

NO.57 SUMMER 2001
BENE LEGERE
 NEWSLETTER OF THE
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NEWS FROM BANCROFT LIBRARY

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: HIDDEN IMAGES IN 19TH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHY

James A. Eason, Archivist for Pictorial Collections, Bancroft Library



Peter H. Burnett, first governor of California. Albumen photographic print in an ambrotype or daguerreotype case, ca. 1858-1865.

Small, personal, mysterious, haunting--there's something remarkably intimate about viewing a cased photograph. Fragile and ephemeral daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, typically presented in protective miniature cases, must be held in the hand and angled "just so" under the light to bring out the images on their mirror-like silver or glass surfaces. Their clarity and image quality can be astounding, revealing to the viewer a long-lost moment in time with startling realism. These objects are often images of long-forgotten people or scenes, and all too frequently they have come down to us, some 150 years after their creation, with origins obscured. Their physical components provide important clues for interpreting their history, but these elements can present even greater puzzles.

A recent Bancroft Library project, funded under the Library Services and Technology Act, has resulted in the preservation and cataloging of nearly 500 cased photographs and has made them available digitally on the World Wide Web. In the course of preservation, staff often discovered hidden inscriptions, dates, verse, or even mementos such as locks of hair--little relics of people long gone. Physical anomalies were also discovered, providing evidence of image swapping among cases. It seems that

original owners, subsequent generations, or later collectors had little hesitation to switch images, mats, and cases as the fancy struck them--confounding today's historians and archivists!

One instance stands out as a particularly interesting puzzle. The Zelda Mackay collection contains a portrait of Peter H. Burnett, first governor of California. This portrait is an albumen print on paper housed in a case with a highly decorative Civil War era brass mat with a patriotic Union motif. While the portrait and mat are probably close in date, the paper print would not have been intended for this enclosure.

Upon removal, conservation staff found that the thin paper print was actually adhered to a glass ambrotype plate. (Ambrotypes are negative images on glass which appear positive against a black backing.) Held to the light, a portrait of a man could be seen, but his features could not be discerned. Presented with this curiosity, some curatorial issues had to be addressed. How important is the ambrotype behind the photoprint? Could it be an earlier and unknown portrait of the governor, perhaps covered over by Burnett himself, or by a family member who preferred the later portrait? Or was the ambrotype simply a convenient backing, its subject unknown and insignificant? These questions could not be answered without a better look at the hidden image.

Removing the albumen photoprint from the glass was not an attractive option. It was well adhered and risk of damage to the paper photoprint was too great. Examining the images together on a light table resulted in a shadowy blend of both portraits. A solution was found in digital technology.

Using a digital camera, Dan Johnston of Library Photographic Services photographed the albumen print of the governor. He then turned the photograph and its ambrotype backing over, illuminated it from behind, and captured the two blended images. The resulting positive and negative images of Governor Burnett were digitally combined,



Portrait of Burnett removed from case and brass mat.



Verso of portrait of Governor Burnett, showing ambrotype backing plate lit from behind, with its unknown portrait blended with the image of the governor.

canceling out one another. The result revealed the ambrotype image of a bearded, middle-aged man, perhaps in a military uniform and topcoat. It is not, unfortunately, an earlier portrait of Burnett and its origins and identity remain a mystery.

With this information, the photoprint, backing plate, brass mat, and case were reassembled and will be maintained as they were found--with the ambrotype hidden behind the albumen photoprint. All of the digital images will be made available as part of the cased photographs collection in the Online Archive of California (www.oac.cdlib.org/), but there was no compelling reason to subject the photographs to the risks of physical separation. We are left with our portrait of Peter Burnett, a still-mysterious image of an unknown man, and an excellent example of the usefulness of new technologies and the complexities of interpreting cased photographs. There is often more than meets the eye!



Unidentified portrait on ambrotype plate (ca. 1855-1860) as revealed when features of Governor Burnett were removed from the digital file.

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