Photographic Presidents

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Published by University of Illinois Press

Finnegan, Cara A.
Photographic Presidents: Making History from Daguerreotype to Digital.
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On August 1, 1843, seventy-six-year-old ex-president and sitting congressman John Quincy Adams visited the photography studio of Dr. Leverett Bishop and Alonzo Gray on Genesee Street in Utica, New York. His old friend, the former congressman Ezekiel Bacon, accompanied him. Adams reported later in his diary that “four Daguerreotype likenesses of my head were taken, two of them jointly with the head of Mr. Bacon.” His assessment of the images: “All hideous.” Adams was not a man who minced words.

Adams’s disappointing visit to the local daguerreotypist took place in the midst of a busy twenty-four hours for the supposedly vacationing congressman. On the previous evening a “committee representing the coloured citizens of Utica” paid a visit to Adams to thank him “for my efforts in protecting the right of petition, and promoting the abolition of slavery.” Adams reported in his diary that one of the visitors “addressed me in a short, formal speech, modest and well delivered.” The former Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard then replied to his fellow citizens with “equal brevity, thanking them for their kind attentions to me.” The Utica Gazette reported that in those remarks Adams had, among other things, wished his visitors “a successful issue out of all the afflictions and injustice under which they and their brethren now in bondage of various kinds had so long labored.”
The next morning, Adams visited Utica Female Academy, where he met teachers and students and was “addressed on behalf of the trustees of that institution by Mr. Spencer in a manner so affecting that it made a child of me.” Spencer had included in his remarks excerpts from Abigail Adams’s letters to her husband and to her son John Quincy. Adams got emotional: “I actually sobbed as he read, utterly unable to suppress my emotion. Oh! My mother! Is there anything so affecting to me as thy name?” Adams reported in his diary that he quickly pulled himself together to offer a few brief remarks in response but confessed, “My thoughts were all upon my mother. My heart was too full for my head to think, and my presence of mind was gone.” After this emotionally affecting experience, Adams was ushered to an outdoor stage where his friend Bacon offered him a formal welcome on behalf of the citizens of Utica, which Adams then responded to “in a speech of about half an hour.” Adams wrote in the diary that “the
shaking of some hundred hands then followed.” Only after this did he head off to the daguerreotypist.

One would think that being formally welcomed, delivering speeches, shaking so many hands, and sitting for daguerreotypes would be enough to fill one’s day, especially for an increasingly frail septuagenarian. But Adams was just getting started. After the daguerreotype sitting, he visited a celebrity described in his diary as “the dwarf C. S. Stratton, called General Tom Thumb.” The great American showman P. T. Barnum had partnered with Charles Sherwood Stratton’s father to exhibit Stratton as a stage performer. Adams’s encounter with him took place during the child performer’s first tour, which took the young Stratton to parts of New York and Canada in the late summer of 1843. Though Stratton was only five years old at the time, Barnum advertised the child as age eleven so as to better play up the spectacle of his small stature. Adams must have believed the humbug, for he reported in his diary that General Tom Thumb was “11 years old. 25 inches high; weighing 15 pounds. Dressed in military uniform, mimicking Napoleon.” After a meal hosted by Adams’s nephew Alexander B. Johnson, he visited a congressional colleague, John M. Niles, who was hospitalized. From there he proceeded to the York Mills Cotton Factory, where he gave another speech. His address was followed by gifts of cotton, which the antislavery Adams was careful to note in his diary he “declined accepting.” Only after these final events of the day did John Quincy Adams return to his nephew’s house for an “elegant evening party and supper.”

Most Americans in 1843 did not spend their vacations like this. Nor were they greeted at nearly every stop along the way with what one newspaper described as “a brilliant torchlight procession, preceded by music, and followed by an immense concourse of the people generally.” But John Quincy Adams was not most Americans. Adams held a singular place in American history. As an eight-year-old, the white, privileged son of a founding father and mother had watched firsthand some of the first shots fired in the American Revolution. That child grew up to be an international diplomat, U.S. senator, secretary of state, rhetoric professor, president, congressman, and passionate antislavery advocate. He boasted fluency in several classical and modern languages, championed science through his advocacy for the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution, and kept a diary that chronicled nearly every day of his adult life. No surprise, then, that John Quincy Adams’s appearances in the towns and cities of western New York
in the summer of 1843 constituted major public events, equaling, perhaps, even the spectacles of Barnum himself. The *National Intelligencer* summed up the former president’s travels this way: “In each city and town that he has passed through, or rested in, the spontaneous evidences of the personal respect which his long life of honor has induced for him among the people have been very numerous and gratifying.”

As a person of national prominence, John Quincy Adams was one of the most visually depicted figures of his age. He sat for dozens of portraits during his lifetime, in multiple media. The most important portrait artists of the day painted him, including John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, and Gilbert Stuart—the same men who had painted Adams’s mother and father, George Washington, and other elites of the Revolution and early republic. Like this earlier generation, John Quincy Adams was the subject of countless engravings, silhouettes, and lithographs as well, affordable images that citizens in the U.S. and abroad could buy, sell, and display. Toward the end of his life, he confided to his diary, “I question whether another man lives who has been so woefully and so variously bedaubed as I have been. There is no picture of my childhood but from the age of 16, when I was caricatured in crayons by Mr. Schmidt for four ducats, down to this my 77th year, when Mr. White has lampooned me in oil, scarcely a year has passed away, without a crucifixion of my face and form by some painter engraver or sculptor.”

Despite his characteristic grumpiness, Adams cared deeply about art, and he liked to spend time with artists. In addition to numerous accounts of sittings with painters, his diary reported evening hours spent in the pleasant company of artists such as the sculptor Horatio Greenough and the painter Charles Bird King, and he often mentioned browsing the visual collections of friends and neighbors whom he visited.

Given Adams’s lifetime of experiences with visual representation, it makes sense that he would be curious about the new medium of photography. According to data culled from entries in Adams’s diary, the Utica trip was his seventh visit to a daguerreotypist in less than a year. By the time he sat for Bishop and Gray in Utica, Adams already had sat for roughly twenty daguerreotypes. Most of those sittings, he reported in his diary, failed to produce a quality image. Adams would sit for and write about somewhere around fifty daguerreotypes before his death in February 1848. As a sought-after photographic subject and lover of technology with a lifetime of
experience being “bedaubed,” Adams occupied a singular cultural position from which to wrestle with the implications of the strange and wonderful new medium. His diary reveals him to be a thoughtful, anxious public figure grappling with the question of what this new visual medium might mean for national life. Adams recognized photography’s unique representational power, but his interest in photography did not amount to a wholehearted endorsement. The new medium’s visual values of fidelity and wonder worried him. He lamented photography’s capacity to produce images that were, as he put it, “too true to the original,” ones that depicted with too much clarity his aging body and face. More broadly, Adams also worried about whether the daguerreotype in all its mirrored wonder was the best art for producing what he termed “true portraiture of the heart”—portraits that were, in his words, worthy of being “transmitted to the memory of the next age.” Adams was ambivalent about the new visual values emerging from inside the place he called “the shadow shop.” The reasons why not only tell us about Adams’s own experiences but also provide insight into how daguerreotypes became part of the visual culture at large.

“Wretched portraits far inferior to the silhouette”

Despite the publicity given to the new art of the daguerreotype in 1840 and the fact that the president, members of Congress, and other local elites sat for daguerreotypes made by itinerant photographers located close to the U.S. Capitol, John Quincy Adams does not appear to have availed himself of the services of a photographer until the fall of 1842. Adams must have been aware of the new medium, because the daguerreotype demonstrations described in the previous chapter were publicized and reviewed in his preferred Washington, DC, newspaper, the National Intelligencer. Adams did not report in the diary that he attended any of these demonstrations or saw early daguerreotype displays in the nation’s capital. Given his propensity for documenting all of his daily activities in his diary, the absence of documentation suggests he likely did not partake of them. Adams did continue his regular practice of taking in other visual representations during this period, however. For example, several days before Seixas’s daguerreotype demonstrations in March 1840, Adams noted in his diary that on his way to the Capitol he had stopped at the studio of a sculptor named Bettrich to look at “his statues and busts.”
Given that Adams famously enjoyed learning about new technology and loved science, it is unclear why he eschewed the opportunity to sit for a daguerreotype before then. One plausible explanation is that his calendar during this period was filled with nationally consequential work that likely crowded out other activities. During late 1840 and early 1841, for example, Adams obsessively prepared for his argument before the Supreme Court on the Amistad case, which would cement his reputation as “old man eloquent” and fuel the abolitionist movement. In early 1842 Adams embroiled himself yet again in a bitter and sometimes nearly violent congressional argument against the so-called gag rule, which since 1836 had banned antislavery petitions from being discussed on the floor of the House. Yet it was perhaps only a matter of time before one of the nation’s best-known and public of citizens climbed the stairs to a daguerrean’s studio and took his own turn before the camera.

Congressman Adams had been home in Quincy, Massachusetts, for just over a week in late September 1842 when he drove into Boston with some relatives. “I went for the aid of a dentist,” he wrote in his diary, and found one Dr. Gray, who “gave me what aid he could by sealing off the tartar, and tying up one of the loose ones with a thread.” Adams found the visit a painful reminder of his aging body, writing that his teeth were “all past surgery, and serve me but as perpetual warnings to make ready for my final dissolution.” After suffering through an hour and a half of this dental work, Adams recorded that the procedure “gave me no relief.”

A short time after leaving the dentist, Adams stopped in at the National Daguerrian Gallery on Court Street, an establishment belonging to John Plumbe. Adams reported in his diary that he “had been invited by a printed card from him to take a photographic miniature likeness of me.” The photographer told Adams he was too busy and unable to photograph the former president just at that moment: “He was so much engaged that he could not take it now, but [I] engaged to go in again, next Tuesday the 27th at 10 o’clock A.M. which he minuted down on a book and is then to take it.” Despite having not been able to get in a sitting, Adams must have browsed the gallery while he was there, for he observed in his diary of Plumbe, “He has a very large collection of photographs but this wonderful invention of Daguerre’s yields but wretched portraits far inferior to the silhouette.” “Wonderful” but “wretched”: paradoxical words from a man who knew a thing or two about being visually depicted.
At first glance the choice to compare the daguerreotype to the silhouette seems strange. Why, for example, would Adams not compare the daguerreotype portrait to the painted portrait? They were similar in look and goals: the creation of a suitable and artful likeness of (in Adams’s case, at least) an elite public subject. The silhouette, by contrast, constituted one of the “low forms” of portraiture. Silhouettes (also known as “shades”) became a popular mode of portraiture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To create a silhouette, the outline of a subject, often in profile, was drawn or cut out of a sheet of paper and pasted onto a contrasting background (usually black pasted onto white). The best silhouettes could be works of art unto themselves and offered good representational accuracy in terms of the tracing of the shape of the subject’s head, profile, or in some cases the entire body. Even so, it is difficult to see how the silhouette would compare favorably to the daguerreotype portrait’s capacity to produce an accurate likeness.

Yet the daguerreotype and the silhouette shared several features. First, both practices involved machines. The daguerreotypist used the camera to focus an image and expose the plate, while the silhouette artist might use a physiognotrace or “profile cutter” to mechanically trace a sitter’s profile. In addition, both visual objects could be made quickly and cheaply compared to other modes of portraiture. Penley Knipe explains, “As opposed to portrait miniatures made with precious pigments on ivory or vellum and housed in expensive cases, shades were often simply snipped from paper for a few pennies. The speed with which one could get a portrait taken was also a great advantage. Only one sitting was required, as compared to numerous sittings needed for more complex forms of portraiture.” This speed and affordability also ensured ease of circulation. Multiple copies of a silhouette could be produced at the same time, and they were easy to store in albums or put into the mail. In this way, silhouettes were more portable and commercially viable than the daguerreotype, which was a unique, comparatively bulky, and unreproducible object. Finally, the silhouette and the daguerreotype shared a visual grounding in the play of light and shadow. A silhouette revealed a subject’s visual features differently because it was a negative portrait. Similarly, the mirror-like daguerreotype offered both a positive and a negative image, depending upon how it was manipulated by the hand. The hyper-accuracy of representation typically ascribed to early photography was only part of the attraction of the daguerreotype;
equally fascinating to viewers of the period was the ineffable, almost magi-
cal way that the daguerreotype’s chemical play of light and shadow worked
to both reveal and hide its subject. This quality might have worked against
the daguerreotype as far as Adams was concerned; perhaps for Adams the
silhouette seemed to be a more stable and accurate “shade” than the wonder
of the daguerreotype’s continuously vanishing and reappearing image.

Adams’s long experiences with the silhouette might also have played
a significant role in his initial assessment of photography. Beginning in
1809, Adams sat for some of the most important “shade men” of the time,
including William James Hubard and, much later, Auguste Edouart, the
latter internationally known as one of the finest silhouette artists.30 Ed-
ouart appears to have spent much of the first part of 1841 in Washington,
taking out an advertisement in late January announcing that “for a short
time only” he had opened “for inspection his extraordinary collection of
upwards of 85,000 Silhouette likenesses, taken by himself, amongst which
are some of the first characters of Europe and America.” The ad listed prices
for any customers who wanted their own silhouette made, but noted that
any members of Congress or “Principal Officers of the Government” who
would “have the goodness to allow him a sitting” would not have to pay.31
Adams reported in his diary that Edouart visited him in Washington on
March 11, 1841, and made his silhouette:

Mr Edouart is a Frenchman who cuts out profiles in miniature on paper,
and came and took mine. He says he has a collection of them 85000 in
number. He took one also of my father from a shade taken in 1809 which
with those of my mother, my wife, myself, and our sons George [sic] then
boys of 8 and 6 years of age, we have under a glass in one frame. He gave
me a full length profile of President Harrison, in the attitude of delivering
his inaugural address.32

Adams’s diary entry highlighted yet another similarity between the silhou-
ette and the daguerreotype: both created a desire to make, collect, and share
or sell images of important national figures. Edouart took the silhouette
he made of Adams that day, superimposed it onto a sketched background
of the kind of library one might have in one’s home, and then had Adams
himself sign and date it.33 Edouart’s production of Adams’s silhouette and
his gift of President Harrison’s silhouette to Adams illustrate the mecha-
nisms of visual exchange that were common to this popular art form.34 In
addition, Adams’s reference to his own collection of silhouettes highlighted
the role the so-called lower art form played in family life. One would gather silhouettes into family albums much like one did with photographs in later eras. It was common to purchase albums specifically designed to house silhouettes. Families also preserved them by framing them, as Adams indicated his family had done.35

Edouart made a return visit to Adams a few months later, in June 1841: “In the Evening Mr Edouart the man of shades, came and left with me full length profiles of my father, President Tyler, and myself.”36 Adams later favored Edouart at least twice with visits to his collection. A few days after
Edouart’s June visit to him, Adams returned the visit, writing in his diary, “On my way to the Capitol I stop’d at Mr Edouart’s lodgings and viewed his collection of silhouettes or full length miniature shades. He has a curious collection of the figures of many distinguished men of this country assembled together and stand in one hall in relative positions to each other forming a very pleasant tableau, and many of them striking likenesses.”

Given that Adams himself knew most of the “distinguished men of this country,” he could comment on the fidelity of their likenesses. Two years later, during his summer 1843 trip to New York, he also mentioned in the diary a visit to Edouart in Saratoga Springs, where the artist had moved to follow the elites who summered there.

For Adams, the art of the silhouette offered a familiar and pleasurable form of portraiture that provided the opportunity to appreciate the public men of his own time as well as remember family members and loved ones no longer with him. In addition, both the old art of the silhouette and the new one of the daguerreotype provided Adams with useful metaphors for describing political character. When a visitor to his home in April 1843 asked Adams to comment upon “the prospects of the approaching Presidential elections” of 1844, Adams did not have much positive to say about any of the potential candidates. He reported later in the diary that he told his visitor that James Buchanan “is the shadow of a shade, and General [Winfield] Scott is a Daguerreotype likeness of a candidate—all sunshine, through a camera obscura.” Adams implied that Buchanan was the shadow side of the silhouette, dark and perhaps unknowable; one might study him closely yet not get insight into his character. Scott, according to Adams, seemed to be the opposite: an “all sunshine” candidate whose light might paradoxically blind the viewer and therefore also limit his knowability. Neither form, Adams implied, seemed amenable to offering the viewer knowledge of one’s character. But this did not stop Adams from taking advantage of both popular forms of portraiture. Despite his initial assessment that the daguerreotype did not live up to the silhouette, he nevertheless kept his appointment with John Plumbe in Boston. He would leave there disappointed.

“I dozed and the picture was asleep”

Because the practice of photography was so new, most daguerreotypists of Adams’s time had started out in another trade, often a scientific one. Plumbe was no exception. John Plumbe Jr. was born in Wales and came
to the United States in 1821.\textsuperscript{40} Plumbe started out as an engineer. He reportedly took up photography in 1840 after encountering the itinerant photographer John Stevenson in Washington, DC, and by 1841 he had set up his own studio in Boston.\textsuperscript{41} An enterprising entrepreneur, Plumbe established some of the earliest daguerreotype galleries years ahead of the later, better-known Mathew Brady galleries of the 1850s.\textsuperscript{42} By 1845 Plumbe had fifteen branch galleries; he eventually owned a chain of twenty-three multicity galleries that he called the “National Daguerrian Gallery.”\textsuperscript{43} A few months after Adams’s visit, Plumbe advertised the collection that Adams described as “large” but “wretched” in a Boston newspaper, declaring it “the largest collection of daguerreotypes in the world.” Plumbe advertised that “colored likenesses” were “taken every day, at three dollars each, and a duplicate gratis.”\textsuperscript{44} Despite Adams’s dismissals of the work, business was good.

During the week between taking in Plumbe’s offerings and sitting for his own daguerreotype, Adams kept busy by fishing with friends, partaking of tea and meals with state legislators, and rejoicing in the flourishing of his garden and trees. He also shared a strange but friendly visit with an elderly man who had shown up at Adams’s home simply “for the pleasure of having it to say that he had once in his life seen a President of the United States.”\textsuperscript{45} Adams returned to Boston on September 27 to keep the appointment to sit for his portrait. He wrote in the diary:

\begin{quote}
I went immediately to Mr. Plumbe’s Daguerrian gallery to have my photograph taken. They took me forthwith up to the top of the house where a sort of round house has been erected, with windows like those of a green house, and with a door opening to let in the Sun. I took a seat at the corner of a settee so that the light of the Sun came obliquely on the side of my face. There was a small telescope nearly in front of me pointed directly at me, and at a corresponding angle on the other side a mirror. A tin or metallic plate was fitted into the telescope, and on that metallic plate the photographic impression was made.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Photographers needed natural light and lots of it in order for a daguerreotype portrait to be successful. As Adams’s diary account illustrated, daguerreotype studios like Plumbe’s tended to be on the top floors of buildings where tall windows and skylights could flood a space with natural light. The photographer and perhaps an assistant would have set up the scene and also, as Adams reported, manipulated the former president’s body so that Adams would be positioned to take full advantage of available light.
The “small telescope” Adams described was the daguerreotype camera, into which a plate treated with light-sensitive chemicals was inserted.

Adams’s analogies to the greenhouse and telescope echoed others’ accounts of early daguerreotype sittings, as sitters worked to describe this strange new experience. Marcy Dinius notes that the practice of making analogies was common to early discussions of photography, “a familiar pattern: the oscillation between assimilating and differentiating the known and the unknown, old and new.” Adams knew the power of analogy. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric*, published some thirty years before, Adams wrote, “The great foundation of figurative language rests on the association of ideas. When a word has in the first instance been appropriated to any particular thing, and is afterwards turned or converted to the representation of some other thing, its new signification must arise from some association with the old.” In his public advocacy for the sciences, Marlena Portolano notes, “This method of arguing through similitude was a favorite of Adams’s.”

Telescopes and greenhouses were an understandable rhetorical move for a man in his mid-seventies.

The diary entry describing his visit to Plumbe’s studio went on to describe the process of photographing the subject:

Not more than two minutes were required for each impression to be taken during which I was required to keep my head immovable, looking steady at one object. They kept me there an hour and a half, and took seven or eight impressions, all of them very bad for an exposition of sleep came over me, and I found it utterly impossible to keep my eyes open for two minutes together. I dozed and the picture was asleep. I gave it up in despair. How the impression is taken came upon the plate [sic] is utterly inconceivable to me.

Adams’s lamentation not only described what the process was like; it also highlighted the emotional aspects of his experience of being photographed: his frustration with the bodily challenges the process posed and his ignorance of the process. He sat for “seven or eight impressions,” each of which he said required two minutes of exposure time. If Adams’s self-report can be trusted, then that meant a total of roughly fifteen minutes of sitting completely still over the course of an hour and a half. For someone used to sitting for painted portraits, where one might relax and chat amiably with the artist (many who painted his portrait reported that he was an excellent conversationalist), this stricture alone must have been a challenge. Despite
attempts to comply with instructions and “look steady at one object” during the exposures, Adams could not help himself and began to fall asleep, causing the picture to “fall asleep” as well. Furthermore, the experience was ruined not only by Adams’s inability to control his body but also by his lack of understanding of the process itself. Tellingly, the diary turned to passive voice at that moment. “The photographic impression was made,” Adams wrote, and in an imprecise fumbling for words not usually present in the diary, he admitted he had no idea how it was “taken came upon the plate.” It was “utterly inconceivable.” The whole experience must have been disconcerting, not only for Adams but for Plumbe and his staff as they tried to capture a waking image of the somnolent ex-president. After all, Adams was a dignitary whom they had specially invited to their place of business, surely the most eminent of any they had photographed up to that point. Ultimately, Adams’s first attempt at sitting for a daguerreotype was defined on all sides by failure and despair.

Of the approximately fifty daguerreotypes that Adams’s diary mentions, he recorded that about a dozen of them failed or were not successful. What constituted a “successful” daguerreotype in the early 1840s depended upon many things. As a highly technical process subject to everything from the weather to the photographer’s ability to properly prepare the plate, operate a camera, pose a sitter, and develop the resulting image, early accounts of daguerreotypy tended to treat success or failure in purely instrumental terms: Did one manage to fix a visible image on the plate or not? Only later did photographers turn to improving the quality of images themselves. For example, in early 1840, newspapers were still reporting as news the fact that individual would-be photographers had successfully created a daguerreotype image.

Of the potential for technical failure Sarah L. Thwaites writes, “Daguerreotypy was a risky business: the process was delicate, expensive and dangerous. The silvered copper plates were costly, the process required unpredictable exposure times, bulky equipment and, moreover, profitable daguerreotypy necessitated the dexterous, and somewhat intuitive, manipulation of a number of elements.” For early photographers it seemed that failure lurked around every corner. Until lenses for cameras improved in their capacity to capture light, photographers emphasized that sitters needed to come on bright, sunny days; a couple of Adams’s diary entries mentioned that photographers were concerned about whether too much
sun or not enough sun might produce an unacceptable image. While Adams did not detail specific causes of daguerreotype failure, the frequent references to failure illustrate how even amid the joys of photographic fidelity and wonder, the new art and science was a highly contingent, sometimes accident-prone venture.

“A very good one”

Despite giving it all up in despair, Adams was willing to try again. Back in Washington, DC, six months later, Adams managed to keep a few pictures awake. This time the photographer was Philip Haas. Born in Germany, Haas came to the United States in 1834 and ultimately ended up in Washington, DC, where he worked as a printer and lithographer. Little of Haas’s photographic work remains today, and in the early 1840s he was primarily known as a lithographer. Even so, as the previous chapter mentioned, he is recognized as one of the first resident photographers in Washington, DC, where the city directory of 1843 listed a misspelled “P. Hass, lithographer” with an address on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Adams came to Haas for the same reason he went to Plumbe’s in Boston: he was invited. On March 7, 1843, Adams wrote in his diary, “Mr. Haas a German who takes Daguerreotype likenesses in the Pennsylvania Avenue [studio near] the capitol had engaged me to come and sit to his camera obscura and I went this afternoon. But Mr Haas said the morning would be a more favourable time and I promised to call again to-morrow before noon.” (Mornings were better because the sun would be more suitably situated, improving the possibilities for a good exposure.) The next day, Adams returned and wrote an account of the sitting in his diary:

I walked this morning to Mr. Haas’s shop, and he took from his camera obscura three Daguerreotype likenesses of me—the operation is performed in half a minute, but is yet altogether incomprehensible to me. Mr. Haas says it is a chemical process upon mercury, silver, gold and iodine. It would seem as easy to stamp a fixed portrait from the reflections of a mirror; but how wonderful would that reflection itself be, if we were not familiarised to it from childhood.

As in the September 1842 account, with this second sitting Adams attempted to understand the unfamiliar through the lens of the familiar.
Adams’s reference to Haas’s camera as a “camera obscura” improved upon the previous telescope analogy, though technically it too was not quite correct. The camera obscura was a precursor to the technologies of photography. Latin for “dark room,” the camera obscura gained popularity during the Renaissance and the scientific revolution as a way to produce accurate renderings of objects. It was an optical device into which light would pass through a lens in such a way as to display an image of an object; that image could then be traced to produce a rendering of it. Haas’s daguerreotype camera likely looked like the camera obscura with which Adams would certainly have been familiar; its purpose of accurate rendering was also similar. Despite the analogy, Adams recognized that there was a difference between the camera obscura, which projected but could not fix an image, and the “daguerreotype likeness” he procured from Haas. His mention of the “chemical process” using “mercury, silver, gold and iodine” suggests that during the encounter Adams must have asked questions of the operator about how the image, as a previous diary entry had wondered, “came upon the plate.” Whatever education Haas might have offered the congressman, however, ultimately Adams lamented that what he termed “the operation” was “yet altogether incomprehensible to me.” Despite having experienced the process more than once, Adams still did not fully understand what happened during that brief period when the exposure was made.

Adams’s experience with Haas also prompted a fascinating meditation on the nature of photography itself. Where his September 1842 diary account focused on his despair at dozing off and creating images that were “asleep,” in the March 8 entry Adams reflected upon the “wonderful” implications of the resulting images themselves: “It would seem as easy to stamp a fixed portrait from the reflections of a mirror; but how wonderful would that reflection itself be, if we were not familiarised to it from childhood.” For Adams, the experience of viewing a daguerreotype was like looking at oneself in a mirror. This was literally true, of course, because the mirrored surface of the daguerreotype not only offered the viewer an image of its subject, but as Marcy Dinius points out, it also reflected “one’s own image . . . on the surface that holds the image,” enabling the viewer to actually see herself “in another’s portrait.” This feature of the daguerreotype, Dinius argues, “allows for a moment of visual identification” between viewer and subject. Furthermore, daguerreotypes are laterally reversed images of their subjects. Mark Osterman explains that they “appear backwards,
capturing the subjects as they see themselves in a mirror, not how they are seen by others.” Adams’s own daguerreotype would thus appear to Adams the same way that he would appear while looking at himself in a mirror.

Continuing this line of thought, Adams wrote, “If we were not familiarised to it from childhood”—familiarized to our own reflection in the mirror, that is—“how wonderful would that reflection itself be.” What made the daguerreotype potentially “wonderful” (full of wonder) was its capacity to not merely capture the image of a person but to also literally reveal the reflections of others to the viewer. Adams recognized that the daguerreotype could provide citizens with a new mechanism for seeing others as they saw themselves, a particular kind of fidelity that would seem to offer a new mode of public subjectivity. Yet if that capacity was the ultimate value of this “wonderful” new mode of portraiture, it was not easy to achieve. As Adams’s earlier comments about the “wretchedness” of the daguerreotype for portraiture hinted, the possibility for seeing one another differently could be hampered by technical problems or, in Adams’s own case, the bodily failures of the sitter.

Three days after the March 8 sitting, Adams stopped in at Haas’s studio to pick up his daguerreotype. He was pleased with what he saw: “Call[ed] at Haas’s shop and took the Daguerreotype likeness of me—a very good one.” While the diary does not report what specifically Adams thought was “very good” about the image, perhaps it was enough that the process had actually worked. In any case, that Haas had managed to produce a pleasing image seems to have warmed Adams’s view of photography as a whole, and he chose on his own to stop by Haas’s studio at least two more times during the following week. On March 15, in the middle of a cold, snowy week during which the diary reported that Adams was not feeling well (“Another restless, hacking, wracking night I awoke coughing before 3”), Adams “walked to the shop of Mr. Haas where I found a young man with two ladies[—]his wife and her companion whose likenesses he took in a group while I was there. He attempted also to take me, but did not succeed because he said there was too much light of the sun; and I promised to come again tomorrow or the first fair day between 8 and 9 of the morning.”

Adams returned as promised the next day. His March 16 diary entry began by noting the weather and his health: “Deep snow. The progress of my catarrh [a buildup of mucus in the nose or throat] continues with increasing severity.” Despite his illness, Adams kept his appointment with Haas:
“According to promises I walked up to Mr. Haas’s shop about 9 my hands in woolen gloves bitterly pinched with cold. Found Horace Everett there for the same purpose of being facsimilead [sic]. Haas took him once, and then with his consent took me three times[,] the second of which he said was very good—for the operation is delicate, subject to many imperceptible accidents, and fails at least twice out of three times.”

Horace Everett, a friend and congressional colleague of Adams who represented Vermont from 1829 to 1843, appears to have graciously let Adams cut ahead of him in line. In that image Adams appears to be grasping his hands both to keep them still and warm them up on a morning when they were “bitterly pinched with cold.” (See figure 2.2.)

According to the diary, Haas made a total of six daguerreotypes of Adams at the March 8 and March 16 sittings. Adams reported that one March 8 image was “very good.” On March 16 he reported that of the three exposures that Haas took, Haas told him “the second” was “very good.” Of these March 1843 images, two daguerreotypes exist today: the daguerreotype now at the Smithsonian and a second, copy daguerreotype held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While it is impossible to know whether any of the “very good” daguerreotypes were the ones that have come down to us today, it is now assumed that the March 16 one (fig. 2.2) is the Everett daguerreotype. Adams likely gave the daguerreotype to Horace Everett sometime after Everett encountered Adams (and let him cut ahead of him in line) at Haas’s studio on that cold March day, making that image the one described in chapter 2.

The March 1843 Haas sittings are important not only because they produced what we now know is the earliest extant daguerreotype of an American president but also because they offer specific insight into John Quincy Adams’s engagements with photography and the subsequent circulation of his photographic image. Despite going on to be photographed dozens more times until the end of his life, the Haas daguerreotypes are the only images Adams confessed in the diary to actually liking. We cannot know precisely what caused Adams to pronounce the March 8 and March 16 daguerreotypes as “very good.” Was it simply that they had not failed, as the ones made at his September 1842 sitting had, or was it Adams’s evaluation of how he felt the images represented him? It is easy to see why Adams might have liked the March 16 picture. The daguerreotype depicts not an old man in his “final dissolution” but a sharp-eyed, decorous, dynamic statesman seated
in a homelike, scholarly setting of fireplace and books. Adams’s gaze marks the daguerreotype as what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen call a “demand image,” in which the subject of the photograph stares directly out from the image at the viewers, visually engaging them on equal (or perhaps even confrontational) terms. Indeed, the very awake Adams seems just about to respond to a congressional opponent with a well-timed, damning verbal rebuke. Keeping in mind Adams’s remarks about how the daguerreotype could reveal to the viewer how the subject saw himself in a mirror, perhaps Adams responded to this image positively because it depicted him as he wanted to see himself: vital, scholarly, a force very much still to be reckoned with, a man still fighting for what was right in the Supreme Court and in Congress. That was Adams’s idea of fidelity. Yet in his experience, the daguerreotype failed to achieve it more often than not.

The Visual Lives of the Haas Daguerreotypes

In 1937 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City acquired a collection of several dozen daguerreotypes that came from the famous mid-nineteenth-century Boston photography studio Southworth and Hawes. Among the daguerreotypes was an image of John Quincy Adams. Posed against the same homelike interior featured in the Everett daguerreotype, this daguerreotype features Adams sitting with a body posture and facial expression that are almost identical to the Everett image. But while in the Everett image Adams’s bare hands grasp onto one another, hovering over his lap in a slight blur of movement (fig. 2.2), in the Met daguerreotype Adams’s clasped hands rest quietly on top of a handkerchief on his lap. (See fig. 3.3.) Comparison of the two images shows them to be nearly identical, from the exact placement of the chair upon the patterned rug, to the books on the table, to Adams’s bodily comportment. But slightly different (though equally imposing) facial expressions and the relative presence and absence of the handkerchief suggests they were different exposures made at the same sitting.

Yet no one knew this in 1937, because they had nothing with which to compare the Met’s daguerreotype. When the Met acquired the group of Southworth and Hawes daguerreotypes, experts assumed that it and all the other daguerreotypes in the collection had been made by Southworth and Hawes themselves. Furthermore, a catalog of the images published in
1939 stated that the daguerreotype of Adams had been made in his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, even though it would have been nearly impossible for Adams’s home to have offered indoor lighting conditions conducive to the successful production of such an image. Years later, other writers repeated the error that not only had Southworth and Hawes made the daguerreotype but that it was made in Adams’s own home in Quincy. In the late 1970s photography historian Beaumont Newhall challenged these interpretations. He had come across a daguerreotype of Ohio congressman Joseph Ridgway; its paper mat listed 1843 as the date it was made and “P. Haas” as the photographer. Comparing the background of the Ridgway...
daguerreotype to the Met’s Adams daguerreotype, Newhall quickly saw that they were the same: the same rug, the same chair, the same fireplace mantle and lamp. The only difference was that Ridgway’s daguerreotype contained no books and was a laterally reversed image of the Met’s Adams daguerreotype: the table with lamp was on the left side of the image rather than on the right side. Newhall’s physical study of the Met’s daguerreotype further revealed that the plate had a manufacturer’s mark dating it to the early 1850s, too late for it to have been inside the camera in a room with John Quincy Adams. Newhall concluded that what the Met held was a daguerreotype produced in the 1850s by Southworth and Hawes but one that was a *copy* of an original Haas daguerreotype made in Washington, DC, in 1843. The evidence provided by the studio backdrop, plate, and reversal of the image suggested that Southworth and Hawes likely made its own copy of an original Haas daguerreotype of Adams in the years after the ex-president’s death.

Haas’s daguerreotypes lived on in nonphotographic forms as well. Haas the daguerreotypist was also Haas the lithographer who invited Adams to visit his studio and pose. Like Edouart the “shade man” and other visual artists of the time, Haas likely wanted not only to photograph the great man but also to publicize his photograph and sell images. In keeping with the landscape of visual commerce of the era, Haas turned at least one of the daguerreotypes he made in those March 1843 sittings into a lithograph for sale and copyrighted it in 1843. Because the lithograph repeated the visual motif of the chair, the rug, and the general body position of the subject, Newhall relied on this image as further evidence that the Southworth and Hawes daguerreotype was a copy of an original Haas image. Despite the visual similarities, however, Haas’s lithograph did not perfectly transcribe the daguerreotype poses. In the lithograph Adams looks off to the side rather than directly at the viewer. In addition, his facial expression, while still stern, suggests a touch of a worried smile. And Adams holds a book in his hand, his index finger marking his spot; no such book appears in either the Met copy daguerreotype or the original Everett one. Did the lithograph represent an entirely different, third pose based on an original Haas daguerreotype that is currently lost to us today? Or did Haas the lithographer take some liberties with the work of Haas the photographer? Lithographs did not have to be entirely faithful to their source images; lithographers were artists in their own right who interpreted images as much as they duplicated them. The Haas lithograph, for example, features not only the
book in Adams’s hand but also a more conceptual sketch of a large book at his feet on the floor. The size of the book suggests that it was not present in any original daguerreotype but added later. Perhaps the lithographer used it to suggest the book that is in Adams’s hand, or (much as Edouart’s library setting for his Adams silhouette) to point more generally to the great man’s learned qualities. Throughout his life, Adams was often pictured holding a book.77

In addition to adding visual elements or embellishments, lithographers also borrowed from one another in ways that seem like intellectual property theft today but were common at the time.78 For example, after Adams’s death a lithographer named Benjamin Franklin Butler produced a hand-tinted lithograph based on Haas’s 1843 lithograph.79 In this image produced to memorialize Adams after death, the scant smile on Adams’s face in the Haas lithograph was transformed into a full-blown one, which
left Adams looking less like “old man eloquent” and more like an impish, grandfatherly figure. Such images illustrate how daguerreotypes of elites like Adams circulated during the period. Like the affordable, popular art form of the silhouette, lithography made images of elite public men like Adams available to the masses. While some Americans in urban areas could visit daguerreotype galleries to view images of famous citizens, many more could purchase cheap paper prints for display at home. Adams’s experiences with early photography reveal how the new medium never operated in a vacuum. The daguerreotype was bound up with other modes of portraiture that circulated in a lively visual culture.

Figure 3.5: Benjamin Franklin Butler, lithograph of John Quincy Adams after Haas lithograph, 1848. (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)
“Requesting me to come”

On the same bitterly cold day that Adams met Horace Everett at Haas’s studio on Pennsylvania Avenue, he had yet another encounter with a photographer. After taking care of some business inside the Capitol building, Adams reported in his diary, “Thence I went into the military committee room of the Senate where I found J. M. Edwards, another Daguerreotype likeness taker. I had received last evening a note from him, requesting me to come this day or tomorrow between 9 and 3, as he wanted my likeness for a large picture of the Senate chamber, which he has projected and in which the senators, judges of the Supreme Court, the President, and his cabinet and others may all be assembled.”80 Jonas Edwards and his partner, Edward Anthony, planned to work with an engraver to produce a giant “collective portrait” of political elites, a kind of fantasy mashup that would display national leaders of the era (including a few women, such as Dolley Madison) visually gathered together in the Senate chamber.81 The first step was to photograph as many of them as they could. In order to do that, the photographers set up a daguerreotype studio in a borrowed committee room of the Senate. Despite responding to Edwards’s invitation to visit him at the Capitol, Adams initially chose not to participate in the project. He reported in the diary that Edwards “said he could not take my likeness this day, but asked if I could not stop to be taken at New York on my way home [where Edwards and Anthony had a studio]. I declined, and on inspecting many samples of the faces he had taken I was glad to be released from being taken by him at all.”82 Perhaps after his more positive experiences with Haas, Adams was coming to realize that some photographers were better than others. Or perhaps a stop in New York City on his way from Washington to Boston was too onerous for the aging congressman.

Despite Adams’s experiences with all manner of daguerreotype failure—that of photographers as well as himself as a sitter—he continued to sit for daguerreotypes until his death. Despite his criticism of their images, Adams eventually did return to Edwards and Anthony to sit for a daguerreotype earmarked for their grand project. On March 1, 1844, Adams wrote that he “went into the chamber of the military committee of the Senate, where Edwards took two Daguerreotype likenesses of me,” and on April 12 he wrote,
“At the request of J. M. Edwards and Anthony, I sat also in their room while they took three larger Daguerreotype likenesses of me, than those they had taken before. While I was there President Tyler and his son John came in, but I did not notice them.” (Given Adams’s animosity toward Tyler, it is safe to assume that when Adams said he “did not notice them,” he meant that he chose not to acknowledge their presence.83) One of these sittings likely produced the profile daguerreotype that was eventually incorporated into the collective portrait.84

When the daguerreotypes were combined with the art of mezzotint engraving, Michael Leja argues, what emerged was “hybrids of the two media . . . having the identity of both photograph and print, each fortified by the other.”85 The Edwards and Anthony daguerreotypes’ “fortified” image was published as a large mezzotint engraving by Thomas Doney in 1846.86 Like the Adams lithographs, Edwards and Anthony’s collective portrait offered another example of how the early daguerreotype participated in the era’s visual politics. In March 1845 Adams noted in the diary that he ran into Edwards near the Capitol, and the daguerreotypist invited him in to see the latest daguerreotypes they had made, including “two of the new President Polk—one
in a breast-pin reduced from the other, and bespoken for Mrs. Polk.”87 A few months later, in May, Edwards called on Adams “and invited me to visit their establishment where they exhibit a collection of several hundreds, persons of notoriety of all descriptions. He told me that Mr Anthony was going to England to carry with him and exhibit there his whole gathering of noted persons of this country, and to procure and bring back a similar collection of European notorieties to exhibit here.”88 Edwards and Anthony mobilized their daguerreotypes of “great men” to build their business, exhibit American greatness abroad, and (as in the example of the pin for Mrs. Polk) facilitate the exchange of meaningful personal mementos. These modes of visual commerce relied on the new medium of photography for their popular appeal.

After 1843 most of Adams’s visits to the daguerreotype studio came after invitations from the photographer or requests by others for a photograph. Between 1844 and 1846, Adams agreed to sit for a number of daguerreotypes designed to facilitate painters’ plans for portraits of him. Despite the early suggestion that photography would “ruin” art because the new, so-called pencil of nature would make the hand of the artist obsolete, not only printmakers but fine artists as well took advantage of the opportunities the daguerreotype portrait offered their work. It became common for artists to base portraits on daguerreotypes of the sitter.89 Of Adams’s twenty daguerreotype sittings, his diary reveals that upward of half a dozen daguerreotypes were produced explicitly to be given to painters working on portraits of him.90

For example, during the spring of 1844 Adams sat a number of times for the Philadelphia painter James Reid Lambdin, who had made a portrait of Adams in 1841 and wanted to produce an updated one.91 On April 13 Adams wrote in the diary, “I gave the last sitting of a full hour this morning to Mr Lambdin who finished his third and last portrait of me. He asked me also to stop on Monday morning at Haas’s Daguerreotype shop and having a likeness of me taken there for him to which I agreed.”92 A few weeks later, Adams made his way to Haas’s after a subsequent written request from Lambdin in which the artist asked for “a full length miniature Daguerreotype for my benefit.”93 After waiting for a less cloudy day and later enduring one failed attempt, on May 3 Adams achieved the image Lambdin had requested: “On my way to the House I stop’d again at Haas’s shop, and he took three more Daguerreotype likenesses of me, one of which is for Mr. Lambden [sic] at Philadelphia.”94

Adams understood that painters would find it helpful to work from daguerreotypes of him because he repeatedly indulged their requests to sit for
them. Yet despite this regular exposure to photography, Adams maintained a vexed relationship with the daguerreotype as its own mode of portraiture. In addition to his early dismissal of daguerreotype portraits as “wretched” and “inferior to the silhouette,” Adams seemed to believe that the very thing that practitioners hailed as the wonder of the daguerreotype—its fidelity to “nature”—was what made it inferior as portraiture. Recall his complaint that the daguerreotypes he sat for in Utica in August 1843 were “all hideous” and “too true to the original.” 95 Similarly, of daguerreotypes he sat for in Washington, DC, with the photography studio of West and Page, Adams wrote, “They are resemblances too close to the reality and yet too shadowy to be agreeable.” 96 Unlike a well-formed painted portrait, the daguerreotype was visually excessive: too true, too shadowy, too real, too much fidelity in every way. Not visual values he would embrace.

Adams had extensive experience sitting for every kind of portrait one might sit for in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the daguerreotype in its wondrous excessiveness was especially problematic. Yet Adams had a love-hate relationship with portraiture in general, no matter what the medium. Of all the portraits Adams sat for, he claimed in an 1843 diary entry, only a few were actually “worthy of being preserved”: “a miniature in a bracelet for my mother, painted at the Hague in 1795 by an Englishman named Parker, now in the possession of my son John’s widow—Copley’s portrait of 1796—Stuart’s head of 1825. And Durand’s of 1836 painted for Mr Lumen Read, are the only ones worthy of being preserved, with the busts by Persico, Greenough and Powers.” 97 Adams did not list specific criteria for why these images and objects were worthy and others were not, but likely his reasons were closely connected to their value as artifacts of history. In 1839 Adams drafted a list of every portrait he recalled sitting for. Although the list was not complete, Andrew Oliver argued that it nevertheless “confirms his genuine, indeed overriding, interest in preserving, not only for himself and his family but for his country’s history, his own likeness.” 98 “Nothing else,” Oliver continued, “can explain the hundreds of weary hours he gave to the scores of painters who besought them.” 99

Adams’s comfort level with the act of sitting for portraits also changed over time. Near the end of his life, the diary reveals that he was horrified, indeed ashamed, by his own physical failures to properly engage the process. By his own account, his failed first daguerreotype sitting, in September 1842, resulted in the ruin of more than half a dozen images. The physical demands of sitting—the need to keep still chief among them—were simply
to have been symptomatic of a more general problem with which Adams wrestled later in life. Writing of a sitting he was doing with painter Franklin White in early August 1843, Adams lamented:

It must be extremely difficult for any painter to take a favourable likeness of me now—for I cannot sit five minutes or three or even one, without falling into a doze. This propensity which I have long observed grows upon me to such an extent, that I ought to be deeply alarmed at its progress—for its termination may overtake me every day and every hour of my life. It benumbs every faculty of my body and soul. . . . This irresistible spell has made it impossible to take a good daguerreotype likeness of me, and it baffles though not in equal degree the skill of the portrait painter, who cannot give life or animation to a countenance all the muscles of which are all the time lapsing into slumber. It deadens alike all the faculties of the mind, and is a continual warning to me of the decays of my powers native and acquired.100

Adams’s biographers and the diary itself chronicle several bouts of sometimes extended illness in Adams’s last years. But it is just as likely that his somnolence was the result of old age and a busy life that left little time for relaxation and made it difficult to sleep.101 Adams’s confession about falling asleep not only related his alarm at the ongoing “decay” of his “powers” but also pointed to an implicit theory of portraiture to which Adams had long subscribed. The creation of a good portrait, his lamentation implied, required bodily agency and active “faculties of the mind” on the part of the sitter. The artist needed an engaged sitter in order to be able to “give life or animation” to the subject. Without that engagement, the artist would not be able to render a rich, full likeness of both the body and soul of the subject. Tensions caused by bodily decline and failure would shape his experience of the daguerreotype’s visual values of fidelity and wonder.

“True portraiture of the heart”

What, then, to make of John Quincy Adams and the daguerreotype? He thought this new art was both “wonderful” and “wretched.” He saw how it had the capacity to show ourselves to one another, to create visual identification among strangers, but he also recognized its excesses and failures. The new visual values of fidelity and wonder did not measure up to Adams’s standards for images of public import and historical permanence. To be valuable as a mode of public portraiture, the daguerreotype would need
to provide not only likenesses but likenesses worthy of preservation. They should be artful but not excessive, offering “life” and “animation” without too much of a dose of reality. During a November 1843 trip to Cincinnati to dedicate the city’s new observatory, Adams wrote of yet another visit to a daguerreotypist: “Before returning to the Henry House we stopped at the Daguerreotype office where three attempts were made to take my likeness. I believe neither of them.” Adams did not elaborate on what precisely made the images less than believable. But when understood in light of his commentary about the daguerreotype, the remarks about believability come into sharper relief. Reflecting just a few months earlier in the diary on his history of being depicted in portraiture, Adams was blunt: “The features of my old age are such as I have no wish to have transmitted to the memory of the next age. They are harsh and stern beyond the true portraiture of the heart; and there is no ray of interest in them to redeem their repulsive severity.” Few portraits—and surely fewer daguerreotypes—could properly communicate the “true portraiture” of what was inside of himself, what lay beyond his own “harsh” and “repulsive” visage. No dose of fidelity and wonder could change his point of view.

Any person who is aging can understand Adams’s frustrations at his declining physical condition; as a result, it may be tempting to read Adams’s commentary as simply the sad complaints of a disgruntled old man who no longer likes what he sees in the mirror. Yet inside the curmudgeonly ambivalence lies a way of thinking about photography worth thinking through. Adams believed that the power of the daguerreotype lay in the ways that it provided citizens with the opportunity to see others as those others saw themselves. For Adams that opportunity was always conflicted. The daguerreotype may have offered fidelity (“the features of my old age”), but for precisely these reasons it would always fail to achieve “true portraiture of the heart.” The daguerreotype might capture one’s image for “communication to the memory of the next age,” but it did so with a wonder-full excessiveness that might tarnish, rather than burnish, that next age’s image of those who had come before. As a public figure who sat for dozens of portraits throughout his life, in nearly every available medium, these issues mattered deeply to Adams. Subject to failure, inevitably always chronicling the decline of the body and mind, and ultimately “unbelievable” as portraiture, this new mode of public subjectivity constituted a dubious art of national memory and history at best.