



Posing for Power/Posing for Pleasure:

Photographies and the Social Construction of Femininity

Posing for Power/Posing for Pleasure: **Photographies and the Social Construction of Femininity**

January 21 - February 28, 1988

Wendy Botting, exhibition curator

**University Art Gallery
State University of New York at Binghamton**

Introduction

This is the third exhibition organized under the graduate program in the history and theory of art and architecture, in collaboration with the University Art Gallery, as part of a new course called "Curatorial Practice." The course, conceived as a combination of theory and practice, offers a context in which graduate students, working with art history faculty and University Art Gallery staff, can curate an exhibition on a theme of their choice, prepare a catalog, and organize a supporting program of lectures and educational events. It therefore provides a new kind of space in which the student as curator can not only acquire skills, but also test and rethink the critical, historical, and theoretical concerns of the program, while engaging with a wider audience under all the institutional pressures of professional work. It reflects the recognition within the art history program that the arenas in which art historians may now expect to find professional employment have changed and greatly diversified with the growth of local museums, art centers, art publishing, broadcasting and journalism, and a burgeoning cultural service industry. "Curatorial Practice" is a first bridge to this expanding field. It points to the great importance, especially for an innovative critical program such as ours, of ensuring that graduates develop the specific kinds of expertise they will need to enter a widening range of arts institutions. It also ensures that the renewed and lively debate in the academic discipline of art history will find a voice—many voices—through these graduates, who will in turn open up new possibilities for a larger public.

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Posing for Power/Posing for Pleasure: Photographies and the Social Construction of Femininity

I.

We look at a lot of photographs of and about women every day; we take them for granted. Rarely do we consider the effects they have on us as men and women. Look at the first two images: two different photographs, but also two different *photographies*, from two very dissimilar normative archives. One, from an institutional family album, tells us what is normal by inviting our identification with an imagined ideal. The other, from a criminal record, legislates on what is normal by defining deviancy, thereby telling us what we should not be.



Fig. 1. Photograph by Verne Morton taken at George Jr. Republic, 1909. Courtesy De Witt Historical Society of Tompkins Co., Ithaca, NY.

It is the latter type of archive which is the focus of this exhibit, *Posing for Power/Posing for Pleasure*.¹ In the presentation of its images and text, I want to make the point that photographs are put to work and have their status or currency in specific *institutional* and *discursive* spaces. In the example below, for instance, a representation of the family, built around a discourse of normative gender and kinship relations, is contrasted with a representation of a woman as produced by the police—an institution newly developed in the mid-19th century and invested with powers of arrest, not only as a means



Fig. 2. Bertillon system photograph, 1909. Bessie Hayden, furnished room thief. Courtesy New York City Municipal Archives.

of punishment, but also as a means of producing a supposedly scientific knowledge of criminal types. The accomplishment of both aims demanded new techniques and new technologies. Thus, a prime means for police work and the science of criminology was an equally new means of representation: photography.

It is the appropriation of photography by such disciplinary institutions that this exhibition seeks to investigate. Its title highlights the fact that these photographs will be considered as elements of particular institutionalized discourses which define and construct their objects of knowledge. Specifically, it will consider how photographs, and the social discourses to which they belong, actively construct both the social category *femininity* and its implication in the category *deviancy*. The dominant discourse of femininity in western societies, though always subject to resistance, marks out and fixes the limits of meaning of the term 'woman.' By representing woman as lacking, it negatively defines and differentiates the female as Other, *not*-male. Fixed in this discursive economy, anatomy becomes the alibi of patriarchal subjection. Yet, this reading of the female body and the limits that are set to *femininities*—always plural, never permanently fixed or homogenous—are socially and discursively produced: they are based not on essential or natural feminine traits, but on the meanings allotted to woman in a patriarchal order. Such an analysis applies equally to discourses of deviancy: the deviant is also represented as lacking, in relation to a set of culturally established positive terms. Thus, the power of normalization is at issue in both discourses, which intersect in the photographs presented in the space of the gallery.

It is because of his concern with normalization and power that Michel Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge is important to the exhibition theme: the appropriation of photography to the institutional and discursive construction of femininity and, or indeed *as*, deviancy. Foucault does not theorize power as a monumental, centralized, repressive force.² His analysis of power is based on specific techniques and their effects, not on an attempt to derive power in general from a central, unitary point of origin. What feminists might draw from this is an understanding that power is relational, dispersed, and embedded in specific discourses, practices, and institutions which discipline the female body, its actions, pleasures, and desires. To grasp this would mean going beyond the attempt to derive this domination from a single, prior source—whether in the givenness of gender, class, or the state. The point is not to argue from this that women have not been oppressed in capitalist states but that, as feminists, we have to look at the ways domination over women has been produced unevenly across specific historical modes of representation, techniques, and forms of knowledge. This takes us back to photography and its implication in techniques of social discipline and the power and knowledge of social sciences which, amidst the upheavals of the 19th century, made the woman's body, the family, and the definitions of deviancy objects of such intense scientific and administrative concern.

Extending Foucault's analysis to the history of photography, John Tagg has examined in "Power and Photography," "The Proof of the Picture," and other writings³ how the new social sciences, deploying new techniques of observation, representation, and regulation, pathologized the human body and



Fig. 3. Illustration accompanying John Turner's essay on faces of the insane, "Journal of Mental Science," 1892. (From Gilman, 1982, p. 187.)

utilized photographic representations as evidential truths, as records which supposedly proved the inherent moral or psychological degeneracy of the criminal (figs. 2 and 5), the female hysteric (fig. 3), or the homeless (fig. 4).

These "sciences of man," and the institutions of regulation and control in which they were seated, are not expressions of a unitary will to power, state control, bourgeois repression, or patriarchal authority. Psychiatry, public health, criminology, and philanthropic reformism, in the latter half of the 19th cen-

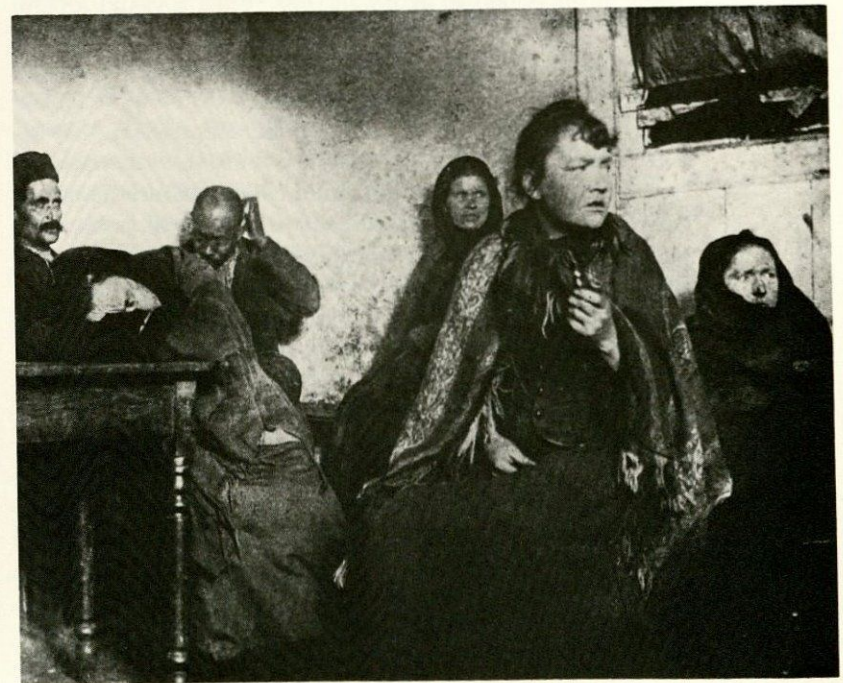


Fig. 4. Photograph by Jacob Riis. Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York.

tury, were the actual sites where new relations of domination and subordination were constructed. In this process, a new class of scientific experts emerged, empowered to survey and regulate society and to *know* those others who were positioned as the passive objects of their social engineering.

The value of the camera to such experts was bound up with photography's status as a modern technology, reliant on scientific discoveries in both optics and chemistry. Such a technology lent its own validity to the social scientific institutions which put it to use in factories, prisons, medical or psychiatric hospitals, and unsanitary areas, as in colonized countries, where anthropological explorers constructed a visual archive of racial types. In "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula suggests that photography held out to 19th century scientists the promise of a "universal language" by which to articulate the accumulated knowledge of a global empiricism.⁴ By integrating the photograph into an archival structure of knowledge, as in the Bertillon criminal identification system, the peculiarities of the human body could be both isolated for study and statistically compared with others pictured in the file. Thus, a basis was laid for what Foucault calls a new "technology of power and knowledge," bearing right down on the bodies of social subjects and *subjecting* them to a constant disciplinary examination.

If we are to make sense of the photographs in this exhibition, therefore, we must analyze *how* they mean or communicate, and the archival context in which they construct their social knowledge and fix the positions you and I inhabit. It is only in such discursive processes and institutional practices that power/knowledge operates.



No. 68.		No. 159	
POLICE DEPARTMENT CITY OF NEW YORK. Detective Bureau.			
Bertillon Measurements.			
Height, 1.63.4	Head Length, 19.5	L. Foot 46.8	
Outer Arms, 1.77.0	Head Width, 15.14	Mid. F. 11.8	
Trunk, 85.0	Len. 5.7	Lit. F. 8.8	
	R. Ear, 5.7	Fore A. 46.6	

Name	Virginia Shelton		
Alias			
Crime	Dish. Servant.		
Age	48	Height	5 ft 7 in.
Weight	55	Build	Med.
Hair	Black	Eyes	Black
Comp.	Slight	Moustache	
Born	Virginia		
Occupation	Maid.		
Date of Arrest	Feb 5 1909		
Officer	Hahn R. Cooke		
Remarks	D.T.B. Scar, light eyes, broad		

Fig. 5. Bertillon system photograph, front and back. Virginia Shelton, dishonest servant. Courtesy New York City Municipal Archives.

II.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the consolidation of the institutional structure of the urban, industrialized societies of the west set in motion a number of radical redefinitions of woman's place.⁵ Most importantly, the family and domestic relations were made the objects of a series of insistent investigations by doctors, detectives, and moralizing philanthropists, by anthropologists like Frazer and Boas, by sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber, by political philosophers like Engels, and, of course, by all kinds of photographers. In the context of rapid social change, the in-



Fig. 6. Photograph by Byron, women packing boxes of candy, Maillard's Confectionary Store, 1902. Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York.

stitution of the family was perceived as threatened and, at the heart of this threat, was the nature and role of the woman.

The issue was not, however, that an increased number of women in the work force posed a threat to family life and masculine authority; women had always been workers. It was rather that, with the advent of industrial manufacturing in England and the United States especially, the settings and circumstances of women's labor had changed drastically (fig. 6). Prior to mechanization and the development of the factory mode of production, the family, in both urban and agricultural areas, had been the productive unit of the economy. This domestic mode of production, in which all family members contributed to the economic stability of the household, was displaced by an industrial mode of production, which of necessity created large numbers of urban, propertyless wage earners. These developments and the factory's replication of the household division of labor demanded the regulation of the reproduction of the work force. Accordingly, notions of femininity had to be restructured and diversified, as part of this restructuring of reproduction *itself*.

The tremendous growth of cities such as London and New York, consequent to industrialization, brought with it a series of threatening developments: homelessness; dangers of disease, contagion and immorality; and, just as destabilizing, new opportunities for leisure and consumption, new and disruptive forms of social mixing, and new forms of social and familial relations. Such developments—closely related to the development of industrial capitalism, but not in consequence reducible to economic determinants—transformed women's social roles and patterns of family life. Women who did not reproduce

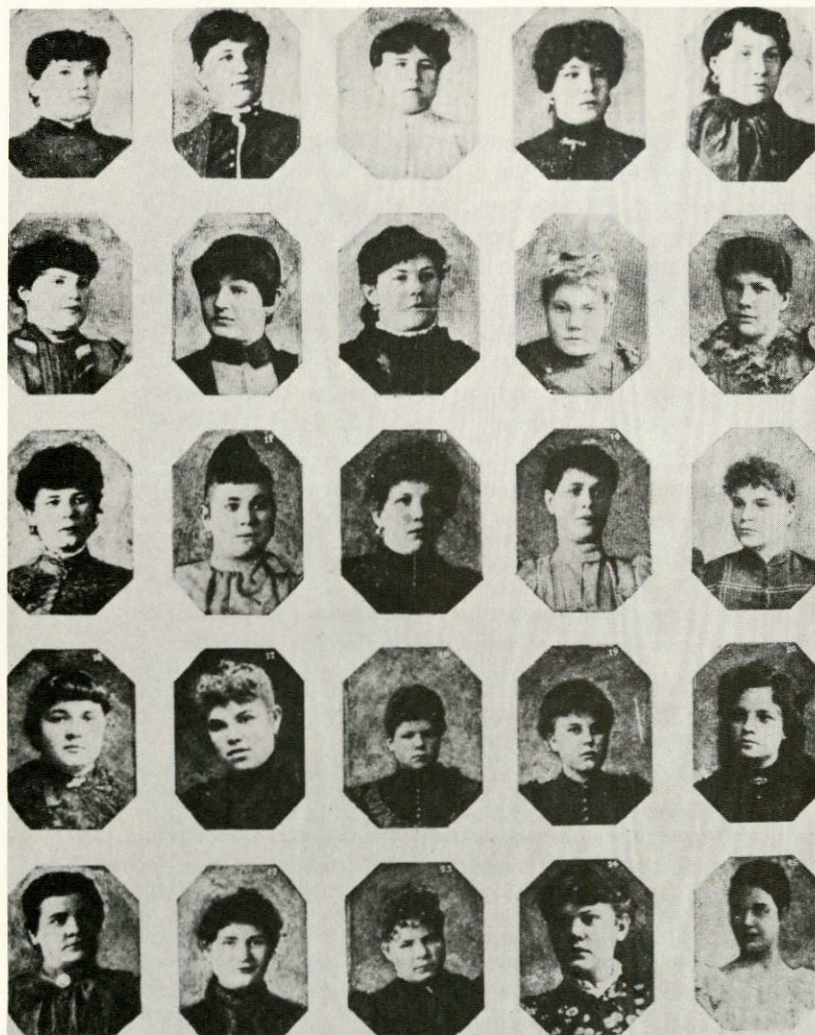


Fig. 7. Photographs by Tarnowsky, 1893. (From Gilman, 1985, p. 97.)

—the new single “factory girl,” as well as the homeless, destitute, or deviant woman—were made to seem threats to continued productivity and to the maintenance of social order through the institution of the family. As such, they were obsessively investigated, monitored, scrutinized, and recorded by social experts of all kinds, with increasing insistence as the century progressed. It is in this context that we return to photography or rather the specific appropriation of photography as an instrument and means of surveillance and record.

A 19th century study of Russian female prisoners, included in the exhibition, lies open at a page of photographs of “fallen women.”⁶ (Fig. 7) These photographs, originally collected by Madame Pauline Tarnowsky, were to be used again in the first criminological study on women: Lombroso and Ferrero’s *The Female Offender* (*La donna delinquente*), published in Italy in 1893.⁷ The analysis this study offered was, as Carol Smart has written in *Women, Crime and Criminology*, dependent on two biologically determinist (and, I would add, teleological) conceptions of deviant behavior: the theories of atavism and social Darwinism.⁸ These theories conceived of all alleged antisocial elements as throwbacks to earlier stages of evolutionary development in which individuals and groups had evolved toward defined biological roles (which, for women, meant motherhood). Thus, in his attempt to understand why there were statistically fewer female criminals than male, Lombroso enlisted photographs of deviant women in his search for the supposed telltale physiognomic signs of evolutionary “degeneration”; signs such as thick, black hair, sunken eyeballs, and misshapen skulls. Lombroso’s conclusion from

this study was that women in general had not evolved as far as men and, consequently, women criminals had less far to degenerate. He concluded it was because women were more primitive than men that criminals amongst them were not so highly visible.

The prostitute, however, was a special and dangerous form of female deviant. In his readings of Tarnowsky's photographic documentation, Lombroso proposed that prostitutes had necessarily evolved to be unusually attractive. Yet, at the same time, they had to be accommodated to the model of atavism: for Lombroso's theory of natural female criminal types to make sense, prostitutes had somehow to display retrogressive characteristics indicative of their degeneracy. To explain this contradiction between aesthetic evolution and criminal atavism, Lombroso fell back on the claim that, in her youth, the prostitute might show outward signs of beauty, "delicacy of mien and benevolent expression," but, as an old woman, the prostitute's true debasement would be outwardly manifest:

When youth vanishes, the jaws, the cheek-bones, hidden by adipose tissue, emerge, salient angles stand out, and the face grows virile, *uglier than a man's*; wrinkles deepen into the likeness of scars, and the countenance, once attractive, exhibits the *full degenerative type* which early grace had concealed. (Lombroso and Ferrero, emphasis added.)⁹

The revelation of woman's truth was not confined to criminal degenerates. The famed beauty of the Countess de Castiglione, about which Abigail Solomon-Godeau has written in "The Legs of the Countess," was also subject to debasement in age.¹⁰

The Countess was a unique yet paradigmatic figure in French Second Empire society. One-time mistress of Napoleon III, she was, in Solomon-Godeau's estimation, photographed more often than any other woman in the mid-19th century. The photographs were not freely circulated for public consumption; rather, they were commissioned for her own pleasure. (Fig. 8) In them, she struck a series of theatrical and narrative

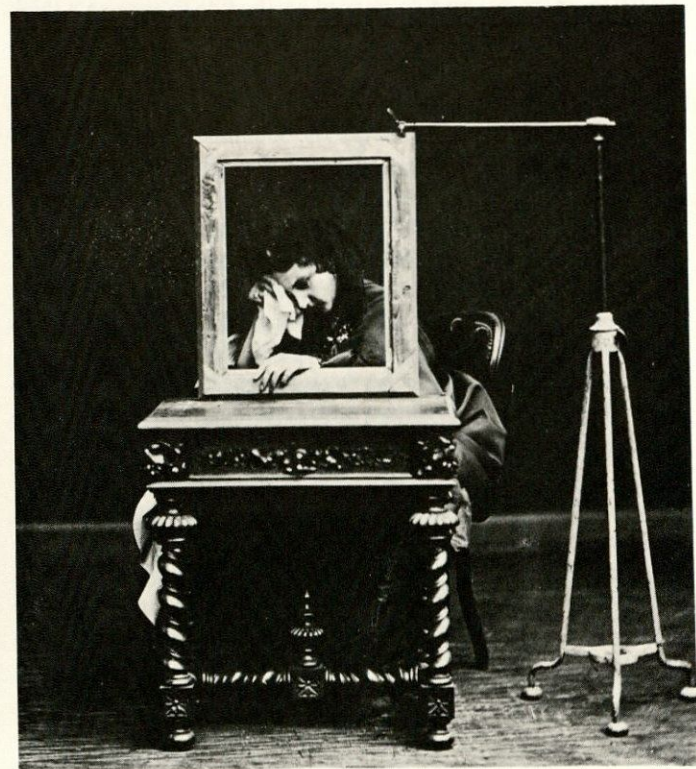


Fig. 8. Photograph by Mayer and Pierson, ca. 1856-60. Courtesy Musee d'Unterlinden, photo Christian Kempf.

poses, including some in which she exposed her nude legs and feet, recording her legendary beauty for herself and, perhaps, unintentionally mimicking contemporary pornographic photography. Similar and equally extraordinary photographs she had taken of herself as an old woman, after she had grown stout and lost hair and teeth, emphasize her degeneration and fading beauty. In one, where her nude legs are laid out on a black, coffin-like bier (fig. 9), the camera positioned from her subjective viewpoint, she seems to acknowledge her own mortality. In another, she has opened her bodice to expose a thick cotton undershirt, such as a peasant might wear: the discourse of femininity, with its codes of age, sexuality, and class, is thrown into confusion (fig. 10). Having lost her fame and the beauty on which it depended, the Countess could make no sense of herself, it seems, as a woman of society.

Solomon-Godeau's analysis moves us equally toward the question of how a woman might be author of her own images and, through self-representation, resist both photographic and social norms. How could a woman evade the discursive construction of femininity in which she is positioned as the passive object of masculine desire, institutional surveillance, or scientific scrutiny? Authoring one's own image, as we see in the photographs of the Countess, does not guarantee that a true representation will be made. There is no true feminine nature behind the patriarchal structure of representation to which we could ever escape. Sexuality does not belong to or inhere in the subject photographed. The desire the photographs of the Countess register was not her *own*. If these were pictures made for her own pleasure, they nonetheless issued from an already defined feminine ideal, constructed in a patriarchal "regime



Fig. 9. Photograph by Louis Pierson, ca. 1895-98. Courtesy Musée d'Unterlinden, photo Christian Kempf.



Fig. 10. Photograph by Louis Pierson, ca. 1895-98. Courtesy the Gilman Paper Company.

of sense" through which the meanings and possibilities for the term woman—in this case, courtesan, spectacle, demi-mondaine—had already been fixed and delimited. The consequences of the Countess's narcissistic identification with herself as an object of male desire were not liberation but silence and pacification, in which she internalized and reduplicated her own subjection. In the later photographs, presenting herself as ugly, dead, or a social outcast, the consequence was even more remorseless: even though these images did not circulate, the very act of "exposing" herself was, for the Countess, akin to self-negation.

III.

The power relations implied in picturing women have to do not only with the question of *who* can make images—itsself an index of social power—but also with social orders of meaning and socially fixed relations *to* meaning. If the Countess, as a woman of relative wealth and social standing, was not empowered to pose for her own pleasure, who could? The attempt to construct positive images leads back only to male desire, in relation to which woman is only an empty signifier. Resistance has therefore to be staged on and around the issue of meaning itself. As feminized Others, women must examine the institutional definitions and redefinitions of otherness produced in language and practice in which they are fixed. This is a struggle that has to be enacted again and again without guarantees or the alibi of a given feminine-ness.

The photographs of women in this exhibition, the female hysteric, the police-station lodger, the petty thief, are posed

and produced as such by powerful institutional discourses that define their difference as Other. But these identifications are never stable. They have to be continually redefined, and it is in this process of renegotiation—the fixing of difference—that the possibility arises for women to find ways to intervene, to break the obviousness of instrumental, pornographic, art, and advertising photographs and the forms of subjection they guarantee. Because meaning is never fixed, difference must be rescued from otherness and from the institutional and discursive structures that define and fix it.

Posing for Power/Posing for Pleasure tries to make such a beginning, by re-seeing the photographs in the exhibit, in their plurality, as part of a wider field of cultural processes that construct social relations of power. But theory is not the end of the show. The consequence of its questions for women may be the realization of the positions patriarchal representations constitute for us. This then opens up simultaneous possibilities for personal and institutional change.

Wendy Botting, Binghamton, New York, 1988

Notes

1. This essay is drawn from research carried out under the direction of John Tagg in cultural theory and the history of photography, and is preliminary to a master's thesis project for the MA in Art History at SUNY-Binghamton, 1988.
2. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, (Ed. Colin Gordon), New York, Pantheon Books, 1980.
3. John Tagg, "Power and Photography—Part One. A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law," *Screen Education*, no. 36, Autumn 1980; and "The Proof of the Picture," *Afterimage*, vol. 15, no. 6, January 1988.
4. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, no. 39, Winter 1986.
5. For some feminist accounts of women, industrialization, and family structures, see: Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York*, New York, Knopf, 1986; *Sex and Class in Women's History* (Eds. J. Newton, M. Ryan, and J. Walkowitz), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983; and Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.
6. From Pauline Tarnowsky, "Fisiomie di prostitute russe," *Archivio di psichiatria, scienze penali ed antropologia criminale* 14, 1893 (cited in Gilman, 1985).
7. Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *La donna delinquente*, Turin, Roux, 1893. English trans., *The Female Offender*, Littleton, Col., Fred B. Rothman, 1980.
8. Carol Smart, *Women, Crime, and Criminology: A Feminist Critique*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
9. See note 7. Also cited in Gilman, 1985 (p. 96).
10. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October*, no. 39, Winter 1986.

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Front and Back cover: *Mamie Mulaly, 1908*. Courtesy The Police Museum, New York City Police Department.

No. 58.

No

POLICE DEPARTMENT

CITY OF NEW YORK.

Detective Bureau.

Bertillon Measurements.

Height, 62.4	Head Length, 17.84	L. Foot, 24.74
Outer Arms, 62.0	Head Width, 13.8	Mid. F. 11.0
Trunk, 84.7	R. Ear, 6.9	Lit. F. 8.5
		Fore A. 43.8

Name

Mamie Mulaly

Alias

Crime

See Servant (Hotel)

Age

21

Height

5

Ft.

In.

Weight

109

Build

Slim

Hair

Ch. Red

Eyes

Blue

Comp

Fair

Moustache

Born

Ireland

Occupation

Chambermaid

Date of Arrest

Jan 8, 1908

Officer

Lorenheim, Goodman

Remarks

and McGowan

D.B.

Mole back of neck
right side

University Art Gallery

State University of New York at Binghamton