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ALEX. GARDNER, Photographer.

Entered according to act of Congress, in the year 1866, by A. Gardner, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Columbia.

331 Seventh Street, Washington.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN ON BATTLE-FIELD OF ANTIETAM.

"President Lincoln on Battle-Field of Antietam," dated October, 1862, is no. 23 of 100 7" x 9" mounted albumen prints illustrating Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866).

The First Photobooks

Pioneers of photographic processes in the nineteenth century changed how books were illustrated

The photobook, in particular books reproducing work by prominent artistic and documentary photographers, has emerged as a popular collecting area. Some collectors (myself included) focus on what one might call the first photobooks: nineteenth-century imprints illustrated with original photographic

prints pasted or bound in (henceforth referred to as "photo-illustrated").

William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844–46) is generally considered to be the first photo-illustrated book. Publishers were slow to adopt Fox Talbot's innovation, but from the 1850s to

the 1890s, the photo-illustrated book became a worldwide phenomenon, especially in Great Britain, Europe, and the United States. Original photographs—first salt prints and later albumen prints—were employed to illustrate almost any kind of publication, including art, architectural, engineering, medical, and scientific

works; biographies; memorial volumes; local histories; genealogies; *belles-lettres*; sermons; viewbooks; travel narratives and guidebooks; children's books; city directories; government documents; trade and auction catalogues; periodicals; sheet music; and ephemera.

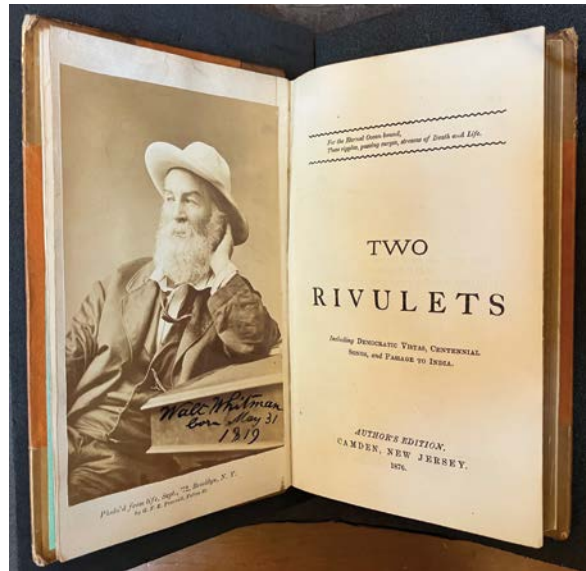
Portraits are ubiquitous in photo-illustrated books, but one also finds an extraordinary diversity of landscape, documentary, and scientific images. Some of these have achieved iconic status: Alexander Gardner's Gettysburg battlefield photographs from *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (Washington, DC, 1866), views of the American West by Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson illustrating official expedition reports, and the inscribed frontispiece portrait in copies of Walt Whitman's *Two Rivulets* (Camden, New Jersey, 1876), to name just a few. The vast majority—tens of thousands of historic images—await discovery and appreciation by collectors and scholars alike. Sadly, many of the photographers remain anonymous.

Photo-illustration offered nineteenth-century publishers a new option for high-quality book illustration. The process was not cheap, typically adding from 10 to 50 cents per print to the retail price. But for small press runs or works with few

in small towns far from major publishing centers.

For the United States alone, I know of nearly 2,000 books and pamphlets published from 1854 to 1900 containing photographic prints; the true total (not including periodical issues, sheet music, and ephemera) probably exceeds 2,500. Considering the many thousands of publications issued during this period, it is clear that photo-illustration never achieved its potential and remained a niche market. But why, given the superior quality of photographic images?

The answer may surprise, but it was common knowledge at the time: salt and albumen prints, unlike ink-printed book illustrations, tended to fade and were therefore not “permanent.” (Impermanence due to acidic paper was not yet a concern.) Most publishers avoided this problem by choosing wood engraving, engraving, or lithography over photo-illustration. Once cheaper photomechanical processes such as halftone and photogravure were perfected during the 1880s, the number of photo-illustrated pub-



Walt Whitman's *Two Rivulets* (1876) containing a mounted albumen frontispiece portrait of Whitman by G. F. E. Pearsall.

illustrations, production costs compared favorably with wood engraving, engraving, and lithography. Photo-illustrated books could be produced in any locale with a printing shop and a photographic studio, and it is not unusual to find examples published

Further Reading

The best introduction to the photo-illustrated book remains Lucien Goldschmidt and Weston J. Naef's *The Truthful Lens: A Survey of the Photographically Illustrated Book 1844–1914* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1980). The best country checklists are Helmut Gernsheim's *Incunabula of British Photographic Literature* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), for the period 1839–75; and Frank Heidtmann's *Wie das Photo ins Buch kam* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1984), covering Germany to 1915.

Useful subject checklists for the United States include Stanley B. Burns's *Early Medical Photography in America 1839–1883* (New York: The Burns Archive, 1983); David Margolis and Martha A. Sandweiss's *To Delight the Eye: Original Photographic Book Illustrations of the American West* (Dallas, Texas: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 1994); and Gary F. Kurutz's *California Books Illustrated with Original Photographs 1856–1890* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1996).

Important online databases include Mark Rowley's *Bibliography of Medical Photographic Incunabula* (artandmedicine.com/index.html), with coverage to 1890, and the Photography Collections Database of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin (research.hrc.utexas.edu/photopublic/). For a checklist of early photomechanical book illustration, consult the Clark Art Institute Library's David A. Hanson Collection of the History of Photomechanical Reproduction (www.clarkart.edu/library/special-collections/david-a-hanson-collection).

lications fell precipitously and has remained negligible ever since.

The landmark 1974 Grolier Club exhibition, *The Truthful Lens: A Survey of the Photographically Illustrated Book 1844–1914*, firmly established photo-illustrated books as a collecting field. Booksellers, collectors, and curators all took note, compiling checklists, curating exhibitions, and even issuing a short-lived price guide. Some institutions—including the Library of Congress, the American Antiquarian Society, the Houghton Library, the Getty Library, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, the New York Public Library, and the University of Colorado at Boulder—have built strong holdings, initially by identifying what was already sitting unnoticed on their shelves. Perhaps fewer collectors are active today, but interest in the iconic works featured in *The Truthful Lens* remains strong.

Photo-illustrated books present some interesting and rewarding collecting challenges. Little is known about press runs, but many photo-illustrated books were published privately, presumably in modest numbers, or received limited distribution. Many are scarce to rare on the market, and finding copies with minimal fading to the prints and with the publisher's binding in sound, unrestored condition can be difficult. In most photo-illustrated books, prints were pasted onto stiff paper or card mounts before being bound in. Although this kept prints from curling, it often stiffened the textblock to the point that bindings would be damaged during use.

Another challenge: for a significant number of photo-illustrated books, prints were added to some but not all copies, e.g., presentation or specially bound copies or deluxe issues; sometimes their presence or absence seems entirely random. For this reason, and because online booksellers may not mention the presence of mounted photographs, always confirm that the copy on offer includes the expected prints.

One more twist: in a small but significant number of editions, the prints may vary among copies. For example, at least four different author portraits, all from the same studio sitting, were employed as frontispieces to Mrs. L. D. Whitson's Civil War novel, *Gilbert St. Maurice* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1875). And to the completist's despair, Edgar Cherry & Company's *Redwood and Lumbering in California Forests* (San Francisco, 1884) contains twenty-four extraordinary albumen prints of redwood



Charles Harrington's popular tourist guide, *Summering in Colorado* (1874), features spectacular views by photographer Joseph M. Collier. Copies include from four to fourteen albumen prints, with many variants.

logging chosen from among seventy different images, but the selection varies in all known copies. A key reason: printing photographs one by one from a negative was time-consuming. If, say, 500 prints were needed for a book's frontispiece, printing 125 copies concurrently from each of the four negatives would be much faster than printing 500 copies from a single negative.

Perhaps the greatest challenge collectors face is identifying which books were photo-illustrated. Checklists exist for Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Australia, and Hawaii, and for a few narrow subjects, but the majority of photo-illustrated books fall outside their scope. Only recently have some libraries begun providing full cataloguing for photo-illustrated books, so online catalogue searches typically yield helpful but incomplete results. That I can iden-

tify nearly 2,000 American photo-illustrated imprints is hard-won knowledge (which I hope to share in a bibliographical catalogue) gleaned from years of searching bibliographies and library catalogues, monitoring the antiquarian book trade, and browsing library stacks for serendipitous finds.

Following *The Truthful Lens*'s precedent, many photo-illustrated book collectors have expanded their focus to include selected examples of early photomechanical illustration. From the 1850s to the 1890s, publishers experimented with various methods of reproducing photographs in ink: Woodburytypes, photolithography, and collotype processes such as heliotype, albertype, artotype, autotype, and phototype. Though not necessarily cheaper than photo-illustration, these methods did produce permanent, non-fading illustrations. During the 1870s and 1880s, these processes gradually superseded photo-illustration until being eclipsed in turn by halftone and photogravure. Confusingly, Woodburytypes, and occasionally collotypes, were mounted like photographic prints, but these can be distinguished from photographs under magnification. Early photomechanical book illustration is perhaps an even more challenging and less traveled collecting field than photo-illustrated books, but that is properly the subject of another article! 📖

David R. Whitesell retired as curator in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia in 2022. He previously worked as the curator of books at the American Antiquarian Society, a rare book cataloguer at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and in the antiquarian book trade.

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