

SHORT

ARTICLES

PHOTOGRAPHY



# reetings from the Past - Danish Press Photographer Holger Damgaard

Mikkel  
Ferneborg,  
Lisa Henssel  
Jørgensen  
Denmark



102

Uncommon  
Culture

Photographer: Holger Damgaard

No other known photographic collection in Denmark has the same consistency and depth in describing Danish society in the first half of the twentieth century, and therefore the Damgaard-collection is an important part of the European and especially the Danish cultural heritage.

Holger Damgaard



On the verge of the modern era Holger Damgaard (1870-1945) was born in Ribe – one of the oldest towns in Denmark but not a place modernity had reached quite yet. Nevertheless, this man would modernize and change the Danish newspaper industry forever.

As a young man, Damgaard would travel to America with his camera and experience how photography was becoming increasingly important in the news media. With Industrialization, the pace of everyday life would pick up, and the ability to visually capture a specific moment would become essential in order to disseminate and comprehend the modern world.

On his return to Denmark Damgaard convinced newspaper editor Henrik Cavling to embrace photography in his newspaper Politiken, and in 1908 the first image by-lined Holger Damgaard was printed in the paper. Thirty-two years later Damgaard retired at the age of 70, never having missed a day of work, and leaving behind an entire production of 39.000 glass plate negatives. Today a fulltime-employed photographer would reach that amount within a year.

The photographic technique and equipment available to Damgaard made taking pictures both costly and time consuming. Therefore, he needed to edit his images before actually taking the picture. That undoubtedly was a contribu-



ting factor to the relatively high quality of his work – he was forced to develop an instinct for composition and timing.

Damgaard was well-liked among colleagues as well as among the people he photographed. A young photographer at a competing newspaper wrote in his memoirs that the senior photographer at his own newspaper would never talk to him, but Damgaard was always helpful and friendly<sup>1</sup>. Proper social skills and courtesy were important to Damgaard. He was a gentleman photographer for whom being polite and thorough were not only virtues but necessities.

Social changes in Denmark in the first half of the twentieth century were radical. The old structures of power were challenged by workers' demands, women's rights and new political ideas. At that time the newspaper *Politiken* advocated for changes that would benefit the working class and the minorities. Damgaard shared that view on social justice. Though he was always trying to be as objective as possible, many of his pictures display the poverty and needs of the lower classes. These pictures act as a documentary of early twentieth century Denmark as well as emphasizing Damgaard's moral position.

The diversity of his work is remarkable. The images depict common people and celebrities, everyday life and special occasions, technological advances and forgotten customs of yesterday. Furthermore, the span of the collection (1908-1940) allows us to observe the changing styles and fashions of clothes (fig. 1), objects and architecture. No other known photographic collection in Denmark has the same consistency and depth in describing Danish society in the first half of the twentieth century, and therefore the Damgaard-col-

lection is an important part of the European and especially the Danish cultural heritage.

Holger Damgaard was in many ways the classic photographer *per se*. His intentions as a press photographer were genuine and objective and he operated long before the concept of photo journalism - or paparazzi for that matter - was introduced. Thus, he was documenting reality rather than telling real stories through photographs.

Damgaard's key task as photographer was to act as a 'fly-on-the-wall', to mirror his surroundings. Nevertheless, his objectivity was sometimes challenged, primarily by technical limitations. His voluminous glass plate camera (fig. 2) as well as its long exposure time drew attention to itself (unlike the paparazzi's hidden lens). Therefore, we sometimes see people on his pictures magically drawn into the camera lens. Often children were not aware of the 'contract' between the photographer and the portrayed, a contract whose main agenda was for the portrayed not to take notice of the photographer.

In the photograph below (fig. 3) the boy in the far right is staring continuously into the camera. Damgaard has probably asked the schoolchildren to keep on with their daily business. The photographer's intervention here is not to be confused with staged photography, as Damgaard basically just wants to be invisible. However, this boy cannot ignore him. This 'breach of contract' adds something extraordinary to the picture. It brings subjectivity into the 'pure' photograph. This boy has a story to tell, and as a spectator I cannot take my eyes off him. He gazes and I gaze back at him. This is what fascinates me in this picture: the unintentional detail, which was not meant to be<sup>2</sup>.





Photographer: Holger Damgaard



To Damgaard this image was probably ruined, or at least the ‘story’ he wanted to tell was ruined. However, as a historical document it greatly increases the value of the image, as the gazing boy offers a view into the past beyond the frame of the image. We meet several of these staring children and youngsters in the work of Damgaard. Their gazes reach us in an extraordinary way, and these photographs get under our skin. They somehow manage to merge the past and the present.

In the same sense, past and present meet on a technical level in Damgaard’s photographs. By digitizing this large number of glass negatives, we are being exposed to a version of the past that is surprisingly vivid. The sharpness of the glass plates - combined with a thorough retouche - is almost hyperreal and it adds a con-

temporary look to these old photographs, even though many of them are more than a hundred years old.

In his entire career, Damgaard insisted on the glass plate technique, though eventually newer techniques became available. His time consuming method, which furthermore required extensive hardware, can be seen as the anti-thesis of modern digital photography – though the quality and sharpness almost compare. History does not show on the surface of Damgaard’s pictures; they do not fade or turn yellow - characteristics often exhibited by old photographs. Yet, the motifs of Damgaard’s pictures are of course those of the past – and through modern scanning and digitization they become as relevant as ever.

1. Vagn Hansen: *Verdens aldste pressefotograf*, In: Irene Greve red.: *Vidnerne Historien – dansk pressefotografi i 100 år*, Forlaget Ajour, 2012.

2. Related to Roland Barthes ‘punctum’, described in his short book *La chambre claire* (1980)