

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL COSTUMES AT THE TOPLEY STUDIO IN OTTAWA: 1876-1906

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Opening a photography studio across from the Canadian Parliamentary Buildings in 1867, the year of Confederation, was a brilliant move on the part of photographer and businessman William Notman (1826-1891). Sending the young apprentice from his already successful Montreal studio, William James Topley (1845-1930), to run the Ottawa studio in January 1868 may have been just as clever an idea, as he went on to help the studio achieve great success and become a prolific photographer. Because of its location and the renown of the Notman name, the studio attracted local and visiting politicians from the time it opened. By 1872 Topley had become the proprietor of the studio, and had continued success under his name.¹ The studio “took photographs of all the prime ministers from Sir John A. Macdonald to William Lyon Mackenzie King and of the governors general from Baron Lisgar to Lord Grey,”² and was also popular with the general public, photographing about 2300 sitters a year by 1872.

The collection of photographs taken at the Topley studio was acquired by Library and Archives Canada in 1936 and includes approximately 150,000 glass plate negatives.³ The collection also contains the albums of studio proof., Holding anywhere from 4 to 20 proofs per page, they index all the photos taken at the studio. The single portraits in the fonds are simple and straightforward. They often depict the subject wearing everyday dress, sitting, and framed from the waist up. However, among these images are a large number of portraits featuring subjects in elaborate and frankly weird costume, which are collected here for this exhibition.

These costumes are indicative of some elements of the Victorian society they sprang from. While the values of Victorian society called for modest and restrictive clothing and behaviour in daily life, the costume balls and other events for which these photos were taken were an opportunity for a respectable deviation from the norm. As a result, “these portraits reveal a great deal about Victorian morals, values, taboos and tastes regarding clothing, bodies and social behaviour. While the basic appeal of fancy dress lay in its semblance of permissiveness and escapism, this sort of amusement was controlled by a complex set of moral restrictions.”⁴



Captain A. Wise in his skating costume

Topley Studio, February 1889

Photograph, 162 x 119mm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3822029

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayl

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The portrait of Captain A. Wise in his skating costume immediately strikes the viewer because of the strange combination of the cowboy costume, ice skates, and the painted backdrop. The painted backdrop “was one of the most ubiquitous of 19th century studio props.”⁵ While it has been difficult to find any biographical information about Captain Wise, there are some interior photographs taken by the Topley studio of a Mr. Wise’s residence taken one year after this skating portrait. A Captain Wise also served in the militia of Canada during the military operations in the Northwest Territories in 1885.⁶



Miss Skead

Topley Studio, March 1877

Photograph, 5 x 7 inches approx.

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3508803

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3508803&back_url=%28%29

There are a number of other portraits of subjects in costumes and ice skates by Topley as the costumed skating carnival or ball was a popular activity at the time.⁷ The portrait of Miss Skead from 1877 is another example, however this time the subject is not wearing a costume, and appears to mimic the action of skating. Miss Skead appears in many photos of the Topley fonds from this era, probably because of her father James Skead's (1817-1884) political career in Ottawa, which spanned 1861-1881. He served on the city council, and later the legislative council, eventually being called to senate.⁸ Her skating costume appears to be a simpler version of the traditional one described in *Godey's Lady's Book & Magazine* from January 1892, which was finished with many beaver fur accents.⁹



Labelled 'Miss McBain and Miss MacPherson'

Topley Studio, February 1889

Photograph, 4.25 x 6.5 in approx.

Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN 3457195

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayitem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3457195&back_url=%28%29



Mademoiselles Allan costumed in “Tennis” and “Winter” Costumes

Notman & Sandham, 1881.

Silver albumen print, 14 x 10 cm.

McCord Museum II-60125.1

http://www.musee-mccord.qc.ca/scripts/printtour.php?tourID=VQ_P2_9_EN&Lang=2

One very peculiar costume can be seen in the image incorrectly entitled *Miss McBain and Miss MacPherson*, taken at the Topley Studio in February 1889. There are no other images online with these names, so it would be difficult to ascertain which name belongs to this subject. Although it only vaguely appears as if she is wearing ice skates in the photo, it was most likely taken at the same time and for the same event as the picture of Captain Wise in his cowboy costume, evidenced by the date and backdrop. This subject's costume has a consistent tennis motif not only in the patterns on her garments, but also from the fact that she appears to have every piece of equipment needed for a game of tennis wrapped around her lower body. However, although this costume may seem unusual to us, "In the late 19th century, fancy dress representing a concept like a game or a season was common, especially for women."¹⁰ An 1881 image from the Notman studio in the McCord archives has another woman wearing a similar 'tennis' costume.



Mrs. Ritchie in Costume

Topley Studio, March 1876

Photograph, 165 x 112mm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3200046

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayitem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3200046

A similar image is that of Mrs. Ritchie, taken at the Topley studio in March 1876. Her costume seems to embody the game of chess, from the pattern that goes down the front of her dress, to the embellishments around her collar, her necklace, and her headdress, which appear to be made out of chess pieces. There are a large number of costume images in the Topley fonds from February and March 1876. The costume in this photo was perhaps only photographed after a ball on February 23, 1876. Held by the Governor General, the Earl of Dufferin, it was the “largest fancy costume ball held in this country to date... (which) accomplished Dufferin’s aim of putting Ottawa on the map as a capital city with prestige.”¹¹ The Topley images undoubtedly played a part in this promotion.



Agar Adamson costumed as Napoléon Bonaparte, Victorian Era Ball held in Toronto

Topley Studio, 1898

Photograph, 164 x 121mm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3200066

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3200066&back_url=%28%29



Napoleon I at Fontainebleau, 31 March, 1814

Paul Delaroche (1797-1856), 1840

Oil on canvas, 1.81m x 1.37m

Musée de l'Armée - Paris

http://www.napoleon.org/en/essential_napoleon/key_painting/files/delaroche_napo_fontainebleau.asp

In the Topley fonds is a large number of portraits with subjects in historical costumes. One of the larger costume balls happened in Ottawa in March 1876, some images from which appear in this exhibition. Another was held in Toronto in 1898, and the Topley studio, which offered a type of mobile service, photographed Agar Adamson (1865-1929) in his costume for this event.

Adamson, born to a military family, was known as a *bon vivant* in Toronto until marrying his wife the year after this photo was taken, and heading to South Africa as part of Canada's military operations.¹² In this portrait, not only is Adamson dressed as Napolon Bonaparte, he mimics the pose of Napoleon in Paul Delaroche's painting *Napoleon I at Fontainebleau, 31 March, 1814* of 1845. This type of costume itself was a popular one, as the book *Masquerade and Carnival: Their Customs and Costumes* from 1892 evidences, giving instructions on how to make a French general costume that is also suitable for Napoleon Bonaparte: "The coat is of brown cloth heavily trimmed with gold, and is crossed by a gold sword-band, while a sash of red, white and blue encircles the waist. Brown hat trimmed with gold braid and a tiny tri-colored rosette."¹³



J.A. Lowell, M.P., dressed as M. De Chavigny in the group representing the “Foundation of Montreal and Settlement of Surrounding District, 1641-1670” at an historical costume ball.

Topley Studio, February 1896

Photograph, 25.3 x 20.2 cm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3200067

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3200067

While the pose and costume made for Agar Adamson's Napoleon is very recognizable, another portrait from a historical costume ball from 1896 shows how very specific the themes in these events could be. The portrait in question shows Member of Parliament James A. Lowell (1849-1900), representing his group's theme of "Foundation of Montreal and settlement of surrounding district, 1641-1670." He is dressed as M. de Chavigny, a 17th century seigneur.



Misses O. Lemoine and W. Gormully in costume.

Topley Studio, January 1906

Photograph, 164 x 119 mm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3200153

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3200153

The portraits selected from the Topley fonds for this exhibition are listed as taken for costume balls. This example above does not seem to be from one of these events, which makes it even more peculiar than it already is. It features Misses O. Lemoine and W. Gormully in doll or child costumes and was taken at the Topley studio in 1906. Each girl holds a doll and poses or pouts like a child. There were costumed events that had fairy tale or nursery rhyme themes, and these costumes could have related to the Mother Goose nursery rhyme *Cry, Baby, Cry*. These costumes are quite revealing for a social event in Victorian Canada. A creature that looks like a dog but seems too small to be one stands in front of the figure on the left, making the girls look like giants. By the time this picture was taken, Topley had had for ten years his own eponymous studio, independent of Notman's. The following year, his son, William deCourcy Topley took over the studio. DeCourcy Topley initially offered the Topley collection to what was then called the Public Archives of Canada. His initial \$25,000 offer was rejected and he was eventually paid \$3000 for the 150,000 glass plates in 1936.¹⁴



Pauline Lemoine in Costume

William James Topley, January 1906

Photograph, 14.1 x 9.8cm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3200042

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayitem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3200042&rec_nbr_list=3200042

Another photograph, clearly from the same session, credits Miss Pauline Lemoine as the girl in the picture instead of Miss O. Lemoine. It is also dated January 1906 and attributed to William Topley, although it is actually part of the Ethel Chadwick fonds. The information on the fonds lists this *carte de visite* as a significant finding, so it is likely that Miss Lemoine and Mrs. Chadwick were friends who exchanged these portraits. The *carte de visite*, very popular in the late 19th century, was meant to be traded with friends and visitors.¹⁵

The presence of these photographs in the National Portrait Gallery of Canada provides us with a clear historical picture of the type of work that the Topley studio produced at the time. It also records a specific juncture in Victorian-era society in Canada, which shows the precarious balance of frivolity and propriety that was characteristic of the social conventions of the time.

NOTES

¹ Collard 3.

² Rodger.

³ Weaver 3.

⁴ Cooper.

⁵ Weaver 10.

⁶ Dominion of Canada 2.

⁷ Cooper.

⁸ Gillis and Gillis.

⁹ *Godey's Lady's Book & Magazine.*

¹⁰ Cooper.

¹¹ Cooper.

¹² Gwyn.

¹³ Wandle.

¹⁴ Rodger.

¹⁵ Gernsheim 55.

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LESSON PLAN

My proposed lesson plan is an activity that would work best for students from grades 4-6 but could easily be adapted for other age groups. It involves a creative activity in the spirit of costumes like the one in the photograph labelled “Miss McBain and Miss MacPherson.”

After showing the students the exhibition, the instructor would split them into groups and give each group an item from a list of “costume concepts.” These concepts could be things such as tennis or winter. The students would then make a list of things that could be adapted to create a costume that represents a concept. If there are more artistic students in the group, they could draw a composite of what all these elements might look like. Some possible concepts could include:

1. Sports: tennis, baseball, hockey, running, yoga, etc.
2. Activities: breakfast, dinner, vacation, birthdays, etc.
3. Seasons: autumn, winter, spring and summer.
4. Personal: their family, their school, etc.

This activity not only promotes interest in history and anthropology, but also encourages abstract thought in a primary school environment.