

When This You See, Remember Me



Smiling Woman Holding an Opened Daguerreotype Case, Daguerreotype, c. 1845
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

In my photography classroom at Ohio State lives a tiny daguerreotype, where light and shadow were imprinted long ago onto a piece of silver-coated copper. Opening its worn leather case reveals a small girl, her face blurred by the slow shutter speeds required to create an image during the early days of photography. I pass the object around for my students to hold. Daguerreotypes are simultaneously images and mirrors, so students must move the photograph to clearly see the girl within their own reflection.

We talk about the girl. We do not know her name, exactly when she was photographed, or by whom, or where. We are unsure of who loved the girl enough to keep the object safe so that we can hold it over a century and a half later. We are unaware at what point the girl was forgotten to time, or exactly how she ended up in our classroom. We discuss how old the photograph is, yet how it will probably still outlive us. And we talk about how the photograph is physical, like the wind and the soil, so eventually it will disintegrate too.

My students are natives to a different world than the girl, born into the omnipresent glow of endless images on screens. These images are precise, repeatable, effortless, and packed with information. We think about photography: what has changed, and what remains the same, as they take out their phones to photograph the photograph.

This past autumn, as the leaves turned and the days shortened, these conversations with my students led me to The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library to study the Floyd and Marion Rinhart collection of cased photographs. The Rinharts were childhood sweethearts from New Jersey who married in 1935. As they approached middle age, they visited an antique fair and purchased a few 19th-century photographs. A few eventually grew into a substantial collection, and they spent the rest of their lives learning about early American photography and publishing many books on the subject. While searching online, I find a digitized VHS recording of the Rinharts, created shortly before their deaths. Through tracking errors and analog hiss, I hear them describing the photographs in their collection as a "lost art."

The Rinhart collection contains some of the earliest American photographs in existence, dating back to 1839, the same year that, building on the discoveries of many before him, French artist Louis Daguerre announced a method of capturing images he named after himself. By the fall of that year, the

daguerreotype process arrived in the United States, only to be replaced by the more economical collodion process the following decade, giving us ambrotypes on glass and tintypes on darkened iron. The Rinhart Collection encompasses over 1,700 cased photographs – daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes – each a tiny, unique impression within a decorative container.

Portraiture dominated early photography, and the cased images in the collection reflect this. Yet beyond the faces captured, the photographs represent our earliest attempts to harness light and time, their imperfections a contrast to the frictionless immediacy of contemporary photography. Plates reveal scars left over from the struggle to evenly spread light-sensitive chemistry and the warping distortions of primitive lenses. Exposure times were long, and though they were soon reduced from minutes to seconds, any small movement from a sitter would result in blur. Behind strained faces, sometimes powdered to hasten exposure, I glimpse braces intended to lock heads in place and mirrors positioned to reflect every ounce of available light. Moving through the archive, I find a young girl bracing her body against a chair to hold still, yet the tiny flowers on her dress are blurred by the subtle movement of her breath, illustrating how, in the early days of photography, even the slightest motion could fracture an image as it was being captured.



Girl with a Blurred Dress, Daguerreotype, c.1854
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

Time is also evident in the deterioration of the cased photographs. Moisture gets trapped beneath protective glass and air invades, transforming each photographic surface into a unique micro-environment, where patterns of corrosion transform the moments frozen within. The protective cases—leather, wood, plaster, and thermoplastic—also become worn when handled, and their spines eventually break apart. In their notes, the Rinharts write about the struggle to preserve the cased photographs, to “renew” them back to life, and to maintain their clarity against the ravages of time.

While studying the photographs, I feel the watchful eyes of the library's conservators as they perform the delicate dance between access and preservation. They are acutely aware that each time we expose these images to the light that brought them into existence, we come closer to destroying them. I open a case protecting a portrait of an unidentified young man, fetched from a dark, temperature-controlled storage room by the library's staff. His gaze is locked with the lens, sternly fixed in time. Irregular orbs of tarnish spread from the bottom of the frame and begin to overtake his form. As I examine the object, I think about how our pixel-based captures may someday fade into obsolescence, but they will never succumb to time in the same material way.



Seated Man, with Encroaching Tarnish on the Photographic Plate, Daguerreotype, c.1855
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

More than just representations, each photograph in the Rinhart collection offers a physical connection to the past, akin to the lock of braided hair I discover pinned to a velvet pad inside a daguerreotype case. When I open a daguerreotype of Walt Whitman, which I have seen reproduced countless times before, I think about how this one-of-a-kind object was once in the presence of Whitman himself. It carries a tangible thread to the man, an ineffable quality that will begin to diminish as the photographic process gives way to copies and will be all but obliterated in our image-saturated digital age.

While some of the portraits in the archive depict known figures such as Whitman, the majority are anonymous. But the Rinharts ask many questions about these nameless faces in their typed notes: Is this woman in mourning? Is this man a dentist? Could this be a young Abraham Lincoln? I find myself thinking about these photographs long after I close their cases, imagining the man dressed in a striped suit and displaying six fingers on each of his hands, the boy with white rabbits meticulously positioned on a table, or the smiling woman presenting a gleaming daguerreotype to the lens. These photographs, evocative and inscrutable, also ask more questions than they answer, whispering about lives once lived, and standing in quiet counterpoint to the information-packed digital images of today.



Man with Striped Suit and Six Fingers on Each Hand, Possibly a Performer, Daguerreotype, c.1856
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

The collection preserves scattered pieces of American culture in the period surrounding the Civil War, handpicked and indexed out of sequence by the Rinharts. Underexposed farmers sit alongside well-lit

politicians, beloved pets beside dusty erotica. Girls with dolls and boys with hammers transition to mothers holding dusters and hunters brandishing guns. Hints of westward expansion surface—a hat suited for gold mining, a portrait of a Southwestern Native American—just before the Transcontinental Railroad would join photography in altering our understanding of space and time. Debates surrounding human rights and our disintegration into war are mirrored in the shiny oilcloth cape of a Wide Awake and on the face of what the Rinharts claim in their notes to be one of the only known American daguerreotypes of a solitary Black infant, captured around 1851.

I think of Frederick Douglass, who would deliver his lecture on pictures exactly one year later, pointing to the camera's potential as a democratizing force in society. While the invention of photography did make representations more accessible, the rare portrait of the infant reminds me that the medium has always been intertwined with power structures governing access, visibility, and preservation. Cameras are now more ubiquitous than ever, but as I study this curated history, I consider the billions of photographs we circulate online today and think about which voices are amplified, distorted, or muted. I wonder about which photographs will be broadcasted as relics of our existence and which will vanish in a sea of overabundance, drifting away from our collective memory.



Baby Propped Up on a Hand-Tinted Blue Chair, Daguerreotype, c.1851
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

In capturing time, photographs offer us a semblance of control, a subtle rebellion against the inevitability of change and loss. Photographs of the dead became widespread shortly after the advent of photography, during a period when death was a common occurrence in households, especially among children. Although these images now appear macabre, they embody our enduring fear of change and loss—a sentiment that underpins the obsessive way we photograph our loved ones today. Within the collection, I find images of the dead posed sitting up with mouths sewn shut or eyes forced open in denial. In the 19th century, many regarded the camera as almost magical, an alchemical tool capable of unveiling the true essence of its subjects or even capturing aspects of their souls. This comes to mind when I see an image of a deceased boy, propped up with hands carefully arranged to clutch a daguerreotype taken when he was still alive, reflecting a yearning to bridge the gap between life and death through this new medium.



Deceased Child Holding His Portrait from Life, Daguerreotype, c.1851
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

I see evidence of our desire for control in other augmentations applied to the cased photographs. Weathered faces are softened through hand coloring, and jewelry is covered with a filter of gold paint. I think of the challenges of photographing my own small children when I view babies tied to highchairs and held in the correct pose by hidden parents. Uninteresting backgrounds are enriched with painted backdrops and undesirable elements crudely removed. One image captures two women sitting side by side, yet one has been mysteriously erased, leaving a mess of scratches on the photographic surface. We manipulate our digital images in many of the same ways today, but more covertly, and without leaving a physical trace.



Two Women, One with Arms Crossed, the Other Scratched from the Plate, Daguerreotype, c.1858
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

Absent of metadata or hashtags, the cased portraits in the Rinhart collection are instead accompanied by tiny notes, clippings, and other tangible clues to their history. Within a broken leather case decorated with flowers is an aged woman wearing a patterned dress and white bonnet. Opposite her image, etched in deliberate all-caps upon a worn pad, is a single word – MOTHER – written by someone who once held the cased photograph close. In a different case, a tiny gem tintype is pinned next to a faded portrait of a small boy, displaying the same boy, now a man, dressed in a military uniform, showing both the boy's

growth and the evolution of early photographic processes. A pencil drawing, perhaps created with the aid of an optical device such as a Camera Lucida, peers towards a dark image, filling in details lost to poor exposure. And in one case, I find a handwritten note: "When this you see, remember me," words that encapsulate the enduring human desire to leave a piece of our existence that might transcend the boundaries of time.



Deteriorated Portrait of a Young Boy, with a Gem Tintype Pinned to Case, Daguerreotype, c.1852
Courtesy of The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

One day, I find what is labeled as a post-mortem daguerreotype of a girl. Upon opening the case, I discover the image dim and faded, with hardly anything left but dust mirrored behind the glass. The spine of the case is broken. Tucked away behind the image is a handwritten note: "Mary Ann Powers, age 3 years 2 months. Died Oct 5th, 1847. Daughter of Darwin and Mary H. Powers. This picture was taken after she was dead."

I photograph the daguerreotype with my phone for a closer look, using my fingers to zoom into the screen. This is where I find her faint outline. I use Photoshop to manipulate the pixels and further clarify the image. And I consider asking Artificial Intelligence to help me digitally resurrect her.

Instead, in the darkness of the early morning, with my phone rising and falling on the back of my own almost three-year-old girl sleeping on my chest, I search online for Mary Ann Powers. I learn that her parents had four other children and lived in Gardner, Massachusetts, where she died of dysentery. I find a photograph of her parents' shared gravestone in Evergreen Cemetery, its metadata detailing that it was captured on September 27, 2020, with a Samsung phone. The gravestone rests on patchy grass, with the sun shining behind a green maple tree, its leaves frozen in time, entering the top of the photographic frame. The 10 million pixels that make up the image were uploaded to a website at 07:57:26 am two days later by a man who claims to share 3.12% of her father's DNA.

I think about the technological miracle at my fingertips. It is a device that contains more information than I will ever need, where I can make connections to a short-lived existence many generations away from my own, this virtual landscape where I pack my own information, frozen pieces of time left to glow long after I am gone.

Still, my heart remains with the small, faded daguerreotype.

I cannot see her, but I know that Mary Ann Powers is chemically embalmed within the image created long ago by capturing the light reflecting off her body. I imagine her mother touching the object I now cradle on a snowy February day with the sun peeking through the UV-protected windows of the reading room and

illuminating the fragments of dust on its glass, transforming it into a tiny galaxy. I imagine the collision of light, shadow, and chemistry that came together for a short period to create the photograph. Among the precise bits and bytes that increasingly shape my days, the cased photograph is an imperfect, tangible link to the past. Its atoms are akin to mine. They cling to a moment in time but slowly return piece by piece to nature's embrace.

-Kate Shannon, 2024

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For further documentation of images from the Rinhart collection, visit kateshannon.net/when-this-you-see-remember-me

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