‘Your’s Truly’: The Creation and Consumption of Commercial Tourist Portraits

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Abstract: There is a long history of tourists substantiating their visits to a destination through the purchase of portraits that show them against a backdrop of the local setting. While its initial expression in the form of paintings was confined to the social elite who could afford to commission and sit for an artist, the advent of photography democratized the process, enabling the aspiring middle classes to partake in the custom. While some tourists took their own photographs, the majority relied on local photographers who offered their services in studio and open-air settings. Smaller-sized images, such as Cartes de Visite (2.5" × 4") and Cabinet Cards (4.5" × 6.5"), could be enclosed with letters to family and social circles, thus providing proof of visits while the voyage was still in progress. The development of picture postcards as a postal item in the 1890s, coupled with the manufacture of precut photographic paper with preprinted address fields, revolutionized tourist portraiture. Photographers could set-up outside tourist attractions, where tourists could have their portrait taken with formulaic framing against a canonized background. Efficient production flows meant that tourists could pick up their printed portraits, ready for mailing within an hour. Using examples of San Marc’s Basilica in Venice (Italy), as well as Ostrich Farms in California and Florida (U.S.A.), this paper contextualizes the production and consumption of such commercial tourist portraits as objects of social validation. It discusses their ability to situate the visitor in locales iconic of the destination, substantiating their presence and validating their experience. Given the speed of production (within an hour) and their ability to be immediately mailed through the global postal network, such images were the precursor of the modern-day ‘selfies’ posted on social media.

Keywords: image interpretation and analysis; pictorial evidence; heritage studies; historic preservation; image manipulation; postcard production; pigeons; ostrich farms; Venice; Los Angeles

1. Introduction

Ever since the advent of commercial photography, photographs have been inseparably intertwined with the tourist experience of the places visited.

This paper intersects three aspects of tourist photography: the photography of tourist attractions (‘destination photography’) by tourists, as well as by marketing bodies; the photography of the tourists themselves (‘tourist portraits’); and the dissemination of tourist imagery by postcards. At present, much, if not most, of the discussion in the literature centers on the nexus between tourism and photography, with many studies examining the camera-enabled gaze of the tourist toward the ‘other,’ be it people or places visited [1–9]. The second area of research is the production of destination images and perpetuation of clichés by marketing bodies, and the subsequent dissemination of this imagery in promotional materials and in the form of picture postcards [10–16]. Additional work has discussed the interrelationship of this ‘official’ and sanctioned imagery with the images taken by the tourists in imitation or as purposeful contra-points [3].

One of the lacunae in the literature is the examination of the photography of the tourists themselves, situating themselves in the visited space. While there is a growing body of work that considers one expression of this in the digital space, in the form of...
‘selfies,’ no works have been carried out into the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century imagery that situated the visitors against iconic aspects to the locations visited. This paper attempts to fill some of that gap by discussing the iconography, creation/production, and dissemination of such images. Images from Venice, as well as from tourist attractions in California, are drawn on to exemplify the discussion.

1.1. Early Destination Photography

Early commercial photography saw the production of large full-plate (203 × 252 mm) images, usually albumen prints. These images featured items of interest, such as vistas, major buildings, or significant statuary and other works of art. As these images were in high demand, they were often produced by rival photographers in a similar framing (Figures 1 and 2). By 1900, cheap personal photography was being popularized by Kodak and other camera manufacturers, with glass plate and especially film negatives. Significantly, this democratized photography, by shifting the gaze from the canonized vision of local photographers to an individual, personalized framing. Essentially, personal photography empowered individuals to take their own imagery and thus create their own narrative, which they could readily, but selectively, disseminate via prints.

To some extent, tourists would emulate the preexisting framing, being informed by imagery they had been exposed to. As noted by Crompton, the tourist image reflects ‘the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination’ [14]. John Urry, in his seminal work ‘The Tourist Gaze,’ argued that there is a ‘closed circle of representation’ where photographs taken by tourists both reflect and inform destination images [9]. While some authors have shown that this circle of representation can manifest itself more loosely [17], cum grano salis, it seems to hold true [4–8,15].

Figure 1. Albumen prints of tourist attractions. ‘Panorama dal loyd,’ full-plate albumen print (184 × 239 mm), photograph by Paolo Salviati (Venice) ca. 1885 (author’s collection).
Figure 2. Albumen prints of tourist attractions. (A) ‘Faciata della Basilica di San Marco,’ full-plate albumen print (195 × 250 mm), photograph by Paolo Salviati (Venice) ca. 1875; (B) ‘Chiesa San Marco’ full-plate albumen print (195 × 250 mm), photograph by Carlo Naya (Venice) (both author’s collection).
More recently, particular emphasis has been placed on the ways in which tourists photograph local people in tourist destinations [1,2], as well as the reverse gaze where subjects photograph the tourists photographing them [18].

1.2. Early Tourist Portraits

The Grand Tour, taking in the sights, sites, and cultural experiences of France, Switzerland, and Germany, culminating in a prolonged stay in Italy, was a standard feature of the education of the European elite, in particular, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century [19,20]. Apart from buying antiques, such as coins and pieces of marble sculptures, as an effective proof of voyage, many travelers commissioned portraits painted by local or international artists. Examples are ‘Goethe in the Roman Campagna’ or ‘Anna Amalia in Naples,’ both by Tischbein [21], or the plethora of portraits by Pompeo Batoni [22] and Rosalba Carriera [23].

While initially confined to the young men (and, to a lesser degree, young women) of the European elite, the development of the railways coupled with the emergence of an educated upper middle class, as well as nouvelle riche entrepreneurs, the numbers of people embarking on the Grand Tour, or reduced versions thereof, increased during the late nineteenth century. Their demands for tourist portraiture could be met by the new medium of photography.

Comparatively little work has been carried out, however, looking at how tourists portray themselves in the destination settings [24]. Exceptions are Odgen’s examination of paintings and photography at Yosemite National Park in California, where she notes the existence of tourists posing in front of scenic attractions, effectively proving that they had visited the sights and sites [25].

Early commercial photography of visitors at tourist locations saw the production of large full-plate (203 × 252 mm) images, usually albumen prints. While the subjects were mainly portraits shot in studios or views of prominent buildings or statues, there are also portraits shot in the open air (Figures 3A and 4A). Invented in 1854, Cartes de Visite, which became common by the 1860s, were an advancement for portraiture as a process or a moving lens allowed to capture multiple images on the same glass-plate negative, thus cutting down on development and printing costs. A thin paper photograph, commonly an albumen print, was mounted on a thicker paper card of the same size as a traditional calling card (hence, Carte de Visite), measuring usually 2.5 by 4 inches (64 × 100 mm). Personal and family portraits were exchanged as gifts, with photographers also distributing portraits of persons of local or national fame [26]. From the 1870s onwards, the Cartes de Visite were gradually replaced by the larger 4.5” × 6.5” (115 × 165 mm) Cabinet Cards (Figure 3B).

Full-plate prints, Cartes de Visite, and Cabinet Cards would be purchased from professional photographers and then mailed or handed to family and friends.

The process was both expensive and laborious, resulting in few photographs taken. Photographers could maximize profits by selling multiple copies of full-plate prints as generic images (presumably with the knowledge of the subject) (Figures 3A and 4A), as well as cropped versions as cabinet cards (Figure 3B). Finally, after the development of printed postcards, the same image could find another use as a mass-produced item (Figure 3C).

1.3. Postcard Production

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century postcard production represents a relationship between the consumer and the publisher. In this paper, we are only concerned with picture postcards using photographic images as their basis. A large body of scholarship has deconstructed the imagery shown on the picture postcards, especially those of colonial and exotic locales such as Tahiti [27,28], Senegal [29], New Caledonia [30], French Indo-China [31], Korea [11], Arabia [32], Mexico [33], and German Micronesia [34].
Figure 3. Multiple use of a single image showing a pair of women posing with pigeons in front of San Marco, Venice. 
(A) Full-plate (200 × 250 mm) albumen print, unknown photographer, ca. 1880; (B) cabinet card (115 × 165 mm; albumen print, 95 × 147 mm) by photo studio E.& J. D. (Venice), mid-1880s; (C) printed postcard published by Römmler & Jonas (Dresden, Germany), postmarked Venice 28 March 1902 (all author’s collection).
Figure 4. Multiple use of a single image showing a couple of women posing with pigeons in front of San Marco, Venice. (A) Full-plate (199 × 250 mm) albumen print, unknown photographer, ca. 1880; (B) printed postcard published by Ferdinando Gobbato (Venice), postmarked Venice 15 April–March 1901 (both author’s collection).

The image selection and framing of postcards, through their stereotyping of landscapes, points of view, infrastructure, and developments, convey political messages to the viewer, messages the audience of the time would have well understood [30,35,36].

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century postcards have often been reproduced in pictorial compilations with a sense of nostalgia [37–41]. Yet, these cards can be productively used as historic evidence (albeit framed by the ideological mindset of the photographer), in particular, to interpret the spatial arrangement and appearance of buildings, as well as the chronology of construction activities [42]. Rogan classified photographic picture cards as topographical cards and differentiated between local cards and tourist cards [43]. The former ‘depicted various themes of special interest or immediate importance to local consumers, i.e., the inhabitants of a region, a town, or a village,’ with typical motifs being ‘buildings, streets, markets and fairs, shops, or even the interiors of shops.’ Typical motifs on tourist cards, according to Rogan, were ‘landscape views, snowy mountains, waterfalls, fjords, glaciers, churches, cathedrals, castles, hotels and passenger ships, as well as folkloric themes like national costumes, folk dance scenes, peasants harvesting, etc.’ [43].
In addition, there are advertising cards, produced by proprietors of establishments, either as custom productions or in the form of overprints of commercially produced cards, as well as promotional cards produced by travel companies [44,45]. Land sale agencies, as well as land developers, also used postcards as a means of advertising their developments, usually by printing advetorial text on part of the message field [44].

Not surprisingly, soon, a collecting craze for postcards developed, which followed the craze of collecting Cartes de Visite. Specialized albums were produced, where these cards could be stored and admired in one’s social circle without the need to handle them [46].

Corkery and Bailey argued that postcards are a good indicator of a visitor’s interest, as the sending of a postcard image requires an active selection of the image by the tourist [12]. This certainly holds true in localities where a range of postcards are available. In their study of two postcard series from Boston (1977 and 1990), the authors demonstrated how images, in order to construct a meaning, are carefully selected and framed—and on occasion, edited. In addition to variations in the same scene under different lighting conditions and viewing angles, the newer postcard series has an increased range of subject matter to satisfy the increasingly diverse needs and interests of the visitors [12]. Other studies have shown overt and covert messaging in industry-sponsored cards [47,48].

This paper examines tourist postcards where the tourists themselves are the focus, photographed in front of sites visited or taking part in theme park rides. Here, tourists are not merely the consumers of imagery but also the subjects and actors. In essence, the images discussed here are the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century precursors of the modern-day ‘selfies.’

In order to adequately exemplify aspects of the nature and variety of the tourist portraits, this paper is unashamedly rich in images.

1.4. Real Photo Postcards

Germany led the way in true picture postcard production, when in 1885, the German Postal service permitted the production and mailing of picture postcards without imprinted stamps. Other countries soon followed suit [45]. As noted earlier, by 1900, cheap personal photography had been popularized by Kodak and other manufacturers, with glass plate and film negatives. This empowered individuals to take their own imagery and thus create their own narrative, which could be readily disseminated via prints enclosed in letters. Photopaper manufacturers, Kodak included, capitalized on this trend and sold photopaper that was not only pre-cut to postcard size but also already carried on the non-emulsion (verso) side a partition between message and address fields and the obligatory lines for the latter (Figure 5) [45]. Often also, a field identifying the preferred location for the postage stamp was indicated. Early books written on amateur photography, such as Wall and Snowden Ward [49] or Tennant [50], gave directions on how amateurs could produce small-run real photo cards.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on a mixed-methods methodology, drawing on standard historic and documentary research [51], material culture studies [52], and image interpretation [45,53]. It builds on a body of literature that uses picture postcards as artifacts and evidence to interrogate motivations of producer, consumer, and recipient [11,25,31,33,34,39]. The primary dataset used in this study was picture postcards, and specifically, real photo postcards produced by photographic studios and roving photographers at tourist sites.

As nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century postcards are collectible items, they are widely offered in online auction houses such as eBay, Delcampe, and Yahoo Japan, as well as retailers such as Amazon and Etsy. Image aggregator sites such as PicClick (http://picclick.com) allow ready access to such images and, through this access, are provided to the original listings that may also show the verso sides of the cards. An additional valuable tool to locate digitized images is the image matching software provided as part of the search function of Google images (https://images.google.com).
Figure 5. Verso of preprinted photopaper: (A–D) Italian Cards; (E–H) U.S. American Cards.
The Venice images examined in this paper are a small subset of images extracted from online sources and compiled in digital or physical form (purchases) by the author between October 2017 and August 2021, while the images of Ostrich Farms were compiled between April and August 2021. The selection of images depicted in this paper are in possession of the author unless stated otherwise. These images were selected as they are typical representatives of these images and because they exemplify the various points made.

3. Examples of Tourist Photography

To exemplify the underlying patterns of image production and consumption, this paper draws on two case studies, one of international renown and significance (Venice) and one of local or regional importance (Ostrich Farms in California). While both are examples of tourist photography in outdoor settings, the example of the photography in Venice is that of an organically grown custom in a public space, whereas the Californian example is one of value (and income) adding to a designed tourist attraction. This discussion is augmented by examples of novelty tourist photography in photographic studios that formed amusement parks.

3.1. Example 1: Venice

The wealthy bourgeoisie and nouveau riche of the United States and the United Kingdom would travel to Central and Southern Europe, embarking on a late-nineteenth-century version of The Grand Tour \cite{54,55}. Similar travels to Italy were mandatory for the bourgeoisie and aspiring, educated middle classes of Germany, France, and Eastern Europe. Among the locations that were de rigueur for the tour of Italy, Venice ranked highest, possibly even above Rome. Apart from the canals with their gondolas or the Rialto Bridge, one of the most stereotyped tourist impressions of Venice are the pigeons of St. Mark’s square.

3.1.1. Context

Setting aside the contested origin of the pigeon population in Venice, it is indisputable that until the end the Venetian Republic in 1797, the pigeons were fed publicly at St. Marc’s at 2 pm. The incoming French government installed by Napoleon discontinued the practice. Thereafter, it seems, the pigeons were left to their own devices, but were fed by private citizens, later funded through formal legacy bequests \cite{56}. By the 1860s, the daily feeding of the pigeons had become a spectacle observed by the visitor as part of their stay in the town \cite{57,58}.

The ‘bible’ of the educated traveler of the nineteenth century was ‘the Baedeker,’ a series of guidebooks produced by the German publisher of the same name. The volume on northern Italy notes the following on the origin of the pigeons:

‘A large flock of pigeons enlivens the Piazza. In accordance with an old custom, pigeons were sent out from the vestibule of San Marco on Palm Sunday, and these nested in the nooks and crannies of the surrounding buildings. Down to the close of the republic they were fed at public expense, but they are now dependent on private charity. Towards evening they perch in great numbers under the arches of Saint Mark’s.’ \cite{59}.

By 1895, when the tenth edition of the Baedeker was issued, the entry contains additional text with a direct reference to pigeon food being offered for sale to tourists. Moreover, there are now photographers on hand to capture the moment:

‘Grain and peas may be bought for the pigeons from various loungers in the Piazza, and those whose ambition leans in that direction may have themselves photographed with the pigeons clustering round them’ \cite{60}.

The visitor had morphed from the observer of a spectacle to a key actor perpetuating an action that, by that time, had become disembodied from its original meaning. Photography allowed this to be documented. Rather than buying commercially printed postcards, or
3.1.2. Production and Consumption of Tourist Photography in Venice

The early days of tourist photography are defined by albumen prints either full-plate or pasted onto cabinet cards with a preprinted frame and associated, pertinent text, such as ‘Le piccione di S. Marco’ (the pigeons of San Marco) (Figure 3B). These are quite uncommon within the current market for historic photography, which attests to the fact that they were only produced for a small, comparatively affluent clientele. This is not surprising, as the early full-plate albumen photographs of people in outdoor settings required an elaborate setup and a certain amount of preparation. Examples are of people photographed in the middle of the piazza (Figure 6), as well as standing next to one of the flag poles, with the main entrance to the Basilica di San Marco and its famed mosaic of the Last Judgment in the background (Figure 7). This framing was soon to become the standard (Figures 8 and 9).

Interested individuals who did not wish to indulge in the spectacle of having their photo taken in public could do so in the privacy of a studio, replete with stuffed pigeons. Given their size, cabinet cards could be readily mailed to one’s social circle. Not surprisingly, then, on occasion, multiple copies still exist, such as in the case of the studio portrait of Beth D. Kimberly (Figure 10), a copy of which is also held by the J. Paul Getty Museum [61] along with another similar portrait of a different young woman [62].
The development of picture postcards and the advent of photographic papers with a preprinted address field on the back revolutionized tourist portraits as it made them much more affordable. It is not surprising, then, that a large number of such cards exist.

The Australian travel and short story writer James Francis Dwyer noted in 1922 that ‘I have sat upon the Square till I think I have a personal acquaintance with every fat pigeon.’ Dwyer also mentioned an American tourist with whom he struck up a conversation and who had done all the tourist things that were de rigeur, including ‘I have been photographed feeding these here pigeons’ [63].

This changed dramatically with the introduction of cheaper and stronger photopapers, which then led to the development of real photo postcards. A selection of these commercial productions is shown in Figures 11–13. Photographers would offer to photograph individuals, couples (Figures 11A and 13E), and groups (Figure 13B). Couples were offered comprehensive sets, being photographed as a pair and individually (Figure 11A–C), while individuals were offered different poses (Figure 11D–E). The subjects were international tourists, with mailed cards known from countries throughout Europe, to North and South America, as well as Australia (destinations based on addresses and postmarks). In addi-

Figure 7. Example of an outdoor portrait of a German couple. Full-plate albumen print (203 × 225 mm). Unknown photographer, 1880s (author’s collection).
tion, there were, of course, also domestic tourists, as documented by the Catholic Curate (Figure 13D). Images of French sailors (Figure 13E) or the soldier of the German Afrika Corps (Figure 13F) attest to the wide appeal these photographs had, cutting across all social strata. People were photographed through the seasons from summer (Figure 12A) to winter (Figure 12B), wearing casual (Figure 12D) to formal dress (Figure 11D), including traditional attire such as a kimono (Figure 13C).

Figure 8. Example of an outdoor portrait of a seated woman. Full-plate albumen print (203 × 225 mm). Photograph by Antonio Genova (Venice), 1880s (author’s collection).

The bases of the cast iron flagpoles were favored locations, not only because of the background of the entrance gates to the Basilica San Marco, but also, presumably, because the subjects could stand elevated above the flock of pigeons at their feet. A number of these personalized post cards show smiling, if not positively beaming, women, while the facial expressions of many of the men accompanying them make it quite clear that they would rather be doing anything else but this.
Figure 9. Example of an outdoor portrait of a young woman feeding pigeons. Full-plate albumen print (203 × 225 mm). Photograph by Carlo Naya, 1880s (author’s collection).

Figure 10. Example of a studio portrait of Beth D. Kimberly. Cabinet card (117 × 165 mm; albumen print, 100 × 144 mm) by photo studio Giovanni Contarini (Venice), early 1890s (author’s collection).
Figure 11. Examples of commercial tourist photography in front of San Marco, Venice. (A–C,F) Undated; (D,E) 29 March 1923 (author’s collection).

The photographers operating on San Mark’s square were licensed with the Venice Municipal government, as were the sellers of bird seed to feed the pigeons. A number of companies are on record (based on imprints on some of the images), but no chronology has so far been established.
Figure 12. Examples of commercial tourist photography in front of San Marco, Venice. (A–C,E,F) undated, except (D) 29 September 1910 (author’s collection).

Some images have the commercial photographers in the background (Figures 14 and 15). A photo taken in the first decade of the twentieth century shows two photographers at work (Figure 14). While the person in the white suit (Figure 14A) is most likely the client, the person with the dark suit and hat standing behind the other photographer (Figure 14C) is most likely the image handler who would ferry the exposed negative(s) to the store to be developed.
In a photograph taken in the 1960s, we note the photographer with the black light cloth over his head, while an assistant provides the subject (in white dress) with additional bird food to liven up the resulting image (Figure 15). The tourists were then given a docket (Figures 16 and 17) that they could take to the photographer’s store to view (and hopefully purchase) the image.
An image taken in the early 1980s shows the tourist photography both on a commercial level (Figure 18, top left) and a private level (center, right). The small A-frame advertising sign shows the range of available options. This image also nicely illustrated the operation, comprised of the photographer, the tout (next to the photographer), and the image handler (with envelope under his arm) who would ferry the exposed negative to the store to be developed and printed within the hour.
Some of the images were clearly ‘rushed’ jobs, as evidenced by the failing fixatives used in some images, affecting long-term preservations. A good example of this is an image dating to the 1970s (Figure 13B).
The presence of touts, which would have been present but are not evident in the earlier images, indicates the competitive nature of the various photographic studies that were permitted to operate on the square.

Usually, tourists would buy a quantity of prints to be mailed to family and friends, either as postcards, or enclosed in letters. On occasion, tourists would purchase the negative as well (Figure 19). Surviving examples of these are very rare, suggesting that such purchases were a very uncommon occurrence.
Figure 19. Example of a glass plate negative sold by the photographer ‘San Marco Gruppo A’ to the tourist (negative sleeve dated 12 November 1931). (A) Exterior of paper sleeve; (B) inverted scan of the glass plate negative; (C) interior of paper sleeve with extracted glass plate negative (author’s collection).

3.2. Example 2: Ostrich Farms in California

The second example of commercial tourist portraits comes from commercial enterprises in the U.S.A. In this example, the photography was not carried out in the public
domain, but on private premises and formed part of the suite of attractions that were offered.

3.2.1. Context

Ladies’ fashion as worn at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century saw a proliferation of hats ornamented with exotic feathers (see the hat worn in Figure 11F). On the one hand, this led to the decimation of bird populations in the wild, such as birds of paradise in Papua New Guinea [64] or of seabirds on the islands of Micronesia [65,66]. The millinery fashion, as well as the trend to wear feather boas in the 1920, further strengthened an already established market for the formalized farming of ostriches (for their leather) in South Africa and other countries [67–69].

To service the demand in the United States, a number of Ostrich farms operated in California, Arizona, Arkansas, Texas, and Florida from the mid-1880s [70,71]. The protagonist was Edwin Cawston, who in 1886 founded Cawston’s Ostrich Farm at Norwalk, but moved it to South Pasadena from 1895, where it operated until 1935 [72–74]. While the breeding and subsequent exploitation of ostriches for their feathers and, to a lesser degree, for leather, was the primary business objective, Cawston was shrewd enough to realize that opening up the farm to visitors, allowing them to view the exotic birds while also touring the operations, would increase sales.

His South Pasadena operation attracted many tourists as it was strategically located along the Los Angeles Electric Railway line connecting Los Angeles with the Mount Lowe Railway in Pasadena. Cawston offered tourists a substantive sales room of products (hats, stolas, and handbags) and augmented that with tours of the operations. A special studio (Figure 20) provided the opportunity for tourists to be photographed mounted on an ostrich (Figure 21) or ride ostrich-drawn carts Figures 22 and 23A–C).

A rival venue, also offering ostrich-drawn cart rides, opened in 1906 at East Lake Park (later named Lincoln Park) in Los Angeles (Figure 23D–F). Established by Francis Earnest, the Los Angeles Ostrich Farm operated until 1953 [75]. Cawston’s success in California also spawned copy-cat operations in Arizona and in Jacksonville, FL [76]. The Florida operation also doubled as a tourist attraction and thus also copied Cawston’s ostrich-cart rides (Figure 23G,H), but also added a race track where some birds could be raced by riders [76]. The farm advertised both the riding and cart-driving of ostriches daily [77].

Figure 20. The photographic sales outlet and darkroom at Cawston’s Ostrich Farm, South Pasadena. Section of a card showing a tourist driving an ostrich drawn cart. Dated 15 February 1923 (author’s collection).
3.2.2. Production and Consumption of Tourist Photography in California

Rather than it being a stand-alone business, as in the case of the photographers at Venice, the tourist photography at the ostrich farms was only one facet of the commercial enterprise, together with sales of finished products, the rides, and the guided tours. It appears that, at least for a short period, Cawston simply subcontracted out the photography to M.A. Wesner of Pasadena (Figure 24), but that he later, sometime after World War I, took over his own production setting up a separate building to act as a sales outlet and darkroom. A large sign above the verandah advertised ‘Your photo sitting on/driving an ostrich’ broadcast the photo opportunities on offer, while a showcase presented examples of the finished works (Figure 20). Cawston offered the tourist two photo opportunities: to be photographed sitting on and holding the reins of an ostrich-drawn cart (Figures 21 and 23) and to be photographed sitting on an ostrich that was taxidermically preserved for that purpose (Figure 22) and which, weather permitting, would be set-up ‘on location’ [78]. In keeping with the custom, and clothing, of the times, there are types of portrayals: women (and some men) riding ‘side saddle’ and men and children sitting astride. For the photography, the base of the taxidermy mount was obscured with sand [78]. The demand for this kind of photograph was such that Cawston went through at least four taxidermy mounts [78].

While the Los Angeles Ostrich Farm, as well as a farm in Jacksonville (Florida), offered to photograph tourists riding ostrich-drawn carts, only the Florida operation offered to photograph visitors sitting on a taxidermically preserved ostrich. This, however, was only conducted in a studio setting—as opposed to the ‘realistic’ open-air scenario offered by Cawston—where the support structure of the mount was quite obvious [78].

The tourist photography offered at these venues comprised set-pieces, with the majority of images taken at the same locations and the same angles [78]. The majority of the imagery shot at the ostrich farms seem to be of women and children, with a considerable proportion of children [78].

4. Discussion

The postcard industry found one of its most profitable outlets in the emerging mass tourism, and picture postcards are inseparably intertwined with the tourist experience of the places visited. The visual and verbal imagery in travel brochures and guidebooks/coffee table books set-up expectations among the tourists as to the sites and sights to be seen and experienced, which are then re-‘broadcast’ to the tourists’ friends and family through postcards being mailed [17]. The receipt of these postcards by the addressee authenticated the sender’s presence at the attraction visited [79]. More often than not, the messages were short, and the card frequently merely served as proof of itinerary [80]. The latter practice authenticated the traveler, but also fed the public’s desire to collect postcards of desirable locations.

The publication of real photo postcards, where even small print runs could be produced economically, allowed protagonists to develop and consolidate their own narrative of events [33], effectively broadcasting it to a wider audience. As shown in the preceding pages, visitor attractions serviced that market by establishing staged photo opportunities that placed visitors into the action, authenticating their visit to recipients. Other examples are images taken by roving photographers at popular parks, capturing images of visitors next to exotic plants printed with varied expanses of writing space (Figure 25).
Figure 21. Young girl sitting on a taxidermically preserved ostrich. Ostrich B. Note the mount base for the taxidermy that has not been obscured by gravel (source: Alamy).

Figure 22. Two women posing in a buggy ‘drawn’ by a taxidermically preserved ostrich. Note the mount base for the taxidermy that has not been obscured by gravel (source: Alamy).
Figure 23. Tourists riding carts drawn by ostriches. (A–C) Los Angeles Ostrich Farm; (D–F) Cawston’s Ostrich Farm, South Pasadena; (G,H) Ostrich Farm, Jacksonville, FL.
As such cards would have been sent to existing social networks, the selection and framing of such images can be interpreted as an early example of narrow casting that has attained much attention in the age of (modern) social media. Consequently, academic research has often eschewed the use of such real photo cards as evidence except when discussing imagery as tools for social control [81].

Commercial tourist portraits, such as those taken in Venice, situate the visitor against a background that is iconic of the destination, thereby substantiating their presence in that location. It is immaterial in this regard that the images are mass-produced and that they are framed in a formulaic fashion. What mattered was that these images validated their experience in the eyes of the intended viewers of these images.
As noted earlier, the wealthy bourgeoisie and nouveau riche would travel to Europe, embarking on a late-nineteenth-century version of The Grand Tour. From there, they would send streams of picture postcards as authentication of their travel, as well as to reinforce their position on the social ladder of their home community. To the recipients of the card, it demonstrated either an air of superiority exuded by the sender, putting recipients into their social place, as they had not (yet) been there, or it served to show that the traveler had now achieved a like status to the recipient.

Given the speed of production of such cards, usually within an hour, and their ability to be immediately annotated with a short message and then mailed through the global postal network, such images have to be interpreted as the precursor of the modern-day ‘selfies’ now posted on social media. In most instances, these cards would arrive at their destinations while the sender was still travelling, thereby setting a late-nineteenth-century version of immediacy.

The open transportation of such cards by mail also ensured that both the sender of the card (if known locally) and, in particular, the receiver of the postcard publicly accrued social credit as the postal employees sorting and delivering the mail were cognizant of the image content and could freely read the open message (as pilloried in Figures 26 and 27). Moreover, the cards, once received, could and would be shown in social circles, as a form of parlor entertainment, thereby further consolidating or enhancing the social standing of sender and recipient.

Figure 26. ‘The latest gossip.’ Humorous postcard pillorying postal delivery workers as conveyors of gossip derived from reading other people’s mail (ca. 1913).
The tourist portraits taken at the ostrich farms fall into a different category. While they, too, situate the subject in the setting and substantiate their presence there, these farms were not tourist destinations imbued with cultural or historical values that were on the ‘bucket list’ of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century travelers seeking to validate their social standing. Instead, they were destinations designed as tourist attractions akin to modern theme parks and in the same vein as contemporary fair grounds and amusement parks of the time, such as Coney Island or the Santa Monica Pier.

These venues have a long history of staged event photography, usually in the form of studio photographs with set backgrounds such as cars, planes, or trains (Figure 28). In these instances, the photography serves primarily as a souvenir of a visit, for personal consumption and manual sharing among the social circle. This can be substantiated by the fact that the majority of the images showing people riding ostrich-drawn carts and all the cards showing people sitting on ostriches were never mailed—although all were printed on postcard paper. Given that many carry a hand-written date on the verso, and some have text, it is likely that these were sent as an enclosure to envelopes.

Unlike the images of Venice, which were taken at an authentic location and where the portraited subjects act in their genuine role as a traveler/tourist, the images taken at amusement parks, as well as the ostrich farms, are pure constructs where the portraited tourist performs a choreographed phantasy persona. While in the Venice setting, portraits of individuals and mixed-gender couples abound, the imagery of shots at ostrich farms seem to be women or children on their own (or with partners/friends/parents standing adjacent), the studio images of Coney Island are of couples or groups of friends out for a good time. Consequently, the latter images functioned as souvenirs of a common experience rather than as objects of social validation.
5. Conclusions

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century photographic picture postcards discussed in this paper allowed the tourists to place themselves at the center of the image in that exotic setting. Rather than merely being consumers of tourist images, these tourists not only became the subject matter of these cards, but also functioned as actors in a staged
multi-layered display of the location visited; the attire they wore at that occasion; and the facial expression and body language they project. The framing of these cards ranges from images taken in a wholly staged setting in a photographic studio attached to the showground or arcade to images taken outdoors with constrained, formulaic framing as in the case of the images taken at San Marco in Venice and the carefully stage-managed images at the ostrich farms. While all these cards are photographic prints produced for near-immediate consumption, akin to modern-day selfies, they fulfilled different social functions. For those sending and receiving these cards, it did not matter that the setting and framing of these images is formulaic. What mattered was to have tangible proof of the visit and to be able to be seen/viewed to have been there and have been part of that experience.

As the images are formulaic, they have their limitations. Primarily, unlike modern selfies, the framing or ‘gaze’ of these images is controlled by the third-party photographer rather than the subject of the image, thereby restricting the subject’s ability for self-expression beyond a socially mediated pose. Secondly, as the photographs were taken outdoors (setting aside the arcade studio photographs) with large-format bellows cameras that were vulnerable to adverse environmental conditions, these postcards only reflect ‘fair-weather’ representations of the tourists, whereas modern selfies are less constrained.

Despite these limitations, the plethora of cards from both locations, but in particular, those from Venice, open up future lines of enquiry. An obvious one to examine are the dates and the spatial range of destinations to which the cards were mailed. This provides an opportunity to approximate seasonal and overall visitation rates of Venice, while the destinations provide proxy data for global popularity and ‘reach.’ As the images were taken ‘on the spot,’ the type of clothing depicted not only allows one to demonstrate the changes in fashion over time, but also allows one to examine what the tourists considered to be socially appropriate (and representative) attire to be worn in public. Finally, an examination of the body language displayed by the tourists at the moment of being photographed could provide a window into their motivations.

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