

NOTES ON STYLE: PORTRAITURE AND PERSONHOOD

A LECTURE



BLACKMASS PUBLISHING

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

“WE ARE THINKING ABOUT BLACK LIFE. AND WHEN THINKING OF BLACK LIFE, WE CAN NOT ESCAPE THE IMAGE; BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE. PARTICULARLY, WE ARE THINKING OF HOW BLACK FOLKS WANT TO BE SEEN. WHAT ARE THE IMAGES WE SHARE? HOW DO WE WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? OVER THE YEARS, WE [BLACKMASS] HAVE BEEN COLLECTING PHOTOBOOTH AND STUDIO PORTRAITS. THESE PORTRAITS CAN BE CONSIDERED VERNACULAR IMAGES; IMAGES OF EVERYDAY LIFE. IN THESE PORTRAITS, THERE ARE SYMBOLS OF WHO THESE FOLKS WERE, OR AT LEAST WHO THEY WANT US TO KNOW THEM TO BE. THE CLUES LEFT BEHIND BY THE SITTER(S) ARE THE SYMBOLS FOR HOW THEY WANT US TO REMEMBER THEM. DESPITE THE “REALITY” OF THE TIMES, THESE FOLKS WANTED US TO REMEMBER THEM AT THEIR BEST. IN THEIR BEST OUTFITS, GIVING THEIR BEST SMILE OR STARE, CAPTURED ON FILM. WHETHER IT BE A HAT, A SUIT OR EVEN THE WAY THEY ARE POSED, STYLE IS HOW WE ARE TO BE SEEN BY THE WORLD. STYLE GOES BEYOND WHAT ONE IS WEARING. STYLE IS A LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPRESSED OUTWARDLY. OUR INDIVIDUALITY LIES IN OUR STYLE. AND FOR BLACK AMERICANS, STYLE HAS MUCH TO DO WITH HOW WE POSITION OURSELVES IN THE WORLD. AND THESE IMAGES CAPTURE STYLE THE BEST. AND FREEZE THEM IN TIME. THE CONSISTENCY OF A PICTURE, SOMEHOW HELPS SHAPE A UNIFIED IMAGE OF BLACK LIFE AS IT WAS AND/OR IS.”

– BLACKMASS



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

POSSIBLY SUNDAY. MAYBE EASTER SUNDAY? A SLIGHTLY TOO BIG FEDORA WITH A TILT. MAYBE BORROWED? ARE THEY SIBLINGS? COUSINS? FRIENDS? ALL DRESSED UP WITH SOMEWHERE TO GO; IN STYLE. WITH THE COOL OF SOME SOUTH SIDE CHICAGO CATS. "WE REAL COOL" LIKE GWENDOLYN BROOKS SAYS. SMIRKS AND SMILES TO MATCH THE STYLE. THIS LITTLE LADY, NESTLED IN THE MIDDLE, DRESSED IN ALL WHITE; HAT MATCHING HER GLOVES, GLOVES MATCHING HER HIGH SOCKS, MATCHING HER BAG, MATCHING HER KNEE LENGTH DRESS, COVERED BY AN OVERCOAT. AND AN HONORABLE MENTION TO HER BLACK LEATHER SHOES. A SQUINT LOOKING DIRECTLY AT THE CAMERA. IN A FOUR BUTTON BLACK OVERCOAT; WITH HAND IN POCKET, WITH THE HAT TO MATCH, SLIGHTLY COCKED TO THE SIDE. SOMEHOW, HE POSSESSES THE SPIRIT OF THE LEADER OF THE GANG. PANTS CREASED AND CUFFED, FALLING UPON HIS WORN BLACK LEATHER SHOES, GRACEFULLY.



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

JUST MARRIED. READY TO TAKE ON THE WORLD, TOGETHER. HER WEDDING DRESS, WHITE AS SNOW, FALLS TO THE FLOOR, GIVING NO CLUE AS TO WHAT SHOES LIE BENEATH. BUT CERTAINLY NO DOUBT THAT THEY ARE STUNNING. WHITE GLOVES, ON HIM AND HER, REFLECTING THE PEARLY WHITE DRESS. WHERE IS HIS GAZE AS SHE SEEMINGLY LOOKS DIRECTLY AT US IN HER CROWN? EVEN IF THIS GENTLEMAN'S EYES DON'T MEET OURS, HIS PRESENCE IS CERTAINLY FELT. A 3-PIECE SUIT THAT FITS AS IF IT WAS MADE TO HIS MEASUREMENTS. THE LARGE OVERCOAT RECALLS THE STYLE OF THE TIME, SLIGHTLY MIMICKING A ZOOT SUIT, ALONG WITH THE OVERSIZED PANTS THAT SLOUCH UPON THESE REMARKABLE BLACK TOE CAPPED SHOES, THAT MAY BE BOOTS. HEAD TO TOE IN BLACK AND WHITE AND BLACK AND WHITE AGAIN. A POCKET SQUARE AS AN ACCESSORY. BUT THE KNIT TIE TUCKED INTO THE BUTTON UP VEST SEALS THE DEAL. AND SIMILAR TO HER CROWN, HIS CONKED HAIR SITS AS A CROWN UPON HIS HEAD AS WELL. WITH A SHARP MUSTACHE THAT ALMOST LOOKS HAND DRAWN. AND IF LOOKS COULD KILL, HIS GLARE WOULD CUT AS SHARP AS HIS MUSTACHE.



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

“GREETINGS” IS THE MESSAGE AT THE TOP OF THE FRAME OF THESE PORTRAITS. FROM AMERICA? ARE THESE OUR PATRIOTS? WHAT STATE OF MIND ARE THEY IN? OR HOW WELCOMED DO THEY FEEL FROM THE PLACE THEY ARE SENDING THEIR SALUTATIONS FROM? ONE CAN ONLY SPECULATE ON THOSE REALITIES. NO MATTER WHAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY ARE STANDING UPRIGHT AND PRESENT IN THESE PORTRAITS. HEAD HELD HIGH, LOOKING DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA, WITH HER HAT ON TIGHT. THEM, ALMOST FADING SOULS, AS A RESULT OF TIME. AND IF NOT FOR THEIR SHINY WHITE SHIRTS, THEY APPEAR AS GHOSTLY SHADOWS. THESE POSTCARDS STAND IN FOR THE STATEMENT “I AM/WAS HERE”. AND HERE THEY CERTAINLY ARE. THEY ARE HERE AND DRESSED. READY TO BE SEEN AND REMEMBERED. NOT ONLY “I AM/WAS HERE”, THIS IS WHAT I LOOKED LIKE AND THIS IS WHAT I WAS WEARING.





COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

OFF TO WHERE? OR COMING FROM? THIS IMAGE IS A REPRESENTATION OF LOVE AND THE ESSENCE OF STYLE; STYLE, STYLE, STYLE. THIS IS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF SUNDAY'S BEST. OR FRIDAY EVENINGS FINEST? HER LITTLE BLACK VELVET JACKET, ACCENTED BY JEWELS AROUND HER NECK SHINING LIKE THE OVEREXPOSED FLASH IN THIS PHOTO FITS PERFECTLY. AND HER SKIRT LOOKS LIKE IT'S MADE OF A SIMILAR FABRIC AS THESE FINE CURTAINS FRAMING THE COUPLE. AND WITH HER HAT TO THE SIDE, YOU KNOW SHE KNOWS SHE LOOKS GOOD. THE BLINDING FLASH ONLY ALLOWS US A GLIMPSE OF WHO SHE'S LEANING ON, BUT HE DEFINITELY CAN HOLD HIS OWN STANDING NEXT TO HER. WITH A GOOD FITTING SUIT, A SHIRT AND TIE AND SOME LEATHER SHOES, IT COULD BE SUNDAY MORNING OR FRIDAY EVENING, BUT WHENEVER IT IS, HE'S READY TO STEP OUT. AND THEIR SMILES ARE ALLURING, ALMOST ALLURING ENOUGH TO OFFER AN INDIRECT INVITATION TO JOIN THIS WELL DRESSED COUPLE FOR A NIGHT OUT ON THE TOWN.



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

IS SHE AT HOME? A STUDIO? WHEREVER SHE IS, SHE LOOKS AS WELL PUT TOGETHER AS THIS LIVING ROOM SETTING. HER COMFORTABLE FLOOR POSE IS HIGHLIGHTED BY HER SMILE AND THE FLOWER IN HER HAIR. IT'S POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE THAT HER SMILE IS AS WHITE AS HER FLORAL ACCESSORY. THE LOOSE FITTING SATIN SILKY GOWN FLOWS ON THE FLOOR, MIMICKING THE PETALS IN HER HAIR. THIS IS ELEGANCE. IT IS APPARENT THAT SHE'S IN CONTROL OF THE ROOM, HOW SHE WANTS TO APPEAR AND BE SEEN AND HOW SHE CARES TO BE REMEMBERED. SIMILAR TO HER HAIR ACCESSORY, SHE IS NOT SIMPLY AN ACCENT, SHE IS THE STAR OF THE SHOW. AND AS THE SAYING GOES "TAKE A PICTURE IT'LL LAST LONGER", WELL HERE'S THE PROOF. SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PHOTOGRAPH. SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PRESENCE CAPTURED. HOW REGAL CAN ONE APPEAR AND REMAIN IN ONE'S MEMORY? AS SHE IS FROZEN IN THIS MOMENT OF ELEGANCE.



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

READY FOR HER CLOSE-UP. NOT MUCH CAN BE SEEN IN THIS IMAGE OF THIS BEAUTIFUL RADIANT YOUNG WOMAN BUT HER PRESENCE IS STYLISH, TO SAY THE LEAST. SPORTING HER BANGS TIGHTLY CURLED AND IN A PONY AND HER BUTTON UP BLOUSE WITH THE TOP BUTTON OPEN. SHE GIVES OFF A COOL CONFIDENT ENERGY THAT HAS BEEN CAPTURED IN THIS PHOTO BOOTH PHOTO. NO FUSS, JUST A JOYFUL BEAUTIFUL SMILE, MAYBE MID SENTENCE OR MID LAUGH? THIS PHOTO IS POETRY. THERE IS A BEAUTIFUL LEVEL OF INTIMACY THAT SETS THE MOOD WHICH ALLOWS FOR ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN US AND THE PORTRAIT. FOR THIS REASON, PHOTO BOOTH IMAGES REMAIN ONE OF THE MOST INTIMATE MEANS OF CAPTURING A MOMENT IN TIME. IT SERVES AS A TIME CAPSULE. OFTENTIMES IMPROVISED WITH LITTLE PREPARATION BUT A MOMENT WORTH DOCUMENTING. IMAGINE OPENING YOUR WALLET AND EVERY TIME SEEING THIS LOVELY SMILE. THIS IMAGE HAS A WAY OF SENDING GOOD VIBES WITHOUT EVEN HAVING TO RETURN THE LOOK BACK.



COURTESY OF BMP IMAGE ARCHIVE

BROTHERS MAYBE? COUSINS? FRIENDS? THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'VE SEEN A GREAT DEAL. THE WEAR ON THEIR BOOTS TELL A TALE. AND HIS BALLED UP FISTS ALSO DON'T SEEM SHY OF WORK. BUT, WHATEVER THEY ARE DOING AND WHEREVER THEY ARE COMING FROM OR GOING TO, THEY ARE FOR SURE IN-STYLE. THE WIDE LEGGED PANTS MUST BE OF THE TIME. TO THE LEFT, PINSTRIPED, WITH A CREASE DOWN THE FRONT AND TO THE RIGHT, HIS APPEAR TO BE WORKWEAR PANTS, THAT HAVE SEEN SOME ACTION. THEIR 3-BUTTON JACKETS ARE FULLY BUTTONED AND THEIR COLLARED SHIRTS AS WELL. THIS IS WHAT WE CALL PERSONAL STYLE. THESE OUTFITS LOOK WORN AND LOVED. DAY BY DAY BECOMING A PART OF THEIR REPRESENTATION. "STYLE FOR MILES" HERE. THE LOOK IN THESE YOUNG MEN'S EYES SEEM LIKE THEY HAVE SEEN PLENTY, ALL THE WHILE LOOKING GOOD DOING IT.

IMAGES COURTESY OF BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE,
NEW YORK CITY



MUSSER'S STUDIO
YOUNG MAN IN CRAVAT
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA
c. 1878
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 X 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY



HENRY'S
MR. WM. HARREL, 2ND TENOR SINGER
CINCINNATI
c. 1875
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 X 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY



J. F. ORTEL
SEATED MAN HOLDING DOCUMENT
BEL AIR, MARYLAND
c. 1878
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 X 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY



SHOREY (WILLIAM F. SHOREY)
REVEREND A. B. WILSON
BALTIMORE
c. 1880
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 X 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY



H. SEYMOUR SQUYER
WOMAN WITH HAT AND UMBRELLA
AUBURN, NEW YORK
c. 1880
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 x 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY



PROF. EHRLICH
WOMAN IN BERET
NEW YORK CITY
c. 1890
CABINET CARD
4 1/4 x 6 1/2 IN.
BURNS COLLECTION AND ARCHIVE, NEW YORK CITY