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Literary History In Color Dana Keller Brings Life to Historic B&W Photos

Tod Hardin · Wednesday, March 19th, 2014

“With b&w photos, people tend to feel distant and disconnected from the real and vibrant world those photos are actually portraying. “

Dana Keller

Colorization of classic films never did go over that well. For whatever reason, despite efforts by many – including a certain media tycoon from Atlanta, Georgia – it just never seemed to catch on. However, things may be a bit different with the still image. While early colorizations were either those using

spot color, or those simply lacking realism, today's photography softwares seem to have taken things to a new level.

Dana Keller, an archival scientist by trade, is one of several people that have gained a great deal of attention for their work in realistically colorizing historic black and white still images. For some, this practice has been controversial, while for others it has been an eye-opening experience to greater appreciating and connecting with the past.

While Keller's subjects have included such figures as Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Audrey Hepburn and many others, it is with great pleasure that we present his work with images of several of the greatest literary figures in history.

Please enjoy both the original and colorized versions of this amazing images, along with a brief interview with Mr.Keller.

[alert type=alert-white]Click Here to View Our Top 10 Historical Colorized Images[/alert]

Mark Twain, 1907. Photo: A.F. Bradley

Hans Christian Andersen, 1869. Photo: Thora Hallagar

Tod Hardin: Who is Dana Keller?

Dana Keller: I'm originally from Arizona, and currently living in Boston. I just recently finished up my Masters here, studying archival science. My undergrad was in graphic design, and I've had several years experience in photography and photo editing, which helps a great deal in the awareness of the roles that light and color play in images.

TH: How did you come to specialize in colorization of historic black and white images?

DK: My interest in it began when I had seen a collection of colorized photos online that was receiving a lot of attention for being very realistic. To me, these images, while very carefully and thoughtfully colorized, did not really look true-to-life, but rather more like paintings. They no

longer resembled photographs. I have seen many colorizations before, and they have always looked very stylized, or at least it was unmistakable that they were colorized, as opposed to resembling an actual color photograph.

Most often, colorizers tend to use one color to “paint” an element in a photo, completely ignoring the fact that light interacts with the world in very complex ways. For example, there are many colors just in a person’s skin, not only a range of pinks/browns, but there are elements of blues and greens, underlying veins visible through translucent skin. Quality and color of light affects everything as well; whether the photo was taken indoors or outdoors. I wondered if it was possible to colorize a photo and really concentrate on the subtleties of color and light, perhaps enough to make it seem as if it really was a color photograph.

I posted a few images online as I was getting started, and the response was very positive. People were saying that they weren’t distracted by the fact that it was a colorization, and were rather viewing the photo in a new way, as if it was really in color. Since then, I’ve been continuing to grow my portfolio and share a lot of figures and events from history with people who are excited to see them in a new light.

I’ve been colorizing photos professionally for nearly a year now with various projects. Largely working with people wanting to see their old family photos in color, as well as larger projects with historical organizations wanting to really engage the public with their archival materials.

Charles Dickens, 1867. Photo: Jeremiah Gurney

TH: For some, colorization of historic black and white photos is a bit controversial – some have called it blasphemy. How do you respond to that?

DK: It is quite an interesting controversy. Firstly, in my experience, the overall response to colorizations has been very positive. The majority of people see the photos in a new way when they are colorized, and they express that it actually helps them to appreciate the events and figures of the past as more relevant. With black and white photos, people tend to feel distant and disconnected from the real and vibrant world those photos are actually portraying. By adding color to these photos, it makes them seem more familiar, and the viewer is brought a little closer to the reality in which they were taken.

Conversely, as someone with a degree in archival science, it’s essentially my responsibility to conserve historical documents/photographs as they are, and to preserve them for future generations. Several archivists in my circle, and many others, see colorizations as a misrepresentation of history or even a deliberate defacing or violation of the original records. I can certainly understand their perspective. What I do want to make clear, however, is that colorizations are done out of a respect and reverence for history. They are not meant to be replacements or improvements on the originals, nor are they meant to assume any resemblance of authority as a historical artifact. The reason they exist is to give the viewer an opportunity to see an image from history with a different perspective, not to change an original record. The originals are still here for us all to see and enjoy and preserve for the future.

Henry David Thoreau, 1856

TH: How do you choose your subjects?

DK: Usually I choose ones that just make me wonder what these pieces of history would have looked like in real life. Like, what would Abraham Lincoln or the Hindenburg disaster have looked like to the photographer? It is sometimes tough to come up with new ideas and subjects, so it's been very helpful to get suggestions from people through social media. They'll send pictures of people and events that are important or interesting to them, and many times I'm not actually familiar with them at all. I'll then get to research and discover new pieces of history, and at the same time color and bring to life the photos for others that I would probably have never found otherwise.

Walt Whitman, 1887. Photo: George C. Cox

TH: Is there any historical figure that you haven't colorized, but you'd like to?

DK: No figures in particular, but I'm still looking for some great photos of the Titanic, or notable figures related to it. Also, as someone from Arizona I'd like to get to some legends of the wild west.

TH: How do you ensure historic accuracy of the colors you use? For example, how do you know Walt Whitman's eyes were blue?

DK: I do research as much as possible when seeking out the proper colors. This can certainly be a challenge when coloring military uniforms, for example, or determining the color of an ancient advertisement sign or company logo. Researching clothing styles of different eras is a whole project in itself. But much of the time, there simply isn't much to go on, so some educated guessing is required, and a lot of trial and error. After some practice though, you begin to recognize the different shades of grey and what their corresponding colors MIGHT be. Some colors just simply will not work on certain shades, and you begin to be able to interpret that to help guide the color selection process. But of course, it's not an exact science.

C.S. Lewis, ca 1950.

TH: Have you gone back and changed a colorization based on feedback from others or finding new facts yourself that tell you what the true color was?

DK: Just recently, I posted a photo of baseball legend Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers. I had mistakenly colored the "42" on his uniform blue. It was the exact shade of grey as the blue bits of the uniform. After I posted the image, someone immediately messaged me saying that it should have actually been red. Complete oversight on my part. So I went back and changed it.

H.G. Wells, date unknown. AP Photo.

TH: Of all the colorizations you've done, do you have one you are most proud of?

DK: The one that is the most popular is Audrey Hepburn, and I really liked how that one turned out. But the one that I am close to would be one I had done for the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington. I was part of a group of colorizers that had planned to color a collection of photos of the event, but I didn't find out about it until the day before it was to be published. Normally an image with as much detail would have taken a couple of days at least, but 8 hours later I completed it just before deadline. While of course I wish I could have spent a bit more time on it, I was really pleased with the final result.

Virginia Woolf, 1902. Photo: George Charles Beresford.

TH: We've presented all of your current literary figures here. Do you have any others in the works?

I actually don't think I currently have any in the works, just some in the list of future potentials: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Lewis Carroll, and Henry David Thoreau.

Jules Verne, 1860. Photographer unknown.

Dana Keller will be speaking at the New England Archivist Meeting, March 20 – 22, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. To enjoy more of his work, visit www.danarkeller.com.

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