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# Dated Photographs: The Personal Photo Album as Visual and Textual Medium

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## Abstract

This article concerns the practice of making inscriptions in personal albums from the second half of the nineteenth century. The overall aim is to discuss the implications of this practice for interpretation and to investigate the cultural ideas and concepts embedded in it. The results are based on a close study of the heterogeneous collection of photo albums held at the Nordiska Museet (Nordic Museum), a museum of cultural history, in Sweden. Unlike personal photo albums produced after 1900, it is rare to find dates in personal *carte-de-visite* albums. Rather than a mere lack of data, this may indicate a different relationship between photography, time, and identity; pointing to a significant change in the vernacular uses and functions of photographs. The personal photo albums were conversation pieces that functioned better without text, as the images could prompt social contact in the form of inquiries and discussion. Later on, albums took on a character more reminiscent of a personal diary. The fact that so few privately circulated nineteenth-century portraits are dated indicates the relations between photographic portraits and painted portraits and furthermore it displays the similarities and differences between instrumental uses of portrait photography and private games of reading faces.

**Keywords:** Personal photo albums, nineteenth century, *carte-de-visite* portraits, material culture

This essay concerns the practice and possible implications of inscriptions in personal photo albums from the second half of the nineteenth century, which are discussed and analyzed with reference to contemporary official photo albums and personal albums of later date. The overall aim is to discuss the photo album as a medium and discern ideas and concepts that are embedded in this cultural practice.

Unlike personal photo albums made after 1900, text is scarce in general in personal carte-de-visite albums and, especially, indications of when the images were taken are very rare. Rather than simply regretting this lack of data, I choose in this study to consider this a valuable feature that may shed further light on the uses and functions of personal photo albums in particular and photography in general. This characteristic seems to suggest a different view of the relationship between photography, time, and identity. The photo album “dictates the embodied conditions of viewing,” as Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart have remarked in their introduction to *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004: 11). In this essay I seek to explore these embodied conditions by focusing on the photo album as a whole, as a medium consisting of a specific combination of images *and* texts.

The presented results are mainly based on close study of the collection of photo albums at Nordiska Museet in Sweden, but are arguably generally applicable.<sup>1</sup> Nordiska Museet is a museum of cultural history founded in 1873. The museum has acquired photo albums since 1890 and holds at present a heterogeneous collection of approximately 600 photographic albums, dated from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1990s. The collection is characterized by heterogeneity with respect to age, theme, and function. It holds official prison albums from the 1860s, carte-de-visite albums filled with portraits from the late nineteenth century as well as binders with color snapshots from the 1970s onward. The majority of the albums are common or ordinary personal photo albums that have been donated to the museum by private persons successively over the last 140 years. The diversity of the collection, as well as the large time span it covers, have been vital to this study. Despite the fact that the source material for this essay and the particular examples discussed come from a Swedish museum collection, the scope is wider and consequently applicable to photo albums in general. The same

patterns of inscription practices can be found in other collections of photo albums in Northern Europe. This is also evident, though not generally pointed out, in reproductions of photo albums originating from Canada, France, and the UK (Di Bello 2007, Frizot 1998, Holland 1991, Langford 2001).

Earlier studies of photo albums have tended to concentrate on the images contained within them, the way they produce meaning and how they form discourses (see for example Chalfen, Hirsch, Holland, Holland and Spence, Motz). More recent publications, for instance by Patrizia Di Bello and Martha Langford, consider the functions and meanings of albums as material objects, but their main focus remains on the images. The present study extends the notion of the materiality to include the album's size, material, decorations, design, and tactile means of inserting images and text. Examining nineteenth-century personal photo albums first and foremost offers clues to album cultures and customs. Yet it may also provide clues more generally to photographic practices of the late nineteenth century, which may be harder to discern once photographs originally destined for the album have been taken out of their original context of use.

Museums and archives that collect and maintain photo albums often conceive of them as mere containers of data. This is especially true of the carte-de-visite albums from the late nineteenth century. The albums appear to have been collected for the content of the images, i.e. portraits or topographic views, or because they were made by certain named photographers. Categorization by image content is the basis for acquisition and registration. This is also evident in earlier archival practice—no longer followed—whereby photographic images would be singled out from the albums and ordered alphabetically by the name of the portrayed person or place. As a result of this practice, the least “interesting” albums have stood a better chance of surviving intact than the more spectacular ones. A good

example is the case of the so-called Lady Filmer Album, compiled in the 1860s in Britain. The extraordinary content and design of this album attracted the interest of collectors in the 1970s, and led to the album being split up and sold page by page, to the point where parts of it are today to be found in at least five different institutions in France and the United States.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, many mass-produced *carte-de-visite* albums from the 1860s onward, filled with portraits of middle-class people taken by photographers not so well known to posterity, have remained untouched in the archives. In the collection at Nordiska Museet, these kinds of albums are well represented.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first part considers the photo album as a medium, traces its predecessors, and describes the emergence of different types of photo albums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This section outlines an approach to the photo album as being more than the content of its images. Rather it is a medium defined by its functional uses. The second part focuses on inscription practices in personal *carte-de-visite* albums from the late nineteenth century. In this section, a personal album from the 1860s in the collection at Nordiska Museet is considered in detail. In order to uncover the inscription practices specific to personal photo albums of this period, this will be compared to a personal album of later date as well as a contemporary official album.

## Part I. The Album as a Medium

The photo album can be described as a medium, in other words an instrument for storage and transmission of information. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, using the term “remediation,” argue that every medium defines itself in relation to earlier technologies of representation. A medium is defined as “that which remediates ... which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media.” The act of remediation is reciprocal, which means that new media remediate earlier media just as earlier

media remediate new media (1999: 44–65). Accordingly, in order to understand the photo album as medium, one must consider a range of cultural objects and practices, both diachronous and synchronous, on a material as well as on a functional level. On a material level, the photo album is a container for photographs made up of volume-bound sheets of paper. Alongside albums sold with empty pages to be filled with photographs, there have been other more or less prefabricated or mass-produced albums for photographs. As a sales commodity, the photo album can be dated to the 1850s, coinciding with the invention of the *carte-de-visite* format (McCaughey 1985: 46–48). From the first period of “cartomanie” in the 1850s and 1860s onward there were three types of *carte-de-visite* albums for the private mass market: (1) complete collections of photographs mounted in an album, (2) partially complete, with some filled slots and some empty ones for individual inserts, (3) and finally the kind of album discussed in particular here, albums that were sold empty in order for users to compile their own unique collection and arrangement.

On a functional level, when considered as collections, representations and tokens of social networks, the early personal photo albums can be situated within a complex genealogy of earlier practices. Long before the 1850s there had been a practice of collecting autographs, lithographs, miniature portraits, silhouettes, coats of arms, and drawings in books (Davidsson 1981; Langford 2001: 18–25). Andrea Kunard has pointed out the relationship between photo albums and sentiment albums, the latter in vogue from the 1820s to the 1850s. She argues that the photo album replaced the sentiment album in the 1850s (2006: 227–43). I would further argue that there are clear parallels to an even older predecessor, the *Stambbuch*, which appears to have influenced the form and aesthetics of nineteenth-century personal albums. The *Stambbuch* derives from the German *Standesbücher* (heraldic books),

initially made by German noblemen in the sixteenth century. In the *Stammbuch* the owner collected images of coats of arms, together with maxims, signatures, and portraits of relatives and friends. Subsequently they also contained notes on the places the person had visited. The tradition of making *Stammbücher* eventually spread to other groups in society—students, officers, tradesmen, and craftsmen; and to countries outside Germany—Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, France, and Italy (Davidsson 1971: 7–20; Davidsson 1981: 13–17). In the eighteenth century the practice spread to a larger extent to women, whose books were dominated by inserts from family and friends (Ekrem 2002: 16). The tradition of making *Stammbücher* disappeared in the nineteenth century and was accordingly replaced by the sentiment album (Davidsson 1981: 17).

I argue that the photo album should not only be seen as a follower to the sentiment album, but also linked to the earlier traditions of the *Stammbuch*. The parallels in makeup between the *Stammbuch* and the photo album are evident, suggesting a kinship that has not been pointed out before. For one, they have the same visual contents, portraits of family and friends, and moreover they are connected to traveling. Furthermore they tend to share the same overall structure. In photo albums from the nineteenth century, just like in *Stammbücher* of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the most prominent person was put on the first page, followed by others in descending order. In accordance with this custom, for example, a great number of the personal albums in the collection at Nordiska Museet begin with portraits of the Swedish royal family followed by portraits of their own family (for example NMA 1924/60; NMA 1938/167; NMA 1939/104; NMA 136.021). The structure of the photo album thus conforms to ideas of the hierarchical ranking of social groups, which were widespread in nineteenth-century Europe (Hargreaves 2001: 21–24). Apart from following the same hierarchical principle as the *Stammbuch*,

nineteenth-century photo albums often displayed another visible link to this predecessor in the form of a metal plate shaped like a coat of arms on the front page (Figure 1). In Swedish album advertisements these were called “name plates” (Karström 1900). Even though metal plates were not common on the cover of *Stammbücher*, the very use of coats of arms on photo albums seems to acknowledge the album’s descent from this earlier method of collecting and displaying the signifiers of kinship, family connections, and social networks.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the principal type of item collected in the *Stammbuch*—the personal signature—carried over into photo albums, notably the *carte-de-visite* album, which frequently also contained autographs of the people portrayed.

### Different Types of Photo Albums

In archives and museum collections, photo albums are often grouped together despite being very different in character. According to Welling, there were three different types of photo albums in the nineteenth century, based on content or use: personal albums, official albums, and specialty albums (Welling 1976: 93–95). The first category was albums made by private individuals. The official albums, on the other hand, often contained images of architecture and monuments commissioned by the state or any private party. The albums by the photographers Auguste Collard and Édouard Baldus describing the architecture and views along the railways in France, commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce, and Public Works in the 1860s, are typical examples (*Des photographes* 2004: 64–83). The specialty albums, finally, were prepared for special events or occasions. These could be made to pay tribute to somebody, as for example albums containing portraits of a company’s employees, which were given to a retiring director. In the following I intentionally use Welling’s term “personal albums” as a comprehensive term for albums produced and used by private persons in different periods. The prefix “amateur” appears in marketing and



**Fig 1** An album decorated with a metal plate in the shape of a coat of arms engraved with the name of the album owner; Maria Lewin. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA 198.210. Photo: Birgit Brånvall, ©Nordiska Museet.

other texts on albums but will be avoided when possible. For one thing, the meaning of “amateur” has changed over the last two centuries and moreover the term has qualitative connotations.

The most important distinction is nevertheless between the kind of albums that appeared in the 1850s, with standardized slots

for carte-de-visite or cabinet card photographs<sup>4</sup> on the one hand, and the later amateur albums as they were termed, on the other.

The personal carte-de-visite albums were filled with photographs of people, works of art, and views, either commercially or privately distributed. Carte-de-visite portraits of celebrities

were popular and sold in large quantities. Subsequently, publicly distributed and marketed portraits of royals and other celebrities were mixed with privately circulated images of relatives and friends in the album. These albums were often leather binders and came in different sizes. Initially, in the 1860s, they were relatively small, having one or two slots for cartes-de-visite on every page. The oldest albums in the collection at Nordiska Museet generally measure 15 × 12 cm. In the following decades they grew larger (generally 30 × 20 cm), holding four images on each page on average simultaneously as their design became more elaborate. The pages of the early albums were plain white with a discreet decoration around the slots. Later, the pages of the albums were extensively decorated with flowers or intricate abstract patterns embossed or printed on the paper. The size of the albums varied but on average the Swedish albums would hold between forty and eighty images, even though there were albums that could hold up to 500 cartes-de-visite (Karström 1899, 1900; Welling 1976: 93; Åhlen & Holm 1900–1959). The carte-de-visite album was central in the public part of the home, often presented on the drawing-room table for guests to browse through. It represented the social status of the owner, based on kinship and friendship, as well as the tastes and preferences of the owner, since these were collections of admired persons in general (Gernsheim 1955: 230). The carte-de-visite albums had elaborate designs on the front, but not on the spine, which shows that they were meant to be displayed on the table or a specially designated album stand.

The so-called amateur albums, with blank sheets, appeared as a sales commodity in the 1890s in Sweden and had their real breakthrough in the 1910s, as in the rest of Europe (Coe and Gates 1977: 34; Dahlgren 2009a: 68). The appearance of the amateur albums is closely connected to the invention of relatively cheap and easy-to-use cameras in the 1880s. During

the 1890s there was a sharp increase in the assortment of cameras; the production of handbooks on photography flourished and the notion of the amateur photographer was spread through advertising and professional journals, although the actual number of people who had access to a camera would, for many more decades, still be relatively few (Coe and Gates 1977: 16–19; Dahlgren 2009b: 46–67). While the carte-de-visite albums had lavish designs with leather binders and elaborate decoration on the pages, the mass-produced amateur albums had a simpler design and binding, often a paper binder, and no decoration on the pages. Some had prefabricated slots for photographs of different formats, much like the carte-de-visite albums, while the majority contained blank sheets onto which the images could be pasted or attached with paper corners. From the 1940s onward, ring binders with loose leaves became popular. The fronts of the amateur albums were not as elaborate as those of the carte-de-visite albums, which indicates that they were designed to a greater extent for the bookshelf. It seems that they were no longer public objects in the same way. In short, the personal carte-de-visite albums are collections of types or specimens while the later personal albums take the form of a life story or a diary. The changes in image content as well as design of the cover imply different uses and different audiences. The album went from being a public part of the domestic sphere to become a more private object shared only with the closest family. Furthermore, as will be shown, this shift in the uses of personal photo albums influenced inscription practices.

Carte-de-visite albums remained in use until the time of the First World War according to Michel Frizot (1998: 679). In Sweden, in contrast, they were still on sale until 1933. This suggests that the photographic format of the carte-de-visite was also in use for considerably longer in Sweden than on the Continent. Thus, around 1900, two types of photo albums were in popular

circulation. In the marketing material they were referred to, respectively, as photograph album—fitted for *carte-de-visite* photographs or cabinet photographs—and amateur album adapted for small photographs taken by the album makers themselves (Peterson 1872, 1876, 1887; Stölten & Simonsen 1894; Åhlen & Holm 1900–59).

According to Michel Frizot, the *carte-de-visite* albums of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth-century amateur albums are two fundamentally different things (1998: 679). Despite their differences, a comprehensive study including albums from different periods and consumer contexts can be fruitful. Such a holistic approach would shed light on how the functions of these cultural artefacts have developed according to social, historical, and material circumstances. The practice of dating the images is one particularly interesting area, which reveals, among other things, how albums have been used in very different ways to construct narratives of identity, experience, and belonging. The second part of this essay, which deals with inscription practices, displays such a holistic approach by comparing albums from different time periods and contexts of use. In this section, three very different albums are presented and discussed. A personal album from the 1860s is compared to an official album from the same decade and a typical personal album from the mid-twentieth century. Besides presenting and discussing different inscription practices in photo albums, this section displays how the photo album as a medium consisting of images *and* texts can give a new understanding of the historical uses of photography.

## Part II. Inscriptions in Photo Albums

The images in personal *carte-de-visite* albums from the late nineteenth century in the collection at Nordiska Museet and elsewhere are often unaccompanied by text and are in very few cases dated. The names of the portrayed people are occasionally written out, but indications of

when the photographs were taken are very rare. In some cases, the name is written directly on the verso in the form of an autograph. In most cases, though, when the names are indicated, they are written on the page below the *carte-de-visite* or on the back of the *carte*. A large portion of these inscriptions were made on a later occasion as notations of the year of death are common. In some cases there is an index of the people portrayed in the album. It should be noted that indexes are quite rare, and in the collection of albums at Nordiska Museet, all but one are handwritten. However, the majority of them have the same layout and handwriting, which indicates that they were made by the same hand—most probably some archivist at the museum—at the time of accession. In short, this means that indexes were added when the albums were incorporated into the museum collection. Consequently, when consumed by their original users, these albums contained only a few inscriptions that can still be found on the album pages and the recto of the images.

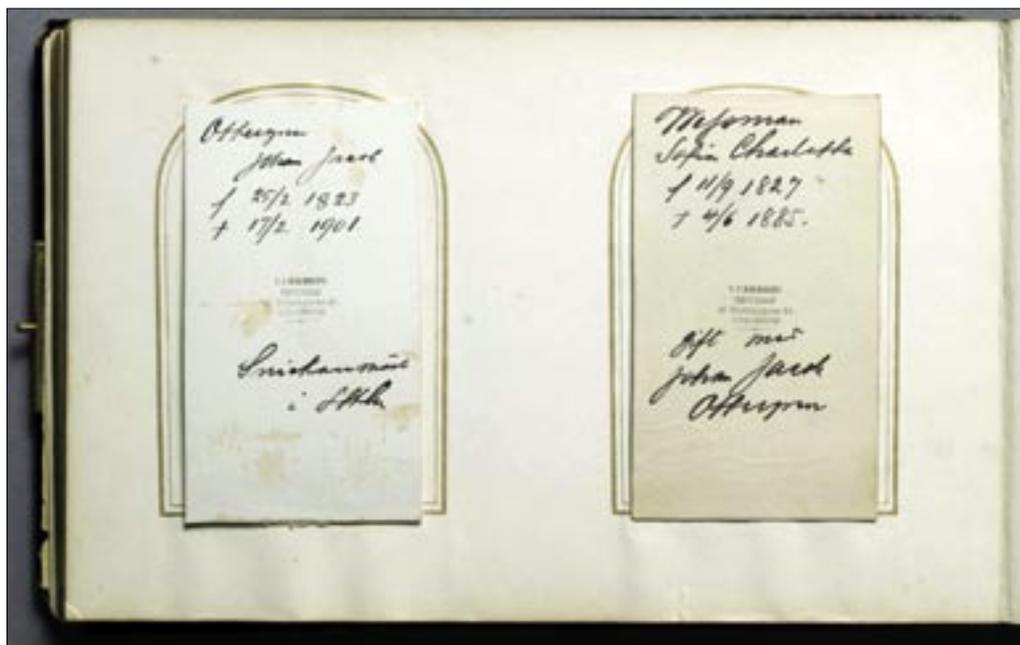
An album donated to Nordiska Museet in 1937 by Mrs. Valborg Ottergren could serve as a typical example of inscription practices of the late nineteenth century (NMA 208.986; see Figure 2). The album contains thirty pages with slots for two *carte-de-visite* photographs per page (measures 15.5 × 23.5 cm). It does not have any recognizable chronology and only two images are dated. One is a group portrait of five young men taken in Vaxholm on July 20, 1893. The other is a portrait of a man taken in 1891. Although not dated, most of the images have accompanying text. Data of the depicted persons are indicated on the album page or on the back of the image. The images have no recognizable chronology, and thus are not ordered in terms of time. This is rather what Langford calls “chronotope—a fictional fusion of time and space” (2001: 44) where the images seem to be grouped by kinship: couples, siblings, children etc., as on the page reproduced here showing a married couple



**Fig 2** Album page from the 1860s without text, showing the married couple Johan Jacob and Sofia Charlotta Ottergren. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA 208.986. Photo: Birgit Brännvall, ©Nordiska Museet.

(Figures 2 and 3). The text on the back of these portraits reads: "Ottergren Johan Jacob born 25/2 1823 died 17/2 1901 master carpenter in Stockholm" and "Vessman Sofia Charlotta b. 11/9 1827 + 4/6 1885 married to Johan Jacob Ottergren." Both images are stamped with the name and address of the photographer on the reverse: C. J. Malmberg, Drottninggatan 42, Stockholm. From this information it is possible to date the images to the beginning of the 1860s. The photographer Carl Jacob Malmberg established his business in Stockholm in 1859 and had his studio at that address until 1868 (*Ny Adress-kalender* 1860: 154; *Ny Adress-kalender* 1869: 181). But the dating of the images does not seem to have been of any interest to the original user of the album, in other words the person who put the text in this album.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, this formula of mixing images and text is in concordance with what a contemporary

British women's magazine called a "biographical family album." In these, "the first page is destined to receive the names, dates of birth, and marriage of parents, with reserved places for their photographs, taken at various periods" and the rest of the album is devoted to the children of the family (Di Bello 2007: 74). The biographical family album mimicked the design but also the content of the family Bible as the "tradition of recording the births, deaths and marriages of the successive generations on the flyleaf of the family Bible" was taken over by the family photo album (Hargreaves 2001: 46). Names, social position or status, and relations between the portrayed people were in focus, not their age (or in other words, when the photograph was taken). In this sense, these photographic portraits from a nineteenth-century album have more in common with ceremonial photographs, such as wedding photographs. As Hirsch has commented, "We do not care whether



**Fig 3** On the back of the same images the name, profession, dates of birth and death are inscribed, but no indication of when the photographs were taken. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA 208.986. Photo: Birgit Brånvall, ©Nordiska Museet.

it was taken, like so many other ceremonial photographs, a day before the wedding, or three hours later; we care only that the man and the woman look like a bride and a groom and uphold the decorum of formal weddings" (1981: 62).

If the compilers of albums in the late nineteenth century had little interest in making notes on when the photographs were taken: this is in pronounced contrast to personal albums compiled in the twentieth century. Here, the essential thing to write down seems to have been the year; and perhaps the season or date when the photograph was taken. The most important information given is the moment of recording, a practice even recommended in guidelines on making photo albums from the twentieth century (Bäckström 1930: 61; "Hur man lägger 1942; Stölten & Simonsen. 1939–40: 258). Recording

the time of exposure seems to be even more important than writing down the names of the portrayed people, no doubt due to the fact that the portrayed people in an album are easy to identify by its users and therefore the information is considered superfluous.

Nordiska Museet holds a large collection of ordinary personal photo albums from 1900 onward. In these the time of recording is almost without exception carefully written down. Among them is a collection of thirty-seven albums made by a woman covering the period from 1938, the year of her birth, to 1993, four years before her death (NMA 1997/29; see Figure 4). They are all paper or plastic ring binders of A4 size. This is an extraordinarily large collection of albums made by one person, but it is typical in its chronological structure and pattern of

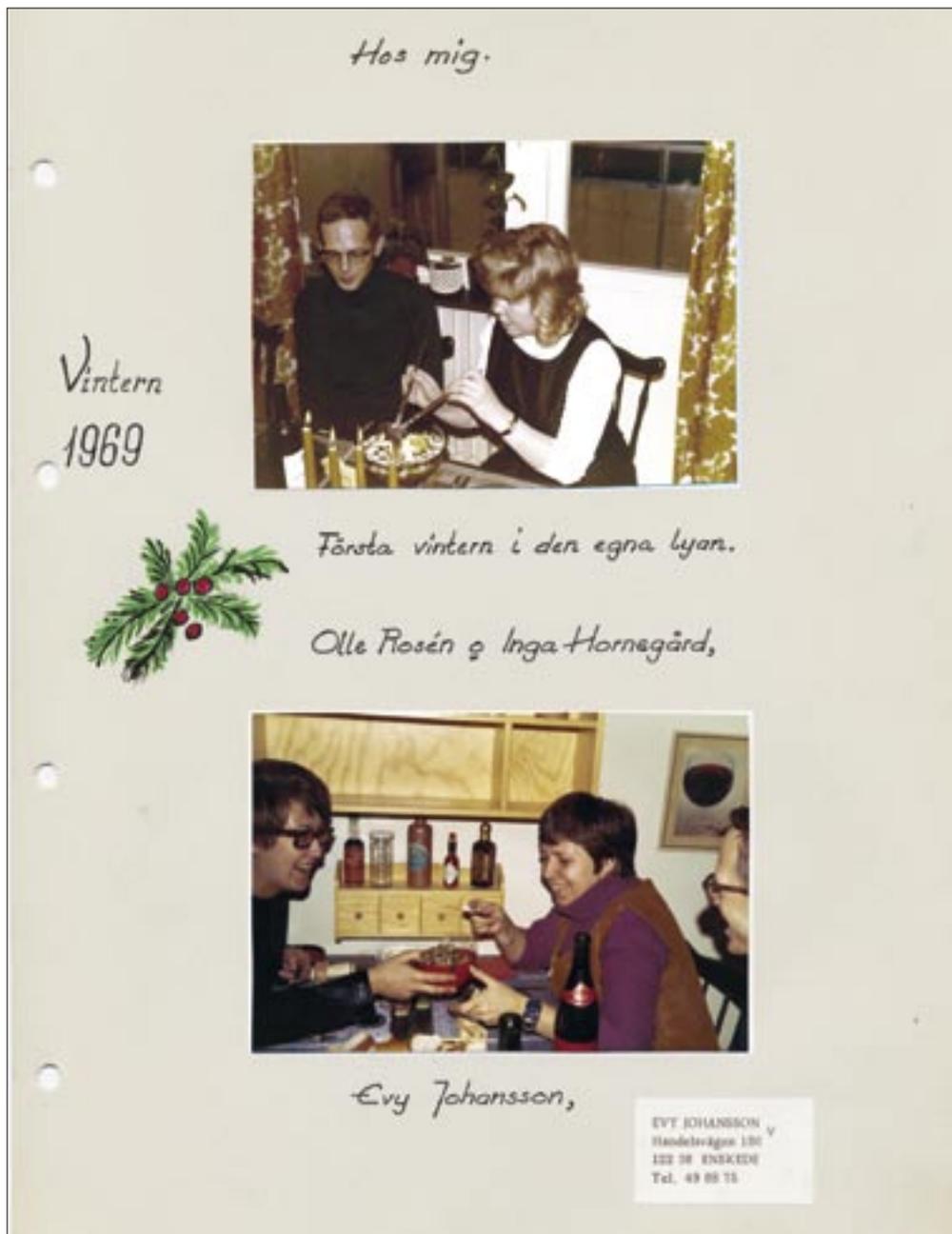
inscriptions. Each album (Figure 4) is numbered and marked with the years it covers on the spine and sometimes with a subject such as "1956 Italy" or "1957–59 School." The first album is marked "1938–1953" and begins with an image of the album maker, Inger Ståhl, as a baby. The following albums are filled with photographs of her family and friends, still lifes, views, and events. All images are situated in time, with the year, season, names of holidays, or even specific dates when the photographs were taken, inscribed on the pages. The page reproduced from album no. 11 (Figure 5) is typical of this particular collection of albums, but also of personal albums in general from the period. The page contains two photographs of people around a dinner table, taken in 1969. The inscriptions identify the time (winter 1969) and place (at home) where the photographs were

taken. Everybody except the album maker herself, appearing to the left in the lower image, is also identified by name.

This focus on dating and a chronological structure is typical of albums from the 1920s onward in the collection at Nordiska Museet. Indications of years, however, appear earlier and become common from around 1900 in personal albums. Thus the photographs in albums from the first decades of the twentieth century are dated but not necessarily chronologically structured. In other words, they could be said to mix the makeup of the *carte-de-visite* chronotope and the later, diary-like albums. One example in the Nordiska Museet collection is an album that covers the period from 1905 to 1942. The images on the first page were taken in 1932, while the last photograph in the album



**Fig 4** A numbered and dated chronology. Inger Ståhl's collection of thirty-seven albums donated to Nordiska Museet in 1997 on the shelf in the archive. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA. 1997/29. Photo: Jessica Wallin, © Nordiska Museet.



**Fig 5** “At my place—Winter 1969.” A page from Inger Ståhl’s collection of albums from the 1960s, where the time of registration is always recorded. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA 1997/29. Photo: Nina Heins, ©Nordiska Museet.

is dated to 1925. In between them is a mix of photographs taken from 1905 to 1942 (NMA 1982/56). It seems that the first decades of the twentieth century were a transitional period when design, content, and inscription practices gradually changed. Amateur albums and *carte-de-visite* albums shared some features. While their cover design often differed, they could be very similar inside, with prefabricated slots. In Sweden the *carte-de-visite* albums were still on sale simultaneously as the market for the so-called amateur albums flourished, and people would mix *carte-de-visite* photographs with the photographs they had taken themselves in the same album. When it comes to inscription practices, it also seems that this was a transitional stage.

### Representing the Person

There are several potential reasons for the practice of not indicating the year or date adjacent to the images in the personal *carte-de-visite* albums. One simple explanation for this could be the fact that people had very few photographs taken of themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century, perhaps only once in a lifetime. On the other hand, one might argue that this would be a reason for noting when this extraordinary event took place. But the habit of not indicating the date of the photo session was also true for images of children, who surely were supposed to be photographed more than once in their lifetime.

One explanation for the practice of not dating photographs in the albums of the late nineteenth century can be found in contemporary ideas and practices in portrait photography. It is clear that the photographic portrait was not primarily apprehended as an image of a moment in time—what a human being looked like on a certain occasion.<sup>6</sup> Rather, its main task was to be a truthful representation of an individual in a figurative sense. The ideal for portrait photography follows ideals for painted portraits in general, which are supposed to be

a distillation of a personality and an entire life (Hargreaves 2001: 51). The conception of a photographic portrait as a truthful depiction of a whole person, and not a moment in time, comes to light in written recommendations for photographers from the period. It is well known that initially the ideal of depiction in the *carte-de-visite* photographs was the full-length portrait (Bäckström 1926: 26; Larsen and Lien 2007: 46; Mortensen 2004: 40–41; Mazer 1864: 64), and in contemporary guidelines for photographers the reasons for this were clearly stated, which also hints at the presumed relationship between image and identity. In Disdéri's famous manual of photography, published in 1855, he writes that the photographer "must be able to deduce who the subject is, to deduce spontaneously his character, his intimate life, his habits; the photographer must do more than photograph, he must 'biographe'" (McCauley 1985: 41). The notion that the photographer should be able to portray the sitter's external appearance as well as the inner character or personality can be found in many contemporary manuals for photographers but was also a recurrent theme in instructions for portrait painters. In a contemporary Swedish photo manual published in 1864 the reader is advised to depict "not half or three-fourths, but the whole person." The facial features were just as important as the posture and dress, and even the arrangement of the background and the props was to be in harmony with the depicted person's character according to this guideline (Mazer 1864: 64–65). This emphasis on the expression of the individual is of course paradoxical, as the conformity in poses and props is so palpable in the *carte-de-visite* portraits, as has been discussed by Batchen (2005: 67–68). Another paradox in this context is the fact that many dressed up in the photo studio and staged themselves as being someone else from another culture, class, race, or sex. Studios even offered to lend clothes to give the sitter a different (better) appearance (Sobieszek 1978: 58–65), which indicates another

understanding of the meaning of true-to-life photographic portraits.

## The Conversation Piece

Another potential rationale for the practice of not writing text in the personal album is connected to how it was used or consumed.<sup>7</sup> From the 1860s onward, the photo album was a popular conversation piece in the middle-class drawing rooms of Europe. The photo album is as much an oral medium as a visual medium, as pointed out by Langford, and from the start conversation was a central feature of photo albums. The album was seen as a virtual meeting point. In the album, family members and friends separated in real life could be reunited. In 1909, a family album with five slots on each page, for a cabinet card in the middle and four cartes-de-visite around it, was advertised as a commodity where “intimate persons sit on the same page, for example the parents in the middle and the children around them” (Åhlen & Holm 1909: 3). In other words, the photo album not only displayed the family structure, like the flyleaf of the family Bible, but was seen as a virtual site, where family members could sit side by side by means of their photographic representations.

Another advantage of the album was the thrills it provided with unexpected meetings between people of different sex, class, age, and morals created within it (Batchen 2005: 72). To add to that, the carte-de-visite album was a flexible medium as the cartes could be taken out or moved around. A contemporary report by the French painter Jules Lecomte in *Le Monde Illustré* of 1860 describes the pull of mixing portraits in albums:

To restore to men and women that equality in the eye of the Sun which they have not in the eye of man—this seems to me as just as it is diverting. ... I have the album before me as I write: in it Alice la Provençale rubs shoulders with Marshal Castelland, Cavour

with Mademoiselle Fiocre, Debureau with Dupin the Elder, Fiorentino with Offenbach ... (Braive 1966: 68–69)

Thus virtual meetings took place on the album's pages, but also between the user and the images. Flipping through an album looking at portraits of friends and family was described as a meeting between the portrayed, but also as a meeting between the beholder and the portrayed persons. A contemporary witness published in the French illustrated journal *L'illustration* in 1861 describes the act of looking in an album as a virtual meeting:

It is very pleasing to have one's relatives and acquaintances reunited in an album. You open the book and flip through it: you see your brother who is in the army in Syria or China, your sister who is fifty leagues from Paris. You converse with them, it seems as they were there beside you.” (McCauley 1985: 48).

Beside the virtual meetings and conversations that took place between the portrayed people and the beholder, there was also the real conversation in the drawing room associated with the uses of photo albums. The photographic album could serve as a social rescue, as one contemporary writer remarked: “[They] are very useful; they supply a fund of talk to people who have nothing to say” (Kunard 2006: 238). As a matter of fact, Jules Lecomte, in his comment in *Le Monde Illustré* in 1860, also reveals that this aspect of its use could be the explanation for not putting text in photo albums. On the contrary, the question whether one should write the names or not was brought to the fore and the lack of text had a clear function:

In the evenings they amuse themselves by fitting the cards into their albums and discussing the great question of the moment: whether names should be written under the

portraits or not. The partisans of anonymity argue as follows: if the name is there, the amateur has nothing to do but turn the pages, whereas the absence of a name gives rise to speculation, interrogation, discussion, contradiction, interpellation ... so that the two or so who can look at the album at any one time are joined by ten or twenty others as the names that are mentioned become topics of general conversation. This precious boon for the hostess disappears if the name is written under each portrait. (Braive 1966: 67–68).

The photo album served as a conversation piece, and to function as such there had to be only the images and no further clues as to who was who, otherwise the game of identification could be spoilt. The absence of names opened up the possibility for conversation and would also put guests to the test. Would they recognize the portrayed people and could they figure out their implied relations? That albums were used for identity quizzes is also evident from the rhymes that were put in the albums with formulations like: "You are welcome to quiz it, The Penalty is, That you add your own Portrait, For others to quiz" (Mathews 1974: 8).

## To Read Faces

There is a clear conceptual link between personal, vernacular, and official, scientific uses of portrait photography in the second half of the nineteenth century (Hamilton: 2001b: 109–15). While the ladies and gentlemen in the drawing room amused themselves by looking at portraits of types and individuals, learning to identify them by their visual appearance from photographic portraits, scientists in psychiatry, anthropology, and criminology also trained and developed their identification skills, but for other ends. The social scientist Francis Galton tried to discern morals, physical health, and family kinship in facial features, while the psychiatrist Jean F. Charcot looked for

traces of mental status (Sekula 1986: 3–64; Frizot 1998: 261–62; Tagg 1988: 66–87). Both practices included the ability to discern (social) status, but while the middle classes in the drawing room were mostly looking up at royals, celebrities, and beauties, the scientists were looking down at the deviant subjects.

The thrill as well as the need to be able to read faces, to identify or classify persons by their looks, can be understood in relation to the social changes due to industrialization and urbanization in Europe and North America during the period. The modern, urban cityscape was characterized by anonymous crowds, short and haphazard meetings, and at the same time "The visual markers of class, prestige, status or esteem were in a constant process of flux ... and ... old signifiers of social position were eroded" (Hamilton 2001b: 110–11). This may also be the explanation for the obsession with taxonomy and social ranking that permeated the period (Hamilton 2001a: 57). In this context photography became an important tool for registration and observation of likenesses and differences. Subsequently the practice of producing and consuming photo albums evolved in a context obsessed by classification and visual identification.

The interest in knowing (and the need to do so) who was who was materialized in different popular cultural practices in the second half of the nineteenth century. The collecting of photographic portraits in albums is one example; another is the book *Who's Who?*, published for the first time in Britain in 1849, and the numerous publications of books of portraits of recognized people or places of interest such as *Men of Mark* (1875–83), *Men of Eminence* (1863–67), and *Living Celebrities* (1856–59), to mention a few. The photographic portraits of the royals and people in power that circulated in the late nineteenth century can be described as democratization of the right to look, even though the main reason for European royalties to have their portraits distributed was to maintain their

popularity and thus secure their power. In the foreword to the 1876 edition of *Men of Mark*, published between 1875 and 1883, this is stated quite explicitly. The purpose of the publication, according to the editor, is: "To bring, by means of photography, the characteristic expressions of our great men under the observation of all, at whatever distance socially or geographically they may be" (Whitfield 1876). In another publication from 1891, the title itself is illuminating: *Portraits and Autographs: An album for the People*. The fact that people were well aware of who should or could consort with whom made the personal album extra compelling, as the owner could order people at will, following the social conventions in real life or choosing to break with them.

In this period, the personal or private and the scientific or instrumental uses of photography were not mutually exclusive. In fact they share some features and converge in the album as a medium. While examining the visual traits of kinship, Francis Galton produced tableaux of mother, father, children, and other relatives, which have clear similarities to the family trees made up of portraits in the biographical family album. Galton also invited amateur photographers in 1882 to send in portraits of their family to receive a composite portrait of the family in return, thus encouraging people to look for common traits in their private albums (Hamilton 2001a: 98). Arthur Batut, another practitioner of composite images, developed a method for parents to find out what features their children would have (Hamilton 2001a: 75). Another link is the occurrence of "diamond portraits" in private albums. Diamond portraits, obviously taken for the pleasure of the sitter, contain four different angles of the person on one carte-de-visite, similar to the aesthetics of mugshots (Mathews 1974: 84; NMA 1922/07/11). A further example connecting albums and popular amusements with contemporary scientific practices is found in the small booklet titled *The Book of Indiscretions: Album for Self-Portraiture* (Indiscretionernas bok:

1881), published in Swedish from an English original. As the introduction reads, this booklet "very well defends its place beside the customary photo album." It was a collection of questions to be filled in by your friends and family. The result would be "self-photography," as "the persons in question . . . portray their inner human being, their virtues and faults, their likes and dislikes." While photo albums could primarily show the outer features of a person, the "self-photographs" in this booklet could also display their inner human being. It is a good example of how amusement and science, in this case phrenology, were intertwined in the period. To collect visual likenesses, guessing the identity and the morals of the portrayed persons, and to collect written confessions displaying the inner human being, were then two complementary amusements in the drawing room.

Consequently, the same themes and design appeared in scientific and private spheres. Furthermore the medium—the album—tied the private and professional practices of collecting identities together as photo albums were the common storage media for photographs; albums were also used to register and control the condemned. In one important respect, though, the official albums produced for scientific or instrumental ends clearly differ from the portrait collections held in personal albums through the presence and nature of text in general and dates in particular. As a belief in change, improvement, and recovery permeated the practice of psychiatry and correctional treatment, dating was vital. The photograph was an instrument for visual recording and time was central, as photographs of an individual before and after treatment could display the efficacy of official efforts (Hamilton 2001a: 66–97; Petersen 2007: 56–119).

The last album presented here is one such album held in the collection at Nordiska Museet. It registers of the prisoners in Malmö prison from 1861 in the form of an album (NMA 1908/48; see Figure 6). On each spread in this

album there are six portraits of inmates on the right and their number, name, date and place of birth, crime committed, and sentence on the left. In some cases, these inscriptions have the form of a biography that declares the prisoner's deeds and character. Prisoner no. 260 at Malmö prison, bottom right in the spread reproduced (Figure 6), was for example described as follows:

No. 260. Mathias Persson. Violence to foreman. Thirty-four years old. Born in the parish of Jernshög, Blekinge County. Previously sentenced for theft third offence and burglary second offence. Has been involved in mutiny at the prison; has attempted to cut the commander. Extremely wild and unreliable.

Unlike the personal album of the 1860s, this official album is carefully dated and furthermore the written information that accompanies the portraits contains data on age, place of birth,

and character. This design has clear similarities to the already mentioned popular publications on admired men, such as *Men of Mark* (Whitfield 1876) and the like. The content, however, is obviously different. What this example shows is that the failure to date photographs in albums did not apply to photographs in general in the 1860s. On the contrary, dating was very central in instrumental uses of photography due to the belief in change and improvement. This in turn strengthens the hypothesis that the omission of textual information in personal *carte-de-visite* albums was deliberate. Time was not a significant factor for the personal uses of photographic portraits in the period, as the images were not representations of moments in time but representations of people.

## Conclusion

To present the year of production of a photograph is common practice today, and



**Fig 6** A register of the prisoners at Malmö prison from 1861 in the form of an album. On each spread there are six portraits of inmates on the right and their number, name, date and place of birth, crime committed, and sentence on the left. In some cases these inscriptions have the form of a short biography that declares the prisoner's deeds and character. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, NMA 1908/48. Photo: Mats Landin, ©Nordiska Museet.

this holds for contemporary professional and personal as well as historical photographs. As this case study of a personal album from the 1860s shows, this has not always been the case. On the contrary, dating was not so accentuated in early private uses of photography. In this essay I have shown how the photo album, being the original context of use, unveils clues about concepts and ideas connected to the photographic image. As has been shown, the material aspects of the album itself provide information on its use, which is especially valuable in the case of the vernacular uses of photography, where contemporary written sources are scarce. Moreover, they reveal aspects of photographic practices in general which, taken out of this original context of use, will remain invisible. Considering the photo album as a medium and carefully studying its material features, such traces of culture help to make customs and general conceptions visible. An important prerequisite for this approach has been the access to the heterogeneous collection held at Nordiska Museet, which has been kept intact since it was acquired by the museum—in other words it is in the same condition as it was when used by its original owners. As has been shown, the absence of text, and in particular dates, in personal photo albums from the late nineteenth century should not be considered as a mere lack of data. Rather, it indicates a different relationship between photography, time, and identity, pointing to a significant change in the uses and functions of personal photo albums in particular and photography in general. While the personal albums of the late nineteenth century were primarily collections of types or specimens, the personal albums later took the form of a life story or a diary where time was a crucial factor. The portraits in the personal carte-de-visite album, on the other hand, were not seen as moments in time but instead appreciated as distillations of personalities, which connects the personal uses of photographic portraits and painted portraits. It was superfluous to date the photographs, while

the decision to note the names of the persons in the photographs was an open question. Many carte-de-visite albums, however, do not have any text at all, which can be explained by the way they were used. The albums were conversation pieces and the absence of written names invited conversation about who was who. The lack of written data on the depicted persons in the vernacular context is in strong contrast to the instrumental or professional uses of portrait photography in the late nineteenth century. As the belief in change and improvement permeated disciplines like criminology, psychology, and anthropology, the date of registration was carefully recorded. In contrast, in the personal albums of the late nineteenth century, time—in this sense—was not a salient feature. One of the main qualities of the personal photo albums, on the other hand, was their changeable, flexible, open character due to their composition of images without anchoring text.

## Notes

NMA accession numbers have been provided as a service to readers of this article.

- 1 The conclusions about archival practices and photo albums in this article are based on my studies of a selection of album collections in museums and libraries in Northern Europe. First I have closely studied the entire collection of photo albums held at Nordiska Museet in Sweden. Furthermore, I have studied samples of the collections of albums at the National Library of Sweden, Malmö Museer (SE), Kulturen i Lund (SE), the Swedish royal collection of photo albums at Bernadotte Biblioteket, the Royal Library of Denmark, the National Library of Norway, the Finnish Museum of Photography, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in France.
- 2 In her study of Lady Filmer's Album, Patrizia di Bello (2007) reproduces pages from the album held in the University of New Mexico Art Museum, Musée d'Orsay, the University of Texas at Austin, Lunn Gallery/ Graphics International Ltd., and the Collection Paul F. Walter. A sixth page, "The Marshaw Sisters," was sold at Christie's in New York

in 1993. See [http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=2440984](http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=2440984).

- 3 Royal monograms and heraldry are, however, common on the cover of the official and specialty albums in the Swedish royal collection at Bernadotte Biblioteket.
- 4 The cabinet photograph, a larger variant of the carte-de-visite photograph, measured approximately 14 × 12 cm. It was advocated by F. R. Window in England in 1866 according to Mathews (1974: 30). In the Swedish context cabinet photographs occurred in the 1970s according to Söderberg and Rittsel (1983: 48).
- 5 The information on the users of particular personal carte-de-visite albums is very scarce in the collection at Nordiska Museet. The name of donor and year of donation are always known, sometimes also the original owner. However, who put the photographs in the album and who wrote the text in the albums is, with very few exceptions, unknown. This is the case with this particular album, donated to the museum by Valborg Ottergren (1860–1949).
- 6 The notion of “moment images” does occur in writings on photography in the nineteenth century, but with a different meaning. Moment images or moment photographs were a certain genre, labeling photographs depicting moving things: human beings, animals, or other things in motion. See for example the following guidelines for photographers published between 1864 and 1899: Mazer 1864: 67; Nyblaeus 1874: 223–25; Burton 1899: 30–32.
- 7 The citations from the French and American illustrated press from the 1860s in the following section are taken from Braive (1966) and McAuley (1985). The points I make in this essay, however, are not spelled out by any of these writers. My preliminary studies of similar publications in Sweden in the 1860s, *Illustrerad Tidning* and *Ny Illustrerad Tidning*, have not yet yielded any similar findings. On the other hand, the reading of Continental periodicals was widespread in the Swedish bourgeoisie and it could therefore be assumed that information about novelties and trends from the Continent reached Sweden and circulated there.

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