

Daguerre's American Legacy: Photographic Portraits (1840-1900) from the Wm. B. Becker Collection

Kurtz Gallery for Photography, MIT Museum
April 18, 2014 - January 4, 2015



Photo courtesy: Unidentified photographer, Three Men with Fish and Lobster, tintype, ca. 1890.

[Wm. B. Becker Collection/PhotographyMuseum.com]

Press contact: Leah Talatinian, Arts at MIT, leaht@mit.edu 617-253-5351

Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 29, 2014 – Photography is the closest thing we have to a time machine – and a new exhibition at the MIT Museum sends visitors traveling all the way back to the 1840s and 1850s, when the very first photographic portraits were made.

Produced on mirror-like pieces of silver-plated copper, a hundred of these one-of-a-kind images, called “daguerreotypes”, are presented at

the MIT Museum's Kurtz Gallery for Photography in *Daguerre's American Legacy: Photographic Portraits (1840-1900) from the Wm. B. Becker Collection*.

Included are photographs of abolitionists and slaves, stalwart firemen and flirts with fans, brick-makers and literary women, cross-dressers and chicken-pluckers. Highlights include superb examples from America's first masters of photography: Southworth & Hawes of Boston, Jeremiah Gurney of New York, and Marcus A. Root of Philadelphia, as well as outstanding works by obscure and unknown artists. The Kurtz Gallery for Photography at the MIT Museum, a gallery devoted to continuing MIT's rich legacy of photography, is the first US venue for this exhibition.

The first photographic portraits were objects of wonder. From tentative beginnings in 1840, the practice of capturing a person's image with a camera became an industry as well as a means of artistic expression. Photography, invented by the French painter, showman and experimenter Louis Daguerre, was a transformative technology that impacted Americans in all walks of life; these early portraits reveal much about nineteenth century society, including the importance of work and family life, affinity groups and leisure.

Daguerre's American Legacy presents daguerreotypes and other nineteenth century photographs including ambrotypes, tintypes, and paper prints. All of the photographs are on loan from Wm. B. Becker of Michigan, a noted collector of early photography.

Visitors to Daguerre's American Legacy will be introduced to different approaches to nineteenth century photography, including recognizing and interpreting codes in early portraiture and interpreting how sitters and photographers collaborated in the creation of images that project the subject's identity or personality.

From its origins in recording the unadorned appearance of the human face, American photography evolved into a means of communicating personal attributes beyond the merely documentary: by the end of the century, people were shown conversing with ghosts, struggling through faux blizzards created in the studio, even confronting their spirit doubles. Rare examples of these "photographic fictions" are

included in MIT's exhibition.

Daguerre's American Legacy was organized in 2013 for two Paris-area museums; the MIT Museum is the first U.S. venue. The exhibition was curated by Wm. B. Becker and François Brunet, Professor of the History of Photography at the University of Paris-Diderot; organizing curator for the MIT Museum is Gary Van Zante.

Daguerre's American Legacy is accompanied by a 327-page book, published by Mare & Martin of Paris and available in the [MIT Museum Store](#).

About the Kurtz Gallery for Photography at the MIT Museum

The 1650 sq. ft. Kurtz Gallery at the MIT Museum hosts temporary exhibitions of fine art photography drawn in part from the rich legacy of work in photography at MIT by luminaries such as Minor White (1908-76), who taught at MIT during the last decade of his life; Harold Edgerton (1903-90), the strobe photography pioneer; and Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), who worked at MIT from 1958 to 1960. *Berenice Abbott, Photography and Science: An Essential Unity* in 2012 was the inaugural exhibition in the gallery, which is named for MIT alumnus Ronald Kurtz '45.

About the Curators

Wm. B. Becker is a journalist and writer who began collecting photographs in 1968. He is director of the American Museum of Photography (www.photographymuseum.com), an online museum.

François Brunet is Professor of American Art and Literature at the University of Paris – Diderot. His most recent publication is the book *L'Amérique des images, Histoire et culture visuelles des Etats-Unis* (Hazan/Paris Diderot).

Gary Van Zante is the MIT Museum's Curator of Architecture and Design. He has curated over fifty exhibitions ranging from Renaissance architectural graphics to contemporary design practice and photography. His photographic exhibitions at MIT have featured the work of photographers Berenice Abbott, Gabrielle Basilico, Margaret Morton, Joel Tettamanti and Cervin Robinson, among others. He is the author of a recent study of nineteenth century urban photography.

About the MIT Museum

The MIT Museum's mission is to engage the wider community with MIT's science, technology and other areas of scholarship in ways that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century. The Museum features two floors filled with ongoing and changing exhibitions, currently with an emphasis on robotics, photography and holography, MIT history, and current MIT research. The Museum presents monthly programs that appeal to middle school students and older, and presents the annual Cambridge Science Festival in late April.

About the Arts at MIT

The arts at MIT connect creative minds across disciplines and encourage a lifetime of exploration and self-discovery. They are rooted in experimentation, risk-taking and imaginative problem-solving. The arts strengthen MIT's commitment to the aesthetic, human, and social dimensions of research and innovation. Artistic knowledge and creation exemplify our motto - mens et manus, mind and hand. The arts are essential to MIT's mission to build a better society and meet the challenges of the 21st century. <http://arts.mit.edu>

Visitor Information

MIT Museum

265 Massachusetts Avenue

Central Square Cultural District

Cambridge, MA 02139 USA

P: 617.253.5927

web.mit.edu/museum

Open Daily 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Closed major holidays

General admission: \$10.00 for adults; Youth under 18, students, seniors: \$5.00; free admission for MIT card holders and alumni.

Free Admission Check website for times and discounts

Parking: Metered street parking and area lots

Public Transportation: Red Line "T" to Central Square or #1 Bus

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