

MIRROR, MIRROR:
AMERICAN DAGUERREAN PORTRAITS

“I received your daguerrean ... I think I never saw anything but life look more natural,” wrote a young woman in 1850 to her husband, absent in the gold fields of California. “I showed it to Little Cub, and to my astonishment and pleasure she appeared to recognize it. She put her finger on it, and looked up at me and laughed, put her face down to yours, and kissed it several times in succession. Every time it comes in her sight she will cry after it.”¹

Daguerreotypes were the earliest form of permanent photography, an image of silver nitrate particles on a copper plate covered in rolled or electroplated silver, caught under glass and kept in leather or thermoplastic cases adapted from those used for miniature paintings. They were small: most portraits were sixth-plates of $2\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ inches, with the largest standard whole plate at $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The surface was mirror-like, the image appearing in positive or negative depending on the angle of viewing. None of these details, however, account for Little Cub’s ecstatic recognition of and attachment to the image of her father in the mirrored surface.

Her fascination with this jewel-like image, unique among photographic methods, is one that I share with my collection of four American portrait daguerreotypes: a young man with muttonchops and a top hat by Anson of Broadway (fig. 1), a bust-length portrait of a young woman by Gurney of Broadway (fig. 2), an anonymous Chi Psi fraternity member (fig. 3), and an anonymous portrait of a boy with slicked-back hair and a high collar (fig. 4). Though small by the standards of some collections, this group reflects my study of the daguerreotype in history and style, and my desire to build a collection of fine American portrait images.

Daguerreotypes were taken during a time of great economic and social change between 1840 and 1870, not only recording important events like the California Gold Rush but also providing a window into the lives of everyday people. Portrait daguerreotypes like those

1. Quoted in Drew Heath Johnson and Marcia A. Eymann, eds., *Silver and Gold: Cased Images of the California Gold Rush* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 9.



1.

in my collection picture individuals not only as they were but also as they wished to be remembered. The process of taking photographic images of an individual had been mastered, but to the individuals in front of the lens, lifelike representation was a completely new concept—one that was embraced with alacrity.

A French invention, the daguerreotype was introduced to the public by Louis Daguerre in August 1839; by November, his student



2.

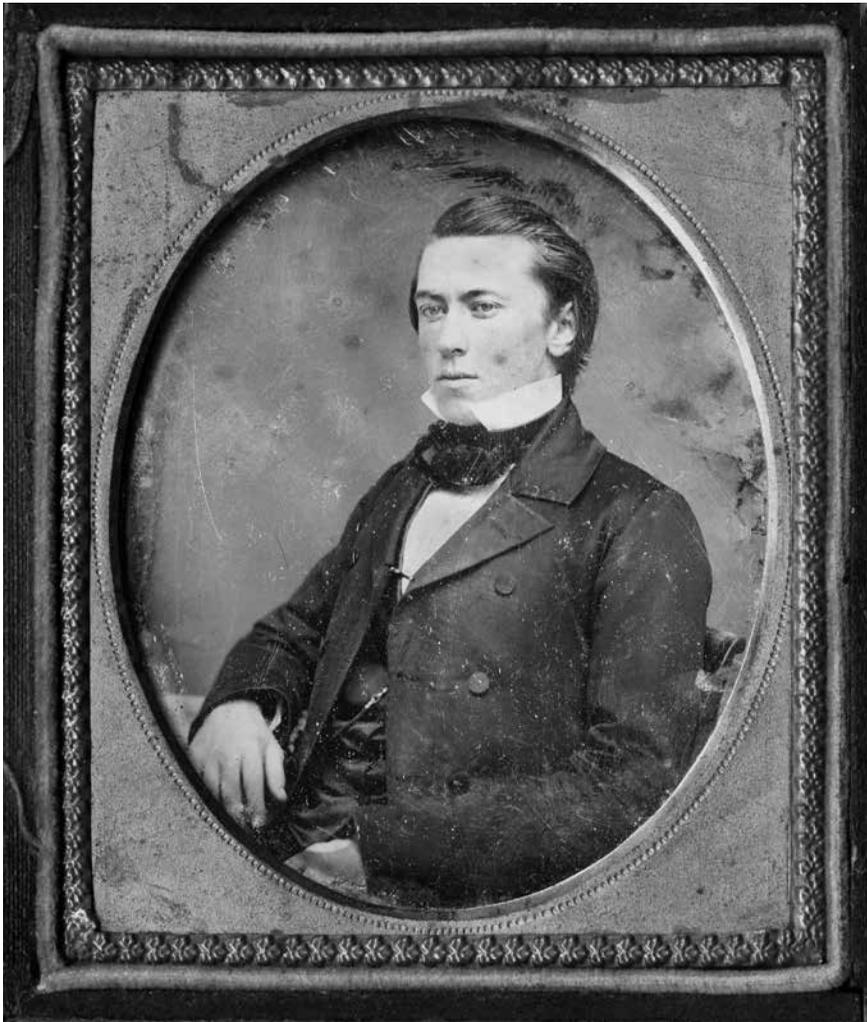
François Fauvel-Gouraud was lecturing on the process in America. Amateur clubs were shortly followed by the creation of professional studios. In Europe, the introduction of William Henry Fox Talbot's paper negative process soon rendered the daguerreotype obsolete and unfashionable. In America, however, the medium remained popular as late as the Civil War, along with the later single-positive processes, ambrotypes and tintypes. America seems to have taken to the



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daguerreotype in a unique way, combining technical mastery—American daguerreotypists won three out of five prizes, and great praise, at the 1851 London World's Fair—with an eagerness for portraiture.² Established portrait studios in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were supplemented by itinerant daguerreotypists who probably took the first likenesses that most of their subjects had ever seen.

2. Floyd Reinhart and Marion Reinhart, *The American Daguerreotype* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981).



4.

The incredible detail of the daguerrean image provided something that a painting—or even later paper negative photographs—could not. The story of Little Cub illustrates the combination of amazement and familiarity inspired by these little pictures. A notice in *Humphrey's Journal of the Daguerreotype and Photographic Arts* used an anecdote to promote the medium:

On board that ill-fated vessel, the *San Francisco*, was a Daguerreotype—it sunk with the vessel; its owner was saved, and with the warmest

anxiety offered a reward of *five thousand dollars* for the recovery of that single impression. This fact is worthy of the consideration for those who are putting off obtaining Daguerreotype likenesses until a more convenient season.³

Whether true or not, the story demonstrates the attachment to daguerreotypes felt by their owners, as well as the promotion and popularity of the process. Daguerreotypes somehow captured the essence of a person, preserving his or her image perfectly, down the last freckle. They hold the same appeal, in many ways, to a modern viewer as they did to their contemporary purchasers.

I saw my first daguerreotype in a seminar during my junior year at Princeton. The whole-plate image of a street in a small French town drew my eye the moment I entered the study room. The image was ghostlike on the silver plate, but I could count the cobbles in the street and the panes of glass in the windows of a distant building. Though I had never been much interested in photography before, the brilliant image enchanted me, transforming a simple scene into a vision glimpsed in flashes of light. Its exactness, rather than burdening the image with detail, was delightful, encouraging close study and imagination.

A long period of research and exploration followed. I received my first daguerreotype, the Anson gentleman, as a gift from a friend who had also become interested, sparked by my initial viewing and subsequent chattering about that little French street. After that, my browsing through auctions and dealers' offerings became more purposeful, and I began slowly to build a collection.

When I first show people my daguerreotypes, the initial response is usually fascination, as the brilliant images are unlike any form of representation we are familiar with today. The next question, however, is almost always: "Why do you have these pictures of random people?" It is a natural concern. After all, these pictures were originally created for close friends and families as mementos, keepsakes, and records of an individual. Sometimes a name survives, but more often it does not. However, the original documentary intent of these images is supplemented by new values: they are artifacts of another time, records of individuals sketched in finest detail.

3. *Humphrey's Journal*, January 15, 1854, quoted in Johnson and Eymann, eds., *Silver and Gold*, 11.

My collection, though limited in number owing to cost, is the reflection of my continuous observation of current offerings and research about the medium. Collecting daguerreotypes is more than an exercise in selecting and purchasing; even finding items to consider requires diligence and initiative. As a result, there is a story behind each image in my collection, and I find the hunt as thrilling as the selection and acquisition. The varied channels in which they are offered—through private collectors, dealers, and auctions, as well as shows—makes the search for each daguerreotype unique and exciting.

The Anson gentleman and the high-collared young man were both purchased on eBay. The site consistently lists a fair number of daguerreotypes, generally of poor quality, but there are occasional exceptions like my two men. Because daguerreotypes almost always enter the market through estate sales, keeping an eye on this and other auction sites is the best way to spot a new piece and pounce on it before a dealer might. For example, a few months ago a portrait purporting to be a young Thomas Edison appeared. After looking at the other known images of him, I am convinced that it may well have been authentic. This combination of mystery and discovery makes the search exciting.

Physical footwork is necessary as well, of course. Last summer I went to the Brimfield Antiques Show in Massachusetts to hunt. Although nothing caught my eye, I did make the acquaintance of the dealer from whom I would purchase the Chi Psi member. I learned of the fraternal daguerreotype from a friend who saw it at a show in San Francisco; intrigued by his description, I emailed the dealer, who sent me a scan. On my next opportunity, I drove up to New Hampshire to buy the dag and to browse through his other daguerreotypes, only a portion of which are listed online. The Gurney woman was purchased from a private collector in New York after I spent an afternoon looking through and learning about his vast collection of daguerreotypes and tintypes.

My collection also provides an opportunity for extracurricular research and close object-focused study. Although knowing the identity of a subject is often impossible, one can determine a great deal from small details. Establishing a date for a portrait daguerreotype is tricky and depends on many factors; the mat surrounding the frame, the maker's mark, if present, the physical appearance of the daguerreotype,

and the case are all to be considered even before the image itself. Within the image, details matter: hairstyle, clothing, jewelry, backgrounds, lighting, pose, expression, and props all help to build an identity for the sitter. Sometimes, given a first name and enough other clues—especially the sitter’s approximate age, economic situation, and location—it can be possible to find some matches in old census reports, although nothing is certain. A good amount of subjective judgment is necessary to connect these pieces, and it is this uncertainty that keeps the images mysterious and interesting. Conversations with other collectors, curators, and dealers are one of the most rewarding aspects of collecting and often yield surprising insight.

The story of the Chi Psi gentleman is a good example. He holds a scroll with a strange symbol on it, superimposed over what appears to be a cross; it seems that his tie pin is a similar shape. These details pointed pretty obviously toward membership in a society or fraternity, and further research brought me to the Chi Psi fraternity, whose old emblem matched the one on the paper exactly. In 1850, my approximate date for the dag, Chi Psi was active at nine American colleges, including Princeton. The image was taken in a brick-and-mortar studio, rather than one of the traveling carts, as evidenced by the control and evenness of the lighting, the smoothness of the background, and the general high quality of the image. My task now, still ongoing, is to narrow down a list of the daguerreotypists who could have taken the image.

Daguerreotypes are single positive images. The image is made directly on the plate, without the use of a negative; this means that each plate is unique, and duplicates can be made only by making another plate or laboriously re-photographing the original. Therefore, unlike many other types of collections, mine is completely unique. A collector of American coins, for example, might treasure his silver half dollars, but he knows that someone else certainly has better versions of everything he owns. Even though a whole-plate portrait by the Boston firm of Southworth & Hawes will always be worth more than any of my sixth-plates, and even though many portraits are considered “better,” my little sixth-plates are valuable to me and cannot be directly compared with anything else. Because each image is unique, my collection follows my personal tastes and attachments rather than the constraints of issues, editions, series, or condition that stratify other types of collections.

For these reasons, daguerreotype collectors and curators are almost always interested in each other's finds. I had a long discussion about my Chi Psi man with the curator of photography at the George Eastman House, which has the largest collection of American daguerreotypes in the world. I doubt the curator of the American Numismatic Society would be much interested in my handful of Constantinian bronzes! Each daguerreotype is a mystery, and often it is by discussion with others that some of the most interesting insights arise. For example, the young man in my Anson portrait has muttonchops, a style of facial hair that was quite uncommon in America after 1853, but apparently popular in England. Was he an Anglophile dandy—as his smart clothes might suggest—or a visiting Englishman? Perhaps he had studied abroad, or perhaps he was deliberately old-fashioned. This kind of discussion and speculation keeps each image continually interesting.

Another attraction of collecting daguerreotypes is that the vast majority are still unknown. A friend of mine who restores daguerreotypes and so sees a great many family collections unknown to the market estimates that more than half of American daguerreotypes are still in the hands of their original families. In fact, my interest in daguerreotypes led to the discovery of some of my own family history. Both sides of my family were in New England in the mid-nineteenth century, and as doctors and lawyers living near Boston, they were prime middle-class candidates for the allure of daguerrean portraiture. With this in mind, I encouraged a search of my father's family's ancestral home in New Hampshire—and sure enough, hidden away in a back drawer were four daguerrean portraits and three ambrotypes, nearly all of them labeled. It was curious indeed to look at the faces of ancestors so long dead but preserved in such detail on the little plates.

Even without a direct connection to the person pictured, a daguerreotype is a piece of history, an artifact as well as an image, which invites inquiry and imagination into its origins and the path it has taken to end up in my hands. There is a vast quantity of material yet unknown, and its slow trickle out to the general market will ensure fresh opportunities for many years to come. It is possible—and indeed quite likely—that a hitherto lost portrait of Abraham Lincoln might appear, to say nothing of portraits of other heavyweights of mid-nineteenth-century America.

Celebrity portraits were alive and well from the very first moments of photography. The famous Southworth & Hawes portrait of Dorothea Dix from 1849 was one of many taken at one sitting—a proliferation that she complained about, as she had given permission for only three exposures! Southworth & Hawes made a great many celebrity portraits and were endearingly profit-minded in one of their advertisements: “We never sell or dispose of likenesses without written order from the one for whom they are taken; except those whose position or standing before the public make it right and proper for worthy and laudable purposes.”⁴ Each daguerreotype is unique, but the more “important” the subject, the more likely there will be multiple portraits, if only they can be found.

Yet, even though a portrait of a recognizable personage would be an incredible find, I prefer the anonymous portraits, photographed for personal rather than promotional reasons. Sometimes an anonymous piece without great technical brilliance can be inexplicably attractive, as is the case with my collared young man. Although he is not in the best style and in somewhat tired condition, I was drawn to him. The fineness of detail and the intimacy of the format create likenesses so true to life—down to the wrinkles of a coat or the few hairs escaping from an elaborate coif—that it is impossible not to think of them as individuals as well as images.

The answer to that second bemused inquiry is clear. My collection is a group of random people—but that is exactly why it is special. The daguerreotypes I look for are the ones that seem to capture the feeling and character of a person as well as his or her likeness. Technical and stylistic concerns play an important role in my selection, but I will not buy a daguerreotype if it does not hold that personal interest. Portraits like the Chi Psi gentleman or the Anson man—of high technical quality and containing a puzzle to solve—appeal especially to my desire to do research. Equally important to me, however, are the quieter portraits: the relaxed superciliousness of the collared gentlemen; the direct gaze and calm beauty of the Gurney woman.

It is the beauty, in fact, of these daguerreotypes that drew me to them in the first place. After the books have been read, the technical

4. “Public Portraiture,” a segment of George Eastman House, “Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes,” online exhibition at www.eastmanhouse.org/icp/pages/intro.html.

details analyzed, the cases examined, and the imagined narratives spun, the daguerreotype still shines quietly, its mystery undiminished. It offers a silvered perfection of reality, dreamlike and utterly concrete. They were devotional objects, in a sense, pictures of departed parents, siblings, lovers, and friends, and nowadays they are representatives of our past. They are part of a larger American history, a record that shows the viewer as much about himself as about the subject. Theirs are faces long gone, but they live on behind glass, inviting contemplation, admiration, and, in the end, compassion.

—MARY THIERRY

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