Who Are We Really?

Delgadillo, Roberto C.

Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials

Delgadillo, Roberto C.
Who Are We Really? Latin American Family, Local and Micro-Regional Histories, and Their Impact on

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/110101.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/110101

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3393187
3. Ordinary Images: Appreciating Photographs of Children in a Pictorial Archive

Claire-Lise Bénaud

In the Center for Southwest Research Pictorial Archive at the University of New Mexico, photographs of children appear in a broad range of collections. The photographs discussed in this paper are an unexceptional sample and many archives in historical societies and universities have similar collections. Because the photographs are not exceptional in any way, archivists and librarians take them for granted and, up till now, have overlooked their significance. A closer look at these ordinary images is thought-provoking.

Most pictures of children in the Pictorial Archive were not taken by artists—even though some have artistic value—but by studio photographers, documentary photographers, and regular people. The Pictorial Archive has countless photographs of children shown either alone or with their families. It also contains group portraits that usually fall into the categories of school photos, sports teams, theater or dance productions. In this paper, we will focus on studio photographs of children and their families from Mexico and New Mexico. The Mexican photographs come from studios in Mexico City, Durango, León, Veracruz, and some others that are unidentified. Many images are in the carte-de-visite format. The New Mexican images come mostly from two photographic studios, the Cobb Studio in Albuquerque and Schmidt Studio in Chloride. These photographs of Mexican and New Mexican children date from the same time period, the late nineteenth century to World War I.

When one looks at these photographs, several questions come to mind. What is the image about? Who was the photographer? How was he or she influenced by tradition and culture? The cardinal question is still discussed today by the public and in the media: Do photographs act as indisputable evidence of a real event? The realist versus constructivist viewpoints, especially for documentary photographs as we find them in the Pictorial Archive, offer a valid debate. Susan Sontag (1973, 86), in her seminal work On Photography, states that the history of photography can be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification, which comes from the fine


23
arts, and truth-telling, which comes from journalism. She argues that photographs “furnish evidence” even though the picture may distort reality (Sontag 1973, 5).

Other academics contend that photographs are constructions subject to the same discursive formations as any other medium and cannot be regarded as a trace of reality. Images of children have an added layer of complexity. Their photographs are taken by adults and often represent the adults’ aspirations. We do not know how the children feel about being in the picture or having to pose for studio photographers. It is impossible to reconstruct feelings. Do pictures reflect children’s real experiences, since they are taken by adults and the children are only subjects? It is not only the photograph that matters, but what’s in the eye of the beholder. The same photograph may be understood differently today than it was a hundred years ago. Meanings and visual cues are understood and shared by a particular society within a particular time period.

Rather than artistic influences, we are more concerned here with the sociohistorical influences and values that the photographer might not have consciously brought into play but are nevertheless present. At first glance, it seems that parents are interested to have photographs of their children because they want to see and remember them as they really were. However, in the last two centuries, as is the case today, families want to present their children as charming and cute. The pictures of these children show us what we want childhood to be.

**Historical Perspective**

Before the Enlightenment, children were represented in paintings like small, imperfect adults. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s treatise, *Emile*, about education and child-rearing, completely changed this perception. Rousseau considered man a *bon sauvage*, a noble savage, meaning that youth is inherently good and innocent. The concept of the child was transformed from that of an inefficient but potentially worthy small adult to that of a new class of being—innocent, helpless, needing education, special clothing, and special attention (Hixson 1977, 10). When photography came along in 1839, society’s representation of children reflected this understanding. The ideal of the Romantic Child simply changed medium, from paintings and illustrations to photographs.

**Mexican Photographs**

The Pictorial Archive has significant holdings of Latin American photography, especially from Mexico (Davidson 2004). Many of these Mexican collections contain scarce and unique works and are from well-known photographers and artists. Despite this rich corpus, the Pictorial Archive holds few items from run-of-the-mill Mexican photographic studios. The emphasis on rare materials, while fundamental to Special Collections, is a detriment to the type of images discussed here.
New Mexican Photographs

In the nineteenth century, women of the expanding middle class stayed home to take care of their children and had them photographed to exhibit motherhood, to show status, and to record significant events. Having studio photographs taken, which became the craze starting in the 1860s, became a necessary step for these families. In the Pictorial Archive, there is a vast trove of studio photographs. These are of children from middle class families, families who could take time off from their chores, had the inclination to dress up their children, could make an appointment, and take them to a studio. The rise of the middle class “created a market for pleasant, undemanding pictures to hang on living-room walls” (O’Neill 1996, 3). Going to the photographer’s studio was not a casual appointment, but a ritual like others of motherhood, such as christening, baptism, and birthday celebrations. The photos proved that women graduated from the role of wife to that of mother, so they were framed for display at home and were sent to family members.

Families

In family photographs, children wore their Sunday best and posed stiffly. Unlike current family photographs, it was not always apparent that the parents appreciated and loved their children. The ways the parents were dressed clearly reflected their status in society. The women wore fancy hats and elaborate

Image 1. “Group Portrait,” photograph, Cobb Memorial Photograph Collection (PICT 000-119-0350), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
dresses, the men wore jackets, starched shirts, and watch fobs. Not a hair was out of place. While the parents often wore dark clothing, the children were dressed in white or light colors. Both boys and girls were well-scrubbed; wore lacy dresses and bows in their hair, on their shoes, and at the collar; had carefully combed hair, which was often curled for the event. Very young boys wore dresses as was customary at the time. There were no children from the lower classes represented in these studio portraits. Nobody smiled at the camera.

The roles of mothers and fathers were clearly defined when one looks at these photographs. Fathers were placed in a slightly more prominent position and mothers sat back, had their youngest child on their lap and were surrounded by their other children (see Image 1). Fathers did not hold their children but were portrayed as the protector or as the educator while mothers were portrayed as the nurturer with babe in arms. In many photographs, little girls emulated their mothers. They sat on chairs and crossed their legs, just as their mothers did, and held their baby sister or brother. Girls clearly fell in the domestic realm while boys often stood. This pictorial convention was true for family pictures as well as portraits of children photographed only with their mother or father.

Motherhood

Photographs of children with their mother far outnumber pictures of children with their father. In Image 2, the mother lovingly holds her little boy on
Ordinary Images: Appreciating Photographs of Children

her lap, surrounding him with one arm and also holding his hand. However, her facial expression is quite stern and contrasts with her affectionate gesture. She wears a dressy dark gown with lace and a high collar. Her young son wears velvet knickerbockers, a velvet jacket, and a loose white shirt with a lavaliere or cravat. His hair is curled. The mother in Image 3 is portrayed in the same affectionate pose. While she does not hold her little girl on her lap, she makes up for it by having her face next to her child’s as if she were about to kiss her. She smiles, a rare occurrence in photographs of the time, and also wears a dark dress with a white lace collar. Her young girl is dressed in a white outfit with a matching lacy bonnet. The children in these two photographs are rather stiff, appear obedient, and stare at the camera. These very common images give a good representation of motherhood in the late 1800s. The mothers are depicted as loving, usually more in their poses than their facial expressions, and their clothing as well as their children’s indicate they come from good families. Such images intend to show that they are good and responsible mothers who love their well-scrubbed, docile children. When background and furniture are present in the images, these elements bring a sense of opulence. In Image 4, the chair is well-cushioned and fashionable with a large tassel hanging on the back, a very ornate table is visible on the side, and the background wall has moldings.

Image 3. “Mother and Child,” photograph, Mexico Photograph Collection (PICT 991-020, box 1, cartes-de-visite, portraits—groups), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
Image 4. “María Rodríguez de Alonso Holding Baby” photograph, Mexico Photograph Collection (PICT 991-020, box 1, portraits—Female—Identified), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Image 5. “Dr. Pearce and Daughter,” photograph, Cobb Memorial Photograph Collection (PICT 000-119-0346), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
Fatherhood

In contrast, the father in Image 5 does not have his daughter on his lap. Instead, the little girl is standing on a chair and he holds her with a protective gesture. It is a controlling grip, as shown by the wrinkle on her dress, maybe because the child appears not to enjoy having her picture taken. The father does not express tenderness as the mothers did. The little girl wears a light-colored dress, a pinafore with a lacy top, and a ribbon in her ringleted hair. In these photographs of children with either their mother or father, the child is the central figure. The parents’ bodies are not fully visible and only parts of their arms appear in the photos. There is no background and the viewer is not distracted by any other props such as furniture. In the few instances in which the father holds a baby and is surrounded by his other young children with no mother present in the image, can we deduce that the mother has died in her prime?

Babies

The baby photograph proves that a woman has achieved the rank of motherhood. There are numerous photographs of babies in christening gowns with lace and embroidery, and propped into position. This makes for awkward poses. The photo of the baby, though not the baby him- or herself who is hardly seen, makes a statement about the family’s position and sociocultural status. The gown matters more than the child and emphasizes the event rather than the baby. These images do not reflect anything intimate or domestic. It is clear that the clothes make the person even at this tender age. These photos exemplify the rituals, especially baptism, surrounding the photographs during this era. Clearly baby worship and the adulation of the mother were complementary ideologies at the turn of the century in both Mexico and New Mexico (Gear 1987, 421). While portraits of babies were very formal in the 1870s, more informal ones were dominant by the 1890s through the end of World War I. Both types of photographs, formal and more informal, “used a basic format that studios used with little deviation over the decades” (Gear 1987, 423). In her article “The Baby’s Picture: Woman as Image Maker in Small-Town America,” Josephine Gear (1987, 433) contends that “all references to the external world, the family, or the home, have been expunged from these portraits, making the portrait space a timeless, immaterial one, a free zone for the projection of the mother’s needs and feelings” (see Image 6).

In some instances, real objects creep into the photos. Children seem to be shown with their toys. While their clothing is only worn on the day the picture was taken, or a formal event, such as a baptism or going to church, their toys are “real.” We can see children with rattles, hoops, toy horses, wheeled horse-and-carts, or dolls. However, if one takes a closer look, even the toys do not look worn-out and well-loved but fresh and unsoiled. Sometimes another real surrogate of a toy, such as a set of keys, is present in the picture, probably to

Image 7. “Margueritta and Mesa Rose” photograph, Cobb Memorial Photograph Collection (PICT 000-119-0329), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
distract the child while the picture was taken. The puppy is also a great favorite and functions as a surrogate for the stuffed animal, but with an extra cuteness factor (see Image 7).

**Children**

Photographs of children, like those of babies, appear in serene and still spaces, and reflect the ideal of the Romantic Child. These portraits are not intimate or domestic and do not reflect tensions and strains inherent in childhood. In Image 8, a little girl stands next to a table draped with a dark cloth. Her light-colored outfit contrasts with the dark fabric on the table and consists of a lacy dress, white socks and shoes. She wears what looks like a crown on her head with a veil flowing down her back. She looks like a very young bride, feminine and innocent. A basket of flowers on the table brings a bit of nature, though very tame, and reinforces the romanticism of the image. This type of image is very sentimental and even soppy. In Image 9, two children are seated in a pose that today would suggest a photograph of adults. The little

Image 8. “Girl with Veil,” photograph, Mexico Photograph Collection (PICT 991-020, box 1, cartes-de-visite, portraits—children), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
girl rests her head on the boy’s shoulder, she is very pretty, rosy-cheeked, has curly long hair, wears a light colored ruffled dress, and has a dreamy gaze. The little boy wears a suit and looks ahead. There is a mildly romantic subtext. Even though the two children are brother and sister, their parents could project what they would become. The little sister suggests the role of the wife that she would be one day, devoted to her husband, her older brother, already dressed as a man, steering the couple towards a happy future. Children wear their best clothing in these photographs, nothing dirty or torn, and some wear costumes to further enhance this ideal. Girls wear white puffy dresses to increase their femininity and girlishness, and proclaim their ethereal purity. Boys wear sailor suits or jackets and ruffled shirts. For older children, toys have been replaced with objects that indicate their future selves. A boy smokes a cigar and another holds a pocket watch, telling the viewer what powerful men they will become; a girl holds a fan, indicating that one day she will be a society woman. Parents can project what their children will become as adults but reality sometimes intrudes in the photographs. In some instances, boys wear formal suits but tired boots which contrast with their pristine outfits. The boots look a bit scruffy since it may have been more difficult for parents to fully control how clean their children’s shoes were.
Backdrops and Props

The backdrop of the studio enhances the imaginary world: serene, nostalgic, innocent, and idealized. In the Pictorial Archive, two types of backdrops dominate: the outdoors, an idyllic rural world, and the indoors, the interior of an affluent home. For predominantly urban audiences, quaint rural backdrops represent the nostalgia for a vanishing agrarian world (Higonnet 1998, 51). In New Mexican photographs, outdoor backdrops show flowering bushes and ferns with lush grass on the floor to represent the ground. This type of countryside does not exist anywhere in New Mexico, making it even more surreal. Some backdrops also include a white picket fence opening into what looks like the Garden of Eden, as if the child were about to enter a heavenly space. In the Mexican photographs, rural backdrops are similar, representing lush vegetation. In several photographs, there are mixed elements: the backdrop represents the outdoors but the floor is covered by a rug.

To make these photographs even more enticing, some children are dressed as country folk, reminiscent of Marie Antoinette dressing as a shepherdess a century earlier. In Image 10 a girl sleeps, holding a broad-brimmed straw hat, next to a basket of flowers. The floor is littered with straw. The girl depicted is not a country girl. While she is barefoot, her feet and pinafore are clean and she shows no sign of ever having worked in the fields. She is the archetype

Image 10. “Amy Schmidt,” photograph, Henry A. Schmidt Pictorial Collection (PICT 000-179-0095), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
of the sleeping beauty. Image 11 shows two dark-skinned girls, one standing and the other sitting. They may be indigenous. They are barefoot and dressed in identical and very plain clothing. Each wears a pristine white dress with an immaculate piece of plain white cloth around her shoulders. They are dressed as country girls, the stereotypical dress you would expect, but their clothing looks more like a costume than real and their feet are unsoiled. They look primeval. In contrast, the backdrop represents a lush garden with a balustrade with several potted plants, suggesting a patio or a balcony of a mansion. In both images, the young girls look virginal, innocent, and are surrounded by an imaginary garden. Even though real children often worked in the fields or at home, none of these photographs reflect this fact.

Children with pets enhance the bucolic backdrop and show that they are close to nature. In the archive, several children are accompanied by dogs, often very large, such as springer spaniels or retrievers. In the case of children accompanied by absurdly large dogs, it cues the “viewer’s projection of his or her adult self into the image as the child’s protector” (Higonnet 1998, 34). Boys are seen with dogs while girls, more often, with puppies, the harmless version of dogs.

The other prevalent backdrop shows the interior of a home, refined and prosperous. One backdrop shows the foyer of an opulent home, featuring a

grand staircase on one side with an ornamental lamp standing on top of the finial, and a marble fireplace with an elaborate mantelpiece on the other. A painting hangs on the wall. There is wainscoting in the back and the ceiling is decorated with a garland frieze. In other instances, urban sophistication is created by props such as fine furniture, carved tables, rich velvety fabrics, wrought-iron staircases, columns, fireplaces, and fake flowers. This is particularly true of Mexican cartes-de-visite, small photographs that began to be exchanged like calling cards in the 1850s, which employ more props than backdrops. In several photographs, children stand on chairs or stools, either to make them look bigger or because they are dwarfed by the backdrop or the props and need to be heightened.

In some instances, the studio is set up in an effort to reflect a traditional activity of children: play. In one example, children act as if playing hide-and-seek. The whole effect is stilted and does not convey the fun of the game. In other instances, a boy poses as if playing the violin and a little girl holds up her dress, revealing a lacy petticoat, as if dancing. Does the boy know how to play the violin or does the violin show that his family had an appreciation of the finer things? Similarly, in Image 12, a young girl stands and rests her arm on a table covered with a flowery cloth. A book is on the table. She wears a dark dress with short puff sleeves, has a low décolletage, and her lacy pantalets

![Image 12. “Girl with Fan,” photograph, Mexico Photograph Collection (PICT 991-020, box 1, cartes-de-visite, portraits—children), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.](image-url)
show above her stockings and high boots. Her waist is cinched by a wide belt. She is bejeweled—earrings, a bracelet, and a necklace—and holds a fan in her hands. Her outfit proclaims that she belongs to a well-off family and the book signals that she is educated. Like clothing, backdrops and props enable parents to project that their children will be wealthy, refined, and well-educated in the future.

**Conclusion**

These pictures of children, taken at the turn of the century by studio photographers, provide visual clues to the Mexican and New Mexican societies of the era. The conventions are similar and there are no noticeable differences in portraits, except for the carte-de-visite format in Mexico. Neither place is well represented either in its landscape or its people. Most of the children are from middle- or upper-class families, a small minority in Mexico and New Mexico. Instead, the Romantic Child, a construction which originated in Europe, is the prevalent image. Childhood innocence is the predominant message. Going to the photographic studio is a social rite and these photographs demonstrate the social values of the time. Children are depicted as obedient, cute, and impeccably dressed; motherhood is glorified; fathers are pictured more prominently in group settings but never as caregivers; and through *mise-en-scène*, thus carefully arranged, parents try to project a future for their children.

Photographers today, both professional and amateur, still try to capture the innocence of childhood. The serious faces of the past have been replaced with the obligatory smile. This does not mean that photographs of children are any more “natural” than in the past. Photographs are still socially constructed to present childhood untainted by life’s vicissitudes and show children experiencing “an unmediated life of pure feeling, honest, guilt free, fun loving, candid, spontaneous, and direct” (Hixson 1997, 10). The role created by both society at large and families functions as in the past. We still romanticize childhood and some representations are absent: battered children, the plight of the homeless, and other types of violence. At the turn of the twenty-first century, pictures of children are still one of the most common, the most sacred, and the most cherished of images. However, we are living through a major change in our culture’s understanding of childhood. Society has recognized child abuse, and pictures of children have become some of the most controversial images of our time (Higonnet 1998, 7). Nonetheless, photographs of children in archives continue to gloss over difficulties and erase conflict just as it is treated in society at large.

**REFERENCES**


