

## Portraits by Heinrich Tønnes

Henning Bender

The *carte-de-visite*, a portrait photograph in the format of a calling card (6 x 9 cm.) has undoubtedly been the most profitable invention in the history of photography. Constituting 95 percent of the photographs made in the 19th century, these pictures replaced calling cards and were exchanged among friends and relatives and collected in albums. Far cheaper than all earlier portrait forms, they appeared worldwide in the early 1850s, a time of unprecedented population shifts. As families were separated, photographs became mementos of great emotional value. In Ålborg, then Denmark's second largest city, Heinrich Tønnes (1825–1903) introduced the personalized *carte-de-visite* in December 1856. It was "the Christmas gift of the year," his advertisements trumpeted. One of his Christmas gift albums of 1856 has been preserved in the Ålborg Historical Archive: it is said to be one of the oldest extant series of *cartes-de-visite* in the world.

The Archive is rich in the history of photography thanks largely to Tønnes and his descendants who operated his studio continuously through 1969. During his long career he made some 150,000 *cartes-de-visite* and another 100,000 photographs in various formats; most of the negatives have survived. In addition, the Archive contains his order books, detailed records of every photograph he took from 1864 on, citing the date, place, number of copies, price and, for portraits, the name and occupation of the sitter. The completeness of this collection and the superior quality of his work distinguish Tønnes from his numerous colleagues in Northern Europe. Through him can be traced the development of the style and technique of the *carte-de-visite* in the second half of the 19th century. His life illuminates the history of what was then a new career—commercial photography.

Tønnes was born on 10 May 1825, in Grünenplan in the former duchy of Braunschweig in northern Germany. Like his father and everyone else in the small town, he was employed in the glass industry. As a glass cutter and skilled painter of stained glass, he labored at various glassworks in the Ruhr and Braunschweig areas. During these years a glass industry was being set up in Denmark. There was a shortage of skilled native craftsmen, however, so manpower was imported from abroad, in particular from Germany, which was more highly developed in technology. For this reason, Tønnes emigrated to Denmark in 1847. By 1855 he was in Ålborg.

Owing to its central location, Ålborg had excellent communications with the Continent and the rest of Scandinavia. German and Austrian daguerreotypists were attracted to the town. The first of these came from Vienna as early as 1843 and many others followed. Among them was the German-born C. Fritsche. From 1855 onward, he produced daguerreotypes and ambrotypes as well as paper prints made from glass-plate negatives. His work aroused the interest of the glass craftsmen. As a painter of stained glass Tønnes was naturally fascinated by the new, seemingly effortless method of delineation on glass; as a glass

### Heinrich Tønnes

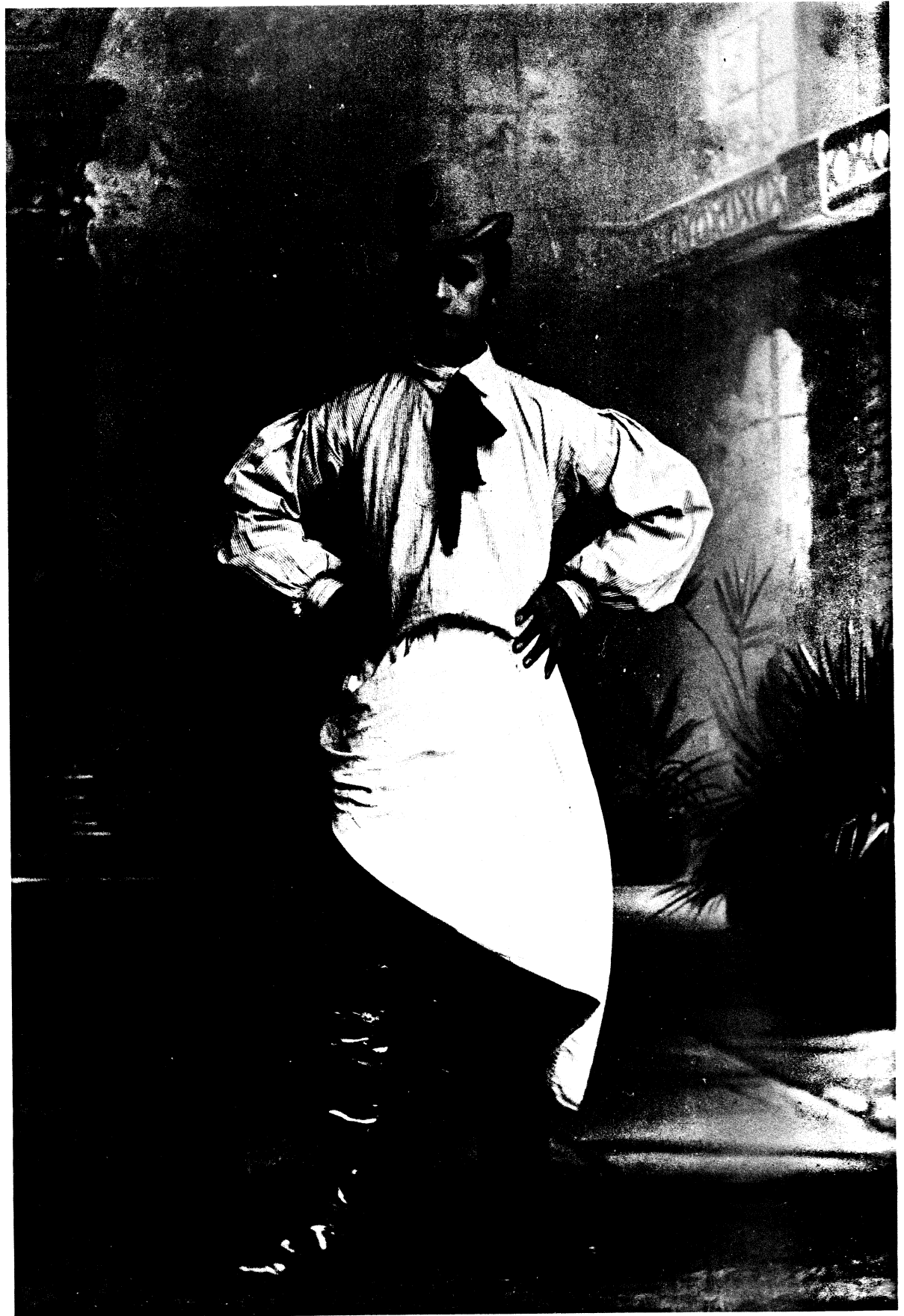
Knud Behrend, butcher's assistant 1891

modern gelatin silver print  
from original negative

10 x 8

25.4 x 20.3

Collection Lokalhistorisk arkiv for Aalborg  
kommune





**Heinrich Tønnies**

Blacksmith Sørensen and assistants 1881  
modern gelatin silver print  
from original negative  
10 x 8  
25.4 x 20.3  
Collection Lokalthistorisk arkiv for Aalborg  
kommune

cutter he was also interested in the camera itself, especially the lens. He acquainted himself with Fritsche's methods and later traveled to Berlin to learn more. When he returned to Ålborg in the fall of 1856, he took over Fritsche's studio and announced that he would make *cartes-de-visite*. It was among the new ideas that he had picked up in Berlin.

Tønnies's *cartes-de-visite* were an immediate success and he quickly became one of the most affluent photographers in Denmark. He invested his money in more advanced cameras and in improving his facilities. In 1880 he built a three-story studio, modeled on the most celebrated establishment in Berlin; it was the largest ever constructed in Scandinavia. He equipped it with the best German cameras available, most notably a giant Voigtländer with a lens 16 cm. in diameter, which had been manufactured in Braunschweig since 1865. Since enlargements were still unknown, the 50 x 60 cm. photographs this could take were remarkable.

Tønnies executed a great number of photographs of Ålborg in the 1860s, making it one of the best documented towns in Denmark at the time. These pictures were sold as a kind of postcard and were used as models for lithographs in illustrated periodicals. This work brought Tønnies an important commission from the Danish National Railways in 1874. He was to photograph in detail all stages of the biggest engineering project in Denmark at that time, the construction of a railroad bridge over the Limfjorden in northern Jutland. Skilled labor had to be recruited from France and Italy for this undertaking, and the laborers wanted to send pictures home showing what they were doing and how prosperous they were. Since Tønnies was the official photographer of the bridge construction, he also took photographs of the laborers in their working clothes, some of them holding handfuls of money.

From this time on, Tønnies made portraits of workers: smiths and housepainters, carpenters with their saws and hammers, chimney sweeps with their brushes, housemaids with their dustpans. Though the number of worker pictures is about half of a percent of Tønnies's 30-year output of *cartes-de-visite*, they form a body of work unique in Scandinavia and fascinating in the light they shed on the professions and the photography of the time.

For all his pictures, Tønnies's prices were considerably above those of other local photographers, but so was the quality. For his worker portraits, his order books show that craftsmen with particularly heavy tools paid extra to be photographed. These pictures had no political motivation; in fact, his granddaughter, the photographer Lili Tønnies (b. 1888), remembers that he was a strict conservative. Apparently, Tønnies had exactly the same attitude toward his portraits of workers as toward his other *cartes-de-visite*. It was all business. For groups he provided discounts on individual portraits; before the Mormons left for Utah, for example, he made at least 2,000 pictures, judging from the negatives that survive.

Jean. *Oh yes, Miss Julie, yes. A dog  
may lie on the Countess's sofa, a  
horse may have his nose stroked  
by a young lady, but a servant . . .  
well, yes, now and then you meet  
one with guts enough to rise in  
the world, but how often?  
Anyhow, do you know what I  
did? Jumped in the millstream  
with my clothes on, was pulled  
out and got a hiding. But the  
next Sunday, when Father and  
all the rest went to Granny's,  
I managed to get left behind.  
Then I washed with soap and hot  
water, put my best clothes on and  
went to church so as to see you.  
I did see you and went home  
determined to die. But I wanted  
to die beautifully and peacefully,  
without any pain. . . .*

August Strindberg, *Miss Julie*, 1888

**Heinrich Tønnes**

Valdemar Larsen and a friend 1900

modern gelatin silver print  
from original negative

10 x 8

25.4 x 20.3

Collection Lokalhistorisk arkiv for Aalborg  
kommune

Julie. *Listen. My mother wasn't well-born; she came of quite humble people, and was brought up with all those new ideas of sex equality and women's rights and so on. She thought marriage was quite wrong. So when my father proposed to her, she said she would never become his wife... but in the end she did. I came into the world, as far as I can make out, against my mother's will, and I was left to run wild, but I had to do all the things a boy does—to prove women are as good as men. I had to wear boys' clothes; I was taught to handle horses—and I wasn't allowed in the dairy. She made me groom and harness and go out hunting; I even had to try to plough. All the men on the estate were given the women's jobs, and the women the men's, until the whole place went to rack and ruin and we were the laughing-stock of the neighborhood. At last my father seems to have come to his senses and rebelled. He changed everything and ran the place his own way. My mother got ill—I don't know what was the matter with her, but she used to have strange attacks and hide herself in the attic or the garden. Sometimes she stayed out all night....*

August Strindberg, *Miss Julie*, 1888

Tønnes's worker pictures, like all his *cartes-de-visite*, evolved like their counterparts in Germany and Scandinavia. Determined entirely by the wishes of the public and extensively retouched, they were flattering rather than true to life. In the 1860s and 1870s they were comparatively simple both as to studio arrangements and accessories, while in the 1880s and 1890s an increasing number of special effects were used to romanticize the pictures or to create the illusion of a more natural environment. Chairs, tables and plants proliferated in the photographs, and so did the variety of painted backdrops used—winter and summer landscapes of fields or woods, limpid lakes dotted with swans and beach scenes with picturesque shipwrecks. Sometimes setting and subject were oddly matched, as in his portrait of a very dirty chimney sweep standing in a palatial interior. Tønnes is not unique among portrait photographers of the time in this superabundance of accessories. Rather, he had more effects and a larger studio than his rivals. And in style he remained several years ahead of his Scandinavian colleagues because of his direct connections with Berlin, through Carl Suck, photographer to the Imperial German Court, with whom he had studied, and his retoucher, August Andrée, who became father-in-law to Tønnes's son Emil.

To modern eyes Tønnes's photographs may seem strange and overcrowded, but their exceptional quality becomes apparent at close view and in modern enlargements of the original negative material. In spite of an extensive production, which on Ålborg holidays could exceed 350 portraits daily, Tønnes and his assistants, who numbered at one time as many as 15, lavished great care on every photograph and always used the most advanced technical aids available. His methods were superior: he was early in moving from the wet collodion process to dry plates, and by the end of the 1870s he began to make dry plates with the Obernetter patent to sell to other photographers. His compositions are varied and assured, and his portraits reveal the unique qualities of his subjects.

*Henning Bender began the Historical Archive of the Ålborg Municipality in 1974, and it now contains about 1.5 million pre-1920 photographs of northern Jutland as well as historical documents. An MA in history, he has taught that subject at the University of Copenhagen. (Translation by Callum Forsyth.)*

