

Seeing the Invisible: African-Americans, Photography and the Quest for Identity

The emergence of photography so seamlessly aligns with America's transformation that you would be forgiven for assuming it's an American invention. America's embrace of this new technology was complete. Miniature portraits immortalized sitters, from the powerful to the powerless, for generations to come. Photography documented America's war with itself and the country that emerged from those battlefields; making the Civil War the first extensively photographed war. This most democratic medium matched America's deepest aspiration as a society: the individual right to self-determination. Peering into the lens, the sitter shaped the image as much as the photographer in this power sharing arrangement - defining how he or she would be presented.

Photography played a significant role in African-Americans establishing their identity in an indifferent and often times hostile society. For a powerless people the vernacular photograph was often the singular tool used against a tide of popular images that reinforced dehumanizing stereotypes of a deracinated people unfit to be considered an equal and therefore justly denied full citizenship. W. E. B. DuBois groundbreaking photo exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition was an all-out attempt to present a counter narrative – that of the new Negro – *The Talented Tenth*. African-Americans used photography to make a silent private statement – *I am here and this is who I am*. With the introduction of the daguerreotype to the photo postcards of the early twentieth century, these marginalized Americans project resilience, pride and self-definition. Within the historical context of the times these early images can be viewed as the first acts of non-violent protest. On a personal level, the photograph would play an important role as evidence in the often fractured African-American family tree. For the legally mandated illiterate, the photograph gave evidence to word of mouth family histories and fueled fading memories.

Unlike Mr. DuBois and his exhibit of African-Americans from the middle and upper classes, this portfolio of 19 individual and group portraits casts a wider net with more modest ambitions. This collection represents an opening, an entryway, for the viewer to come face to face with some of the invisible people of America's history. In addition to the personal histories, the significance of these images is derived from the time period in which they were produced – from the cusp of emancipation into the Jim Crow era. As a viewer, you are invited to fill in the narrative of these anonymous few. Look into their eyes, examine their dress and pose a question or two. For those who have seen the racist iconography of the late 19th and early 20th century of stock stereotypical characters, it will be impossible not to measure the imaginative arc from those depictions to this reality.

The idea of reimaging existing photographs was to make intimate images more accessible. Printed in limited edition of 15 portfolios with archival pigment inks to attain the highest quality and longevity, the prints retain the detail and emotional weight of the originals. For this I thank digital print pioneer Jon Cone and the team at Cone Editions for the loving care and craftsmanship they invested in this project.

Robert Scott - Curator