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Daguerreotypes: Capturing American History

At Houston Baptist University's Museum of Southern History, captured on a thin, silver-plated sheet of copper is the image of a grandmother and her granddaughter. Taken in 1855, the grandmother, Mary Warner Wilson, wears a long-sleeved dress with a scarf tied around her neck connected by a large brooch. Her young granddaughter leans against her, placing an arm on her knee, wearing a short-sleeved, frilly gown. The two of them are encased in a small leather box that opens up like a book. The other side is padded with brown velvet with flowers engraved into it. When faced directly, the full photo can be seen, but under bright lighting or when viewed at different angles, they disappear. This type of photograph is called a daguerreotype, and it was the first photographic process made available to the general public. Invented by French artist Louis Daguerre, the daguerreotype was introduced worldwide in 1839 and remained the most popular format in America until the late 1850s (Coddington 45). The daguerreotype democratized portraits. Everyone, even those from working class families, could have their likeness immortalized and handed down for generations. This magic invention changed the accessibility of photography forever, and these images play a significant role in American history. By granting everyone the chance to photograph their lives, daguerreotypes serve as a glimpse of what life was like in the nineteenth century and capture the culture, patriotism, and sentiment of the American people.

The daguerreotype's lasting quality is seen in the image of Mrs. Wilson and her granddaughter, whose faces live on nearly two centuries later. Louis Daguerre set out with the

goal to produce high-quality images that could be preserved for years to come. When he finally succeeded with the daguerreotype, word of his invention spread like wildfire. Ronald S. Coddington writes, “news traveled quickly to America, where the daguerreotype was hailed as a beautiful invention, of Rembrandt perfected” (45). Americans could not get enough of the daguerreotype, and everyone wanted to have one. In fact, “the daguerreotype remained the unchallenged leader in American photography for nearly 15 years” (Coddington 45). To make a daguerreotype, an expert would take a polished sheet of silver-plated copper, treat it with sensitive halide, place it in a camera obscura, and then expose it to mercury vapor. This chemical process would then make the latent image appear. Because this method was easy to reproduce and the images were often pocket-sized, daguerreotypes were infinitely cheaper than portrait paintings. Coddington notes that entrepreneurs “spread photography to the far corners of antebellum America” (45). Even working class Americans could afford to hold onto images of their loved ones. Thus, portraits were no longer a luxury exclusive to the upper class.

Daguerreotypes were the first democratic medium for portraits. With class boundaries shattered, the potential of photography could be explored thoroughly. As the demand for daguerreotypes swept the nation, “the most accomplished artists established impressive studios in the major American cities” (“Divine Perfection” 43). These studios were run by talented photographers, such as Mathew Brady in New York and Southworth and Hawes in Boston (43). Aside from these photos being one-of-a-kind, daguerreotypes could capture real life in a way that had never been done before. Donald D. Keyes remarks that “the daguerreotype brought accurate representation of people and things to Americans at a price they could afford” and this made them invaluable (117). Unfortunately, many portrait artists were driven out of business because they could not compete with the affordability and accessibility of daguerreotypes. However, it

was more than just convenience that made daguerreotypes sought after in America. Keyes argues that “daguerreotypes of all kinds did partake in the overall encouragement of cultural nationalism which dominated the 1840s and 1850s. The work ethic and corollary implications of moral uprightness were frequently the basis of daguerreotypes” (117). Many would bring with them objects and symbolic representations of their lives. Working men would bring in the tools of their craft. Women would bring in a sewing machine or hold onto a large daguerreotype of a loved one in their lap. Many people also brought their Bibles with them as a symbol of their Christian faith. Portraits were taken seriously because they would go on to be what remains of them after death. This meant that Americans wanted to be represented as accurately as possible, which is why they chose to include meaningful objects as well.

Patrons could also request for special additions to be made to their daguerreotype if they so desired. On the daguerreotype of Mary Warner Wilson and her granddaughter, Mrs. Wilson has gold gilt paint applied to her brooch, necklace, and chain. It glimmers in the light a faint yellow color. Modern museumgoers might then wonder, if this much care was given to a portrait, why do they look so unhappy? Well, though the process only required the models to hold still for upwards of twenty seconds, some could have chosen not to smile because it was easier. Even so, it is more likely that they were following the pre-existing customs in painting, where smiles were not deemed appropriate for portraiture. Yet, the models in daguerreotypes had other ways of showing their happiness and affection. Daniel Cornell and Alison L. Luxner write, “the model in American daguerreotype portraits for any kind of kinship relation included some sign of interaction, most typically in the form of a physical touch” (110). Mrs. Wilson and her granddaughter show their familial bond through contact. As her granddaughter leans against her and she places her arm behind her, they are demonstrating to everyone that they are kin. These

details show “the very deliberate nature of sitting for a daguerreotype” and that choices were often not made lightly (Cornell and Luxner 103). Even the smallest details might have significant meaning in a daguerreotype.

Eventually, the demise of the daguerreotype arrived. Ambrotypes, a type of photograph on glass that can be viewed by reflected light, “dominated the market during the [Civil War’s] first year” (Coddington 45). Daguerreotypes fell out of fashion and lost to newer, cheaper methods. Though its popularity waned by the early 1860s, there are several daguerreotypes of soldiers in uniform during the Civil War. Coddington speculates that “some may have preferred the superior qualities of the daguerreotype, despite the higher cost versus the new formats” (46). Perhaps daguerreotypes appealed to American patriotism more because the quality mattered for a soldier trying to honor their country in an image. They must have seen in daguerreotypes a special quality that could not easily be replaced.

Daguerreotypes serve as an important time capsule of American history. Their influence and spread over the course of twenty years proved to be invaluable to what we know now about nineteenth-century life. As wars passed, buildings crumbled, and presidents left office, these images lived on. Being able to see the face of someone from the 1800s is remarkable. Mrs. Wilson and her granddaughter are remembered through their daguerreotype and their familial love can still be felt today. Photography has come a long way since, but without Louis Daguerre’s magical invention that started it all, history might have been vastly different.

Works Cited

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