**ATTAINING AN IDEAL
TIME, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE VICTORIAN FAMILY COMPOSITE**

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Abstract

Combined photographic imagery is a broad and varied category of photography even when narrowed down to nineteenth-century iterations such as the composite technique. While a general understanding of composite photography exists, there is a lack of scholarship regarding a specific variant, the Victorian family composite. Using a study group of five Victorian family composites and photocollages, this thesis explores the importance of the family and of photography in Victorian society in order to arrive at an understanding of the particular motivations behind choosing the composite technique to represent the family. The determining factors include the need to overcome the technical and logistical limitations of nineteenth-century photography, as well as the aesthetics inherent to the composite process. Although the full trajectory of composite photography is not traced, definitions of major nineteenth and early twentieth-century combined imagery techniques are offered in order to contextualize the images discussed.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family and friends, whose love and support sustained me throughout this journey.

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-Introduction-

Combined photographic imagery is a broad and variegated category of photography that by its very nature participates in multiple, often overlapping, contexts. To further complicate matters, the manipulated status of these images demands that we participate in their viewing in a way that is inherently different from that of straight photographs. When presented with an image that diverges from our concept of what a normal image should look like, we are compelled to analyze why it is different, and to note all of the clues that reveal its non-alignment with visible reality. Our perception of the image is mediated, at least in part, by our knowledge of this falsity and by the subsequent reconciliation with the truth that we are intended to experience. In short, the manipulation of or crossover between techniques that one sees in combined imagery cannot help but produce new meaning, often with creative or even revolutionary results. Yet not all combined photographic imagery is so doubly complicated. There are instances where yes, the contexts overlap in unique ways, but the new meaning produced by the convergence of two or more media is not political, artistic, or even intended. Instead, it reflects the technical limits of what a photograph can accomplish, and shows us that through combining and altering photographic imagery, these limitations can be overcome in the pursuit of an ideal portrait.

A particularly compelling, if under-researched, example of a photographic process involving manipulation is the Victorian family composite, an unusual hybrid of family portraiture and combined imagery. Broadening our view to the larger genre of the “family photograph” under which the family composite is often categorized, we see that historically, formal studio photographs depicting families have been an important component of family life since technological advances made them readily available in the mid nineteenth-century. Continuing the trajectory of the painted portrait, these images restated family ties and social values while reaffirming the familial legacy.

In turn, if we look closely at the Victorian family itself, it becomes apparent that the importance that was placed on it as an institution was not simply a domestic matter but a social one. The family unit became a grounding point from which a “perfect society” could

grow, and furthermore, acted as a means of fostering an individual's development into an upstanding citizen of the larger community.¹ Symbolic of the family's importance and status was the home, the foundation of the family and a material manifestation of its sanctity and integrity.² In early and mid-century Victorian homes, the parlor was particularly meaningful, as it constituted a liminal space that merged the public and private spheres of social and domestic life. This room in particular became a focal point for the family, and served as the site of many major life events from courtships and marriage, to christenings and wakes.³ It was natural then, that the parlor was the predominant place to display family photographs both for familial contemplation, and perhaps more importantly, as a public proclamation of a thriving and unified family.

A strong example of photography's pervasiveness in the Victorian household is the photograph album. As a method for displaying and safekeeping photographs, it was a fixture in many homes, maintaining a place of importance in the parlor. Cartes-de-visite (small photographs that were made in multiples) were introduced into the album with the growing ubiquity of the photograph in the 1850s, yet it wasn't until the 1880s that the photo album experienced a sudden increase in popularity, as did commercial and non-commercial group photography.⁴ The proliferation of photography in these forms as well as others was due to the introduction of faster-speed gelatin dry-plate negatives, the use of which allowed groups, and thus families, to be photographed together more easily, and also allowed photography in general to become more accessible.⁵ Although group and family photographs had existed since the daguerreotype, with this democratization of the medium came both a sweeping amateur interest and an expansion of the group image, both professional and amateur. Previously, the group portrait (and from this we can extrapolate the family portrait) was a feat of technical mastery and the means by which a professional photographer's skill was determined. Yet by the 1880s the professional group portrait was

¹ Shirley Wajda, "A Room with a Viewer: the Parlor Stereoscope, Comic Stereographs, and the Psychic Role of Play in Victorian America," in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Rochester: The Strong Museum, 1992), 113.

² Ibid., 10.

³ John. R. Gillis, "Our Virtual Families: Toward a Cultural Understanding of Modern Family Life" (The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life Working Paper No. 2, 2000), 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits* (London: Tauris Parke Books, 1993), 128.

no longer solely for wealthy families or the “academic elite,” it had expanded to include factory workers, unions, sports teams, and school classes in addition to families.⁶

In studying the family, and in turn narrowing our focus to the family photograph and finally to the family composite, this thesis explores the factors that determined how and why a family photograph was made as a family composite, and investigates the reasons behind choosing the composite process. In the following pages I will analyze five images from the late nineteenth-century belonging to a range of collections: the Art Gallery of Ontario, George Eastman House, the Ryerson Photographic Preservation and Collections Management program study collection, and my own collection. As both composite photographs and family photographs, each image was born from a unique historical context that privileged various technical, aesthetic, and social influences. Generations of viewers, whether descendants of those depicted, historians, or scholars, have ascribed different meanings to these images, yet by sifting through their many contexts we may discover common motivations for their creation.

-Literature Review-

Family, Time, and Transitions

The late Victorian era was a time of transition in a multitude of ways, not the least of which was a shift in the family dynamics brought about by the second industrial revolution. A number of historians have written about this time of flux; John Gillis writes in “Our Virtual Families: Toward a Cultural Understanding of Modern Family Life” that prior to the 1850s the notion of family in middle-class society was centered around the idea of a place, namely the physical household and its members.⁷ The family unit, one temporally rather than physically grounded, resulted from the reconfiguring of family dynamics brought about by a shifting relationship with time. He argues that whom you spent time with, rather than whom you shared a physical location with, became the identifying factor of the family.⁸ This familial revolution took place in conjunction with the industrial revolution; the structure that standardized time gave to daily life, as heard by the factory whistle and seen by the

⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁷ Gillis, “Our Virtual Families,” 5.

⁸ Ibid.

pocket watch or railroad-station clock, is one that has so permeated our current psyches that it becomes difficult to imagine our life without the divisions of hours, minutes and seconds.⁹ For Gillis, time, or more specifically the time they spent together, became the defining element by which families identified themselves.¹⁰

Gillis also writes about the ways in which the Victorian family used photographic portraits of themselves, with the core of his argument being that family life is by and large experienced through a collective imagination. Gillis states that as time became something to be monitored and managed in the late nineteenth-century, families of all social levels ceased to live in the present, and instead began to live within an imagined space projected either towards the past, or even the future.¹¹ As memory became integral to the Victorian family, the photograph became essentially “inseparable” from the rites of passage such as births, marriages, and deaths that were the foundation of family life in the Victorian era.¹²

Thomas Schlereth similarly highlights the “transitional quality” of the 1890s, and also views that decade as a pivotal time in Victorian society; he chooses to focus on the increased and varied uses of material culture that began to mediate Victorian social actions and interactions.¹³ Schlereth acknowledges that there simply isn’t room in his book, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915*, to address the increasing importance of visual culture, especially in regards to photographs and other visual media.¹⁴ However, both his writings and those of John Gillis offer many insights into this shifting society, providing the groundwork for understanding an increased dependence on technology and other material advancements particular to the Victorian era—a useful context for the study of the Victorian family.

The importance of the Victorian family itself is highlighted in Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s *A Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family*, which examines the importance of the Victorian family through studying the expansion of the family’s

⁹ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 29.

¹⁰ Gillis, “Our Virtual Families,” 4.

¹¹ Ibid 2-4.

¹² Ibid., 4-11.

¹³ Schlereth, *Victorian America*, xv.

¹⁴ Ibid, xvi.

private life into the public sphere. The authors examine the “pervasive cultural compulsion to publicize the virtues of the family” that culminated in every banal detail of home life being thrust before the public eye.¹⁵ Particularly relevant is the book’s introduction, which addresses notions of the family using primary sources such as the 1851 census, where the family is defined as the “the *social unit* of which parishes, towns, countries, and the nation, are composed.”¹⁶

Like Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s book *Family Fortunes*, which uses the family to study the growth of the English Victorian middle class incorporating work, leisure, gender roles and hierarchies, *A Spectacle of Intimacy* also focuses on late eighteenth-century to mid nineteenth-century Britain, raising questions about the role of family and gender during an era of political, social, and economic transformation. Chase and Levenson are in agreement with the standard view of the Victorian family expressed by John Burnett, who states that throughout English history, the mid-Victorians were by far the most “family-conscious and home-centered” of any social group.¹⁷ The authors expand upon this idea by introducing the anxieties and tensions that the Victorians experienced resulting from an intense societal scrutiny of the family, and address the romanticizing of family life in Victorian England that so thoroughly permeated the culture. Fine art, literature, entertainment, and even everyday gossip were suffused with a friction created by the polarity between public and private life, generating a cultural energy particular to this time.

While these readings do much to affirm the importance placed upon Victorian family life and the subsequent upheaval of family structure that has informed Victorian art and culture, they are grounded in the early to mid Victorian era in Britain, whereas the images in my study group are from late nineteenth-century Canada and America. Despite slight differences in place and time, these works, among other such academic studies, provide a thorough and detailed analysis of family dynamics in the Victorian era, and allow us to build a more informed understanding of later, North American, Victorian culture.

¹⁵ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *A Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

Group and Family Photographs

Many historians have written about various aspects of nineteenth-century portrait photography: Miles Orville spends part of a chapter in *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* discussing the nineteenth-century portrait studio and its stylistic conventions, such as use of props and backdrops, which is useful in providing a basic understanding of studio portraiture and its goals. In a similar vein, Audrey Linkman addresses the rise in the popularity of group portraiture in *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, which gives us insight into the historical evolution of various types of group photographs, also important for a grounded understanding of the genre. One notable author, Julia Hirsch, trains her focus on family photographs in particular. In her book *Family Photographs*, she describes how the now iconic imagery of the formal family gathering is seen in both nineteenth and twentieth-century photographs, and can trace its beginnings back to the painted family portraits of the Renaissance era. Hirsch argues that it was during this time of social shifting and restructuring that the family was first visually separated from both lord and church, and depicted as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity with its own intrinsic hierarchies.¹⁸ She also states that photography sustained the metaphor of the family, transforming and disseminating it to a greater degree than did the painted family portrait. For Hirsch, the family photograph from any era has three metaphorical attributes: it is a visual manifestation of the emotional ties between family members, it depicts the family as a “state” defined by social status and possession of a home, and it acts as the visual manifestation of those intangible moral values that the family promotes and protects.

By contrast, in his *Photography: a Middle-brow Art*, Pierre Bourdieu writes about the group photograph as a means of integration, and puts forth the idea (also not specific to the nineteenth-century) that family photography acts as a means of strengthening, illustrating, and immortalizing the perceived unity and feelings of connectedness and integration within the family.¹⁹ Both Hirsch and Bourdieu offer contexts not only for the family portrait, but

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Pierre Bordieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 19.

also for the family itself, enhancing our knowledge of the Victorian family and its photographic representations.

Composite Imagery

The re-contextualization of images across and between different media was not a new practice in the Victorian era, nor did it end with the turn of the century. It would be impossible to address all of the variants of such processes within this thesis, yet in order to give us a grounded understanding of the images in this study group, it is important to define the processes used in their creation. To begin with broad strokes, any sort of combined photographic imagery is essentially the product of juxtaposing two or more photographic images in order to create an entirely new, and absolute image.²⁰ Robert Sobieszek, in his exhibition label copy for “Composite Imagery, 1850-1935: The Early History of Photomontage” uses a version of the above definition to elaborate upon his concept of photomontage in its simplest form. While this distillate meaning holds true for all combined imagery, the techniques involved with certain variations define them as belonging to distinctly different categories with variegated purposes and histories, as will be described in Chapter 1.

The Art Composite: Rejlander, Robinson, and Notman

Englishman H. P. Robinson and Swedish-born O. G. Rejlander were two early practitioners of combined imagery. Both are nearly always included in conversations relating to composite photography and its history, or indeed any form of manipulated imagery, and are central to a large body of literature. Many cite Rejlander as the “father of art photography.” Indeed Stephanie Spencer writes in *O.G. Rejlander: Photography as Art*, that Rejlander was famous in his time as an art photographer, and used theories derived from painting in the creation of genre photographs and portraits using combination printing.²¹ Lindsay Smith writes about Rejlander’s use of combination printing in placing himself twice within a single photograph: *The Artist Introduces O.G. Rejlander the Volunteer* (1860), one of Rejlander’s later works, depicts Rejlander himself as a volunteer soldier posing with his double, the artist. This image, according to Smith, irreverently and

²⁰ Robert Sobieszek, “Composite Imagery, 1850-1935: the Early History of Photomontage” (Wall Label & Exhibition Checklist, George Eastman House, 1979).

²¹ Stephanie Spencer, *O.G. Rejlander: Photography as Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 5.

obviously contrasts the photographer and painter, symbolizing the dichotomy between visual veracity and falsehood or imitation, as well as between technology and fine art.²² Smith sees Rejlander as introducing certain fundamental elements of the photograph's indexicality through the very subject matter, as opposed to allowing it to be mediated more subtly through the combination printing process itself, thus forcing the viewer to "confront" the intertwined relationship of painting and photography.²³ Smith's interpretation comments on how combination printing and composite photography were viewed in the mid nineteenth-century in the art world, upon which the later uses of manipulated imagery were built.

Rejlander's contemporary, Henry Peach Robinson, also endeavored to raise photography to the status of fine art.²⁴ Linda Shires spends part of a chapter of her book *Perspectives: Modes of Viewing and Knowing in Nineteenth-Century England* examining the ways in which Robinson's composite photographs challenged how people perceived photography, and photography as art. For Shires, Robinson's juxtaposition of photographic elements (both prints and negatives) goes beyond a dedication to perfecting perspective using technique; instead Robinson aimed to create a complete composition in which viewers were asked to suspend their disbelief of the image's falsity, at the same time as he drew their attentions to those same elements. In other words, Shires sees Robinson's work as provoking inquiry into the "relationship of parts to a whole" despite the objective being a perceived unity of the entire image.²⁵ Ellen Handy takes a slightly different view, and cites Henry Peach Robinson's approach to photography as being grounded in technique. Yet she agrees that Robinson's motivations were purely artistic, writing that his "contrivances in the services of his art emphasized the value of ingenuity, technique, and artifice..."²⁶

William Notman (1826-1891) practiced composite photography in North America somewhat later than Rejlander and Robinson; he was born in Scotland and immigrated to Montreal, Canada where he built an empire of photography studios. Notman was almost

²² Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children, and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 88.

²³ Ibid., 87-88.

²⁴ Linda Shires, *Perspectives: Modes of Viewing and Knowing in Nineteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2009), 65.

²⁵ Shires, *Perspectives*, 63.

²⁶ Ellen Handy, *Pictorial Effect Naturalistic Vision: The Photographs and Theories of Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson* (Norfolk: The Chrysler Museum, 1994), 14.

certainly aware of the man who is credited as the very first practitioner of the composite technique, fellow Scott George Washington Wilson, who in 1856 (the year Notman left Scotland) created the first known composite photograph entitled *One Hundred and One Citizens of Aberdeen*.²⁷ In Canada, Notman didn't begin making composite photographs until the 1870s, and it wasn't until he made his mural-sized composite of hundreds of costumed people, *The Skating Carnival* (1870) that the technique became immensely profitable for him and appealing to the public. Stanley Triggs, the longstanding authority on Notman, has written much about the prolific photographer, including *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio*, and *The World of William Notman: the Nineteenth-Century Through a Master Lens*. He indicates that Notman commonly photographed wealthy self-made businessmen, politicians, and members of elite society, as well as members of the middle and even working class.²⁸ These readings are useful in understanding the audience already in place for the later family composites that this thesis studies.

Victorian Photocollages and the Family Composite

There are tenuous parallels between Victorian Photocollages—albums featuring photographs of family and acquaintances embellished with watercolor painting or ink drawings, and the family composites in this study group. Both use figures cut from photographs, are grounded in family or group dynamics, and often incorporate painted backgrounds and heavy retouching or enhancement. A defining difference however, is that Victorian photocollages have not been re-photographed. Furthermore, Victorian photocollages were authored exclusively by women, and family composites were not. Each was created for very different purposes. Many scholars have studied and written about Victorian photocollage, including Patrizia DiBello, Marta Weiss, and Lindsay Smith, all of whom offer nuanced insight shaped by slightly different perspectives.²⁹ Another notable

²⁷ Stanley Triggs. "Composite Photographs: Inspiration – A Historical Perspective" McCord Museum, 2005. <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/keys/virtualexhibits/notmanstudio/themes/composites/page3.html>. Accessed August 25, 2012.

²⁸ "A Successful Portrait, a Soul Revealed," video from the McCord Museum Website.

²⁹ These perspectives can be found in Patrizia Di Bello's book *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts*, Marta Weiss' dissertation *Dressed Up and Pasted Down: Staged Photography in the Victorian Album*, and Lindsay Smith's book *Victorian Photography, Painting, and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris, and the Pre-Raphaelites*.

author is Elizabeth Siegel, who states in her essay “Society Cutups” that Victorian photocollages were a gendered and collaborative leisure activity. According to Siegel, these albums were circulated among family and friends, and were not made for commercial purposes. She also makes the case that the Victorian photocollage, which would not have been possible without the industrialization of photography resulting in the mass production of the cartes-de-visite, was not a revolutionary or subversive act of defiance against the strictures of Victorian society. Instead, it was an act of compliance, a shifting within the extant structures of society. She interprets and analyzes these imaginative and narrative albums within this context, focusing on the unique circumstances of their female authorship and status in Victorian society. Knowledge of this practice is essential to understanding the mindset of the time, showing us that by the mid nineteenth-century, combined imagery was brought into the home and appropriated, in this variant, as a domestic activity.

Victorian Photography and Composite Imagery: Fracture and Narrative

One conventional view of photography centers around the idea that the frame represents a fracture that privileges the view chosen the moment the image was made.³⁰ At the same time, the frame draws awareness to what *wasn't* chosen, a truth that existed and continues to exist outside of the frame: “In the way in which it contains and constrains, [the] frame heightens and produces a fracture that makes us intensely aware of what lies beyond.”³¹ However, this way of understanding the frame, according to Daniel Novak, is a modern one, and does not necessarily reflect the Victorian’s understanding of it. In order to comprehend the dichotomy between our perceptions and those of an earlier time, thus viewing the family composite from an unadulterated lens, we need to deconstruct our present ideas and create a new structure. Daniel A. Novak suggests in his essay “A Literature of its Own: Time, Space, and Narrative Mediations in Victorian Photography,” that in order to build a grounded and valid understanding of Victorian photography, a specific theory based on temporality and narrative is required. Novak expands upon the Barthesian ideology that a photograph is essentially a relic of a fleeting moment and an absent place (simultaneously incapable of recording anything *other* than that moment and place), and fails to have meaning unless we invest it with such. Thus, a photograph is incapable of

³⁰ This view is central to modernist definitions of photography.

³¹ Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (New York: Berg, 2001), 19.

narrating—is, in a sense, the fractured antithesis of narrative, and the significance we ascribe to a photograph is contingent upon the information we apply to it.

According to Novak, because of their inherent distrust of photographic referentiality Victorians saw individuals within a photograph as rendered so similar as to be interchangeable. This perspective divested the figures of their individuality and re-invested them with a certain anonymity and abstraction beyond the dislocation of the original, external, Barthesian fracture.³² Extracting the idea of narrative fracture from Barthes' framework, Novak applies it to the figures within the frame. He bases this interpretation on the ways in which authors writing in the nineteenth-century interpreted group photographs: "when two or more persons are taken in one picture, it is no uncommon thing to see them standing without any connexion [sic] whatever with each other..."³³ For Novak, it is the photograph's perceived failure to be an instrument for narrative that in fact allows for combined imagery's creation of a photographic narrative: the narrative created by time and place exists and is re-made within the frame in endless variations. This, then, is combined imagery's "literalization of and response to the fragmentation and abstraction" of straight photographs.³⁴

It bears noting that Novak has only applied his theory to two specific iterations of combined imagery, one of which is the combination prints created by Robinson and Rejlander. At the time they were made, these mid nineteenth-century works were considered by most art critics to be artistic in nature, and had little to do with family composites in subject matter as they were allegorical staged images rather than formal portraits. Novak also addresses Victorian photocollages, which were authored by upper-class women. While often depicting the family in various imagined and embellished configurations and invented contexts, these images are definitively vernacular and emblematic of a personal artistic expression. The five images this thesis studies differ from Victorian photocollages in that they have a commercial context, and were, it is assumed, co-authored by the family and the photographer or technician. The product of dual visions,

³² David A. Novak, "A Literature of its Own: Time, Space and Narrative Mediations in Victorian Photography," in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch*, ed. Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Burlington: Ashgate, Burlington: 2011), 69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

they serve a distinctly different purpose from either of the above-mentioned genres, yet each can be said to fit within, to some degree, Novak's framework.

To understand the framework, we must distinguish between the fracture of the medium (the cutting and pasting) and the implicit disconnect between the family members stated by Novak: the family or group's "distrust" of referentiality seen in the wooden and apparently emotionally distant adjacency of the subjects. While Novak offers two examples supporting this argument, I remain unconvinced that this perceived disunity was subscribed to by all Victorians in all varieties of combined imagery. I argue that it is the literal fragmentation of wrenching a figure from its original photographic context and suturing it together with others like it in a new configuration that more aptly embodies the idea of fracture, rather than a dis-unity among the figures themselves. From what I know of the families in most of the images in this admittedly small study group, I can say with confidence that they were not disaffected with each other. Novak also somewhat contradictorily states: "In some of these montages, it is precisely the disintegration of the family photograph that enables the production of the picture-perfect family. Cutting themselves to pieces could have the surprising effect of supporting the most bourgeois myths about the domestic sphere."³⁵ For Novak, it is the re-assembling, and even redundancy of pasting the image that reinforces the unity of the family.

-Chapter 1: Combined Imagery Defined-

Because there currently exists no explicit or authoritative literature on the terms 'composite photography,' 'combination printing,' 'photocollage,' or 'photomontage,' permutations of these terms have come to signify various techniques at various times. For example, H.P. Robinson in his nineteenth-century photographic manuals consistently refers to both composite and combination printing as the same practice, while Sobieszek prefers to classify both the cut-and-paste technique and combination printing as composite photography.

While many authors discuss composite photography and combination printing as types of photomontage or composite imagery, I find it useful to separate these terms into

³⁵ Ibid., 79.

distinct categories of their own, the basic division being whether the process is darkroom-based or not. If a darkroom technique, it is likely a variation of combination printing with the noted exception of double-exposure, which occurs during the exposure of the film in the camera, rather than during the printing of the negative. Non-darkroom based combined imagery involves cutting and pasting, with the additional step of re-photographing the paste-up being unique to composite photography. Just as important to understanding what composite photography is, is understanding what it is not. The following paragraphs attempt to organize and make sense of these terms by defining them separately so that their subsequent use in this thesis may be placed in a precise and collectively understood context.

Darkroom

Combination printing

Combination printing, or double printing, is a darkroom technique involving the printing of multiple negatives onto a single piece of photographic paper, and is often confusingly referred to as composite photography. Masking techniques are employed to block particular aspects of one or both negatives (the sky, certain figures or buildings, the foreground) allowing only certain elements to register on the photographic paper. In its most advanced iterations, combination printing can adopt cut and paste techniques similar to that of composite photography: essentially cutting out figures from a print in order to make a mask to place over the background negative, leaving an appropriately shaped space for the image's negative to then be printed.

Like composite photography, combination printing was first used to overcome technical limitations of the medium. In the early years of glass plate negatives (1850s-70s) the emulsion used in making these plates was sensitive almost exclusively to blue light: when photographing a land or seascape, the sky would be exposed at a far greater speed than the comparatively shadowy foreground, which reflected colors other than blue. By the time the land or sea fully registered on the film, the sky would be rendered so overexposed as to obliterate any cloud detail or subtle gradation of tone. In order to obtain a realistic

rendition of an outdoor scene, it was common for photographers to print a separate negative consisting solely of cloudscapes in combination with their foreground negative.³⁶

Combination printing has a strong association with trick photography, a technique particularly embraced by the amateur. Trick photography is most often created through masking techniques, and combination printing can be found in carte-de-visite, photographic post cards, and even photograph albums. A subset of composite printing is combined negatives, often known by the unfortunate and colloquial term “sandwiched negatives.” This technique became easier to execute with the invention of flexible film bases, as the negatives could be pressed together in the same negative carrier and projected onto the sensitized paper. When printing with paper negatives, pin registration was often used to align more than one negative, and it was not uncommon for separate negatives to be cut and pasted together before printing.

Multiple Exposure

As a creative technique, double or multiple exposure was used heavily in nineteenth-century spirit and trick photography, as well as by artists such as Harry Callahan (1912-1999) and Lazlo Mololy-Nagy (1895-1946), who in 1947 created the term “automatic photomontage” to describe this processes of successively exposing a single negative within a camera.³⁷ Multiple exposures contain an inherently temporal element of juxtaposition and repetition wherein multiple subjects or successive instants inhabit a single frame. Sobieszek views the technique of multiple exposure as a fundamental “species of photomontage” that at the same time requires, because of its specific method of construction, a “separate critical viewing” from traditional cut-and-paste photomontage techniques.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷Robert A. Sobieszek, “Composite Imagery and the Origins of Photomontage Part II: The Formalist Strain,” *Artforum* October (1978): 43.

³⁸ Ibid.

Spirit Photography

Spirit photography, or photographically capturing apparent spiritual presences or ghosts, was a natural outgrowth of the Victorian obsessions with religion, science, and the occult.³⁹ Practiced for either the genuine or spurious pursuit of communicating with spiritual entities or the deceased, spirit photography was often commercially marketed either as a way of transcending the material world in order to gain otherworldly knowledge, or as a way for the bereaved to contact the deceased. Many methods were used to produce the appearance of a spectral figure or ghost upon a photographic plate, including re-exposing a previously exposed plate, adding certain extra chemicals during processing, and allowing light leaks during exposure or processing, among other methods.⁴⁰

Composite Portraiture

Composite portraiture, a specific, and purportedly scientific use of multiple exposure, was first used by Sr. Francis Galton in 1887 for the production of an ethnographic “type” in the studies of certain classes of people. By exposing a single negative plate to a succession of aligned photographic portraits of the same size, he was able to achieve an amalgamated image to produce a single typographic face.⁴¹

Cut-and-paste

Collage

While not a strictly photographic process, collage, which comes from the French *coller*, meaning to glue, shares many of the same elements as photocollage yet is not limited to using photographs as a primary component. Cloth, various papers, text, paints, and drawings might be used, with an occasional photographic element. Collage has a long history, dating back to the invention of paper ca. 200 BC.⁴² However, a famous example, and some would argue the first modern and intentional fine-art use of collage occurred in 1912,

³⁹John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁴¹ John T. Stoddard, "Composite Photography," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, March, 1887. Accessed June 28, 2012. <http://archive.org/details/centuryillustra08conggoog>.

⁴² Lewis Kachur, "Collage." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Accessed January 13, 2012. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T018573>.

when Picasso glued chair caning and a rope to one of his cubists works, *Still-life with Chair-Caning*, an assembled technique and aesthetic that would come to be adopted by countless twentieth and twenty-first century artists.

Photocollage and Victorian Photocollage

As we know the term today, photocollage refers to a collage in which the majority of the elements are photographic in nature, more often than not incorporating elements of drawings and painting. As a general technique, it can be found in almost any post-photographic era, however more specific genres of photocollage exist, for example the Victorian photocollage, which had its beginnings in late Victorian era and temporally paralleled the family composite. As similar as composite photography and Victorian photocollage may seem (they both used images cut from cartes-de-visite and the cutting and pasting technique), there are significant differences between the two techniques, most notably that of purpose. Making Victorian photocollages was a feminine pastime involving cutting figures out of carte-de-visite photographs and placing them in an album in often intricate arrangements, accompanied by drawings or watercolor imagery and embellishments in which the photographic images were incorporated.

Composite

As defined in this thesis, composite photography is a process in which the photographer cuts multiple figures from existing photographs, assembles them onto a photographed or painted background, re-touches these edges to hide the joins, and finally re-photographs the entire piece to form a single, seamless image.⁴³ The most important aspect of this categorization is the re-photographed nature of the final image. Prior to this final step, the object is considered to be a “paste-up” of the final product that at this stage is essentially a photocollage. Composite photography evolved out of a need to surpass the limits of the photographic medium in accurately representing the natural world in perspective, lighting, and detail.

⁴³ Shires, *Perspectives*, 65.

Photomontage

While identical to photocollage (and nearly so to composite) in technique, photomontage has a very different history. Originating with the Dadaists in Berlin, who invented both the term and their take on the process in the years following World War I, photomontage is associated with a revolutionary undercurrent and a rejection of the kind of “high-art” seen in paintings. Using newspaper images as well as photographs, the early photomonteurs created polarizing images meant to provoke a change in both the art and the politics of the time. The use of photographs and typographic elements in conjunction with drawings is unique to photomontage, and employs a ready-made aesthetic as the photographs were almost exclusively found images. Photomontage was a purely modern, if not revolutionary, conceit. With its political and anti-art establishment roots, it was born into an age defined by technological forays into mass production of media and art, as well as mass communication.

There is an inherent ambiguity at the heart of manipulated imagery that begs the question is it fictitious, or is it real? This tension is what makes it compelling: manipulated imagery is recognized as a false representation of reality, and accepted as such. These definitions function not as a standard, but as a guide to understanding the terminology associated with combined imagery. From this survey of techniques we see that the composite process was not singular or unique in its adaptive nature, it was part of a larger genre of photographic manipulation. The uses for each of these processes were, on the whole, driven by particular needs generated from particular contexts. For example, composite portraiture sought scientific justification for a typographical classification, while Victorian photocollage was part of a social fabric whose warp and weft intersected in this creative outlet. What makes a composite photography able to be subsumed under the category of “composite imagery,” is its status as a manipulated image that combines photographic elements in some way. The motivation behind the choice to use combined imagery in all of these cases, whether commercial or artistic, public or private, came from a need to achieve a certain outcome that could only be arrived at through adapting or expanding the photographic process.

-Chapter 2: Objects of Study-

Harris Portrait

All true composites are copy photographs. The slightly blurred details of the background and the loss of information and brightness in the highlights are not consequences of image deterioration, but rather the result of re-photographing an assemblage of other photographs—a second generation image. The creator of the image, through careful arrangement of the various elements, endeavored to translate a pieced-together image from a fragmented lexicon into a seamless visual language.

Beginning with the figures of the Harris portrait (Fig. 1), which have been exactly cut from their original photographs and glued to a photographic background, we clearly see that the intent of the photographer was to create a believable scene grounded in a fabricated reality. Although the surface of this gelatin silver photograph is of one contiguous plane, slightly darker edges outlining each figure are discernable, a clear indication of the composite process. The attention paid to the background similarly gives away the composite nature of this image—the seam joining the two halves of the photographed backdrops has obviously (to our eyes) been manipulated, as seen by the discontinuity of the arched motifs that abruptly and meticulously align in the exact center of the background. It is possible that the photographer kept these two images at hand to serve as instant backdrops for other composited photographs. If it had been photographed especially for this occasion, one might assume that he would have created it to the correct size, rather than cobbling together two smaller images to accommodate the large family. From the annotations on the verso, we know that in this portrait, made in 1885, the eldest male is the father of the group, and the eldest female, the mother. Their eight children range in age from infant to young adult, with the eighth, a young boy in a sailor suit, depicted in a small inset head-and-shoulders portrait appearing in the bottom right corner of the image. The inscription was written by Chester J. Harris in 1944, whom we know from the 1881 census to be the infant in the portrait. John Harris (1841-1887), the patriarch, successfully took over his father's business manufacturing farm equipment, and in doing so, transformed the small agricultural town of Brantford into an industrial hub of southern Ontario and himself into a wealthy and well-respected man.

Fig. 1.

Kitchen Portrait

The second photograph in the study group was created by the entrepreneur J.B. Kitchen, as can be seen by the wet-stamp on the verso of this albumen family portrait. Kitchen, according to M.G. Bixby, writer for the journal *Industries of Canada*, practiced photographic enlargements finished in India ink, oil, and water-colours, as well as “commercial and mechanical” works used for travelers’ samples, and clearly expanded his repertoire in order to market himself to a variety of clientele. Kitchen purchased his small studio, located in the industrial town of Hamilton, Ontario in 1885.⁴⁴

The albumen photograph (Fig. 2) depicts a family of seven arranged in front of a conventional studio backdrop, with a space left for an image an eighth family member who was later collaged onto the straight print, thus overcoming the logistical problem of taking a group portrait when one member cannot be present. This convention allowed an absent member of the group to still appear to have been standing next to the sitters: a portrait was made by a photographic studio in distant location in a size and pose specified by the original photographer, who would then, upon receiving the image in the post, include it in the paste-up to be re-photographed, or as in the case of the Kitchen portrait, simply collage the final image onto the finished print. This image is technically a photocollage because it was never

⁴⁴ M.G. Bixby, “Historical and Commercial Sketches: Hamilton and Environs.” *Industries of Canada* (1886): 50.

re-photographed. However, as a variation on a theme, it speaks to the inherent practicality of this the photomontage, and by extension, the composite technique.

Fig. 2.

Sartain Portrait

John Sartain (1808-1897) was born in London, and in 1830 brought with him to the United States a formidable talent and energy.⁴⁵ An engraver, painter, publisher, and reformist, he was an early, if not inaugural, practitioner of the mezzotint process in the United States. At the start of his career, Sartain allied himself with fine art painters rather than printmakers, establishing a place for himself among the cultural elite. They treated him as a fellow artist, rather than a practitioner of a purely mimetic form of reproduction, and recognized Sartain as having the ability to invest his works with a vivacity and presence while still conveying the form and essence of the original referent.

In this portrait, estimated to have been made circa 1865, those children of artistic bent in the Sartain family-- Emily, Henry, and William or Samuel, are seated with their father in what is likely his library. John's wife and the other five children are not represented in this portrait, a declaration that it is the individuals depicted who would carry on the artistic legacy either as engravers or painters. From the background, which is so heavily retouched as to resemble a painting, it appears that the Sartains are in the library

⁴⁵Katharine Martinez, *Philadelphia's Cultural Landscape: The Sartain Family Legacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 4.

of their house on Sansom Street in Philadelphia, where they posed in a similar configuration for a straight photograph in 1865.

Fig. 3.

Grant Portrait

A family man first, Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) was also a general in the Civil War and the eighteenth president of the United States, two illustrious careers that secured for him a place in history books and cultural memory. Pictured seated on the steps of the Drexel cottage in Mount McGregor New York just days before his death, he is surrounded by his family: his wife and three of his four adult children, as well as three of his grandchildren (Fig. 3). They are arrayed around Grant, and act as a supporting structure of which he is clearly the centre. The Drexel cottage, later known as the Grant cottage, was not where the Grants lived year-round, but rather a comfortable and private location for the General to convalesce in his last days. The cottage itself represents the archetypal home, and is emblematic of solid and enduring family ties. Here, the idea of “home,” and thus family, is not just a ‘mental construct’ but a physical one.

There exist many straight (as well as slightly altered) versions of this image, at least two of which, as evidenced by the similarity in clothing and poses, were taken on the same day in 1885. In 1886 the U.S. Instantaneous Photo Company bought the rights to these, and close to a thousand other negatives pertaining to Grant for the creation of a commemorative album, a commercial venture that was never fully realized.

Fig. 4.

Untitled Paste-Up

While technically a photcollage, this unidentified paste-up bears inclusion in this survey because it exists as an artifact of the composite process.⁴⁶ It is significant for three reasons: the first being that these objects are rare—how often would a plaster cast be kept after it had molded a sculpture? The second: it verifies the process of making a composite, especially in regards to the painted backgrounds and retouching, as found in the Grant portrait. In traditional photography retouching is done on the negative, however with composite photography the paste-up is treated as an inter-positive with which to make a

⁴⁶ There is no way of knowing definitively that this is indeed a paste-up (or part of the working methods of the composite process) rather than a final image. The sophisticated manner in which the figures were cut and pasted makes this image similar to Notman's paste-ups, and it is likely that the photographer would not have gone to such lengths without taking the final step of re-photographing it. The written notation on the bottom of the mat that reads "oval" and what appears to be "opening" does seem to indicate that a mat was intended to be put over the image, yet I still can't say that this is the final image. One possible scenario could be that it had a "second life" as a final image, and the notation referred to the arrangement of the background. As was the case with Notman's studios, the background of the paste up was painted after the figures had been glued on, a technique in evidence here as seen by the brush strokes in the background that cover some of the support. Another possible scenario could be that the mat was used as part of the working process of making the paste-up, as a framing device that was perhaps glued on before re-photographing or to help visualize the painted background. It appears that the oval line within the matted area was painted, almost certainly a framing device rather than the effects of fading generated by the edge of an oval mat and exposure to light.

new negative, and thus the retouching is applied directly to the paste-up. The third, and perhaps most significant reason this object retains special importance is because it demonstrates the way in which the paste-up was used by the photographer—as a work in progress to be altered and adapted to his particular vision, albeit a vision verbalized by the client. There is an inherent creativity to this process that has been overlooked thus far; while the message is one the family itself projects, the decisions of placement beyond that of how a shadow falls or is painted in--essentially how the family is made to interact, is at the discretion of the image's author.

Returning to the object itself, by the arrangement of the three men, three women, and child around a table, the figures seem to be family members, perhaps siblings or cousins. However, with no identifying inscriptions or annotations on the paste-up, likely because it was not the final object, it is impossible to know with certainty. Because the object contains no inscriptions and has no known provenance, the label of “family” is assumed based on the convention of arrangement. A solitary chair as well as a decorative table have been cut out and pasted onto the painted background along with the human figures, clearly a laborious task given their ornateness. They conspire, together with the pasted-in fur rugs that match those under the feet of the figures, to evoke an authenticity, a grounding of the illusion in a constructed reality.

Fig. 5.

While the sample size is admittedly small, there are several common elements among the five images this thesis studies. Perhaps one of the most interesting is that like the Sartain and Harris composites, virtually all of the Notman family composites depict captains of industry or those of prominent social standing and their families. Group composite photography was less expensive and time consuming than hiring a painter to create a portrait, yet the cost was still much higher than a series of single portraits, which is what many middle and lower class families could afford.⁴⁷ Previously, the group portrait, and from this we can extrapolate the family portrait, was a feat of technical mastery and the means by which a professional photographer's skill was determined, yet by the 1880s, the professional group portrait was no longer just for wealthy families or the "academic elite," it had expanded to include factory workers and unions, sports teams, and school classes in addition to families.⁴⁸ The images in this study group are not in Notman's league (the artifice is readily apparent, while Notman, especially in his later years, was a master of visual trickery). However, they do share the same audience, and were made for similar purpose. With the exception of the Grant portrait, which was part of a commercial album, these images were meant to be displayed in the homes of the families depicted as talismans of a family legacy.

-Chapter 3: Analysis and Interpretation-

Technical Limitations

The history of photography is essentially the history of overcoming impediments to achieving an ideal image, and photography of the mid-nineteenth-century was certainly mediated by inherent technical limitations.⁴⁹ Because emulsion speeds were relatively slow up until the late 1880s, subjects were required to remain absolutely still to avoid blurred movement registering on the negative. A single sitter or small group may have been able to, with the help of posing stands, achieve proper immobility, however a large group, especially

⁴⁷ Hélène Samson, Ph.D. Curator of Photographs, McCord Museum, interviewed by the author May 30 2012.

⁴⁸ Grace Seiberling, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 103.

⁴⁹ Miles Orville, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 78.

with children, would find it nearly impossible to remain still enough to register on the negative without blurring. With the emergence of the gelatino-bromide dry plate in 1880s, the increased sensitivity of the emulsion meant that the subject only had to stay still for an instant, rather than minutes.⁵⁰ According to Miles Orville, even by the 1870s and 1880s, portrait studios were reluctant to utilize instantaneous photography; it was thought that the true nature of the sitter would be revealed in the act of staying still for long moments, while an instant's observance of the subject would do no more than capture a distorted expression rather than a slowly distilled essence.⁵¹ Instead, dry-plate technology was readily taken up by the growing ranks of amateur photographers, enamored as they were with outdoor scenes and candid family snapshots. However, it also must be noted that successful studios such those owned by William Notman, effectively stopped producing group composite photographs by the 1890s. The time and skill needed to surmount the inability of the medium to capture groups was diminished with the advent of a faster emulsion speed, making the new technology indisputably advantageous.

Another technical hurdle to overcome was the limitations of the lens itself; the nineteenth-century lens could only insure that the subject or part of the subject in the exact center of the frame was in focus.⁵² However, the composite photograph circumvented this issue by using single or small-group portraits in the making of a larger constructed group portrait insuring that all members of the group were in focus and correctly posed.⁵³ Because a shallow depth of field was inherent to early lenses, both combination printing and composite photography were originally employed in the pursuit of a properly focused foreground, mid-ground, and background in order to achieve a higher fidelity to nature. If one part of the image was not objectively accurate or did not fit the photographer's vision, it could then be altered to achieve the desired effect. Additionally, this technique allowed for a single image to contain the "heightened effects of three-dimensionality characteristic of stereoscopy" further invoking the illusion of the real and immediate.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, (London: Tauris Parke Books, 1993), 128.

⁵¹ Orville, *The Real Thing*, 89.

⁵² Linkman, *The Victorians*, 128.

⁵³ Stanley Triggs, "The Composite Photographs of William Notman," Exhibition Catalogue (Montreal: McCord Museum, 1994).

⁵⁴ Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting, and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris, and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 99.

Although portraits made in studios by and large dominated the market, a growing trend emerged involving making images in customers' homes either in the parlor or on the front porch, as seen with the Sartain and the Grant portraits. As popular as it was, not all locations lent themselves to photography: the length of the exposure required to capture the Sartain's parlor for instance, made for an impossibly long posing time for the subjects. The composite process allowed the family to be photographed in the photographer's studio, as can be seen by the highlights on their faces, then placed back into their parlor through cutting and pasting. For the Sartain portrait, it was in all likelihood not the number of subjects that made coordinating their poses difficult, after all there were only four, and a similar straight image exists of this group, but rather the inability of the photographic medium used by the photographer to make an ideal image in this particular location.

A similar problem of dim lighting became problematic for the Grant family; the shade cast by the porch roof upon the Grants would have left their faces somewhat obscured without intervention. There are a number of reasons that the photographer or technician would have needed to composite different faces onto the image of the Grant family, perhaps he preferred the composition of this image, yet did not possess the negative. In this case, the only way to retouch the faces, which were almost certainly deeply shadowed, was to find a similar negative and then retouch the faces, and finally paste faces from the print made from the retouched version onto the original photograph before re-photographing the entire piece to create the image seen here.

Logistical Limitations

The Victorians not only delighted in the family portrait, they relied on it as an essential component of their familial self-image. With the increased popularity of the relatively new postal system, correspondence between families by letters, often accompanied by photographs, became the preferred method of communication.⁵⁵ The logistical limitations of any family gathering or group assemblage in which one or more members were absent from the group could not, and clearly still today cannot, be reconciled without photographic manipulation. With the aim of attaining a family image representing a unified group, the photographer may choose to employ the composite process to make

⁵⁵ Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making*, 78.

time and space inconsequent, abolishing the barriers of distance and absence in a manner still practiced today with digital imagery. This solution is evident in the Kitchen portrait, in which the photographer left a space for the image of a woman who was elsewhere at the time the family portrait was made, and again with the Harris portrait, which contains a small image of a boy in the lower right hand corner, unable to be convincingly fitted into the family grouping because his image was only of his head and shoulders, not full-body as are the others. Rather than represent a family without all its parts, thus not upholding the moral and social values of completeness and strength, the family and photographer chose to manipulate the image in order to attain the ideal family portrait, artificially resolving a separation of time and space.

Family portraits have historically been made during important moments in the family's history, and much like family photographs today, they marked milestones and accomplishments. For example, when the family moved to a new location, or when the dynamics would soon change or had recently changed significantly (such as when someone in the family was ailing or about to die, or with the birth of a child) a photographic portrait was used to express the state of the family at that given time. Even the distance created by death could be overcome: a portrait of the deceased would be placed in the background so as to appear on the wall with a painted frame surrounding it, and in this way the departed could still be included in the family image.⁵⁶

Retouching

Retouching, which is often thought of as merely enhancement of a photograph through application of pencil or paint to the negative, can take many forms, all of which act to alter the image. Some of these changes are more subtle, as with eliminating blemishes from a sitter's face through penciling on the back of a glass negative, and others are more apparent, as is seen in many hand-painted tintypes in which the background is completely covered with paint. These variations, among other techniques including collage can, according to Michel Frizot, "combine to modify the account, to transform slightly what is shown, to elevate the image toward a symbolic function."⁵⁷ Of course not all retouching was

⁵⁶ Triggs, "The Composite Photographs of William Notman."

⁵⁷ Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography* (Koln: Konemann, 1998), 752.

applied out of a desire to reach beyond photography's technical constraints, yet all of these "transformations" give the image a new meaning.

One example of such retouching is the lightening of the face through darkening the back of the glass negative, conveniently obscuring blemishes. This also had the effect of brightening shadows, as seen with the Grant portrait. In the interest of aesthetic consistency, all members must have had this treatment applied to their photographed faces, even if some didn't require it. Additionally the highly stylized smooth face that came from extensive retouching was an aesthetic convention of the late nineteenth-century.

According to Audrey Linkman, the attitude towards retouching in the mid nineteenth-century was one of slight condemnation: "No photographer who aspired to standing in the profession could condone retouching which changed the original without incurring the charge of interfering with the truth of nature – unless, of course, it could be argued that technical shortcomings had produced distortion in the first place."⁵⁸ In the Sartain portrait, it is unclear what, out of the background, is photographic and what is painted, and whether or not the entire background was once photographic, and then over-painted, or even if photographed elements of the background were applied to a painted image. Ambiguities such as this do little to inform us as to the particular methods of assemblage, yet they do speak, as does the painted background of the Grant portrait, to the established importance of embellishment and painterly aesthetic. One could surmise that such painted enhancement might mimic to some extent the higher-brow painted portraits that were still in fashion, although not affordable to middle and lower class, yet it was likely that retouching and over-painting techniques were employed out of necessity rather than an aesthetic convention.

-Conclusion-

The way many Victorians thought about composite photography is perhaps, through a stretch of the imagination, akin to what you or I might think when playing a scale on the piano and finding that someone had inverted one note with another; we understand that the scale isn't objectively correct, yet we accept that the aggregation of notes represents the

⁵⁸ Linkman, *The Victorians*, 80.

entire octave. In our willingness to believe in the integrity of the scale, we create an internal echo of how it “should” sound. Viewing composite family portraits appears to work in a similar way, in that doing so requires that the audience suspends its disbelief in the false reality it is presented with, and mentally construct a coherent and whole image based upon the visual cues in front of it. Indeed, the illusion of family stability and unity could in some cases depend upon the perceived continuity of the familial representation in the image itself. In other words, the understanding the viewers is “supposed” to have in which all of the family members are harmoniously present, could depend upon the level of skill involved in creating the artifice. Just as suspending one’s disbelief when viewing an obviously manipulated photograph allows viewers to arrive at a desired understanding of the image, the technical reasons behind choosing the composite process also serves as a means to an end. For the Victorians, the family was of the utmost importance, and photographs of the family were valued because they reified the importance of the family within Victorian society. The composite family portrait as represented by this small sample, made its appearance across classes and even countries, and testifies to the necessary role the family, and the family portrait, played in late Victorian society.

This thesis demonstrates that the family composite was created with the aim of overcoming certain technical limitations, namely the mid-nineteenth-century technical constraints of the photographic medium seen in the necessarily long exposures, as well as the still insurmountable logistical difficulties of time and place. Also imperative to overcome were the aesthetic discontinuities that were inherent to the composite process: the slight disproportion of figures, the outlines many figures possess, even the sometimes awkward placement of the figures within a scene could be softened and refined through embellishment and retouching in order to enhance the illusion of continuity and to match with the painterly aesthetics valued at that time. From this small sampling we see that in surpassing these limitations, the family composite offers us something more than an assemblage of photographic parts made to look like a whole, from our knowledge of the audience and the techniques available at the time, it gives us a more nuanced understanding of the ideal Victorian family.

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