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"Traveling Daguerreian Wagon, Western New York," circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype. Because the daguerreotype captured a mirror image, the sign "daguerreotype saloon" appears in reverse.

Through The Looking Glass

Daguerreotype Masterworks From The Dawn Of Photography

BY KATE EAGEN JOHNSON

POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y. — In an 1859 article in *The Atlantic*, Oliver Wendell Holmes dubbed the daguerreotype "the mirror with a memory" because it captured a reverse image of the sitter upon a silvered base. In his novel *The House of Seven Gables*, 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne posited the idea of the daguerreotype as revelatory of a sitter's true character, even as it moved from positive to negative depending on the viewing angle. The title of the exhibition currently at the Loeb Art Center makes yet another reference to photographic depictions both elusory and piercing.

"Through the Looking Glass: Daguerreotype Masterworks from the Dawn of Photography" runs until June 14 at Vassar College's Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center and includes more 140 examples belonging to Westchester County, N.Y., collectors Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg. In a 2005 *The New York Times* exhibition review, Benjamin Genocchio termed their holdings "probably the most comprehensive and important private collection of vintage photography in the United States." The Vassar exhibition was organized by art2art Circulating Exhibitions, LLC.

Queried why he was drawn to collecting photography in general and daguerreotypes in particular, Mattis reflected, "When Judy and I started collecting vintage art photographs as

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"Young Woman With Stippled Purse and Elaborately Painted Backdrop," circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype.





“Boy in Revolutionary War Outfit, New York City” by Josiah W. Thompson (active 1849–1860), circa 1850, American, quarter-plate daguerreotype.



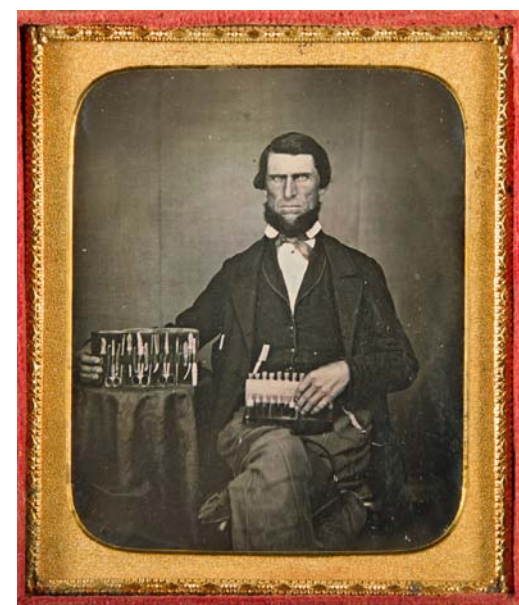
“Gold Assayer,” circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype. In occupational portraits, artfully arranged “tools of the trade” enhanced composition while also illustrating sitters’ professions.



“Seated Nude with Feather Tickler,” circa 1850, French, sixth-plate stereo daguerreotype.



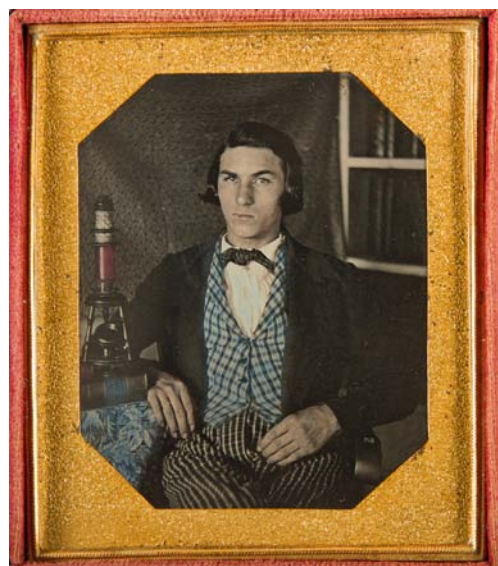
“Two Sisters, One Gloved” by Beckers & Piard (active 1850s), circa 1850, American, half-plate daguerreotype.



“Homeopathic Doctor Displaying Scalpels and Remedies,” circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype



“The Daguerreotypist’s Young Sons,” circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype.



“Medical Student with Microscope” attributed to O.P. Reeves, 1846, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype. The sitter is 19-year-old R.F. Jameson of Montrose, Penn., who is shown with his *Mackintosh’s Practice of Medicine* textbook.



“Standing Girl with Large Doll,” circa 1850, American, sixth-plate daguerreotype.

Through The Looking Glass

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graduate students 30 years ago, photography was very much the stepchild of the fine art market. When we focused on daguerreotypes more recently, ‘dags’ were very much the stepchild of the photo market. Apparently we are partial to stepchildren!” He went on to observe that “viewed through its finest examples, the daguerrean era produced photographic works every bit the equal of the best of art photography from any decade.”

Mary-Kay Lombino, the Emily Hargroves Fisher ‘57 and the Richard B. Fisher curator and assistant director for strategic planning, has structured the exhibition along classic daguerreotype collecting lines. These categories include the daguerreotypist, his studio and family; occupational; medical and scientific; music; military and hunting; outdoor; solarized; French erotic; post-mortem; portraiture and “picturing slavery.” She also devotes a section to portraits created by the famous Boston studio of Albert Southworth (1811–1894) and Josiah Hawes (1808–1901). According to Margaret Vetare, coordinator of public education and information, the exhibition offers “an embarrassment of riches” for those interested in photography, technology, Nineteenth Century visual culture, period clothing and accessories

and social phenomena.

It is unusual to have American and European daguerreotypes showcased in the same exhibition. Since collectors and curators generally consider these separate spheres, the Loeb exhibition provides a rare opportunity for comparison. Works by the Studio of Mathew Brady, Plumbe Daguerreian Studio, Oliver Francois Xavier Saron, William R. Knapp, Louis-Auguste Bisson and John W. Draper, for example — as well as by daguerreotypists whose identities have been lost to history — can be seen here.

The Loeb Art Center’s installation is designed to bring forth the detail inherent in this form of photography. Vetare pointed to the specially fabricated exhibition cases, which allow viewers to lean in for close examination. These custom cases also assure proper lighting angles and levels for these reflective and sensitive objects.

It is fitting that the exhibition is mounted just a few miles from the home of Samuel F.B. Morse (1791–1872), the artist-inventor who introduced the daguerreotype process to the United States. (In 1847, Morse bought land in Poughkeepsie for his country estate Locust Grove, which is now a historic site open to public.) In 1839, Morse had attended a joint meeting of Académie

des Sciences and the Académie des Beaux-Arts, which honored both his success with telegraph and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s (1787–1851) achievement in image-making using a light-sensitized, silver-coated copper plate. Morse studied with Daguerre and then introduced this form of photography to the United States later that same year. (Also in 1839, England’s William Henry Fox Talbot publicized his photographic technique using light-sensitized paper, but it did not receive as warm an embrace in America.)

Americans’ preference for highly realistic portraiture and their fascination with new technologies undoubtedly contributed to the daguerreotype’s greater popularity in the United States than in Europe. Photographers used this process mostly between 1839 and 1860, with the zenith occurring during the 1840s. It was eventually supplanted by the ambrotype, the tintype and the albumen print on paper.

Early critics thought that that the invention of photography would herald the death of painting, but they found themselves in error as the art forms intertwined. Daguerreotypists, some of whom were academically trained painters, relied on accepted artistic conceits when posing sitters. The touches of hand coloring added, if only a bit of pink applied to the subject’s cheeks, allud-



“Reverend Stephen Brown with His Wood-grooving Machine” by Studio of Mathew Brady (1822–1896), circa 1850, American, quarter-plate daguerreotype. Brown was employed as a minister with the Genesee Conference, New York, before retiring to Washington, D.C. The famous Civil War photographer Brady operated portrait studios in New York and Washington.



“Twelve Gold Miners at Work, Including a Woman,” circa 1850, American, half-plate daguerreotype. This image is considered extremely rare due to the presence of a female miner.



“Architectural Study with Church,” circa 1845–1850, half-plate daguerreotype.

Collection Of
Judith Hochberg And
Michael Mattis
On View Through June 14

“Solarized Bull,” circa 1850, sixth-plate daguerreotype. Since overexposure could result in a blue tint, some daguerreotypists used the technique to color the sky and other features.



Daguerreotype Masterworks From The Dawn Of Photography



“Three Dapper Men Smoking,” circa 1850, American, three-quarters plate daguerreotype. This example is a particular favorite of Lombino’s: “You can see they have a zest for life.”



Diptych: “Mother and Two Daughters,” circa 1850, French or English, two quarter-plate daguerreotypes. According to the label copy, “The presentation, including printed French language text in the housing, suggests a French origin; the formal style with painted backdrop suggests English.”



“Woman in Damask Evening Gown, Posed with a Chair” by Southworth & Hawes (active 1843–1863), circa 1850, American, full-plate daguerreotype.

ed to the painted portrait. Particularly in America, daguerreotypists enshrined their work in a manner first used for painted ivory miniatures. Glass protected the easily damaged surface of the plate, which, in turn, was held in place by a gilded metal liner. All components were contained within a leather-covered case.

The exhibition’s “Young Woman with Stippled Purse” stands as a prime example of technique fusion. To paraphrase Lombino, the only features that look photographic in this very painterly piece are the sitter’s face, hair and hands — the hardest things for an artist to render. The decorative fabric of the dress was probably much plainer in reality. The message here is that photographs have always been manipulated. The practice did not start with the invention of Photoshop.

When discussing connoisseurship criteria for judging daguerreotypes, expert Mattis explained, “Technically speaking, the best daguerreotypes are characterized by a magical, almost holographic three-dimensionality. Imagewise, whether it’s a portrait or an outdoor scene, Judy and I are looking for something indelible, a ‘best of type’ that rises to the level of art. Millions of daguerreotypes were made in the 1840s and 1850s. Most are routine and instantly forgettable.”

Since daguerreotypes are delicate and prone to deterior-

ation, Lombino emphasized excellence in condition as central. Created primarily as family mementoes, daguerreotypes as a rule were handled often and stored in less-than-ideal environments. Time did not treat the majority well.

Asked if an art curator considers daguerreotypes differently than a collector, Lombino mentioned that while she worked closely with Hochberg and Mattis, “They come with a different eye and they value rarity.” Using the category of occupational daguerreotypes as an illustration, Lombino noted that a collector might be attracted to an image that is uncommon because it contains a woman (as in the case of “Twelve Gold Miners at Work”), while she was more likely to look for images representing typical female pursuits. Plus, “When it’s your own collection you have to live with it. It is very personal. I chose things [for the exhibition] that I would not necessarily want to live with.”

In regard to the market, veteran collector Mattis commented, “As with many subfields in the art and antiques market, the daguerreotype market has stratified: the top one percent has climbed to ever higher peaks, while the bulk of the market has languished, with fine plates available at ten-year-old prices.”

Happily for dag lovers, “Through the Looking Glass” is

not a singular offering. “In Focus: Daguerreotypes,” an exhibition featuring examples from the J. Paul Getty Museum and two private collections, will be mounted at the Getty Center in Los Angeles this fall. It will run from November 3 to March 20. (No surprise that the Daguerreian Society’s annual symposium will take place November 5–8 in nearby Pasadena. And May 8–9, the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection in New York City is hosting the symposium “Seen Through The Collector’s Lens: 150 Years of Photography.”

Mattis gives the following advice to fellow collectors: “Build a solid reference library, browse museum websites and figure out what aspect of daguerreotypy appeals to you most; then buy the best you can afford. If it hurts to write the check, but the plate stops your heart, you’ve got the bug!”

The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center is on the Vassar College campus at 124 Raymond Avenue. For information, 845-437-5632 or flac.vassar.edu.

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All daguerreotypes from the collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg.