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Jeff Rosenheim Talks Civil War Photography at FotoFocus

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On Friday evening at Cincinnati's FotoFocus Biennial, Metropolitan Museum photography curator Jeff L. Rosenheim took the stage of the city's historic Memorial Hall to talk about photography during the Civil War — what he called “a watershed moment in American culture.” Indeed, as he pointed out, by the time rumblings of the war began in the mid-19th century, photographic technology had only been available to the public for about 20 years; though residents of urban areas likely had some familiarity with the medium, it was still relatively novel in smaller towns — and as such, it became wildly popular. Rosenheim delved into historical records and archives to collect over 200 such images, which he then displayed last year at the Met and concurrently published in his book, “Shadow and Substance: Photography and the American Civil War.”

While this surge in the medium's popularity was in large part to document the horrors of war — whether corpses splayed in battlefields or hasty on-site medical procedures — one of the most prominent uses of the camera was apparently as a maker of portraits, and especially cheap, quick self-commissioned portraits, about the size of an iPhone screen. “They were ubiquitous in their era as cellphone pictures are in ours,” Rosenheim said. “They went to war with their loved ones in their pockets.”

In them, subjects posed themselves with new, bulky uniforms or proudly displayed weapons, always staring straight into the camera, to what Rosenheim dubbed a “talismanic” effect. “Even in the most formulaic of Civil War portraits, I see a kind of spectacular [quality], a kind of honesty that reveals so much,” he said, pointing out that you can tell immediately which of the oft-anonymous young men have yet to “see the elephant” of combat and which have already seen too much.

By examining these early images, heightened by their emergence in a time of strife and bloodshed, we can see the beginnings of our desire to be in and to create photographs. For example, one especially remarkable print zooms out to show a photography tent in which these portraits were taken, complete with its skylight — but just on the edge of the frame, it also captures a man walking out of the tent, who is looking at a just-developed image of himself, possibly for the first time. “If we want to understand what photography is doing today,” Rosenheim said, “we need to start looking at carefully at what it was doing then, because it was a cataclysmic moment.”

— *Anneliese Cooper (@DawnDavenport)*

(Photo: Anneliese Cooper)

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