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## ***The Composite Photographs***

**Stanley G. Triggs**

### **Introduction**

It was a busy time at William Notman's studio at the foot of Bleury Street in the winter of 1878. Over a period of several weeks there was an unusually large flow of well-known citizens to and from the studio, some arriving in fine sleighs drawn by matched teams, harness and fittings immaculately polished, others in rented sleighs with hardy drivers wrapped in buffalo coats, while still others made the visit an opportunity for a brisk walk through the snowy streets of Montreal. Among them were such notables as Sir John A. Macdonald, Canadian Prime Minister, and his wife Lady Agnes; Lord Dufferin, Governor-General of Canada, with Lady Dufferin; Sir Hugh Allan, founder of the Allan Steamship Lines; Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt, politician, diplomat and industrial promoter; John Popham, advocate and Commissioner for Ontario and Quebec and the lower provinces; Matthew Hamilton Gault, President of the Exchange Bank of Canada; the Reverend Jacob Ellegood, Canon of Christ Church Cathedral and rector of St. James the Apostle Church; Alex McGibbon, prominent Montreal grocer;

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Lieutenant Colonel E.G.P. Littleton; and Captain Selby Smith. They came in response to an invitation sent by William Notman to have their pictures taken for inclusion in a large composite photograph of a curling match he was planning. The finished picture, made up of 122 individual photographs pasted on a painted background, was to be sent to the International Exhibition in Paris scheduled for the following summer.

Notman was at the peak of his career. Since inception in 1856 he had twice expanded his Montreal studio and also opened studios in four other Canadian cities. The year he made the curling composite, he had also opened a studio in Boston, the first of many in New England. Offering a high-quality product at a reasonable rate, Notman captured the custom of a wide range of Montreal citizens as well as visitors from other cities and from abroad. From the beginning he was keenly aware of the power of advertising. In 1860 when the Prince of Wales visited Montreal to inaugurate the Victoria Bridge, Notman had prepared a group of five hundred photographs as a royal gift, which won for him the title of "Photographer to the Queen". His international recognition was furthered by entries in most of the world-class exhibitions and a number of smaller shows in Europe, Canada and the USA. When the exhibition commissioners in charge of Canadian entries to the 1878 Paris exhibition invited Notman to send an exhibit, he decided on a large composite photograph representing

both the growing nation and a unique aspect of Canadian life. Since he was already planning to send a composite picture of the Montreal Snow Shoe Club to Paris<sup>1</sup>, what better way to represent the nation in this second entry than a scene of the popular winter game of curling on the historic St Lawrence River, played and attended by some of the leading citizens of the country, with the distant metropolis and Mount Royal as a backdrop!

These weren't the first composites Notman had made...

1. Hugh W. Becket, *The Montreal Snow Shoe Club* (Montreal: Becket Bros., 1882), p. 385.

## A Famous Composite Photograph

The occasion of a fancy dress skating carnival in the Victoria Rink inspired his first large production in 1870. This event was staged in honour of Prince Arthur, who, as an officer in training with the Rifle Brigade, was stationed in Montreal. Notman declared his intention of making a record of the event, and invited those who planned to participate in the skating carnival to bring their costumes and skates to the studio and have their portraits taken for a composite photograph. One hundred and fifty people came in answer to the advertisement to don their brightly coloured costumes representing various themes and epochs. They included Scottish couples in Highland costume, Elizabethan ladies and courtiers, several soldiers and sailors, a voyageur, a pilgrim father, "Diana", goddess of the hunt, with bow and arrows, a scattering of young women in peasant costumes, a woman dressed as Night, another as the morning star, a man arrayed as a counter bass, another as a giant head and an "Indian" who appears to be aiming his arrow at a woman smoking a cigar. Notman's advertisement, published in *The Gazette*, February 25, 1870, reads:

BLEURY STREET, FEBRUARY, 1870.

The approaching CARNIVAL at the Skating rink is likely to be one of more than ordinary interest from the fact that His Royal Highness Prince Arthur is expected to grace the occasion with his presence.

I have therefore selected this opportunity as one offering many advantages, to carry out what has long been my intention; To get up an effective PICTURE OF THE RINK, for which purpose I beg to request that you will give me an early sitting, before or as soon after the event as possible, in the Costume you intend to use on the occasion.

The Directors have kindly consented to give me every facility in their power, so as to ensure a successful Picture.

Your obedient servant,

WILLIAM NOTMAN.

On completion of this composite photograph, measuring 20 x 27 1/2 inches, Notman had his staff produce a much larger coloured version as well, measuring 37 1/2 x 53 1/2 inches. By use of a solar enlarger (an apparatus using sunlight as a light source), the image was projected on to a large canvas that had previously been coated

with light-sensitive photographic emulsion. During the necessary very long exposure the image gradually appeared on the emulsified canvas. After fixing, washing, and drying, the canvas was attached to a wooden stretcher, of the type used for oil paintings. The image was then coloured in oil by Notman's two most talented artists of that period, Henry Sandham<sup>2</sup>, who had been on staff since about 1860 and was now at age thirty head of the art department, and Edward Sharpe, a twenty-year-old of immense talent just hired the previous year. Placed in an ornate gold frame with glass to protect it, this large coloured version of the skating carnival was on display in the Notman Studio for sixty-five years. In 1955 it was given by Charles Notman (William's youngest son) to McGill University and now, still in near-new condition, it is one of the highlights of the Notman Photographic Archives.

Notman's announced intention of creating a composite photograph of the colourful event evoked a quick and angry response from a young photographer and fellow Scot, James Inglis, who had already begun to make a composite of the same subject.

In *The Montreal Daily Witness* February 26, 1870, Inglis placed the following challenge:

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## VICTORIA SKATING RINK

A notice having appeared in the public papers that another Picture of the Fancy Dress Entertainment at the Skating Rink is to be made in opposition to the one I had arranged for with the Director, and which has been in progress the last five weeks, and the manner of carrying out of which originated with me, I take this opportunity of coming before the citizens of Montreal in an open contest for the Laurels so long and deservedly worn by my competitor, who advertises to make the Picture in opposition to mine. I offer a Challenge, of which the following may be the terms: - That the merits of the respective Pictures may be decided upon not later than the 12th of May next, by three Judges chosen by the Directors of the Rink - the losing party to pay a forfeit of \$200, one-half to be given to the Montreal General Hospital, the other to the Protestant House of Industry.

JAMES INGLIS

N.B. - Ladies and Gentlemen intending to appear in costume or as spectators on the occasion, will confer a favor by calling at my Rooms at the earliest possible date, where every facility will be afforded for dressing, etc, etc.

J.I.

Notman ignored the challenge, content perhaps with the free publicity. The claim by Inglis that he was the originator of the technique was, of course, untrue (if indeed that is what he meant when he wrote "the manner of carrying out of which originated with me"). The technique for making composite photographs had been practiced in Europe and North America for a number of years.

But why it took so long for Notman to make his first major composite is a puzzling question.

2. For biographies of Notman's senior photographers and painters see Stanley G. Triggs, *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Coach House Press, 1985).

William Notman opened his studio in Montreal in 1856 and during the intervening fourteen years, so far as we know, made only a few simple paste-ups containing one and two figures. He was certainly aware of the technique, for in 1856, the year Notman left Scotland, George Washington Wilson completed a large oval-shaped composition of head-and-shoulders portraits entitled "One Hundred and One Citizens of Aberdeen"<sup>3</sup>, the first of a series of seven that received wide distribution. Wilson is credited as being the first to use the technique of cutting and pasting separate photographs to form a group. Farther south in 1863 London photographer Leopold F. Manley put together a death-bed scene of Prince Albert, with the royal mourners and physicians in attendance.<sup>4</sup> The same year Notman acquired a carte-de-visite-sized copy of Manley's photograph, which he in turn copied and then offered prints for sale to the Montreal public<sup>5</sup>. A day or two later Notman copied a recently published engraving entitled "The Kings and Queens of England"<sup>6</sup>. This was a composition similar to Wilson's Aberdeen portraits but produced by engraving likenesses from old images of the monarchs. In Canada too, a few photographers had been producing composite photographs, at least occasionally. Notman must also have

been aware of the work of David Octavius Hill in Scotland, who between 1843 and 1866 produced a very large (11' 4" x 5') painting containing portraits of 470 clergymen entitled "The First General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, Signing the Act of Separation and the Deed of Demission, at Tanfield, Edinburgh, May 23, 1843". Although the work was purely a painting, it was based on photographic portraits taken by Robert Adamson, a young Aberdeen photographer from St. Andrews, under Hill's direction. This image, as a documentary record of the clergymen who took part in the Dissent of 1843 when the Scottish Free Church was formed, was very much in tune with Notman's later composite photographs in which he sought to record important and colourful activities and events in a realistic yet dramatic style.

Near London, in the small town of Wolverhampton in the 1850s, the swede Oscar Gustave Rejlander was experimenting with multiple-image photographs in quite a different way and working towards a different end. His goal was to create a "work of art" that would compete with the finest paintings of the day.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by Raphaël's Renaissance painting "The School of Athens" he produced an allegorical image he called "The Two Ways of Life". The technique Rejlander employed was one using multiple exposures rather than paste-up or montage. The print was made from thirty separate negatives: sixteen were required for the twenty-seven figures and fourteen

to create the background. The negatives were exposed one at a time on a single sheet of photographic paper, with the areas of the paper he didn't want exposed masked out. The resulting image, completed in 1857, was both acclaimed and criticized. The criticism, however, was not directed at Rejlander's expertise in blending together the images from so many negatives, for all agreed that the work was finely executed. Some critics were strongly opposed to the use of nude models while others felt he failed in his attempt to challenge painting, simply because he tried to create "art" by imitating another medium rather than by exploring the inherent capabilities of photography.

At about the same time H. P. Robinson, a London photographer who was also very caught up in the need to gain eminence in the "art world", began creating genre scenes by the paste-up technique. "Fading Away", made in 1858 from five separate negatives, was the first of a number he composed over the next twenty years. However, none were so elaborate as Rejlander's "Two Ways". When faster emulsions became available Robinson eventually gave up this method of making scenes saying that combination printing should be reserved for those effects that could not be obtained on one negative.<sup>8</sup>

The representation of groups is seen early in European art and became common in religious themes in frescoes and tapestries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Italy. Especially noted for their realistic portrayal of group figures in representations of events were the artists Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. Group paintings proliferated and became increasingly secular in subject matter over the next few centuries. Rembrandt created three of the most famous, works that are more than collections of figures but true group portraits, revealing something of the personality and inner soul of each person. Rembrandt's groups became models for his contemporaries and later artists who practised the genre of group portraiture, painting the figures in dynamic poses with varying degrees of success. It wasn't until the invention of photography that large groups of people were arranged in very stiff and formal rows, staring robot-like straight at the viewer. The blame for this degenerate form of group portraiture is usually cast upon the slow emulsion speeds requiring long exposure times. But a contributing factor was the recognition by photographers of the expedience of arranging the clients on tiers of benches so as to get a clear view of each person with the resulting efficient turnover of commissions and quick sales.

3. Rodger Taylor, *George Washington Wilson* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1981).

4. The only known original copy is a carte-de-visite print which was in an heirloom album given to the Notman Photographic Archives by a Montreal family. Due to the faded condition of the print, it is difficult to tell whether it is a painting using photographs as a guide or a combination of photography and painting.

5. Notman number 6338-I, Death of Prince Albert.

6. Notman number 6323-I, Kings and Queens of England.

7. Helmut Gernsheim, *The History of Photography* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), pp. 246-247.

8. Ibid, pp. 247-248.

In the days of long exposure times owing to slow emulsion speeds, there were always several people in each photograph of a large group who moved during the exposure or had an unpleasant expression or were partially hidden behind the person in front. The intention of photographers engaging in composite photographs was to alleviate these problems and at the same time offer the customers photographs more true to life.

The technical limitations of photography also made it impossible to photograph a group of three or four hundred people dressed in snowshoe costumes on Mount Royal, to supply, transport and arrange posing stands for each one, and expect to create a dynamic composition with everybody in sharp focus and looking their best.

But in the controlled conditions of the studio, where each person was photographed individually with a posing stand at the head to prevent movement, a clear portrait with a pleasing expression and a good pose was guaranteed. Photographing even a small group, such as a family, indoors in a single picture was impossible. Most families wanted their own living-room or parlour as a setting for the family group, but the exposure to record the room would have been up to an hour long at least. Therefore a

photograph of the room only was taken, enlarged, and the figures added later.

This paste-up technique had other advantages as well. It was a convenient way of including the whole family in the picture even if one or two members were not present at the time. A letter would be sent off to a brother or sister overseas, for instance, asking for a portrait of a certain size and pose. On arrival, it would be cut out and pasted into the group. Even death couldn't prevent the grandparents from being represented in the composite. A suitable head-and-shoulders portrait was copied and pasted into the composite. Nothing so macabre as including the deceased person in the group was contemplated, but rather placing the image on the wall behind the group with a frame painted around it. This was a procedure long practised by European painters.

The Victorian fascination with photographs stemmed from the ability of the camera to record accurately in minute detail the subject at which it was pointed, a fascination reflected in the style photographers chose to use and in the sort of photographs the public chose to buy. They wanted their photographs to show "accuracy", "perfect definition", "naturalness" and "a good likeness". The addition of colour to composites and to studio portraits in general was another manifestation of

the public's desire for realism. Notman's artists with a few deft strokes of the brush could transform a photograph from sepia tone to living colour, not by changing it into a painting, but by preserving the sense of reality imbued in a good photograph.

The earliest known Notman composite, made in 1864, is a simple thing depicting a brother and sister sitting under a spreading tree in a pastoral setting.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by a few more of equal simplicity. But it wasn't until 1870 with the creation of the "Skating Carnival" composite that Notman paid any serious attention to this medium. In Montreal, from April to August 1870, *The Gazette* carried advertisements inviting interested citizens to see the composite and the enlarged coloured version on display in his studio. ~~*The Canadian Illustrated News*~~ of May 21, 1870 featured a large Leggotype (a halftone reproduction invented by Charles Leggo) of the picture accompanied by enthusiastic comments. (Extract 1)

Encouraged by the public reception and the brisk sales of copies of the "Skating Carnival" produced in several sizes, Notman began to include composites as part of his regular service to customers. In the next five years alone, his Montreal studio produced several dozen composites with subjects as widely diverse as the military, families, schools, actors, clergymen and sports groups including snowshoeing, rowing,

camping, skating, lacrosse, football and cricket. The most ambitious of these early projects was a composite made in 1875 depicting "The First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada", which included over 450 figures. From then on, composites containing 300 to 450 portraits and of greater complexity in composition and design became commonplace.

## Technical Aspects

The making of a composite photograph was a complex operation requiring the close co-operation of artists and photographers under the supervision of William Notman. The artists, in consultation with the photographers, worked out a composition even to the individual posing of some of the figures, and prepared a sketch as a guide for the photographers. To achieve the correct perspective the photographers had to compute the distance from the camera at which each individual would be photographed and the size of the negative that would be used. Figures in the foreground of a large composite might be taken on an 8 x 10 plate while middle and background figures, which must appear smaller, were taken on 5 x 7 and 4 x 5 plates respectively. If the camera distance was off by more than a foot the figure in the composite would look too big or too small.

It was not only the artists and photographers who co-operated in making a composite. Once the sketch had been prepared the entire staff, which in peak years numbered as many as fifty-five, was involved and their workload increased according to the number of people included in the composite. After the sketch had been made, the next step was to make appointments with everyone who was to appear in the

scene. In the case of a small family composite of ten or twelve people this was a simple task, but when dealing with a large group of three or four hundred it was formidable. For some composites, notices were placed in the newspapers or announcements made at club meetings requesting people's participation.

Photographers' assistants, whose duty it was to carry freshly-prepared wet plates in their light-tight plate holders to the camera room and return to the darkroom with the exposed plates for development, would have to hustle with the increased number of portraits being taken. Once developed, washed and dried, each negative had a number and the name of the sitter inscribed in the emulsion; the same information was written on the envelope, then entered in the two record books. The ladies of the printing room would be standing at the printing racks at the south-facing windows more frequently and for longer periods, eking out the last rays of the sun to print the pictures and fretting on dull and rainy days when printing times were so slow. The accountants and the staff of the mailroom were equally affected by the increased number of people visiting the studio, as were the dressing-room attendants who assisted the ladies in changing into their costumes to be worn in the photograph.

After the prints were washed and dried, they were passed on to the art

department where the figures were carefully cut out with fine scissors and pasted onto a previously prepared background. For composites depicting an indoor scene such as a family group or a gymnastic team, an actual photograph of the room was usually taken. But for outdoor groups a painting was almost always made for the background, as it was easier to arrange the figures in a natural way with a believable perspective in a landscape especially prepared for the particular group. In any case, once the figures were in place, a certain amount of touching up with a sepia wash was done to achieve a better blend of figures to background. This usually entailed no more than adding a few shadows being cast by the figures, extending blades of grass to blend feet into the landscape so the figures would not appear to be floating, and adding some highlights to reflections on water or to the ice or snow in winter scenes. Indoor scenes would be similarly treated; deepening of shadows made by architectural detail, addition of shadows from figures and furniture, and placing a few highlights on chandeliers, mirrors and polished furniture were basic techniques. At this point, though the picture was complete, the job was not yet done. The composite went back to the photographers to be copied on various size negatives, and then sent on to the framing room where it was placed under glass in an appropriate frame.

All this extra work paid off. The composites were tremendously popular, and

created a lively interest beyond the members of the group depicted. Scenes of public events such as The Skating Carnival, Curling in Canada, or the Investiture of the Marquis of Lorne, and outings of the Montreal Snow Shoe Club were popular items and much sought-after by the general public. Pictures such as those of the snowshoe clubs had over three hundred people in them, and since each person had been photographed separately, a good likeness of each was guaranteed and therefore sales of prints, perhaps in several sizes, were assured to all in the group. Copy prints of the composite were available in several sizes to suit the pocket book and taste of each customer. These were contact prints from glass negatives of the following sizes: 4 x 5, 5 x 7, 8 x 10, 11 x 14, 14 x 17, 16 x 20 and 18 x 22. Customers generally ordered the larger sizes fully framed and placed the medium sizes in albums; the smallest, when not bought for albums, were slipped into envelopes for mailing to friends and relations to show off the dynamic and colourful activities of their city.

9. Copy Niven's two children, 1864, Notman number 13159-I; Willie Niven, 1864, Notman number 12322-I; Mrs. Niven and baby, 1864, Notman number 1332-I.

## A Well-earned Celebrity

When we look at composite photographs today it is in some instances with a certain amusement at what we may perceive as a naive idea, mixed with a sense of wonder at the magnitude of the project and admiration of the craftsmanship and artistry required to bring it to a successful completion. A few of the composites such as the school group of young girls sitting in stuffed chairs on the grassy slopes of Mount Royal have an almost surreal effect; in others, an occasional figure may seem to float in air, or appear just a little too small or too large.

Yet, at the time composite photographs were created, they were accepted by the enthusiastic public as factual, as true renditions of a group or an event. The previously cited article in the *Canadian Illustrated News* of May 21, 1870 describes with enthusiasm the life-like quality of Notman's new composite photograph of "The Skating Carnival".

In London, England in the January 17, 1870 edition of *The Photographic News*, the realism and artistic merit perceived in a tiny copy of the same Skating Carnival composite are extolled at greater length. (Extract 2)

A few years later the Halifax *Morning Chronicle* of 1879 also stresses the accuracy of another large composite showing over four hundred and fifty people attending the investiture of the Marquis of Lorne the previous December. (Extract 3)

Notman deserved the praise, for he and his staff took great pains to produce an artistic but truly representative image within the bounds of the technical limitations of photography at that time. True perspective was striven for and usually achieved. Consistent lighting of the subjects is another strong point of Notman's composites. An early composite, "The Rendez-vous" of 1872, depicts a group of snowshoers who have just completed a nocturnal tramp over Mount Royal to Lumkin's Hotel. Most of the individuals in this large group were back-lit when they were photographed in the studio, making it appear in the finished composite that the snowshoers are lit by the moon which is seen over the crest of the mountain, while the members of the group sitting around the bonfire in the foreground appear to be lit by its warm glow.

In 1868 Notman expanded his operations to Ottawa and Toronto, establishing a studio in each city on the same lines as the one in Montreal and each managed by one of his personally trained staff. He opened a studio in Halifax in 1869 and one in St.

John in 1872, and later made further expansions into New England. Notman had been photographing students and professors of schools and colleges in Montreal ever since he opened his business, and by 1869 had ventured into the lucrative American school market at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, followed closely by Harvard and Yale. Eventually he had contracts to photograph the students, campus and buildings of Dartmouth, Princeton, Lafayette, Andover, Smith, Holyoake, Trinity, Amherst as well as others.

To photograph the students, Notman set up temporary studios in one of the college buildings or erected a prefabricated studio on the campus. One of these was made entirely of wrought iron and glass. After the photographs were taken, the processed negatives were sent to Montreal where prints were made and mounted on cards or placed into albums, which were then sent to the student customers at the various colleges. This involvement in school photography led to the opening in Boston, in 1878, of Notman's first permanent studio in the U.S.A. at No. 4 Park Street. This was followed by two more in Boston; one each in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Newport, Rhode Island, and Albany, New York; and several seasonal studios in resort towns such as Poland Springs, Maine and Saratoga, New York. These American studios were incorporated under the name of the Notman Photographic Company. Through all this

expansion, Notman's Montreal studio remained the centre of his business and creative endeavours. Just as the negatives for regular portraits of students in the United States were sent to Montreal for printing, so too were those for the composites from the American studios as well as from the branch studios in Canada, at least most of them for many years.

Notman's first school composite was made in 1871 for Miss McIntosh of Bute House, a "young ladies' seminary" which stood on Sherbrooke Street at the corner of McGill College Avenue in Montreal. In 1873 Notman portrayed the Bute House girls skating on Mount Royal, now Beaver Lake, and composed a summer scene of the students of a St. Albans, Vermont girls' school in fancy dress under a fanciful outdoor setting. The last known school composite of the decade was a dramatically lit indoor view showing the young men of the Collège de Montréal, the oldest boys' school in Montreal, which was and is operated by the Sulpician Fathers of the Grand Séminaire.

Although Notman had been photographing the professors, students and campus of McGill College in Montreal since about 1860, it wasn't until 1876 that the first known composite of McGill students was made. In the 1880s and '90s Notman made many composites of McGill students, and once the medallion composites were introduced in the 1890s the Notman studio produced, it seems, a composite for every graduating class in all departments up to 1935 when the studio was sold.

Medallion composites were made up of close-cropped head-and-shoulders portraits which were trimmed to a standard oval shape and glued side by side on a large plain card with minimal art work added. These quickly became popular with students, corporations and sports clubs because they were so much cheaper to make. An added appeal, especially to students, was the inherently democratic nature of the style: there were no stars, all portraits were the same size, and no key was needed since the names were printed underneath each portrait.

The earliest medallion composite in the Notman Photographic Archives is "The Dominion Cabinet" made in 1871, containing fourteen portraits of politicians and the Governor General. The owners of four Montreal retail stores commissioned it as an advertising gimmick, and had the names of their establishments worked into the surrounding design and printed on the front and back of the card. No other composites of the medallion style by Notman are known until 1889, when a large-format design containing twenty-five portraits of "The Officers of the Victoria Rifles of Canada" was produced. The next year a larger one containing fifty-six portraits of graduating students and their professors was made for the École de Médecine et de Chirurgie de Montréal, Université Victoria. The largest medallion composite ever made by the Notman firm contained 680 portraits of members of the Montreal Board of

Trade.

Charles Notman said in an interview in 1955 that making appointments for such a great number was so difficult that though it was begun in 1891 before William Notman's death, it wasn't completed until two years later.<sup>10</sup> From then on medallion composites were in the ascendancy, quickly replacing the realistic scenes in popularity. From a strictly photographic point of view medallion composites are quite dull. The figures lack setting, a place to work or play. There is no grand sweep of snow-covered trees, no swift-flowing river or sumptuous drawing-room to set off the figures and bring them to life in a setting natural to them. On the other hand, medallion composites, when looked at purely from the standpoint of graphic design, are frequently exciting visual experiences. There often is a sense of seeing multiple views of the same subject, the class of students becoming the symbolic "student" seen from different angles. This illusion, together with the visual dynamics of the closely packed shapes that seem to project a sense of alternating tension and movement, sometimes recalls the effects seen in early Cubist paintings. A similar sense of multiple viewing and tension and release is conveyed by some of the huge snowshoe-club composites created much earlier by Notman in 1877, 1880 and 1884.

Few of the traditional realistic composite scenes were made over the next twenty years in the Notman studios. The last two of any note, made in 1914 and 1915, were in a more spare and poster-like style and attributed to C. W. Dennis. The earlier of the two is a moonlit winter scene showing the Montreal Snow Shoe Club. The second, in the Notman Photographic Archives, is entitled "Les Commissaires d'Écoles de la ville de Maisonneuve. 1914."

An interesting composite of 1901, which may represent a transitional phase, combines both realistic and medallion styles. In the centre of the composite is a small print, itself a composite, composed of the professors of the Montreal campus of the Université Laval grouped around a table as if in a meeting. The print is surrounded by a mass of medallion portraits of the graduating students. This technique was occasionally used earlier, as in the City Council composites of 1885 and 1888 and the Bicycle Club of 1885.

10. *Weekend Picture Magazine*, Vol 3 No. 52, 1953, "Pioneer Picture-Takers", David Willock, 1953, pp. 14 - 16. In this article, based on an interview with Charles Notman, it is stated that the Montreal Board of Trade composite of 1893 contained 1,800 portraits. Charles was 85 years old at the time.

## Inimitable Notman

William Notman was an internationally known and respected photographer, and his photographs were widely disseminated. The many studios he established under his name, which were operated in compliance with his goals and standards by staff trained in the Montreal studio, established Notman as a creator of fine portraits and landscapes in the minds of people in the major cities of eastern Canada and New England. His customers treasured their family albums filled with Notman portraits, and each year the photographing of thousands of graduating college students was a major event on campus. Notman's landscapes were sold not only in all his studios but also in book stores, hotels and railway stations in the eastern U.S.A. and across Canada. His photographs of all types, portraits, landscapes, architecture and composites, were in frequent demand for magazine and newspaper publication in London, New York, Philadelphia, Montreal and other centres. They were also published as posters and calendars, and as illustrations in text books, tourist guides and pictorial collections, and were produced as lantern and stereographs.

Notman sent his photographs to all the major international exhibitions in Europe and North America and to many local ones as well, where they received the

highest praise from critics and top prizes from the judges. The items that attracted by far the most attention in these exhibitions, because of their uniqueness, were the composite photographs. A rarity they were in truth, for few other photographers engaged in the practice and fewer still produced composites with anything like the skill exhibited by the Notman team. Their huge size alone was enough to confirm the uniqueness of the ones Notman sent to various exhibitions.

However, other photographers were making composite photographs in Europe and a few in the States and in Canada. The Ewing Photo Company in Toronto recreated the first general assembly of the Canadian Presbyterian Church held in Knox Church in June 1870, containing a crowd of close to four hundred individuals. Jocia Bruce worked for eight years in Notman's Montreal studio and another seven at Notman & Fraser in Toronto. When he opened his own portrait studio in 1875 he made some fine composites including a very dramatic action sailboat scene which at present is part of the decor in the Toronto Yacht Club. And beginning in 1881, on the far western edge of the country in Victoria, Hannah Maynard was creating intriguing images composed of sometimes thousands of young children and babies.<sup>11</sup> These composites, like Notman's, were commercial ventures made on commission, or on speculation, as Hannah Maynard's were. But no one made composites on so grand a

scale and in such great numbers and over such a long period of time as did Notman. Likewise he was the only photographer to turn composite-making into a grand commercial enterprise. By offering an exceptional product, he knew he would sell at least one print to every person in a group of three or four hundred. He might sell two or three prints or even more to each sitter: one for the wall, one for the album, one for the wallet, and perhaps several cabinet-sized copies for mailing to relatives and friends. On top of that, the individual portraits of each sitter showing the studio background were available for sale.

Notman was not trying to emulate or compete with painting as Rejlander and Robinson had done earlier. Nor was he using photographs as a guide to creating paintings as David Octavius Hill had done in Edinburgh. Notman's intention was to create highly saleable realistic group photographs in the only way it could be done at that time; by combining the technique of cutting and pasting photographs with the more fluid techniques of painting. And people accepted this, they knew why they were made this way, they themselves had sat in the studio with a posing stand at the back of their heads. They understood that these were photographs, and they bought them by the thousands.

Of course it is not known whether or not commerce was the primary motivation behind Notman's initial entry into the field of composite photographs. He must also have considered the publicity these astonishing productions would bring, and it was a chance for the art department to demonstrate their skills in a productive way in co-operation with the photographic staff. But it was certainly the economic opportunity inherent in the popular appeal of composite photographs that caused Notman to promote this branch of his studios' output in an unprecedented manner. No matter what his motivation, Notman blended commercial appeal, artistic vision and documentary accuracy in an elegant and convincing manner, and the prints received such a wide dispersion that many of them have survived intact, bringing us important, fascinating and beautiful records of the past.

11. Claire Weissman Wilks, *The Magic Box. The Eccentric Genius of Hannah Maynard* (Toronto: Exile Editions Ltd., 1980).

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**EXTRACT 1:**

THE CARNIVAL AT THE SKATING RINK.

Notman's picture of the Carnival at the Skating Rink has attracted so much attention and become so well-known in Montreal, that it appears desirable to reproduce it in these pages for the benefit of our readers at a distance. The Leggotype copy does not of course give an adequate idea of the beauty of the original, but it serves to show the arrangement and grouping of the scene, and the variety of costumes and characters partaking in the entertainment. The original has been on view at Mr. Notman's studio for the past few weeks. It is a beautifully coloured photograph, and is exhibited in a way that sets it off to great advantage. The picture is placed in a recess draped with crimson curtains, and light is thrown upon it from above by a concealed lamp and reflector. The room, in which the picture is exhibited being dark, the effect of the brilliant colours and light is magical, and on using a powerful magnifying glass the deception is complete. The visitor has before him the scene exactly as viewed from the gallery of the Skating Rink.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Canadian Illustrated News, Montreal, May 21, 1870

### **EXTRACT 2:**

..... Mr. Notman also sends us perhaps the most perfectly composed group we have ever seen produced by photography..... The scene is a most animated one, consisting of some hundreds of figures in fancy costume engaged in skating in a "rink" gaily decorated for the occasion. Of these figures nearly two hundred are perfectly made out and the features perfectly traceable, although the picture does not exceed nine by seven inches..... The great beauty and the great difficulty of the case is the admirable composition and grouping, so as to secure harmony, ease, and naturalness. The arrangement of men and women, and the suitable juxtaposition of costumes, the choice of position and occupation – some figures skating, some in conversation, some making salutation, some standing and looking on – but all varied and all natural; the admirable perspective, the perfect definition, and the perfect light and shade and fine relief, all tend to produce a group such as we have not before seen produced by photography.....<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Photographic News*, London, January 17, 1870

### **EXTRACT 3:**

.....After six months of labour the desired result has been obtained and the picture is now on exhibition at Mr. Notman's studio in this city. We do not exaggerate when we pronounce it the finest work of the kind ever seen here..... while in regard to the accuracy of the likenesses it challenges admiration, every familiar face being recognized at a glance. Altogether, Mr. Notman has produced a picture worthy of the historic occasion, and in the highest degree creditable to his establishment...<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Morning Chronicle, Halifax, 1879