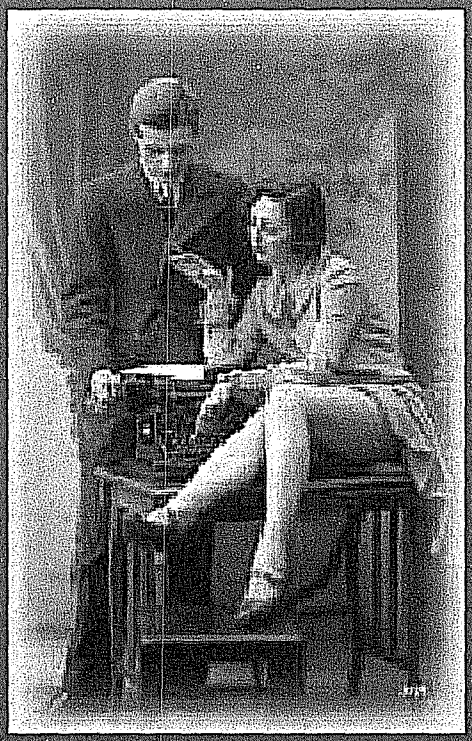
Sexy Legs and Typewriters

Women in office-related advertising, humor, glamour, and erotica

Paul Robert



The Virtual Typewriter Museum

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Robert is a journalist/publicist and typewriter collector. He is also editor and publisher of the Virtual Typewriter Museum: www.typewritermuseum.org

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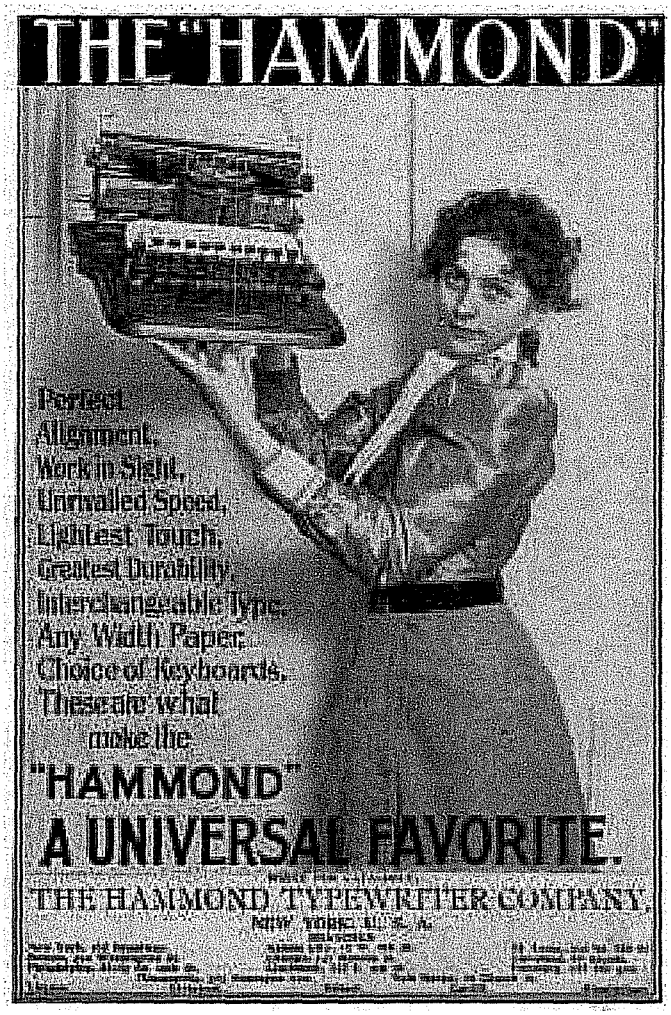
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In the year 2000, I asked an international group of typewriter collectors to join me in an interesting web project: an online museum of rare writing machines, The Virtual Typewriter Museum. Typewriter collectors? Yes, typewriter collectors. They are out there. Maybe 1,000 of them worldwide. Are they weird? They do not think so. In a world where thimble collectors can form national associations, typewriter collectors have no reason to consider themselves weird.

Anyway, it took six months to put the website together and fill it with an incredible collection of rare and even one-of-a-kind machines. But like other enthusiasts, typewriter collectors have a passion that goes beyond their immediate object of desire: they also collect related items, or ephemera. And so we expanded the site to contain pages with instruction manuals, ribbon-tins, tools, typewriter art, books, and photographs.

When I asked collectors on the internet to send me historical photographs with typewriters in them, one collector added a couple of erotic shots. They were charming nudes and partial nudes, carefully posed, lovingly illuminated, and professionally printed. I placed them online and asked if any others were available. There were not many. At one point, we even formed a group of volunteers who happily surfed the web looking for more of these early erotic photographs. There were thousands of early nudes online but few with typewriters, and the assignment was clear: try to stay focused and find the ones with typewriters. We found about a dozen. The result was a web page containing a handful of very old photographs with ankles and legs and the occasional bare back or breast. And always a typewriter – the Underwood seemed to be a favorite.

The focus of The Virtual Typewriter Museum is the period from 1870 to about 1920, but over time more photos showed up, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Apparently typists have always tickled more than typewriter keys.

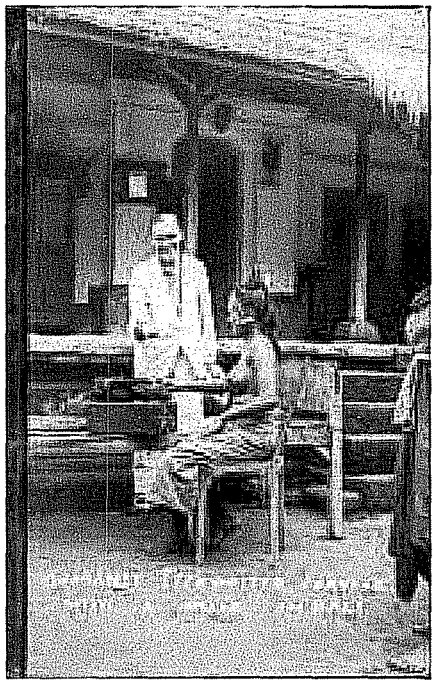


Unless she was very strong, the girl in this 1903 photograph could not have posed like this for long. She is balancing a full-sized Hammond 2 typewriter on the fingertips of her left hand while supporting the machine from behind. The way her thumb folds backward shows that there is no trick involved here. What is interesting about the picture is that the girl does not serve any practical purpose and is there only to attract attention. It makes this a very modern advertisement.

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A clear example of early celebrity advertising is this 1905 ad for the Hammond 12. A very pretty young actress named Melle Harlay writes a letter to Mr. P. Castelli of the Hammond company in Paris: "Sir, What do I think of the Hammond? I use it and I love it, and the more I use it, the more I love it. Yours, M. Harlay." Melle Harlay was an actress who performed in Parisian theatrical revues. This terrific eye-catcher was shot in the studio of Émile Reutlinger, a famous celebrity photographer who worked in Paris between 1890 and 1930. The pose is only slightly unnatural. The girl is carefully positioned so that the shape of the back of the chair balances the composition. She is also seated too far away from the typewriter for comfortable writing, leaning slightly forward in exactly the same angle as the cover of the typewriter case. A splendid photograph that credits M. Reutlinger's reputation





This odd photo was used as a postcard and was probably made in the 1920s. The caption reads, „Guaranty Typewriter Service with a smile in Bali." Public writers (people who write letters and fill out forms for illiterates) are a common sight in many countries. In this case, the writer is clearly not the bare-breasted girl but the man in the white suit. The girl probably cannot even read. Also note that there is no paper in the typewriter.

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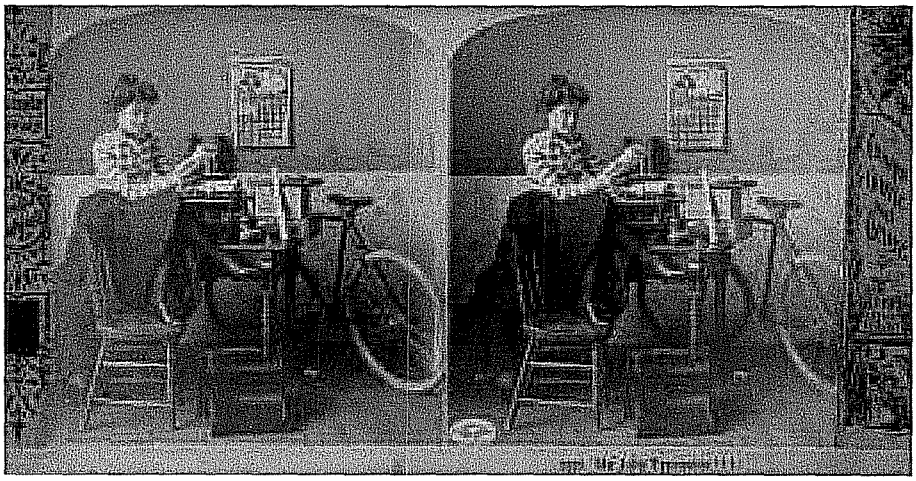
The young woman with a highly professional expression on her face, seems to be fully in charge of the situation while showing many miles of slender leg. This photo would also have fit well in the Erotica section. The typewriter is an Underwood, of course.

■■



"Typewriter Supplies" can only be ribbons for the machine and "bon-bons" for the girl. A pleasant surprise is the splendid Commercial typewriter on which the girl is working.

This is one of very few nonstandard humorous images. "My Jolly Typewriter!!!" is the title of this 1899 shot of a young women that was published as a comic stereoscope photo by Montgomery Ward in Chicago. The girl sits on top of a writing table, displaying her ankles. On the table, there is a half-eaten apple, a glass, a desk calendar, filing cases, and a splendid Remington Standard 2 typewriter. The picture is one of a category in which the female worker is seen wasting time. She has almost finished her book and seems all but ready to go for a ride on her bicycle. The calendar on the wall is from the Avil Printing Company of Philadelphia, a publisher of books and postcards.



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Humor

THERE ARE TWO TYPES of situation that people generally consider to be funny. The first is one in which someone gets hurt in a silly way (man walks into a lamppost). The second is any that develops contrary to what we have learned to expect (man heads straight for a lamppost but stops because he steps into a pile of feces). If you can infuse a funny situation with a certain erotic tension (man does not walk into a lamppost but steps in poop because he is looking at a pretty girl), then you have the recipe for a killer joke.

Sexual tension between men and women in the office is something that is no longer considered unusual or necessarily funny. It is a fact of life. But a century ago, it was the source for an unending stream of cartoons, jokes, funny postcards, and serial photographs. The plots were simple. They either built on the common belief that women were bad workers, wasting their time talking or reading, or dealt with the girl(s) in the office getting it on with the boss. The latter got caught by his wife or not, but there was always something to laugh about. There was an amusing double-entendre in that the word "typist" arrived relatively late and for many years the girl operating a typewriter was also called a "typewriter." Touching the typewriter could therefore be a very exciting business.



This drawing tells the story of two typewriters: "Typewriting a Side Line." One typewriter sits idle on the table, whereas the other sits with her legs up, reading a book. The conspiratorial smile includes us in the joke.

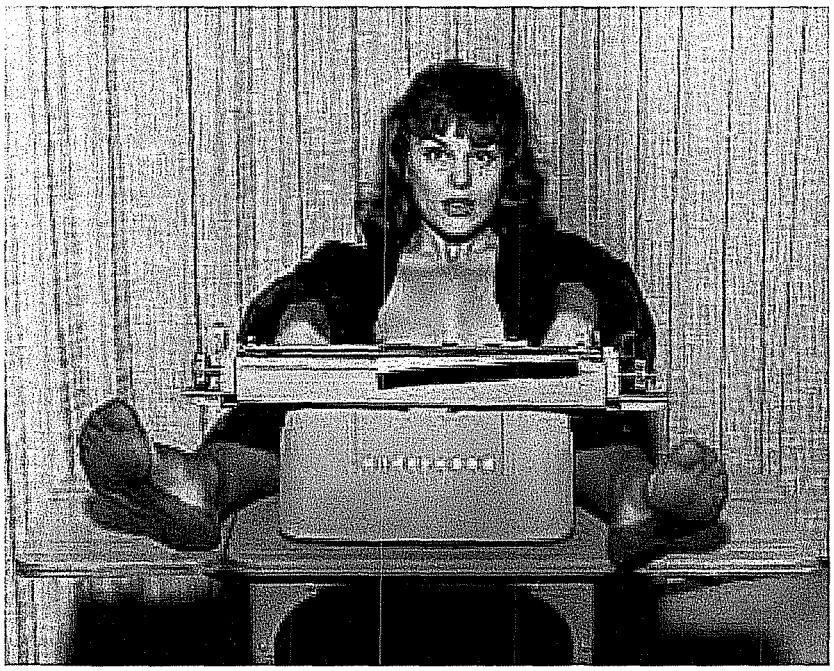


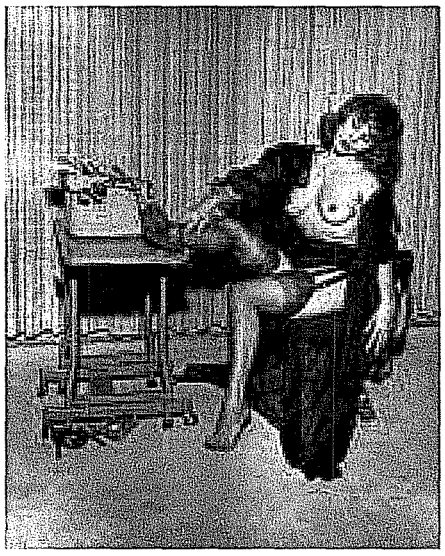
There is something very odd about this French photo from the 1920s that features a man carefully peeling the bra off a young woman who was only just working on some business letters. Her skirt has been hiked up so that we can see the edge of her garter belt and heavy stockings. She must have pulled it up herself though, before sitting down, prompting the boss to embark on the task at hand. Although the man is completely focused on her breasts, the girl herself is smiling, fully relaxed and seemingly talking about the weather, her husband, or the shopping that she still has to do. There is a length of string or power cord on the floor behind them as if to emphasize the likelihood that the photo was not composed. This was the only early photo found showing some sort of sexual activity in the vicinity of a typewriter, which by the way seems to be an Underwood 6.



This photo includes a typical steel office desk, with a plastic telephone and other office paraphernalia, as well as a pack of cigarettes. There is, in fact, typewritten text on the piece of paper rising from the portable that is seen in the corner. This picture was taken for a magazine, as there are still cropping marks at the edges of the print. For publication, the entire right side of the typewriter was cut off to draw attention to the girl. She is obviously pretty, but the editor in question should have shown more restraint.

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Curtains play a leading role in these two quite unnatural photos of a seminude woman with an Underwood typewriter. Next to her transparent dressing gown, garters, and nylons, the typewriter is totally out of place. The top picture, in which she sits with her legs up to either side of the typewriter, is the silliest. Her arms are stretched forward, pretending to type, but she is staring at the photographer as if to ask, do you really want me in this ridiculous pose?













An interesting detail is that these pictures were taken in an actual office. The entire series of some 20 photographs shows a muscular model in different poses around the office and studio of a Los Angeles architect in the 1960s. The pictures are not detailed enough to actually identify the office, but we do see an abundance of period office furniture with an IBM Model B as the crown jewel. Whether or not the architect knew that these shots were taken in his or her office is a mystery.

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This could well be the most modern set of photos in the entire book. And again it is an Underwood that witnesses the undressing of a dark-haired lady in an evening gown and her more heavily set partner.









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