

Hugh Diamond, the father of psychiatric photography

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Hugh Welch Diamond (1808–1886) was a British physician-psychiatrist-antiquarian, an early adopter of the technology of photography, and the first to take photographs of female patients in the Surrey County Asylum, where he was superintendent from 1848 to 1858. His photography project was intended to study the physiognomy of mental illness – the idea that one’s face reveals one’s mental state – with the goal of identifying visual signs of mental illness. Just as Diamond collected artifacts for historical studies, he also ‘collected’ the images of mental patients to study, archive and use in diagnosis and treatment. Along with many others at the dawn of photography, Diamond believed in the apparent objectivity and realism of the faithful photographic record, ‘free altogether from the painful caricaturing which so disfigures almost all the published portraits of the Insane as to render them nearly valueless for purposes of art or of science.’¹ However, Diamond’s photographic images were not objective depictions of mental illness but rather reflections of the predominant cultural understanding and iconography of the Victorian era. His photographs demonstrate the futility of the physiognomic project, as he posed his subjects using props (e.g. Ophelia’s headpiece, a classic symbol of female insanity and hysteria) and clothing (e.g. shawls and blankets) to indicate that they were seriously mentally ill. For example, Fig. 1 depicts a woman holding a dead bird, possibly indicating her morbid preoccupation with death, or as a contrasting symbol of hope for her recovery.

When exhibiting these photographs, Diamond continued a tradition of ‘othering’ by labelling and typologising his female subjects as mentally ill – their identity is their diagnosis. But the photographs also humanise them, such that they are brought to the forefront of our awareness, showcased as the epitome of human suffering, rather than being hidden away in the asylum and ostracised from society. His photos demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsically found in these women’s bodies or faces that demarcates them as mentally ill. Whatever Diamond’s intention as a leader of the asylum reform movement that advocated for non-restraint and moral treatment, his photographs humanise these anonymous women. This contrasting double effect – where the women are immortalised and given power while also representing the face of mental illness in the 19th century, an inherently devalued group – becomes complicated by the subjects’ sense of defiance and confrontation. The women either stare at the camera (and directly at the viewer) or avert their gaze, refusing to engage and be objectified.

Hugh Diamond served as a liminal figure at the intersection of the science of psychiatry and the technology of photography. He hoped to bring systematisation and order to the chaotic natural world, to rationalise the irrational face of madness. But while he may have fallen short of that scientific aspiration, his images continue to be scrutinised and appreciated more than a century and a half later.

Reference

- 1 Diamond HW. On the application of photography to the physiognomic and mental phenomena of insanity. *Proc R Soc Lond* 1856; **8**: 117. Reprinted in *Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography* (ed SL Gilman): 17–24. Echo Point Books & Media, 2014.

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Fig. 1 Hugh Welch Diamond, Plate 27 (Seated Woman with a Bird), (c. 1855). Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.