

ELLIOTT FINE ART

Nineteenth Century to Early Modern

Armstrong Photographic Studio
(Active in South Africa, 1880s)

Seven Zulu warriors with cowhide shields, staffs and knobkerries; and Six Zulu warriors with spears, staffs and knobkerries

The latter signed and dated in negative: *Armstrong Pho 1886*

Both silver prints

16 x 21 cm. (6 ¼ x 8 ¼ in.)



These two studio portraits, taken in South Africa in 1886, depict Zulu men in traditional attire, posed against the same painted backdrop of a wooded landscape. The first photograph shows a group of seven men dressed in elaborate ceremonial regalia. They hold traditional Zulu shields, or *isihlangu*, made from cowhide, and wield either staffs or wooden clubs, known as *knobkerries*. Their outfits feature feathered headdresses, ornate beadwork, fur embellishments around the arms and legs, and other accessories associated with Zulu warrior or ritual dress. The second group of Zulu men are in similar yet slightly less militarised garb. They hold spears and *knobkerries* but no shields. The dress is again characterised by beadwork, feathered elements and fibre skirts.

One of the photographs bears the inscription 'Armstrong Pho 1886' in the negative, though no definitive records have surfaced for a studio or photographer by that name operating in South Africa at the time. He may have been an independent or lesser-known figure whose work has not survived in institutional archives. It is also possible that Armstrong worked in association with a more established studio, signing this particular plate with his own name. Known contemporaneous studios photographing Zulu subjects during the 1880s include Samuel Baylis Barnard and the Caney Bros. Studio in Durban, both of which specialised in producing commercial and ethnographic portraits for a colonial and European market.

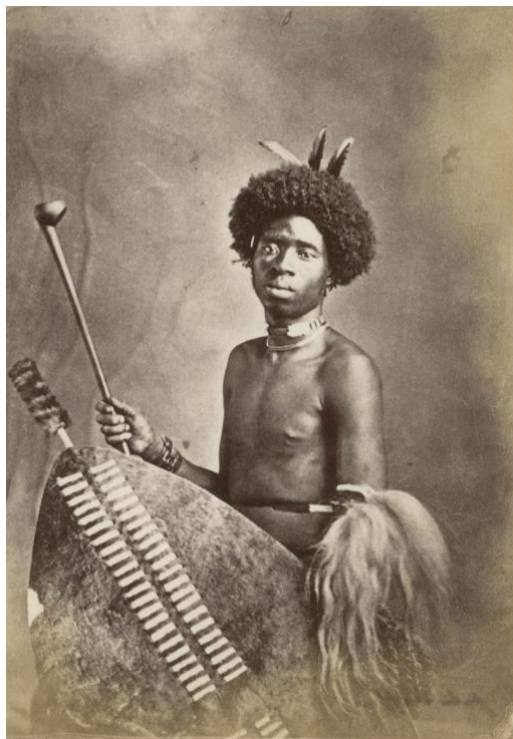


Fig. 1, Samuel Baylis Barnard, *Zulu Warrior*, albumen print, 13.7 x 9.5 cm, The Walther Collection



Fig. 2, Caney Bros. Studio, *Zulu Warriors (Ordinary and Fighting Dresses)*, albumen print, 28.4 x 23.6 cm, The Walther Collection

The photographs date from a critical period in Zulu history. By 1886, the Zulu Kingdom was still reeling from the consequences of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. That conflict had resulted in the death of King Cetshwayo, the defeat of the Zulu army, and the dismemberment of the kingdom into British- and Boer-controlled territories. Zululand in the mid-1880s was a contested and unstable region, subjected to colonial administrative encroachment and internal fragmentation. Although the Zulu military tradition remained culturally significant,

its political power had been severely curtailed. The same period also saw the ongoing tension between British imperial forces and Boer settlers in the region, culminating later in the decade and into the early twentieth century in the Anglo-Boer Wars. Within this context, Zulu identity was often romanticised or objectified by European audiences, who perceived the warrior image as both noble and exotic.

These photographs were almost certainly made for commercial or ethnographic purposes. Studio portraits of African sitters in traditional dress were highly popular in colonial South Africa, particularly among European settlers, anthropologists and collectors of so-called ethnological imagery. Many were sold as cartes-de-visite or cabinet cards and circulated internationally. However, these particular images appear to be rare. No other known examples of these photographs exist in public archives or digitised collections, and unlike the mass-produced ethnographic prints that dominate this genre, these may have been issued in very limited numbers or produced for a private patron. The quality of the prints, the theatrical staging, and the care taken in costume and composition suggest that the photographer intended the images to serve both as aesthetic artefacts and as curated representations of Zulu cultural identity. As such, they also preserve a tangible link to the resilience and visibility of Zulu heritage during a period of profound political transformation.