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American Daguerreotype Camera Sells at Benefit Auction

by Jeanne Schinto



Daguerreian Society, Baltimore, Maryland

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Photos courtesy Daguerreian Society

A mid-19th-century American-made daguerreotype camera in excellent original condition sold for \$14,300 (including buyer's premium) at the Daguerreian Society's benefit auction on November 10, 2012. The auction was part of the organization's annual weekend-long symposium, held this time at Renaissance Baltimore Harborplace overlooking the city's Inner Harbor. Such cameras, in any condition, rarely come up for sale.

The consignment came from the estate of a noted collector of cameras and photography, Jordan Patkin (1924-2011), who belonged to the Daguerreian Society for many years. Included with the camera was its original plate holder for half-plate (4 3/4" x 5 1/2") daguerreotypes. It is extremely rare to find a daguerreotype camera and plate holder intact, as most were modified for wet-collodion-prepared plates after the invention of that process in 1851.

The buyer of the camera was Mike Robinson, president of the Daguerreian Society and director of education and research programs at the Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC) in Toronto. Readers may recall that AMC bought Matthew Isenburg's photography collection last spring. (See *M.A.D.*, August 2012, p. 37-C.) Robinson is also a contemporary daguerreotypist, and just a couple of weeks after taking his new camera home to Toronto, he had already begun using it to make images.

Greg French of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, a society board member and chair of the auction committee, landed the consignment, which came from Patkin's family. French, who is a dealer as well as collector, had been called to look at Patkin's image collection. When he saw the camera, he knew it would appeal to the organization's membership. "They agreed to give it to us, because they thought it would honor their father's legacy," French said.

Robinson owns one other antique daguerreotype camera. He bought it at the trade fair of the 2008 symposium, held that year in Philadelphia. He described it as an early design quarter-plate chamfered-box camera with L.B.B. & Co. engraved on the lens barrel. The initials stand for Louis B. Binsse, whose firm was in New York City in the 1840's. Robinson also owns a replica of a daguerreotype camera that he made about a dozen years ago, using as its model a camera that was part of the Isenburg collection that went to AMC.

"I used the same wood and rosewood veneer as the original," said Robinson. "Matthew's camera, the replica I built from it, and the camera I just bought at the auction are practically identical to each other."

Great items such as the camera were not the usual fare at this auction until after French took over its management a few years ago. Now, what used to be a fairly lackluster occasion has developed into an entertaining evening, as well as a far more productive event for the nonprofit organization. That's because of a major rule change. Previously, many dealers who set up at the weekend's trade fair used to submit merely their unsold leftovers to the auction. French moved the deadline for submissions to some weeks before the event. As a result, "Mostly, it's fresh stuff now," said French, who posted the lots on the society's Web site as they came in.

First lots were listed in late September with new consignments introduced continuously until the deadline in late October. In a few cases, bidding wars had begun even before the symposium started, said French, who told us the auction netted \$18,650 for the organization on a record gross of over \$50,000.

"The auction was way, way beyond expectations," French said. "Some of the prices were ridiculous, but there were also some bargains. You wouldn't think anything would slip by this group, but occasionally things do."

Approximately 180 people attended the symposium, up from approximately 100 in 2011. That accounted for some of the auction's success. In addition, absentee bidders are now an integral part of the process.

"Some of the absentee bidders say they like to support the auction, which is an attitude we appreciate," said French. Others simply want to own the items offered at these well-edited sales.

Society member Craig James was the auctioneer for the third year in a row. Attendees praised his enthusiasm, elocution, and humor. Wes Cowan of Cowan's Auctions in Cincinnati, Ohio, was guest auctioneer for one item that had special significance for him. It was a quarter-plate (3 3/4" x 4 1/4") daguerreotype that he used to own. Cowan told the audience that during his second year in business, in 1996, he bought it at the Ohio Civil War Collectors and Artillery Show in Mansfield, Ohio. He hadn't seen it in many years. Its subject, a boy and his dog, is not unusual, and the dog is blurred because he squirmed during the pose. But since the boy tried to hold him still, the result is a great composition, well blended and revelatory of each subject's character and of the relationship between the boy and the dog. Bidding was competitive. Cowan hammered it down to Greg French at \$2090.

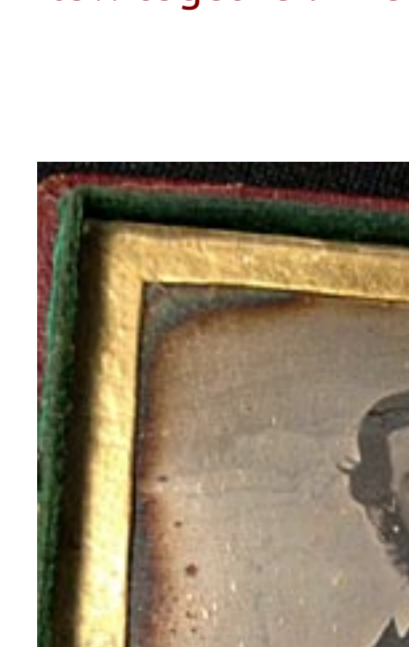
The earliest daguerreotype in the sale was an early 1840's sixth-plate (2 1/4" x 3 1/4") image of a young man that sold for \$5720 to AMC via Neil MacDonald, the institution's curator. The pose is atypical of the early years of the medium because it's casual. Rather than sitting squarely, looking like a deer in the headlights at the camera, the subject is gazing off to the side, slightly smiling, with his arm resting on the back of the chair.

AMC's MacDonald paid \$1760 for a sixth-plate daguerreotype of a tinted boy and girl standing on either side of a posing stand covered with a white cloth. The boy is jauntily posed with his foot on the stand and a hat in his hand. Those details make it desirable enough, but the stand is the real key to the photo's value. Many collectors seek images that contain photographic.

MacDonald was among eight representatives of AMC at the symposium. One of that group was AMC's founder, David Thomson, chairman of Thomson Reuters and known as Canada's richest man. Thomson, who is famously remote ("private almost to the point of reclusive," in the words of a December 4, 2012, *Wall Street Journal* article about him), obviously found the symposium, whose main events are a series of scholarly talks and workshops, worth the public exposure.

The next symposium will take place in Paris and Bry-sur-Marne, France. The focus is a celebration of daguerreotypy's inventor, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851). Daguerre lived the last years of his life in the Paris suburb, and the town has plans to buy his former residence in order to create a museum devoted to him.

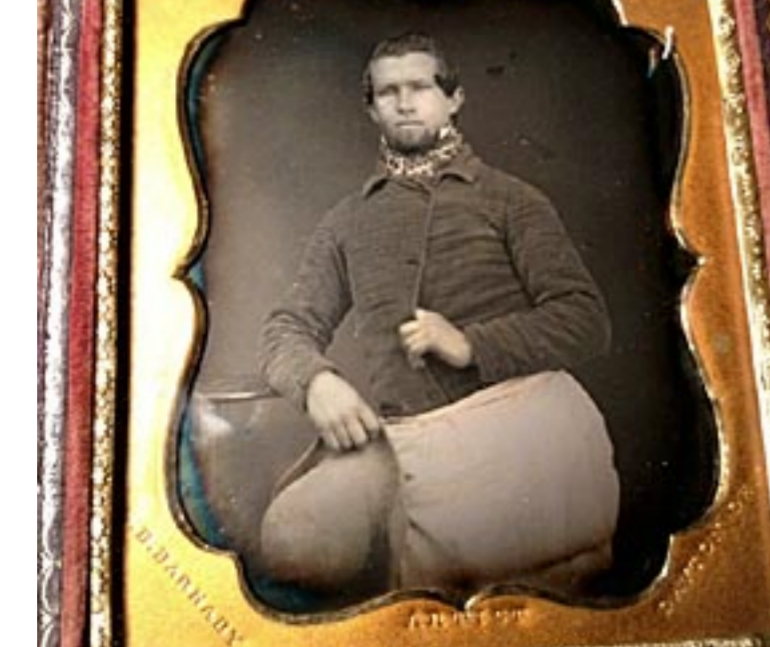
For more information about how to join the Daguerreian Society, whose members are dedicated to the art, history, and science of daguerreotypes, see the organization's Web site (www.daguerre.org).



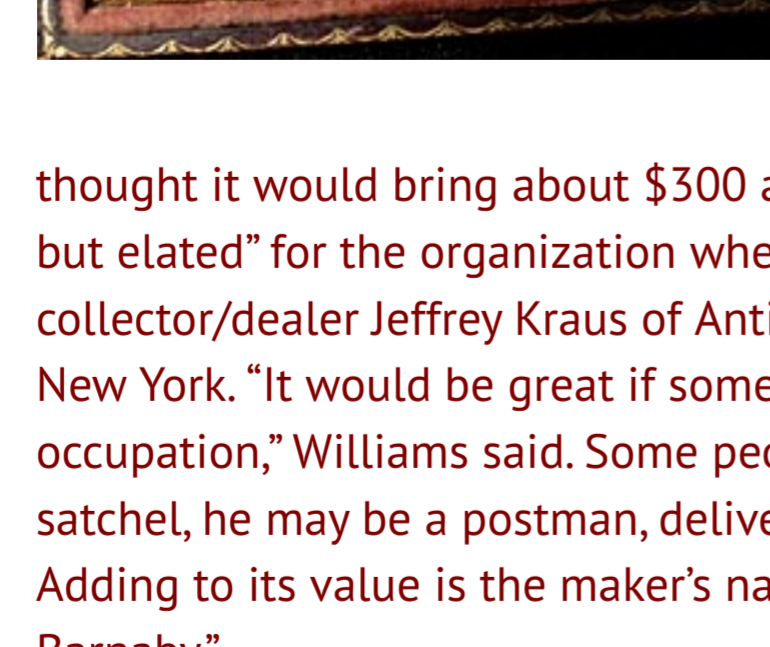
A complete, original wet-plate-era iron headrest came from the same collection as the camera and sold for \$1320 to contemporary daguerreotypist and longtime Daguerreian Society member Ken Nelson. The design for this stand was originally marketed by Samuel Peck and Company until 1857, when all of its stock and trade was purchased by the Scovill Manufacturing Company. It is rare to find complete headrests including all the original locking hardware, iron rods, and adjusting "melon ball" type parts that steady the sitter's head.



Greg French paid \$2090 for this quarter-plate daguerreotype of a boy and his dog. "I usually steer away from dogs that moved [during the shoot]," said French. "You learn, after you've dealt a lot of images, that you want to get the sharp dog that stayed still. In this case, though, it works, because the kid's got his hand on the dog's head, and they just flow together. The appeal is in the composition."



This early 1840's sixth-plate daguerreotype, which sold for \$5720, was made within the first few years of the 1839 announcement of Daguerre's invention. Neil MacDonald bought it for AMC, which he said currently owns about four million images, divided between the institution's two locations, Toronto and London.



This sixth-plate occupational daguerreotype was donated to the auction by Dennis O. Williams of Raleigh, North Carolina. A member of the Daguerreian Society for ten years, he is its treasurer and a member of the auction committee. Williams, whose primary area of collecting interest is daguerreotypes and other early photographic images of African-Americans, said he bought the image on eBay about two years ago. He

thought it would bring about \$300 at the auction and was "stunned but elated" for the organization when it went for \$1760 to collector/dealer Jeffrey Kraus of Antique Photographics, New Paltz, New York. "It would be great if someone could figure out this man's occupation," Williams said. Some people think that, because of the satchel, he may be a postman, delivery man, or Pony Express driver. Adding to its value is the maker's name stamped into the mat, "S.B. Barnaby."



"It used to be that elderly people were just out. People didn't want to buy daguerreotypes of aged people," said Greg French. But now there's a new category—people who were born before the Revolutionary War. Captain Daniel Gay (1768-1851) of Stockbridge, Vermont, fits the bill. This circa 1840 sixth-plate image of Gay, who served in the War



This sixth-plate daguerreotype of a boy and girl, with posing stand between them, sold to AMC for \$1760.

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