

The Amon Carter Museum of American Art Presents Exhibition Offering an Unprecedented View of Transformative Nineteenth- Century Portraits Known as “Cabinet Cards”

Acting Out examines how a little-studied photographic phenomenon transformed public perception and laid groundwork for the snapshot.



Fort Worth, TX, July 1, 2020 — This August, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art (the Carter) will present *Acting Out: Cabinet Cards and the Making of Modern Photography*, an exhibition offering the first in-depth examination of the nineteenth-century photographic phenomenon of cabinet cards. Charting the proliferation of this underappreciated photographic format, *Acting Out* reveals that cabinet cards coaxed Americans into thinking about portraiture as an informal act, forging the way for the snapshot and social media with its contemporary “selfie” culture. *Acting Out* presents hundreds of photographs—many on view publicly for the first time—from collections nationwide, including examples from the Carter’s own extensive photography collection. On view August 18 through November 1, 2020, the exhibition is organized by the Carter and will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, cabinet cards gave birth to the golden age of photographic portraiture in America. Measuring 6 1/2 by 4 1/4 inches, roughly the size of the modern-day smartphone screen, they were three times larger than the period’s leading photographic format. This larger size revealed previously obscured details in the images captured, encouraging action-ready gestures and the introduction of an astonishing array of props. Where photographs had once functioned as solemn records of likeness and stature, cabinet cards offered a new outlet for entertainment and remembering life’s everyday moments.

Acting Out investigates how this new performative medium prompted sitters to become far more comfortable with having their portrait made. By the time Eastman Kodak introduced its new affordable Brownie camera in 1900, cabinet cards had primed Americans to photograph every aspect of their lives. Though produced over 100 years ago, cabinet cards have a familiarity and a levity that resonates with our experience of photography today.

“*Acting Out* exemplifies the Carter’s commitment to organizing exhibitions rooted in groundbreaking scholarship, a core tenet of our curatorial philosophy,” stated Andrew J. Walker, Executive Director. “This exhibition harnesses the resources of our vast photography collection and archive to show visitors the contemporary relevance of the medium’s pre-modern history.”

The exhibition is organized into four sections chronicling the birth and evolution of the cabinet card:

- **Caught in the Act:** Actors, orators, and other public figures were among the first to embrace cabinet cards. This section examines how the creative innovations employed by New York photographer Napoleon Sarony and his cohorts built public enthusiasm for a new kind of photographic portraiture founded on a relaxed sense of immediacy that influenced studio photographers across America.
- **The Trade:** This section looks at the entertaining and evocative ways that photographers worked to overcome low prices and fierce competition, and to stand out from their peers. Their creative solutions gave rise to the ubiquity of cabinet cards across America by the 1880s.
- **Sharing Life: Family and Friends:** Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century, cabinet cards were often the favored means for recording and celebrating family life. This evocative section reveals the ways in which cabinet cards established a model for family albums as channels for sharing and boasting of the joys and transits of life.
- **Acting Out:** If portraiture was the ostensible subject of cabinet cards, play was just as important. This section examines Americans’ acceptance of the camera as a tool for shared amusement as they toyed with photography’s pretense of reality and truth.

“In our current moment of ‘selfie’ culture and social media-centered interaction, understanding the history of self-presentation and portraiture is more prescient than ever,” said John Rohrbach, Senior Curator of Photographs at the Carter. “This exhibition reveals how nineteenth-century Americans approached photography far more playfully than ever before, a transformation that forever shifted our relationship to the medium.”

Acting Out: Cabinet Cards and the Making of Modern Photography was organized by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. The exhibition is supported in part by the Alice L. Walton Foundation Temporary Exhibitions Endowment and accompanied by a 232-page catalogue co-published with the University of California Press, Berkeley. The book is the first dedicated to the history of the cabinet card and features color plates of 100 cards at their actual size. Contributors include Dr. John Rohrbach, Senior Curator of Photographs at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art; Dr. Erin Pauwels, Assistant Professor of American Art at Temple University; Dr. Britt Salvesen, Department Head and Curator of the Wallis Annenberg Department of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and Fernanda Valverde, Conservator of Photographs at the Carter.

About the Carter’s Photography Collection

The Amon Carter Museum of American Art houses over 45,000 exhibition-quality photographic prints and 250,000 photographic objects, making the museum one of the country’s major repositories of American photography. The holdings span the history of the photographic medium, from one of the earliest daguerreotypes made in this country to inkjet prints being made today. The holdings reflect photography’s central role in documenting America’s nineteenth-century culture and history and the medium’s development as a significant and influential art form in the twentieth century to the present. Throughout its history, the Carter has supported the work of contemporary

photographers. In 1979 the museum commissioned Richard Avedon to create his acclaimed series *In the American West*, and the collection now holds one of two complete sets of prints from that project. A collaboration in 2013 brought Chicago-based photographer Terry Evans to Fort Worth to document the city's Trinity River. The museum is also home to the archives and monographic collections of photographers Carlotta Corpron, Nell Dorr, Laura Gilpin, Eliot Porter, Helen Post, Clara Sipprell, Erwin E. Smith, and Karl Struss.

Images (left to right): W. A. White, Wilson, KS, *My First Baby Friend Tompie and His Pet*, 1896, collodion silver print, Robert E. Jackson Collection; Benjamin J. Falk, New York, NY, *Helena Luy*, 1880s, albumen silver print, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, P2016.120; Unknown photographer, [*Chess against myself*], 1880s, albumen silver print, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, P2016.101

About the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Located in the heart of Fort Worth's Cultural District, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art explores the breadth and complexity of American creativity through an important and dynamic art collection. The Carter opened in 1961 to benefit its community by sharing the wonder of American art, fostering the growth of a vibrant cultural spirit, and stimulating everyone's artistic imagination. Housed in a building designed by Philip Johnson (1906–2005), the Carter features one of the great collections of American art including masterworks of painting, sculpture, and works on paper by artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Jacob Lawrence, John Singer Sargent, Frederic Church, Thomas Eakins, Grant Wood, Alexander Calder, and Stuart Davis. The Carter is also home to a world-renowned photography collection that spans the history of the medium from the Nineteenth century to today. It is also home to Amon G. Carter Sr.'s collection of nearly 400 works by Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, two of the most significant artists of the American West. Admission is free. Open: Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Thursday 10 a.m.–8 p.m.; Sunday 12–5 p.m. Closed Mondays and select holidays. cartermuseum.org
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