

Rediscovery: Women in Photography

Laura Jones

Quatre commentaires différents sur les femmes et la photographie de 1890 à 1974 . . . qui est arrivée de loin, bébé?

We might think we've come a long way in altering our image as professional women—read on and you be the judge....

The following four articles express attitudes toward women in the field of photography in England, Canada, and the United States. The first is a communication to the Bath Photographic Society in April, 1890, entitled 'Photography in an Age of Movement'.

Now the next subject I shall connect with this paper, or at least movement or movements of photography, is the ladies, for they are pushing themselves forward in a marked manner. The interest they take in photography, the patience with which they work, and the amount of pains bestowed by them in the different departments, is something alarming. I know it is difficult to realize in the increasing battle for existence that men can be confronted by a rival. An argument may be brought forward that these smaller, delicate beings, with white hands and long hair, are physically, and therefore mentally, incapable of taking an equal place with men in the intellectual world. Well, what they may be I don't know, but I do know this, as regards their intellect in connection with the fascinating art of photography, we shall find a hot competition, and one in which if we don't help them to win a place they will win a place for themselves. If you watch closely you can see women's intellect brought into use day by day in connection with photography. So let me impress upon you, the members of the Bath Photographic Society, to encourage ladies to join the Society, and whatever you do don't ignore their work.

The second is a Canadian example. A reporter who interviewed Napoléon Sarony (a noted Canadian-born photographer) on the status of woman in professional photography, obtained the following interesting statement for the *Canadian Photographic Journal*, 1895.

There are not many women photographers, nor is there any good reason why women should not be excellent photographers. They must, of course, learn the business, like any one else, and the posing and lighting, being the finest artistic points, naturally require the greatest artistic aptitude. There are few really good photographers in the country. It requires great skill and constant application and must be closely followed.

It is, of course, conceded that women have a great deal of natural artistic talent, and if they once conclude to start out and become photographers, there is no doubt that they will succeed in it. The business pays well and by its very nature seems to invite women, as there are no unpleasant features about it.

The third is an excerpt from the speech by Richard Hines, Jr, 'Women In Photography', delivered before the Art League of Mobile, Alabama, 19 January 1899.

There is no more suitable work for woman than photography whether she takes it up with a view of making it a profession, or simply as a delightful pastime to give pleasure to herself and others. She is by nature peculiarly fitted for the work, and photography is becoming more and more recognized as a field of endeavour peculiarly suited to women. There is scarcely a woman who has not some inborn artistic feeling, latent though it may be until brought out by study and training. Nevertheless, it is there, and its presence in greater or less degree, is promise of success in photography. Cleanliness and patience are two of the cardinal virtues necessary to the successful pursuit of photography. The first seems to be a God-given attribute to most women, while, if they have not the latter in sufficient amount, it is a virtue that can be cultivated. The light, delicate touch of a woman, the eye for light and shade, together with her artistic perception, render her peculiarly fitted to succeed in this work.

The fourth article is 'you've come a long way, baby' by Leo R. Knight and Linda Farynk, from *The Professional Photographer*, November 1974.

Portrait studios, and many commercial studios as well, offer to the female in search of a career numerous opportunities in all phases of the wide world of photography. Some of the possible roles we will discuss include photographer, darkroom technician, retoucher, print correctionist, colorist, receptionist and production department assistant.

Through this increase in opportunities for employment, management has become increasingly aware of the special suitability of women for the many roles that now exist in our profession. There has been pressure from certain quarters to lump all jobs together and assign them equally, without regard to sex.

But I submit: there is a difference between the sexes. Women are particularly suited to certain jobs because of temperament, spirit, emotions and physical capacities.

Roles Open to Women

The role of photographer.... Another dimension to the role of photographer exists that cannot be learned through any sort of instruction. One must be born with this quality. It's that certain sensitivity to the feeling and emotions of others. I submit that this quality is the common thread that is woven through every female. Many men possess this quality, but not in as great a degree as the fairer sex. If the photographer is to interpret the subject realistically, he or she must possess this very human capacity.

The receptionist, in her most amiable and confidence-lending voice, will reassure the client that her studio is qualified and prepared to handle the assignment in a way that no other studio can. The woman receptionist makes good use of this inborn sensitivity and understanding of human needs.

Photographic printer is a role specially tailored to the patience and temperament of most women. A good printer is a technician, as well as an interpreter. And women are acutely aware of what looks good and what doesn't look good. They are also sensitive about pleasing the eye of the beholder, a testimonial proved by the billions of dollars worth of feminine cosmetics sold in this country annually. With the proper technical training, it would be easy to direct this trait and natural talent into photographic channels. Cropping, color balance, density and other considerations are readily evaluated by the super-sensitive and perceptive eye of the lady printer. The distinctively feminine qualities of neatness and cleanliness are necessities that perhaps nearly overshadow all the other important character traits required in this role.

A fourth level of opportunity for women in the studio is in the area of *corrections of direct color prints*. All of the qualities that make for a good photographic printer, excepting the knowledge of print chemistry, are integral to the print correctionist. But in addition to having an eye for color balance and tone, she must also have a personality split into equal parts of the following: artist, magician, idealist with rose-colored glasses, and somber realist. It is a position in which virtue is rewarding, providing the virtue is patience.

A fifth occupation in the portrait studio that is more suitable for women than men is that of *negative retoucher*. The emphasis is on a certain delicacy of touch more than anything else, except possibly a placid disposition.

Opportunities for the woman in the progressive studio are governed by the spirit and talent of the individual herself. The veils and taboos seem to have been removed. The door is all but wide open now; not due to any one sharp blow, but as a result of many tiny nudges by many people making their voices heard. Listen hard, studio owners, to these voices, for they are voices signifying progress and improvement. And, if you come to like what the voices are saying, you'll come to know and love women for their sensitivity, generosity, and amiable temperaments. Take advantage of women . . . photographically that is!

YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY?

