



## Portraits of Paradox: Jane Grey Swisshelm

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Even though they were made more than 20 years apart and in different mediums, on the surface the two images—an oil painting and a small photograph—share many similarities. Both show a modest-looking woman, dark hair parted in the middle, wearing a dark dress with white fabric collaring her neck. The woman is Jane Grey Swisshelm (1815–1884), a pioneering American journalist and publisher, women’s rights advocate, and abolitionist who was born in Pittsburgh and lived in the region for much of her life.

The two images, currently on view in the exhibition, *Smithsonian’s Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*, capture Swisshelm at very different moments, in fact, almost completely different lives. The painted work, a self-portrait created in Pittsburgh, represented a personal desire she dreamed about but never fulfilled. The small photograph, taken during the years she moved west to Minnesota, captured her around the time of one of the most controversial episodes of her career, a moment that stands out against the contours of a life that is otherwise celebrated today. Together, they remind us of the importance of context in portraiture, that the face staring back at us remains grounded in another time and place, outside our modern references in action, thought, and speech.

Jane Grey Swisshelm painted her self-portrait around 1840, just a few years after she encountered the work of a traveling artist in Wilkesburg around 1837. She later wrote that seeing the easel, paints, and brushes made her feel “at home in a new world, at the head of a



**Self-Portrait, between 1840-1849, attributed to Jane Grey Swisshelm.  
Oil on canvas, mounted on board.**

HHC Collections, courtesy of N.N. Moore, 86.1.267 a,b.

long vista of faces” she wanted to paint. She tried her hand at creating those faces, painting a portrait of her husband and her own self-portrait in the History Center’s collection. “From the moment I began,” she wrote, “I felt I had found my vocation.” But the weight and disapproval of 19th-century expectations made Swisshelm abandon painting; she decided she could not balance the duties of

married life with her desire to be an artist. Nearly 40 years later, the loss still hurt; in 1880, she wrote in her autobiography, “I put away my brushes; resolutely crucified my divine gift, and while it hung writhing on the cross, spent my best years and powers cooking cabbage.”<sup>1</sup>

In reality, Jane Grey Swisshelm accomplished much more than this despairing statement suggested. As a pioneering journalist,

she published her own abolitionist weekly newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Saturday Visitor* starting in 1848 and became the first woman to enter the press gallery of the U.S. Senate in 1850. She also advocated for women's rights, especially property rights, although her stance regarding how to secure those rights was more moderate than some of her outspoken contemporaries.

Swisshelm bucked the conventions of the day and left her husband in 1857, moving from Pittsburgh to St. Cloud, Minnesota. There, she became involved with one of the most heroic episodes of her life as well as one of the darkest. She resumed printing an abolitionist newspaper, the *St. Cloud Visitor*, but a group of angry pro-slavery men attacked her offices and destroyed her printing press in March 1858. Swisshelm resolutely persisted and launched a new paper, the *St. Cloud Democrat*, that same year. Four years later, Swisshelm was one of many Minnesota journalists who editorialized about the events of the Dakota War of 1862. This was an uprising of Dakota Sioux along the Minnesota River in southwest Minnesota. Provoked by repeated treaty violations of the U.S. Government and financial battles with Indian agents that caused their people great hardship, the Dakota attacked settler homesteads, killing some people and causing many to flee. In retaliation, the U.S. military captured hundreds of Dakota men and imprisoned their families. More than 300 men were sentenced to death. President Abraham Lincoln later pardoned more than 260 men, but 38 were still hanged in Mankato, Minnesota, the largest mass-execution in American history.

Swisshelm, clearly taking the perspective of the settlers, printed vicious assessments of the Dakota in her paper, calling them "hyenas" and "wild beasts," and advocating strongly that

all of them should be exterminated. The words were ugly, sounding like sentiments typically relegated to far more sinister historical figures. Her photograph from the National Portrait Gallery is itself an artifact of this time. The image was taken by Joel Emmons Whitney, the first photographer in St. Paul, Minnesota, who specialized in images of soldiers and Minnesota Indian tribal leaders. After the Dakota uprising, these images were in great demand across the nation; Whitney became known as one of the documenters of the tragic events of 1862.

Today, Swisshelm's words and sentiments about the events in Minnesota strike a deeply discordant note against the record of a life admired by many for how she pushed back against the gender conventions of her day. Swisshelm, as a journalist in the 19th century, was speaking with a voice typical of her time and place, during a period when journalists were not known for their objectivity, nor were they expected to adhere to such standards. Her case is a reminder that the truth of any historical figure's life is often far more complex than the popular versions of their story, with aspects worthy of both admiration and censure. Her portraits remind us to dig deeper and look at all aspects of the real person behind the famous face. 🌻

<sup>1</sup>Swisshelm's account of her artistic ambitions can be found in Chapter VIII ("Fitting Myself Into My Sphere") of her autobiography *Half A Century* (Chicago: J.G. Swisshelm, 1880), p. 47-50.

For further reading:  
Chomsky, Carol. "The United States-Dakota War Trials: A Study in Military Injustice," *Stanford Law Review*, November, 1990, at [https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1230&context=faculty\\_articles](https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1230&context=faculty_articles).

Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life, 1815-1884* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).



**Jane Grey Swisshelm, c.1865, by Joel Emmons Whitney, albumen silver print.**

Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery.

Minnesota Historical Society, "The US-Dakota War of 1862," at [www.usdakotawar.org/](http://www.usdakotawar.org/), 2012.

Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R Kailbourn, "Joel Emmons Whitney," *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839-1865* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Jane Grey Swisshelm, *Half A Century* (Chicago: J.G. Swisshelm, 1880), at [www.loc.gov/item/10007633/](http://www.loc.gov/item/10007633/).