

## The Heinrich Tønnies collection: Photography as the market wants it

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### Introduction: *Carte-de-visite* portraits and the Tønnies archive

Developments in photography around the mid-nineteenth century created an explosion in the demand for portraits. The new photographic method using a negative imprint meant that a motive now could be turned into an infinite number of positive prints. It also led to a revolutionary democratization of the portrait, through mass production at a price that roughly corresponded to a day's wages of an average worker. The price of painted portraits and daguerreotypes had previously limited the availability of personal portraits to the well-to-do, but now just about anybody could afford to be depicted at least once during his or her lifetime and collect pictures of other people or places. It was in particular with the *carte-de-visite* format (5½ x 9 cm) that pictures became a common property, and together with pictures in the larger *cabinet* format (10, 3 x 14 cm) they constituted the majority of all photographs produced in the years 1856-1918.<sup>1</sup>

Within just a few decades, photographic ateliers were opened in every town over the world. In Aalborg alone (a town which between 1856 and 1914 would grow from 10.000 to 50.000 inhabitants to make it the second largest town in Denmark and the most industrialized after Copenhagen), more than 500 portrait photographers established themselves during this timeframe for a shorter or longer period. The market consisted not only of the strongly growing population in the town, but to an even larger degree of peasants from the surrounding countryside during the years when the export of dairy products and bacon to England was beginning to make Denmark a rich nation.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the photographers did not consider themselves as being artists, but rather as tradesmen, artisans, whose task it was to deliver to the customer what the customer wanted: a portrait that was a good, suitably 'improved' likeness, but which above all had to be offered at a suitably low price. Style and composition were taken over from portrait paintings, but the products could hardly be varied much, seeing as the photographer, in order to keep the price down, would have had to turn out literally dozens of individual portraits - per day. But that was less important, as the portraits were not expected to, and indeed, by preference *should* not, deviate from the established norm. They were made for the purpose of inspiring respect and were collected in photo albums or would be hung up on the walls in private homes where they were displayed with pride. In this way the pictures bespoke the solidity and respectability of the subject, his family and his circle, as well as the solidity of the society to which he belonged; thus the portrait photograph became one of the most important material symbols of the age.

At the same time, the technology that these photographers worked with was quite limited, and as a consequence the original prints appear small, finicky and faded until enlarged via modern methods from the original negatives. The dress, settings and props used in the portraits are often mismatched and marked by a compromise between what the customer desired and what the photographer would have happened to have at hand. The portrait subjects often look serious, not because they were afraid to be depicted, but simply due to the long period of exposure, where any movement would blur the picture, meaning that neither the hands nor the facial muscles were to be moved during the taking. The subject's head was, until the mid-1880s, tied to a support and the arms kept absolutely still by being supported by props in the atelier, but movements of the eyelids could not be prevented

and so the pupils had to be painted in. The garments were often rented for the occasion, so the clothes followed reigning fashion and thus lent respectability to the person pictured. Such was also the case when work clothes and implements were used to signify the capable and well-established tradesman. So it is no matter for surprise that the photos filled every available space on tables, shelves, and the walls of rooms and halls, as well as being exchanged among relatives whom the large population movements during the this time-period had scattered to different parts of the world. As a consequence, you can today find photographs by a single photographer like Heinrich Tønnies wherever Danes have settled in the United States<sup>3</sup>, and vice versa: portraits exist in Danish homes which had been sent home by Danes who had immigrated to North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Considering their great prevalence it may seem strange that researchers have not until fairly recently shown much interest in the *carte-de-visite* portraits. The explanation is that in the period between the two world wars these photographs had been made outdated by the new methods used by professional photographers, by the privately owned box-camera, as well as by the new media contexts of illustrated journals, cinema and so forth. Being thus outmoded, the old portraits were now seen as standardized and anonymous – also by the descendents of the subjects portrayed, who had no relationship to their ancestors. The *carte-de-visite* portraits were discarded along with most of the old glass negatives and re-order books. Why keep archives when nobody was reordering prints any longer from the old negatives that were taking up so much storing space? The fact of having so relatively few, anonymous original prints that by chance have survived the vicissitudes of time has meant that historians would experience great difficulty in understanding and describing the mass-production of portraits in its very beginnings.

The problem consists in having to comprehend a revolutionary mass-production on the basis of randomly surviving, often anonymous and faded examples of positive prints. As luck would have it, by a singular combination of events, we have come to possess 29 completely intact photographic archives at Aalborg's City Archives. The oldest and the largest archive covers the years 1856-1974. Its preservation is partly due to its during the entire period having been owned by the same Tønnies family: Heinrich Tønnies (1856-1903), his son Emil Tønnies (1903-1923) and the grandchildren Lili and Verner Tønnies (1923-1974), and partly due to its having been kept in the years 1881-1961 in the largest photographic atelier ever built in Scandinavia. There had been space enough and neither the need nor the will to scrap anything, even after atelier-photography had gone out of fashion.

### **Heinrich Tønnies: From Immigrant to established and reknowned photographer**

Heinrich Tønnies (1825-1903)<sup>4</sup> was born at the glassworks of Grünenplan, south of Hannover in Germany, but when the region was hit by the great potato rot and famine in Northern Europe in the mid-1840s, a large part of the population emigrated. Some of them moved to Voigtländer's newly started optical works in Braunschweig (also known as Brunswick in English); others became glassworkers in Bay City, Michigan, USA.<sup>5</sup> Tønnies himself went in 1847 to the Conradsminde glassworks in North Jutland in Denmark in order to work there as a glass cutter and painter. When this glassworks changed over to only producing green glass bottles in 1853, Tønnies was dismissed. On 4 August 1853 he was married at the American Consulate in Hamburg to Emma Müller (1830-1911) from Grünenplan en route to joining relatives in Michigan. But, just prior to their departure, Tønnies received an offer of 5.000 rixdollars from a new glassworks in Aalborg if he would turn back and work there as the chief glass cutter.<sup>6</sup> So, Tønnies and his new wife went to Aalborg

instead of Bay City, but when in 1855/56 the Aalborg works scaled down its production to only making green glass bottles, there was no longer need for a glass cutter and Tønnies once again had to leave. Instead he became an apprentice to the first photographer with an established atelier in Aalborg, Carl Fritsche of Berlin. Fritsche, who wanted to establish himself in Hamburg instead, sold his atelier and equipment to Tønnies on 9 December 1856. The purchase price was half of the 5.000 rixdollars Tønnies had been given for coming to Aalborg. Apart from whatever training as a photographer Tønnies had received from Fritsche, Tønnies's knowledge of glass-cutting enabled him to judge the quality of a camera lens, while his work as a miniature painter on glass meant that he knew precisely how to arrange a picture "drawn" with light on the small glass plate he placed in his camera.<sup>7</sup>

Tønnies soon made a great break-through in Aalborg, when he in December of 1857 ran a big advertising campaign in the newspapers of the town, inviting the readers to "let the Christmas gift of the year be a photographic portrait." The Tønnies Company could deliver portraits that were more beautiful and at a lower price than anybody else. Some of these *carte-de-visite* portraits from December 1857 are actually preserved, making them the oldest dated photographs of this type in Denmark.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that they were not produced according to the method patented back in 1854 in Paris by André Disdéri, with up to 12 portraits per negative plate. Instead they were produced by a method that allowed only two portraits per negative, a method Heinrich Tønnies had learnt in Berlin, where he had stayed during November of 1857.<sup>9</sup>

All in all, it was in Berlin that Tønnies acquired the knowledge and inspiration as photographer during his yearly travels on business to that city, the capital of Prussia. In particular, he sought out the royal, later imperial court photographer Carl Suck, Unter den Linden 24, from whom he learnt especially much. And it was here that Heinrich's son and successor, Emil Tønnies (1860-1923) was educated and in 1887 he married the retoucheuse (footnote a reoucheuse would paint directly on the glass-plate to correct flaws and age- marks on the face of the sitter before the photograph was printed) of the atelier, Bertha Andrée (1863-1848). The Tønnies family represents the development of photography in the German capital, and is thus representative of a Central European photographic tradition as well. This is a tradition we do not know so much about, as the source material to that tradition consisting of negative plates and order books disappeared during the Allied bombing on 3 February 1945 which obliterated the photographers' district in central Berlin. That of course increases the value of the Tønnies collection from the perspective of international research, where the British, French and American materials otherwise predominate.

Along with what Tønnies learned in Berlin – this can be traced through the prints, equipment and books he brought home to Aalborg, he expanded his photographic activities in the 1860s with topographic pictures from Aalborg. They were both stereoscopic and framed motifs that were sold all over Denmark, making the old and picturesque buildings of the town well-known. With the arrival of industrialization in the following decade and the disappearance of the old houses, Tønnies changed over to thoroughly documenting the new factories along with their machinery and workers. This cannot be ascribed to any especial interest in photographically documenting the development of the town per se; instead it must be understood as having been a lucrative business to work as an advertisement photographer making *carte-de-visite* pictures of the industrial products, steam engines, castings, textiles etc., that were collected in albums for use by the travelling salesmen of the factories.<sup>10</sup>

These activities, when added together with the flourishing business of making portraits, made Tønnies one of the richest men in Aalborg with a yearly income of about 5.000 rixdollars. This was

why he in 1881 could afford to erect a new, three-storey atelier building in the very centre and main marketplace of Aalborg, with huge wings for storage, a factory for negative-plates, darkrooms, along with retouche- and framing workshops. Here, from Tønnes's negative factory, most of the photographers from Jutland were from 1883 provided with the new and more light-sensitive "dry" gelatine plates, always ready for use, instead of the "wet" collodium plates which had to be specially prepared immediately prior to each picture taking. As possibly the largest photographic enterprise in Scandinavia, the buildings had rooms for storing the whole and Heinrich Tønnes's descendents did just that with great piety.<sup>11</sup> All these buildings were demolished in 1961 to be replaced by a shopping centre, but the plates, books and equipment were for the greater part preserved, as the Tønnes Company stayed in business until 1974. It was therefore possible for us to receive the entire collection when the City Archives of Aalborg was established that same year. Cameras, darkroom implements, atelier properties, and curtains all the way back to the start of the company, plus 250.000 negatives on glass. All the negatives after 1864 were numbered, dated and identified in the re-order books, and together with the main book-keeping records that also start in 1864, this means that you can on a day to day basis for a period of 110 years follow the number of exposures, the profits and the names and addresses of the customers. On average 15 photographs per day were taken – all year round. But on the occasion of special events, such as fairs, Tønnes became part of the entertainment; when people travelled to Aalborg from the big surrounding countryside in order to attend the markets or cattle shows, 'Tønnes at the Market' could manage up to 200 exposures per day, with the help of his up to 15 employees.<sup>12</sup>

At the time of receiving the Tønnes collection at the newly established Aalborg City Archives, not everybody could see the value of preserving such a vast collection in its entirety. This scepticism was also present with the local public authorities and so, as director of the institution I was forced to work out how to the public could be made to understand that this collection was something truly unique. The original interior of the atelier could be pretty well reconstructed and exhibited, and as such was received with much interest, as were the topographical pictures. But the main part of the collection, the portraits, proved more difficult to make popular apart from genealogical researchers. Neither the many glass negatives nor the rather few original prints were in their original state very suitable for exhibition. The original negative plates would therefore have to be enlarged and printed on modern photographic paper and be retouched for contrast and light. But it could not be denied that this procedure had a major drawback, namely, that you change the original picture completely by methods that are totally different from the intentions and technical possibilities of the original photographer.

### **What the market demands – today!**

What the customers wanted at the time when Tønnes created his portraits was, as mentioned above, not 'the reality' but 'a reality', that is to say as beautified, respectable and inexpensive a picture of themselves as possible. But what about today's 'customers' who are the patrons of institutions of cultural history? What they wish for is an arranged and easily understandable tale from the past, which can speak to new audiences of exhibitions, their own imagination, and not just a simple summoning up of some previous era's reality in the shape of original artefacts presented in the form in which they have been preserved.

This dilemma has made its mark on the long row of Tønnes-exhibitions, which since the mid-seventies have been shown in both Europe and the USA. Titles like "The best preserved photo-collection in the World" have, of course, attracted attendance but not necessarily satisfied the

public. What they preferred was exhibitions where they themselves were photographed in the reconstructed ‘Tønnies atelier’. At the exhibition *Heinrich Tønnies – the photo album of Aalborg*, visitors could acquire a digital photo of themselves after trying to retouch it by means of a Photo-shop program. Added to this was the possibility to search directly in Tønnies’s order-books on the web. These activities ensured sufficient grants to enable careful registration, packing and storage of the enormous material.<sup>13</sup>

Such initiatives were, however, technically possible from the mid nineties. Previously, the big eye-opener had been a broadcast in 1974 of the Tønnies-collection in the sole TV-channel at the time in Denmark. Here it was possible to give the pictures a life of their own through the use of sound, music, and different enlargements and zoomings in a medium that the whole population knew. And when this TV-broadcast was shown in the USA in 1975, it caught the attention of an American photographer.

Alexander Alland, Sr. (1902-1989) was the photographer who in the 1940s found the negative-plates of the Danish-born journalist Jacob A. Riis (1868-1914), author of the book *How the Other Half Lives. Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1900). Riis did not consider himself as being a photographer; he was a crime-reporter at the New York Tribune. The pictures that he took with a flash camera (invented in 1887) were to be used here and now as a strong exhortation to solve the slum problems of the city. His appeal was followed by a strong reaction among his socially conscious contemporaries and inspired not least the Progressive president Theodore Roosevelt, but after that both Riis and his pictures were forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

The oblivion was rectified by Alexander Alland who made heavily edited new prints from the old negatives. This was done through enlargement, cropping, new framing from the negatives and substantial changes in light and contrast effects made in the dark-room. It was done to such a degree that The Museum of the City of New York, where the negatives were kept, refused to buy Alland’s new prints, as they, according to the management of the museum, differed so much as to be unrecognizable from the original negatives. Nevertheless it was Alland’s positive prints that made the collection famous and lifted Riis from relative obscurity to being considered the very founder of the photo-documentary tradition since followed by Lewis Hine (1874-1940) and others. It was a role that Riis himself had never contemplated; on the contrary, he thought that: “I am no good at all as a photographer...I am clumsy and impatient of details.”<sup>15</sup> But the fame was underlined in Alexander Alland’s *Jacob A. Riis. Photographer and Citizen* (1974), where Riis’s pictures quite rightly stand strong, beautiful and well composed with a social appeal that was interpreted – mistakenly! - as being something especially Danish.

Alexander Alland sought the roots of this social appeal in an earlier Danish photographer – the German-born Heinrich Tønnies – and, after a long stay at the City Archives of Aalborg, he published *Heinrich Tønnies. Cartes-de-visite Photographer Extraordinaire* (1978). Alland chose a number of negative plates from the Tønnies collection, but the work had to stop, at least partly, when he started to remove the original retouche from the original negatives to reveal what Tønnies had seen behind his camera. As was the case with Jacob Riis’s negatives, Alland’s prints were reinterpreted and re-edited as his own pictures rather than those of Tønnies. Or as the then director of The Royal Library’s photo-collection, Bjørn Ochsner expressed it in the foreword of the book: “Alexander Alland managed to produce the pictures as genuinely as the photographer saw the motives in reality.”

That is a very problematic view when it concerns reproduction of original material, but the book meant that Heinrich Tønnies, as edited by Alexander Alland, became known in the US.

When the Nordic Council in 1980 asked the director of Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Martin Friedman, to be in charge of the great travelling exhibition “Scandinavia – The Frozen Image” touring in the USA and the Nordic countries, it was not surprising that Heinrich Tønnes was chosen to represent the Scandinavian photographic portrait of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Martin Friedman during his preparations for the exhibition reached Aalborg, he – somewhat taken aback – noted the difference between those original negatives and those of Alland’s prints which he had seen, but he decided to reproduce from the original negatives using only original paper and methods, but enlargements. It did not diminish the pictures in any way, as the negatives were in fact of a high quality. It is of course still a problem that you have to use electrical light to enlarge the prints as Heinrich Tønnes himself had no electricity installed before 1899 and as time goes by you will have still more problems to find original paper and use original methods as analogue photography is now being replaced by the digital. In short: it becomes ever more difficult to avoid manipulating in the process from original negative to contemporary print.

### Concluding remarks

Thus the *carte-de-visite* photographer was accused of manipulating reality in order to offer the customer the picture he wanted and was willing to pay for. The question is whether we behave very differently when we mediate old pictures. They are being constantly adapted in order to make the greatest impression on our modern audiences so as to encourage funding and grants for our institutions. But we can, of course, try to deconstruct photographic history of its overlay of later myths. Heinrich Tønnes did not produce his pictures driven by his social conscience, but because he could make money from it. Models and inspirations were taken over from the German photographic tradition that also provided the background of the later so well known German photographer August Sander (1876-1964). When both Tønnes and Sander are regarded today as being unique, this may be due to the fact that so much source material for the wider history of German photography is lost or missing.

The internet has given us radically new possibilities for providing access to this important source material to the public, which the cultural institutions must serve. This is done, partly by opening Tønnes’s order-books to everybody on [www.aalborgkommune.dk/tonnes](http://www.aalborgkommune.dk/tonnes) - and partly, as the scanning of the pictures themselves progresses, on [www.danpa.dk](http://www.danpa.dk).

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<sup>1</sup> Bender, Henning, ‘Heinrich Tønnes negativarkiv. Omfang og overlevering’ in Hobolth, N. (ed.), *Heinrich Tønnes. Et fotografisk atelier*, Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, 2004, pp. 115-119.

<sup>2</sup> Bender, Henning, *Aalborgs industrielle udvikling 1735-1940*, Aalborg Kommune, Aalborg, 1987, p. 264.

- <sup>3</sup> I have particularly found Tønnies-photos in Utah, Sanpete County, where the Danish Mormons especially settled. Aalborg was one of the key points of the Mormon mission in Denmark and Tønnies had a contract to photograph all converted saints before departure for the U.S.
- <sup>4</sup> The Tønnies family and company records 1813-1975 are kept at the City Archives of Aalborg. See [www.danpa.dk](http://www.danpa.dk) and search "Tønnies, Heinrich" or "fotograffirma" for seeing the registry (# 326).
- <sup>5</sup> Pohlmann, Cornelia, *Die Auswanderung aus dem Herzogthum Braunschweig*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2002, pp. 152-158 (Die Kolonie des Grünenplaners im US-Bundesstaat Michigan), <http://books.google.dk/>
- <sup>6</sup> 5000 rixdollars was a very large sum of money. The annual wage for a skilled worker at the time was about 400 rixdollars. A white glass factory however, could not operate without a skilled glass cutter and glass painter.
- <sup>7</sup> Bender, Henning, 'Fotografen Heinrich Tønnies' in Hobolth, N. (ed.), *Heinrich Tønnies. Et fotografisk atelier*, Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, 2004, pp. 86-91.
- <sup>8</sup> Bender, Henning, 'Danmarks ældste fotoalbum', *Objektiv. Dansk Fotohistorisk Selskab*, vol. 60, 1993, pp. 4-8.
- <sup>9</sup> The many trips for Germany can be followed in the passport records of Aalborg's police master.
- <sup>10</sup> Bender, Henning: *From Birth to Global Expansion. Metallic Industries for 175 years*, Suzhou Huafang Printing, Suzhou, 2009, pp. 54-57.
- <sup>11</sup> When in 1980 I interviewed Lili Tønnies (1888-1984), she told about daily life and how it was to be a photo assistant in the famous studio of her grandfather (Heinrich Tønnies 1825-1903) and father (Emil Tønnies 1860-1923)
- <sup>12</sup> Bender, Henning, 'Heinrich Tønnies negativarkiv. Omfang og overlevering' in Hobolth, N. (ed.), *Heinrich Tønnies. Et fotografisk atelier*, Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, 2004, pp. 115-119.
- <sup>13</sup> Bender, Henning, Heinrich Tønnies negativsamling reddet, *Objektiv. Dansk Fotohistorisk Selskab*, vol. 54, 1991, pp. 10-20
- <sup>14</sup> Jensen, Lauren, 'The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth', *Constructing the Past*, vol. 5, Issue 1, Article 6, 2004, <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol5/iss16>
- <sup>15</sup> Yochelson, Bonnie, 'The Masked Image: Recapturing the Work of Reformer Jacob Riis', *Humanities* 19, 3, 1998, pp. 16-21 <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-05/riis.html>

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[www.aalborgkommune.dk/tonnies](http://www.aalborgkommune.dk/tonnies) - search database on Tønnies' orderbooks. City Archives of Aalborg

[www.danpa.dk](http://www.danpa.dk) - search database on Danish private records. For the records of The Tønnies Company – search "fotograffirma". City Archives of Aalborg.

[www.berliner-fotografenateliers.de](http://www.berliner-fotografenateliers.de) – search database on photographers in Berlin By Prof. Dr. Sibylle Einholz, Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft, Museumskunde.