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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The Pied Piper of Parmenter Street - The Philanthropic Work of F. Holland Day

BY PATRICIA FANNING

In 1896, Jessie Fremont Beale, a social worker with the Boston Children's Aid Society, wrote to a trusted volunteer concerning a needy Lebanese youth named Kahlil Gibran. Recognizing the boy's artistic talent but fearing that his potential would be lost, Beale turned to Fred Holland Day to assist the then thirteen year old. The support and guidance Day provided and the friendship that developed is well documented in numerous biographies of Gibran, who went on to considerable fame as a poet (today best known for his work *The Prophet*). A lesser known tale is that of Fred Holland Day himself, a publisher and photographer, who generously aided countless young people and their families at the turn of the last century.

A major retrospective of Day's photographic oeuvre ended its run at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in March and this summer travels to museums in Amsterdam and Munich. It is a welcome re-examination of one of the world's master photographers in the Pictorialist tradition. Day's subject matter ranged from sensitive portraits and figure studies to allegorical depictions of classic subjects. Perhaps his best known works were his 'sacred' studies, including a bold series on the crucifixion of Christ for which he was his own model. All were well represented in the exhibition *Art and the Camera: The Photographs of F. Holland Day*. The exhibition also introduced to the public some of Day's philanthropic activity, a dimension of his career that deserves elaboration as it shaped both his life and his art.



*"Kahlil Gibran with Book," 1897,
F. Holland Day, The Royal Photographic
Society, Bath, UK*

Born in 1864, the only child of wealthy but socially liberal parents, Fred Day was teaching Sunday School at the Parmenter Street mission in Boston's north end while still in his teens. By 1889, he was enthusiastically writing to friends about the activities of his "Parmenter St. cherubs." His growing concern for the fate of Boston's underprivileged immigrant children also led him to volunteer as a "friendly visitor" with the Children's Aid Society's home libraries project. Devised by Beale, the project involved placing a bookcase filled with juvenile books and magazines in the homes of the poor. A "friendly visitor" would meet with the children weekly to discuss their reading. Gracious and personable, Day was quickly embraced by a number of families. Kate Brown, a friend of Day's, recalled him standing "in the midst of a flock of little girls almost crazy with delight over the dolls and rubber boots he has given them," and he became well-known

for taking street-car loads of children on country excursions. He was so popular among the children that one Gibran biographer likened Day to a Pied Piper moving about Boston's ghetto neighborhoods.

From 1893 to 1899, Day and a friend, Herbert Copeland, published volumes of poetry, essays, and children's books. Their firm, Copeland & Day, was a significant participant in the Arts and Crafts Movement in Boston, a movement which combined artistic achievement with social responsibility and reform. In this tradition, Day introduced his settlement house charges to the cultural institutions of Boston's symphony, art museum, and theatre. He also encouraged particularly gifted adolescents, like Gibran, by sponsoring their education and employment.

While still in the publishing business, Day's interest in the arts turned seriously to photography. Several of his young proteges became the models for his "subject pictures," a type of costumed portrait popular among Pictorialists. These portraits demonstrated Day's ability to celebrate the varied ethnicities of his models at a time when others were attempting to downplay their differences and encourage their assimilation. As depicted by Day, Lebanese, Japanese, Greek, Chinese, and African-American adolescents were dignified, proud, and self-assured.

Following a 1904 studio fire that destroyed his negatives, art collections,



*"Ethiopian Head Crowned," circa. 1897,
F. Holland Day, The Royal Photographic
Society, Bath, UK*



"Head of a girl, Hampton, Virginia," 1897, F. Holland Day, The Royal Photographic Society, Bath, UK

and hundreds of prints, Day traveled to the Hampton Institute in Virginia. The journey kept his charitable work alive and renewed his artistic sensibilities. Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (alma mater of Booker T. Washington and now Hampton University) educated African and Native Americans as teachers, agricultural and trade workers. Day had been invited by the school's camera club to offer advice and critique their work. Correspondence indicates that he met with students of Hampton and its affiliated elementary school in informal settings as well. These encounters allowed him to reveal once again his unbiased affection towards and unerring rapport with young people. The naturalness and ease of the images taken at Hampton demonstrate Day's extraordinary empathy with his models as he captured close-up the thoughtful faces confidently looking into the future. While the Hampton photographs are seen as a bridge between his early portraits and later, less contrived work, it was at his summer home in Maine that Day's camera opened fully to embrace the coincident joys of youth, nature, and beauty. At the same time, his philanthropic efforts took on a new, more ambitious, form.

Beginning in 1898, Day spent summers at a retreat he called Little Good Harbor near Five Islands, Maine. Because of Day, the bucolic setting became a kind of artist's colony for his friends and their families. Among the

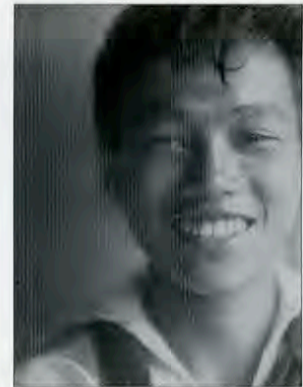
photographers who visited were Gertrude Käsebier, Alvin Langdon Coburn, George Seeley, and Clarence White, who himself opened a summer photography school a few miles from Day's property. The area was also popular among Day's inner-city proteges. (In 1912, Day built a large, Swiss-style chalet to house his numerous guests.)

Day's "camp" was informally fashioned after the programs for disadvantaged youth then popular in New York and Boston, and perhaps was inspired by similar camps run by the Episcopalian Sisters of St. Margaret and Cowley Fathers, with whom Day was closely associated. All visitors enjoyed boating, swimming, reading, board games and, of course, photography. Sailor suits were worn by all to eliminate any trace of social inequality or privilege. In this way, Little Good Harbor provided a brief respite from the hardships of urban life as well as a healthy physical and social environment for Gibran and other young people. Encouraged by Day and his photographic associates, several of the adolescents eventually pursued artistic careers. In addition to Gibran, Nicola Giancola became a successful commercial artist and landscape painter, while two others, Ernest Bachrach and James Giridlian, worked in Hollywood as still and motion picture photographers.

Perhaps most significantly, Day's mentoring relationship with these young men continued for decades. They kept in touch through letters and in person well into adulthood, informing Day of educational, occupational, and familial milestones. Many served in World War I, during which time Day kept up a steady flow of letters and gifts to raise their spirits. Gibran and Giancola last made contact with Day in the mid-1920s; Bachrach and Giridlian in the early 1930s. By then, Day was a semi-invalid, bed-ridden much of the time but maintaining a vast correspondence with his far-flung "family." As he grew older, the "Pied Piper" of Parmenter Street wrote affectionately to his 17 godchildren – all the offspring of friends, proteges, and former models. To them, he was "Mr. Day," or "Bro

Day" (short for the summer camp title of Brother Day), or the "Uncle of Chocolate" as he was called by the children of a Japanese friend, Kihachiro Matsuki. Day died in his home in Norwood, Massachusetts, in 1933 at the age of 69, and was remembered by Matsuki, in a letter to a local newspaper, as "a most kind and thoughtful person."

After years of anonymity, F. Holland Day's artistic reputation has been reestablished with the current traveling exhibition helping to ensure his rightful place in photographic history. But Day's work with Boston's urban poor should be recognized as well. Perhaps the words of one young protege, Bert O'Brien, written to Day in 1921, are a fitting epitaph for a good and decent man who, in his own way, tried to ease the burden of ghetto life for so many:



"David Leung," 1911, F. Holland Day, The Royal Photographic Society, Bath, UK

"Oh Boy!! For those good old days at Little Good Harbor; once again those happy hours with you; those twilight naps on the window seat; those joyous moments with oars or paddle; or those sound sleeping nights in the best little Chalet in the world....Tho the days and years are fast fleeting [1] shall never forget you, or the many many good times your kind generosity enabled me to have."

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