

What can we learn from Victorian portrait photography?

Class: Primary 4-5

Subject: Social Studies/Technologies

Duration: 30mins

Lesson Focus and Goals:

- Learn about some of the ways photography was used in the past
- Understand what the lives of people were like in the Victorian era
- Understand why photography is so special to St Andrews

Materials Needed:

- PowerPoint Slides
- Mind map one x2
- Mind map two x2
- Mind map three x2
- Whiteboard pens
- **EXTENSION:**
 - Mobile phone with 'Even Longer' app installed £4.49
 - Tripod/stack of books to hold phone still

CfE Learning Points:

- I can compare aspects of people's daily lives in the past with my own by using historical evidence or the experience of recreating an historical setting. SOC 1-04a
- I can explore the latest technologies and consider the ways in which they have developed. TCH 1-05a
- I understand how technologies help provide for our needs and wants, and how they can affect the environment in which we live. TCH 1-07a

Teacher Notes:

- Start with a discussion introducing Thomas Rodger, his work developing a new photography process and his portrait photography studio in St Andrews. Think about who would get their photo taken at the studio/why?
- Move on to first activity, analysing at example portraits on slides as a class, discussing what we can learn from them.
- After this group analysis, go on to complete mind map activity, letting the class have a go at analysing Victorian portraits for themselves.
- There is also an additional extension activity if time.

Background Information:

- Thomas Rodger (1832-1883) was a photographer and scientist who studied at Madras College before going to the University of St Andrews to study chemistry.
- Rodger helped to develop something called the Calotype photography process. This process involved lots of chemicals which meant that only people who were knowledgeable about science were able to do it and not just anyone could pick up a camera.
- The exposure time was very long, sometimes of up to an hour or more, which meant that people who were having their photos taken would have to sit or stand very still for long periods, otherwise their photo would go blurry. Even if people did stay still, sometimes their photo would still go blurry because of the paper used.
- The camera which Rodger used was also massive and not portable (see photo on slide) so photos couldn't just be taken anywhere at any time.
- This idea that photos could not just be taken whenever or wherever people wanted prompted Rodger to set up the first photography studio in St Andrews.
- This was in the building next to the Victory Memorial Hall (see photo on slides).

Discussion Questions:

- If we take a photo now – how easy is it? What do you normally take photos on? (Mobile phone)
- Who do you think would go to get their photo taken at Rodger's studio? (Expensive so you had to be wealthy)
- Have any of you ever had a professional photo taken by a photographer? (Special occasions, eg school photo)
- Why do you think people went to get their photos taken in the past? (Also, occasions, eg wedding, christening)

Activity Instructions:

Whole Class Portrait Analysis (use portraits taken by Thomas Rodger - on slide 5)

Facial Expression

Look at the facial expressions of the people in the photos. What face are they making? Are they smiling?

- No. Smiling was not the done thing at the time. Maybe this was because of how long it took to take a photo and they couldn't hold their smiles for long enough.

Pose

What about their poses? Do they look relaxed?

- Probably not. People had to pose in a certain way, the photographer probably would have told them how to sit or stand – probably like they would if you were getting your school photo taken today.

Background

Where does it look like the photo of the woman holding the harp (on slide) had her photo taken? Any ideas?

- Probably not in her house as you might think. Likely in Thomas Rodger's studio in front of a background which would have been designed to make the photo look like it was taken in a well-furnished large home.

Clothing

Perhaps for a school photo you made sure your hair was smartly brushed or your uniform was perfect. Do you look like this every day?

- Probably not all the time. People often present the best version of themselves for a professional photo, and this would have been the same for people going to Thomas Rodger's studio. For example, look at the lady in the middle (on slide) in her dress.
- People would have worn formal clothes and sometimes looking at what people are wearing in some of the old photos is a good way to tell what the occasion was.

Props

- We can also tell a lot about a person getting their photo taken from props included in the photo. For example, props could be used to show what job someone did such as the man with the scientific object who perhaps worked at the university.
- People would sometimes pose with the props to pretend they were doing something (remember they would have to stay still because of the long exposure time). Point to manwriting (on slide), he wouldn't actually be writing, he would be still.

Mind Map Activity

- Need: Mind map photos printed out and stuck into blank A3 paper (if possible laminate these so whiteboard pens can be used), pens/whiteboard pens
- Answers:
 - Soldier: Thomas Rodgers son, 17 yrs old, fighting in American Civil War, middle/upper class
 - Woman with baby: unknown persons, child under 1, woman in 20s, middle/upper class
 - Woman: Sister of a university lecturer, in 20s, occasion unknown, middle/upper class
- Activity Instructions:
 - Split the children into groups of 3-4 and hand them one of the A3 sheets with a picture in the center.
 - Ask them to think of the occasion behind the photo being taken, the age of the people in the photo, what the people in the photo are wearing and how this may hint at their socioeconomic class.
 - The children should write these things around the central photo in a mind map

Extension Activity

- Set up your own classroom photography studio using the EvenLonger app to increase the exposure time on your phone camera. Set the timer to one minute, split the class into groups and get them to stand still – otherwise the photo will go blurry! You will need something tripod-like to rest your phone on to avoid shaky hands creating the blurry effect.
- Get groups to come up with a pose to 'tell the story of a primary school pupil in a 21st century classroom'.

