

'Working Girls' Photographed and Memorialised

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(<https://sites.courtauld.ac.uk/documentingfashion/2018/12/04/working-girls-photographed-and-memorialised/>) Posted by: *lucycorkish*

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While taken and kept in obscurity, snapshots revealing the lives of 19th century working girls have come to light in San Francisco. Believed to be the earliest known photographs taken within an American brothel, the collection of William Goldman photographs currently on display at the Sorokko Gallery are both rare and insightful.



The images date to the 1890s and depict prostitutes associated with a brothel in Reading, Pennsylvania. The snapshots are posed, with playful and individualised compositions. Some images are whole, while some have been cut or torn into cloud-like shapes, giving them a dreamy, surreal quality. All of the images offer a glimpse into the daily lives and minds of the traditionally mysterious brothel girls.



25 of Goldman's ethereal photographs are on display in the Sorokko Gallery. The exhibition, which runs from November 15th to December 9th, coincides with the publishing of a book on the same collection by Robert Flynn Johnson, entitled *Working Girls: An American Brothel, Circa 1892*. Johnson, art historian and curator emeritus for the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, discovered the collection nearly 15 years ago and is the reason gallery owners and collectors Serge and Tatiana Sorokko came into possession of the photographs. The book features essays from author and professor of history Ruth Rosen, as well as curator and fashion historian Denitta Sewell. It also features a foreword by burlesque star Dita Von Teese.



Von Teese brings attention to dressing for seduction, giving mention to the striped or patterned stockings all the women pictured wear. She asserts that individuality, allure and confidence intersect within this garment. She also discusses the empowerment which this series of photographs may have offered those depicted, giving them the opportunity to be represented more or less as they wished. The women in these photographs smile and appear relaxed, offering an unusual sense of fun and agency to their tabooed lifestyle.



The subversion of Victorian morals and cultural norms which these images represent makes them especially significant for historians of fashion and photography alike.

All images are William Goldman photographs from the Sorokko Gallery, made available by CNN Style.

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