



Austen, Alice (1866-1952)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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An untitled photograph (circa 1896) by Alice Austen. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Alice Austen, one of the first American women to become a photographer, lived the life of an independent, genteel woman during the Victorian age. She also defied conventions and challenged stereotypes in nearly every aspect of her life.

She was born Elizabeth Alice Munn on March 17, 1866 to Alice Cornell Austen and Edward Stopford Munn, who married in 1863. The future photographer's father abandoned her and her mother around 1869. Her mother then reclaimed the surname of her birth and, with Elizabeth Alice, moved into her upper class family's Staten Island home, called Clear Comfort.

The house, originally built in 1700, had been enlarged into a Carpenter Gothic country home during the mid-nineteenth century by Austen's grandparents, John Haggerty Austen and Elizabeth Alice Townsend. Residing among some of the country's wealthiest families, such as the Vanderbilts, Cunards, and Roosevelts, the Austens lived in genteel circumstances.

In 1876, when Austen was only ten years old and photography was a new medium, her uncle Oswald Mueller, a shipper, gave her a large-format camera. Austen mastered it, including its bulky dry glass plates, by the time she was eighteen. Later she developed her prints inside her family's home.

Since Austen was of independent means, she had enough time to become a splendid photographer, championship tennis player, skilled sailor, avid swimmer, golfer, and bicyclist at an early age. Her wealth allowed her to create images without relying on the sale of her work. It also allowed her the freedom to challenge gender stereotypes.

Alice Austen captured a visual record of elegant family life during the Gilded Age. While wonderful images of friends and family at home, in private clubs, on picnics, sailing, lounging in gardens, and living the refined life resulted, Austen was not satisfied with documenting her life of privilege. She also captured sweeping views of New York harbor, recorded some of the earliest automobile trips, traveled into Manhattan to take photographs of commuters, immigrants and laborers, and recorded historic events.

In addition, she documented her own trips throughout the Northeastern United States, to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), and across Europe. Austen's photographic forte was capturing people and places as they appeared. Unlike much photography of the day, Austen's photography utilized a sharp focus. In technique and subject matter, Austen anticipated the genre of documentary photography.

Herself a woman-identified woman, Austen included women in her photographs and recorded the private world she shared with her women friends, including Gertrude Eccleston, Julia Marsh, Sue Ripley, Violet Ward, and Daisy Elliott. Much of Austen's photographic work recorded the life she lived on her own terms with her women friends--all of whom lived as independent "new women."

Austen's images of her women friends provide evidence of homoeroticism. Such photographs as those

entitled *Mrs. Snivley* and *Julia and I in Bed* (both from 1890), *Julia Martin*, *Julia Bredt*, and *Self Dressed Up as Men* (1891), and *The Darned Club* make manifest Austen's homoerotic feelings and her ability to alter the stereotypical vision of women.

In 1899 Austen met Gertrude Amelia Tate (ca 1871-1962) of Brooklyn, who was to be her long-time companion. Tate moved into Clear Comfort during 1917. The two women lived together and supported each other for thirty years.

Austen's life ended on a sad note because, although talented and renowned, she invested her family inheritance in the stock market shortly before its crash in 1929. She unwisely mortgaged the family home so that she and Gertrude could travel to Europe one last time. Upon returning home to Staten Island, they ran a tea room in Clear Comfort and Gertrude taught ballroom dancing lessons in an attempt to meet their financial obligations.

The plan did not work, however, and Austen lost the house in 1945 when she was evicted at the age of 79. She signed her possessions over to Gertrude, who moved in with her own family members, and Austen spent the next few years in a small apartment.

Austen spent her remaining years in nursing homes, entering the Staten Island Farm Colony (a home for paupers) on June 24, 1950 when she was 84.

The following year, however, Austen's fortune changed. The art historian Oliver Jensen discovered the negatives of her photographic plates and saw to their purchase by the Staten Island Historical society in 1951. Jensen secured publishing rights to the plates and arranged for an exhibition and sale of prints of Austen's work. Austen earned enough money to live in a comfortable residence for one more year. She died on June 9, 1952.

Gertrude Tate lived another ten years with her family and then moved to a nursing home. Upon Gertrude's death the Tate family learned that Austen and Gertrude had wanted to be buried together. The Tate family, however, refused to honor the women's wishes.

Alice Austen created more than 8,000 images over a period of five decades. More than 3,000 of her photographs survive and are housed at Clear Comfort. The house was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark on April 8, 1976, one month after the 110th anniversary of Austen's birth.

Clear Comfort is decorated in the manner of the late nineteenth century and includes Austen's darkroom. Young women of today can visit and learn of an important role model who defied the limitations and expectations of her day. However, as Barbara Hammer's documentary *The Female Closet* (1998) discloses, the board of Austen House discourages the use of the collection in order to study sexuality.

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