



Too Black to Be White and Too White to Be Black

To land her first job in Jim Crow New Orleans, she passed for white. As a single, female teenager in the first decade of the twentieth century, she moved out of her parents' home. After a decade of marriage to a jealous iceman whose insecurities were exacerbated by her independence, she got a divorce. Her Creole culture may have circumscribed women's roles, but Florestine Marguerite Perrault—intentionally or not—was often pushing at the edges.

Hers was a world suspended between black and white, too black to be white and too white to be black. Respectable young Creole girls did not leave home unless they were getting married. Once married, fiercely Catholic Creole women stayed married, however dysfunctional the relationship. Divorce was generally out of the question. Proud of their history and traditions as free people of color—*les gens de couleur libre*—and obsessively protective of their mixed racial heritage, Creoles valued appearance as much as reality, if not more so. And Florestine chronicled that culture over nearly three decades as a pioneering black female photographer operating her own New Orleans studio.

In a rabidly racist America where horrific photo postcards of lynchings were peddled as souvenirs, Florestine focused her lenses on the genteel dimensions of black communions and graduations. While a mainstream white culture embraced caricatures of African Americans as sambos, asexual mammies, and pickaninnies, Florestine documented weddings and piano recitals. She photographed the sacred and secular rites of passage that marked special moments in Creole culture. Her photography created a powerful record of middle-class black propriety and dignity, a record providing a glimpse of the rich and varied threads running through the fabric of this vibrant culture.

I use the term “Creole” to define people of color whose ties to New Orleans and southeastern Louisiana begin in the colonial and antebellum periods. Sometimes I use “Creole,” “black,” and “African American” interchangeably because, despite their white ancestry, Creoles lived on the colored side of the color line.

By going into business for herself, Florestine avoided jobs, such as laundress or seamstress, that were reserved for black women in favor of work that was challenging, lucrative, and offered working conditions she could control. When she opened her studio in 1920, only 101 black women were identified as photographers in the U.S. census, and only Florestine and two white women were listed in the New Orleans city directory as professional photographers. The eldest of six children, Florestine had gone to work in 1909, when she was fourteen, to help support her family. She was hired as a clerk in a Canal Street photo studio only because her complexion was fair enough that whites “couldn’t tell whether I was white or colored.” Her boss, Jerome Hannafin, gradually expanded her responsibilities and taught her how to make strips of quick-finish—direct positive—pictures. After six years with Hannafin, she worked as a photo finisher with another white photographer, Herbert J. Harvey, on Camp Street.

She later worked in yet another studio on Canal Street where the owner “was so lazy that he would want to go to a show. So he saw that it was to his advantage to teach me how to make pictures so that he could go and leave me in charge, which he did. He saw that I was apt and learned easily. He left me in charge. That is how I began to pick it up, to learn. In fact, he started me doing the finishing part of the work: the developing and the printing. Then finally when he got pushed, he started teaching me how to take pictures.” She knew that if the owner or his customers “ever thought I was colored, they probably wouldn’t have allowed me to take pictures.” Before opening her own studio, she also worked as a stationery embosser and developer for the Eastman Kodak Company—jobs likely to have been contract work requiring her to pass for white to get them.

After she opened her studio in her living room, her work was initially confined to photographing individuals and small groups. She knew many of her subjects in the early stages of her career. Her customers certainly were not all relatives, but photos of relatives are many of the ones that have survived. Two of her favorite subjects were her nieces Germaine and Jean Gardina, her sister Mildred’s children. One photo shows Jean holding a teddy bear (photo 1), and Florestine would later make hand-painted photographs of both girls. One hand-painted photograph shows Jean holding a Shirley Temple doll (photo 2). Another photograph is of her sister Germaine with hand-painted fingernails (plate 1). She also photographed them as teenagers probably dressed for a recital in the mid-1940s (plate 2). She later made a picture of Lydia Sindos, the daughter of a family friend, as a junior bridesmaid for a 1945 wedding (plate 3). The engaging portraits Florestine made in the 1920s include one of a beautiful unidentified young woman wearing pearls and



Photo 1. Jean Gardina, Florestine's niece, with teddy bear, early 1930s.



Photo 2. Jean Gardina, Florestine's niece, holding a Shirley Temple doll, mid-1930s.



Photo 3. Unidentified young woman, Bertrand's Studio, early 1920s. Emile LaBranche Jr. Papers. By permission of Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.



Photo 4. Unidentified woman, mid-1920s. The Historic New Orleans Collection, accession no. 2001.79.9.

a headband (photo 3). Another is of an older woman who also wears pearls and a barrette (photo 4).

Florestine was my maternal great-aunt. She operated studios under three names in several locations, first as Bertrand's, then as Claiborne, and finally as Collins. The name changes roughly paralleled her own as she went from Perrault to Bertrand after her first marriage and to Collins after her second. She did not think of herself as an artist, although she clearly was. For her, the studios she owned were businesses. But they were businesses that could give life to fantasies, projecting images of a reality that often could only be dreamed. Her portrait of her friend Mae Fuller, for instance, shows Mae perched seductively on a bench, looking directly at the camera and dressed in the style of a flapper from the Roaring Twenties (photo 5). Mae, in fact, worked as a maid for a dentist during the day and most likely wore a uniform at work.



Photo 5. Mae Fuller in the Roaring Twenties, mid-1920s.