



*How a Photographic Image
Venerated to This Day Was Created
Thirty Years before the Invention of Photography
or
How Two Lovers Were Unable
to Find Each Other*

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There are many accounts in literature concerning two lovers who simply do not come together. Some are not allowed (Romeo and Juliet), while others have been affected by magic (Orlando Furioso and Angelica). There are those whose love is so intense that the beloved may not even exist (Petrarch and Laura), or will only be met in paradise (Dante and Beatrice). And then there are still others who are joined in death out of sheer affection (Heinrich von Kleist and Henriette Vogel), or those for whom the object of love is simply too difficult to reach, being, in the end, his or her own ego (Narcissus).

And then, sometimes, what is described in literature is more harmless than what actually happens in reality.

At the end of the eighteenth century in Tyrol there lived two young people who loved each other, but who were forever to remain apart. The boy was from the wealthy city of Innsbruck, and the girl resided just a short walk away from the village of Absam. Georg Johannes Stebenbauer, the son of the painter Johannes Friedhelm Stebenbauer, was nineteen years old when he first saw eighteen-year-old Rosina Bucher at a well during a trip to Absam with his father.

Father and son had been taking a hike to indulge in picturesque nature studies, as, at the time, it was fashionable to draw and paint from nature. Rulers were demanding more and more landscapes so as to be able to recognize their surroundings, while at the same time augment their perspectives with a bit of Italian flair. And so, father and son were busy honing their skills to meet just such a demand.

The two were sitting near the well and looking at the mountains of the northern ridge that stood between the farmhouses when Georg Johannes suddenly saw a stunningly beautiful girl. He could see a long brown skirt and a dark green stole, a piece of white blouse sticking out at the top of her neck, and a glimpse of hair (which actually could only be imagined, as it was covered by a modest headscarf that framed her petite, but still peasant, face) as she went to the well to scoop up some water.

She noticed the young stranger's gaze, tilted her head, formed a slight smile, and turned away before a blush crossed her face. "Who are these two men? No doubt they must be from Innsbruck. Recently town folk have been coming to our village ever more often. What are they doing with paper across their legs? Are they drawing? How handsome the younger one is! How properly he turned his eyes away from me when they met mine." With these thoughts in mind she drew her two jugs of water from the well, and then went back, blushing more and more, towards her home. She briefly looked back at them one last time before turning to the path that led to her house. She saw the beautiful boy look away again and knew that he had been looking at her. Indeed, he was sitting in a place that conveniently allowed his eyes to accompany her all the way up to her house.

Once back in Innsbruck Georg Johannes tried to revive the phenomenon at the well by creating many drawings from memory.

His longing to see her again grew stronger and stronger, and so a few days later he went back to Absam. He walked in circles three times, and the fourth time he positioned himself very close to the well. He began to draw the path where she had last gone, and as he looked up to get perspective with his pen, saw her coming down the road.

At first she hesitated. "There he is again, just as I anticipated. But now I do not want to go—will it be chaste to appear before him? And what is he doing there? I just want to fetch some water. Will I manage to ignore him?"

Once there, he stood beside her and she him. He spoke to her so decently and in such a mannered way that she was indeed able to remain chaste and nevertheless exchange a few words with him.

She usually came when the sun had reached the rear of the church, she told him. Now he knew how to meet her, and so began to thoroughly exploit the opportunity.

It was only on his fifth or sixth visit that he dared to ask if he could make a painting of her. "Well, it would be inappropriate, but you can so long as I do not notice." He paused for a moment to think, and then asked if he could indeed capture her reflection. He would hold a reflective paper against her window; all she would have to do was look at it without moving, just as she so often did when looking dreamily out of the same window. The image, reflected there on the paper, could then be claimed as his own.

Together with a friend, Georg Johannes had long been making experiments with chemical liquids that reacted to light. This time, however, he wanted to try something new. They had already managed to capture small images using light on paper. But could they create a mirror image on a piece of paper?

On the afternoon of January 17, 1797, when no one was at home as had been planned, he stood in front of her window with a strong piece of paper that had been soaked in refined and caustic substances. He attached the paper to the fourth upper part of the right panel of the 7 x 5" crown glass window and smoothed it out. Then he waited.

For a long time, sewing needles in hand as always, she looked dreamily into her own reflection. A quarter of an hour, a half an hour, or a whole?

He took the nearly dried paper away, wiped the glass meticulously clean, and looked at her one last time through the window.

Then he hurried home, washed the paper with various materials, rubbed it with an acrid fixing paste, and hung it up to dry, waiting for the moment when her face would appear. But nothing happened.

After a week of waiting in which he did nothing but try in different ways to wrest the image from the paper, his courage finally failed him. Rubbed away from all the treatments it had undergone, the paper grew thinner. There was nothing left to do. He decided to go upon his way to Absam to confess his failure.

The village was atremble. Religious people hurried back and forth, talking excitedly. Georg asked a nun of Perpetual Adoration from a nearby cloister what was going on.

She looked at him in surprise and asked how he could not know. Here, on the seventeenth day of the month, just over a week ago, the Virgin Mary, our dearest Virgin, Mother of the Lord Jesus, had appeared in the house of the Buchers late in the afternoon, around four o' clock. The highly gifted Rosina was now on everyone's lips. Rosina, the chosen one, at first had not believed it and had tried to wipe the image off of the window, but before it was barely gone, it reappeared. Passing peasants saw her attempts and immediately realized that it was Mary who had appeared there. The priest they summoned confirmed that this was indeed the pure image of the Blessed Virgin and knelt down before it. The ever-so-modest Rosina could not believe it and denied it. Again and again she repeated "It cannot be—no, it is not so." She simply could not believe the Holy Virgin had appeared to her. Everyone understood her confusion and expressed great compassion; after all, she was the one to whom the sacred image had appeared.

The agitated nun wanted to move on, but Georg Johannes kept her a bit longer and breathlessly asked what was going to happen to the girl. She told him how at the convent there was much debate as to who should get her. Five claims had been sent to the bishop, all requesting to receive the chosen one, for each convent wanted to adorn itself with the one who had been chosen to see the mother of God. Then the nun pulled herself away and hurried off.

Georg Johannes went back to Innsbruck in despair. What was he supposed to do? If he recounted what had really happened, no one would believe him and he would be accused of heresy, pride, and deception. How would he ever see her again? The guilt of having condemned her to being immured behind the high monastery walls through his actions tormented him. How could he ever be happy again? A gnawing pain began to eat away at him.

Six months later Georg Johannes left Innsbruck. Evidence suggests that he went to Augsburg, but that he did not stay there for long. Then his path becomes difficult to follow. It is said that he appeared in St. Petersburg, but it is also reported that he set sail for America from Nantes. In any event, after Augsburg, all traces of him disappear.

The glass with the etched image, however, was brought to Innsbruck for examination. It was inspected by the high clergy, analyzed by enlightened scientists, washed, scraped, and treated with alkali. And yet, nothing happened. The image remained. No one had ever experienced such a thing, and it was decided that, depending on one's belief, it could be seen as either a curiosity or a wondrous appearance. After much discussion they decided that it should not be made into a big deal, but simply recognized as a regional miracle.

In a solemn procession, the image of Rosina was taken into the Baroque village church in Absam. Today the village church is a sanctuary where the image can be seen to the right side of the altar and worshipped or simply admired.

At first there was no tear in the Venerable Maria's eye. This only appeared three years later. On the day Rosina was married to Jesus, they took away her worldly name and after a perpetual vow she assumed the name Maria Walburga and renounced the world. And upon that very day a tear appeared in her image, and it was immediately considered to be the sign of yet another great miracle.

Literature:

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