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# Making Art Out of War: "Photography and the American Civil War"

by Jeanne Schinto

Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York City

Photos courtesy Metropolitan  
Museum of Art

*Photography and the American  
Civil War*, now on view at the  
Metropolitan Museum of Art in  
New York City, is as much  
about photography as it is about  
our bloodiest military conflict.  
Curated by the Met's Jeff L.

Rosenheim, the show explores  
the role of the camera before,  
during, and after the war. It  
examines how photographic  
images influenced the war's  
outcome and how the war in  
turn influenced photography.  
That's the bare bones of it,  
anyway. The experience of it is  
something else again.

This is an exhibit that silences  
people. Even if it didn't, the  
sound would be muffled by the  
walls' white canvas. A brilliant  
design choice, the material  
bridges the two sides of this  
complex undertaking. The  
material is the kind used for the  
battlefield tents that officers sat  
in as they planned their attacks  
against each other. It is also the  
kind used for the battlefield  
photographers' makeshift  
darkrooms, where many of the  
visual records that have become  
our collective memory of the  
war were made.

Mathew Brady is easily the most  
famous name in Civil War  
photography even though he  
took few of the photos to which  
that name has been attached.  
Represented here by, among  
other things, a camera and  
tripod from his studio lent by  
the Loewentheil family, he  
mosty directed and  
disseminated the work  
produced by staff. His  
entrepreneurial role was  
achievement enough, however.  
A *New York Times* reporter  
reviewing Brady's 1862  
exhibition *The Dead of  
Antietam* commended him for  
bringing home "the terrible  
reality and earnestness of war."

Until then, the American people  
had not seen views of war. They  
understood the battlefield as a  
reality but a remote one, "like a  
funeral next door," as the *Times*  
reporter put it. Brady in effect  
laid the bodies out in the  
public's "dooryards" and along  
their streets.

The work of Brady's chief  
operator, Alexander Gardner,  
who went out on his own  
shortly after *The Dead of  
Antietam* went up, is another  
necessary highlight of this  
comprehensive show. It was he  
and his crew who created the  
gruesome battlefield  
photographs that are well  
known. These include John  
Reekie's *A Burial Party, Cold  
Harbor, Virginia*, featuring  
skulls, limbs, and a disembodied  
boot on a wagon, ready for  
carting away by one of the  
African-Americans assigned to  
gather and bury these neglected  
remains. What I didn't know  
until I read the catalog,  
however, is that *Gardner's  
Photographic Sketch Book of  
the War*, besides being a seminal  
document of the Civil War, was  
by all accounts America's first  
book of photographs.

Similarly, George N. Barnard's  
magnificent, almost magisterial  
*Photographic Views of  
Sherman's Campaign*, besides  
providing one of the most  
aesthetically pleasing parts of  
the show, was the first  
monograph in American  
photographic history, published  
in 1866. His photographs *Ruins  
of the Rail Road Depot,  
Charleston, South Carolina;  
Scene of General McPherson's  
Death, Nashville from the  
Capitol*, and the like read almost  
like Hudson River school  
landscapes in black and white.

This show is much, much  
bigger than Brady, Gardner,  
Barnard, and other well-known  
names, however. In fact, a case  
could be made that some of the  
most affecting images, among  
the more than 200 assembled  
here, are the studio portraits of  
soldiers by unknown artists.

Uniformed men and boys sit or  
stand, often alone, but  
sometimes in pairs or groups,  
looking vaguely familiar, like  
people we recognize from  
somewhere we've forgotten,  
wearing expressions we might  
have worn if we had been in  
their situation. Often they have  
weapons in hand, their cheeks  
are artificially rosy by tint, or  
gold flecks have been added to  
their military buttons. Visiting a  
photographer's studio to have  
one's likeness made was already  
established as a tradition before  
the war. It brought new  
meaning and purpose to a  
soldier who made a stop at a  
studio before he left home.

What once had been merely the  
means to acquiring a permanent  
mirror became a process  
believed to be a talisman. But  
what to make of an unknown  
artist's sixth-plate tintype of a  
woman holding cased portraits  
of Civil War soldiers? Is this the  
only way she could "be" with  
the pictured men because they  
are among the war dead? Or is  
this a lucky charm doubled  
down?

Earlier studio portraitists  
produced daguerreotypes.  
Wartime business opportunities  
spurred the development of less  
expensive, more democratic forms—ambrotypes, tintypes, and cartes de  
visite. But there are far fewer Confederate examples since photographic  
supplies in the South were scarce, given the Union's successful blockade  
of almost every Confederate-held port, and open studios were close to  
nonexistent. One of those rarities, showing two related Confederates, is  
the subject of an unknown artist's quarter-plate ambrotype that was lent,  
along with other items, by David Wynn Vaughan and used on the cover  
of the catalog. A short story, if not a whole novel, is contained in the  
contrast: the Hollywood handsome Captain Charles A. Hawkins appears  
ready to be heroic, while Sergeant John M. Hawkins, his brother or  
cousin to judge by his surname, telegraphs his misery and fear with  
vacant eyes and a pitiable frown.

Images of war equipment and military engineering feats are another  
mesmerizing part of this exhibit, and they make a rich counterpoint to  
the portraits, putting them in context and emphasizing the impersonal  
nature of modern warfare. Andrew Joseph Russell's 1863 *Confederate  
Method of Destroying Rail Roads at McCloud Mill, Virginia*, for  
example, is an albumen silver print showing the clever technique of  
disrupting a section of iron track by heating the rails to twist them. (The  
heat was created by piling up logs beneath the rails and lighting a fire.)  
Attributed to Alma A. Pelot of Charleston are three other albumen silver  
prints showing the inside of Fort Sumter. Dated April 15, 1861, they  
were made on the third day of the battle that officially began the war.  
Pelot's images are not only well composed, they are believed to be the  
first photographic images of the conflict, and his *Western Barracks and  
Parade* is the first known photograph showing the Confederate flag in  
military use. A young studio assistant hoping to cash in on an  
opportunity, Pelot had essentially slipped into a then relatively new  
profession—photojournalism.

There are no actual battle scenes in this show, only scenes of the  
aftermath. Action photography was still decades away, given the heavy  
wooden glass-plate cameras, the fragility of the plates themselves, and all  
the chemicals needed to sensitize those plates. And for the same reason  
that we lack many Confederate soldiers' studio portraits, there are no  
large sets of extant battlefield studies made by southern artists during the  
war years.

What the period did have was three-dimensional imagery in the form of  
stereoviews, and in one of the galleries there are two stereoscopes  
showing a series of stereoviews from *Gardner's Sketch Book*. Rosenheim  
notes in his catalog that those who were working for Gardner seem to  
have worked in teams using both stereo and flat-view cameras.

Stereoviews, for those who do not know, consist of two images mounted  
side by side. One is slightly different from the other, corresponding to the  
two slightly different images that our eyes submit to our brain, allowing  
us to see depth. When viewed through a stereoscope, stereoviews appear  
in 3-D. Twin-lensed stereoview cameras, being more compact than the  
typical 8" x 10" flat-view cameras and with shorter exposure times, were  
found to be ideal for the task of photographing in the field.

Incidentally, the controversy over Gardner's manipulation of facts for his  
*Sketch Book* is made better known by this exhibition. Granted, the  
practice of doctoring or faking an image for a more dramatic result isn't  
anything new in the world of documentary photography, nor is everyone  
convinced that that's what Gardner did. But it does appear to some that,  
in one instance, he moved a body to make a better picture, and in  
another, provided a dead soldier with a prop rifle, then wrote a caption  
mislabeling him as a crack Confederate sharpshooter (who could "snuff a  
candle at a hundred yards") when he was actually just another poor fallen  
Union infantryman.

Others who understood the power of images, doctored or otherwise,  
were the makers of the world's first political campaign photo medallion,  
in the form of a tintype, copied from Mathew Brady's 1860 campaign  
photograph of Abraham Lincoln. Actually, there were several versions,  
the most common being one that slightly altered the candidate's features.  
And as Rosenheim points out, this had the benefit of making him appear  
"more classically handsome and less rough-hewn; more like James  
Stewart in *Rear Window* than the wild man found in period  
descriptions."

Five years later, America's first broadside illustrated with photographs,  
another photographic first that was the result of the war, helped militia  
hunt down Lincoln's assassins. Within 24 hours of the president's death,  
authorities had found Booth's photograph by searching his hotel room  
and had extracted cartes de visite of accomplices John Surratt and David  
Herold from their respective families. The wanted poster reproduced the  
portraits along with the words "THE MURDERER OF our late beloved  
President, Abraham Lincoln, IS STILL AT LARGE." They were soon  
found. Although Booth died of gunshots during the manhunt, among  
the last photographs associated with the Civil War is Gardner's grim  
*Execution of the Conspirators*, part of a series he made on that hot day.

The hanging took place at the old arsenal penitentiary in Washington,  
D.C., on July 7, 1865. On the gallows along with Herold was Surratt's  
mother, Mary, seen under a parasol prior to having the rope fixed around  
her neck. Gardner sold his prints as a sequential picture story. "Among  
the world's first spot-news photographs, they are as unnerving today as  
they were at the time," Rosenheim writes.

But of all the graphic images in this exhibit, none can compare to the  
clinical studies from the collection of medical historian Stanley B. Burns,  
who lent a selection from the photographs of U.S. Army surgeon Reed  
Brockway Bontecou. It is an unprecedented record of patients  
documented in cartes de visite upon their arrival from the battlefield,  
before and after surgery, during their recovery, or upon their death, if seen  
again, considering the evolution of doctor-patient confidentiality laws.

Included are four pages, mounted with a dozen cartes de visite each, from  
Bontecou's voluminous *Private Teaching Album of Wounded Civil War  
Soldiers, 1864-1865*. They show men with missing or mutilated limbs or  
other parts of their bodies holding a signboard chalked with their name  
and the date. Sometimes Bontecou made enlargements and put them in  
oval mounts. *Private John Parkhurst, Company E, Second New York  
Heavy Artillery* is a 5 1/8" x 7 1/2" silver print showing the recovered  
subject with a hole in his head left by a bullet. A note affixed to the  
reverse said he was 50 years old and "Doing well."

It all sounds very gruesome, and it undeniably is. The medical portraits  
show what happened to all those men and boys in those studio portraits.  
Considering their expressions, though, the subjects seem to understand  
the purpose of the doctor's camera. Their trust in him comes through, as  
does his respect for them. As Burns has written, it was Bontecou who  
"introduced the application of photography for clinical purposes...The  
images became a major educational device to help surgeons learn routine  
procedures and the expected results."

Too bad that while we have made great advances in medical science since  
then, we still haven't figured out how not to fight in the field.

*Photography and the American Civil War*, on view at the Met through  
September 2, will travel to the Gibbs Museum of Art, Charleston,  
South Carolina, and be on view from September 27 through January 5,  
2014, and then will be at the New Orleans Museum of Art from January  
31 through May 4, 2014. For more information, see the Web site  
(www.metmuseum.org).

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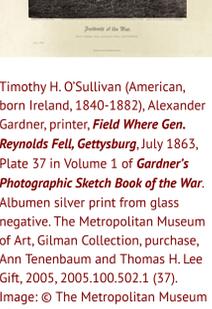
Unknown artist, after an 1860 carte  
de visite by Mathew B. Brady (circa  
1822-1896). Presidential campaign  
medal with portraits of Abraham  
Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin  
(Hamlin on reverse, not shown), 1860.  
Tintypes in stamped brass medallion.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
purchase, The Overbrook Foundation  
Gift, 2012 (2012.12). Image: © The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Unknown artist, **Captain Charles A.  
and Sergeant John M. Hawkins,  
Company E, "Tom Cobb Infantry,"  
Thirty-eighth Regiment, Georgia  
Volunteer Infantry**, 1861-62. Quarter-  
plate (3/4" x 4 1/4") ambrotype with  
applied color. David Wynn Vaughan  
Collection. Photo: Jack Melton.



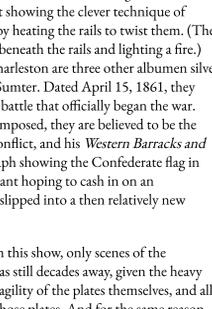
Unknown artist, **Union Private, 11th  
New York Infantry (also known as the  
1st Fire Zouaves)**, May-June 1861.  
Sixth-plate (3/4" x 2 3/4") ambrotype.  
Michael J. McAfee Collection. Image:  
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



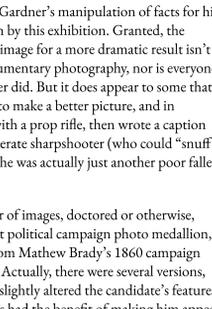
Unknown artist, **Sojourner Truth, I  
Sell the Shadow to Support the  
Substance**, 1864. Albumen silver print  
(carte de visite) from glass negative.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
purchase, Alfred Stieglitz Society  
Gifts, 2013 (2013.54). Image: © The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.



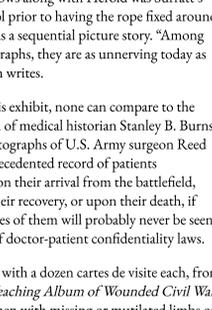
Andrew Joseph Russell (American,  
1830-1902), **Slave Pen**, Alexandria,  
Virginia, 1863. Albumen silver print  
from glass negative. The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman  
Collection, purchase, The Horace W.  
Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through  
Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005  
(2005.100.91). Image: © The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Timothy H. O'Sullivan (American,  
born Ireland, 1840-1882), **Alexander  
Gardner, Field Where Gen.  
Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg**, July 1863,  
Plate 37 in Volume 1 of **Gardner's  
Photographic Sketch Book of the War**.  
Albumen silver print from glass  
negative. The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, Gilman Collection, purchase,  
Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee  
Gift, 2005, 2005.100.502.1 (37).  
Image: © The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art.



Alexander Gardner (American, born  
Scotland, 1821-1882), **Ruins of  
Gallego Flour Mills, Richmond**, 1865.  
Albumen silver prints from glass  
negatives. The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund,  
1933 (33.65.11, .226). Image: © The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Reed Brockway Bontecou (American,  
1824-1907), **Union Private John  
Parmenter, Company G, Sixty-seventh  
Pennsylvania Volunteers**, June 21,  
1865. Albumen silver print from glass  
negative carte de visite. Collection  
Stanley B. Burns, M.D. Image: © The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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