Elizabeth Siegel has illuminated a significant part of our photographic history in the first monograph to explore these early albums as more than interesting pieces of Americana. In the introduction, Siegel states she will provide a “social and cultural history of nineteenth-century American photograph albums,” and further defines that with a series of questions: how did they come about, what did they represent, how were they marketed, how were they displayed, and what kinds of stories do they tell? A reference to nineteenth-century America’s “desire to possess a visual genealogy,” makes us curious, and we want to know exactly what these albums may have to tell us.

The author explores these questions by placing the photograph album within the history of photography as a final result of several types of commercial businesses. Each of four chapters has a slightly different focus, but within the first three (a fourth briefly relates the rise of the Kodak snapshot) Siegel analyzes album contents, focusing on the 1860s carte-de-visite (to a lesser extent the tintype and cabinet card that followed), and the albums themselves. Predecessors to and the production of the carte, its different use in Europe, changes in portraiture, photographers’ studios, posing for the photographer, the cult of celebrity, and the craze for cartes are all addressed. Siegel points out that “cartomania” made the albums a necessity, which in turn expanded photographic and related industries and methods of mass-production. The examination of collecting the photographs, compiling an album, the placement of the album in one’s parlor, and the marketing of images and albums emphasizes that the nineteenth-century photograph album was a combination of the commercial, the public, the private, and the domestic realms.

Ms. Siegel is associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago and has published on Victoriana and on contemporary photography. It is curious that no bibliography is included here. Siegel cites interesting, diverse primary and secondary sources in detailed notes, and a bibliography would be more useful than the appendix of “Photograph Album Poems and Songs,” already quoted briefly in the text. The name of nineteenth-century photographer [C.J.] Quinby, correctly cited by the source given, is misspelled.

The book is still a welcome addition to existing literature on the subject and will inspire further scholarship. It is recommended for academic and special libraries, particularly those with collections supporting students or researchers in American photography, art, material culture, or business history. It is attractively hardbound with a faux-album-page front cover, and well-illustrated through photographs, cartoons, advertisements, diagrams, and album pages.

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