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Tiepin with inset photograph

Unknown photographer, c.1900, photograph in a metal pin,

Photograph 18 x 7mm, pin 50 x 1.9 mm

National Museum of Film, Photography and Television, Bradford

No: 4732

Inside a cabinet drawer, among thousands of artefacts held in the collection of the National Museum of Film, Photography and Television, is this small pin. About 5 cm long, so smaller even than the palm of my hand, the pin is a modest example of photo-jewellery. It is described as a tiepin, featuring a portrait of a boy, or a young man, wearing a cloth cap. On close inspection, other details are revealed - the lapels of a jacket, and a button on a waistcoat. He wears a pale bow tie. The photograph appears to be hand tinted, but the process of ageing is adding its own colour. The youth gazes directly out of the picture. His eyes and mouth have the tiniest trace of a smile, but then again perhaps not. The notion of a smile seems to belong to an era of photography yet to come, so the smile and the direction of his gaze are on the side of uncertainty – after all, a gaze that appears to look directly into the lens may be a look to the photographer, standing by the camera.

To imagine the photographer behind the camera, or the rest of the young man's suit, is to step outside the frame of the portrait. However, stepping outside this frame, as well as attending to the face of an unknown youth, are necessary moves. I am already involved in a step back in time, for while the date of this particular pin is unknown, other examples are dated around 1900. Thus the pin, held in my hand, brings with it over a century of time, an eerie feeling. The passage of time summons ghosts – long gone bodies of the unidentified – the young man, the photographer and, of course, the person who wore this pin.

With no record of its origins, establishing the youth's identity or that of the wearer seems impossible. Yet here lies a clue: the reading of this face is inextricably linked to some consideration of its wearer. So while actual identities may never be known, the notion of the wearer offers other possibilities for understanding the portrait. Even the museum labels of 'tiepin' and 'photo-jewellery' are immediately

suggestive. A photographic historian, such as Geoffrey Batchen, would remind us how such photo-jewellery was made to be worn. This has a number of implications that include declarations of love to signs of mourning. Now we are led to the question of why the tiepin was made in the first place – was it for love, or as a keepsake whilst a loved one was away, or a memorial to someone ‘taken’ before their time? Whatever the reasons for the tiepin, its function to replace the sitter's absence is the recurring theme. (1)

Before attending to the theme of absence, let's consider what is visually present in the portrait. Barely 2cm in size, and encased in a gilt frame, the photograph does require intimate looking. Notice how this portrait has been placed delicately into its frame, how the portrait has been carefully cropped: the measured space above the cap and below the waistcoat button demonstrate skill and judgement in the manufacture of the pin. This is evidence of the work of the unknown photographer and possibly of a jeweller, who might be one-and-the-same person. I think of them, whilst moved by the face of an unknown youth. Implied in these thoughts are strange bedfellows: materialism on one hand, nostalgia on the other. From the moment of its production to the pin's current location in a national archive, sentiment and the marketplace have been bound together through the pin: it has moved through the hands of its original purchaser, perhaps to other family members or close friends, to dealers and then finally to curators - all of whom are involved in an exchange of sentimental and monetary values.

The combination of materialism and nostalgia that imbues the history of the object is also significant to the reading of a key detail: the cloth cap. Is this, then, the face of a working-class boy, photographed in ‘everyday’ dress of the period? This question reveals wishful thinking rather than historical probability, but its directness is useful. I am interested in the desire, as well as the profound difficulties that such a question presents me. The cloth cap got my attention, and it could also get me into trouble. The pin is in an archive located in Yorkshire, so the cap inevitably resonates with the region, despite the fact that the tiepin's geographical origins are just as unknown as the sitter. (2) As a sign, the cap is therefore potentially loaded, in danger of being caught between cliché and relic; signifying an English working class stereotype that appears consigned to industrial history, while having

an iconic place in British photographic history. (3) The cap evokes the connotation of redundant masculine class identity, but this is an unreliable interpretation. I reminded of this when - looking at the tiepin and wondering privately whether this was a memorial pin to a young local miner – the curator made a casual comment. “He looks dapper, doesn’t he?”

Yes, he does. Nimble, neat, well turned out: not the conventional description of a manual worker. The portrait is proof only that the youth’s class position cannot be grasped easily; in any case, a costume historian would have already reminded me that the Victorian sitter would dress for the photographer. (4) I carry on looking at the cap, and think about my limitations in understanding it, and the danger of assumptions. Still, the cap is the key: why don’t I think about it from my viewpoint as a photographer?

While I have been looking at the portrait, I have been tempted to describe its ‘openness’, but this term is used so regularly that it seems a little trite. However let’s consider the association of openness through some technical attention to the portrait: the youth is evenly lit, with no distracting shadows on his face. If this stickpin is anything to go by, the photographer was accustomed to photographing boys wearing their caps. He (we assume) didn’t need to ask the youth to take the cap off, knowing how to light such sitters.

In addition to the photographer’s knowledge (the maker of the portrait to myself as a reader of the image), the cap still needs the expertise of another: the hat historian. Their expertise would be informed in part by tactility: the handling of a cap would bring forth information about the weight and the quality of its cloth, and in turn, what it might reveal about the cap’s wearer. I contact a hat historian, but she is in a region that specialised in 19th century fur felt hats, not cloth caps. (5) She then makes a pertinent suggestion - find a costume curator in a region ‘known for its caps’ – and sends me back to Yorkshire. The circumstantial evidence is building: the tiepin may not have travelled that far from its origins.

I have now arrived at a point in which I can get no further, by reading the portrait alone. Two questions hang elusively in the air: what did the cap mean to the boy,

and what does it say about him? Answers seem frustratingly vague, but the questions are at least being asked. What is emerging is who else I need in the reading of the pin: this becomes even more acute as I make my final move beyond the portrait's frame.

Given the difficulty of attending to an item of clothing that is at least clearly visible, it might seem perverse to embark on a discussion based on items of unseen clothing. But I want to return the pin to its original purpose, to bring us closer to the wearer. Let's try to picture an item of clothing, to which this tiepin would have been attached. Perhaps this is when the notion of the wearer becomes gendered, although gendering the pin is not straightforward.

I am tempted to first assume that the wearer would have been male: imagine it then, worn on a tie or the lapel of a Victorian man's jacket. The actual jacket would have told us something about social status of perhaps a father, a brother or friend. Let's suppose it was worn as a sign of mourning - although the tiepin is much more understated (and presumably cheaper) than many other examples of mourning jewellery. Whatever the social and economic significance of this pin, photo-jewellery permitted the open display of intimate attachments. So what if the tiepin is not a sign of memorial, but of love? This love may be familial or touch upon Victorian notions of friendship. Both allude to the interior lives of Victorian men, and other histories of masculinity: here the pin reminds me of the need for another expert eye, that of the social historian. (6)

I am also aware of a nagging doubt: how likely is the image of this pin on a male body? This comes in part from Marcia Pointon's observation that the public wearing of portrait miniatures was largely associated with women, while men usually handled and contemplated such miniatures in private moments. If the cultural practice of displaying a portrait miniature is historically a feminized one, we might presume that men would distance themselves from it. (7) Although Pointon's remarks apply to painted portrait miniatures of the upper classes in a pre-photographic era, one wonders - despite the consequent 'democratisation' of the portrait to the Victorian middle classes - whether photo-jewellery would have entirely shaken off those cultural connotations. (8)

Let's propose that the tiepin's wearer is now female, and that my costume historian has already cautioned against taking the term 'tiepin' too literally. After all 'tiepin' and 'stickpin' seem interchangeable terms, with ties and pins being worn by Victorian women in a variety of ways. Imagine then this pin on the body of a mother, sister, or lover. The word 'lover' seems strangely inappropriate – clashing perhaps with the presumed youth of the boy. However the image of the grief stricken mother is suspiciously palatable – saying probably more about our received ideas of Victorians than the pin's actual use.

This does not rule out the wearer was the youth's mother: it is just one of many questions the stickpin raises. Not least, how to negotiate a territory that is fraught with ambiguities and assumptions. But I have had to start somewhere, and from these speculations a structure for thinking about the portrait begins to emerge. The speculation is not idle, but there is a lot more work to be done to fully understand this piece of photo-jewellery featuring an unknown youth. How then to do it? The clues lie in the intersections between art, photography, dress and social histories: this then would be the team of interpreters for the tiepin. If I could now put it into their hands...

Endnotes

- 1 Geoffrey Batchen, **Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance** Princeton Architectural Press, 2004
- 2 The pin was bought at an unspecified market stall on 12 March 1981 for £10, Archival information, the NMPFT
- 3 For example see "Toppers and Cloth Caps: The Social Divide according to Bill Brandt" http://www.specialphotographers.com/pages/exhibition.asp?action=more_info&exhib_id=21
- 4 Joan Severa, **Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans & Fashion, 1840-1900**, Kent State University Press, 1995
- 5 www.hatworks.org.uk
- 6 An example: John Tosh's work on histories of masculinity **A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England**, Yale University Press, 1999
- 7 Marcia Pointon, "Surrounded with Brilliants": Miniature Portraits in Eighteen-Century England, **Art Bulletin** 2001 No 83 (1): pp48-71