the rest.' (5) She concludes that the greatest artistic challenge for these early photographers was to represent the human head. Undaunted by the technical limitations of the medium in its infancy, Hill and Adamson took on the challenge of representing facial expression repeatedly in their many portraits. While most of their photographs do attempt to capture something of their sitter's characters, I like the simple elegance of these women photographed from behind, who sidestep the problem of accurately representing their features altogether.

The photographers have presented us with a stylised form of female dress and deportment which was considered beautiful in the 1840s: in this sense it is literally a 'Calo-type' or beautiful imprint. It also embodies the 'type' of the bourgeois lady in early Victorian society, a woman whose public persona was defined by fashionable conventions. Yet it is more than this. By turning away from us, this sitter physically enacts the conundrum we face when we are confronted by any portrait: ultimately, the 'true face' of a man, woman or child who sat for an artist remains elusive. For me, this turning away from the viewer feels like a refusal to submit to the relentless gaze of the camera. The photograph promises us truthfulness and this sitter denies us the satisfaction of free access to her 'real' face and figure. Her pose echoes her current status as an 'unknown woman' in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. She deliberately confounds an easy reading of her identity, remaining both unknown and unknowable to contemporary viewers except through her fashionable facade.

In conclusion, I would ask again what an approach involving dress history might help us understand about an anonymous sitter and her place in history. My field began as a handmaiden to help date paintings for art historians, rather than a connoisseurial practice in its own right. Though surviving garments and images in museum collections largely represent the dress of the upper classes, the discipline's overall lack of prestige and the lower financial value of dress items has meant that we are less hindered by traditional concepts and structures for establishing meaning than those who focus on 'high' art objects. Compared to a Picasso, a man's bedroom slipper seems banal and workaday—it was not important to note who owned or wore it. Because the humble materials we work on frequently have no definite 'provenance' or origin, we try to read how sitters perform class and gender roles based on internal clues provided by gesture and clothing. When combined with contextual social research, the dress historian may provide powerful, though still subjective and fallible, approaches to learning about people whose identities have been 'lost.' I believe that considering the literal fabric of history can help us tease out new threads of meaning in images like this one, while allowing sitters to conserve their enigmatic ambiguity à tout jamais.

Endnotes

1   Nancy Hall-Duncan, **The History of Fashion Photography**, NY: Alpine, 1979, p.16.

2.   Joseph Koerner, **Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape**, London: Reaktion, 1990, p.162.

3   Alison Gernsheim, **Fashion and Reality, 1840-1914**, London: Faber and Faber, 1963, p.25.

4   Gernsheim, pp.31-32.

5   Lady Charles Eastlake, cited in **Photography In Print**, ed.Vicki Goldberg, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1981, p.93