
SUBSCRIBE FOR ONLY 25¢

Sign in

'Working Girls' exhibit at Sorokko gallery a secret peek into 19th century brothel

By Jennifer Raiser

Updated Nov 29, 2018 3:20 p.m.



Images from the book “Working Girls: An American Brothel, Circa 1892, The Secret Photographs of William Goldman” (Glitterati Press; 240 pages; \$60), also on display at Serge Sorokko Gallery.

William Goldman / Courtesy Serge Sorokko Gallery

The story has all the makings of a Victorian novel: An art curator discovers a trove of 250 antique girlie photographs at a postcard fair in Concord. Intrigued by the quality of the silver gelatin prints and entranced by the subject, he offers to buy them from a widow liquidating her husband’s collection. The widow will sell a few; the curator persists. Eventually, she allows him to purchase 50, and two gallery owners to purchase the remaining 200. And then our intrepid curator embarks on a 12-year journey to discover how this beguiling collection came to be.

Our story’s protagonist is Robert Flynn Johnson, curator emeritus of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. His supporting player is San Francisco gallerist Serge Sorokko, one of the two gallerists, who is revealing his portion of the collection at his Sutter Street establishment in an exhibition that opened Nov. 15.

SUBSCRIBE FOR ONLY 25¢

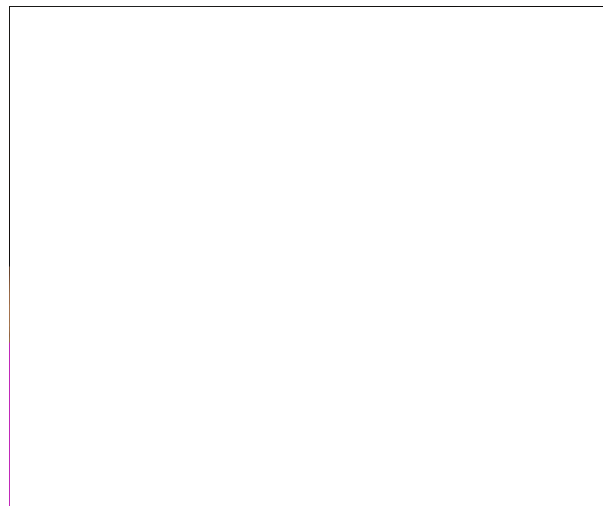
Act Now

More Information

“**Working Girls:** An American Brothel Circa 1892, Photographs by William Goldman” exhibit. Through Dec. 9. Serge Sorokko Gallery, 345 Sutter St., S.F. www.sorokko.com.

The mysterious character is the portrait photographer William Goldman (1856-1922), who ran a successful commercial studio in Reading, Pa. The intriguing cameo is madam Sallie Shearer (1848-1909), who presumably recruited these women for her well-heeled clientele.

ADVERTISEMENT
Article continues below this ad



But the real stars of this tale are the subjects, the “Working Girls” in the photos. That epithet is used in the title of exhibit, as well as curator Johnson’s resulting book, “Working Girls: An American Brothel, Circa 1892. The Secret Photographs of William Goldman” (Glitterati Press; 240 pages; \$60).

Johnson was always sure the collection was the work of a professional. “This was a long time ago, photography was a relatively new medium. To have gotten the light and exposures right you needed to have some experience.” He also noted the development, border masking and printing, and the consistency of the images as evidence that these photos were taken by someone with proper resources and training.

The essential clue was revealed in three photographs of a nude woman reading the Reading Eagle newspaper dated Aug. 14, 1892. The newspaper discovery led

Johnson to Reading, Pa. A local historian helped Johnson learn about the upscale “parlor houses” of the day, and to discern the likelihood that the photographic subjects worked for the madam Sallie Shearer. Goldman’s studio was located a few blocks from Shearer’s bordello, and his career fell on both sides of the newspaper date of 1892. The only thing Johnson did not learn were the identities of the sitters, the “working girls” under Shearer’s roof.

The gelatin silver print photographs in the exhibit are from the collection that Sorokko, one of the two art dealers, purchased directly from the widow at Johnson's encouragement. They depict women in naturalistic poses reminiscent of the painted boudoir portraits by Renoir and Manet. The women in the photos reveal a little (like a stocking) or a lot (like a full frontal pose a la Manet’s “Olympia”). Their demeanor is serene and resolved. Some are going about their daily dressing ritual, others are posing in front of a mirror or peeking behind a curtain. They are more charming than carnal, and photographed with a certain respect that seems unusual for the time and situation.

Johnson surmises that the photographs were taken at the brothel and at Goldman’s studio, where he had a series of props and backdrops befitting a commercial photographer. The women would have had to hold their poses for some time, as the then-new medium required long exposures. Although mostly youthful and comely, the models depict a range of body types and ages, including one visibly pregnant woman, and a single African American model who looks directly into the camera with confidence. There are also five photographs of a nude young man in various athletic poses, presumably a devil-may-care client, and one unapologetic portrait of an older naked man who turned out to be Goldman himself.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

The photographs offer a rare peek into a late-19th century brothel in a prosperous industrial city. We see what women wore to be seductive, and get a rare view of their many layers of stockings, drawers, petticoats, chemises, corsets, corset covers, blouses, skirts, shoes, coats and hats. The variety of stockings, which Johnson calls “the most erogenous garments of the era,” came in an assortment of colors and patterns, secured by lace garters, or tied at the knee with a silk bow.

Phoenix Art Museum Fashion Curator Denitta Sewell writes in Johnson’s book: “Lingerie of the Gilded Age reached a height of extravagance, elaborateness, and complexity.” She continues: “Known as ‘unmentionables,’ undergarments were only seen in rare glimpses ... layers of fabric unraveling a protracted flirtation.” In the book’s foreword, famed burlesque star Dita Von Teese writes that the images are “lessons in history, anthropology, fashion, interior design, and gender interactions.”

In this era of #MeToo and heightened sensitivity about exploitation, it is important to acknowledge what we don’t know. While Johnson makes the assumption that the prostitutes were paid to pose for photographs, he offers no proof. He does emphasize how comfortable they appear in front of the camera, the reason he found the collection so engaging.

The book’s preface is written by UC Berkeley history Professor Emerita Ruth Rosen, who explains, “The oldest profession was neither legal nor illegal; it was simply tolerated as a ‘Necessary Evil,’ as an effort to protect ‘innocent’ women and girls from rapacious men.”

Rosen asserts women did so out of economic necessity, as the “daughters of immigrant families or working-class girls and women who worked for subsistence wages.” While prostitution was not a desirable occupation, the factory or domestic positions available to women could also be exploitative and dangerous.

Rosen writes: “For young, attractive women, working in an upscale brothel offered an opportunity to wear nice clothes, eat well, share camaraderie with other women, and receive protection from the madam.”

Because we do not know the identities or motivations of these models, at some level we participate in their objectification. They facilitated the private art project of the photographer for his artistic expression or titillation — likely both. They may have felt pleased to be photographed in the same studio as Goldman’s society clients.

Says Von Teese: “The opportunity to sit for Mr. Goldman was very likely not only thrilling — it was also empowering.”

Their identities lost to history, we can only infer from what we see in their expressions. What we do know is that the photographs speak as works of art, sociology and erotica. One hundred and twenty-five years later, they reveal a Victorian tale of discovery, beauty and artistic sensibility that we are particularly fortunate to discover.

Jennifer Raiser is a San Francisco freelance writer. Email: style@sfchronicle.com

Nov 29, 2018 | Updated Nov 29, 2018 3:20 p.m.

By **Jennifer Raiser**

Top Of The News



EAST BAY

Furious Oakland parents are declaring war on politics and status quo in schools: 'This is a call for excellence'

Parents are fed up with administrative dysfunction, low test scores, strikes and other upheaval. Now, they are organizing to refocus funding and political priorities on academics.

RESTAURANTS

What to eat when spending the day in Santa Cruz

SAN FRANCISCO

Condos on this S.F. island are as high as \$4.4 million. What life is like for the first residents

RESTAURANTS

A new San Francisco hot spot is serving Peking duck with caviar. Is it worth \$158?

Here's which California ski resorts could get the most snow from a late March storm

[Top](#)

[About](#)

[Contact](#)

[Services](#)

[Account](#)

HEARST *newspapers* © 2024 Hearst Communications, Inc. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [CA Notice at Collection](#) |

[Your CA Privacy Rights \(Shine the Light\)](#) | [DAA Industry Opt Out](#) | [Your Privacy Choices \(Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads\)](#)