

STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA STAFF

Vincent Kelly photographic studio, Bendigo: opening up a collection of early 20th-century photographs

Introduction

Madeleine Say

In the 1970s, in a basement in Bendigo, Victoria, that once housed the studio of photographer Vincent Kelly, a collection of around 5000 early-20th-century glass-plate photographic negatives was discovered. The collection was donated to State Library Victoria in 2016, and this article reveals the preservation, digitisation, research and cataloguing processes undertaken by the Library to make the long-hidden photographs universally accessible online.

Vincent Kelly (1877–1958) was the proprietor of a successful commercial photographic studio in Bendigo during the first half of the 20th century. The longevity of his studio is testament to the quality of its work.

The Library's collection of Kelly's photographs, dating from around 1900 to 1920, is a significant record of Victoria's social history. The photographs are predominantly studio portraits of individual men, women and children as well as family groups, and some images were clearly taken for milestone events such as confirmations, graduations and theatrical performances. They appear to represent a wide cross-section of the people of Bendigo and central Victoria, although it is likely that Kelly, of Irish Catholic background, attracted clients of Catholic background in particular.

Studio portrait of a family group, name possibly Adams, c. 1920 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/249



The images give insights into social conventions of the time, as the ways in which subjects were portrayed, and with whom, disclose information about what those subjects valued. In some cases, one plate was used for two exposures, and the studio marked the non-preferred image with a cross, showing us how this generation of Australians wanted to be represented.

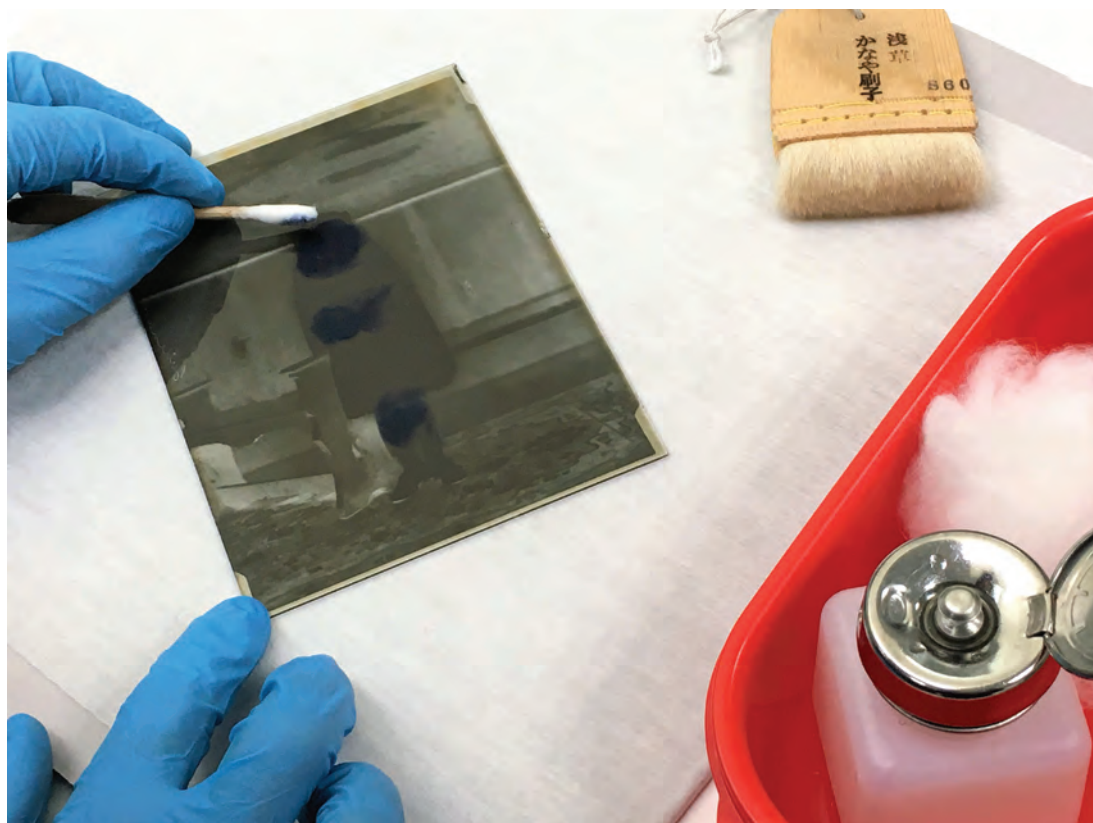
Almost every plate carries an inscription of a family name, likely that of the client, if not the person photographed. Some inscriptions are cryptic shorthand notes that presumably refer to clients' orders, and others are technical terms, such as 'sepia'.

The collection also gives insight into the operations of a commercial photographic studio of the period. The images often contain elements of the studio setting, such as props and painted backdrops used to create decorative illusions. The glass plates themselves, which are the full negatives from which the final images were created, reveal much about the studio techniques and processes, such as masking, deep etching and tinting, used to enhance or create particular effects in the prints. For example, masking was a technique commonly used on photographs of children or babies, to remove accompanying adults and make it appear as though the children were posing alone. The portrait on page 49 captured a woman with children, but the studio marking makes it clear that the woman would have been trimmed from the final print.

The glass plates are standard half-plate-size (120 × 160 millimetres) dry gelatin negatives, and most were stored in the original boxes used by Australian and British manufacturers of photographic supplies. The majority of the collection was in reasonable condition when acquired by the Library, although the emulsion on some plates showed water damage.

Considerable resources are required for a cultural institution such as State Library Victoria to take on a collection of this size and nature and make it available for public use. Many staff have been involved in the work of preserving and digitising the collection, researching the subjects of the photographs and the photographic techniques used, and cataloguing the images. Below, a staff member involved in each of those processes describes the behind-the-scenes work that brought this remarkable collection to light after so many years.





Blue pigment is removed by cleaning with an ethanol solution and cotton swab. The name inscribed on the plate is Cullinan, c. 1940 – c. 1950, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, H2018.319/166

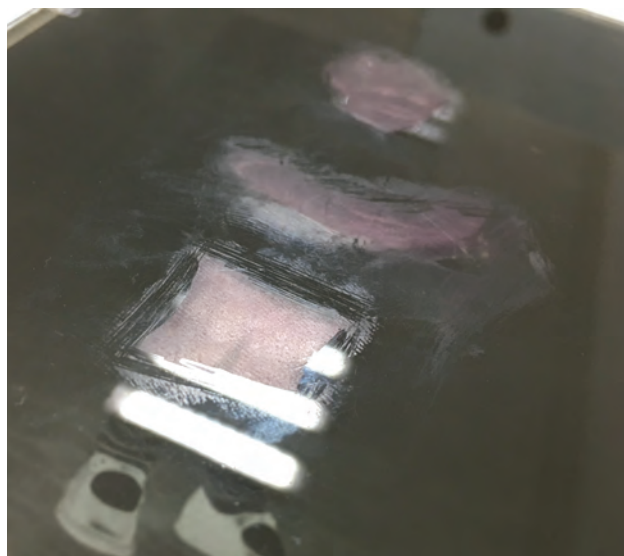
Preserving

Joshua Cassidy

Before the collection could be assessed in detail, preservation work was required. First, the plates were taken to quarantine for preparatory cleaning. Degraded original packaging was discarded and the loose plates were temporarily repackaged.

Plates selected for digitising were then cleaned and rehoused for safe handling and in preparation for long-term storage. Both the photographic bases (the glass) and the image layers (the silver gelatin emulsion) of the plates are fragile. A soft brush was used to clean the emulsion sides, while an ethanol solution was used to remove grime from the glass sides, significantly improving the clarity of the plates. Each plate was placed in an individual inert plastic sleeve, with archival paper protecting the emulsion. The plates were housed in boxes with interleaving foam to reduce the chance of breakage.

On close examination of the newly digitised images captured by the Library's imaging studio, we noticed a lack of clarity in some of the subjects' faces and realised that this was due to retouching that was applied after the



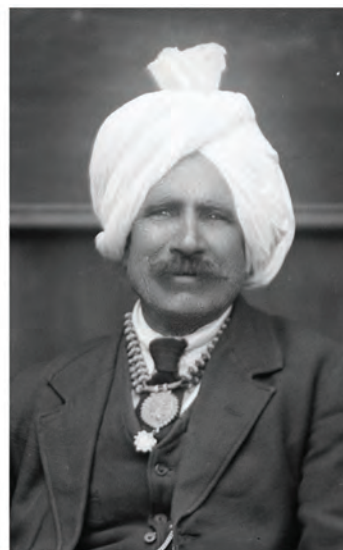
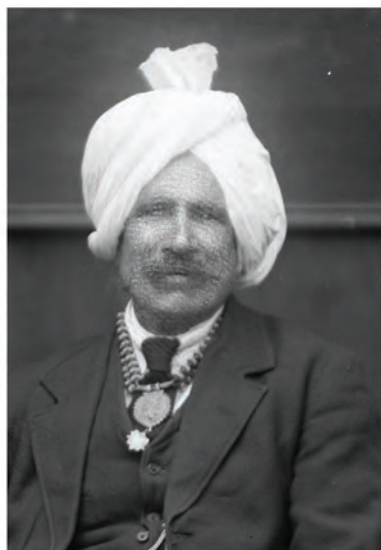
Left: Transmitted light highlights the pink tint applied to the subject's face, arms and legs. The name inscribed on the plate is Jones, c. 1910 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection H2018.319/128

Right: Raking light details the texture of the tinting pigment applied to the glass surface. The name inscribed on the plate is Jones, c. 1910 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection H2018.319/128

exposure of the plates. In fact, the art of retouching, rendered visible by the high quality of the digital images, is evident throughout the collection, and many techniques were used to 'improve' the images. To adjust detail, tone or contrast, graphite pencil and pigments were applied, or emulsion was removed by etching with a sharp point or abrasive powders. This work was aided by transmitted light from a purpose-built desk. According to a 1908 practical manual, these techniques aimed to, 'remove the defects caused by photographic methods', and were used for 'altering, adjusting, and improving, as may be desired, the expression and other detail, to obtain a given object'.¹ Retouching was more prevalent than we might have realised as it was skilfully disguised in the final prints.

The plate on page 51 shows three patches of transparent, blue tinting applied to highlight the face, hands and legs of the figure. The images above show the use of a pink tint to enhance the skin colour. The detail on the right is a view of the same image showing how paint was applied to the surface of the glass negative. Prints generated from the slide would not have been in colour; however, we can assume that the tinting achieved an effect of perhaps brightening the skin of the figure in a flattering way.

The evidence of retouching work on the plates, then, tells us about the photographic techniques of the period. However, in some cases retouching obscures or distorts the image. Is it more important to preserve the

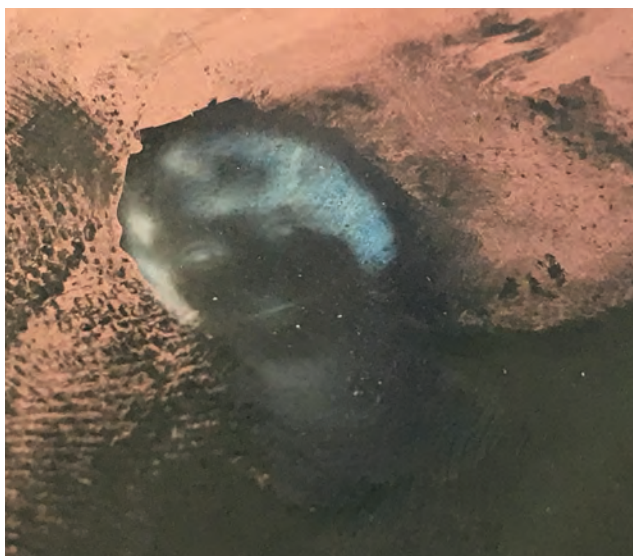


The detail on far right shows the clearer digitised image of the face after cleaning. The subject of the photograph is Utcher Singh, c. 1910 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection H2018.319/29

original retouching work on the plate or to clean it off to make the image as clear as possible?

The person in the photographs above is Utcher Singh, who is also shown on page 59. In the detail on the left, it is clear that Singh's face is distorted, with lines that are evidence of a fingerprint made when the tinting pigment was applied. In cases such as this we decided to prioritise identification of the subjects in the photographs, for research purposes and for aesthetics, and opted to remove tinting from faces. The detail on the right shows the same image cleaned, with the face now clearer and the person more easily recognisable. As these images are most likely to be accessed in their digital form, this will assist anyone researching them. The decision was not taken lightly, as the general principle in preservation is to retain as much of an object's original material as possible. Any removal of original material is documented, however, and the details are noted in the catalogue record for each plate. While we have removed retouching work from some plates, there are still many others in the collection on which examples of the techniques have been kept.

The photograph on page 54 (left) shows two images of the same man, the single plate being used for two exposures. The image on the left would have been the one chosen for the final print, as it has been significantly retouched. The masking around the head, using opaque paint, prevents light from passing through the glass plate, blocking out the background so that the figure is prominent. The etching of fine lines on the face with a graphite pencil achieved a smoothing effect, in this case to disguise the subject's freckles. This



Left: Transmitted light details the graphite pencil etching applied to the face of the figure on the left. The name inscribed on the plate is Reid, c. 1920 – c. 1940, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection H2017.74/55

Right: This close-up image shows transparent blue tinting and opaque pink masking applied side-by-side. The name inscribed on the plate is Burke, c. 1920 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection H2018.319/177

was applied to the emulsion side of the plate. Neither the etching nor the masking appears to compromise the clarity of the digitised image.

The image above (right) shows tinting as well as masking applied to the same plate. When the plate is closely observed, the care required to remove the blue tint on the lady's hair and face while retaining the pink masking that surrounds her becomes clear.

As in photography today, what was captured by the camera was not always reflected in the final images. Complementing the easily accessible digitised images, preservation of the glass plate negatives provides physical evidence of the manual manipulations of early photographic processes.

Digitising

Monika McIntyre

Digitising collection items allows them to be made universally accessible online through the Library's catalogue. The Library has been digitising glass photographic plates since the early 2000s, and in 2007 we embarked on an ambitious project to digitise over 50,000 glass-plate negatives and lantern slides from many different collections. The process required a dedicated camera set-up that could hold glass plates of different shapes and sizes. We created a special light box with white corflute boards at the sides and bottom, and a white perspex sheet over the top for the soft, diffuse light important for



Peter Mappin, digital production specialist, capturing a glass plate in the Library's imaging studio, 2019, photograph by Monika McIntyre

illuminating a glass plate evenly. Then, we positioned a cardboard template with an aperture to fit a glass plate on top of the light box, aligned on a central axis, and we mounted a camera on a stand and positioned it above the plate. Our conservation staff made templates in a range of sizes to fit plates of up to 12 × 16 inches (305 × 406 millimetres).

Imaging-studio staff photographed the glass plates one by one and turned the negatives into positive images. They then worked on the digital images in order to get the best possible representation of the photographer's intent as well as making the images pleasing to the eye. This involved checking and adjusting the exposure, the contrast and the tonal range to ensure that details in the images, such as patterns in clothing fabric and hair texture, were captured and that details in the black and white areas and tones throughout the images were maintained.

Researching

Jane Miller

Once the plates had undergone preservation work and the images were digitised, our team of reference librarians began researching, to find out as



Studio portraits of a woman, possibly Ruth Worthington, c. 1915 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/298

much as we could about the subjects of the pictures. The aim of this sort of research is to identify the people in the photographs and make relevant information available in the catalogue record for family and community history research, thereby making photographic archives accessible parts of Victoria's social history.

Names inscribed on the plates do not necessarily refer to people in the photographs. However, the images contain a surprising number of clues that can be used to help date them and identify the individuals, such as clothing fashions, special-occasion or theatrical costumes, uniforms, badges, regalia or medals, accessories and props, and family groupings. We followed up any names and clues using a range of family-history and other research resources, including births, deaths and marriages indexes, electoral rolls, post office directories, service records, local clubs and local histories. Contemporary Bendigo newspapers, digitised and viewable through Trove, a national database of Australian library collections, were also useful. To substantiate our research, we tried to cross-reference our findings with corroborating photographs (family trees on the Ancestry family history database were useful for this).

Our priority was to confirm their presence in or connection to Bendigo during the period the photographic studio was operating. We also aimed



Left: Sizer family, c. 1900 – c. 1910, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/78



Right: Sizer family, c. 1900 – c. 1910, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/285

to record birth and death dates along with parent and spouse names in the catalogue descriptions. Inevitably, in some cases we were unable to locate a particular name in records of the Bendigo area, or the pieces of the puzzle just didn't seem to match up. Where an identity is uncertain, we preface the descriptions with 'possibly'. We're hoping that the public will assist once the images are online.

The more we researched the collection, the more we found family names recurring and the more connections were made between different photographs. A sense of the Bendigo community of the period began to emerge. The Sizer family (shown above) is one example. So far, we have researched five photographs labelled 'Sizer'. It is possible the children are siblings, but we are not sure of the identity of the woman shown with the children: was she their mother? There were Sizer families in the surrounding districts, so these photographs may also have included relatives.

Originally, we thought one photograph was labelled 'Kean Smith' or 'Keam Smith'. However, when we later came across an image of a man called Utcher Singh (shown on page 59), we realised the other label probably said 'Kean



Ruth Batterham, c. 1910 – c. 1925, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/57

Singh' or 'Keam Singh'. There are listings for a Keam family in the Bendigo district around the time in question.

Utcher Singh was listed as living in Eaglehawk, near Bendigo, in 1914, in the *Sands and McDougall's Directory for Victoria*, which contained listings of local people, businesses and organisations.² Later listings located him in the Leitchville area, in northern Victoria, and a 1939 newspaper article described him as a well-known hawker, who on his annual visit to Bendigo for his hawker's licence made a donation to the Bendigo Hospital.³ Coincidentally, a Library staff member, Katie Flack, told us that her grandmother Gwen Ottrey, who as a child lived in the area near Leitchville, was taught by Utcher Singh to make flatbreads – which were known in the family as 'Ootchie cakes'.

We think the lady shown in the photograph above is Ruth Batterham, who ran a private hospital in the Melbourne suburb of Camberwell from 1913 to 1937. Ruth's brother, Ernest Batterham, was secretary of the Bendigo Hospital. While she didn't live in Bendigo, Ruth may have had this photograph taken while visiting her brother. The image shows some retouching work.

Tracing the Batterhams' story led to the discovery of a connection within this collection that wouldn't necessarily have shown up in official records. In 1925, a patient called Beer Singh died in the Bendigo Hospital. If Beer



Utcher Singh (centre), c. 1910 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.15/187



William Donohue, 1926, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/2

was a relative of Utcher Singh, did this inspire Utcher's regular donation to the hospital?

The photographs of William Coffey Donohue (above), a post office worker, and Loretto Moylan (opposite), a school teacher, were originally in separate boxes in the collection. Research to identify Loretto located her in a marriage index with William, and so here they are reunited. They were married in 1926,



Loretto Moylan, c. 1920 – c. 1930, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/280

probably in Bendigo. There is a corroborating picture of William in Hibernian Australian Catholic Benefit Society regalia, in the *Advocate* (Melbourne) of 18 March 1926. There is also a photograph of Loretto with a young woman – perhaps William’s sister?

Cataloguing

Monika McIntyre

Each glass plate in this collection will have its own separate catalogue record that describes the image and includes any information known about the subject of the photograph. Each photograph is given a title – generally, a formulaic description such as ‘Studio portrait of a young woman, family name possibly Smith’. The record notes if the title was derived from information found somewhere other than the image itself. The date of the photograph may be a time span, which is as narrow as possible and based on clues in the image and other research.

The condition of each glass plate is recorded, including any damage – for example, to the emulsion. Notes are included about the image itself, such as whether it’s out of focus or underexposed, there are two images on one plate or the image has been retouched. A ‘contents/summary’ note describes



Title	Studio portrait of a young man in tram driver's uniform, possibly Stanley Thomas Dennis.
Author / Creator	Vincent W Kelly active 1904-1958, photographer.
Date	[between 1926 and 1928?]
Description	1 negative : glass ; 12 x 17 cm (half plate)
Copyright status	This work is out of copyright
Conditions of use	No copyright restrictions apply.
Identifier(s)	Accession no: H2018.319/75
Subjects	Street-railroads -- Employees Glass negatives Portrait photographs
Notes	Possibly Stanley Thomas Dennis (1899-1975). Photographed in a Bendigo Tramways cable tram driver uniform, where he worked 1926-28. Dennis married Edith Doris Arthur in 1926. Son of Frances Dudley Harris and William Frederick Dennis. Inscribed on glass negative: Dennis Possible dates assigned by cataloguer from dates of subject. Title devised by cataloguer from information provided by research.
Contents/Summary	Whole-length, full face, standing with right hand in pocket; wearing cable tram driver's uniform of three-quarter length jacket and peaked cap, medalion on left side of chest stating driver 3.
Source / Donor	Gift; The Rosenberg family; 2016.
Series/Collection	Studio of Vincent Kelly. Glass negatives. Rosenberg collection.
Biographical/Historical note	Vincent William Kelly, active 1904 to 1958; Photography studios in various locations in Bendigo, Victoria, from 1904 to 1958. Also associated with Bartlett Brothers Photographers, Bendigo 1936 to 1938; Moonee Ponds, Victoria, 1904.

Example of a catalogue record. Studio portrait of a young man, possibly Stanley Thomas Dennis, in tram driver's uniform, c. 1926 – c. 1928, photograph by Vincent Kelly, Pictures Collection, Rosenberg collection, H2018.319/75

the subject of the photograph, including details such as the way the subject is seated and if they're holding something, what they're wearing, their hairstyle, and any props in the background. The catalogue record also notes any work done by the Library on the plate prior to digitisation, such as cleaning the negative to remove degraded retouching tint, as described above.



Once the digitised images have been catalogued, the images and records will be loaded into the Library's digital object management and preservation system so that they can be made available online. A small number of images can be viewed now via the Library's digital image pool (go to slv.vic.gov.au/images and search for 'Rosenberg collection'). More of the collection will progressively be made available in 2020. The entire collection will take a few more years to complete.