

Early Women Artisan Photographers: Narrative Nuances, 1840–1930

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"But I thought it was always a man under that hood behind the camera!"
— Signora D-, Verona, Italy, 2017

Would it surprise you to learn that women started to pursue careers in photography as early as the men did, circa 1840?¹ Women were some of the early adopters of photography who mastered ever-changing equipment and cutting-edge technology right from the beginning. Not only did they produce remarkable photographs, but some also became successful entrepreneurs, running thriving photography businesses for decades.

However, a popular misconception is that women became professional photographers only after 1930, even though it's clear even just from the U.S. Census records alone that women started well before that.²

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² Data from U.S. Census 1870-1930. Note that before 1870, the U.S. Census did not record women's occupations. But from other contemporary records, including newspapers articles, advertisements, and city directories, it is clear that there were women who worked in and/or ran photography studios starting as early as the 1840s. For my research on U.S. photographers, I am combining U.S. Census records with information found in city directories; birth/death/marriage certificates; newspaper advertisements, articles, and other notices; and other contemporary primary sources. Women who were early photographers in other countries are outside the scope of this paper <TBD: fill in references here for representative women in Italy, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. >

Figure 1 Slide: Graph of US Census data for women photographers 1870-1930

In this talk, we're going to interrogate several of the more common myths about early women professional photographers, and untangle the nuances of the multi-threaded narratives that emerge from their stories. Among other things, we'll try to understand why these talented early entrepreneurs are so often not included in the historical record.

My research focusses on the workaday artisan photographers who ran studios and made a living by taking everyday photographs of people, places, and things, producing a variety of outputs, including daguerreotypes, tintypes, cartes de visite, cabinet cards, matted prints, etc.

Figure 2 Slide: Artisan Photo Examples

One such photographer was Mrs. Elizabeth Withington. In 1857 she opened up her studio in Lone City, California.³ That same year, on the other side of the country, Mrs. Lydia Hicks was working in her photography gallery in Brooklyn, NY.⁴

The fact that both of these women were “Mrs” leads us to encounter one of the most common myths about early women photographers: that is, if you find a married woman running a studio, she is (of course!) married to a photographer, and is either just his assistant, or his widow running his studio after his death.

Figure 3 Slide: Myth - Married women were either the assistants to or widows of photographer-husbands

Many people in the 21st century, including many photo historians and archivists, seem unwilling to believe that women by themselves were able to master the techniques necessary to do

³ *Elizabeth W. Withington*, undated essay by Peter Palmquist, Clio Visualizing History website, www.cliohistory.org/exhibits/palmquist/withington/. Accessed December 16, 2018.

⁴ The exact start date for Mrs. Hick's studio is still to be determined. A notice in the *New York Herald*, August 23, 1870 that says Mrs. Hicks is retiring and mentions that the gallery has been in business for 25 years, but I have as yet been unable to verify exactly when Mrs. Hicks started running that business.

photography and run a studio in the mid 1800s. They offer objects like, “But surely the equipment was too heavy! ... too complicated! ... involved too many chemicals!”

But that’s not the case. There are many married women whose husbands did not do photography, including Mrs. Elizabeth Withington.⁵

Figure 4 Slide: Mrs. Elizabeth Withington

Mrs. Withington took *herself* off to New York City in the 1850s to train with the well-known photographer Matthew Brady. Mrs. Withington opened her own studio in California in 1857. She specialized both in studio portraits and landscape images, producing (among other things) beautiful stereograms of landscapes. During her lifetime, Mrs. Withington even gained renown among her fellow photographers for innovating a revolutionary wet-plate photography process that allowed her do landscape photography *without* having her own darkroom wagon on hand (not even Matthew Brady did that!).⁶

In the case of Mrs. Lydia Hicks, she and her husband eventually become partners for a while there in Brooklyn.

Figure 5 Slide: Lydia Hicks

However, she’s the one who had opened the studio; it was only later she taught her husband, a former shoe salesman, how to do photography.

⁵ Married women who were NOT partnered with a photographer-husband include Emma Albright, Kate Aplington, Mary Carnell, Mary Huston, Elizabeth Jewett, Gertrude Käsebier, Millie Kemp, Ada McAllister, Josephine Sharkey, Emily Stokes, Mamie Taylor, Elizabeth Withington, and many more.

⁶ *How a Woman Makes Landscape Photographs*, Eliza W. Withington, 1876. Text compiled by Peter E. Palmquist, *Shadowcatchers: A Directory of Women In California: Photography Before 1901*, Arcata, California: Peter Palmquist, 1990. In her essay, Mrs. Withington discusses the methodology she invented to pre-treat the glass plates in her darkroom before her journey, as well as her use of a portable “darkroom petticoat” that she also invented to stabilize the exposed plates before she got back to her darkroom at home.

As for the notion that a “Mrs” running a studio was a widow running her late husband’s studio, well, there are some women who *were* widows of photographers. But there are also many examples of widows running studios who were *never* married to photographers. For example, Mrs. R.E. Clark opens a studio in 1871⁷ in Black Hawk, Colorado, after her husband, Marshall Robert E. Clark, is killed in a shootout in the line of duty.

Figure 6 Slide: Mrs. R.E. Clark

Of course, a more general version of this myth is that it was somehow required to have a man involved to run a photography studio, whether the woman was married or not.

Figure 7 Slide: Myth - A woman is never the “real” photographer, there’s always a man involved.

But that myth is also easily refuted by numerous examples of both married women (e.g. Mrs. Withington, et al.) and single women running studios alone or in partnerships with other women. We find a variety of business models, including sole proprietorships;⁸ partnerships with female relatives (predominantly sisters⁹); or partnerships with unrelated women.¹⁰

⁷ Announcement for New Photograph Rooms run by Mrs. R. A. Clark, *Daily Central City Register*, April 13, 1871. In addition to Mrs. R.E. Clark, other widows working as photographers who were not widows of photographers include Mrs. Anna Ellstrom, Mrs. Louise E. Halsey, Mrs. E. C. Jewett, Mrs. M.E. Mater-Smith, Mrs. Josephine Sharkey, Mrs. Emily Stokes, Mrs. Jennie Utter, and others.

⁸ Women running studios as sole proprietors at some time in their career include Kate Aplington, Margaret DeM. Brown, Mrs. R.E. Clark, Lydia Hicks, Francis Benjamin Johnston, Gertrude Käsebier, Minnie Libby, Ada McAllister, Daisy Roche, Costilla Smith, Emily Stokes, Eva B Strayer, Elizabeth Withington, Benedikte Wrensted, and many others.

⁹ Sisters who ran studios together include Frances and Mary Allen, several of the six Alspach sisters; Anna and Minnie Black; Emme and Mayme Gerhardt; Ella and Sarah Graham; Mary and Myrtle McKellips; Mary and Alba Miller; Margaret and Anna O’Donnell; Ida and Hannah Overbeck (Overpeck); Flora and Margaret Stanley; Mary, Jessie, and Margaret Snodgrass; Beatrice and Clara Tonnesen; Myrtle and Lizzie Yost; Stella and Minnie Young; and many others.

¹⁰ Women who ran studios with an unrelated female partner include Anna Wing Towne and Alma Whitney; Margaret M. Foster and Maxine K. Wachtman; Letitia E. Wright and Laura Reeve; Mae Stearns and Bess M. Fellbaum; Bessie Krum and Ethel Cheney; Serge Duclos and Rose Ouellette; and many others.

But of course, when it comes to single women running studios, there are a variety of other myths about them, too, including one of the most prevalent, namely that women give up their photography careers when they get married.

Figure 8 Slide: Myth - Single women always give up photography when they get married

While we do find some examples of single women who close their studios when they get married, there are also many others whose stories refute that assumption.¹¹

To counter several of these myths all at once, I'd like to focus for a moment on the life and career of a photographer named Belle Bybee Chase.

Belle Bybee starts her career as a single woman in Harper, Kansas,¹² partnering (briefly) there with a man who was no relation before running her own photograph studio there in town.

Figure 9 Slide: Belle Bybee

Later, she marries D.B. Chase, a prominent western photographer, and together Belle and D.B. run the popular Chase Studio in Denver for several years.¹³ However, after D.B. is publicly caught having an affair with their studio assistant, Belle sues D.B. for divorce and gets the studio as part of the settlement.¹⁴

Figure 10 Slide: Chase Studio

¹¹ Women who started their photography careers as single women and did not give it up after their marriage include Belle Bybee, Myrtle McKellips, Mary McKellips, Iva Roach, Emma Roche, Juno B. Shane, and others.

¹² It is not clear where Belle Bybee started her career. In 1885, when she and John Burgener buy a studio together in Harper, Kansas, they are described as "old hands" at the business (*Harper Sentinel*, August 15, 1885). Burgener and Bybee part ways soon after; there are no directories available for Harper in 1886, but by 1887 Belle Bybee and John Burgener are running separate galleries in town. (Harper City Directory 1887).

¹³ Article that mentions Belle B. Chase filing suit for divorce in 1897 mentions that Belle B. and Dana B. Chase were married in Santa Fe in 1888 (Denver Rocky Mountain News, December 22, 1897)

¹⁴ Article details allegations during the divorce proceedings, that Mrs. Chase discovered Fannie Smith in an embrace with Dana in the studio. *Denver Post*, April 26, 1898. Fannie Smith, a clerk in the Chase Studio, later becomes Dana B. Smith's wife and partner in a new studio in Salt Lake City. (information compiled from census and marriage records.)

Her career then reaches new heights as the owner/operator of the popular (and re-branded) “Mrs. B.B. Chase” studio in the mid 1890s and early 1900s.¹⁵

Figure 11 Slide: Mrs. B.B. Chase Studio

Belle ultimately closes her Colorado business down in 1905 when she marries a pharmaceutical salesman¹⁶ and moves with him to Cape Town, South Africa, where she (apparently) opened a new photography studio.¹⁷ After her husband’s death, Belle returns to the U.S., eventually opening up a photography studio in California. Late in life, she winds up working for other photographers in both California and Hawaii, working in the photography profession until her death in the 1936.

Figure 12 Slide: Mrs. B.B. Chase photo and article

Belle’s story provides a counter-point to many of the myths I’ve already mentioned. In addition, since she ran several successful studios during her 40+ years in photography, Belle B. Chase’s story also refutes myths about the supposed lack of business skills of women photographers.

*Figure 13 Slide: Myth - Women photographers are not good at running a photography business
– i.e. Women photographers necessarily have short careers*

¹⁵ Starting in the 1898 Denver City Directory, Mrs. B.B. Chase is listed as a photographer on her own, at the old Chase Studio address, 916 16th Street, Denver.

¹⁶ *Denver Post*, September 9, 1904, has an interview with Mrs. B.B. Chase about her plan to go to Cape Town to open a studio. A subsequent article, *Denver Post*, January 1, 1905, has another interview with Mrs. Chase, who explains she moving to Cape Town with her new husband, Charles F. Chase, a pharmaceutical salesman. In the interview, Mrs. Chase explains that it’s just a coincidence that Charles F. has the same last name as her first husband and says that they are no relation. However, my research indicates that Charles F. Chase was in fact the younger brother of Dana B. Chase. It’s unclear why Belle says that the two men were unrelated.

¹⁷ In an interview in the *Denver Post*, September 9, 1904, Mrs. Chase indicates that she will open a new studio in Cape Town, South Africa. Confirmation that she did actually do that is pending further research.

Beyond Belle B. Chase, there were numerous successful female photographic entrepreneurs who enjoyed careers longer than 10 years.¹⁸ For example, let's consider the career of a woman named Mrs. Rosa Vreeland.

Figure 14 Slide: Mrs. Vreeland

Rosa Vreeland ran a small photographic "empire" in the period 1881-1910, opening multiple branches in Kansas and neighboring.¹⁹ For a time she even ran a photo car,²⁰ i.e. a private railroad car that served as a travelling photographic studio.

Mrs. Vreeland's advertising campaigns in the newspapers are remarkable for their thematically creative approaches, including poetry.²¹

Moreover, Rosa Vreeland clearly understood the importance of branding. Initially achieving success as "Mrs. Vreeland" (when she was a young farmer's wife with 2 small children) she maintained the "Vreeland" brand through 3 husbands and 2 divorces, briefly rebranding her studio as "Vreeland Whitlock" during her short 2nd marriage to a man named Ogden Whitlock

¹⁸ As a reasonable indication of career longevity, I am considering a career of 10 or more years to qualify as a long career. Women who had careers longer than 10 years include Emma Albright, Kate Aplington, Georgene Bagger, Margaret DeM. Brown, Ethel Cheney, Emma Collis, Martha DaLee, Serge Duclos, Eliza DaLee Willis Squires Fey, Emma Fontaine, Margaret M. Foster, Maud Frink (Dorothy Crawford), Harriette Ihrig, Francis Benjamin Johnston, Gertrude Käsebier, Minnie Libby, Clara Ober-Towne, Rose D. Ouellette, Iva Roach, Daisy Roche, Helen Rosenkrans, Gertrude Sayen, Julia Skolas, Costilla Smith, Eva Strayer, Zilphia Sneed, Margaret Snodgrass, Mary Snodgrass, Mae Stearns, Mabel Sykes, Anna Wing Towne, Maxine K. Wachtman, Mathilde Weil, Alma Whitney, Elizabeth Withington, Benedikte Wrensted, among many others.

¹⁹ City directories from McPherson Kansas and elsewhere, combined with newspaper notices and advertising, show evidence that Rosa Vreeland operated her main studio branch in McPherson, Kansas while simultaneously opening and operating studios elsewhere in Kansas, including Marion, Windom, and Salina, as well as also operating studio in Colorado Springs, CO. Her last studio was in Alva, Oklahoma. Further research is necessary to determine the full extent of Mrs. Vreeland's studio 'empire'.

²⁰ Notice that the Vreeland Photo Car has been renovated and is to depart appears in the *McPherson Weekly Republican*, April 13, 1900

²¹ One example of Mrs. Vreeland's ad is a poetic tribute to Mother, *The McPherson Daily Republican*, February 27, 1890.

(Ogden Whitlock was never a photographer nor a partner in the business.) After that marriage ended in divorce, Rosa reverted back to using just “Mrs. Vreeland” for her studio name.²²

Even after she sells all her Kansas studio branches when she marries a dentist and moves to Oklahoma, the Vreeland brand moves with her when she opens her new “Vreeland Studio” in Alva, Oklahoma.²³

As a successful early photographic entrepreneur, Mrs. Vreeland also served as a teacher and role-model for several women who learned photography from her and then later struck out on their own.²⁴

So, if these early women photographers existed, and some of them even had long careers, why are they and their achievements most often left out when talking about the early days of photography?

One explanation that has been suggested to me by a number of archivists and historians is that even if we accept that these women existed, they were at the end of the day *merely* artisan photographers, and therefore they never did any interesting, innovative, or worthy of note.

That, of course, is another myth.

Figure 15 Slide: Myth - Women never did any interesting or innovative photography

²² For a time she partners with her son, George, and uses the brand “Vreeland and Son, c.f. Marion Record, April 29, 1898, ad for the new “Mrs. Vreeland & Son” studio.

²³ There are also newspaper notices and ads that confirm Rosa is running Vreeland Studio in Alva, O.T., along with examples of photographs produced in this period. Cf. *McPherson Daily Republican*, December 3, 1901, when her son, George, brings the Vreeland Photo Car (which he now runs) photo car to visit her and her studio in Alva.

²⁴ Women who worked for Mrs. Vreeland and later opened their own studios include the Young sisters (Minnie and Stella) and Eola White. Miss Leora Seitz worked for Mrs. Vreeland in both McPherson and on her photo car, and later worked for the White studio. (Information compiled from newspaper notices). Further research needs to be done on other women who worked for Mrs. Vreeland.

There are many women whose work was innovative; others were even groundbreaking and/or award winning.²⁵

For example, let's look at the career of Miss Margaret DeM. Brown.

Figure 16 Slide: Margaret DeMotte ("DeM") Brown

Margaret DeMotte Brown started her career by teaching photography at the Illinois School for the Deaf in the early 1900s. On the side, she also produced beautiful and highly acclaimed pictorialism photography.²⁶

After taking a year-long leave of absence from her teaching job, Miss Brown studied in New York City with Clarence White . She was there when he and Gertrude Käsebier formed their new Pictorial Photographers of America group. Miss Brown, in fact, became the corresponding secretary of the PPA.²⁷

An unexpected legacy from long-lost uncle²⁸ allowed Miss Brown to move across country the next year and open her own artisan studio in Poughkeepsie, NY.²⁹ While in Poughkeepsie, she built a successful business that was in operation for over 20 years. Initially modelling her business on the "Pictorialist Portrait" style popularized by Gertrude Käsebier, Miss Brown's studio eventually encompassed a variety of genres, including yearbook photos, graduation

²⁵ In addition to Mrs. Withington's innovative wet plate photography process, other women who did groundbreaking work in photography include Jessie Tarbox Beals (journalism), Margaret Bourke-White (industrial photography), Francis Benjamin Johnston (journalism, general documentary and work as White House photographer) and Julia Skolas (documentary), Gertrude Käsebier (co-founder of two influential Pictorialism groups), Beatrice and Clara Tonnesen (photography in advertising), among many others.

²⁶ One of Margaret DeM. Brown's Pictorialist work was included in the 1917 Pittsburg Salon, cf. the *Photographic Journal of America*, 1917, p. 187-188.

²⁷ 1917. *Photo-era Magazine*, Volume 38. p 260.

²⁸ *Topeka Daily State Journal*, September 7, 1918

²⁹ Margaret DeM. Brown announces studio opening, *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 20, 1918

photos, garden photos, scientific studies, theatre performances, architectural photos, and book illustrations.

One thing that Miss Brown did not seem to advertise is “baby photos,” but another myth about women photographers is that they specialized in just that.

Figure 17 Slide: Myth - Women photographers specialized in baby photos.

Certainly artisan photographers could make a good living taking photos of babies and children, and some women photographers did this, but no more or less often than their male counterparts.

And, there were also women like Mary Snodgrass, who advertised in 1913 that she had hired a *man* who had experience taking 10,000 baby pictures.³⁰ Interestingly, later on, when Mary was running the Snodgrass studio with her sister Margaret, they apparently did not make baby photos a specialty. An archive of thousands of negatives representing nearly 20 years' worth of their work reveals photos of all types of subjects – but only a handful of baby photos.³¹

Getting back to Margaret DeM. Brown, I have found no examples that she ever did baby photos, including multiple genre examples that are in the collection at Vassar College (Miss Brown did a lot of work with a variety of departments at Vassar).

Interestingly, as it turns out, there are a few examples of her work in the collection at the Library of Congress, including this wonderful portrait of a relaxed FDR before he was president.

³⁰ “E.A. Myers, who has photographed 10 thousand babies in Utah and Idaho in the past two years, has been engaged to assist Miss Snodgrass in the studio” [for taking photos for taking free photographs for Baby Contest]. Caldwell Tribune, August 29, 1913.

³¹ The Snodgrass-Stanton archive at the Robert E. Smylie Archives at the College of Idaho, Caldwell, Idaho contains thousands of photos taken by the Snodgrass Studio between 1919-1939, the period when Mary Snodgrass was running the studio with her sister Margaret. Prior to that period, Mary Snodgrass ran the studio with her brother, Lucian, from 1911-1913, then with her sister Jessie until Jessie's death in 1919. Unfortunately, the records for the period prior to 1919 have been lost.

Figure 18 Slide: FDR portrait by Brown in LOC

However, in the Library of Congress archive, that photo is identified only as being by “Brown, Margaret DeM. Photographer,”³² with no information about where that photo came from or who this woman photographer was.

And that’s the problem.

Photos like this by early women photographers, works that were celebrated in their own life times, are out there, but they are routinely passed over. However, with a little bit of digging, it’s possible to piece together the wonderfully rich history of these women’s careers. There’s not, of course, a single narrative that emerges. It’s rather more nuanced than that, with multiple intertwined narrative threads.

These women’s photographic work truly represents a full gamut of photographic genres. Some of them did artistic photography, some did documentary or scientific photography, others pursued a varied career that incorporated all of those elements and more. Some did groundbreaking, award-winning work – and that, at the very least, should be recognized and celebrated.

But at their core, the careers of all of these early women photographers embraced the vital role of artisan photography, from portraits of people in all walks of life to photos of businesses, school classes, or town events. In the days before Instagram, when everyone has a camera in their pocket, these women were key players as photographers, preserving the memories of everyday people’s everyday lives.

³² Photo of FDR by Margaret DeM. Brown: Library of Congress Control Number 91480307. LCCN Permalink <https://lccn.loc.gov/91480307>.

And yes, in the early days of photography, there definitely sometimes *was* a woman under that hood.

References

In addition to the specific things cited in the text, material was gathered from the following sources.

Digitized material from Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.com, including

- Birth/Death/Marriage Records
- Census Records (U.S. and State)
- City Directories
- Passport Applications

Historic Newspaper Articles and Ads from

- Online sites including Newspapers.com, GenealogyBank.com, NewspaperArchive.com
- Library of Congress Chronicling America
- Microfilm records at state archives and public libraries around the U.S.
- State Historical Newspapers Sites (Colorado Oklahoma, New York State, and others)

Original writings by women photographers in collections by Peter Palmquist:

- *Camera Fields and Kodak Girls: 50 Selections by or about Women in Photographer, 1840-1930*. Midmarch Arts Press, New York: 1989.
- *Shadowcatchers: A Directory of Women In California: Photography Before 1901*. Peter Palmquist, Arcata, California:1990

Photos used as visual examples in the talk are used with permission (as noted on the slides) from private collections and public archives.