National Gallery of Canada

Collecting Cards: Cartes-de-visite

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André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Mrs. C. Howland*, c. 1860, albumen silver print, 19.9 x 23.1 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

Did you know that business cards first appeared in Europe during the 17th century? Known as "calling cards" or "visiting cards," they featured the person's name, address, and a crest or other symbol. People exchanged them socially, and merchants handed them out to their customers.

In photography, a carte-de-visite is a type of portrait — also meant to be exchanged — that first appeared during the second half of the 19th century. Before that, photographers produced daguerreotypes and direct positives on collodion (ambrotypes) to create portraits. These processes resulted in a single image, which was difficult to reproduce unless re-photographed or printed using lithography or engraving. Multiples and large-format prints were made using wet collodion negatives, a technique that was more expensive.

Realizing the potential demand for photographic portraits, French photographer André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri (1819–1889) looked for a way to produce a larger number of portraits at a lower cost. He developed a camera with four lenses, allowing him to create up to eight negatives on a single plate. His prints generally featured eight small rectangular images. The images were cut apart, then glued to cardboard for sale to the client at an appealing price. In 1854, Disdéri patented the carte-de-visite format (approx. 6 x 10 cm), and the technique soon expanded to photography studios around the world.

Four-lens camera, c. 1880, wood, brass, glass and leather, 30 x 19 x 39.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

Various specialized cameras were developed in the wake of this invention. The number of lenses varied, depending on the model and brand, and allowed four to eight images per plate. The photographer exposed the lenses one at a time, or all at once. Some cameras had mechanical systems that made it possible to move the plate in order to expose different sections. This resulted in a single image captured in several shots, or a variety of successive poses. Produced by Disdéri around 1860, the print *Mrs. C. Howland* features eight portraits before they were cut apart. The subject has been captured in several poses: facing the camera, in profile, standing, seated, and with a document in her hands.

Cartes-de-visite were at their height in the 1860s, but remained popular until the beginning of the 20th century. People ordered several sets to exchange with friends and family at holiday gatherings. The cards were collected in photo albums and displayed in parlours. During the American Civil War, cartes de visite served as photographic reminders for the families of soldiers who had gone off to fight.

Disdéri was a shrewd businessman, somehow convincing Napoleon III to pose for him. This attracted other public figures, wanting their own cartes-de-visite. People began collecting card-sized portraits of politicians, authors, artists, explorers and athletes. Portrait cards were even sold in neighbourhood shops. Some cards featuring celebrities and royals also became sought-after collectibles.

André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Portrait of a Woman with a Boy*, c. 1874-1877, albumen silver print, 8.5 x 5.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC
André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899)*, c. 1875, albumen silver print, 8.8 x 5.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of Karen Gabbett-Mulhallen, Toronto, 1974. Photo: NG

The invention of the carte-de-visite made photographic portraits accessible to the middle class. The cards were the first mass-produced photographic products. With images printed on paper, then cut apart separately, the carte-de-visite was a precursor to the instant portraits produced in booths originally known as Photomatons. Following the installation of the first Photomaton in 1928, photo booths allowed people to take their own portraits. All a person had to do was enter the booth, trigger the camera with a coin, and wait for the images to be printed.

Generations of artists, from surrealists to pop and conceptual artists, have engaged with the photo-booth concept to play with the codes of portraiture, create sequences of images, explore automatic processes, and examine their own identities.

In 1974, Canadian artist Barbara Astman created the work *32 Self-Portraits*, capturing images of herself within the intimacy of a photo booth. Back in the studio, she photocopied the strips of photographs onto plastic film, which she sewed onto canvas, forming a grid resembling a contact sheet. She also added colour to the portraits, recalling the hand-painting on many 19th-century photographs.

Barbara Astman, *32 Self-Portraits*, 1974, electrostatic print with applied colour printed on plastic, stitched to canvas, 40.4 x 60.7 cm, CMCP Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © Barbara Astman, courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto. Photo: NGC

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