Democratizing Images: The Ferrotype of Four Wilson Daughters, ca. 1850

by Aaron Huegel

It is amazing how much historical weight can be packed into a single image. Whether it be Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808,* where its subjects' emotional anguish simply leaps off the canvas, or the photographs of the Twin Towers in their final moments, our minds are captured by these visual representations far more than any written account of the same events could achieve. Even simple portraits can carry this sort of emotional impact. When we look at these old pictures of long-forgotten wives, children, and husbands, we look straight into the faces of actual human beings that once were. These images, however, were not made merely for posterity's sake; they were carried in the pockets and placed on the mantles of people who were once real, too. These portraits were not originally the last vestiges of an ephemeral human story but rather a dear object to whoever owned them. What, then, did these images mean for those owners? By looking at a particular daguerreotype preserved in HCU's Museum of Southern History, which depicts four daughters of the Wilson family around 1850, we can come to appreciate how these images in the 19th century were valued and how they left an unmistakable imprint on American society for the centuries to come.

For most of human history, accurate image-making has been a near-impossible (or, more often, flatly impossible) task. Even up to the beginning of the 1800's, it would take a skilled artist many months to paint a portrait, often at a hefty price for the patron. In 1839, however, a

French artist and inventor called Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre revealed to the world a new process that would begin to challenge this inaccessibility, which would aptly come to be known as daguerreotyping. By that point, there was already a sophisticated camera obscura, or a box that could focus light onto a translucent pane for tracing over, that "possessed the key features of the modern photographic camera: lens, focusing mechanism, and viewing or imaging surface" (Davis 13). By using a thin film of polished silver on a copper backing, which was "sensitized" (prepared for photoreaction) with the fumes of iodine, in place of the translucent pane of the camera obscura, salts would be deposited on the areas of the pane where light hit, producing a negative that could be developed with the fumes of Mercury. The image could then be "fixed" onto the plate with a bath of warm salt water (Davis 14).

Since the new process had a long exposure time, however, it had limited uses. It was not yet particularly effective in capturing images of humans with much clarity, for example, since minute movements would end up blurring the photo. As the process was refined and the exposure time brought down, though, portrait images, "the Holy grail of 1839 daguerreotypists," quickly became possible for a few inventive photographers (Davis 17). From there, daguerreotyping would spread across the world like wildfire.

Innovations in the new realm of photography shortly afterwards began to make the process more accessible and the product higher-quality. By using different polishing techniques, chemical compositions, and lens designs, Image quality and exposure time rapidly improved. Additionally, improvements in camera size enabled many entrepreneurial Americans to begin careers as itinerant daguerreotypists, visiting city after city to photograph their inhabitants. This, in fact, was how Houston was first introduced to the world of photography; a Mrs. Davis

advertised that she would take portraits of anyone who could purchase one, but that she would only be in town for “two to three weeks” (Houston Chronicle).

As the daguerreotypist profession spread, the early photographers began to take more of an artistic view of their work. By 1843, with the improvements to sharpness and durability of the images, photographers were able to move on “from the era of the mechanical ‘likeness’ to the age of the true portrait” (Davis 22). While most were still taking portraits, many photographers, taking inspiration from paintings, began posing their subjects, setting up lighting, and using other techniques to subtly alter or enhance the image. Accordingly, “The most ambitious daguerreotypists sought to make likenesses that were more than simply objectively true. They sought a Platonic, ideal likeness in each sitter the suggestion of a universal human beauty or grace” (Davis 95).

The ferrotype of the Four Wilson daughters on display at the HCU Museum of Southern History is an excellent example of these trends. The girls, who are members of the Wilson family that moved to the Houston Area in the 1840s, are arranged in an undeniably painting-like manner. Starting at the far left, one of the girls, perhaps the youngest (Alice Ann), sits at a table reading from a book. Above and to the right of her, another daughter (who does not look much older; perhaps Henrietta) stands with her hand around the former’s shoulder, looking down upon the page. Across the image to the right of her, a third, taller, daughter (maybe the second oldest, Mary Elizabeth) stands in profile looking down upon the same page. Lastly, in the center, the eldest-looking daughter (Virginia) sits in profile in front of the table, seemingly unaware of the scene behind her, thoughtfully staring into the distance. Her hand is curled up next to her face as she gently rests her head against it, which was a common trope in American photography to depict an intelligent woman (the influential authors Harriet Beecher Stowe, Augusta Jane Evans,

and Caroline Lee Hentz would all be taken photographs of in the same pose). As the eldest, she is looking beyond the realm of her home life to other things, such as marriage. In fact, Virginia married William Fulton in 1847 at the age of 17, around the time this photograph was taken (Texas Marriages). The photograph tells a story within it, as though simply capturing a likeness was not enough.

As time passed, and the complexity of the photographic process diminished, photography became much more temporally focused. The art shifted toward capturing a space or a moment in time, rather than the people as subjects in and of themselves. For a time, however, Americans from all walks of life were invited to take the likeness of their loved ones, often in a way that took care to tell the story of those persons. These portraits were not like the spur-of-the-moment snapshots of today, which in the worst cases project an image of a forced happiness, but an attempt to capture the very nature of the person as enhanced by the artist's framing. Photographs tell a story; it is our responsibility, even as casual photo-takers, to tell it well.

Works Cited

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