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“Le Portrait Daguerrien en Amérique”/”The Daguerreian Portrait in America” (14 Sept – 1 Dec 2013)

Interview of Wm. B. Becker (Director of the American Museum of Photography and lender of the photographs presented in the exhibition)

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“Le Portrait Daguerrien en Amérique”/“The Daguerreian Portrait in America” (14 Sept – 1 Dec 2013)

Interview of Wm. B. Becker (Director of the American Museum of
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Géraldine Chouard

- 1 The exhibition “Le Portrait daguerrien en Amérique/The Daguerreian Portrait in America” took place in Bry-sur-Marne at the Daguerre Mansion and in Lagny-sur-Marne. The exhibition was co-curated by Professor François Brunet (University of Paris-Diderot), Wm. B. Becker (Director of the American Museum of Photography) and Margaret Calvarin (Museum Director of the City of Bry-sur-Marne). The portion of the exhibition in Lagny-sur-Marne was under the direction of Céline Cotty.
- 2 This interview took place at the Maison Daguerre, in Bry-sur-Marne, on October 13th, 2013.



Fig. A : Daguerre Mansion, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard



Fig. B : Daguerre Mansion & Gardens, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard



Fig. C : Entrance to exhibit, Daguerre Mansion, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard

- 3 A 328-page book with 250 color illustrations, including all 220 images in this exhibition, is published by Mare & Martin of Paris in both French and English editions, titled *Daguerre's American Legacy/L'Heritage de Daguerre en Amérique*. The book is co-written by the exhibition's curators, François Brunet, Professor of American Art and Literature at the University of Paris-Diderot, and Wm. B. Becker, director of the American Museum of Photography. The photographs in the exhibition are selections from the Collection of Wm. B. Becker. The exhibit and book are supported by the Conseil général du Val-de-Marne, the cities of Bry-sur-Marne and Lagny-sur-Marne and the Société Bryarde des Arts et des Lettres, in conjunction with funding provided by the Laboratoire de recherches sur les cultures anglophones of Université Paris-Diderot and the Institut Universitaire de France. Additional support was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Cultural and Educational Affairs Section of the United States Embassy in France.

Géraldine Chouard :

Thank you Mr. Becker for granting us this interview for the journal *Transatlantica*.

We are going to talk about two landmark exhibits, “Le Portrait daguerrien en Amérique/The Daguerreian Portrait in America”. The first one is presented at the newly renovated mansion of Louis Daguerre, inventor of the first practical process of photography. It shows about 80 nineteenth-century American daguerreotype portraits from your collection. And the other exhibit, held in nearby Lagny-sur-Marne shows about 130 portraits taken between the 1840s and 1900.

First of all, on behalf of my fellow French citizens, I would like to thank you for generously lending us a part of your collection and to say how grateful we are to have the opportunity of seeing these amazing daguerreotypes for the first time. From what I know, it has been a great success, which is wonderful. Visiting the exhibit feels like entering an antique jewelry box.

I would like first to ask you, how does it feel for you to be in Bry-sur-Marne, the home of Louis Daguerre, and to have your daguerreotypes shown here ? Do you feel that you came with your whole family in a way ?

Bill Becker :

Thank you so much for asking and thank you for doing this interview. This has been a very emotional time for me, and in some ways, it's almost like a pilgrimage. I started collecting photography by buying one daguerreotype when I was about sixteen years old. From that time, I've been in love with daguerreotypes, and from that, in love with photography and the history of photography. But always, the daguerreotype is a first love. From the very earliest time when I was collecting, I wanted to learn more about the daguerreotypes I was acquiring and that led me to learn about Daguerre. The more one reads about Daguerre, the more one realizes what an absolute miracle he created when he invented the first process of photography, and how improbable the combination of ingredients that he ended up with turned out to be. It's amazing that he somehow discovered the latent image, the key to making photography into a practical art and a practical form of communication.

As a teenager, I would read about Daguerre and about the little church at Bry and how he painted this wonderful diorama that turned the little country church into a cathedral of the mind. And I thought that maybe someday I would have a chance to visit Bry. But I never would have dared to dream that my precious daguerreotypes would be along with me. I have very deep feelings about this place even though I never visited here until the occasion of the exhibition. It's an enormous honor, for me as a collector, but also for the American daguerreotypists, who as much as anybody revered Daguerre for giving this incredible invention to the world. To have their work shown, as the first examples of American photography in the home of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre is an amazing moment for me.

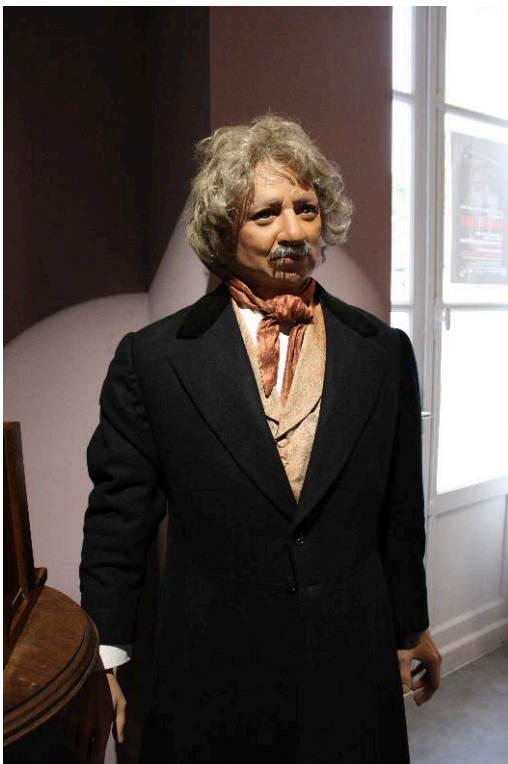


Fig D : Louis Daguerre Plaster Cast, Daguerre Mansion, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard



Fig E : Bill Becker, Daguerre Mansion, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Carlos Vertanessian

GC : How do you see your role or function as a collector ? You also do research on the daguerreotypes you collect, don't you ?

BB : Not all collectors collect in the same way. There are many collectors who are passionate about their collections and not just collectors of daguerreotypes or collectors of photography, but collectors of art, or collectors of antique furniture, or rare musical instruments. There are significant collectors who are very wealthy people, and they have the luxury of having things brought to them. Then there are other collectors who perhaps are not quite at the very tippy-top of the pyramid but who have the wherewithal to buy often at public auctions, from galleries, and I don't quite fit into that category either. I don't come from a wealthy family. I didn't start out with a collection that my grandmother, for example, had put together. This was something that just happened. It just was fate that I started to collect, without much money and at a very early age. But even wealthy collectors will tell you they still have to set limits on what they buy. For me, the excitement is in putting together objects that are acquired at different times and different places so they tell a story, in finding and recognizing wonderful things that others have not looked at closely enough, and gaining an understanding for the times in which the pieces were made. Many of the images in this exhibition were acquired by me after other collectors turned them down.

GC : Would you like to show one example in particular ?

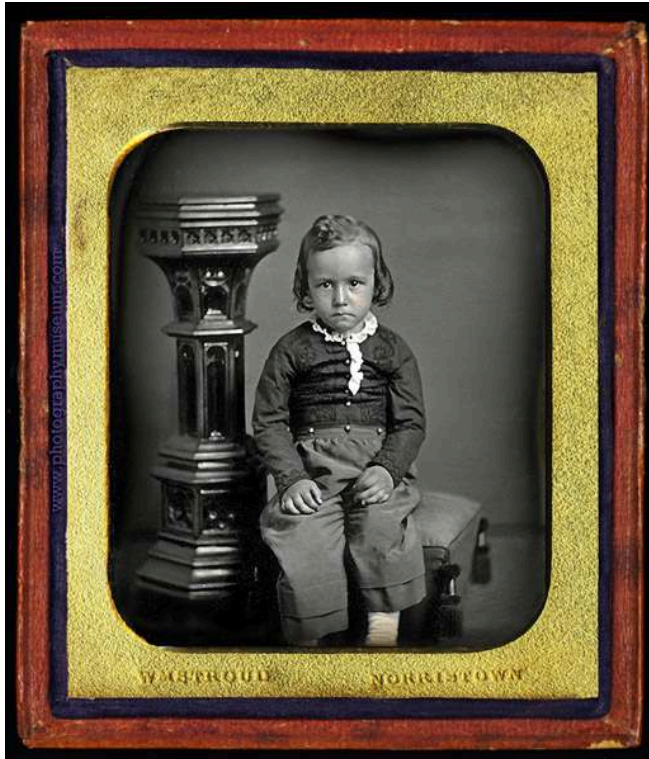


Fig. 1, William Stroud, Boy Beside Gothic Column (The Grumpy Boy), daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca. 1853. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

BB : Yes, this little boy here, we call him “the grumpy boy,” an unofficial title. He's standing next to this formidable neo-Gothic column, and he's on a little tufted stool with little tassels. He's very properly dressed for the photograph. It was taken by a very talented daguerreotypist who was in a town called Norristown, Pennsylvania, not too far from Philadelphia. His name is William Stroud and he was capable of doing extraordinary work. I saw this daguerreotype first in an online auction, it wasn't a lot of money and it didn't sell. Then the dealer who had him for sale brought him to one of the bourses of the Daguerreian Society, which are held once a year when the Daguerreian Society meets. He was on the table and again, nobody bought him. Eventually, the pain of not acquiring it got to be too great, and I was able, with the help of this wonderful dealer – a member of the Daguerreian Society – to make an exchange. So, we added this piece in time to get into the show. I showed it to one of my oldest friends, someone who is not a photography collector, and his comment was, “Looks like the young man is unhappy because someone has taken away his cigar.” And I looked at it again, and I realized that this boy has the same expression on his face as the most famous portrait taken by Yousef Karsh of Winston Churchill. Karsh got that defiant expression by taking away Churchill's cigar just as he was about to click the shutter on the camera.

GC : How did the Bry and Lagny exhibit projects come about ?

BB : I'll tell you the whole story. I've curated a number of exhibitions from my collection over the years. The biggest one was in 1989 for the 150th anniversary of photography, and it produced an exhibition that had two venues in the United States and a book that was very well-received and went into a second printing called *Photography's Beginnings: A Visual History*. I've also loaned a number of pieces,

mostly within the United States for inclusion in shows at some very good institutions, such as the National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum at the Smithsonian, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I've also loaned pieces on request to exhibitions outside of the United States, for example to the Museum Folkwang in Essen, the Museum of the City of London, and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris. So, I was aware that my collection included a big segment of American photography that really had not been seen outside of the United States to any degree, and that there was interest in that. So, that's the background.

Even though I had additional exhibitions in the United States every few years, including one when the Daguerreian Society met in the Detroit area in 2000, there has been a shift in the direction of many of the museums, in the United States, away from showing private collections. I think that, in the long run, is not a good idea because new collectors enter a field where they feel they have an opportunity and where they can see that others have had an opportunity to do something meaningful. And not necessarily only others who own private museums, or others who are industrialists or financiers who have fabulous collections that they have been able to put together with the help of hired curators and advisors, but ordinary people. And not just in photography, but in a whole bunch of areas, so this has become an issue that they don't want to show what the collector's eye can accomplish.

GC : And where do you fit in this picture ?

BB : One of the ways I've filled in the gap has been by having my own online museum, which is called the American Museum of Photography. That allows me to curate very small, but interesting online exhibitions that are available all around the world, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

GC : A place to visit by all means.

BB : Of course, it's great to have your own museum, but people who have their own museums with buildings have to have somebody to handle security and lock the doors and clean the bathrooms. With three-quarters of a million visits a year, that would have been outside of my capability. Not to mention the cat would have been very upset if that many people had rung the doorbell. So, I had started thinking about the possibility of doing an exhibition outside the United States. I got into a very interesting correspondence with François Brunet and found in him, in many ways, a kindred spirit. He is extremely knowledgeable and passionate about American photography, the same period that interests me. He is a person with fascinating insights into the differences between the United States and France, socially and culturally, at this period and also today. He asked me on a couple of occasions to loan him images for publication, in particular for his recent book *L'Amérique des images* (Hazan, 2013), so I was aware of the fact that he was teaching history of American photography of this period. I said to him, "I don't know if this interests you, but I want to suggest the possibility of arranging a loan exhibition so that your students could see what they're studying, right there in front of them". And that led to further discussions with Professor Brunet, and really, to another important piece of the puzzle.

Separately, we could probably discuss my feelings as a collector : even though I don't exercise stewardship of public property as a museum curator would, I feel that

ownership of these pieces makes it incumbent to share and spread the understanding of these works. It’s not appropriate for me to just put them in a box and hide them away. So that motivation is another of the ingredients necessary for this complex recipe of producing an exhibition.

What we did not have was a venue. Independently of my contacts with François Brunet, I had come to know Jean-Pierre Spilbauer, mayor of the city of Bry-sur-Marne and his very able director of museums, Margaret Calvarin. They attended the Daguerreian Society meetings in the United States over a period of six years. They would give us reports on the diorama project at the local church, created by Louis Daguerre. So, I spoke a few words of my very, very limited French with the mayor and Margaret Calvarin, and told them how much I was excited by this project to revive the last surviving diorama in Bry. I also knew that the city of Bry had purchased Daguerre's mansion, but was told it would not be possible to remodel the space in the Maison Daguerre for an exhibition in time for the unveiling of the diorama, which was the occasion that was going to bring the Daguerreian Society to Bry. Later, and independently of all this, Professor Brunet was speaking with Dominique de Font-Réaulx (former senior curator at the Musée du Louvre) and she had heard that there was interest from the city of Bry in doing an exhibition that would be simultaneous with the “Heritage Days” (“Journées du patrimoine”) and with the Daguerreian Society meeting and the November month of photography in Paris — and now, the space would be ready. So, François Brunet contacted me and he said, “Well, you know there is this small town. It's really sort of a suburb. I doubt that you've heard of it. It's called Bry-sur-Marne.” And I said, “Not only have I heard of it, but I know the mayor !” All these different pieces of the puzzle just clicked into place, and we had the opportunity to work with the mayor and Madame Calvarin to do this project.



Fig. F. Entrance to the Lagny-sur-Marne exhibit. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard



Fig. G : Bill Becker & François Brunet at the Lagny-sur-Marne exhibit. Copyright © Robert Lansdale

gc : So, a very successful cooperation made this happen. How long did it take you to put all this together ?

BB : It seems to me that from the time we made a firm decision to proceed with the exhibition, it was about one year for everything.

gc : That's not much.

BB : No, it's absolutely not much. Some of the research for the book had been done, but the selection process and the decision about what would go to Bry, what would go to Lagny, making shipping arrangements and so much more lay ahead. At the same time, they were still working on the renovation of the Maison Daguerre, and then it became necessary to produce these “vitrines”. And I had a request from Margaret Calvarin to do period framing of some of the daguerreotypes, which would reduce the need for quite so many vitrines. This was the case for this daguerreotype in particular.



Fig. H : Bill Becker, Daguerre Mansion, Bry-sur-Marne. Copyright © Robert Lansdale

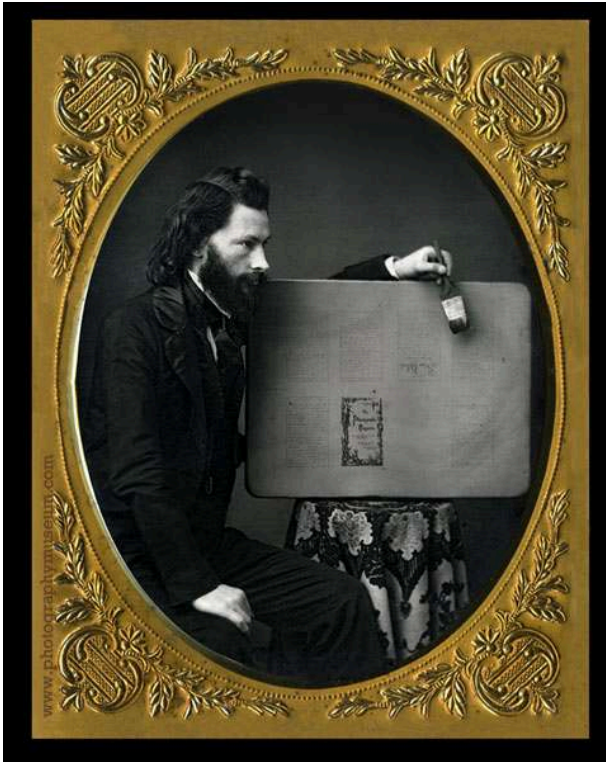


Fig. 2. Unidentified photographer, Portrait of Benn Pitman, Cincinnati, daguerreotype (quarter plate, 3.25 x 4.25 in.), 1854. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : That's the image of the book cover, isn't it ?

BB : Both versions, yes. I needed to get the silk that looked like the silk pads in some daguerreotype cases and the only way I could do it was by cutting up a silk shirt I'd purchased to wear. So now my green silk shirt has a large hole in it. But, I think it looks very good.

GC : It's very effective. Don't regret your shirt.

BB : The shirt looks better on Benn Pitman than on me.

GC : In your book, you wrote, "When we look at 19th-century daguerreotypes today, we may feel like interlopers, voyeurs, intercepting what was intended to be a private communication." Could you elaborate on this tension between the public and the private ?

BB : I can give you an example of something that was probably a very rare form of an image that was intended for the public. And that might be the daguerreotype by Jeremiah Gurney of the actress wearing a military hat called a kepi and a fake beard.

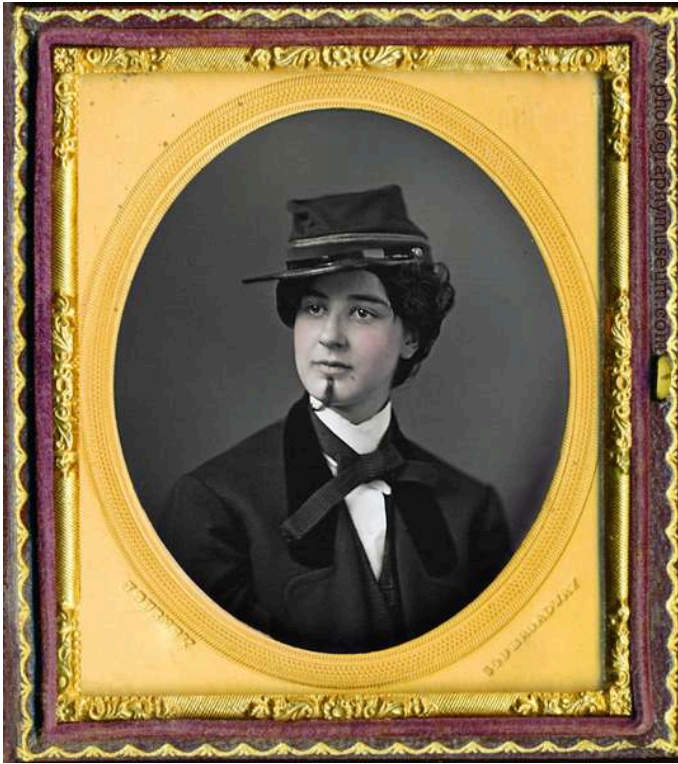


Fig. 3. Jeremiah Gurney (1812-1895, NYC), Woman with Kepi and False Beard, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca. 1858. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

- 4 Shortly after this image was made, Gurney switched away from daguerreotypes. He brought his son in as a partner, and they began to specialize in theatrical personalities. These would have been made in the multiples because they were *cartes de visite* and other photographs on paper. This represents a transition from his portrait studio business to a business of basically distributing images of celebrities. There was undeniably a certain element of theatricality in this, and obviously this is not an intimate piece that only reflects somebody's personal life.

GC : Could you now comment on a private one now ?

BB : So, this is a very moving photograph called "Bedside Vigil" of a mother with a hidden figure on the left, holding up this beautiful child with blond curls, who is either deceased or very close to death. Postmortem portraiture was practiced in this period primarily on elderly people, those who died at an advanced age, and infants who could not have made it to a daguerreotypist's studio to be photographed when they were alive, either because they couldn't travel there or there wasn't a daguerreotypist close enough. These are the only memories that families would have of these children. But, in this case, it's really heart-rending to see the mother in this space at this particular moment. You can't imagine a more intensely private moment.

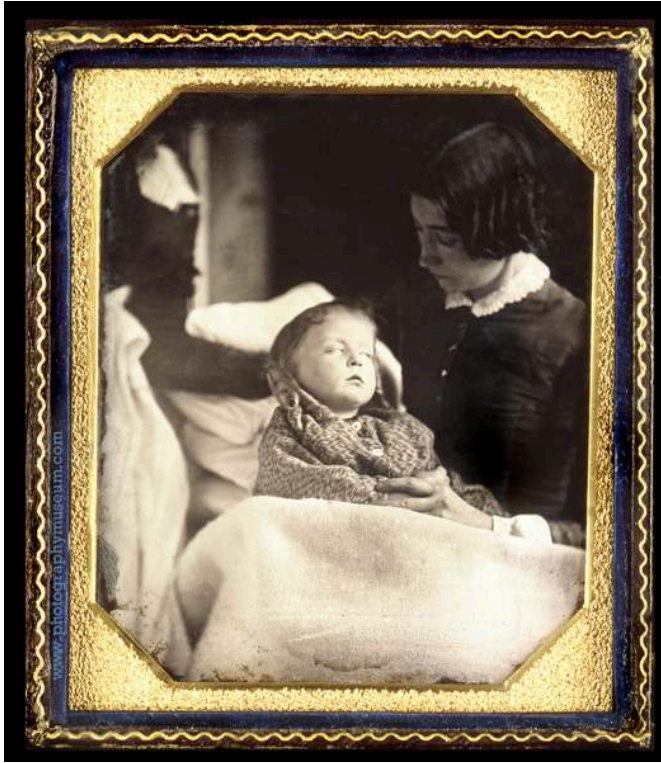


Fig. 4. Unidentified photographer, Bedside Vigil, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca. 1845-1850. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

This is an extreme example of what I mean by being an interloper: inserting ourselves in very private moments. That doesn't mean that many of other daguerreotypes are less intimate, with these people inviting us into their lives. I really think this is the case for "Uncle George and Gus" but it feels a little less invasive. It's a little less of a private moment, but it's still an intimate, an emotional moment captured. It's just the essence of these two people and this relationship.



Fig. 5. Unidentified photographer, *Uncle Geo and Gus*, ca. 1850-1855, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.) Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : When looking at all these very diverse portraits, we're very much struck by the fact that they are really staged, projecting a mood or personality, enhancing a specific identity. Could you comment on this and could you also tell who decides on the position and the expression of the sitter ?

BB : That is a fascinating question. Because this exhibition, at Professor Brunet's request, was limited to American photographic *portraiture*, we found ourselves trying to explain this to ourselves, so that we could explore it in the exhibition and the book. We're very fortunate, I think, to have a fascinating group of Southworth and Hawes daguerreotypes. Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah J. Hawes in Boston are the best-known American daguerreotypists today because such a huge number of their original plates were preserved into the 20th century. We have this opportunity not just to see their work, but to go back and read their advertising, which gives plenty of advice to sitters about what to do. There's a famous quote from a little bit later on when Alfred Lord Tennyson is escorting Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Julia Margaret Cameron's studio on the Isle of Wight. He says, "Well, Longfellow, you'll have to do whatever she asks. I'll be back after a few hours to see what's left of you." So, you do have this tradition in photography of a photographer with a particular vision, and the sitter is putty in the hands of the photographer and has to do whatever they're told.

Now, Southworth talks about how the sitter should, by all means, suggest how they want to appear, but then they have to just have trust in the art and to let the photographer guide them and control the situation. While far more was written about how to properly polish a daguerreotype plate, and how to get the contrast and exposure correct, very little was said about the human dynamic of the portrait. But Southworth is one of the few people we have from whom we can understand some of

the interaction with the sitter. In the catalogue raisonné of his work, I have only found one portrait of a person smoking, and that is the infamous singer, dancer and courtesan Lola Montez, who is shown scandalously with a cigarette in her gloved hand. Also, Southworth was very careful about not letting men wear their hats inside because these were indoor portraits and hats were intended for protection from the weather. I've looked through more than one thousand of this gallery's portraits of men and have found only three where there's a man wearing his hat. And yet here's somebody sitting in a Southworth and Hawes' chair, which was a trademark. Now, maybe Southworth was working with another client and his partner made this. I don't know how to explain it. He's not only wearing a hat indoors, but he's smoking.

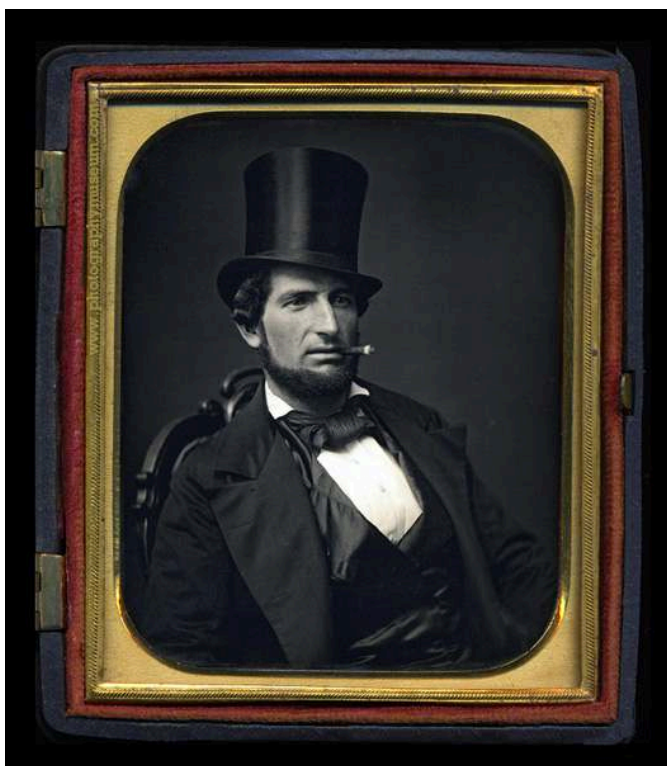


Fig. 6. Albert S. Southworth (1811-1894) & Josiah J. Hawes (1808-1901), Boston, Gentleman in a Top Hat, Smoking, Daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca. 1856. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : An unusual one, indeed. Very intense.

BB : Neither of these things is rare in the works of other studios, but it's an unknown combination for Southworth and Hawes. They showed an admirable ability to break their own rules when it served their artistic purposes.

GC : One is also struck by the number of accessories, and more generally, of all the details featured in those daguerreotypes.

BB : People are posed with what's meaningful to them. There's this whole category of occupationals, showing people posing with the tools of their trade. Obviously, a child doesn't have tools of the trade, although we do find children with their schoolbooks or with little toys. This charming girl holds a large figure of a dog, which looks like a piece of Staffordshire pottery, but I'm told is probably not because the base is atypical for Staffordshire. More likely, it is made out of cheaper material called chalkware, which is lighter — because she seems so small and she doesn't seem to be weighted down by it. She's presenting it as if this is something very important to her.

It's just such a sweet and innocent picture, but without the toy in there, it would be less expressive. It fixes it more closely to a point in her life when this was an important toy for her and when this was an important occasion, perhaps a birthday that she was going to have her daguerreotype taken.



Fig. 7. Unidentified photographer, Girl with a Chalkware Squeak Toy or Staffordshire Dog, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.) ca 1850. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : One can't help noticing the strong presence of textile in these daguerreotypes.

BB : The daguerreotype was superior to other forms of photography that came about early on because of its incredible capacity to convey detail. So, they took advantage of that by putting in things that had very, very fine detail. With the best daguerreotypes, you could use a microscope to go and look at the weave of a fabric, if you can find one that's sharp and in the right place. Beyond that, sometimes they used distinctive tablecloths that were made by weavers. For example, there are several other daguerreotypes by this studio and they all have this particular tablecloth. It's the Benedict National Daguerreotype Gallery in Syracuse, New York.



Fig. 8. E. H. Benedict, Syracuse, New York, A Bookkeeper, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), March 23, 1855. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

gc : It's a good clue for you then to identify the various daguerreotype studios.

BB : Yes, it is a trademark in a way. The most unusual use of a cloth is this gold miner displaying what seems to be a wound on his hand and a dirty bandage. A bandage that he'd wrapped around it, which is now in his breast pocket and sticking up onto his shoulder. You can see sort of a blood stain on it. It's a very, very intense portrait. You think that he's telling you a story here. If you look at the scratches on his hand, you wonder if he wasn't in a fight with a bear out in California in the gold fields, which were pretty wild places at the time.

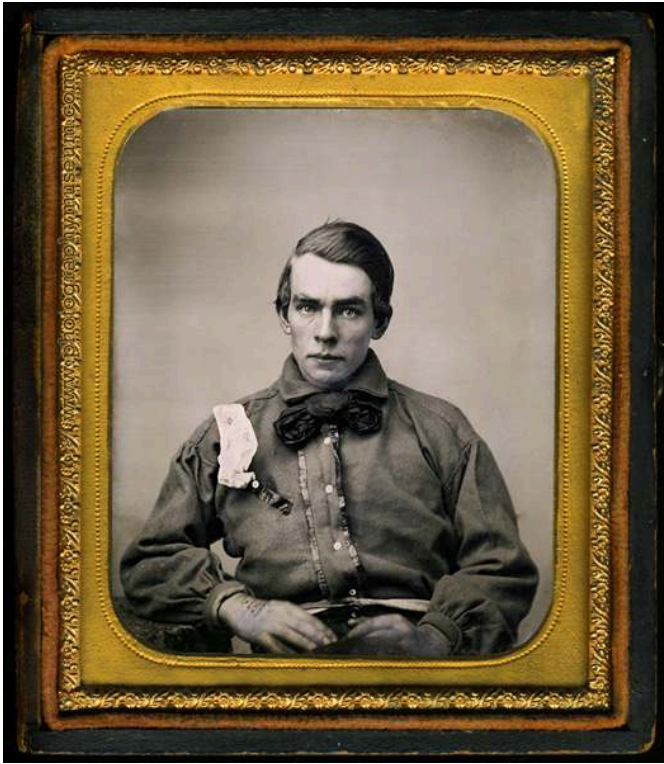


Fig. 9. Unidentified photographer, '49er with a Wounded Hand, daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca 1850. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : In a lecture you gave at the Université Paris-Diderot you showed that there were secret codes embedded in daguerreotypes, and you demonstrated the use of phrenology and the language of flowers to communicate symbolically. Could you give us one example of this type of interpretation ?

BB : I'll give you one example that's in the exhibition and the book (p.16, which is this daguerreotype of Daguerre himself by the American Charles Meade. It's on loan from the Société française de photographie. There are several in the series that were taken in Bry-sur-Marne by Meade in which Daguerre's fingers are pointing very specifically and somewhat awkwardly to his head. Now, it was said this was a way of holding his head steady, but they had other ways of doing this with a special headrest. If you look at these carefully, there are a couple where he is specifically trying to find points with his fingers on his head.

In the literature of phrenology, you'll find that these two places he's pointing to correspond to two so-called "organs of the mind". One of these is called Ideality, which is the artist's or the writer's search for the sublime and for the ideal in perfection and beauty. Of course, Daguerre was primarily a painter. The other point, I believe, is Constructiveness, which is a faculty that would have been required in the mind to be a mechanic or an inventor. And, of course, we know Daguerre's inventiveness. I've documented other examples of people pointing to their organ of Ideality, and this is explained further in the book *Daguerre's American Legacy*, in a small section on "cracking the code" [133-147].

GC : What the most incongruous object you found in a daguerreotype ?

BB : I couldn't think of one because they all seem to fit in, all important enough to be included in the picture. In Lagny, there is a tintype showing three men with a fish

and a lobster. Now, there's nothing really incongruous about it. This is what they did for a living. Obviously, they were fishermen or fishmongers. But, to drag that into a studio presumably dripping wet and to hold it up to the camera, that's pretty unusual.



Fig. 10. Unidentified photographer, Three Men with Fish and Lobster, tintype in CDV format (2.5 x 4 in.), ca 1890. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker



I. Jigsaw puzzle of "Three Men with Fish and Lobster" daguerreotype, Kid's Corner at the Lagny-sur-Marne Exhibit. Copyright © Géraldine Chouard

GC : Anything else unusual you'd like to mention in this collection ?

BB : Yes, this daguerreotype is the first example of photobombing. You know about photobombing ? People insert themselves into somebody else's picture. It's a big thing now.

GC : Yes, you find it all over the internet, on Flickr, everywhere, photobombing.

BB : Here is what certainly appears to be the first case of being photobombed by a dog. It completely upstages everybody.



Fig. 11. J. E. Carpenter (Le Roy, N.Y.), Three Boys and a Dog, daguerreotype (quarter plate, 3.25 x 4.25 in.), August 27, 1854. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : We haven't mentioned the fact that some of them were tinted. Could you comment about this addition of color ?

BB : We don't know how many were tinted originally and have lost their color from being cleaned, or even just from the fugitive nature of the colors. It was almost universal that there was a little pink, a little rouge added to the cheeks. Every once in a while you find a very heavily tinted image that's been beautifully done. But, the most beautiful ones to me are the ones that are so natural that they just take on a different dimension. I think my favorite of all is this Williamson cameo, which doesn't have any brilliant colors in it, but it's just the most natural appearing colors. Everything about it is just perfection, and this man was known for his ability to tint daguerreotypes.



Fig. 12. Charles H. Williamson, Cameo Daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), ca. 1850-1855. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker.

gc : What about this woman writing letters next to tinted flowers ?



Fig. 13. Unidentified photographer, Writing Letters, tinted daguerreotype (sixth plate, 2.75 x 3.25 in.), c. 1853. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

BB : The tinting of the flowers is effective, but may not be the primary attraction of that portrait. The attraction is the composition and the accessories. It's the only daguerreotype I've ever seen with postage stamps in it. It's an extraordinary thing because it really is a portrait of her as a writer. Maybe as a correspondent, and it's all about the communicating. She's also telling you she's thinking those ideal thoughts.

GC : I don't see any daguerreotypes of African American people here. How do you explain this absence ?

BB : Sometimes it's difficult to know. There were people of mixed race. There were light-skinned African Americans, and I do have a few such daguerreotypes in my collection. We decided that was not the primary thrust of this part of the exhibition. However, there is a significant selection of images of African Americans and Native Americans at Lagny. There is an ambrotype of an identified slave boy. It's extremely rare to find someone who was identified as a slave because in most cases, slaves did not have the opportunity to voluntarily go in to sit for a portrait photograph. So, daguerreotypes, no, but immediately after, still from the middle of the 19th century, there are other wonderful things depicting Native Americans and African Americans.

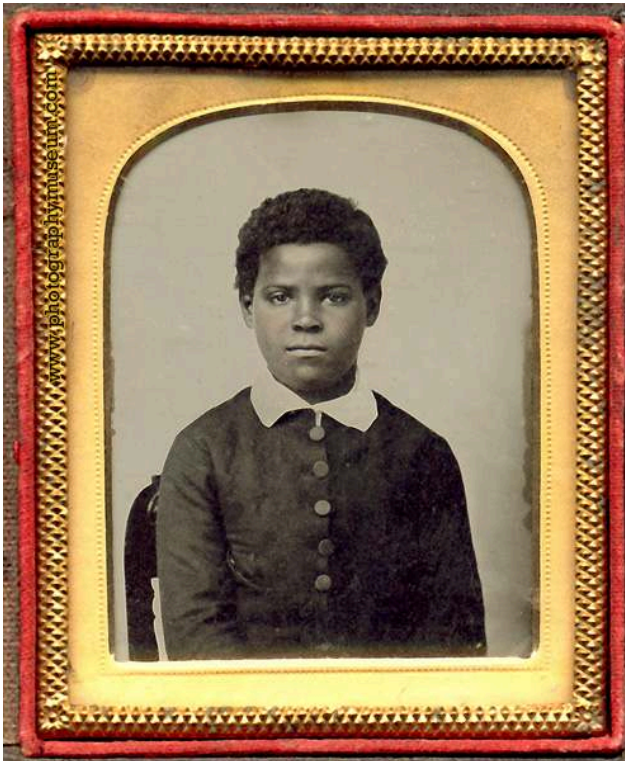


Fig. 14. Unidentified photographer, *Slave Boy Brought to Waterbury*, ambrotype (ninth plate, 2 x 2.5 in.) ? ca. 1859. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : There's this very striking picture of a Native American woman holding a very blond baby.



Fig. 15. Geo H. Dresser (1854-1912), Winfield, Kansas, Native American with Blonde Baby, albumen print on cabinet card mount (4.25 x 6.5 in.), after 1885. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

BB : It's an extremely moving story, the interchange between the races, which was very warlike and oppositional in much of the country during most of the 19th century. Yet there are these portraits that show just common humanity, and that's one of them. It's a real contrast to the portrait of an important Navajo woman named Juanita, who was married to the Navajo Chief Manuelito, posing with the territorial governor of her tribe, William Arny. Juanita traveled as part of an official tribal delegation to Washington to meet with the President after the Civil War and she presented to him a flag on her loom, an interpretation of the American flag, which is now in the Smithsonian. It's a very different example of the relations between the races. Juanita and Arny are physically separated by the photographer with this loom in between, but you compare that to George H. Dresser's cabinet card of the Native American woman and the blond baby, and you see there's no separation. The people are just allowed to be human and neighbors.



Fig. 16. Charles M. Bell (1848-1893), Juanita and Governor Arny with Weaving of the American Flag, albumen print (approx. 5 x 7 in.), 1874. Copyright © 2013 Wm. B. Becker

GC : Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to say ?

BB : This whole project really would not have been possible without the support of my family over many years, but especially my lovely wife, Fran Becker. There were many people who were involved in the realization of this project. Of course, none of this would have been possible really without Mayor Spilbauer because he has recognized this globally important heritage that the city of Bry-sur-Marne has in being the home of Daguerre. He has worked for years and tirelessly to rescue the Diorama and the home of Daguerre, and to bring Daguerre's story to the forefront. He has created something wonderful of worldwide importance in Bry-sur-Marne. And, of course, Margaret Calvarin has been absolutely instrumental in supervising very complex international arrangements, and in coming up with this installation, which is just the perfect way to light and to look at daguerreotypes. It's not an easy thing to do. So, we're very fortunate to have this team in Bry-sur-Marne who has done just a miraculous job of bringing these events together. In Lagny, Sylvie Bonnin the mayor, Françoise Copeland, the deputy mayor for culture and Céline Cotty, who is the curator of the Musée Gatién-Bonnet. All of them were enthusiastic for providing the venue for a very rich and important part of American photographic portraiture.

GC : Well, thank you very much. And again, congratulations for this spectacular accomplishment.

BB : Thank you. It's been tremendously meaningful and rewarding to me. I could not be happier, more dazzled or more pleased to be here.

AUTEUR

GÉRALDINE CHOUARD

Université Paris-Dauphine