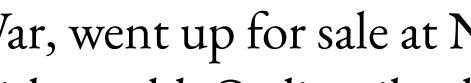


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Warts and All: Identifying Famous People in Vintage Photography

by Jeanne Schinto



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Two photographic portraits, each identified by its owner as a famous personage of the Civil War, went up for sale at New England auction houses in mid-April. Neither sold. Ordinarily, that would be the end of the story, except that these portraits raise anew a thorny question: who—or what—is best equipped to identify otherwise unnamed people in antique images?

One image was believed to be the only known daguerreotype of Judah P. Benjamin. Widely viewed as "the brains of the Confederacy," Benjamin was its attorney general, then secretary of war, and finally secretary of state. Since Benjamin is also an important figure in American Jewish history, being by virtue of those Confederate posts the first Jewish cabinet member in a North American government, Skinner offered the daguerreotype during its latest Judaica sale at its Boston gallery on April 10.

That wasn't the image's first time out. It had previously been offered in the Civil War sale of Dallas's Heritage Auction Galleries on December 1 and 2, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee. Heritage's estimate was \$50,000/75,000; Skinner's, \$25,000/35,000. Skinner expert Kerry Shriver stated in an e-mail that bidders didn't hesitate as much over the price as they did over the lack of definitive identification of the sitter.

The consignor of the daguerreotype, Albert Kaplan, was reached by phone at his home in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is a stockbroker involved in direct access electronic trading whose name may be familiar, because for three decades he has tried to sell what he believes is a daguerreotype of a young Abraham Lincoln. On a Web site ([www.lincolnpportrait.com](#)) Kaplan has posted his "authentication" of his image. It includes the opinion of Claude N. Frechette, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon based in Paris.

Provenance would be helpful, but as Kaplan's Web site states: "Not long after I purchased the daguerreotype from a New York art gallery [in 1977], the owner of the gallery died, and apparently the gallery's records, which would have indicated from whom the gallery acquired the daguerreotype, were lost."

The provenance of Kaplan's supposed Benjamin image is no more certain. Kaplan bought it in Charleston, South Carolina, about three years ago from a person whose name he cannot recall. He did remember that the man had a brother in Louisiana, from where Benjamin was elected to the United States Senate in 1852. The private seller had no knowledge of photography and no idea that the image was of Benjamin, said Kaplan, who claims to have recognized him instantly.

Each time the image went up at auction, comparisons with authenticated Benjamin portraits started many discussions in the photography-collecting world, but obviously nobody opened his or her wallet, and there that story pauses.

Two days after the Skinner sale, on April 12, The Cobbs Auctioneers, Peterborough, New Hampshire, offered its consignor's image. It was a large tintype purportedly of the man who appointed Benjamin to his positions in the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis.

Davis is one of those personages who are very often "seen" in unidentified images in private hands. (Lincoln, by comparison, is the all-time favorite.) "They come at you all the time if you're a serious buyer," one collector said. "There's a quote in my circles: 'Famous people are the last frontier.'"

Grant B. Romer, a noted expert on American daguerreotypy, said he has recently seen, among other images, one purported to be that of Al Capone. Is it the gangster? "On the general principle that there very well may be unidentified images of individuals of significance to the history of our country or to the world in private hands, why not?" After all, that's where many of the authenticated ones in institutions have come from, he said.

Romer doesn't trust "any one human's opinion, solely," though, not even his own. That's despite his 30 years on the staff of George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, which holds one of the largest collections of daguerreotypes in the world. It's also despite his private collection, which he began at age ten, in 1960.

"Good opinion, bad opinion, correct opinion, wrong opinion—it doesn't matter," Romer said. "It's one opinion, which may be well informed or it may be poisoned by prejudice. Who knows? Humans, being what they are, are fallible. All you can get is a consensus. Of course, there are many a guilty man walking the streets and many an innocent man in jail, based upon consensus. We want something other than opinion."

According to the Cobbs catalog, something other than opinion was used to make the identification of the tintype it was offering. Two "facial recognition software programs" were used to compare the image with well-documented daguerreotypes of Davis from the Chicago Historical Society and the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. These "confirmed" them all to be the same person, according to the catalog notes, and Cobbs estimated it at \$25,000/40,000. Asked who saw the resemblance in the first place, Charlie Cobb said it was the consignor, Scott Berube of Ashby, Massachusetts.

Berube describes himself as a collector for 45 years (since age five) who has lately come to focus on vintage photography. One Sunday in 2003, he bought the unidentified image at the Rietta Flea Market in Hubbardston, Massachusetts. It was in a box under the table of a picker from the Worcester, Massachusetts, area "who cleans out houses and sells them off the back of his truck," Berube said.

Some months later, while re-watching Ken Burns's *The Civil War*, Berube abruptly stopped the film when an image of Davis appeared on the screen. He said he knew at once it was the same person in his tintype. Next he compared it to other authenticated Davis images, which served only to strengthen his conviction, especially since he had also begun reading biographies of Davis, where he discovered that an illness in 1858 could account for the swelling around the eyes of his sitter.

Following his research, Berube went "through a long period of self-education about museums." He summed it up by saying "no one in the ivory tower" was willing to authenticate the image without more proof, including provenance. He returned to the Rietta Flea Market to quiz the picker—a fruitless effort—after which he decided to turn to science.

A firm called Viisage Technology ran Berube's tintype through facial-recognition programs. Berube was more than pleased by the results. Whereas he was naturally an interested party, hoping his intuition was right, the computer, in his phrase, didn't "have a dog in the fight."

He listed the item on eBay. He said the Web site "pulled it, because there was no authentication from a museum," whereupon he brought it to auction houses, eventually consigning it to Cobbs.

Speaking after the lot had passed, Charlie Cobb said The Cobbs received numerous e-mails during previews and posted replies on the Internet. "We were going back and forth with the doubters. It became a forum. Some people just don't want it to be Jeff Davis. They don't want him to look like he's been through the mill. So there was a group of people trying to sabotage it."

Even so, Cobb said he has had "two post-auction calls from collectors who are thinking about it." As of this writing, neither had materialized into a sale. "It may take some doing" in the form of more computer work, said Cobb.

When Berube used the services of Viisage Technology, it was a local Massachusetts-based firm; it has since been merged with another company to form L-1 Identity Solutions, headquartered in Stamford, Connecticut. Repeated requests for a comment from L-1 Identity Solutions did not result in one. A look at the Web site ([www.l1id.com](#)) shows the company is busy with many other tasks, e.g., using facial recognition to identify "suspects and criminals during the booking, release, and investigative processes."

In the late 1990's, the technology was used on a daguerreotype owned by Robert and Joan Hoffman of Pittsford, New York. The program matched it with three known Lincolns. Described as "Portrait of a Gentleman, Believed to be Abraham Lincoln, Aged 34," it was offered by Christie's in 1998 with an estimate of \$200,000/ 300,000.

Their image had provenance. According to the Hoffmans, they bought it in 1992 from George Feeley of Caledonia, New York. The dealer, who died the following year, had liquidated the estate of the Wadsworth family. Senator James W. Wadsworth Jr. had connections to Lincoln. He was married to Alice Hay, daughter of John Milton Hay, Lincoln's private secretary.

Skeptics weighed in on the so-called Hay Wadsworth Lincoln nonetheless. Most notable among them was Lloyd Ostendorf (1921-2000), coauthor of *Lincoln in Photographs* (1963), whom the *New York Times* quoted in a presale story in August 1998: "I have no questions about what that is, and it's not Lincoln." The photo failed to sell, and the Hoffmans still have it.

What to do? The answer did not come in 2004 with The History Channel's "Lincoln—Man or Myth?," an episode of the series *Investigating History* that featured both supposed Lincolns. The program did make facial-recognition technology look like our best bet for the future.

Grant Romer agreed: "I have argued that using facial-recognition programs to identify historical personages believed to be represented in any given photograph is the only way to do it that's not someone's opinion. The problem is, I'm aware of no one who has adapted it to this function. I think it is certainly highly applicable to this issue. If it's working on portraits of people alive or dead, what does it matter? I have thought about this a lot over the years. This is a constantly boiling pot, and it's going to become more and more so. This is an issue that doesn't go away, and what progress there will be, will be in facial-recognition technology."

Larry Gottheim of Be-Hold, Yonkers, New York, cautions that even as the technology improves collectors will resist. "My experience is that they are very, very hesitant to go with something that doesn't have ironclad provenance and doesn't look like a dead ringer," he said.

What does Gottheim use to make his identifications? "I have my little network of people whom I trust to be more authoritative than others," he said. "There are ways in which human so-called subjectivity is profound. Our senses, combined with our memory and intuition, are very powerful. Of course, experts often disagree."

Today a search on the Internet will result in numerous labeled images, even of relatively obscure figures, but Gottheim hopes people will question this unvetted source. In the mid-1970's, he recalled, a box of daguerreotypes could be bought for very little. At that time, "certain dealers and collectors would accumulate large bodies of them and come up with identifications that were convincing to them—they were famous for doing it—and in that way more obscure images would get labeled, for better or worse."

Rather than programmers taking the initiative by adapting the technology to photographica's needs, Gottheim predicts that there will be a criminal-justice breakthrough on which photographica will be able to "piggyback." Meanwhile, he is "actually much more involved in the aesthetics of photography and tr[is] to keep away from these gray areas."

Greg French of Early Photography, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, believes that a technological breakthrough is a long way off. "It's easy to morph one face into another, and that's all I've seen," the dealer commented in an e-mail. "I have read that eventually law enforcement will go with facial recognition rather than fingerprints, but to me it's still science fiction."

Besides authenticated images from the Internet, French relies on "resource books" and his own memory to make his identifications. "The memory is pretty strong for people I'm familiar with," continued the dealer, who also is a highly regarded collector of African-American images. "It's interesting to compare faces feature by feature, but there are pitfalls. Yes, the nose is the same, the lips are similar, but what about the eyebrows? Or what's the distance from the mouth to the chin? So after analyzing particular features, it's best to go back and look at the face as a whole."

One problem, French pointed out, is "that fashion or style can suggest a likeness, such as a full beard on men, or bottleneck curls on women. Or two poses may match up so perfectly, when in reality the faces don't. For my work, it's imperative to be cautious. I'd rather err on the side of caution than leap in and later have to retract an erroneous identification."

Like French, Matthew R. Isenberg of Hadlyme, Connecticut, president of the Daguerreian Society, thinks it will be a long while before computer science trumps the capabilities of the human mind. "I'm not saying there won't eventually be a program that's up to the task," stated Isenberg, owner of one of the most revered 19th-century American photography collections in the world. "But if you spend fifty years of your life looking at photographs, and you are open and receptive to what you're looking at, as well as to the possibility that you could be wrong, which allows you to change your perceptions, I don't think there's anything even close in the computer world yet."

The resource book that Isenberg likes best is an old one, published in 1967 by Dover Publications and edited by Dover's cofounders Hayward and Blanche Cirkor, *Dictionary of American Portraits: 4000 Pictures of Important Americans from Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Don't rely on it only, though, Isenberg advised. Look at as many images as possible of the person in question. "When you have hundreds of them—and that's possible if they lived through the daguerreian and ambrotype eras into the paper era—then you can see him or her in profile, face on, two-thirds to the right, two-thirds to the left, and you begin to see different things. You'll see how the ear looks head-on, how it looks half sideways, in profile, and so on. It all helps. You're always feeding information into your brain, and your brain is still one of the best computers that you'll ever use."

Isenberg compared an expert's ability to judge whether a sitter is a famous person to the ability of a mother to pick out her child on a crowded beach. "'Where's Johnny?' Even just seeing the back of his head, she'll say, 'Oh, there he is.'"

The child on the beach is moving, of course. The kinetic fact calls to mind a related controversy of the moment. It involves vintage film footage found in a box of rock memorabilia at an auction in London, showing someone the buyer later identified as Jimi Hendrix.

According to the *New York Times*, the 11-minute film was in a tin labeled "Black Man." It has no audio and is pornographic. Offered on eBay about a year ago, it apparently did not sell and was subsequently bought by Vivid Entertainment of Los Angeles. That firm, which bills itself as the "world leader in the production of high quality erotic movies," combined it with a retrospective of Hendrix's career and released the result during the last week of April as *Jimi Hendrix: The Sex Tape*.

Defenders and detractors alike speak of bone structure, eyebrows, nose, and hair—precisely the language used by the people involved in the controversial images of Lincoln, Benjamin, and Davis.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

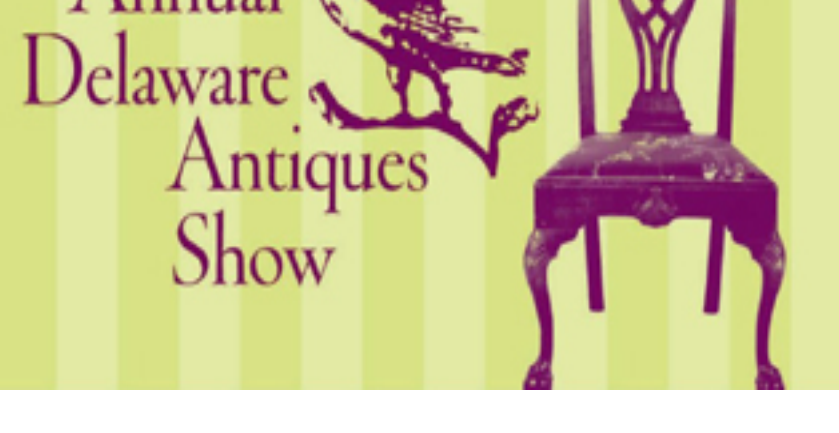
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