

Cracking the Code:

dating Australian portrait
images through dress

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<http://www.portraitdetective.com.au/>



STATE LIBRARY™
NEW SOUTH WALES

Portrait Detective Project Objectives

- Increase awareness of SLNSW Australian portraiture collection a unique (& currently under-utilised) resource
- Streamline collection access chronologically collating digitised portrait images of various media linked to their electronic records
- Facilitate remote & independent use (ie. client self-service) of SLNSW portraiture collection
- Provide unparalleled online service allowing SLNSW staff & clients to see pictorial resources arranged in a brand new way
- Encourage sharing of information & knowledge for mutual benefit applying visual analysis methodology to Australian portraiture

Public & private collections around the country contain millions of portraits of Australian people in the form of :

- Oil paintings
- Watercolours
- Miniatures
- Silhouettes
- Drawings
- Photographs
- Engravings
- Printed illustrations in Books, Newspapers & Magazines



Family Albums



*The dear people brother & sister
Brother & sister*



Mr. P. H. Morlon - Mrs. J. A. Morlon - Anna Hay



Ethel Clibborn & Ethel Dowling (R. D. Dan)



Candid 'snapshot' portrait
Caird Family Album (1912)

We can speculate most confidently about a portrait image when we know the context of its production. But, faced with an image which has lost its history, how can we reconstruct the circumstances of its production?

Lack of information lessens the documentary value of many images, forcing us to make guesses about their true historical context.

Contextual information is provided by:

Medium, ie. how the image is made

Creator, ie. who made the image

Provenance, ie. who's in the image & where it comes from

And when combined with the visual evidence recorded within the image itself, it can be possible to fix an undated image in time.

How people look and what they are wearing can provide vital clues....

Appearance



When nothing is known about the subject, place, or creator of an image, the one identifiable element common to all portraits is clothing. Even in nude studies hairstyles, accessories, props and backgrounds can usually provide sufficient detail to suggest a fair accurate date.

Looking for Australian Portraits





1833



1836



1836



1837



1838



1839



1840



1840



1840



1840



1842



1843



1845



1845



1846



1847



1848



1850



1850



1851



1852



1852



1854



1855



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First portraits, c.1793, wash drawings by Juan de Ravenet



Portrait miniatures - Isabella Laycock & Thomas Laycock, c.1811
watercolour on ivory



Jane & Charles Thompson of Clydesdale, NSW
dated 1836 by Richard Read Jnr



Troughton Family, 1857, hand-coloured ambrotype

1840 — Mrs [Anna Elizabeth] Walker

What we see in this image

This left facing, ½ length portrait shows Mrs Walker (aged 37) in mourning for her elder brother, John Marquet Blaxland (1801-1840) who died suddenly on 29 May 1840. The landscape view stretching behind her could be a reference to her home in Tasmania and/or her place among colonial Australia's first generations of landed gentry.

Mrs Walker's recent bereavement is signified by her choice of black garments, further accessorised with appropriate memorial jewellery in the form of jet pendant earrings and an enamelled mourning brooch containing plaited hair of the departed which she has pinned to her corsage. The sheen of the gown suggests it is made of black [silk] satin, rather than the lustreless black materials favoured for mourning after the death of Prince Albert in 1861. It follows the fashionable silhouette for the 1840s, with its shallow, demure wide neckline just revealing the edge of a sheer white chemise, above a fitted bodice trimmed with a series of flat tucks fanning up over the corsage in a V-shape from the pointed waist. The sleeves appear to be tight-fitting at the shoulder with rows of flat tucks over the upper arm, confirming a post-1836 date, and becoming more voluminous below the elbow. Her judiciously draped Turkey red [paisley] shawl is thought to have been a family heirloom and serves a double purpose by concealing Mr Walker's advancing pregnancy

Hover on image to zoom in



1840 — Mrs [Anna Elizabeth] Walker



George Johnson & Family, 1854, daguerreotype



Portraits of Eleanor Elizabeth Stephen (1839-1861)
by Edwin Dalton, 1854 and ca. 1859.



Jane Penelope Atkinson (nee Reibey)
(1807-1854)

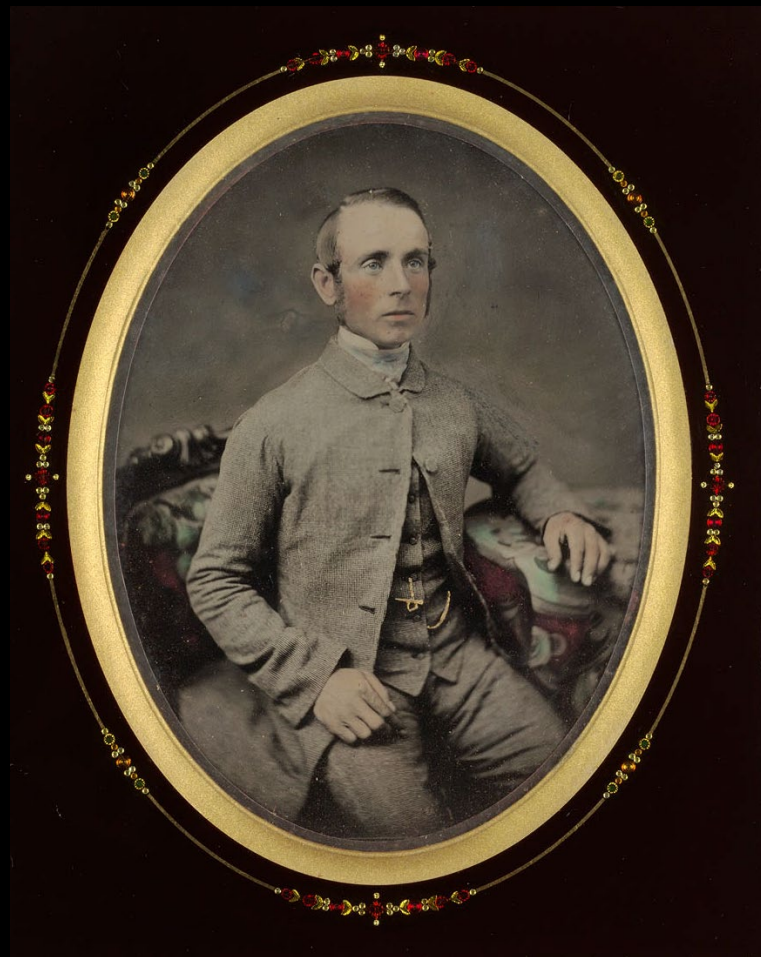
Watercolour miniature dated 11/1832
by Richard Read Jnr

French Fashion Plate, 1832





Ambrotypes, ca.1860, professional vs amateur



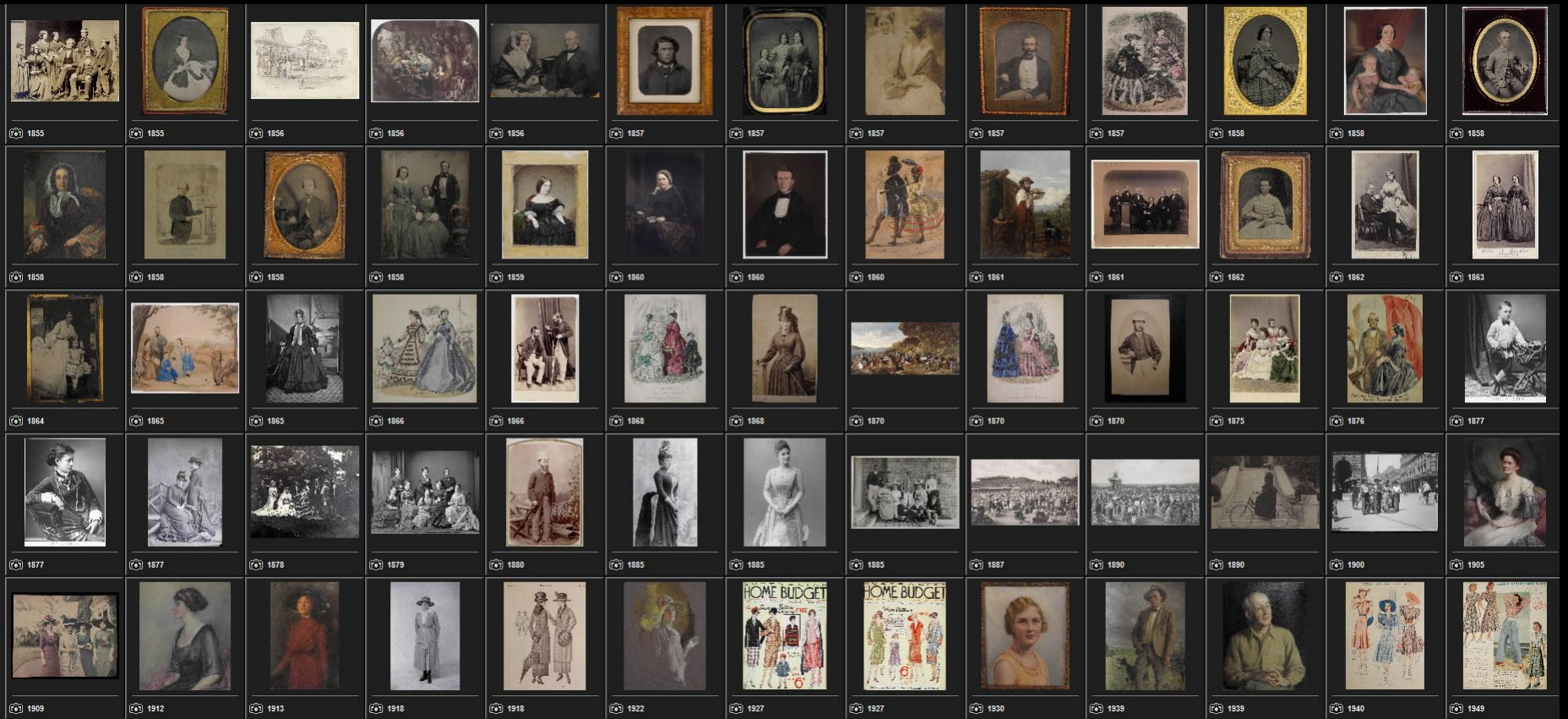
Unknown man & woman,
c.1858
hand-coloured ambrotypes,
T. Glaister attrib.



Mrs Hutchinson, c.1873, Holtermann Colln



Marie Carandini & her
daughters, c.1875,
hand-coloured carte de visite



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