

A GRAND FINALE AND OFF INTO THE BLUE

TWO ERAS REFLECTED IN PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Monika Faber

To say that 1900 marked the beginning of the era of portrait photography must, at first glance, seem illogical. After all, portraiture was the commercial photographer's mainstay from the pioneering days of the art until well into the twentieth century. It is of course not surprising that the nature of the portrait has changed over time, but on closer inspection, many of the changes that appear to be strictly aesthetic prove to be of a more fundamental nature, particularly regarding the portrait's function as an expression of prevalent sociopolitical conditions.

The psychological and sociological reasons for the popularity of photographic portraits have been thoroughly analyzed from very different perspectives, not only by photographic theorists and historians but also by critical thinkers of all kinds, such as Siegfried Kracauer, Pierre Bourdieu, and Roland Barthes, just to name a few of the most well-known figures to have dealt with this topic. The complexity of the subject makes it impossible to regard the photographic portrait as one homogenous phenomenon, just as it is impossible to classify photography itself as a unified visual art. Individual pictures are too different, too diverse are the contexts in which they were created, or from which the viewer, either then or now, can approach them.

When faced with the daunting task of choosing a representative sample out of the vast number of pictures available, it is a challenge both difficult and exciting to attempt to categorize or narrow down, or to focus on one specific aspect. Austrian and German photography have never before been viewed in such close comparison to each other, and so the most logical course seemed to be to present a specific period in time, one that prompted both radical aesthetic changes in the art of photography, as well as sociopolitical upheavals, the like of which had never been seen before. Both processes, in art as well as in society, were driven by people whose lives and work were constantly in the public eye—selected portraits of some of these significant figures made a good starting point for choosing this collection. Contrary to all expectations, it took only a few decades after its invention for photography to put virtually the entire profession of miniature painters, lithographers, and specialized—if sometimes mediocre—portrait artists out of business; people who had, until then, been able to make a decent living from their assignments. At first, the long and uncomfortable sittings, the difficult procedures in the darkroom, and the astronomical prices kept many people from being able to have their picture taken, but after around 1870, technical developments made the process simpler and paved the way for a veritable flood of photographic portraits.

It did not take long for the first critics to begin complaining about the lack of originality and impersonal sameness of studio portraits. Amateurs, for the most part wealthy, private photo-