

# YOUREBESTSHOT

Antique portraits are easy—with a white sheet, window light, and patience

**Photographers of the late Victorian and the Edwardian eras often captured their subjects as calm, confident, and self-possessed. With the right backdrop, light, posing, and photographic techniques, you can easily give your modern subjects that same transcendent look.**

Facial expressions in portraits of that period were inanimate and grim, not because people were humorless, but because they couldn't hold facial expressions for the 30 seconds or more required for exposures. As a result, portraits often had the solid appearance of marble busts. This look was actually considered chic by the standards of the reigning Pictorialist style of photography, which held that photos should imitate paintings and sculpture.

Can you coax similar expressions from family members and friends? You bet. Just have the subject sit still in front of the camera for a few minutes, while you pretend to adjust its settings and make the smallest of small talk. Soon, nervous fidgeting subsides, your subject relaxes, and (here's your cue to reach for the shutter release) boredom sets in. The good news: When the right moment comes,

your shutter speed will be a fraction of a second, and not minutes.

Other techniques for reviving the Victorian look:

- Use very flat, low-contrast light. This can be from a north-facing window or skylight, or shoot outdoors below an overcast sky or in the shade of a tree.
- Shoot verticals using a nondistorting focal length suitable for portraits (i.e., between 70 and 105mm). Avoid cropping into the head or hair, but, at the same time, don't allow the head to become too small in the frame.
- Use a simple white backdrop, preferably a slightly mottled or textured muslin, rather than stark white seamless paper.
- Shoot at or near maximum aperture for shallow depth of field.

Because Victorian-era photo-sensitive materials were really slow, photographers set wide apertures. These threw much of their subjects' hair and shoulders into soft focus, and eliminated creases and smudges in the white sheet or wall used as a backdrop.

- Focus carefully on the near eye.
- Dress your subject simply. Contemporary clothing (a print blouse or shirt) will sabotage this project.
- Go monochrome.
- Add an off-white tint. An image editor will help you produce the antique creamy tones common to print types of the era. Assuming you're starting from an RGB color image...

**1** Delete two of the color channels to produce a monochrome image. Smoothest complexions often result from using the red channel. To exaggerate freckles, as Charles Maraia did in his portrait (opposite page), use the green channel.

**2** Convert the file to grayscale, save it, then convert back to RGB in order to add the color tint.

**3** Create a blank, new layer and fill it with an off-white tint (250R/250G/175B, for example). Adjust the opacity and choose a Blend mode (I like Multiply) for an eggshell tint in the white background and low-contrast overall.

Will you want all of your portraits to take on this austere Pictorialist look? Of course not. But for one or two subjects, it can be fun to embark on this photographic trip back in time.



# Antique Portrait Steps for Pixlr Editor

## 1. Convert to Black and White

Go to adjustments and click desaturate to convert the image to black and white.

Save the file with a new name.

**Optional** - To create variations in the black and white image:

**Delete two of the color channels.**

Go to adjustments and levels.

In levels, change the channel setting from RGB\* to one color: red, green, or blue.

Reduce output levels to zero and click ok.

Repeat this for a second color channel.

Save the file with a new name.

Create and save a few more versions of the same image with different color channel settings converted to black and white, then choose the one you like best.

## 2. Create a new layer and fill it with an off-white tint.

Make a new layer. You could name it “tint.”

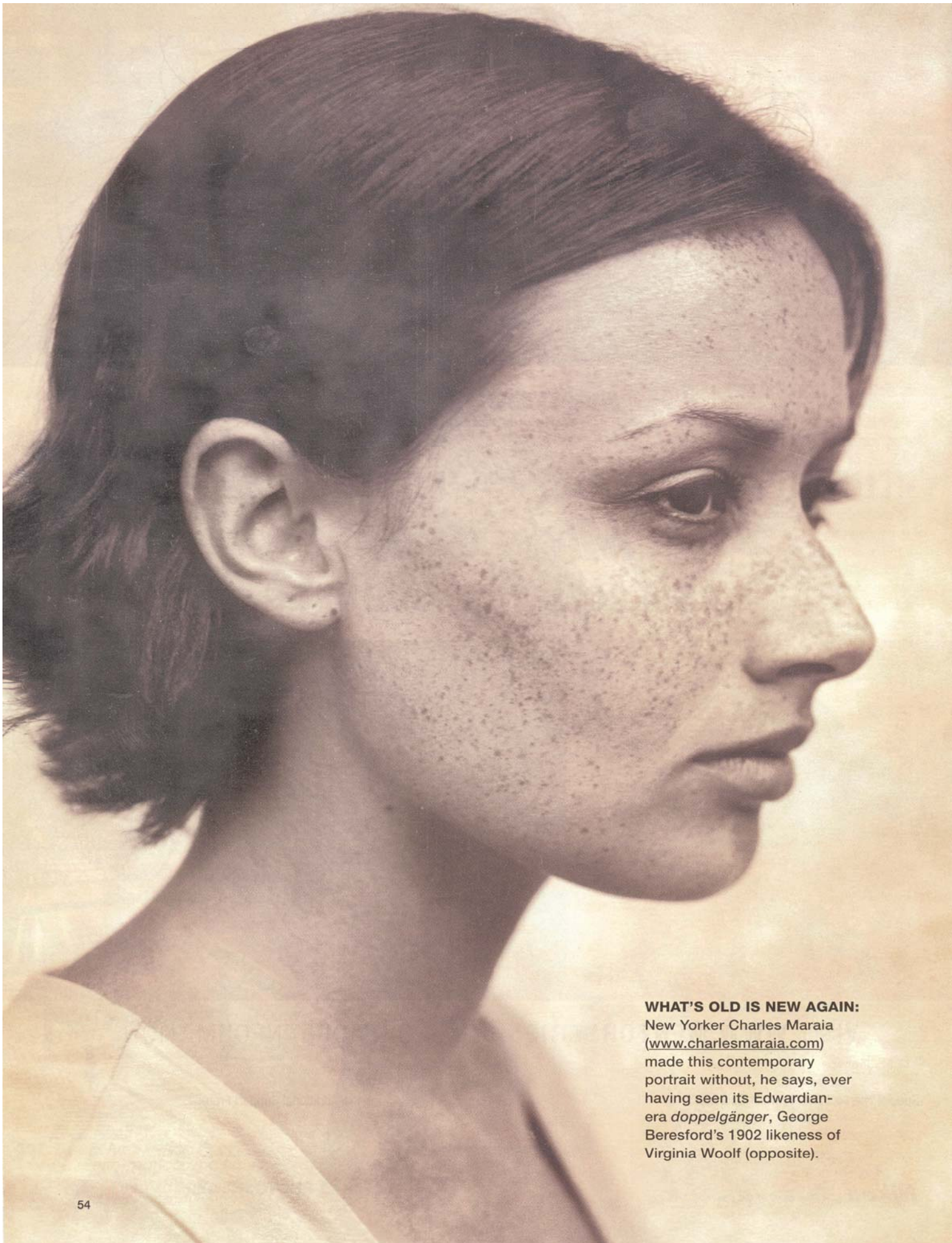
Click on set main color (the large color rectangle at the bottom of the tool box) and choose an off-white tint. Do this by clicking on a color or by typing numbers into the R, G, and B boxes. The article suggests 250R, 250G, 175B.

Use the paint bucket tool to color the tint layer.

In the layer menu, choose the multiply blend mode (under mode, scroll down to find multiply) and adjust the opacity of the color layer.

Go to your image layer and adjust the levels of the image under the tint as needed. (Go to adjustment, levels, channel RGB.)

\*Note: The three color system is called RGB, for red, green, blue. Pixlr calls it RBG in some places.



**WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN:**

New Yorker Charles Maraia ([www.charlesmaraia.com](http://www.charlesmaraia.com)) made this contemporary portrait without, he says, ever having seen its Edwardian-era *doppelgänger*, George Beresford's 1902 likeness of Virginia Woolf (opposite).