1857 – John F. Mann.

What we see in this image

This front facing ¾ length hand-coloured daguerreotype portrait shows surveyor John Frederick Mann, aged 38, in a seated pose with one arm resting on a section of turned wooden balustrading, set against a plain backdrop. Though the sitter wears no wedding band, it probably dates from around the time of his marriage in April 1857. It was taken at the Sydney studio of Freeman Bros (William and James) – the Gallery of Photographic Art – located at 231 George Street.

In this image, Mr Mann exhibits the relaxed, life-like attitude for which Freeman portraits were renowned. He is shown wearing an unmatched ensemble of suiting components characteristic of the 1850s, comprising a well-cut, narrow-sleeved, double-breasted frock coat of fine dark wool with a notched collar and wide cuffs, light tweed trousers and a single-breasted waistcoat in pale silk, figured with a small scale [printed or woven] all-over pattern, with two welted pockets and a self-covered button fastening, worn over a fine white linen shirt with a peaked collar and a dark silk neck cloth tied in a loose bow.

He wears his side-parted, light brown hair brushed back from his forehead and curling over his ears; his beard, side-whiskers and moustache are not overly groomed but neatly and naturalistically trimmed.

What we know about this image

John Frederick Mann (1819-1907), explorer, surveyor, sketcher and amateur photographer, was born in London on 16 December 1819, the fourth son of Major-General Mann, Royal Engineers. Educated at Gibraltar in Spain where his father was stationed,

he entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in August 1834; he later abandoned his military career in favour of working on the Trigonometrical Survey of Britain. In 1841 he sailed to Sydney in the Palestine arriving on 6 March 1842. In October 1846, Mann joined Leichhardt's second expedition as second-in-command.

On 20 March 1848, Mann was appointed as a surveyor in the Department of the Surveyor-General, under Sir Thomas Mitchell, and posted to the Counties of Murray, St Vincent and Argyle; on 16 April 1857 he married Camilla Victoria (1835-1863), third daughter of Sir Thomas Mitchell, at St Mark's Church, Darling Point.

The couple travelled from Sydney to Southampton on SS Oneida, 4 June-25 Aug. 1857, and then through England and Scotland, returning to Australia in the Livingstone (Jan-April 1859). (MLMSS 327/BOX 1 /1: J. F. Mann diary, 16 April 1857 – 10 September 1862)

During the family's time in England, Mann took photography lessons from a 'Mr Rolph'. Advertisements appearing in the Sydney Morning Herald from August 1857 advised potential enthusiasts that amateurs would be 'supplied with the necessary apparatus and chemicals' and 'Instruction…in every branch of the art' of collodion photography at Freeman Brother's 231 George Street studio. Camilla Mann's youngest sister, Blanche Mitchell (1843–1869) recorded in her diary on 24 August 1858 that she had: 'Walked out to Milly's… Watched John prepare his photographic apparatus, making the bath solution, which is composed of distilled water, nitrate of silver and alcohol …' Thurs 6th September [1858] '… Saw John taking views with his camera. At present they are not very good owing to defective collodion, but time will improve it much'. (MLMSS 1611 /Item 2)] No surviving photographs by John Mann are known.

After Camilla's death in childbirth in 1863, Mann resigned

from permanent employment as a NSW government surveyor, thereafter working as a contract surveyor into the 1880s. Mann never remarried, raising his two sons and one daughter with the aid of an English nurse; he died at his Neutral Bay home, ‘Carthona’, on 7 September 1907.

PHOTOGRAPHER

William Freeman (1809-1895) arrived in Sydney in April 1853, and worked first at John Wheeler’s Sydney Photographic Rooms in Bridge Street, where his brother James (1814-1870) joined him in October 1854; the studio later moved to 231 George Street. By early 1855, the company was known simply as Freeman Brothers. Many of Sydney’s wealthy citizens became regular visitors, choosing Freeman’s ‘Gallery of Photographic Art’ as the place to have their daguerreotype portraits made.

Sydney newspapers reported that portraits by Freeman Bros ‘appear to be distinguished by the naturalness of their expression…They also have a method of colouring that is very pleasing…’ (Sydney Morning Herald, Sat 13 Jan 1855, p.3). The Empire, on 6 Jan 1855, recorded that a portrait of Governor-General Sir Charles FitzRoy was deemed ‘an exceedingly correct likeness’ and ‘highly creditable to the artists’.

By mid-1855, Freemans’ was offering portraiture by the new, faster collodiotype process, popularised under the American ‘ambrotype’ brand name and brought to Sydney by James Freeman in 1854. Invention of the ‘wet-plate collodion’ process in 1851 enabled a photographic image to adhere to a glass plate for the first time. This special type of collodion process produced a glass photonegative which, when placed against a dark background, created the optical illusion of a positive image without the reflective issues of the daguerreotype, and could also be coloured.

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Creator
Freeman Brothers
Inscription
Gilt stamp on red morocco case: ‘Freeman Brothers’ with kangaroo and emu crest.
Medium
Photograph
Background
none
Reference
Open 1
Open 2
Open 3