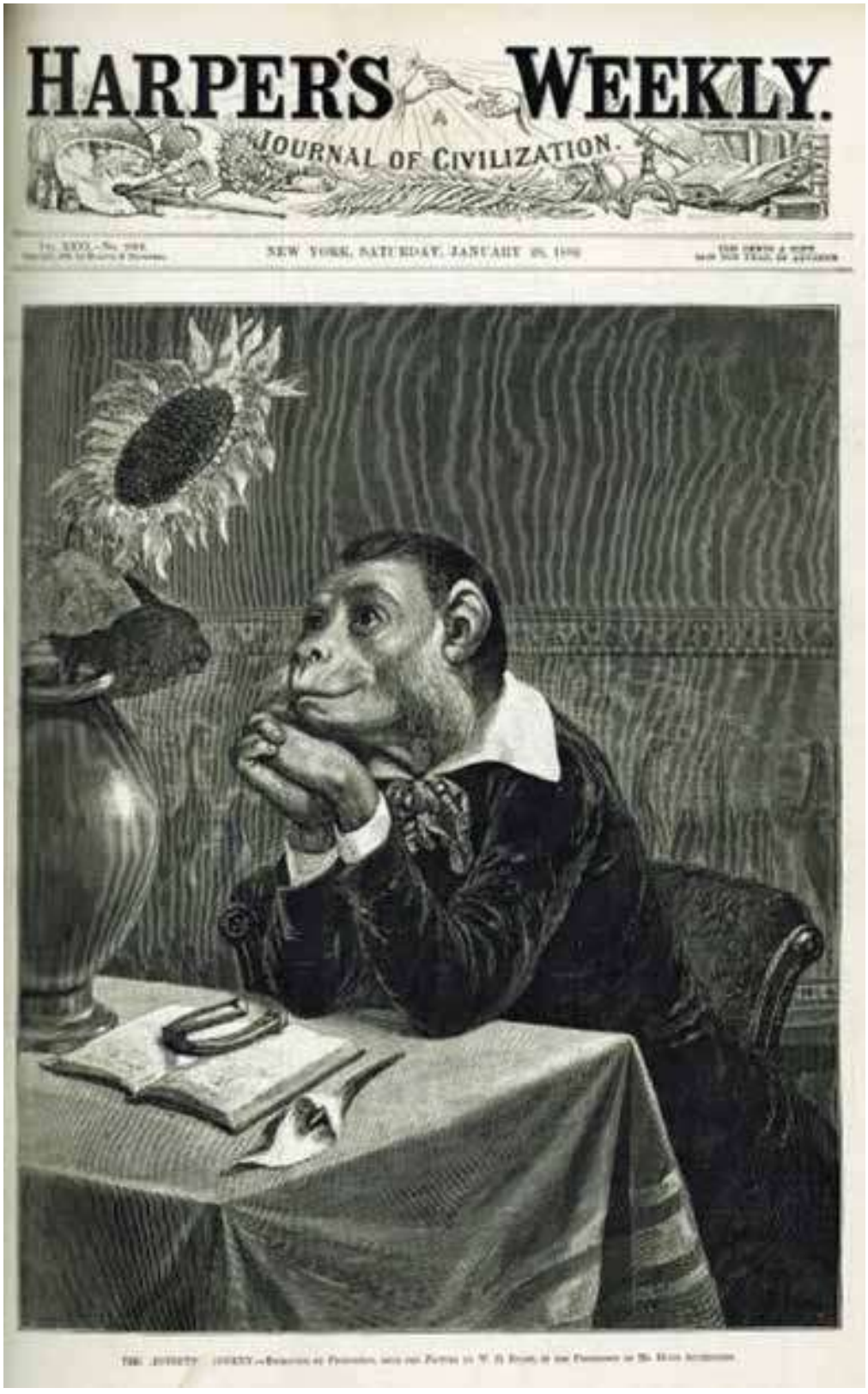


William Holbrook Beard. *The Aesthetic Monkey*. Wood engraving for the cover of *Harper's Weekly*, January 28, 1882. Published a few weeks after Wilde's arrival in America, it set the tone for many of the vicious caricatures to come.

The Wilde Woman and the Sunflower Apostle

VICTORIA DAILEY

Oscar Wilde arrived in New York on January 2, 1882 on his first trip to North America.[1] By the end of the month, he'd landed (more or less) on the cover of the nation's most widely read journal, *Harper's Weekly*. The seated figure, dressed in fancy clothes, gazing dreamily into space and surrounded by a book, a horseshoe, a sunflower and a lily, referred to the poet – but it was not Wilde.[2] It was a monkey. An invidious lampoon titled 'The Aesthetic Monkey,' the image was reproduced from the painting by William Holbrook Beard, an American artist well-known for his anthropomorphic animal pictures, especially those of carousing bears.[3] But for their cover, the editors at *Harper's* chose to present the recently arrived poet as a simian, a choice that began an avalanche of derogatory, disdainful and satiric images of Wilde, whose presence in America caused a sensation unlike anything previous.[4] Yes, Charles Dickens had toured the country (1842 and 1867) as had Jenny Lind (1850–52),

1. Wilde returned to New York for his second (and last) American trip during August of 1883 to supervise a production of his play *Vera, or The Nihilists*; it closed after a week.

2. The sunflower and the lily were flowers associated with the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde had championed their use in the garden and in decoration, and they became visual metaphors for him.

3. William Holbrook Beard (1824–1900). The painting (current whereabouts unknown), had an interesting provenance in the 1880s: it belonged to Hugh D. Auchincloss, the prominent merchant and financier whose son Hugh D. Auchincloss Jr. married the mother of Gore Vidal; after that, he married Janet Lee Bouvier, mother of Jacqueline Kennedy.

4. A few small caricatures had appeared in the press the week before *Harper's* cover, including 'The British Fungus and the *Wild* American Sunflowers,' by Thomas Nast that depicted Wilde as a mushroom-like creature (January 21, 1882. Nast satirized Wilde at least two more times in 1882.) An unsigned caricature appeared in the *Washington Post* (January 22, 1882) comparing Wilde to 'Mr. Wild of Borneo,' an ape-like creature, but the cover of *Harper's Weekly* was the most significant and influential of these early negative portrayals.

each to great fanfare – Sarah Bernhardt's tour was still nearly a decade in the future – but no 19th century celebrity garnered as much attention as did Oscar Wilde in 1882.

To make the cover of *Harper's*, one had to be famous or notorious – Wilde was both. At twenty-seven, he had published just one book, a volume of poetry, yet he had become a celebrity, and it was not because of his verses.[5] Rather, his vocal support for the then radical Aesthetic Movement, his unusual clothing, physical appearance, dandyish manners, and of course, his witticisms and epigrams, had made him infamous. Recruited by opera impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte, Wilde was about to embark on a lecture tour across America to promote the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta *Patience* which had debuted in London in April, 1881 and in New York that September.[6] A spoof on the Aesthetic Movement – its main characters were limp-wristed poets based on Swinburne and Rossetti, and possibly Wilde himself – *Patience* drew crowds. D'Oyly Carte, the opera's producer, had hoped that Wilde's growing notoriety would drum up business in America, but it was Wilde who captured the lion's share of the public's attention: his American tour lasted nearly a year; *Patience* closed in New York after six months and 177 performances.[7] Although it was successful, it was no match for Wilde himself.

Wilde was so novel, so audacious, so 'utterly too too,' as the popular phrase he inspired had it, that he created a sensation everywhere he went. And he went far, and wide. Between January and

5. Wilde's first book, *Poems*, was published in October, 1881. He brought copies with him to America. One such is a signed copy, now at Magdalen College Library; it bears Wilde's inscription 'Jany. '82, Philadelphia' and is also inscribed and dated '1882' by philanthropist and publisher George William Childs, who gave it to his wife Emily. The Childs had entertained Wilde at their Philadelphia home the evening of January 18, 1882. Earlier that day, Wilde had called upon Walt Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, where they famously drank elderberry wine and, according to Whitman, 'had a jolly good time' and as Wilde suggestively reported: 'I have the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips.'

6. Extremely popular in London, *Patience* ran for 578 performances, second only to *The Mikado*'s 672. Wilde had yet to publish any poetry when the opera was written, but over time, the lead character of 'Bunthorne' has come to be associated with him.

7. *Patience* closed on March 23, 1882; Wilde departed America on December 27, 1882, nearly a year after he arrived.

November of 1882, Wilde visited and lectured in 125 American cities, including such far-flung places as Milwaukee, Omaha, San Francisco, Leadville, Cedar Rapids, Memphis, Louisville, New Orleans, Galveston, San Antonio, Savannah, Charleston, Portland, Atlantic City and Pawtucket.[8] He lectured on the subjects of art and decoration, beginning with his first public speaking event in New York a week after he arrived: On January 9 he gave an hour-long talk titled 'The English Renaissance' in which he explained the Aesthetic Movement: "I call it our English Renaissance because it is indeed a sort of new birth of the spirit of man, like the great Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century."[9]

Home decoration and aesthetics had become popular topics among rich and prosperous Americans after the Civil War, especially the wives of tycoons who were eager to display their wealth by building the most fashionable homes their husbands could afford. Colonel William Francis Morse, Wilde's tour manager, recalled: 'His lectures were always of the greatest interest to women. Men, unless cultured and students, rarely took much notice of the new gospel of art. His most attentive listeners were women, and to them his views came often as a new revelation.'[10]

Although the Aesthetic Movement had originated in England, it generated a great deal of interest across the Atlantic; books about interior decoration and applied art by such authors as Clarence Cook, Christopher Dresser, Charles Eastlake, Mary Eliza Haweis, Owen Jones, Walter Pater and Candace Wheeler were read with enthusiasm on both sides of the Atlantic. Because the women of

8. *Patience* had been performed in various American cities in 1881, before Wilde's arrival (including St. Louis and San Francisco), and afterwards, was staged in various North American cities from coast to coast. In the smaller cities, the productions were one-night only events, but most performances occurred in conjunction with Wilde's lecture tour. Wilde also went to several Canadian cities including Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Halifax, Charlottetown.

9. Wilde lectured approximately 150 times in the U. S. and Canada, ultimately delivering four different talks: 'The English Renaissance,' 'The Decorative Arts,' 'The House Beautiful,' and 'Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century.'

10. W. F. Morse in *The Writings of Oscar Wilde*, London, 1907, p.84. Morse (1841–1922), an imposing Civil War veteran and Indian fighter, had become a business manager for D'Oyly Carte in New York and as such, arranged for all of Wilde's North American appearances.

America were especially eager to hear Wilde's decorating theories, his lectures were not entirely without a context. It was Wilde who was without precedent – his first lecture quickly sold out, even at the high price of $1 per ticket, to twelve hundred eager audience members, many from New York high society.[11]

Unfortunately, Wilde's Oxford English struck many in the audience 'as a voice that might have come from the tomb. It grew monotonous, and was fast becoming painful,' according to the *New York Times*, but a moment of levity was struck when Wilde, smiling, said something humorous and the audience began to laugh. 'At the finish of the lecture the poet was vigorously applauded, and when he retired from the stage he blushed like a school-girl.'[12]

Wilde had dressed for the lecture in an aesthetic 18th century-inspired outfit consisting of a 'low-necked shirt with a turned-down collar and large white necktie, a black claw-hammer coat and white vest, knee-breeches, long black stockings and low shoes with bows.'[13] White kid gloves completed the ensemble. It was hardly the attire of the American entrepreneurs and businessmen in the audience, and Wilde's clothing never failed to capture the attention of the public and the press – he was interviewed at least ninety-eight times during his tour, and special attention was always paid to his wardrobe. As one *New York Times* reporter noted: 'He was dressed as probably no grown man in the world was ever dressed before.'[14] Artists and illustrators began to create caricatures of him, launching a mini-industry that included sheet music, advertising trade cards, photographs, Currier & Ives prints and newspaper cartoons.

Wilde must have understood the power of visual imagery, and soon after his New York lecture (and at Morse's urging), sat for twenty-eight portrait sittings with Napoleon Sarony, the city's leading commercial photographer.[15] Sarony cleverly arranged for

11. One dollar in 1882 would equal $25 today.

12. 'Oscar Wilde's Lecture,' *New York Times*, January 10, 1882, p. 5. That he 'blushed like a school-girl' hinted at his perceived effeminacy, which would provide much fodder for the press and disapproval from certain journalists and public figures.

13. Ibid. A claw-hammer coat is a formal tailcoat.

14. *New York Times*, October 24, 1883, p. 8

15. Sarony made twenty-eight portraits of Wilde in 1882 and three in 1883. Sarony was Wilde's only photographer during his two American visits.

Strike Me with A Sun Flower. Chromolithograph, 1882. E. B. Duval, printer. One of scores of advertising cards that lampooned Wilde; a merchant's information was printed on the verso.

Anonymous artist. F. H. Snow [music]. *Oscar Wilde Galop*. Sheet music cover, 1882. Wilde inspired numerous waltzes, galops, mazurkas and serenades.

an exclusive contract that made him the only photographer permitted to take Wilde's likeness, and it proved profitable – Wilde told a reporter that the demand for his portraits far exceeded the supply.[16] Wilde, Morse and Sarony all astutely perceived that the dissemination of Wilde's likeness would increase his celebrity, and these images, which were sold throughout his tour, are the images that now provide the clearest impressions of the young Oscar Wilde.

Many other printed images were created in Wilde's wake, images generated not by Wilde but by businesses eager to piggyback on his growing fame by associating themselves with his views on home decor. The new printing technique of chromolithography created colorful images that were cheap to print; it was used extensively to disseminate all sorts of ads, including those associated with Wilde. Manufacturers of household items such as wallpaper, paint and thread created thousands of business cards depicting Wilde in a

16. *New York Tribune*, June 11, 1882, p. 9

variety of poses and postures, typically with sunflowers and lilies, the flowers that became his hallmark – he became known as 'The Sunflower Apostle'. Publishers of sheet music, who provided much of the home entertainment of the time, put Wilde on their covers in a variety of guises in order to sell popular songs; some of the tunes were inspired by Wilde himself.

While most of the printed messages are obvious in their attempts at broad humor and satire, many mocked Wilde in ways that today seem unthinkable, especially those that began to emerge portraying him as a black man. One South Carolina photographer made a startling, coded image that warrants our attention, as we shall see. Cryptic in nature, only recently has it been decoded as anti-Wilde. All of these images, whether lithographic or photographic, share similar iconographies that reveal an attitude of derision, a mindset of racism and an obliviousness to prejudice – and they all align with the visual culture of the late 19th century that included casually cruel images of black people. How Oscar Wilde became enmeshed in this imagery reveals a great deal about America's deep-seated unease with racial, sexual and cultural differences.

After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, when the era of Jim Crow began, the plight of African Americans became nearly as perilous as it had been under slavery as blacks lost the political and social rights they had gained after the Civil War ended in 1865. The former slaves and their descendants were subjected to many iniquities, including being portrayed in print as either monkeys or buffoons, a result of pseudo-scientific interpretations of Darwin. The American tragedy of slavery was never expiated, and the shameful results manifested themselves in new ways to exclude and deride black people. Racist caricatures permeated American society, and with technological advances in color printing, the realms of advertising, entertainment and the press – the mass media of the day – churned out demeaning images of black people that were meant to keep them in permanent bondage to white society along with exclusion from it. Blacks were depicted as semi-literate and childlike, unable to speak standard English; as being closer to household pets and apes rather than fully realized humans; as inherently unable to perform any but the most menial tasks; and as foolish imitators of a white

Currier & Ives. *The Aesthetic Craze*. Lithograph, 1882. One of many images depicting Wilde as an African American. From "Darktown Comics," a popular set of seventy-five separate caricatures of African Americans issued between 1879 and 1896.

Ise Gwine for to Wushup Dat Lily… Chromolithograph, 1882. E. B. Duval, printer. From the series *National Aesthetics*, six caricature trade cards portraying Wilde in various ethnic guises: African American, Irish, Chinese, Jewish, French and German. All employ the disparaging clichés of the era.

society they could never join. Into this cultural milieu stepped Wilde, and unbeknownst to him, he would become part of this phenomenon when, after having been portrayed as a monkey, he began to be portrayed as a black man, and in one instance of gender reassignment, as a black woman. African Americans, the ultimate outsiders, were the easiest people to mock and humiliate in late-19th century America and Oscar Wilde joined their ranks.

Wilde's persona was just too much for most Americans to appreciate, let alone understand. An effete man dressed in velvet and silk who espoused what were typically thought of as women's subjects (interior decoration, household matters, art, opera and literature); a man who spoke in epigrams and witticisms; a man whose weapons were words and not firearms was someone to fear, isolate and ridicule, and that is what happened. A newspaper report from Wilde's three Texas appearances noted: 'Oscar Wilde made a failure of it in Texas. In many places a large percentage of the audience left the hall before the lecture was half over. It is about fifty years too soon for aestheticism to take root in Texas. The cowboy element could not be persuaded but he was a woman. They never saw a man like that before.'[17]

Never, indeed. Wilde's dress and manners were considered effeminate and unmanly, making him seem like a woman; he contravened expectations of how a man should appear. Yet paradoxically, in one instance during his tour, Wilde was mistaken for an actual cowboy, when, in Los Angeles, an article appeared with Wildean overtones entitled 'Too Tenderly, Utterly Too. How He Made a Mistake – It Wasn't the Sunflower Apostle,' in which a reporter took note of a recent local incident:

> 'Last Saturday a gentleman well known in commercial circles rushed madly home—about lunch time—and calling excitedly to the partner of his terrestrial joy, said:
> "Wife, I've seen him."
> "Seen who?" said his unsyntactical superior fraction.
> "Why, Oscar Wilde, of course. Met him on Spring Street, all dressed up in long hair, knee-breeches, yellow cravat and everything. Gimme clean collar, quick!"

17. *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1882, p. 1.

Napoleon Sarony. *Portrait of Oscar Wilde*. Cabinet card photograph, 1882. Wilde's dashing capes, velvet coats, cravats and hats added to his notoriety.

> And straightway arraying himself in a white vest and his best sunflower, he meandered his way toward Baker block, unconscious that the party he mistook for Oscar, the aesthete, was none other than Buffalo Bill, the Comanche scout, who was laying over in Los Angeles a day or two to have a jamboree all to himself.'[18]

Buffalo Bill, whose flamboyant garb was easily accepted by the public, was never caricatured as anything but a white he-man. Wilde, equally florid, was understood to be the opposite and was always portrayed as a limp-wristed sissy or a grotesque black man. The cultural norms of the time allowed only for the approval of traditional masculine attributes, which fit Buffalo Bill, but not Wilde. Wilde's homosexuality was perceived, but any mention of it was

18. *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1882, p. 3. The aesthete and the scout had more in common than just their dashing clothing. A rumor circulating in 1888 had it that Gilbert & Sullivan, whose *Patience* Wilde was promoting, were composing an opera on the 'Buffalo Bill Craze.' (*Los Angeles Herald*, 4 March 1888, p. 6.) Regrettably, the opera never appeared.

The Aesthetic Darkey. Color wood engraved trade card, c. 1882.
Wilde, again portrayed as an African American, advertises Ashley Phosphate, a fertilizer made in South Carolina.

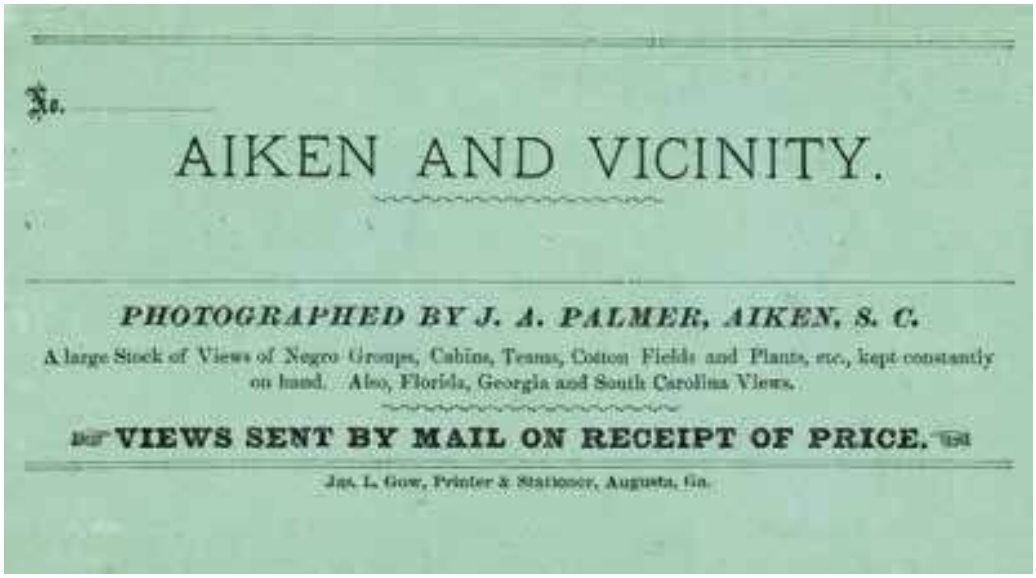
prohibited–the English language itself had very few words then to refer to a homosexual–and visual imagery was the most effective way to convey and ridicule it.[19]

Easier to target than homosexuals were African Americans. Derisive images of black people, often used to sell products, were thought of as humorous, embodying the culturally accepted stereotypes used to normalize racism.

After being on tour for a few months, both in the South and the North, Wilde was invariably portrayed as an absurd black man, the ultimate insult. The fact that he was Irish compounded the tendency since Irish immigrants were often vilified by being called 'Black Irish.' The anti-Irish bigotry that was so prevalent in 19th century America became an element in the transmogrification of Oscar Wilde into a black person.

19. The few 19th century English slang words synonymous with homosexual include *poof*, *bugger*, *bardash* and *invert*, but many of the terms we know today did not enter the language until after 1900.

J[ames]. A. Palmer. *The Wilde Woman of Aiken*. Cabinet card photograph, 1882. Wilde is transformed into a black woman wearing an Aesthetic Movement-style dress seated next to a sunflower, his most recognizable emblem. The face-jug is a distinctly local reference; such vessels were made by slaves (and later, freed men) in the area around Aiken, South Carolina, where the photographer had his studio.



The label for Palmer's "Aiken and Vicinity" series. Printed by James L. Gow in Augusta, the labels were affixed to the verso of the stereographs in the series. The two known copies of "The Wilde Woman of Aiken" also bear this.

One image stands alone in the visual record of Wilde's American tour – the one that portrays him not as a black man, but as a black woman. It is not a cheap chromolithograph advertising card, but instead, a cabinet card photograph by James A. Palmer, a professional photographer in Aiken, South Carolina who specialized in stereograph 'views of Negro Groups, Cabins, Teams, Cotton Fields and Plants.'[20] Aiken was a very small town with a population of about 2,000 in 1882, and because of its mild winter climate, it had become a popular winter resort for well-heeled Northerners after the Civil War. Palmer's many images of rural black folk supplied such visitors with what would have been to them, 'exotic' souvenirs, akin to buying photos of 'native' people in foreign lands. The 'Wilde Woman of Aiken' was something else. Created as a scathingly insulting portrait, the image shows a seated young black woman dressed in an Aesthetic Movement-style patterned dress in much the same pose as the Beard cover of *Harper's Weekly*. Palmer merely substituted the monkey for a black woman, while keeping the sunfl-

20. James A. Palmer (1825–1896), born in Ireland, had emigrated with his family to the United States when he was a boy. He had lived in Rochester, New York, Illinois and Georgia before settling in Aiken, where he set up his successful studio.

ower, horseshoe, desk and chair.[21] However, he added an element that was meant to further demean both the sitter and Wilde – a face jug. This object would have been familiar to Aiken inhabitants as an example of local pottery made by slaves in Edgefield County.[22] The exact origins of these unusual water jugs is unknown, but they are thought to have first been created by slaves from the Congo who arrived in the region in 1858 and who had transposed some of their cultural iconography from African wood to South Carolina clay.

The photograph, which appears to modern viewers as beautiful, was not intended as such, and appears to have been meant for a select audience: the cabinet card format, larger than Palmer's typical 'tourist' stereographs, was much less common in his output, and its seemingly strange, single subject based on Oscar Wilde would have appealed to only a limited number of buyers – he must have published only a few.[23] A copy that appeared in a recent auction bears the photographer's label on the verso and is titled in ink in a contemporary hand 'Wilde Woman of Aiken' and 'The Aesthete of Aiken SC 1882.'[24] A viewer in 1882, especially one in Aiken, most likely would have laughed at it, understanding the vicious iconography that portrayed someone as lowly as a black woman

21. The horseshoe, a common Victorian symbol, meant not only luck but also alluded to superstition, especially protection from evil spirits; black people were thought to be especially superstitious.

22. The Edgefield area of South Carolina became the center of a thriving stoneware industry based on the local red clay and deposits of kaolin known especially for the distinctive face jugs made by enslaved African American potters. These Edgefield face jugs are characterized by their exaggerated facial features and technical achievement although their meaning and function are still unknown. The Edgefield District, created in 1785, contained the town of Aiken until 1871, when the region was divided into smaller divisions and Aiken became part of Aiken County. The region had a reputation as a center of racial violence and was home to the Red Shirts, a late 19th-century Ku Klux Klan-like faction; it was also the birthplace of Strom Thurmond, the controversial United States Senator who opposed civil rights and supported segregation.

23. Currently, there are two known examples of the image, an indication of its rarity; one is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the other is in a private collection. Both examples bear Palmer's printed label on the verso identifying the images as being from his 'Aiken and Vicinity' series, but because the series was made up of stereographs, rather than print a new label for the cabinet card, Palmer must have used one that was readily at hand.

24. Sold at auction in 2018 for $12,000 plus $2,400 premium, it is the one in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

as being a part of the Aesthetic Movement. The face jug added a further insult by implying that the young woman could only appreciate something as 'ugly' as a distorted face, perhaps recalling (and misunderstanding) some of Wilde's lecture that had appeared in the extensive newspaper coverage he received. He had stated:

> "In your [American] art schools I found no attempt to decorate such things as the vessels for water. I know of nothing uglier than the ordinary jug or pitcher. A museum could be filled with the different kinds of water vessels which are used in hot countries. Yet we continue to submit to the depressing jug with the handle all on oneside.'[25]

Did Palmer read Wilde's criticism of American water jugs in the press? Perhaps, but more likely is that he actually heard Wilde's lecture on the decorative arts. On July 6, 1882, Wilde gave one of his five Georgia presentations at the Opera House in Augusta, just across the Savannah River from Aiken.[26] Hearing the lecture may have inspired Palmer to include the face jug as a way to satirize Wilde, an extra insult heaped onto the one portraying him as a black woman. In any case, his inclusion of the face jug, unique in anti-Wilde imagery, tends to bolster this view.[27] Since James L. Gow, Palmer's label printer, was in Augusta (then a city with a population of around 25,000, ten times larger than Aiken), he must have gone there often on various business matters. Because Gow was also a stationer, he most likely kept a stock of photos for sale, as did many such businesses at the time, which would have made Palmer's photos available to a much wider audience than would have been possible in Aiken alone. An object of curiosity and unlike

26. He also spoke in Columbus, Macon, Atlanta and Savannah, and from Georgia, went to Charleston, South Carolina; Wilmington, North Carolina; and Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia, where his Southern tour ended.

27. Palmer created one other anti-Wilde image, a stereograph entitled 'The Aesthetic Darkey,' an image of a young black boy seated in much the same pose as 'The Wilde Woman' and with the same props. Also from his 'Aiken and Vicinity' series, this image was more in keeping with Palmer's other stereographs, especially his images of black children and black families. After Wilde's departure, it would have appeared to viewers as just another regional picture of a poor black child rather than as a Wilde satire, similar to Palmer's images of black children eating watermelon. (Teal, Harvey S. *Partners with the Sun: South Carolina Photographers, 1840–1940*, 2001, p. 273.) Teal himself was unaware of the Wilde connection, writing that the 'Aesthetic Darkey' was a picture of an 'African American boy... looking at a 'voo doo' or face jug.'

the majority of images in Palmers output, 'The Wilde Woman of Aiken' was undoubtedly printed at the time of Wilde's appearance in Augusta, a snide souvenir of his lecture, and one with a regional reference. Given Wilde's unfavorable press coverage that aligned with Palmer's negative iconography, the image would have appealed to at least a few locals, an inside joke to those who understood its references. The day after Wilde's talk, the Augusta *Chronicle and Constitutionalist* reported: 'At nine o'clock Mr. Wilde came on to the stage, in a peculiar, gliding walk…He was clad in black velvet – full dress coat, waistcoat and knee breeches…He at once struck an attitude…This attitudinizing was never relaxed for a moment, and it struck the audience as both uncomfortable and ungraceful…The subject of the lecture was 'Decorative Art,' and the matter was both instructive and interesting, but much of its interest was destroyed by the mannerism of the lecturer.'[28]

Wilde was aware of the negative press he was receiving, and early in the tour complained about it, to no avail, to his tour manager, Colonel Morse. Unfortunately for Wilde, Morse was interested in publicity, both good and bad, and he generated a lot of each. (The early caricature of Wilde as 'Mr. Wild of Borneo' may have come directly, and secretly, from Morse.)[29] After Wilde left Augusta, the criticism continued in the usual vein. In Charleston, his next stop, a reporter described Wilde as 'two hundred pounds of avoirdupois of aesthetic human flesh and bones done up in a mouse-colored velveteen shooting jacket and salt and pepper small clothes…something out of the style of Buffalo Bill or Texas Jack.'[30] A month earlier, in Memphis, he was described as a 'long-haired, round-bodied, slimly-underpinned apostle of the BEAUTIFUL…He is not a thing of Beauty…Their [the audience's] curiosity satisfied, they care no more for the Wilde man of England than for his prototype,

28. *Chronicle and Constitutionalist*, [Augusta, Georgia], July 7, 1882.

29. See Mendelssohn, Michèle. *Making Oscar Wilde*, 2018, p. 100.

30. *Charleston News and Courier*, July 8, 1882, p. 4. 'Texas Jack' Omohundro was a cowboy who, as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, dressed in a flashy style similar to Buffalo Bill. At the time, these showmen, because they wore elaborate embroidered and fringed buckskin jackets and shirts, were the only men with whom Wilde was compared in terms of looks despite their differences in attitude and temperament.

the wild baboon of the Amazon.'[31] *The Goldsboro* (North Carolina) *Messenger* reported: 'Oscar Wilde, in an abridged form, appeared upon our streets yesterday. He wore a low collar and long hair, and sighed heavily. A luminous vest surmounted a pair of eccentric breeches, and an aesthetic langour roosted all over him. The general sentiment was – 'take him out and kill him.'[32]

It was one thing to portray Wilde as a monkey, but to suggest that he be murdered is stupefying. Goldsboro was then a whistle-stop town between Wilmington, North Carolina and Richmond, Virginia, but Wilde was not in either place in early June (he was in Ohio and Tennessee), so the press report seems to be both vicious and spurious. There were, however, numerous Wilde imitators travelling around the country during Wilde's tour, and the reporter hints that it was one of these faux Wildes who so enraged the town by stating that it was Wilde 'in an abridged form.' Whoever he was, the Wilde-like character managed to provoke an animosity that still shocks and disturbs – such malice explains a great deal about the anti-Wilde imagery that dogged the poet on his tour.

Not only were there Wilde imitators, there were several minstrel show satires of him, among them, 'The Utterly Too Too's, or Parodies on Oscar Wilde,' and 'Patience Wilde or Ten Sisters of Oscar.' Not surprisingly, both were performed in blackface, and the latter featured 'The Only Leon', a cross-dressing, white mega-star of the time.[33] The popularity of minstrelsy cannot be overstated: it was the dominant form of popular entertainment in 19th century America. Such troupes as Haverly's Mastodon Minstrels and the Christy Minstrels toured the country for decades. Some troupes did away with blackface and featured African American performers, including Callender's Georgia Minstrels, but Haverly's show remained the largest and most spectacular of the genre. In New York in March, 1882, Haverly featured 'a burlesque on 'Patience,' entitled

31. *Public Ledger*, [Memphis Tenn.] March 2, 1882.

32. *The Goldsboro Messenger*, June 8, 1882, p. 3.

33. Francis Patrick Glassey (1844–c.1903), who performed in drag as 'The Only Leon,' was the highest-paid minstrel performer of his day, earning $100 a week (equivalent to $2500 in 2019 dollars).

Zip Coon. Lithograph sheet music cover, c. 1834. New York: J. L. Hewitt. Lithography by [George] Endicott. Satirizing African American men as dandies was a common practice in 19th century America. Such images paved the way for those depicting Wilde as a black dandy.

Ceticism, My Beloved, Bredren… Chromolithograph, 1882. New York: Donaldson Brothers, [printer]. Wilde, as a black dandy, lectures to a crowd of African Americans; his speech is transcribed in dialect. Clarence Brooks & Co., a varnish manufacturer, issued numerous trade cards caricaturing black people; this is the only one that satirizes Wilde.

'Patience Wilde; or, Ten Sisters of Oscar,' with Leon as Patience.[34] A cross-dressing man in the title role of the opera associated with Wilde and with all 70 of the performers in blackface clearly demonstrates the emerging link between Wilde, transvestitism and racism in the popular imagination.

Racist images of black men dressed up as dandies had a long history, appearing soon after the emergence of the word 'dandy,' circa 1816. The term was used to describe a man unduly devoted to style and fashion 'wearing immense plaited pantaloons, coat cut away, small waistcoat, cravat and chitterlings immense, hat small, hair frizzled and protruding.'[35] One such image appeared on the cover of the popular minstrel song 'Zip Coon,' introduced in about 1829 and made famous by the blackface performer George Washington Dixon in 1834; it demeaned free blacks by satirizing their speech and clothing. Such images were copied, reinterpreted and reimagined throughout all manner of printed media, and for decades they would have been familiar to most Americans. It wasn't a stretch to incorporate Oscar Wilde, with his dandified dress, unfamiliar mannerisms and Irish 'blackness' into that visual vocabulary.

A trade card for Clarence Brooks & Co., a New York manufacturer of coach varnishes, features one such image. Here, Wilde has been transformed into an exaggerated black dandy lecturing to a black audience, a satire of his lecture on aestheticism, which is rendered in black dialect.

Although the Wilde craze would subside, the mania to depict blacks as grotesque creatures did not. African Americans would have to wait a century before the overt, vicious racism of the printed image would begin to subside. Wilde had merely to leave America, where he had become a household name, and where, with his earnings of $5600, he had made a great deal of money.[36]

Had Wilde sensed that America would be the ideal place to launch

34. *New York Times*, March 21, 1882, p. 5.

35. Bee, Jon and John Badcock. *Sportsman's Slang: A New Dictionary of Terms Used in the Affairs of the Turf, The Ring, The Chase*...London: For the Author, 1825, p.63. This work cites the term 'dandy' as being 'an invention of 1816.' In the 18th and early 19th centuries, jabots, or ruffled neckbands, were also called 'chitterlings.'

36. $5600 is approximately $141,000 in 2019 dollars.

his career as a public figure? Somehow, he understood that to succeed in America he would have to play a role, that of an aesthetic dandy, a character out of *Patience*. Had he appeared in the attire of an American businessman or professor, or even that of an English gentleman, he would have been largely overlooked. His hundreds of lectures and interviews, given *in character*, were full of sensational and witty observations that made him a darling of the press. "Interviews are a product of American civilization, whose acquaintance I am making with tolerable speed."[37] Interviews were then a new phenomenon, unknown in Europe. "We have no interviewing in England," he went on to say.[38] Wilde, who instantly recognized their usefulness, was among the first to capitalize on them. He is said to have received more press coverage than Queen Victoria. He had become famous in America for playing a character, not for any substantial achievement. That was yet to come. He reversed the typical course of fame by winning a fortune first, and whether he was portrayed as a monkey, a black person, an effeminate dandy or a limp aesthete, he triumphed in the end. As he famously wrote: 'There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.' But it may have been his experience in America that caused him to remark: 'In old days men had the rack; now they have the Press.'

Wilde returned to Europe in January of 1883, and by the spring, he was living in Paris. 'He threw aside his mask and wig as an apostle of aesthetics, had his hair cut, and donned ordinary garments. Of his connection with the Aesthetic Movement he said: "That was the Oscar Wilde of the second period. I am now in my third period.[39]"

This article will appear shortly in the Los Angeles Review of Books.

37. *Boston Globe*, January 29, 1882, p. 4.
38. *St. Louis Republican*, February 26, 1882, p. 13.
39. Morse, *op. cit.*, p.138.