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# MUSEUM LUDWIG

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## **Smile! How the Smile Came Into Photography**

Presentation in the Photography Rooms

Smizing, squinching, duck face, fish gape, cheese, or prunes: Beauty ideals and social media have given rise to increasingly mercurial trends in portrait photography. Until the late nineteenth century, having one's photo taken required the sitter to remain absolutely motionless in order to produce a sharp image, which more often than not resulted in a fixed and lifeless expression.

*Smile! How the Smile Came Into Photography*, presented in the Museum Ludwig Photography Rooms, investigates how our “photographic faces” have evolved over time. The show assembles a range of anonymous and artistic portrait photographs from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century to recount a history of the smile.

Whether or not we smile when being photographed, or whether we show our teeth, depends on social norms and the photographic technology available. In 1878, the photographer Josef Janssen observed that “the awkward situation in which a person finds themselves at the moment of having their photo taken is in itself enough to prevent them from displaying their individual personality. Motionless and with a fixed gaze, their head leaning on that dreaded, detestable head rest, they are required for a set period of time to stare at a certain point in space that generally offers the eye nothing of interest. What else could this result in but stiffness and lifelessness?”

The fact that people in the nineteenth century rarely smiled when having their picture taken in a photographic studio also reflected contemporary norms regarding how one should appear in a portrait, norms based on conventional ideas of class, gender, and context. Emotions were considered a private matter that had no place in a portrait.

The emergence of silent film played a key role in the appearance of the smile in twentieth-century portraits. Facial expressions were used to convey emotions, filling the frame in tight close-up shots. Parallel to this, headshots increasingly replaced full-body portraits. Then came advertising, where the beaming smiles of actors served to embody the allure of products. The corners of the mouth began to rise ever upward. A 2015 study of student portraits in American yearbooks revealed that smiling in photographs has consistently increased since the start of the twentieth century, with results confirming that women smile more than men. A trend toward increased facial expressiveness can be observed the world over. A look at fashion photography, however, shows that status and coolness are conveyed with barely a smile. As early as 1927, the sociologist Siegfried Kracauer noted that the world—and thus the people in it—had taken on a “photographic

face." The presentation at the Museum Ludwig aims to show that this observation still holds true today and that the smile has a history.

The show is accompanied by a publication with a text by Katharina Sykora.

Curators: Miriam Szwast with Brit Meyer

**#PhotographyFaces #MLxPhotography**