

Wicker Chairs in the Nineties

Wicker chairs, tables, and stands are exclusive to the 1890s, generally 1893 and later. They were usually white or a very light natural color and tended to blend into the scene rather than dominate it like props of the 1880s. The studio props and backgrounds of the 1880s

began to lose the bulky, dark, heavy looking elements and the scene became very light. Improvements in photographic papers yielded nice pearl-hued images when light scenes were photographed and when the subject was dressed in darker colors, this combination resulted in very nice contrast, highlighting the person and not the accessories.



Figure 4-11. 1890s furniture and backgrounds focused attention on the people, not accessories or backgrounds.

Fake Rocks, Fences, and More

As the 1880s arrived so did the full-length style of photography, along with the trend of posing the subject in a realistic setting, which usually was anything but authentic looking. With the added space (the image area was 250% larger than the carte de visite) the cabinet card begged for surrounding visuals to help with composition. Columns and balustrades made brief returns, but were soon replaced by a new wave of studio accessories.

The business of creating paper maché rocks, walls, columns, fences, and other items flourished in the mid-1880s and into the early 1890s, apparently peaking around 1889. Also, the background business was revitalized, and many sets of matching props and backgrounds were sold.



Figure 4-12. Studio props in a c. 1885 cabinet card.

On close inspection of the photograph in Figure 4-12, the scene includes a background painting with a stone wall on the left, yet she is resting her arm on a physical, yet fake, paper maché gatepost attached to fake stones.

Animal Hide Floor Covering

A peculiar clue to look for in 1880 photographs is the use of longhair animal hides, possibly buffalo, in the foreground. They typically look very coarse almost like straw, though close examination reveals the hair has a solid backing like a rug. These rugs would have covered the floor, creating an acceptable transition to the backdrop.



Figure 4-13. Animal hide rug in 1886 cabinet card.

The use of these seems to be exclusive to the 1880 era with most examples found in the middle of the decade. Examples of these rugs have not been seen by PhotoTree.com in photographs from the 1890s.

Note: The background canvas in Figure 4-13 was hung on the wall, but low enough that it flowed onto the floor where the men and dogs were actually standing on it. Very odd.

Fur Rugs

Luscious fur rugs were used for baby pictures in the 1890s, mostly in the earlier years. The thick folds provided easy cover for the mother who was usually behind the rug holding onto the baby. Early pictures show heavy canvas or cloth which did not hide the mother very well. The soft thick fur probably was more comfortable for the child also.

Few baby-only photographs are found before the very late 1880s as the exposure times for photographers could be multiple seconds, which could be difficult keeping the baby still for that length of time.

Baby Toys

How did they get babies to sit still and come up with those quizzical looks? Probably every trick in the book was used by mothers, photographers, and anyone else around. The idea of holding up a colorful, animated toy to get the toddler’s attention is used today, however this is not new.

Here is a wind-up parrot from an 1880s advertisement (Figure 4-15) that is *highly colored and attractive in appearance*.⁴ Placing this mechanical bird next to the camera would no doubt produce the frozen expressions with mouth agape seen in many baby pictures of the 19th century. One can just image the studio scene in the 1891 and 1893 where the baby was mesmerized by the moving parrot (Figure 4-14).



Figure 4-14. Fluffy fur rugs gently held babies, and afforded an easy way to hide a mother’s arm as the center picture almost accomplishes.

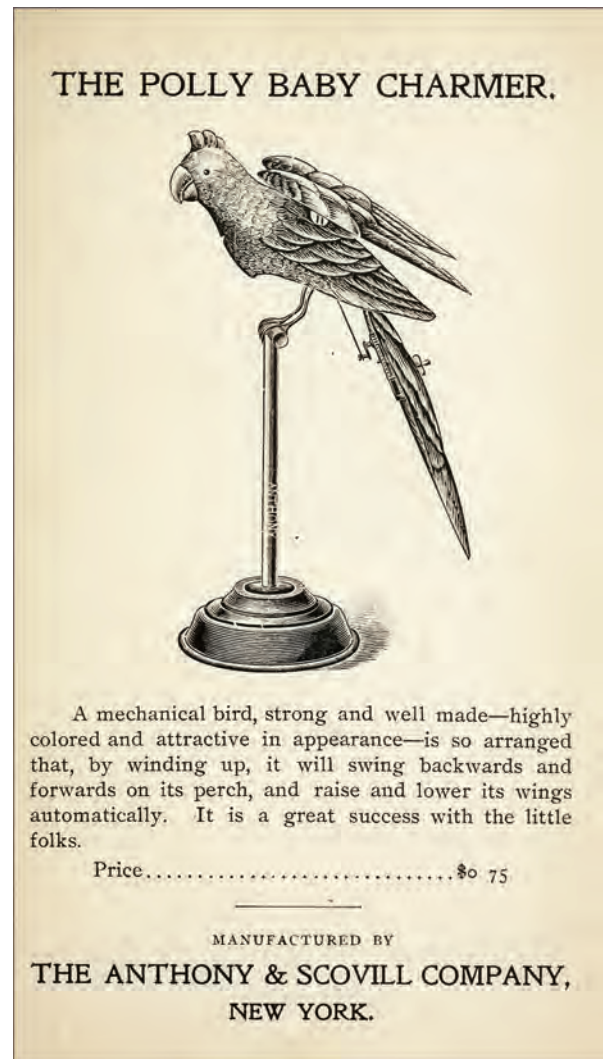


Figure 4-15. Wind-up mechanical bird used to entertain babies and *little folks* in a photography studio.

Studio Props	
Prop	Date Used*
Painted backgrounds	1862 - 1890s
High-back chairs	1860 - 1866
Fringe chairs	1864 -1870s
Wicker chairs & furniture	1893 - 1900
Paper maché props	1880s - 1890s
Animal hide floor covering	1880s
Fur rug in baby pictures	Early 1890s

* These are the most commonly found years of use.