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The Allure of the Anonymous Daguerreotype

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The Allure of the Anonymous Daguerreotype

2016-2017 Thesis Project
Olivia Tyson
Introduction

My senior thesis, “The Allure of the Anonymous Daguerreotype,” explores contemporary photography collectors in America and how they relate to anonymous portrait daguerreotypes, for which little-to-no information is known. After a brief history of the daguerreotype and its place in the contemporary market, the main portion of my paper will concentrate on how collectors perceive their daguerreotypes. I will investigate topics such as what drives collectors to collect, what captivates them about certain daguerreotypes, and how these photographs help shape their sense of the past. In addition, I will explore how the unique physical and material nature of the daguerreotype contributes to the overall allure of the medium. With these concepts in mind, my main argument will focus on how these qualities and the anonymous nature of the portrait enable the collector to project their own personality and life experience onto the sitter.

Interdisciplinary in nature, this project draws from art historical, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, and psychological studies. In order to better understand these concepts, I conducted interviews with eight American daguerreotype collectors and sellers to understand how they value their daguerreotypes. Through my findings, I conclude that the daguerreotype has several unique qualities—including its clarity, fetishistic nature, reflectiveness, and indexicality—which contribute to its overall appeal. Because of these special characteristics and the lack of information in the case of anonymous portraits, daguerreotype collectors feel the freedom to project their own personality and life experience onto the sitter.
Interviews with Collectors

This is a largely exploratory project which looks for significant patterns and findings primarily from qualitative data and personal accounts from collectors. I conducted interviews with eight American daguerreotype collectors.\(^1\) I sent my questions by email and received written responses, with the exception of one in-person interview. Those interviewed included Dennis Waters, Gregory French, Gus Kayafas and Mike Medhurst, who are four of the top daguerreotype dealers in the country who have personal collections as well. I also interviewed Waters’ children, Erin and Casey Waters, both of whom sell and collect daguerreotypes. Jack Shear, a photographer, curator, and collector, was available for an in-person interview. Lastly, I interviewed my father, Peter Tyson, who has become an amateur daguerreotype collector in recent years.\(^2\) I asked each participant nine interview questions (some with follow-ups) in order to learn more about their experiences as collectors and how they relate to their daguerreotypes. My interview included questions such as what the collectors found special about daguerreotypes, how they felt about anonymous sitters, how they might imbue daguerreotypes with a new significance, and whether or not their collection is a projection of their personality. A full list of the interview questions is provided at the end of this paper.\(^3\)

As expected with the qualitative and open-ended nature of my questions, the answers I received varied greatly. Some interviewees provided long and descriptive answers while others gave more brief responses or did not directly answer the questions.

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\(^1\) Names of collectors will appear in bold throughout paper for clarity.

\(^2\) My father, Peter Tyson, has collected daguerreotypes for six years. I acknowledge that there is an inherent bias in interviewing him. However, I found his particular perspective as a collector to be a valuable resource for my paper.

\(^3\) See appendix.
Some interviewees skipped particular questions entirely. Each collector has a different background in photography and relates to their collection in a unique, personal way. It is also critical to consider the similar backgrounds of my interviewees, as seven out of the eight collectors are men, all are white, and all are middle- to upper-middle class. I recognize that having only eight perspectives from a narrow demographic limits the scope of my paper. Because of their diverse responses and the relatively small sampling of individuals, these interviews have served as a source of relevant quotes that connect to my main ideas, rather than definitive data.

The History of the Daguerreotype

Understanding the origins of the daguerreotype contributes to an appreciation of why the medium remains significant today. During the mid-nineteenth century, several players were involved in the invention of photography, including Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Nicéphore Niépce, and William Henry Fox Talbot. Talbot (1800-1877), an English botanist and inventor, introduced the first negative-to-positive process known as the calotype and the salted paper print. Talbot's process involved exposing a piece of paper covered in sensitized chemicals in a camera to create a negative. From this negative, multiple positive prints could be made. Talbot began experimenting in 1834 and made his work known only after hearing of the announcement of the daguerreotype in 1839. Due to his use of patents and a lack of public promotion, the commercial success of his invention

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4 In terms of further research it would be important to deconstruct how the race and gender of the collectors affects how they relate to daguerreotypes and American history.

was greatly restricted. Nevertheless, Talbot's pioneering negative-to-positive method would form the basis from which most 19th- and 20th-century photographic processes would be derived. Like Talbot, Daguerre also determined how to make permanent the image projected by the camera obscura, but through a different technique that resulted in a single, unique image.

Daguerre (1787-1851) was born in Val-d'Oise, France, and while he did not have a formal education, he enjoyed a successful career as a stage designer, academic painter, and inventor with a particular interest in lighting and cameras. Niépce (1763-1833), a French lithographer and amateur inventor, had created in 1826 or 1827 what is known today as the first photograph in existence using a method he called the heliograph.7 Daguerre and Niépce developed a partnership in 1829 and worked together until Niépce's death in 1833. Finally, on August 19, 1839, the daguerreotype process was announced at the joint session of the Académie des Sciences and the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Instead of patenting his invention, Daguerre decided to give the rights to the daguerreotype to the French government in exchange for lifelong pensions for himself and Isidore Niépce, Niépce's son. Open to the world, unlike Talbot's invention, the groundbreaking new invention achieved great commercial success.8

Daguerre's process entailed treating a silver-coated copper plate with light-sensitive chemicals, exposing it in a camera obscura, and developing it with mercury vapor.9 After

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7 Rudisill, Mirror Image, 34-5.
8 Rudisill, Mirror Image, 37-8.
much experimentation, Daguerre realized that a latent image could be produced after thirty minutes of exposure and then developed into a visible image. Within a few years the process would be streamlined to require only seconds of exposure time. Unlike Talbot’s process that involved a negative image from which multiple positive images could be generated, the daguerreotype process resulted in an image that after development emerged as a direct positive—a unique, one-of-a-kind image.

The Daguerreotype in America

The daguerreotype found widespread popularity in Europe as well as the United States, becoming the premiere form of photography for approximately twenty years after its introduction. In the period between 1824 and 1840, known as the Jacksonian Era after President Andrew Jackson, “the common man, the individual, territorial expansion, and mobility [were consecrated] as fundamental values of American democracy.” These factors created a climate in which Americans were especially receptive to this new invention. Photography collector Matthew Isenburg describes the democratizing effect and large-scale appeal of the daguerreotype: “The truth of the medium was its ultimate message: visual facts for the masses, immortality for the common man, and an uncommon

12 Newhall, The Daguerreotype in America, 11. Daguerreotypes eventually lost their popularity around 1860, becoming eclipsed by other cheaper and faster processes like the ambrotype, the tintype, and the paper photograph. See Floyd Rinhart and Marion Rinhart, American Daguerreian Art (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967), 8.
13 Francois Brunet and William Becker, Daguerre’s American Legacy: Photographic Portraits (1840-1900) from the Wm B. Becker Collection (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2013), 25.
uplifting of the middle classes." Within a few months of its introduction, American studios around the country began producing and selling daguerreotypes and perfecting the process. Recording photographic scenes of American life, this momentous invention revolutionized how people documented and perceived the world.

Without the advent of the daguerreotype, many Americans would be forgotten as the average person did not necessarily have their portrait painted. Several forms of portraiture, including paintings and miniature portraits, were popular before the invention of photography and served as models for the creation and presentation of daguerreotypes. However, portrait painters often struggled to get work, and usually only wealthier families had their portraits painted. Daguerreotypes made portraiture far more accessible and widespread, with the price ranging from between fifty cents to about seven dollars depending on the quality of the studio. Both identified and anonymous portrait daguerreotypes preserve the past and survive as a valuable historical record of American men, women, and children from the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

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15 Rinhart and Rinhart, American Daguerreian Art, 4.
16 Rinhart and Rinhart, American Daguerreian Art, 5.
17 Ben Maddow, “Rembrandt Perfected,” in The Daguerreotype: A Sesquicentennial Celebration, ed. John Wood (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 36-37. The common laborer made about one dollar per day, so the daguerreotype still would have been a considerable expense for some. See Maddow, The Daguerreotype, 36.
Contemporary Collecting

While other less expensive and faster photographic techniques eventually supplanted the daguerreotype, it remains one of the highest quality analog processes to this day. Daguerreotypes have survived remarkably well, as the process is relatively permanent and people are not likely to throw them away. Today these photographs are widely collected and sold, ranging from under $100 to hundreds of thousands of dollars depending on the size, quality, subject, and photographer. Photography scholar Nicholas Graver remarks that “few antique art fields offer affordable items that equal museum pieces in age and craftsmanship,” highlighting this special opportunity to collect these works of art. For the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate on the smaller-sized, “common” portrait daguerreotypes that show anonymous sitters with little-to-no information. These sizes include 1/4 plates (about 3 x 4 in.), 1/6 plates (about 2.5 x 3 in.), and 1/9 plates (about 2 x 2.5 in.), all of which can fit in the palm of one’s hand. The vast majority of daguerreotypes that have survived to today are formal portraits. For some, one of the most intriguing aspects of these daguerreotypes is the mystery behind the anonymous portrait sitters. Each photograph is a unique treasure, allowing a collector to seek out portrait sitters that “speak” to their sense of individuality.

19 Newhall, The Daguerreotype in America, 11.
Collectors and their Motivations

To better understand contemporary daguerreotype collectors, one must explore what defines collecting and what motivations might drive a collector. Business scholar Russell Belk describes collecting as the "process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences."23 In other words, the collector’s primary interest in collecting is ownership over the objects, regardless of their previous function. According to English scholar Susan Stewart, another important aspect is the personalized organization and categorization of the objects within the collection, with each object contributing to the larger whole. Although the objects are initially added to a collection because of their similarity, they are then prized for their subtle differences from one another.24

With this definition of collecting in mind, one should examine the numerous psychological motivations that could shape collecting. In her book Museums, Objects, and Collections, museum studies scholar Susan M. Pearce explores the various reasons behind collectors’ desire to accumulate certain objects, including aesthetics, leisure, competition, a sense of community, prestige, desire to reframe objects, ambition to achieve perfection, extending the self, and achieving immortality.25 Psychology scholars William Mcintosh and Brandon Schmeichel point out that nearly all of Pearce’s motivations reflect self-fulfilling or

self-enhancement needs. Similarly, Sociologist Jean Baudrillard argues that collectors use objects as a coping mechanism to deal with the unpredictability of life. Objects thus help the collector “master the world” and “establish dominion over time, interrupting its continuous flow” by the act of their categorization and recontextualization. These concepts support the idea of collecting as a sense of control and an affirmation of the self, which directly contribute to the appeal of the anonymous portrait daguerreotype.

Demographic information about collectors also helps shed light on what kinds of people are drawn to daguerreotypes. Citing studies which focused on Western collectors, Belk explains that the majority of children exhibit collecting behavior until a marked decline in adolescence. However, many men find a renewed interest in collecting when they reach middle age. Men have historically dominated most areas of collecting, as they have had more economic resources and thus the ability to spend extra money on collections. Even though collecting is sometimes perceived as a feminine or childish, it also serves as an accepted outlet for men to express themselves. The types of objects that people collect tend to fall into gendered categories, as they often align with stereotypically feminine (e.g. nurturing, playful, sentimental) and masculine (e.g. logical, strong, serious) characteristics. While men exhibit more interest in items such as guns, antiques, sports items, and automobiles, women enjoy objects such as jewelry, houseware, and animal replicas.

Socioeconomic differences also impact the type of object collected, as wealthier people are

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more likely to collect fine art or rare objects, while those of fewer means are more likely to collect mass-produced objects.\textsuperscript{29}

In her book, \textit{Collecting in Contemporary Practice}, Pearce explores the phenomenon of collecting by examining the lives of contemporary collectors and searching for larger societal and cultural connections. The book is predominantly based around “Contemporary Collecting in Britain Survey” (conducted in 1993), which reports that one in every three adults in the western world self-identifies as a collector, marking the practice as a significant social phenomenon. Similar to Belk, Pearce found that collecting tends to align with socially constructed gender roles.\textsuperscript{30} The types of items typically collected by men include militaria, machinery, musical instruments, sports items, paintings, records, and natural history items. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to collect pop material, household objects, room ornaments, jewelry, tourist items, and toys.\textsuperscript{31} While men are more concerned with organization and owning a complete set, women tend to focus on the display and aesthetic appeal of their collections. Both genders reported a preference for their collections to serve multiple needs.\textsuperscript{32}

Daguerreotypes prove to be a fascinating intersection in terms of these qualities. In one sense they are rare, one-of-a-kind treasures, but on the other hand, many have been produced using the same technology, allowing for the wide availability and affordability of daguerreotypes which continue to circulate today. They have “masculine” characteristics in certain respects since they are historical and served a practical use at the time. However,

\textsuperscript{29} Belk, \textit{Collecting in a Consumer Society}, 100.
\textsuperscript{31} Pearce, \textit{Collecting in Contemporary Practice}, 134.
\textsuperscript{32} Pearce, \textit{Collecting in Contemporary Practice}, 150.
they also have “feminine” qualities as well, as they are beautiful, decorative, and have the power to provoke emotional responses.

During my interviews, I noticed that nearly all of the collectors (most of whom are men) mentioned how the historical value of daguerreotypes is especially important to them and makes them feel connected to an earlier time. **Mike Medhurst** remarked “Today, these [daguerreotypes] are windows into our past and the dawn of photography.”

**Peter Tyson** observed that daguerreotypes provide a link to the 19th century: “Daguerreotypes bring the 19th century alive for me, particularly the 1840s and 1850s, the heyday of daguerreotypes. . .[they] enliven the antebellum period in a way no novel or nonfiction could do, putting a face to it in a literal way.”

Although it is difficult to draw direct conclusions from demographic findings of these eight collectors, certain continuities show that historical value is of great interest to male collectors.

**Special Qualities of Daguerreotypes**

Other aspects of the special qualities of daguerreotypes, which emerged during my interviews, showcased why this process in particular tends to captivate collectors. Since the moment of its introduction, the daguerreotype amazed and astounded viewers with its holographic quality and exquisite detail. American Studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg attempts to capture the materiality and enchanting nature of daguerreotypes:

> External or material explanations go only so far—the superior clarity of the image on the mirror-like surface of the daguerreotype; the flickering quality of that image when viewed at a certain angle to the light, making it seem magical, evanescent, “like fairy work,” in the words of one early beholder; the sheer weight of

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33 Mike Medhurst, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 11, 2016.
34 Peter Tyson, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 10, 2016.
the object, the message of substantiality and luxury spoken by the inside velvet pad (maroon or deep red or vermilion), and the silver-coated copper plate which flashes the image. A stiff brass overmat lies between the image and a thick piece of protective glass—plate and mat glass fastened together by a thin pliable frame embellished in a gold finish, and the entire ensemble housed in a sweetly decorative case with delicate brass latches.35

As Trachtenburg attests, the feeling of the daguerreotype in one’s hands enhances the experience, allowing the viewer to observe and even touch the various material elements. This speaks to the festishistic qualities of the daguerreotype, which film theorist Christian Metz writes about in terms of photography: “A fetish has to be kept, mastered, held, like the photograph in the pocket.”36 According to Metz, the physical ownership and sense of control over these mementoes adds to their overall allure. Several collectors expressed interest in the act of physically holding and privately owning daguerreotypes. Greg Kayafas admitted: “I like all sizes, and obviously the bigger the better, but there’s something special about the sixth plate size because sixth plates fit so well in one’s hands.”37 Dennis Waters added, “Because the way they were packaged, dags were meant to be viewed individually in a very private and personal manner.”38 The packing of the image, often in decorative borders (see Figures 1 and 2) and ornate cases (see Figure 3), also contributes to the overall presentation as viewers can admire the cover and unveil the daguerreotype at their own leisure.39

With other forms of photography, the images tend to lose detail and become blurry or pixilated when they are blown up. As seen through Figures 4 and 5, the quality and detail

35 Trachtenberg, American Daguerreotypes, 15.
38 Dennis Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 28, 2015.
of the daguerreotype is impressively maintained when zooming in on the image. Notice how the individual hairs of the man’s mustache, the subtle wrinkles around his eyes, and the contours of his face become even more apparent in Unidentified Man (Figure 5).

Another example of this fine detail can be admired in Figures 6, 7, and 8. One can see how the tight, shiny curls of this woman’s hair become more defined and precise in Unidentified Woman (Figure 7), along with the diamond pattern on her dress and metal broach on her bow. In Unidentified Woman (Figure 8), no quality is lost as the viewer gets a sense of the delicacy of the white lace, the softness of her hands, and patterned cloth on the table. While my reproductions here reveal detail, they cannot capture the depth and changeability of the daguerreotype when held in one’s hands. When tilted at precisely the right angle, the portrait sitter appears to pop out of the frame with an incredible life-like quality. Figure 8 demonstrates how daguerreotypes can be viewed as either a negative or positive depending on how they are held in the light.

The clarity of the daguerreotype was appealing for many of the collectors I interviewed. Dennis Waters described daguerreotypes as “magical likenesses with astounding contrast and a mirror-like highly reflective surface that [is] free of graininess.”

Gus Kayafas echoed this sentiment, “Sometimes you can’t believe how clear and sharp these are; they have an extra magnified presence that deserves a closer look.” Peter Tyson conveyed how he feels closer to the portrait sitters because of the extreme clarity, “[Daguerreotypes] have an almost three-dimensional quality, with, in the best of them,
incredible sharpness and depth of field, giving the sense that the individual pictured might start speaking or reach out and touch you.”

Another enticing element of the daguerreotype is that it is the exact plate which originally captured the portrait sitter. This connects to the concept of indexicality, coined by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Metz draws upon Peirce’s description to describe indexicality as “the process of signification (semiosis) in which the signifier is bound to the referent not by a social convention (=symbol), not necessarily by some similarity (=icon), but by an actual contiguity or connection in the world: the lightning is the index of the storm.” Metz goes on to explain, “[In photography] what is indexical is the mode of production itself, the principle of the taking.” Thus the daguerreotype has a direct material connection to the act of the photographing and therefore the person.

Daguerreotypes serve as special, primary source documents as they are not reproductions, but the original plate which captured, more than a century and a half ago, light reflected from the sitter.

Several of the collectors shared the sense of closeness they feel with the portrait sitter and history due to the indexical nature of the daguerreotype. Gus Kayafas, who is particularly interested in the technique of daguerreotypy, remarked that

“[Daguerreotypes] give you an unbelievably direct connection; no intermediary. There is something magical about that for me.”

Casey Waters also felt strongly about the indexical nature of the process: “They are a direct positive where the image is exactly what is seen through the glass of the lens. There is no filter. So what you see in a great dag is as close to

43 Peter Tyson, interview by Olivia Tyson, November 1, 2015.
44 Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” 82.
45 Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” 82. Emphasis in original.
what someone actually looked like... By capturing their reflection on a mirrored silver surface a bit of their essence is sealed onto the plate.”

Because of this unusually direct connection not found in other forms of reproducible photography, the daguerreotype proves to be especially enticing to collectors wanting to connect to the past. Together, the particular material qualities of the daguerreotype—its fetishetic nature, its clarity, and its indexicality—cause collectors to become particularly drawn to the medium.

**Changing Significances and New Meanings**

With these material qualities in mind, one could then explore which other non-material elements of daguerreotypes might attract collectors. As previously explained, the sheer beauty and verisimilitude of daguerreotypes have consistently captivated viewers since the introduction of the process. However, other factors may also be at play for contemporary collectors, such as the fact that these daguerreotypes often have fascinating and unknown histories. The concept of the “cultural biography of things,” as defined by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, argues that objects change contexts several times during their life and become imbued with different cultural significances. This perspective holds true for the daguerreotype, in that it has been removed from its original context where it was likely someone’s personal keepsake and meant to stay within the family. After a series of seemingly mysterious journeys, the daguerreotype eventually finds its place in the possession of the collector. Especially in the case of anonymous portrait daguerreotypes,

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47 Casey Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, November 5, 2015.
present-day collectors can more easily create a new, idiosyncratic connection with the daguerreotype.

Alan Trachtenberg also speaks to this idea of the complex journey of the daguerreotype: “Traded, exchanged, bought and sold, passed from hand to hand like chips in a revolving game of speculation and chance, they have had a second life starkly at odds with their first.”49 By reestablishing a personal significance for the portrait sitter, collectors can feel a strong attachment to certain daguerreotypes, which might captivate them for any number of reasons. Several collectors spoke to this phenomenon, explaining that they felt a sense of purpose around their love and care for these historical objects. Peter Tyson commented on these intricate histories: “After a few generations no one knows who their ancestors are... a known person becomes anonymous again... the connection has been lost. Fortunately, there are people who value them not only as visual treasures but as real people who had real lives, long ago. We give them new lives, or immortality in a way, by valuing them.”50 Gregory French made a similar observation, saying “The sad truth is the families don’t know these people and usually made conscious decisions to get rid of the photos. So they’re being re-purposed and new life is breathed into them by the collector.”51 Gus Kayafas admitted, “I feel privileged about [owning these daguerreotypes], but also feel that it is sad. Whatever connection once existed is lost. How could you let this go if it was part of your family?”52 Many of the collectors echoed a sense of sadness and confusion at the idea that the family would discard this meaningful object. However, many also felt

49 Trachtenberg, American Daguerreotypes, 19.
50 Peter Tyson, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 30, 2016.
51 Gregory French, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 10, 2016.
52 Gus Kayafas, interview by Olivia Tyson, March 28, 2017.
excitement over their personal ownership of these daguerreotypes and the chance to revitalize them as they instilled the images with their own personal meaning.

**Psychology of Collecting**

Other elements may also draw in the viewer, such as the subject matter, the setting, or the overall historical value of the daguerreotype. Susan Stewart posits that the passage of time lends authenticity to a collection, as many objects are valued more highly the older they become. She explains that through the act of collecting, the collector attempts to freeze time by classifying and containing the past in a way that is personally meaningful. At the same time, a collector can also reframe their collection to disregard the past and reflect their own identity.53 I believe this tendency directly applies to the daguerreotype, as collectors tend to be initially drawn to these photographs because of their historical significance. Once the daguerreotype becomes absorbed into a collection, the collector has the power to create their own story of the past and who they believe the anonymous portrait sitters were.

Several of the collectors expressed interest in the historical importance of their daguerreotypes and the various ways their photographic collection has reinforced their view of history. As Dennis Waters described, “I have always, for 31 years, taken great pride in holding onto these historical artifacts. I realize that it is important for me to take the best possible care in preserving them for the future.”54 Erin Waters also observed, “I think most collecting comes from a sense of nostalgia. . . . There are all the anonymous

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54 Dennis Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, November 20, 2016.
people I’ve seen, and their clothes, and hairstyles. . . . It’s a big catalogue to keep track of. I feel too that the 19th century is much closer for me than the average person.”

Jack Shear expressed his love for the historical and rare nature of the daguerreotype, especially considering the world we live in today with the constant bombardment of images: “I think it has become much, much less about how people respond to images because they’re just so ubiquitous.” However, while these collectors are compelled by the historic nature of the daguerreotype, they also establish a new personal significance for themselves due to the lack of information about the portrait sitter.

The Allure of the Daguerreotype and the Projection of Personality

After contemplating these possible psychological phenomena regarding collecting, one can focus on the idea of the allure of the anonymous portrait sitter. Based on my research and interviews, I learned that these daguerreotypes have the power to spark the imagination and lead people to develop a deep desire to connect with the portrait sitter. The lack of information about anonymous daguerreotypes allows collectors to envision what kind of person the portrait sitter may have been, as they project their own identity and life experience onto the person captured in the daguerreotype plate. Archaeologist Paul Graves-Brown’s concept of an object as extension of the self relates strongly here, as collectors experience an extension of their personality through the anonymous portrait

56 Jack Shear, interview by Olivia Tyson, December 7, 2016.
sitter without fear of being proven wrong. Any number of characteristics may entice the viewer, such as facial expression, body language, or the overall scene created by the photographer. Several of the collectors expressed fascination at how a particular daguerreotype might enrapture one collector and completely disinterest another. Gus Kayafas, for example, spoke to personal feelings collectors carry with them, explaining that one daguerreotype of an adolescent girl looked remarkably similar to his wife when she was that age: “This image resonates with me in a way I can’t even pretend to be objective about.”

Another intriguing aspect of anonymous portraits is the almost instantaneous impression that a collector can get when presented with a new daguerreotype and how their immediate reactions may be fueled by their own emotions and life experiences. As Jack Shear commented, “To me, the daguerreotypes I’ve collected, it’s always been an immediate response. As a photographer and somebody who is visual, I either respond to an image or I don’t.” Similarly, Peter Tyson said, “I see many daguerreotypes that leave me unmoved. I feel nothing in particular when I look at them. But then one will turn up that instantly intrigues me.” These comments suggest that the clarity of the medium and the historical appeal of the daguerreotype are not enough to captivate the collector. The value and allure of the daguerreotype seems to increase if the collector experiences some kind of emotional or personal reaction to the anonymous portrait sitter.

60 Jack Shear, interview by Olivia Tyson, December 7, 2016.
61 Peter Tyson, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 30, 2016.
During the interviews, many of the collectors agreed on this tendency to construct identities and backstories behind many of the anonymous sitters. Dennis Waters partially attributed this to his job as a seller, explaining, “Since I tend to write [stories] for dags that I offer for sale every two weeks on the dag salon, it is imperative that I form a bond with each subject. I am always ‘guilty’ of going out on a limb so to speak to tell a tale about the people who lived and breathed before us and in some way, large or small, had an influence on our own lives today.”62 While Dennis constructs these stories to make the daguerreotypes more intriguing to potential buyers, he also spoke of the genuine excitement of forming this bond: “I love the spectacular feeling of opening a case for the first time and immediately communing with the sitter . . . [and being] taken to a location in-between the here and now.”63 Gregory French also described this impulse, stating that “There’s a tendency to create an identity, that is to speculate. It doesn’t feel like fiction, it feels like we’re tapping into the person’s essence. Of course, there’s a leap there.”64 Most of the collectors seemed to agree that while their impressions of the portrait sitters are largely speculative, they are an inevitable and enjoyable aspect to collecting and selling anonymous portrait daguerreotypes.

Daguerreotype collector Shaun Caton describes his idea of “the world of the metaphysical mirror,” in which the anonymous portrait sitter is trapped in the past on the other side of the reflective glass. This mysterious, alternate universe entices the viewer to make a connection with the stranger on the other side of the metaphysical mirror, but Caton points out that “the mirror does not give up its secrets readily or tangibly. Instead,

62 Dennis Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 28, 2015.
63 Dennis Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 28, 2015.
64 Gregory French, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 28, 2015.
we are only met with silence.” He argues that we become allured by this parallel world in which we see these unreachable other versions of ourselves. He illustrates this concept further by explaining:

Our engagement with unknown portrait daguerreotypes may be void (indeterminate) yet it is also alluring as it draws brilliance from a symmetrical (parallel) world. Within this symmetry one can believe an invisible counterpart universe that is superior to our own mundane reality. Dreams of crossing into the 'world' of the daguerreotype are wish fulfillment: we fear death, crave rebirth and redefinition on the other side . . . We see our own personal histories, mythologies and desires in the faces of the long dead.  

Most of the collectors agreed that they feel a strong connection to the portrait sitter even though it is not reciprocated. When asked if daguerreotypes gave him a sense of nostalgia for an earlier time, **Dennis Waters** responded, “Not only do I feel connected, but I know for certain . . . somehow I have actually visited [these portrait sitters] between 1839 and say 1848 . . . . Yes indeed, I feel tethered to these people from the past in an almost inexplicable relationship.” **Peter Tyson** admitted to this kind of connection as well, explaining, “With the anonymous sitter, you feel like you’ve surreptitiously stepped into their lives, at a specific moment, without their knowledge. They don’t know me, but I know them; they have become my friends.” Both **Dennis Waters** and **Peter Tyson** tend to view anonymous portrait sitters as close friends from generations past with whom they can form a meaningful connection. Photograph historian John Wood further articulates the impulse “to find in the familiar, weary, and exhausted plainness of most men and women something urgent and universal, a truth about ourselves; to discover that we are capable of

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67 Dennis Waters, interview by Olivia Tyson, October 28, 2015.
68 Peter Tyson, interview by Olivia Tyson, November 1, 2015.
an immediate, individual, and humane response to the faces of our fellow human beings and to the lives that linger beneath them waiting and hoping."

**Conclusion**

Reflecting back on this research project, I identify numerous common themes in both my research and interviews surrounding the allure of the anonymous portrait daguerreotypes. I found the interviews I conducted to be enlightening to all aspects of my research, including the history of the daguerreotype, the contemporary market, the psychology of collecting, and the appeal of the anonymous portrait sitter. Even though all of the interviewees had the same passion for these photographs, I perceived how their individual backgrounds and unique personalities affected how they thought about their collections. Because of the qualitative nature of my interview questions, I was able to obtain rich and nuanced responses that allowed me to discover significant patterns and themes that spoke to my thesis. Keeping in mind all of my combined research, the most important insight I gained is that the special material qualities of the daguerreotype (its indexicality, fetishistic nature, and clarity) and the anonymity of the portrait sitters allow collectors to speculate about the lives of the sitters in their own personal way. The immediate and subjective responses the collectors have to the anonymous portrait sitter lead them to imagine the nature of the sitter’s personality and life experience. This sense of control and the creation of one’s own personal significance contribute to the thrill of collecting and thus the allure of the anonymous daguerreotype.
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Appendix

List of interview questions

1. What sets daguerreotypes apart from other forms of photography?
   - Why is photography (and specifically daguerreotypes) so powerful for evoking these feelings of connection to the past?

2. What is your interest in “common” daguerreotypes, which are often portraits of anonymous people?

3. Do you find the idea of the anonymous portrait sitter alluring?

4. If little to no information is known, do you imagine personalities or backstories behind the subject(s)?

5. Do you feel your collection is an extension of your personality?

6. How do you imagine the second half of the 19th century in America (when daguerreotypes were most popular)? Is your view of this time period at all romanticized?
   - Do anonymous portrait daguerreotypes help to shape or reinforce your view of this time period?
   - Do anonymous portrait daguerreotypes help you feel a connection to this time or any sense of national pride?

7. How is it a different experience to collect daguerreotypes of known people, with more additional information about their lives?

8. Do you feel the need to guess what the portrait sitter was like?
   - If yes, why do you think collectors (or anyone) feels the need to connect with a stranger?
   - What kinds of characteristics do people look for in the anonymous portrait sitters?

9. How does it feel to own a one-of-a-kind, private memento that was likely meant for the sitter’s family?
   - How has its context changed overtime, from the moment of its creation to being in your collection?